

Lights in the Heavens

GENESIS I:14-19

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And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years" (Gen. 1:14).

Soon after meeting with God at the burning bush and receiving his call to Egypt, Moses found himself standing in the presence of the mighty Pharaoh. Not only was this a daunting assignment because of the earthly power of Egypt's ruler. But Pharaoh was also held to be the son of the Sun God, Re. Moses understood this, but he stood before Pharaoh as the servant of a far greater God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Knowing this, he said: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, Let my people go" (Ex. 5:1). Pharaoh was not impressed. He asked, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" (Ex. 5:2). Moses was undaunted because he knew that the name of the Lord, *Yahweh*, meant, "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14). The God he trusted was the eternal God, the only true God. And through the plagues that followed, Moses attacked and exposed the false gods of Egypt. The ninth plague, the last before the final crushing plague on the firstborn, assailed the supposed realm of Pharaoh's personal God, the sun. Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven and there was "darkness over the land of Egypt," so that there was no light for three days (Ex. 10:22-23). In this way, the supremacy of the true God, the God of Israel, was exerted over the false gods of the Nile so that Pharaoh let God's people go.

Not long after these events, Moses wrote the first chapter of Genesis by the inspiration of God, perhaps while he met with the Lord atop

Mount Sinai (see Ex. 34:31-35). The creation account, no less than the plagues that fell on Egypt, involves a put-down of the false gods and idols of the ancient world. This anti-idolatry polemic is especially strong on the fourth day of creation, when “God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars” (Gen. 1:16).

The Fourth Day

The first three creation days were spent constructing the heavens and the earth, make it a fitting inhabitation for God’s creatures. Starting with the fourth day, we transition to the second half of the creation week. Here, God creates the beings who will live on the earth. Before making the creatures, however, God placed lights in the heavens: “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth’” (Gen. 1:14-15).

A great deal of the scholarly interest given to these verses concerns how there could be light on the first day of creation when the sun, moon and stars were not made until the fourth day. Moreover, a literal view of Genesis 1 has the plants growing prior to the sun shining. One popular approach is to say that the sun existed on day one but only appeared visibly on day four. The language of verses 14 and 16, however, makes it clear that God created the sun and moon on the fourth day, using the formula, “Let there be,” and saying that God “made” them at this time. The purported problem is solved not by changing the text but by taking it at its face value, supposing that God supernaturally provided his own light while the work of creation was proceeding. Then, on the fourth day, God hung the earth’s main lights in the sky: the sun by day and the moon by night.

Three tasks are appointed to these luminaries. The first was “to separate the day from the night” (Gen. 1:14). This refers to the way that the rising and setting of the sun, together with the appearance of the moon, marks the passage from day to night. It is not the sun that creates the day – God created the day and the night – but the sun’s movements regulate daytime and nighttime so long as creation stands.

Second, the lights in the heavens are placed as “signs and for seasons, and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). God is preparing for the coming of animals and mankind, for whose sake the regular movements of the stars are a means of calculating time and events. By saying that the lights are “for signs,” we think of the navigational value of the stars and the use of astral and lunar events for predicting weather. Later in the Bible, eclipses and bright stars will be used by God to signify great events, such as the birth of Jesus Christ (Joel 2:30; Mt. 2:2). The movements of heavenly bodies exert a great influence on agriculture and nature, including the breeding times of animals and the migration schedules of birds. The stars also provided the basis for calendars, the measuring of “days and years,” which in the ancient world could be extraordinarily accurate. Verse 17 states that God “set them in the expanse of the heavens,” not randomly but according to his purpose. G. C. Aalders writes that the stars “did not accidentally fall into their designated positions. The whole system was effectively established by God with a view to controlling the orderly rotation of days and nights, years and seasons.”¹

Except in rare cases where noted by God, we should not consult the stars for information regarding our futures or destinies. The stars do not have a mystical intelligence of their own, and the practice of astrology and the zodiac belong to the very occult paganism that Genesis opposed. The Old Testament took a hard stand against all fortune telling other than divine revelation. Jeremiah 10:2 forbids us from being “dismayed at the signs of the heavens.”

The third assignment given to the heavenly objects was “to give light upon the earth” (Gen. 1:15). The Hebrew word used for “lights” is usually applied to “lamps” that reflect the light. The idea here is that even active light sources like the sun are in fact shining a light that God has given them onto the earth. In his goodness towards his creation, God poured out their light which is so beneficial to the growth and well-being of his creatures. We see in the purity of light a reflection of God’s own character: 1 John 1:5 says, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

¹ G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 1:66.

It is remarkable to us that in addition to creating the sun and moon, Genesis off-handedly adds that God made “the stars” (Gen. 1:16). In the ancient world where a cloudless night sky was not washed by street lights, people looked up to a myriad bright stars in a fantastic array. Today, the night sky the ancients saw is seldom seen except out at sea or in the deep desert. There, the stars are almost overwhelming in their mysterious twinkling over the earth. When Moses casually added to the creation of the fourth day, “and the stars,” his first readers were given a sense of the awesome power and sublime wisdom of the God who, as Psalm 147:4 says, “determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.”

Today, we have the advantage of powerful telescopes that present even more fantastic visions of distant stars and galaxies. Together with its vast scope and glorious scenes, the order and design of the universe compel our awareness of the almighty Creator. Johannes Kepler, the founder of modern astronomy, thus said, “The undevout astronomer is mad.”² Consider the life-sustaining design of Earth and its solar system. It is the earth’s precise 23° slant that gives us our seasons, when a minute deviation in either direction would make life impossible. It is the precise mass and distance of the moon that keeps our tides from either stagnating the ocean or inundating whole continents. Astronomer Geoffrey Marcy wrote in the *Washington Post* about the marvel of our solar system, apparently unique in its design to sustain life. “It’s like a jewel,” he said. “You’ve got circular orbits. They’re all in the same plane . . . It’s perfect, you know. It’s gorgeous. It’s almost uncanny.”³ Unknown to him, Marcy’s comments echo those of Isaac Newton 300 years before: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”⁴

The Only True God

While the spectacular design of the universe rebukes the unbelief of atheistic scientists today, the creation account of Genesis 1 contains evidence of an intentional assault against ancient idolatry.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 32.

³ Get Colson footnote from Hughes, 33.

⁴ Hughes, *Genesis*, 33.

We have already noted the awesomeness of the starry sky, so it is not surprising that people who were bound in sin would begin to worship heavenly objects, whether in the deification of the sun and moon or in constellations of the stars. Alasdair Paine points out, however, that “this is not a noble exchange. . . . The creation is marvelous, but it is not God. Its glory points to his glory, so that we might come to know him.”⁵ Moses warns the people of Israel against this false worship of heavenly objects, since they are still creatures made by the true God.

This polemic against idolatry began in verse 1, where “In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth.” Unlike the pagan conception of limited Gods who indwelt nature, and in many cases were merely local to a specific territory or people, the God of the Bible is eternal and transcendent. He created the entirety of the universe.

But it is especially when Genesis 1 turns to the sun, moon, and stars that it targets the objects of false, idolatrous worship. Gordon Wenham explains: “In neighboring cultures, the sun and the moon were some of the most important gods in the pantheon, and the stars were often credited with controlling human destiny.”⁶ These heavenly objects often had their own religious cults, mythologies, priests, and devotees. But Genesis 1 says, “No, these are not gods. They are created lamps to shine God’s light on the earth and perform the functions the Creator has assigned them.” This is a point that would be made throughout the Old Testament. Isaiah wrote that the stars urge us to worship only the Lord, relying on his wisdom and might: “Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name” (Isa. 40:26). Meanwhile, if God created and determines the function of the heavenly lights, it would be most foolish to worship them or consult the stars for our fate.

It is especially Moses’ treatment of the sun and moon that show an unwillingness to suggest even a hint of the mythological pantheon common to the pagan nations. It is probably significant that Genesis 1:16 does not name them. Instead, Moses calls the sun and moon “the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser

⁵ Alasdair Paine, *The First Chapters of Everything* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2014), 42.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 21.

light to rule the night.” The Hebrew words for sun and moon, *shemesh* and *yareach*, were used in other Semitic languages as names of high deities. So Genesis 1 will not personalize their creation by using these names when they are in reality mere objects under God’s control. Similarly, the almost dismissive manner in which Moses says “also the stars” may well be a way of putting the idolatrous myths in their place. John Currid makes clear the message from creation’s fourth day: “Luminaries are mere material objects with no life of their own, and they are never to be worshiped” (see Dt. 4:19).⁷

In contrast, David Atkinson notes how God’s creation of the stars should humble us before him in reverent awe: “The majesty and mystery of God, seen ‘through his works’, was surely part of the faith of the author of Genesis 1. He would no doubt have concurred with the psalmist: ‘When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him’ (Ps. 8:3-4).”⁸ The ancient poet who penned Psalm 136 certainly took this view. In response to the created heavenly lights, he exclaimed:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever. . . .
to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever (Ps. 136:1, 7-9).

Like Stars in the Sky

When we studied Genesis 1:2, we noted that the way God described the original, unformed mass of creation, as desolate and uninhabited, God was anticipating his future intention. Thus the first of those concerns is answered in days one to three of creation as God makes the once-desolate creation into a lush and watered world. The second intention is solved when God inhabits the earth with

⁷ John Currid, *Genesis: Volume I, Genesis 1:1-25:18* (Darlington: UK: Evangelical Press, 2003), 76.

⁸ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 32.

creatures. The same reality can be expanded in Scripture when it comes to the pattern that we see in the creation. God is eternal and he entered into creation with his plan for the entirety of history already worked out. Thus, the forms and patterns of the first chapter of the Bible, and even the words and phrases that are used, anticipate the history and redemption that God intended from the very start.

We look on the fourth day of creation and see the heavenly lights that God placed into the expanse of the heavens. If we look forward in Scripture and ask how God later uses this imagery and language later, the result is staggering. I say this because the imagery of the fourth day with its shining stars in the dark sky is applied consistently in Scripture of *us*, the people of God who are redeemed through his covenant of grace. When Abraham complained about his lack of offspring, God took him out under the night sky and had him look upwards: “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). The New Testament assures us that this refers to Abraham’s spiritual offspring, that is, those who join him through faith in the saving promises of God (Gal. 3:7). The contemporary Christian singer Rich Mullins puts it well: “Sometimes I think of Abraham, how one star he saw had been lit for me.”

If we think that God’s point to Abraham involved merely the number of the stars rather than the stars themselves, Jesus’ later teaching makes this certain. At the end of his parable of the sower, where Christ summons us to a true and persevering faith, Jesus noted that history will end with a great separation. When he returns with his angels, Jesus will gather all who remain in their sin through unbelief for the fiery furnace of eternal condemnation. Those who were cleansed by his blood and renewed by his Spirit remained. Jesus then stated: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt. 13:37:43). Daniel 12:3 applied this same imagery to faithful believers: “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Given the Bible’s own use of this imagery to describe believers, I would note that the assignments God gave to the heavenly lights

provide a convenient summary of the believers' calling in following Christ. First, God put the lights in the heavens "to separate the day from the night" (Gen. 1:14). In like manner, God intends for us to clearly distinguish between faith and unbelief. There is the church and the world, holiness and sin, truth and error. We noted in our study of the third day that God created the world with clear distinctions and he separated things that do not belong together. Likewise, Christians are to distinguish correctly, following carefully the path laid out in God's Word.

The great need of our generation is Christians who know how to live in the world but not of the world, who know how to separate light from darkness. Paul made this very point to the believers in Philippi, urging them to live carefully according to the light of God: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life" (Phil. 2:14-16). To the Ephesians, Paul likewise called for holiness of life as Christians separated themselves, refusing to become partners with those committed to sin: "for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8).

Second, God created the heavenly lights to serve as signs for those living on the earth. A sign points to something or someone else. Christians are to be signs for others to see the grace and power of Jesus Christ in salvation. Jesus said in Revelation 22:16, "I am. . . the bright Morning Star." His work in us now is to equip us to bear testimony to his glory and grace before the world. He told us to hold fast, conquer by faith, and keep his works until the end (Rev. 2:25-26), and promised to each one: "I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2:28). If you hold fast, live by faith, and pursue his works, Jesus will make you a lamp in which his own shining light will be seen.

Third, God made the heavenly lights "to give light upon the earth" (Gen. 1:15). In addition to our witness, Jesus applied this teaching to our calling to do good works to declare God's glory:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine

before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:14-16).

Light illuminates, and we are to shine forth the way of salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Light warms, and we are to extend the love of God in Christ to hurting people in the world. Light exposes, and the gracious, godly lifestyles of believers are to stand in stark contrast with the crude, ungodly pattern of this world. Light guides and directs. We are likewise to offer the wholesome truth of God’s Word that our generation so greatly needs to hear.

Fourth, God made the sun and moon “to rule over the day and over the night” (Gen. 1:18). The point was that the sun and moon stand above their respective spheres, dominating the portion of time granted to them by God. This provocative language seems odd when spoken about impersonal objects, however great they are. Perhaps God spoke of the sun and moon ruling with an eye to the influence that Christians and the church are to have over each generation.

Christians rule not by force, compulsion, or pride. We reign with Christ through prayers that go from our hearts to the very throne of heaven above. Christians determine the course of the world by their willingness to stand for Jesus and God’s truth against all opposition. It was Christians from England and America in the last two centuries who left the safety of their homes and took the gospel through great peril to darkened lands, often at the cost of their lives, and changed the world. It was a Christian like William Wilberforce who stood up before the House of Commons in England and demanded that the slave trade end. It is Christians today who stand up amidst a culture of death and plead for the dignity and value of every human life, whether born or unborn. It is the Christian in the classroom, in the workplace, in the family, or in the neighborhood who offers hope of salvation through the gospel witness only he or she can provide.

In Revelation 5:10, the watching spirits in heaven give praise to Christ on behalf of his faithful, suffering, light-bearing church on earth, saying: “you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” Do we realize that what we do as a church and as Christians is always the single most significant earthly factor in our culture and generation? If we do not stand fast

in proclaiming God's truth from his Word, how will the world ever hear it? If we do not invite unbelieving friends to the salvation Jesus alone can give, how can they ever be redeemed? Do we fear the world and its power too much to play the role God has assigned to us? Then let us remember Moses standing before mighty Pharaoh and the gods of the Nile. The God who sends us today as lights in the world is the same God who delivered Moses and broke the false idols of that generation. He created the sun, moon, and stars and apportioned their tasks in the dawn of creation. May we, too, by faith in his great power, be faithful to shine the holy light so needed in our world today.

The Light of the World

On the fourth day of history, God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens" (Gen. 1:14). By God's Word, "it was so" (Gen. 1:15) and "God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:18). On the last day of history, when Jesus returns, God will summon his true light-bearers. Revelation 7:9-10 anticipates the scene:

behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The apostle John said of believers on that day, "We shall be like [Jesus], because we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn. 3:3). Will you be gathered in that resplendent number, shining like a star, after Jesus has returned? You can know that you will by trusting in him now, confessing your sins, looking to his cross for your forgiveness, embracing him as both Savior and Lord. Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world." And he promised that if you follow him, living by his Word, opening your heart to him in prayer, and walking as his true disciple, you "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).