



YEAR 1—The God of Life: A Story of God’s Redeeming Shalom

Module 1—The God Who Gives Life: Stories of Life and Death and Life from Death

Lesson 1—Genesis 1:1-2:4

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today’s Scripture passage.)

GOD’S STORY

“First this: God created the Heavens and the Earth—all you see, all you don’t see” (Genesis 1:1, *The Message*). The passage begins at bedrock. There is God and God creates. Other translations use the more familiar opening phrase, “In the beginning . . .” The word beginning has a richness that leads us to the bedrock of God. We are more prone to read the opening of Genesis as a way of explaining when God created. We think of “beginning” as the start to a sequence of events that day-by-day march on until they are complete and creation is accomplished. This way of understanding the “beginning” certainly makes sense of the text but does it make sense of the story? Not just the story of Genesis 1:1-2:4, but the rest of the story which explodes out from this first narrative? Not really.

“First this” better captures the heart of what this story is telling us about God. Put differently, “first this” says something like, “Hey, if you want to understand how there is a world at all, then you have to get this first: there is God!” The “beginning” is much deeper than simply the first moment in a series of moments the sum of which amount to creation. The word “beginning” implies the basis for all that is, the reason for something, or the foundation upon which the whole of reality hinges. In the beginning there is God. And God desired to create life from what was formerly void and empty, from nothingness.

Creation, especially here in Genesis 1-2:4, begins a drama that has life at the center of it. In creating, God shares God’s life with creation and so sets the agenda for the entire story of God. God’s story is about life, where life is to be maintained and allowed to flourish over and against anything that might be set against it. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) there is a vision of what life with God looks like, summarized by a great Hebrew word, *shalom*.

God’s shalom is the sharing of God’s life with all of creation in fellowship and rest. The bedrock of all reality, of creation, is a God who desires over and above anything else to share life with that which God has created, including us. That is why each successive day of creation generates more and more life.

Light and darkness lead to sky and water leading to land and oceans giving forth seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees, situated in a sun-lit sky and starry night, which taken together begins to teem with fish, birds and all manner of aquatic life. Even this prosperous creation cannot contain the life which God wishes to bestow upon the world being crafted into existence and so there is more life—all kinds of wild animals, living moving and breathing beings. Then, finally, the crown jewel of life, humanity created in the image of the life-giving God. In the beginning, first this: God. God loves life, and God’s world is designed to bring forth life.

Days one through six all have evening and morning. They are completed. Day seven has no morning and evening. It has no completion. Day seven is consummation, or the fulfillment of the promise of life rooted in

who God is and who God determines to be for the world. This is why it is the blessed day, the holy day. It is the unending day of future-promise when all of creation is at rest in completed wholeness of life with God. Even as things begin to fall apart in Genesis 3, day seven reminds us where this story is headed. Day seven is the trajectory for God's story. Day seven tells us that God desires life for God's world, so that even in the face of death and a return to the emptiness at the start of Genesis 1, God sustains and brings forth life. The God of creation is a God of promise, and God promises life.

OUR STORY

Since this story draws us into the bedrock of life—God—we might wrestle with how this is a story about ourselves. Where do we fit? We perhaps more easily see how this story involves others. Genesis 1 talks more generally about humanity created in the image of God (1:28), so we might be able to discuss the role others play in this story more readily than we do ourselves. Remember, though, this story opens up the grand narrative God is telling, and it's all about life in shalom with God in the world. We—you and me—are invited to share in the ultimate aim of creation—the shalom of life with God. This means there are at least three distinct ways this is our story, and they all center on Sabbath.

Through this story we are compelled to practice Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping means being intentionally restful and to be more attentive to God at work in us and around us. Keep in mind that practicing Sabbath is a missional practice. We are participating in God's work of bringing creation towards its intended wholeness, towards shalom. We are bearing witness to the God who creates to share God's life of shalom with us and the world by actually practicing shalom now.

Sabbath, therefore, leads us to see God's created world through relationships, which is where God intends the life of *shalom* to be experienced. In keeping Sabbath we are invited to stop our work in order to see its purpose in our own lives, for others and for the sake of the world. We are reminded to see our personal place in God's creation. We are reminded that the ultimate aim of creation is to be in a life-giving relationship with the God who created us, and gives us relationships with others. Sabbath gives us space to simply be present to God, ourselves, others, and the world.

Sabbath places us firmly within creation. Keeping Sabbath reminds us of our need for rest. Feeling the limits of our own bodies and lives, we may begin to yearn for our ultimate rest in shalom with God. Sabbath reminds us of the goodness of the created world as we pause to recognize our place within it. Sabbath alerts us to the "more" of true life with God towards which creation points on day seven. Therefore what is created on this day is hope that is rooted in a vision of what true life—*shalom*—will be for each of us.

OTHERS' STORY

As we discover our own personal place in this story of creation, we also realize that it is humanity together that is created in God's image (1:26). While each of us bears God's image, we do so together. In our relationships with one another and all of creation, humans stand unique as those responsible for bearing the image of the life-giving God. Humanity has the special role in creation of maintaining and watching over creation for the sake of life, for shalom. The meaning of this divinely ordained role in the world has manifold meaning, which becomes clear throughout the entirety of God's story, but in this beginning story, through relationships, humanity is called to reflect the life-giving ways of God.

For instance, in verse 28 humans are commanded to be fruitful and multiply. In other words, humanity is given the task of bringing forth more life. Women and men are to reflect God's decision *for* life by participating in the creation of life through procreation. Yet, God also desires that each of us develop godly relationships with others that allow for other forms of fruitful and growing life through *shalom*. That is to say, when humanity cares for each other with Christlike love and compassion, they are fulfilling the mandate to be fruitful and multiply life. They are participating in the extension of God's *shalom*.

Humanity is also told to be responsible for God's creation, to have dominion or rule over the earth, as some translations state it (1:28). The responsibility that humanity is called to exercise over creation is to be an out-working of their status as image-bearers of God, meaning humanity exhibits responsibility when we care for creation the way God cares for creation. As the story marches on from here, and we see the way humanity has lost its way, this calling to bear God's image and lead others and creation to life with God will take different form and shape, ultimately finding its fulfillment in Christ, who is our shalom.

THE WORLD'S STORY

As we move through this story beginning with God to ourselves and others, we recognize that it is a story about all that is, the world. The world God creates serves as the theatre in which God acts. God is not a distant God, who creates and leaves creation on its own. We come to know the God who is the bedrock of this story through God's action in the world. The world here is the stage upon which God brings about God's purpose of for all of creation. God sees what God has created and calls it good because as God's handiwork the world of creation participates in God's life-giving way of shalom.

The world continues to be the theatre of God's activity. Here, in the initial act of creation, God establishes the world as the context in which God shares life with something that is not God. God, even after the brokenness of sin begins to mar the world, offers life from within the world. God in Jesus Christ, the moment when God establishes shalom once and for all, moves into the world to retrieve it as the place of God's creative action and love. This story of creation establishes the goodness of God's world, so that God will do what is necessary to maintain and sustain life that is the world's goodness even in the face of that which is opposed to it—death. While the world is not God, the world is the good and beautiful creation of God, and this story reminds us of this.

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