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# Creation

**DAVE BAST**

When you look at the unimaginable vastness of the universe, you can come to one of two conclusions: On the one hand, you can conclude that life is basically meaningless; just a flutter of activity on an unimportant speck of dust hurtling through the infinity of space. That is the conclusion many today have drawn; but on the other hand, you can look at that incredible universe and conclude that the God who made it all must be very great; and the human creatures for whom he made it must be very important to him. Well, that is the conclusion the Bible draws, and we will be considering it today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

**DAVE BAST**

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we are beginning a new five-part series of programs on the first eleven chapters of Genesis—one of the most influential and important and also in some ways difficult parts of the whole Bible.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and so, what we want to do...we cannot look at everything in those first eleven chapters, but in these five programs we are going to look at the key stories that come up in that section, and we will summarize some of the chapters in between that we do not cover, but that is the plan; and Dave, we have a guest for this program, and the third one in this series.

**DAVE BAST**

We are really excited to welcome Dr. John Hilber to our program—to *Groundwork*. John is Professor of Old Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary in...wait for it: Grand Rapids, Michigan; and John, welcome.

**JOHN HILBER**

Thank you; thank you for inviting me.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is good to have you here, John. Well, Dave and John, let's get right into it and just read that first verse of the Bible:

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

**DAVE BAST**

Which is really kind of an introduction, isn't it, to the rest of Genesis 1? It is sort of the heading or the title over the chapter?

**JOHN HILBER**

Right; yes, I think of it as a summary introduction to the whole episode.

**DAVE BAST**

And you cannot help but think of John 1:1, if you are familiar with the Bible: In the beginning was the Word...through whom all things were created... So, what we have...where the Bible starts...it does not tell us where God came from, does it? It just says he has always been there.

**JOHN HILBER**

Right; it is the assumption from the beginning, and everybody in the ancient world would have assumed that there were gods, or God if you are an Israelite, out there who created.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And he created the heavens and the earth; and I think that is called a *merismus*...isn't that what it is called when you take the highest and the lowest, and that means it includes everything in between, right?

**JOHN HILBER**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, in the beginning, this first line says God created everything.

**JOHN HILBER**

Correct.

**DAVE BAST**

So, all that is comes from God, which seems so basic, I mean, if you are a Bible believer or a Bible person or a Christian, or even a devout Muslim or Jew, you just sort of assume that; but a lot of people no longer believe that today.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes; I tell my students that verse 2 is actually the most important verse in the Bible. There are only three possible worldviews: One is that it is all material and there is no God; another possibility is that everything is God—pantheism; and the third possibility is that there is a creator God who is distinct, independent of, and outside and sovereign of everything that he created; and this verse...these first two verses really separate out the biblical worldview from all other logical possibilities.

**DAVE BAST**

Which is great to think of. So, we begin with the assumption, as does our Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. There is a God. Everything comes from him; and yet, the creation is not God—it is not divine—it is separate from him. Everything else is a creature; only God is God.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And it is interesting to note here too that, right, God was in the beginning, and he was before the beginning, as a preacher friend of mine likes to say: God was before was was. So, he is in the beginning, but we are not really told when the beginning is. That has not stopped a few people from trying to claim that the Bible tells us exactly when this beginning was, but the text does not really seem to take much interest in that. It had a beginning, which is important, by the way. The universe is not eternal. It had a beginning point. So, that is also another worldview that is out there, that it is just sort of an eternal thing, or it has been expanding and collapsing forever and ever. No, the Bible says it had a beginning. God was all there was when he kicked it off, but when that was, we are not so sure.

## **DAVE BAST**

And yet, it seems like a lot of people lately have been arguing that, really, to believe in the Bible you have to hold to the idea that the earth is very young—that creation happened maybe just a few thousand years ago; otherwise you are rejecting the truth of Genesis.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

## **DAVE BAST**

Give us a sense of that.

John Hilber:

I feel the pinch of that. I was a young Christian, 18 years old, starting my Bachelor's degree in geology. I think it is important for people to appreciate that the questions of science are something that have been imposed on the Bible fairly recently, actually, starting in the 1700s with the age of science. Before that time, it was not really a pinch point for anybody; and it is also important to realize along with that that since the earliest Church fathers, there have been many different views on explaining Genesis, and in fact, taking the days as normal days has been one of the dominant views for two thousand years, fair enough to say; but it is not often really known or appreciated that from the days of Origen and Augustine...

## **DAVE BAST**

Early Church fathers.

John Hilber: Yes, in the early centuries, clear through the Middle Ages...Peter Lombard, who is maybe the most influential theologian before Aquinas—they held to figurative use of Genesis. John Colet, who lived in the 1400s, before the scientific issues were really important, thought that the days of Genesis were revealed as days to help humans understand their work week, and that God accommodated that structure of six days plus one to help teach us to rhythm our own lives; and here is a guy in the 1400s, what arguably the most literate man in all of England at the time, who held to a view that many of us hold today.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And that is an important point, John, because I think there is this common conception that all Christians...anybody who is a devout believer in the Word of God Scripture have always thought it is...there are seven literal 24-hour days about six thousand years ago. That is a fairly recent manufacture. The text itself tipped off people like Augustine that maybe we are not supposed to take it literally, but rather theologically, it is so very important.

## **DAVE BAST**

Right; you know, even that word taking it literally...it is much better, I think, to speak about the author's intended meaning.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Yes; it is very important that we need to read the Bible through the eyes of the original author and the original audience that was being addressed; and so, we have to read Genesis through ancient eyes, if you will. They were much more interested in worldview questions: Who is God? Who are we in relation to God and the things around us? And there were the competing ideas about those questions that were most important. So, they were looking for the theological pay dirt, I guess you would say.

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, great. So, Genesis was not written as a scientific treatise. It is not intending to give us a scientific picture of where and how the world began. It wants to tell us about the who and the why. Those are the questions that are important—those worldview questions you mentioned, John; and we will proceed to look at the creation account in just a moment.

*Segment 2*

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## **DAVE BAST**

I am Dave Bast; and once again, we would like to welcome Professor John Hilber of Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. He is an Old Testament scholar. He has done special research in a sabbatical year on questions of creation and the early chapters of Genesis. So, you are a perfect guest, John, for this series where we are looking at these wonderful ancient stories.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Thank you, I am enjoying being here.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, let's continue in Genesis 1. We won't read all of it because it is fairly long, and I think many of us anyway are quite familiar; but the text in Genesis 1 goes on:

<sup>2</sup>Now the earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night; and there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

## **DAVE BAST**

So, right off the bat, John, we start with this tremendous...and whenever I hear those opening verses, I hear them through the lens of Franz Joseph Haydn: *The Creation*; and God said, "Let there be light," and there was; and then there is this huge crash from the orchestra, and the chorus sings out: Light—there was light! But what Genesis actually says is that God calls the light Day; and yet, he does not create the sun, which is actually what makes day on earth, until day four; so right away I think we are introduced to the idea that there is something figurative going on here—there is something non-literal.

## **JOHN HILBER**

I like the comparison of the day one and day four because it helps us to look to the overall structure of the passage. You have days one through three that are really the separation of light and darkness, separation of the waters on day two, and the separation of waters and land on day three; and then on day four you have the filling. So, you have the luminaries—the sun, the moon, the stars, which are the lights—fill God's structure on day four, and then on day five you get the birds in the heavens and the fish in the sea; so you've got the waters above, the waters below; and then on day six you fill the land with human beings and the animals. So, right off the bat it gives us that structural overview of the things that are important in the passage.

## **DAVE BAST**

And structure is the key word, isn't it; because at the beginning, in verse 2, it is chaos.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

## **DAVE BAST**

Everything is formless—it is empty—it is void—it is kind of randomized; and so God's creative work is really focusing on how he brings structure and order into that.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Uninhabitable...not conducive to life...and possibly, some would argue, even potentially hostile...

**DAVE BAST**

*Tohu va bohu.*

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, formless and void, right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; and so, what God is doing is he is imposing cosmos on the chaos. He is setting up all these barriers that will make life possible; and that is so very important because there were, in the ancient Near East, John, I think...there were a lot of competing creation narratives, and the person who wrote Genesis 1 and 2 was aware of those competing narratives, and so wrote this with a polemical edge, I think, right? This is what *we* believe, as opposed to the Egyptians or the Babylonians.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes; when you think about it, Moses was educated in the finest universities that Egypt had to offer...  
Dave Bast/

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes.

**JOHN HILBER**

He knew those Egyptian texts...

**DAVE BAST**

He grew up in Pharaoh's household, yes.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, scribal training. He would have copied those texts. He knew them in and out, and he would have been alluding and countering those texts, and giving a biblical re-narrative.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And so, the key thing is that God is enthusiastic for life, for delight, and for flourishing; and so he put all of these protective barriers into place to hold back the chaos of the sea, to hold back the chaos of the night, to hold back all the forces that would destroy human life, because God is enthusiastic about the human beings who are going to be the crown of creation at the end of day six.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, if you think about being an ancient Near Easterner, you are not worried about whether there are rare elements in the earth to make computer chips for cell phones, you are worrying about day and night, and water, and your agriculture—your plants, your animals—those are the things of concern to you, and God so ordered and so filled his world to make it a good habitat; and that word *good* is a really important emphasis of the text over and over again.

**DAVE BAST**

At the end of every day, right?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

It was morning and it was evening...the first day...the second day; and God saw all that he had made and it was...

**JOHN HILBER**

Good; with the exception of day two when it was just the waters.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; I heard Walter Brueggemann, I think, in his commentary on Genesis, he noted that that word *good*...we sometimes think it is a moral quality or something like that, but Brueggemann pointed out that in kind of the original Hebrew, God saw that it was good carries with it God saw that it was just gorgeous. He saw it was just so beautiful. God saw it and was so enthusiastic about what he had made; and I think that divine delight that comes through...that God does not just make a few fish, he fills the oceans with fish. He does not just make a couple birds; he blackens the skies with birds. There is just this exuberance of God in this text. I also like, John, that you were talking about Egypt. Talk about some of the polemical...the argumentative function of this text. A lot of people in the ancient world worshipped the sun...

**JOHN HILBER**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And the author of Genesis says: Well, why do that? God made light three days before he made the sun, so don't worship the sun, worship him who made light without even needing it, right?

**JOHN HILBER**

Exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; I also think of the throwaway line almost: He made the stars also...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

On day four.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

What an understatement.

**JOHN HILBER**

And the stars were all worshipped by the others...

**DAVE BAST**

Oh, yes, and feared. People believed in astrology. They thought their lives were dictated by the stars; that they, you know: Thank your lucky stars. We still sometimes say that. That is a holdover from the belief in astrology, that you are born under these stars and they exerted power over you and there was nothing you could do about it; and the Bible says: Poppycock to that; you know, that is all rubbish. God made the stars, too. They are all his creatures; and here is the great thing...to me the great, thrilling thing of Genesis 1: It is all for the sake of humankind, male and female he created them, in his own image. Everything that has gone before is leading up to the creation of Adam and Eve, right?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, indeed. The point is, the transcendent Creator, who is sovereign over all, has created a very good habitat for his creatures to flourish in; and of course, at the end you get the blessings; and you know, we are told to flourish and multiply, and God has given everything to help us in that.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And that image of God...so, the idea that God...you know, Genesis 1 gave them that image that they somehow now resemble God, which will be important to remember when we get to the story of the fall later in this series. They already were like God. The serpent will say: Eat the fruit. You will be like God. They already were. So, God gave every advantage also to keep us in good relationship with God himself, right? Giving us the image, giving us a living soul and so forth. God set up the conditions that we could stay in contact with that awesome Creator, because that is what he wanted.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes; the irony of the image idea, especially when you get to Genesis 6, is that as images...that word in the ancient world means that you were like a little idol statue; and so humans are idols of God, if you will...

**DAVE BAST**

Representatives, right.

**JOHN HILBER**

Sacred shapes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Chips off the divine block.

**DAVE BAST**

And an ancient king would send an image of himself into a distant province to sort of represent his authority, right?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

So, God is creating us not only like himself, but in order to function as he himself does as his sort of agents, his servants, who are entrusted with this incredible responsibility and opportunity; and actually, we have looked at that whole question of image and the creation mandate in previous *Groundwork* programs; but now we want to focus a little bit more on some of the implications...some of the theology of this whole story, as you mentioned; some of the takeaways that we can bring with us as we wrap up the program.

*Segment 3*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and joining our conversation today is John Hilber, Professor of Old Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, as we are in this first program of a five-part series looking at some of the earliest stories of the Bible that we find between Genesis 1 and 11; and today, Dave, we are in Genesis 1 and 2.

**DAVE BAST**

Right; so John, at the end of the last segment you said a little something about creation in the image of God—human beings being the crown of creation, as the traditional way we put it. Let's talk a little bit about the Genesis 2 story, where God takes the dust of the earth and breathes into it and creates Adam, and then later Eve. Say a little bit about that story, and maybe the message that it is sending.

**JOHN HILBER**

It picks up in many ways the theme in Genesis 1 of humans as being special; and you see in Genesis 1 that God says: Let the earth bring forth; let the animals after their kind; you know, let the plants after their kind; but we [God] make humanity in *our* image; in other words, after *our* kind; and then you get that pictured in a

beautifully portrayed description in Genesis 2 when God, in the image of a potter taking the clay—the dust from the ground—and shaping the human, and that sets in contrast in Genesis 2 with the animals, which are brought out of the ground again with not such intimate connection; and God breathes face to face into the nostrils of the man, which is different.

**DAVE BAST**

And again, non-literal, I mean, I don't think we should imagine some sort of clay model that is resuscitated by God.

**JOHN HILBER**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

It is a beautiful, poetic description of whatever God did when he made Adam and Eve.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, I think the art analogy works well. If you think of the realistic landscape portraits of the old masters, or photography compared to, say, impressionistic art. These early chapters of Genesis are more like impressionistic art, where you get the mood and the color. It does not mean that it does not refer to things in reality, real life, or real history, but it is done in very vivid ways.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And what has always been striking, particularly from the Genesis 1 presentation of creation with the seven days of creation is that, of course, the animals are created on day six, and the humans at the end of day six, as sort of like we said, the crown of creation...the climax of it; and then you get to day seven, which is the Sabbath, which is a day of rest. I like the commentator I read a while back who said: You know what that means? That means Adam and Eve's first day of existence was a day off. Their very first day...but why did God need a Sabbath? Well, it wasn't because he was tired. What God does on day seven is enjoy what he made on the first six days. He takes delight in just watching those birds and watching those fish, and Adam and Eve get to join him in that. They don't have anything to do, it is the Sabbath. Join God in taking delight in this incredible creation that the sovereign God of Israel alone has fashioned in its every detail. I love that kind of theology of delight in the idea that the first thing Adam and Eve had to do was just sit back and enjoy the show that God was putting on.

**DAVE BAST**

So, this immediacy of God's creation of Adam and Eve also speaks to the importance of human beings, doesn't it? The uniqueness, in a sense. I mean, animals, yes, created on day six, but also spiritual beings.

**JOHN HILBER**

There is a capacity that humans have in spite of all the similarities materially and even, you could argue, psychologically between humans and higher mammals, there still remains, even in modern psychology, distinctive capacities for humans for cooperation, for communication, that the animals do not even come close in the same ballpark as us in many of these relational ways that make us unique.

**DAVE BAST**

So again, the whole polemical aspect of this creation story, it is still appropriate today, because we have a bone to pick with materialists who say there is nothing but matter, and everything is just chemistry or physics. No, we believe in a God who not only created, but continues to create. And we have a bone to pick, I think, with people who say there is nothing special about human beings; a dog, a bird, a cat, a boy—the same thing. No, says Genesis. We are unique.

## **JOHN HILBER**

Yes, they are all wonderful creatures with their God-given abilities, but we are still unique; and I think those unique aspects are necessary for us to function as God called us to function as his stewards over creation, which is what this text moves towards as well.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

That is right; God did one of the things that the image of God being like God implies is that God wants us to take care of his world for him, and he says to tend and keep it. That is a task we have not always done very well, but God knew we were enough like God that he could trust us with the gift of this incredible creation, and he asks us to cultivate it, yes, but also preserve it and keep it; and that is a high and holy task that was given to human beings alone.

## **DAVE BAST**

And you know, I cannot help but think that God must not totally approve of the way we are messing up the creation in so many different ways; but nevertheless, he is patient and he has promised a new creation, hasn't he, when all will be well.

## **JOHN HILBER**

One of the most convicting texts in the Bible for me is Revelation 11:18 when the judgments of God come. In part, they come on those who have destroyed the earth. That is a scary thing.

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

But, thanks be to God, Dave, as you were also saying that particularly in Christ we know that there will be a new creation and a restored creation, even better than the creation that we read about originally in Genesis; and thanks be to God for that.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and our guest today was John Hilber. We hope you will join us next time as we look at Genesis Chapter 3 and the tragic story of humanity's fall into sin.

Connect with us at [groundworkonline.com](https://groundworkonline.com) and share what *Groundwork* means to you, and suggest also what you would like to hear discussed on future programs of *Groundwork*.

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