

The pattern of the kingdom



Genesis 1 – 2, the first two chapters of the Bible, show us God's original, perfect creation. They present us with a vision of how the world is meant to be. I want us to notice four important truths about creation.

1. God is the author of creation

The Bible begins with the declaration, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). He alone is eternal. There has never been a time when God, the three in one, was not. Jesus became incarnate, taking on human flesh, only when he was born in the manger in Bethlehem; but that was not the beginning of his existence. God has always been a trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He existed before anything else came into being. Then he just said the word and the universe came into existence out of nothing. Whether he completed the job in six literal twenty-four-hour days or over a longer period does not really matter (Christian opinions differ over how we should interpret Genesis 1). What is important is the fact that God is the creator of all things.

God the Father took the initiative. Genesis tells us that the Spirit was also involved: 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters' (1:2). And the New Testament teaches that Jesus, the Son of God, was his Father's agent in creation: 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made' (John 1:3); 'all things were created by him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).

The Bible stresses that God is pleased with what he has made. After each of his days of creative labour, except the first two, we are told, 'God saw that it was good'; and, when he finished the job (the writer of Genesis comments), 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (1:31).

This attitude to the material world is very different from that of many philosophies and religions, which are really concerned only with the spiritual and the soul. Everything else is regarded, at best, as of secondary importance, and, at worst, as evil. Their understanding of salvation involves the soul being released from the prison of the body to join the non-material world in which God lives. But the Bible has no place for such views. It never allows us to rank the spiritual above the physical. Matter matters because God made it; it is 'good'. He is interested not just in our souls but also in our bodies and the world we live in. As we shall see in the next chapter, human sin spoilt everything in the world, both the physical and the spiritual. In his grace God decided to put things right again, and he is determined not to do only half the job. His plan of salvation includes everything, spiritual and physical. Our look at the big picture of the Bible will take us on a journey from creation to new creation. God made everything in the beginning and he will redeem everything in the end. The Bible is heading towards a conclusion in heaven because that is the culmination of God's plan for his world. In many ways it will take us back to

the beginning, to the way everything was designed to be in the first place: a new Eden.

2. *God is the king of creation*

As creator of all, God is Lord of all. He is the rightful king over everything he has made. The only proper response to that truth is to acknowledge his rule and worship him. The psalmist writes:

... the LORD is the great God,
 the great king above all gods.
 In his hands are the depths of the earth,
 and the mountain peaks belong to him.
 The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us bow down in worship,
 let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
 for he is our God
 and we are the people of his pasture,
 the flock under his care.

(Psalm 95:3-7)

In much eastern religious thinking the natural world is believed to have emanated out of God. The result is that everything is a part of him. You dare not kill an ant or a fly: it is divine, along with trees, mountains, human beings and everything else you could mention. But the Bible will not allow such thinking. God is transcendent, above and beyond all that he has made and distinct from it. That truth explains the Bible's abhorrence of idolatry (see the second commandment, Exodus 20:4-6). If God made everything, then to worship anything within creation as if it were God is bound

to demean him, because, by definition, it is less than him. God alone is worthy of worship. Our duty as his creatures is to submit to him as our king and give him the glory that rightly belongs to him.

'You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.'

(Revelation 4:11)

3. Human beings are the pinnacle of creation

The anthropologist Desmond Morris has written: 'Human beings are animals. They are sometimes monsters, sometimes magnificent, but always animals.'¹ That statement is correct as far as it goes. We are creatures, made on the same day of creation as the beasts and sharing much in common with them. But we are not just animals, mere 'naked apes'. We alone, of all God's creation, have been made in his image:

... God created man
in his own image,
in the image of God
he created him;
male and female
he created them.

(Genesis 1:27)

That is true of all people: male and female, black and white, young and old, born and unborn, able-bodied and disabled, whether mentally or physically.

Someone might say of a son, 'He's a chip off the old block;

he's the spitting image of his father.' That is not to say he is identical, but he does bear the family likeness. You can see his father in him. It is similar with us and God. One writer has expressed it well: 'Man is a creature because he is made by God. But he is a unique creature, he is made like God.'² We reflect something of God's nature in a way that nothing else in creation does.

As those who have been made uniquely in God's image, all human beings have great dignity and have been set by him above the rest of the created order with responsibility for it. He said, '... let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' (Genesis 1:26). That is certainly not a charter for abuse. God is a loving ruler and, as his image-bearers, we are called to rule in a loving way. We are God's stewards, entrusted with the care of his precious creation.

4. 'Rest' is the goal of creation

The chapter divisions of the Bible were inserted not by its authors but by editors at a later date. It is a shame that they ended Genesis 1 where they did, after the creation of men and women. That gives the impression that human beings are the climax of God's creation. But the real climax comes at the beginning of chapter 2, with the account of the seventh day:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creation that he had done.

(Genesis 2:1-3)

The writer of Genesis ends his description of each of the other days with the words, 'And there was evening and there was morning – the first [etc.] day.' But no such end to the seventh day is recorded; it continues. In a sense, God has rested ever since. He lives in a continuing Sabbath, the seventh day. That does not mean that he is not working. He continues to sustain his creation; without him everything would fall apart. But he has rested from his work of creating. When a job has been done perfectly, there is nothing more to do. And he wants human beings to live with him in that seventh day, sharing in his 'rest' and enjoying his perfect creation. That is what we see happening in the verses that follow. Genesis 2:4–25 provide a second account of creation, not contradicting but complementing the first. In the first account human beings are just one of God's many creations, but in the second the focus is very much on them. It gives us a picture of the goal of creation; here is life as it was designed to be lived. It is marked by a series of perfect relationships.

God and human beings

God lovingly cares for the man he has made. He places him in a beautiful garden and provides for all his needs, including the creation of woman to be his helper and companion. Adam and Eve are given great responsibility, but there is no doubt about who is ultimately in charge. It is God who sets the rules. But his law is not oppressive; it is for their good. He issues just one prohibition, which is designed to protect them: '... you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die' (Genesis 2:17).

Man and woman

Man is created first, then the woman as his helper. Man is the leader in the relationship,³ but his authority is not abused

and the woman does not resist it. They enjoy marital bliss: 'The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame' (2:25). They have complete intimacy without fear or guilt.

Human beings and creation

Adam and Eve both exercise the authority God gave them over the created order but, once again, that authority is not abused. They obey God's instructions both to 'work' the land and to 'take care of it' (2:15). Human beings and creation work in harmony, so the earth brings forth its fruit.

The kingdom of God

It is an idyllic picture of the good life: life as it was meant to be. We see in the garden of Eden a pattern of the kingdom of God. God's people, Adam and Eve, live in God's place, the garden of Eden, under God's rule; as a result, they enjoy God's blessing. Sadly, it is not long before everything is spoilt by human sin. Ever since, God has been at work to re-establish his kingdom and to call a people back into fellowship with himself. He wants us to enjoy the goal of creation and enter into the perfection of the seventh day, his rest. Part of the purpose of the Sabbath law (Exodus 20:8-11) was to remind the Israelites that that is ultimately what life was designed for, rather than the concerns of the present world. We can experience something of that rest even in this fallen world, if we trust in Jesus. He said, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). And, as Christians, we can look forward to enjoying it fully in the new creation after Jesus

We see in the garden of Eden a pattern of the kingdom of God.

returns. The writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament points us to the future with these encouraging words: 'There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his' (Hebrews 4:9-10).

The kingdom of God	The pattern of the kingdom
God's people	Adam and Eve
God's place	The garden
God's rule and blessing	God's word; perfect relationships

Figure 7. The pattern of the kingdom