

UNIT ONE: THE HUMAN SITUATION

SESSION THREE: CREATION, PART TWO – HUMANITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

Summary of the Third Session

“We Praise Thee, O God, Our Redeemer, Creator”

The line above comes from one of our hymns, and in the previous session we saw some of the ways in which the Bible ties together Israel’s experience of Yahweh as Redeemer with an emerging faith in Yahweh as Creator. To begin this third session, we looked at some scriptural passages that unite trust in the Redeemer with praise for the Creator.

Psalm 95:1-7 (handed out to everyone on a separate sheet):

The psalm expresses Israel’s happiness that Yahweh, their Redeemer from slavery and its hopelessness, is also the world’s Creator and their own. Everything belongs to the God to whom they, also, belong. “In his hands are the depths of the earth . . .” The comfort in this thought is the same as that in the spiritual, “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” which goes on to confess, “He’s got you and me brother/sister in his hands.” Israel could feel secure in God’s care knowing there was no greater power than Yahweh’s. So, the greatest power of all is compassionate and has adopted them in love.

“The sea is his, for he made it. . . .” We had discussed the sea as a biblical symbol of chaos, and the psalm affirms what we find in Genesis: that the sea is just another created thing, not any threat to Yahweh at all. God is greater than all the world’s chaos (and all our inner chaos, too). Indeed, God is greater than the world, greater than nature, and greater than time and space. So, we can relax and be human, knowing that everything does not depend upon us. We are not meant to be in control of everything but to trust our God.

Revelation 21:1-6 (also on the separate sheet):

The God of the beginning will be the God of the ending. So, the end of the creation as we know it will be its completion, not its termination. The world and human history will not end in meaninglessness but will be fulfilled according to God’s promise. The old creation will give way to the new. The apostle Paul used a birth image to communicate this promise: what seems to be the world’s death groans will be turned by God into the birth pangs for a new world. What looks like death will turn out to be new birth—not by any natural process, but by the grace of the God who loves the creation. What God wants, God will have, and we will become the people God created us to be.

“. . .and the sea was no more.” In the new creation, there will be no chaos, no destruction or even the threat of any. God will be at home among the people. So, nothing will be permitted to wreak havoc on people and their lives.

Beginning with Genesis and concluding with Revelation, the Bible presents a Creator God who is also the Redeemer God. Finally, creation and redemption will be brought together in a new creation. Then, nothing in creation will contradict redemption. Nothing will hurt or destroy. Life will not be lived in distress.

The Wonder of Our Selves

The Bible regards the human creature highly as God’s special creation. Neither our humanity as such nor the human body is scorned or denigrated in the Bible. Instead, we find a paradox. We are so small in the universe that we might be dismissed as insignificant, but God has made us great. We are creatures of dust, but God has designed us magnificently. Our lives are short and often filled with suffering, but God has created us for eternity.

Psalm 8:

When he looks up at the moon and stars, the psalmist feels very small. Our universe is infinitely more vast than his, and so we might feel even smaller and less significant. What fills him with wonder, however, is not the vastness of the heavens, but the concern Yahweh God seems to have for the human creature. Why should the God who made the vastness and everything within it care about us? And yet, God does care about us, very much.

We have even been given dominion over the works of God’s hands. Here, as in Genesis 1, the concept of human dominion over nature is left open to interpretation. Is the world here for our use—for us to ravage and waste as we please? That notion would scarcely have occurred to the ancient Israelites. They struggled just to survive in the world of nature. They were more likely to be nature’s victims than its masters. Certainly, the idea of blowing up the world in a thermonuclear explosion or poisoning all its life with toxic waste would never have entered their worst nightmares. To understand Genesis and this psalm, we need the concept of *stewardship*. A steward takes care of someone else’s property, and we are God’s stewards in the created order.

The real wonder of our humanity is God’s love for us, not any natural glory of our own. And yet, the Israelite saw a God-given glory in humanity and in the human body itself.

Psalm 139:13-16a

“I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” The psalmist sees himself as a marvelous creation and gives the credit to Yahweh God. Contempt for the human body is not biblical. Science has

given many people today a great appreciation of the complexity and coordination of systems in our bodies, but science leaves open the question of *why* we are made as we are. Science looks into the process of our formation, but that question differs from the theological question of *why*. To the psalmist, the wonder he himself is bears witness to the glory of God, and the real wonder is that God should care so much for us that we are never out of God's sight.

The Second Creation Story, Genesis 2:4b-9,15-25

To get us started, I asked how the second creation story differs from the first. The group's answer was that the second seems more personal. Genesis 1 shows us the grand view of the universe, but Genesis 2 focuses in on the human creature. Here creation is hands-on, with God shaping the human being from the soil. Here the gift of life is intimate, as God breathes life into the newly formed human.

We identified the characters in this creation story. The main character is Yahweh God, but another moves to center stage—the human being (in Hebrew, the *adam*). The animals appear also, but none is named in the narrative, even though they are all given names by the human. Finally the human (*adam*) becomes a creature in two kinds, male and female. So, we have two characters instead of one: the man/husband (*ish*) and the woman/wife (*ishshah*).

We also find two particular trees in the story: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These two trees represent two possibilities for the *adam*. One possibility is life as God's continuous gift of grace, symbolized by the fruit of the tree of life. The other will become clearer in Genesis 3, but it stands in contrast to receiving life as God's gracious gift, and it leads to death.

The Breath of Life

For the Israelite, every breath came as a gift of life from Yahweh God. When God withdrew the breath of life, the creature (human or animal) died. Any creature alive by the breath of life that comes from God is a *nephesh*—a Hebrew term for which we have no good translation but which is very poorly translated as “soul.” The Bible also speaks of the human's having a *nephesh*: “Bless Yahweh, O my *nephesh*!” but here the *nephesh* is not part of the human but the person's *very self*. From the beginning, the *adam* is completely mortal; the human has no life of its own apart from the gracious gift of God, nor does God put any immortal part into the human. Life is always and only a gift.

The *nephesh* is the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Later, certain Greek philosophies would give Christianity the notion of an immortal soul imprisoned within the mortal trash of the human body, but that whole idea is unbiblical. We discussed some of the negative influences the foreign philosophical notion of an immortal soul had upon Christian thought and history. These

influences included a degradation of the church's view of human sexuality and its historical opposition to both faith healing and modern medicine. For a time in church history, sickness was seen less as an evil to be overcome by God's grace than as an opportunity for persuading the ill person to repent. We discussed also the possibility that the evils committed by the church during the Inquisition might have been justified by the perpetrators, at least partly, by the notion that it was permissible to break the mortal body to save the immortal soul. We recognized, however, that there were other motives behind the Inquisition including greed, lust for power, bigotry, and sadism.

In Genesis 2, the breath of life shows the intimate relationship between Yahweh and the human creature. The *adam* is no accident of nature but a very personally and carefully formed and enlivened creature of Yahweh God. It is no big jump from this picture of creation to the belief that God loves the human creature.

The Human's Relation to the Soil

God forms the human from the dust of the ground, from the soil. The human is *adam*, and the soil is the related Hebrew word, *admah*, and so the two are positively related in creation. After the disobedience, the human and the soil will be more at odds. The soil will no longer yield its produce easily to the human but will produce thorns and thistles instead. In chapter 4, the ground will open its mouth to receive Abel's blood shed by his brother Cain. Yahweh God will tell the rebellious *adam*, "You are dust, and to dust you will return."

The land is a major theme in the Old Testament. For the Israelites, the land of their own became the concrete reality of salvation, and each tribe, clan, and family was given its "portion in Yahweh," which was its piece of ground. The land was sacred, not in the sense of being divine in any way itself, but as each one's portion in Israel's life and salvation from Yahweh God.

The Naming

In Genesis 1, we were told God created humanity in the divine image and likeness. As the image of God on earth, the human bears authority and responsibility as God's representative to the other creatures. Here, in Genesis 2, the same position of authority and responsibility above the animals but under God is symbolized by the naming. The *adam* gives names to all the animals and so gives to each its nature and destiny. In the Bible, a change in nature and destiny resulting from the intervention of God is sometimes reflected in a name change that comes with God's call to the new life. So, God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. Likewise, God renames Jacob as Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus renames Simon as Peter, and Saul of Tarsus the persecutor of the early church becomes Paul after his conversion to faith in Jesus.

We retain this significance of the name in our sacrament of Baptism. When the minister asks the parents presenting their baby for baptism, "What is your child's name?" the minister already

knows the answer. The idea is to have the name conferred upon this baby now as a “child of the covenant,” a son or daughter of God. The child is not to grow up to become the man or woman who would have been apart from Christ. So, the child (or adult baptized) is given a new identity and destiny in union with Christ.

Our Need for Relationship

“It is not good that the human should be alone.” God creates us with a need for companionship, a need for other people. Just as we need God, so we also need each other. So, Jesus sums up human life in two commands that we love our God wholeheartedly and that we love our neighbor as our self.

The solution to the human’s aloneness is, “I will make him a partner who is like him but opposite.” The world translated in the King James Version as “helpmeet” and in later versions as helper does not rightly refer to an assistant or subordinate. It is one who is “like but opposite.” The idea is for the *adam* to have a living counterpart, one who is like him enough to share his life and destiny as an equal partner but opposite enough to attract.

First, Yahweh brings the animals to the *adam* to be named, but they are inferior and subordinate and so cannot provide a partner for the human. So, Yahweh divides the human (*adam*) into two kinds, male and female. Then, God, much as the father of the bride, brings the woman to the *adam*. Seeing her, he is delighted by his recognition that she is bone from his bones and flesh from his flesh and yet attractive to him. He names her “woman” (*ishshah*) and, by so doing, receives his own gender identity and name, “man” (*ish*). And so a man leaves his father and mother and joins his wife, and the two become one flesh. Here we have the wondrous mystery of human sexuality and marriage in which the need for each other is satisfied but never fully or permanently satisfied.

The notion of some Christian interpreters that the man is superior because he is created first and because he names the woman is false to Genesis. He becomes the man and husband (same word in Hebrew, *ish*) as and only as she becomes the woman and wife (*ishshah*). There is no gender identity without the partner who is *like but opposite*. There is no husband without wife nor any wife without husband. Together, they receive their gender identity and destiny as partners from Yahweh God. The man does not name the woman any more than he names himself; he recognizes her as his “like but opposite,” his partner in life. There is here no battle of the sexes nor any question of dominance and submission.

Is he superior because she is made from him? He is made from dirt. Trying to use this chapter of Genesis to establish male dominance is reading sin into God’s intention for human sexuality where there is no sin. It is interjecting shame into a relationship without shame. It is using something beautiful and good to argue for something ugly and evil.

Genesis 2 shows God giving us our need for each other. This need is fulfilled in the variety of relationships within the human community, but Genesis focuses upon the most intimate and personal. From this passage, we believe marriage to be ordained by God in the creation of humanity.

It is interesting that, even though the Israelites placed very high priority upon having children and sons especially, no mention is made here in the Bible's prime marriage passage of the couple's having children. Instead, human sexuality is presented as created for love and partnership. The worth of children is certainly not denied; rather, the love the man and the woman have for each other will find new expression in their love for their children. But human children are to be born of the man and woman's love for each other and need for each other as partners in life, not out of instinct to procreate. Animal sexuality may be for procreation (some might debate that limitation for certain animals who might seem to love each other), but human sexuality is primarily for the union of love. So, the love which cures aloneness finds new form in each child.

In many ways, the picture of marriage in Genesis 2 is way ahead of its time. Men and women were not seen as equal partners in ancient Israel. Often, even generally, a wife's value depended upon the number of sons she bore. Life was hard, and a woman needed to be married in order to survive. So, the wedding in the Garden of Delight (Eden means *delight*) must often have seemed far removed from the everyday realities of married life, and yet the creation stories in Genesis are promises, not fantasies. If God created marriage to be good, then God has made it to be redeemed. Love is not just an ideal or a dream but a promise for humanity. However far we may be from the purity and delight of this Genesis 2 picture, it still is not good for the human to be alone. We are created to need God and to need each other.

The Redemption of Our Bodies

In Romans 8, Paul presents the resurrection of Jesus as the promise of the redemption of our bodies. He pictures the entire creation groaning in eager expectation of the revealing of the children of God so the creation can be set free from its bondage to decay, while we wait for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

In modern times, the church is experiencing a partial redemption of the human body in our view of life and faith. Since we have rediscovered the Old Testament as more than just a digging ground for texts to prove Jesus to be the Messiah, we have reclaimed some of our heritage as an earthy faith that appreciates God's love for the created order and its creatures and delights in the things of earth. We are developing a better view of marriage and human sexuality. The progress is not straight-ahead improvement; there are detours and retreats all along the way, but we have made headway.

For too long, the church saw two purposes in marriage: (1) having children and (2) regulating the lusts of the flesh. As long as the body was viewed as mortal trash and earth was to be discarded in favor of heaven, human sexuality had little chance of being seen as much more than just a

troublesome thing necessary for the procreation of humanity. Sexual love was generally considered the lowest form of love and was viewed with suspicion if not outright rejection. The celibacy of those people supposed to be most committed to Christ suggested that sex was considered less than pure if not downright dirty. The Christian tendency to make virginity synonymous with purity reveals much about the church's view of sexuality. Our ongoing recovery of the Old Testament as real scripture, not just a treasure of proof-texts buried in rubble, has helped in the redemption of our faith's view of love and marriage.

Genesis 2 is about the creation of our humanity by the creation of relationships. First of all, the human is related to God. Yahweh God gives life, not just at the beginning, but throughout life. We are related to the earth itself and to its soil. We are related to the animals, our fellow creatures of God, by our stewardship responsibilities. We are created to need God and to need each other, and we are given the need for intimacy and love. We are bodily creatures, and love is bodily for us: the two become one flesh. From that oneness come children and family, and from those relationships comes community. Not only is it bad for the human to be alone, it is impossible. One cannot be a person alone. We become persons through our interactions and relationships with other people. The need to love and be loved is God's great gift to us.