

In The Beginning (Week 4) - Earth, Spirit, Rescue, and Covenant:

Like the last few weeks, this is a fuller summary than usual, just so you can have or save a lot of the nitty-gritty details.

We spent the last week of our series focused on what we could glean about what it means to be human in Genesis 2. (Last week, we had the same focus but in Genesis 1.)



Before we get into the three big takeaways, remember that the first humans in Genesis - "Adam and Eve" - are meant to be symbolic figures of God's benevolent aspirations and intentions for humanity. That is, Genesis 2 is about all of us, not just the first man and his wife.

Takeaway #1 = We as humans are unique mystery in the created order: we are both dust and God's breath (Gen. 2.7):

- God "formed" the first human like a potter: this verb connotes an intentional, skilled, artistic, planned, and even repetitive act by God over time. (God also formed the animals in the same manner, see 2.19.)
- The man (in Hebrew, 'adam) was made from the dirt (in Hebrew, 'adamah): this direct verbal connection is meant to tell us that we are linked to and come from within the created order. As one Old Testament scholar puts it, tying our origin to our task to nurture creation in Gen. 2.15, "We are a literal creation of our literal environment...We come from earth are to care for the earth."
- The first human became a "living creature," just like the animals in 2.19 and the sea creatures in 1.20. Again, our sameness to creation is highlighted, not our distinction from it.
- But the phrase that sets us apart from everything else is the middle one: "God breathed (or blew hard) the breath of life into his nostrils." This is not used of the animals in Gen. 1-2, though animals are said to have God's breath in the later flood narrative (Gen. 6-9). So at least some of our uniqueness might be an issue of degree: whereas animals are "living creatures," only we have been given such a pronounced or large a dose of God's "breath."
- Old Testament Walter Brueggemann concludes about Gen. 2.7 "God's very life is then breathed into the first human. Something of God's own Self becomes an integral part of human identity."

- Psalm 8:3-6 expresses this dual nature of humanity well: we are tiny in comparison to so much of the cosmos, yet God made us just a "little lower than the angels." The New Testament will come along and piggyback on this understanding of humanity set forth in Gen. 2: we are "temples," a place where earth/nature and God/heaven meet.

- Human beings have a tendency to explain themselves by emphasizing only one of these two aspects: a modern Western scientific atheist might only view us as "dirt," whereas some Eastern and New Age spiritualists might hone in only on us being "God's breath/spirit" housed in physical bodies.

- To take Gen. 2:7 seriously is to allow both aspects to be true in a mystery that defies full explanation. St. Augustine once wrote, "If you understand it, it isn't God." Same thing could be posited about the sacredness and wonder of being human: who we are and how all our facets fit together is awe-inspiring, if not completely comprehensible.

- The Confession of 1967 - 9.17 (one of our denomination's creeds) reminds us that human uniqueness exists so that we can relate to our Creator and respond to His love.

Takeaway #2 = The first great enemy of humanity was not sin, it was loneliness. God intends for us to rescue one another from that foe:

- The first time we're told that anything is "not good" in creation is in Gen. 2:18, and it's not about human failure/sin (that doesn't enter the picture till Gen. 3), but instead is said about loneliness.

- So God decides to make a "helper" that "fits" the first human. That Hebrew word, "helper," is used in the Old Testament only two ways: the primary use is of God's own assistance to us, often on occasions when only He can save us, and the secondary use is of military assistance given by one person to another. So "helper" is hardly the best possible translation of that word; far better would be "rescuer," "savior," or "the cavalry coming over the hill."

- Ironically, this term (and verse) has been used by some Christians to prove female subservience (women made to be a "helper" to men) but, based on the above, you can see that nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, the helper is stronger than the helped, for the helped cannot rescue themselves from the assailant of loneliness.

- Thus, the assumption we cannot save ourselves from our loneliness. And America is currently experiencing a loneliness epidemic: at any given moment, about half of American adults are experiencing significant to severe loneliness, which leads to all manner of physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual maladies.

- For those who try to reconcile scientific insight with scripture, on both counts we as humans seem hardwired for relationship, and being alone is holistically bad for us.

- Loneliness can often become a vicious cycle: being lonely makes us less likely to engage or reach out to others.

Takeaway #3 = Humanity is knit together in a spiritual bond or covenant: we belong to each other:

- Being over 2500 years removed from Genesis 2 and not sharing its culture, we can miss the extraordinary meaning of 2.23: "bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." This is familiar covenant language in ancient Mesopotamia and Israel: e.g., between Laban and Jacob (Gen. 29.24), between distant blood relatives (Judges 9.2), and about a political commitment by Israel when making David king (2nd Samuel 5.1).

- So Genesis 2 is trying to tell us that the human race should live as if we are deeply committed to one another's wellbeing, so much so that we do not have to fear one another and we can be vulnerable with each other (so says Gen. 2.25 two verses later). What hurts one hurts all; what lifts one lifts all.

- The late archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa expressed the sentiment of Gen. 2.23 this way: "...My humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong to the whole, to the community, to the tribe, to the nation, to the earth...In our fragile and crowded world we can survive only together. We can be truly free, ultimately, only together. We can be human only together."

- This "covenantal" bond and purpose for humanity may well be the best explanation for our species' evolutionary rise. Here's how Helen De Cruz, the chair of the philosophy dept. at St. Louis U., describes that: "The more recent archaeological research that shows it was our capacity for cooperation, for empathy, and even altruism, that contributed most significantly to our evolutionary success, rather than the survival of the fittest being understood as the strongest, most ruthless, and even the most selfish."

For This Week

1. Two scripture reading options for you:

- First, read through Genesis 3-4, 6-9, and 11, because these chapters are the unspooling or breaking of God's intention and hopes for creation that we've been studying in Genesis 1-2. You'll note a lot of direct inversions - God created things to be one way, and the exact opposite happens:

- [Genesis 3-4 NRSVA](#)
- [Genesis 6-9 NRSVA](#)
- [Genesis 11.1-9 NRSVA](#)

- Second, the Bible uses so much language and imagery from Genesis 1-2 when describing God's Kingdom, "heaven," Christ, salvation, or God's final victory in history. We mentioned some of those during Communion yesterday. For another example, check out Revelation 22:

[Revelation 22.1-5 NRSVA](#)

2. Some helpful questions for you to dig deeper into Genesis 2 as a whole, and reflect on it meaningfully: [The Garden | Masterpiece](#)

3. A six part podcast series from BioLogos on the uniqueness of human beings, entitled ["Uniquely Unique"](#)

4. Much like you can only understand Genesis 1 if you take it in its historical context, same goes for Genesis 2...there is a recently-discovered ancient Mesopotamian ritual that sheds a tremendous amount of light on what we're supposed to take away from the 2nd chapter of Genesis...this is really insightful and pretty cool!: [The Ancient Near East and Genesis 2](#)

5. Some wise, practical advice if you're feeling lonely: [17 Easy Things To Do When You're Feeling Lonely](#) and [20 Ways to Feel Less Lonely and More Connected](#)