

A Good Creation
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
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The Bible's best read as a story, because that's what it is. And that's what we'll be doing this year together, is reading the Bible as a story. Now, we can't read every page beginning to end on Sunday mornings. But we will be covering the entire story from beginning to end in a survey fashion. We're not gonna be approaching the Bible this year like a rule book, so that we're all very expert at calling fair and foul in every situation. We're not gonna be approaching the Bible as a theological reference book that gives us the systematic answers to every theological question man has wrestled with. Neither are we gonna approach it as a tactical manual that will equip us for every spiritual battle, and neither are we gonna approach it as a how-to guidebook on how to manage your relationships best. We're gonna read the Bible the way it's read best—as a story, a story with a very definite beginning. Open your Bibles to Genesis 1:1 and you'll find the statement

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

In the beginning the heavens and earth came to be by the creative word of God. What follows from there is a set of verses that give us an account of the creation event. When we read through 'em we're gonna be astounded, amazed. There is a being whose existence has been from all time, before time, and forever, who has called all that is into being.

When we read the account immediately people begin to get very analytical, and historically there's been three different ways the story, the account, is analyzed among Christians. All Christians agree at verse 1, "In the beginning God created." When they read through the account of creation there are Christians who have varied understandings of the account. Some see a sequential seven-day account covering 24-hour days lined out in sequence. Other believers will say, 'You know, what I see here is a sequential account, but the days aren't twenty-four hours. They could be much longer time periods.' It's kinda called the 'day-age' interpretation of the account. Then there's still others that say, 'You know, I read it sequentially, but I think there's something else going on in the way this is put together, and there's a thematic structure to this account that's trying to make a point, and it's not a sequential account of the events. It's a thematic structuring of the creation events, that we understand the principal parts of it.' I have Christians that I respect and that I value at each one of those three positions of interpretation, Christians who live their lives with the centrality of Jesus Christ, Christians who have devoted their lives to the authority of scripture and have devoted their lives to the analysis of the Hebrew text and the Greek text and where we got them and how to interpret them, Christians whose writings I've respected and have helped shape my life. You'll find believers at all three of those positions. It doesn't bother me. I treat 'em all with respect. I value their lives, I value their testimony, and I value their work in scripture.

My concern is that, as we get into trying to analyze some of the interpretive issues, we lose sight of the story. We don't hear the account. We're gonna read it through. And what I want you to do today is just listen to the story, and very specifically I want you to pick up the rhythm of the story. Ok? Because there's a rhythm to this story, a rhythm of there being nothing, God speaking, and then there is something—something good, glorious, and wondrous. Let's begin at Genesis chapter 1 verse one. More extended reading than we're used to in congregational settings, especially in our culture and our time. But it's the type of reading I believe God's people need.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

Then God said, "Let the waters below and the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth sprout [I love that!] plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them"; and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a third day.

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. There was evening, and there was morning, a fourth day.

Then God said, "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens." God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind"; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

There was nothing. God spoke, and there was something—grand, wonderful, glorious, good, very good—the creation we live in. And oh, was it good.

Gonna have you read two passages of scripture that are kinda different, that are gonna take you in a little different direction. And I'm not gonna push these; they're just kinda reflective passages that I enjoy, and they give you another way of the goodness of this creation. The first one I'm gonna take you to is in the book of Proverbs...the book of Proverbs...Proverbs chapter 8. And let me set the stage for you a bit. It's a section of the Proverbs where there's a poem about wisdom. And as the writer is talking about wisdom, the Spirit of God is giving him an understanding of wisdom, and as he's writing the Spirit of God is helping him describe wisdom. And something happens as he describes wisdom—he begins to personify it. In other words, he treats wisdom as a person. And pretty soon you begin to realize he's not talking just about a concept here, or intellectual ability; he is talking about a person. And scholars over the years have begun to look at that passage and say, 'You know, we think he's talking about Christ, the Word who was in the beginning, with God, and was God.' Now, I'm not gonna press that interpretation real strong, but I think there's truth to it. And thinking of it that way, that part of what we have in Proverbs 8 is a vision of Christ, our Lord, prior to and right at creation. Picture this, and I'm gonna pick up the reading at verse 30. In fact, let's pick it up at verse 27, ok? This is wisdom, and I believe it's our Lord speaking.

When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; there I was beside Him, as a master workman; and I was daily His delight,

...and then here's the line...

...rejoicing always before Him...

That's Christ saying "I was rejoicing in those days of creation."

...rejoicing in the world, His earth, and having my delight in the sons of men.

That's Jesus saying, "I was there at the beginning, working in creation, and I was enjoying what was being made. It was a good creation."

One of my favorites is when you go to a really obscure verse that I would have never noticed, except one writer kind of highlighted it. It's found in the book of Job, ok? Turn to the book of Job with me; in verse 38...excuse me, chapter 38 in the book of Job. And I'll set the stage for you. This is a man who's been struggling with all kinds of struggles in his life, and he doesn't realize that it's part of the conflict between good and evil, between God and the evil one, and he's been caught in the in-between. He doesn't understand what's going on, and he's raising his heart to God. He's been confused, he's even been complaining. And God finally responds to him, and God doesn't give him answers. God just says, 'Hey, remember, I'm the Creator here.' And that's part of what's goin' on in this portion. But there's one phrase I wanna highlight, because God calls Job to think about creation. And when He says this, He says...we'll pick it up at verse 4 of chapter 38. God says to Job, He says

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? [Who put out the plumb line for creation?] On what were its bases sunk? [I mean, what's the foundation of the earth?] Or who laid its cornerstone,

Now here's the phrasing...

...when all the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

I believe what He's talking about there are the angelic host. He's describing how when God called into being, when there was nothing and God said, "Let there be..." and there was something, the angelic host shouted for joy!

Last winter we went over to a fireworks display in Palmer in the middle of the winter, I think it's Colony Days or something; I don't know what it is, but it sure is cool. You know, you can actually see fireworks. Can't see 'em on the Fourth of July, but I tell you what, mid-winter in Alaska, you can see 'em...any time of the day, almost. And we're over there, and it's... And you're standin' and everybody's gathered around, and suddenly you hear this "fwiss...pwoooooh!" And somethin' flies up in the sky, and there's just spectacular display, and you know, everybody just looks up and goes "Ooohhhhh!" And then there's another one, and everybody just goes, "Ooohhhhh!" And another one, and everybody goes, "Aaahhhh!" And everybody's cheerin' and shouting, and everything goes...

Guys, that's what creation was like! God said, "Let there be light" and there was light! And Jesus goes, 'Yes!!' And the angels shout for joy! And God says, "This is good." God says, 'Let the earth sprout', this...this odd clump of dirt where angels have never seen somethin' like that before. What is this thing? And God says, 'Sprout', and there's vegetation, and Jesus goes, 'This is so fun!' And the angels go, 'Whoa ooooohhhh!' and God goes, 'This is really good.' And then He says, 'Let's make man. Let's make 'em male and female, in Our image.' And He makes these two kinda strange creatures, and Jesus, if I read Proverbs right, says, 'I really like this!' And the angels are goin', 'Yay!!!' And God says, 'This is really very good!'

The story begins that way. We're not prepared for the ending. The story that begins with such a great and glorious and beautiful beginning...we're not prepared for the ending. Let's go to Revelation chapter 21. Revelation 21...this is a closing scene. There will be aspects to it that we won't read very far. I'm just gonna set the scene of the conclusion, of the ending of the story. And I'm gonna start the reading at verse 1, ok? We've looked way back into the past at a time when no man was there. Now we're looking far off into the future, or maybe close...I don't know.

But we're looking somewhere where we haven't been yet. And John the Revelator, the writer of Revelation, has been given a vision of the future. And he writes like this. He says

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.

That grand and glorious first creation is gone!

And then I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle [the tent, the dwelling] of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them..."

It's interesting. We always talk like the end is us going to heaven. The end is God coming to earth. Heaven's a temporary stop on the way. A new earth, a new heaven. And it says

"...and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

And you read that, and you have to say, 'What went wrong?' From that grand and glorious creation to a time when God has to say in verse 5, "He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" 'I'm wiping the slate!' And there's not gonna be those things that would never been expected in a good creation—tears, and death, and mourning, and pain.

Then he said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega [this is Jesus speaking], the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murders and immoral person and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

And suddenly you realize something really went wrong somewhere, that God has to make all things new. And there is something really critical that requires an overcoming, and those who don't overcome are not gonna be part of that new creation.

What we're gonna see is that there is a story between that creation and that new creation. It's a story of ever-increasing sin that is answered repeatedly and over and over again by an even greater grace; that yes, there was a good creation, but it went bad, very bad. And yes, there will be a new creation that is forever good. That's the main story line. In the middle of it will be a hinge point, a critical point that allows the good-creation-gone-bad to eventually look forward to a hope of a new-creation-forever-good. And that hinge point is a man on a cross, tortured and beaten and mocked and rejected, screaming out with His last breath, "It is finished!" That'll be the story line.

The danger when we look at it and we talk about it as a story is we begin to think it is only a story, and we dismiss it possibly as an ancient myth. 'That's just mythology...we can find other things like it in other histories and other cultures when we talk about the beginning of things. And when we look to the future that's a fanatic's delusion. We got all sorts of people throughout history who've had ideas about the future, apocalyptic visions of disaster and change. How is it we can look at this and say "This is reality", that this is a story line we're all on?'

Answer...I'm gonna walk you through this carefully. It's a statement I've repeated before. It is so foundational to who we are I need to repeat it again. How can we say this is reality we live, this is the story line we are actually on? Number one—I begin with this. We have a reliable record of what Jesus Christ said and did. When we pick up the New Testament we have a reliable record of what Jesus Christ said and did. Everything hinges on that point. If you want me to denounce Christianity and walk away from it, that is the point you have to prove me wrong on. We have, in the gospel records, a reliable record of what Jesus Christ said and did.

When I read that record I see someone that I am convinced can be trusted; and I will trust Him, because there is no other teacher like Him.

And the third point...this is the story He told. And since it's the story He told, it is the story I believe, and the story I will tell. This is our story line.

Alright, we're done with my teacher session, and I still wanted to turn pastor on ya. 'Cause I do have a closing word for you, and we're right at the... I'm gonna go four minutes over if you'll let me, alright? You'll let me, right Daniel? You kinda shook your head. Whether you meant to or not, you're stuck.

Everything I've said so far has been along the line of being as a pastor...I mean, as a teacher. What I'm gonna do now is move from being instructional to being personal, and being pastoral. I wanna be careful, so I've actually written it out, 'cause I wanna speak to you carefully as a pastor. Over the years I've seen two basic approaches to Christian life in our congregation. I'm not talkin' about cultural Christianity and what other churches everywhere else... In our congregation I have seen two basic approaches to the Christian life. The difference between the two is not often recognized, but it is real and it is profound. There are those who are trying to make room for God in their story, and I underscore the word 'trying'. It's a challenge, given our limited schedules and all the other things crowded into our lives, to make room for God. We've got families, friends, work, school, community, church, projects, recreation, chores...it is hard to make room for God in our stories. For some, when they do, it's a matter of desperation. Things have gone horribly wrong and we need God to fix the mess right now so our story will get better. For others, it's a deep desire. There are great deeds we wish done, and good and glorious deeds, and we want God to be part of it, because then those deeds will truly be good and glorious. And so we want God to get involved in our story, and we call to Him! For most, it seems more a duty, an 'ought', a 'should', one of those relationships that we know we ought maintain. It's just hard in and among all our other relationships. And intellectually we know it ought to be a priority above all others, but it's difficult—because we don't really see God, and He's not right in front of us, shouting at us. Our approach to worship is intellectually grounded, but emotionally it's no more passionate than taking out the garbage...another duty to be done. When things go well with our story, maybe even better than we expected, we have a sense of being blessed, and we give thanks. When things go poorly with our story, the great expectations are crushed, there's disappointment, there's anger, there's a subtle bitterness, and "God, you done me wrong." For most, truth be told, it's more often simply boredom, because the stories we're writing for ourselves are, frankly, boring stories. There are those who are trying to make room for God in their story.

There are those who have taken their place in God's story. They seem to actually get it, that He started all this and He will finish all this, and this is His story beginning to end. And they simply take their place where he has put them at this time in that story, and their work at home, in the community, in the congregation—they take their place regardless of condition, regardless of circumstance, and they take their place with a confident faith, a resilient hope, and an engaged heart. And it doesn't seem to matter to them that theirs is not the lead, exciting part. They fully understand that the story is not about them. They simply take their place and they answer the ever-increasing sin with the even greater grace released by Jesus at the cross. It's not often dramatic. It's a careful tongue; it's a helping hand; it's a disciplined mind; it's a pure heart; it's an earnest prayer; it's a husband loving his wife; a wife honoring her husband; a father encouraging a child; a child obeying his parent; a worker doing quality work; an employer paying a fair wage; it's a blessing in answer to a curse; it's truth spoken in the heat of debate—with grace. It's respecting all. It's honoring those in authority. It's caring for the saints. And it's worshipping God.

The difference between those who are trying to make room for God in their story, and those who have simply taken their place in His story, is real and profound. In the weeks ahead I'm gonna press that difference. I am going to press that difference. I'm gonna be instructional; I want you to have a firm grip on the story. I want you to be able to tell it comprehensively and concisely from beginning to end. At the same time, however, I am going to be pastoral. I am gonna press the difference and I am going to challenge you to rethink everything in the light of two questions. Question number one and two—are you trying to make a place for God in your story, or are you taking your place in His story? Rethink everything with those two questions. The way Jesus put it was "Repent."

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, lay hold of that grace. Amen.