

The Big Picture¹

7/3/2005 Pastor Kevin Saxton, Brewster Baptist Church

Since it's a holiday weekend, I figure we've got some extra time today so we're going to cover the whole bible . . .

When we think about the good news of the gospel we often think about how it affects and applies to us personally, or to a particular person or community, or group of people. We narrow it down to specific aspects, to specific situations, but today I want us to take a look at the gospel in a different way, we're going to pull the camera back and take a look at the big picture, out beyond individuals to all of creation, out of just the present and encompass the past and the future as well. I think that if we really want to understand what the good news really is and how good it is, we need to examine it from this perspective.

So let's begin with the very beginning. In Genesis 1-2 we find the world described as God created it to be. In chapter 1, we find God creating everything that we know and declaring it to be good, then creating human beings in his image and declaring them to be very good. In chapter 2, we find a different account that is more specific in the way that it describes the world God has made. Let's pick up the story at verse 5.

4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, ^{} and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (so if someone calls you a dirtclod, its really a rather spiritual thing!) ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of*

¹ Some thoughts, ideas, and concepts were inspired by a sermon by Rob Bell Jr (Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI) titled "Between the Trees"

the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Then the text describes a series of rivers that flow out of Eden and go out to water the world. Picking up at verse 15:

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' ¹⁸Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.*

²³Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

If we're trying to pull out the main ideas from the image that we're given here of the world that has been created the way that God has intended it to be, we find several things that are going on.

First, we find that God is providing in abundance. He causes all of these trees and grow to provide food and nourishment for his creation. There is abundance. We are given no indication in the text that Adam, and later Eve, want for anything. God has provided for their

every need to the overflowing.

Second, we find human beings living in meaningful relationship and partnership, with God. In chapter 1, humans are given the mandate to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it, or perhaps a better way to say it would be that they are designated by God to “steward” the earth. In chapter 2, we find something similar but more specific, God gives Adam the specific responsibility of naming the animals. Maybe its just me, but I’ve always found these verses to be a bit odd . . . maybe because this is sort of the picture I get: God tells Adam, “I’ve got something for you to do. I’m going to bring all the animals to you, and I want you to name them.” Adam says, OK, and God brings the first animal to him. Adam ponders, and stammers out “rhinoceros.” God says “OK, relax, you’ll get the hang of this.” And along comes the next one, “Duck-billed Platypus?” God says alright, and along they go through all the animals. At the end, Adam’s getting tired and his creative juices start to wane, and he blurts out, “ummmm Dog?” It kind of a strange picture is it? That God is giving Adam stuff to do, making a partnership with humans. After all, God could do this himself, couldn’t he? And he would probably do it better, but God elects and seeks out a meaningful relationship and partnership with human beings. Later on in chapter 3 after they eat the fruit they aren’t supposed to, we read that God apparently has a habit of walking in the garden with them. There’s this sense that God is engaged in this meaningful and close relationship with them, where they are living in the presence of God and God is in the midst of the garden.

And not only is there an open relationship between God and humans, but also between humans. What does the text tell us? That they were naked and unashamed. The naked here is much bigger than just physical, its getting at that there are no barriers between them. No false facades, no fear, or embarrassment, just complete openness in their relationship. Each one allows the other to see them as they are, with no airbrushing, glossing, masks, or barriers. (side note: the first place that sin affects is relationships, fig leaves and hiding)

We also find that humans are living in a state of wholeness and health. Death and

decay don't enter until after they eat the fruit in chapter three.

So in the opening scenes of the bible we find a world of abundance, human beings living in a meaningful relationship and partnership with God, with God somehow present in their midst, and human beings living in wholeness and health and in open relationship with each other. And according to the text, there are rivers and a tree of life.

Now, let's go to the very back of your bible, right before the maps, to the end of Revelation, to chapters 21 and 22. *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' ⁶ Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*

Then it goes on to describe the city's dimensions as well as a specific description of it, We'll pick up again in chapter 22: *Then the angel^{*} showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life^{*} with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants^{*} will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

Anything sound familiar? Here at the end of the story we find many of the same things we find at the beginning of the story. We find abundance and the removal of want. We find human beings living in meaningful relationship with human beings as he dwells in their midst. We find God partnering with human beings as it describes them “reigning” with him. We find a restoration to wholeness and health as all things are made new, the nations are healed, suffering and death are removed from the scene, rivers of flowing water, and a tree of life.

Now if we believe, as the Church has held for 2000 years that Genesis is a book of beginnings and that Revelation is a book about the end of things, then we live in a realm that exists in between Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22, in a sense, a realm between the trees.

This being the case, I think that there are several things we need to think about and consider. Perhaps this should impact the way we think about time. The scriptures describe God as existing forever, who always has been and always will be, standing outside of time, with no boundaries or borders, He just simply is. When Moses asks God for His name, he says “I AM.” He simply has been forever and will be forever. This is the God who created time. Let’s think about that for a while. This is the God who created time and created human beings who say things like, “Oh, I sat in the backup at the Sagamore Bridge forever.” Or “It took an eternity to drive to Hyannis.” No, you didn’t.

This realm that we live in is like a blip when compared to eternity. When we think about God going forever into the past and forever into the future we realize, that many things that exist and happen in the world we live in, like lack of abundance and the existence of want for many, or the toil and meaninglessness people experience in their work, barriers and facades exist in our relationships with God and with each other, broken relationships, and broken people, pain, suffering, and death are temporary. If we are to believe what these scriptures tell us, the world has not always been this way, and it will not always be this way. Need, broken relationships, toil, suffering, and even death are temporary at best, and only last until God reestablishes the world, reestablishes his Kingdom just as he has intended and created it to be. (Amen!)

And if God is eternal and forever, standing outside of time and we enter into a relationship with him, that relationship starts now and goes on forever. It is interesting to note at this point that Jesus never speaks of eternal life as something that happens in the future, it something that starts now.

Another thing we need to consider is what this means for how we think about miracles. We tend to think of miracles as a surprise or aberration to the way things work. But if abundance, wholeness, health, and life are the standard of how the world was created to be, and will be how the world will be again in the future, then miracles shouldn't surprise us. They become spots and patches where the once and future reign of God is established in the realm in which we live. Almost like flowers popping up through the snow in a mountain meadow, they remind us of how things really were and how things will be.

I think that this also brings us to consider our role as human beings in the present world in which we live. We've touched on how people were created for meaningful partnership with God to steward and reign. And even after Eden God has continued to call people into active partnership to establish, advance, and care for God's Kingdom. In the Bible we read of people like Noah, Abraham, and Moses (to name just a few) who God calls, and says "Hey, I've got something for you to do." Down through the ages, God has continued to call people and say, "Hey, I've got something for you to do." As people have answered the call and taken on the task, God's Kingdom has advanced in the world. Hungry people have been fed, sick people have been cared for, mourners have been comforted, broken people and relationships have been healed.

God is still looking for partners today. God is looking for people who are want more than this world has to offer to follow him and help him to re-establish his kingdom. People who will use their lives to ease suffering, brokenness, and poverty even just a little bit. People who are willing to tell the story of what God has done and what God will do in the world. People who will

be wise stewards of everything they have been given and allow God's kingdom to come and flow through them into the world.

I think that this also has implications for how we think about Jesus and what he has done. When we think of Jesus, we think of his teachings, his miracles, his death and resurrection, and what those things mean to us. But when we consider that the world we live in is not how things were, and it is not how things will be, we get a fuller picture of Jesus. If people were placed in a world of abundance, and one day God will restore that abundance and people will be free from want or need, we can understand why Jesus says he comes to proclaim good news to the poor. If people were created to live in the presence of God, and God comes and lives as one of them with the promise that the kingdom is coming in its fullness, we can understand why the gospel is good news. If Jesus comes healing the sick and raising the dead, we can understand how anyone who believes in him will live. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a bright beacon, demonstrating that there is hope. That God has not given up. That the world will be again what it was created to be.

This is why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, ¹⁷*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* ¹⁸*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;* ¹⁹*that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,* not counting their trespasses against them,*

But Paul does not stop there, Paul reminds us that God invites us to partnership with Him, that we have not been reconciled to God simply for the sake of ourselves, but that we might partner with God and share the gospel with the world. He continues:

and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰*So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* ²¹*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is good news that the whole world needs to hear, in word as we tell the story of God's love and coming kingdom, and in action as we partner with God to establish his kingdom in all the earth, one small flower patch at a time.

The gospel is good news because when we see the big picture, those who are hungry, thirsty, suffering, sick, mourning, broken, and hopeless will not be forever. The Gospel is good news because when we see the big picture we remember that death is temporary. The gospel is good news because God's dwelling place will be among his people and we will live in his presence and reign with him forever. The gospel is good news, my friends, let's not forget the big picture.