

Fiat Lux!

GENESIS 1:3-5

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And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness (Gen. 1:3-4).

One of the questions in studying Genesis, or any other Old Testament book, is how Christians should relate it to the New Testament. Many scholars urge that we must read Genesis on its own terms, since whatever message it has for us was first given by the original author to his readers. This is indeed an important principle: we must read every passage of Scripture in its own context and setting. The Bible identifies the human author of Genesis as Moses, the redeemer of Israel from its bondage in Egypt. His writing began while atop Mount Sinai in the presence of God, where Exodus 24:4 tells us, “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.” During the exodus, Moses would go into the tabernacle “to speak with the Lord” and receive his Word (Num. 7:89). In this way, all of the Bible’s first five books, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, were written: “Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests. . . , who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel” (Dt. 31:9).

The original audience of Genesis was therefore ancient Israel, a pilgrim people who sojourned through the wilderness of Sinai towards the Promised Land in Canaan. As we interpret Genesis, we should keep in mind this exodus context of a people seeking a home from God. Liberal scholarship has long sought to deny Mosaic authority, ascribing the Pentateuch to other writers as late as the Babylonian exile. But according to Joshua 1:8, the Pentateuch was completed by Moses and given to his successor Joshua. With the Bible as our

authority, we may confidently embrace Genesis as having been written by Moses at God's inspiration for the exodus people of Israel.

The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is further attested by the New Testament, including references given by Jesus himself (Mt. 19:8; Mk. 12:26; Jn. 5:45-47; 7:19; Acts 3:22; and Rom. 10:5). This raises the question of how we should relate the Old Testament to the New. The answer is that while noting the original setting for Genesis, Christians are bound to interpret its meaning as explained by Christ and his apostles. Christians not only use the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament, but we understand Genesis in light of the fuller revelation that later came through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself made a Christ-centered principle key to the Old Testament, declaring to the scribes and scholars: "if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (Jn. 5:46).

The Word in the Beginning

In our study of the opening verses of Genesis 1, we have noted the dominant place occupied by the triune God. We have seen God the Father, who "in the beginning, . . . created the heavens and earth" (Gen. 1:1). We have encountered God the Spirit "hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). As Christians, we should suspect the presence of God the Son as well. After all, Paul stated that by Jesus "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, . . . all things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:16). Hebrews 1:2 identifies Christ as "the heir of all things, through whom [God] also created the world." If all things were created by and through God the Son, we would expect his presence to be notable in the creation account of Genesis 1. Where, then, is Christ in the creation?

The answer to this question is seen in Genesis 1:3: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." The Gospel of John explains how this relates to Christ by referring to Jesus as the divine Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (Jn. 1:1-3). The deliberate link to the opening lines of Genesis is obvious. The New Testament depicts Christ's salvation as a new

work of creation, so it is no surprise that it also places Jesus as God and with God in creating the heavens and earth.

John 1:1 teaches Jesus' deity both in terms of his eternity and his divine personhood. Genesis 1:3 shows that God created by means of the Word, so that the Word – Christ – existed prior to creation. Just as Genesis 1:1 says that “In the beginning, God,” John 1:1 declares: “In the beginning was the Word.” When the creation “was made,” Jesus already “was.” This was an important statement in the church's fight with the earliest heretics. Arius, whose denial of Christ's deity prompted the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., maintained that while Jesus was God-like in many ways, he was still a created being and less than God. But John 1:1 and Genesis 1:3 tell us, instead, that when time and creation began, Jesus already “was.” Leon Morris says, “The Word existed before creation, which makes it clear that the Word was not created... The Word is not to be included among created beings.”¹

By connecting Jesus to Genesis 1:3, John also wants us to understand the personhood of the Word. The Word is a person, the companion of God himself. This warns us against another perennial heresy, that which denies the distinct personhood of the various members of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity states, “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons... God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”² When John identifies Jesus as the Word of Genesis 1:3, he means God the Son, Jesus Christ, who eternally lives in relationship with and does the will of God the Father. The Word is God's executor in creation, the agent who accomplishes God's will. Jesus thus prayed to the Father at the end of his earthly ministry: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (Jn. 17:4).

Seeing Jesus' glorious presence in the very opening moments of creation helps us further to appreciate his humility in coming to die for our sins. As Paul pointed out, the very Jesus who is one with the Creator himself was later incarnated so as to redeem us from our sins.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66.

² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, II.3.

Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). Sidney Greidanus writes: “The King of the universe became a slave. When the world was headed for destruction, God spoke his word again through Jesus. . . . The Word of God, Jesus, created this world, and the Word of God, Jesus, will redeem this world.”³ This holy thought informs the praise of our Christmas carols:

Come to earth to taste our sadness, he whose glories knew no end;
By his life he brings us gladness, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.
Leaving riches without number, born within a cattle stall;
This the everlasting wonder, Christ was born the Lord of all.⁴

And God Said

Our Christian understanding of Genesis 1:3 would not have been as apparent to the original readers of Genesis. From our standpoint in redemptive-history, Christians have a more developed revelation that draws out the fuller implications of God’s Word. To Moses’ Old Testament hearers, the main point would have been the sheer power of God as he created by means of his mere word: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). As Psalm 33:6 would later extol: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”

It is highly significant that God’s first action in creation was to speak: “And God said.” We encounter this formula ten times in Genesis 1, so that “God said” forms the drumbeat of the marching creation. This reminds us, as did verse 1, of the radical distinction between the Creator and his creation. Gerhard von Rad writes: “Creation cannot be even remotely considered an emanation from God; it is not somehow an overflow or reflection of his being, . . . but is rather a product of his personal will.”⁵ Moreover, “And God said” highlights how God’s purpose is achieved and worked out by the going forth of his Word. Joining the presence of the Spirit in verse 2 to the creative

³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 56.

⁴ Mark E. Hunt, 1978, adapted verses for John Wesley, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” 1744.

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 50.

Word in verse 3, we see the pattern that is repeated throughout Scripture: the activity of the Spirit joined to the ministry of God's Word. As the Spirit-blessed Word created light in the beginning, so also does the Spirit-blessed Word shine divine light into the hearts of sinners to create new life through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Latin version of Genesis 1:3 gives us the expression *creation by fiat*. "Fiat lux," says the Vulgate Bible: "Let there be light." The point is that creation is the expression of God's will. God willed it, saying, "let there be light," and it was so: "and there was light."

By saying, "Let there be," God was expressing his will. Here, at the beginning of the Bible, we learn a lesson that will be vital for all of history and life: God's will is the creative and determining power of all that there is and will be. We ask the question if God is able to accomplish whatever he wills. The answer is that it was his will in the first place that created all things, causing even the first perfect rays of light to shine. God's will is a sovereign, creative power, enforced by his Word of command. Whatever God's Word declares to be his will, whether it is a promise of salvation or a warning of dire judgment, we may be absolutely certain that his will will be done.

God's will in creation further notes the lordship of God over all that he has made. In contrast to the secular philosophy that seem history as governed by chance events, Walter Brueggemann writes: "The design of the world is not autonomous or accidental. It is based upon the will of God. . . . The shape of reality can only be understood as the purpose of God. Creation is in principle obedient to the intent of God. . . . Creation is what it is because God commands it."⁶ The same principle extends to each of us: we exist as we are because of the will of God and we are designed to respond obediently to God's will as it is revealed in his holy Word.

Genesis 1:3 especially displays the power by which God's Word is always effectual: "And God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light." The Word of God possesses the power of God to accomplish the will of God. Gordon Wenham writes: "It is a divine word of command that brings into existence what it expresses. Throughout

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 30.

Scripture the word of God is characteristically both creative and effective: it is the prophetic word that declares the future and helps it come into being.”⁷ What is only four words in English (and only two in Hebrew) possessed the awesome power to create the light that would shine into darkness. Alasdair Paine observes how much this tells us about God: “He is not silent; he may be known, because he speaks. And look what happens when he does: a universe springs into being.”⁸

Christians should remember the power of God’s Word in creation when we are challenged to bear witness to the Bible before the hearts of an unbelieving world. How can we dare speak unpalatable truths, convicting truths, truths that offend the ears of idolatrous unbelievers, in the face of all manner of secular and spiritual opposition? The answer is that we know that God has willed the light of his Word to shine and that by means of that Word to grant new life so that sinners will believe. Christians are, Peter said, “a royal priesthood,” commissioned to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Moreover, the same Word that powerfully created light and converted us as sinners, goes on with that same power to cultivate God’s saving grace in our lives. This is why discerning believers have always given a priority to the Word of God in the witness and worship of the church and in the daily life of the faithful Christian.

Psalm 33 sets the pattern for how we should respond to the power of God exhibited through the Word of God in creation. Psalm 33:9 declares the fact: “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” Our response is given in the preceding verse: “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!” (Ps. 33:8). Indeed, the scenes of worship in the book of Revelation show that awe-inspired praise for the power of God in creation is the very theme of heaven. Revelation 4 shows the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders falling on the faces before the throne of God, casting their crowns before his feet, and crying out with wonder: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 18.

⁸ Alasdair Paine, *The First Chapters of Everything* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2014), 32.

and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

And There Was Light

On the first day of creation, God spoke and by the power of his Word caused light to shine: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God created light itself: “not just visible light, but the entire electromagnetic spectrum itself, apart from any light sources.”⁹ This is the Christian answer to those who scoff at the literal possibility of Genesis 1:3, since it presents light shining prior to the creation of the sun. But the sun is not the cause of light. God is the creator of light. Moreover, just as one would not create a musical instrument before sound itself had been made, it is entirely logical that God would make light on the first day before later making objects designed to shine and reflect that light.

In the Bible, just as in our earthly experience, light is associated with the flourishing of life. If you want a plant to grow, you place it in the sunshine. The Bible also speaks this way. 2 Samuel 23:4 speaks of “the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,” which together with rain “makes grass to sprout from the earth.” Light furthermore reveals. When you walk into a dark room, you turn on the light in order to see. It is not surprising then, that in revealing his glory through the work of creation, God began with the shining of light. Starting on the first day, creation would take place in the light of God’s revelation. Light also speaks of safety and salvation. “The LORD is my light and my salvation,” David wrote; “whom shall I fear?” (Ps. 27:1).

Given the numerous blessings associated with light, it is no wonder that verse 4 continues: “And God saw that the light was good.” This depiction is wonderful, for we learn that after speaking his very first creative word, on the first day of creation, God looks upon what he is done and finds pleasure in it. We will be contemplating the goodness of creation all through Genesis 1, a truth that our damaged world needs help remembering. As Gordon Wenham writes: “God the great

⁹ Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-Shire, UK, 2009), 124.

artist is pictured admiring his handiwork. This account of creation is a hymn to the creator: creation itself bears witness to the greatness and goodness of God.”¹⁰ God not only delighted in the light but he knew how beneficial it would be to his creatures. The light is a reflection of God’s blessed nature. Psalm 18:28 extols: “the LORD my God lightens my darkness.” The great Aaronic blessing made light synonymous with the expression of God’s favor: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you” (Num. 6:24-25). God’s approval signifies the perfection of his creation in fulfilling his will. We, too, should approve all that God does, learning to assign value in keeping with his measure of what is good and true. Therefore, whenever we witness how beautiful is the light of God rising majestically above the morning horizon, we should praise our Maker, who shined light into darkness.

Imagine what Genesis 1:3-4 would have meant to the people of Israel when they first heard these words from the lips of Moses. The dark nights of Sinai were cold and threatening, stirring fear and foreboding in their hearts. But light dawned on each new day, and as it shone they learned from Genesis that the God whose Word they were following was the very same God who created the light itself. God provided a special light, his *Shekinah Glory*, to shine on a difficult path as they trudged through a wilderness towards a land that God had promised. The very light itself testified to the sovereign goodness of the Lord, urging them to go forward with confidence and expectation. Under the shining light that God had made, they could believe and keep his commands. David would later connect God’s light to the guidance that comes to those who follow his Word: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105).

The first day saw not only the first shining of light but also God’s first act of division: “And God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:4). By separating, God provided a sphere for the light and another sphere for the darkness. Verse 5 elaborates: “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

¹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis*, 18.

It is impossible to avoid the impression that darkness is foreboding and evil. Certainly Scripture will often convey this idea, just as every child instinctively struggles with fear of the dark. It was light that God called good, then separating it from darkness. But we should hold off on such thoughts as we consider the first day. All that existed was made by God according to his perfect will. There is a place and role for darkness just as there is for day. God's division of light and darkness, day and night, provides a rhythm to life. There is a time for work and a time for rest. John Calvin preached:

if we had only a single [continuous] day, we would not realize so clearly the good that God does for us with light. But when night overtakes us and we are cloistered within it, so to speak, needing a candle to guide us, and then when morning returns, we see how God has pitied us. . . . When lying down and rising up, we must bless his name for protecting us through the night and watching over us while we were asleep. And when day is at hand, let us also thank him for bringing us to a new life.¹¹

In naming both the light and the darkness, God claims his sovereign rights as Creator: "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Gen. 1:5). God is Lord over both, so that whatever fear we experience in facing them may be brought to him for our aid. Whatever purposes are pursued in them are ruled and judged by God, so that both day and night are to be spent in his service. In separating the light from the darkness, God gave order to the progression of time under his kingship. Psalm 19:2 offers them both to the praise of his revealed glory: "Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge."

The Light of the World

In the Jerusalem of Jesus' day, the Feast of Tabernacles was concluded each year with a festival of lights at the temple. Great candelabras were lit, casting beams throughout the city, to remember the guidance and protection that God gave in the exodus through the pillar of fire and light that was his *Shekinah Glory*. It was probably in the midst of this illumination, six months before his death on the cross, that Jesus took a prominent place and proclaimed, "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12).

¹¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis Chapters 1-11*, trans. Rob Boy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 23, 25.

There are so many ways in which Jesus could legitimately have made this claim. He was, after all, the Word who with the Father created light itself on the first day. John thus said of him, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (Jn. 1:9). As light was given to reveal, Jesus came to be the perfect image of God to mankind. He said: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). Jesus is the light who provides salvation to men and women trapped in the darkness of sin. Isaiah foretold his coming in just these terms: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isa. 9:2). Jesus is the light of the world. Just as he was the source for the first light that shone through the darkness in creation, so also will he shine God’s light on our paths. Therefore, he claims, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

Reading the creation account, it is tempting to wonder what it would be like to have seen those brilliant first beams piercing the cosmic darkness. The marvel of the gospel is that we are not so distant from that light as some might think. On the first day, the Spirit of God was hovering as the Word of God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. The Spirit and the Word have not ceased in the work they began on that first day. By the Word of God, the Spirit of God is shining the light of God to give life, reveal truth, and bring salvation to everyone who believes. The apostle Paul encouraged us to have confidence in the saving power of God’s word, and to that end he made this an astonishing claim. He said that just as Jesus was the source for the first light that shone through the darkness in creation, so also will he shine that very light into our hearts as we believe: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).