

**“Creation, Fall and the Promise of Redemption:
The Story of the Old Testament”**

--CEFC 9/10/17;

In the beginning there was nothing but a big bang,
but through time and by an entirely random process,
expanding matter, pulled by the forces of gravity,
began to coalesce and to cluster
and formed stars and planets and galaxies--
billions and billions of galaxies.

And on one small green planet,
located third from a middle-sized star we call our sun,
that matter somehow became organized
into that complex and mysterious thing we call life.

These tiny living molecules--
through long stretches of time and the chance mutation of the genetic code,
and a natural process of the selection of those organisms
most able to survive—

these tiny molecules of life evolved into bacteria,
and into algae,
and into fish,
and into rats,
and into primates,
and into homo sapiens like us.

And these homo sapiens developed from gathers to hunters to telemarketers.

And we now live, we die,
and our decaying matter returns to the dust from which it came,
as the cosmos either continues in an infinite expansion
or contracts back in upon itself into one Big Crunch./

This is the story that is offered to us by our modern, secular, scientific culture--
It is told over and over again.

I think of the PBS special: “The Mysteries of Deep Space”
which laid it out very well.

It is now the official defining narrative of our existence--
the story that tells us who we are and what our lives are all about.

What is all comes down to is this:
we are lumps of clay, nothing more--
existing for a brief moment as a tiny speck in the vastness of space and time.

Carl Sagan, who was the well-known televangelist of the religion of scientific naturalism,
preached a very simple message:

“The Cosmos:
it is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be.”

Reflecting on the human condition in this cosmic story, Sagan says,
 “We’re like a newborn baby left on a doorstep
 with no note explaining who it is.”

As they documented in that PBS program, one of the driving forces in astronomy today
 is the search for some glimmer of life out there--
 some signal from beyond that we are not alone.

Though we have no parents, we may at least have siblings.
 Perhaps around some distant star, a planet exists like ours,
 which could support life like us--

perhaps we could
 make contact, and communicate.

But so far there is nothing--
 we remain lost and alone in the cosmos.

This is the story we are given--
 the meta-narrative, the big picture,
 the guiding understanding of the world and our place in it
 that is supposed to give meaning to our lives./

Every one has to have some kind of story.
 Neil Postman, a communications professor at New York University,
 puts it well:
 “Children everywhere ask, as soon as they have the command of language to do so,
 ‘Where did I come from?’
 and, shortly after,
 ‘What will happen when I die?’
 They require a story to give meaning to their existence.
 Without air, our cells die.” he writes.
 “Without a story, our selves die.”¹

But is this story--this story of atoms and energy,
 time and chance and nothing else—
 this story that is limited to what science can describe--
 is this story a story that allows our “selves,”
 our souls as human beings to live?

Does it really explain who I know myself to be?
 Is a philosophy that says, “Men are evolved from apes;
 therefore we must love one another”—
 Is that really enough?

I don’t think so.

I believe the secular scientific story
 is a story that leaves us “homeless,” like orphans left on a doorstep.

¹Cited in Keyes, *True Heroism*, p. 215.

And the first thing he does is create all that is.
 God is the ultimate origin of all creation--
 He is the first cause of all other causes--
 He is the source of all other beings.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

This is not to deny the validity of the scientific enterprise
 which seeks to discover cause and effect in this created world,
 and perhaps to discover, say, the process of stellar evolution.
 God can create however he likes.

But God the Creator is the one who stands behind any such stellar process.
 Even a Big Bang, if there was such a thing,
 is the work of his hand.

The biblical story begins with the central truth that God is the Creator of all that is.

And there are three aspects of this first movement of the first act of the biblical story
 that are particularly important.

First, the Bible affirms that God and this material world are distinct.

This world is not a part of God, or an extension of the being of God.
 The sun, moon and stars reflect the glory of God,
 but they are not gods themselves.

God is not in the rocks and trees
 in the sense that they are a part of God.
 He created them apart from himself.

God stands over the world, as the transcendent ruler of this world.
 He allows no rivals to his power.
 He is the Author with a capital “A” of this story--
 all of history is, indeed, His-story.

Second, the Bible affirms that God created an orderly world--

The biblical story sets this forth in the description of the seven days of creation.
 However they are understood,
 they reflect a controlled and ordered process,
 reflecting God’s own wisdom.
 That’s what makes this a cosmos, rather than mere chaos.

It is a rational process, not a random one,
 and it is this biblical understanding of the natural world
 that actually led to the rise of modern science.

Think of Isaac Newton, for example,
 who saw his work of scientific investigation
 as “thinking God’s thoughts after him.”

This is an ordered world that reflects the character of its Creator.

And this ordered world has a purpose--

You can sense that purpose in the narrative of Genesis 1,
as it builds in these six days to the crowning act of creation--
the creation of humanity, male and female--created in the image of God.

The creation of mankind is not just one stop along the way.

We are more than just the present stage,
of an on-going process of evolution.
We are the highest expression of the creative activity of God.

This is the third aspect of this creative work of God that is so significant to us.

**Human beings have a distinctive God-given character,
unique among the creatures he has made.**

--we are rational beings--able to think;
--we are moral beings--able to choose;
--we are social being--able to love;
--we are artistic beings--able to create; able to appreciate beauty;
--we are spiritual beings--able to worship and to pray.

These unique qualities reflect the fact we are God's image in the world--
in all these ways we are in some sense like God--
they are all ways in which we are personal,
imaging the personal nature of God.

In fact, these are all ways that God has created us
such that we may live in a relationship with himself.

We are created as the image of God—

This is the source of our unique dignity as human beings--
and of our responsibility toward one another.

This is the source of that famous statement that
“we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights,”
and it is the ground of the other side of that truth—
that we are entrusted by our Creator with certain inalienable responsibilities.

We are moral creatures, who are accountable to the God who made us.

We are created in the image of God—

This is what gives the lie to all forms of racist bigotry.
Every human being has an inherent dignity before God.

The Hubble telescope can look ten billion light years into space,
and I tell you, it will not find one object as mysteriously divine
as the person sitting next to you in this room.
We are personal beings created in the image of God.

No wonder we so long for relationships,
No wonder we look for some extra-terrestrial beings out there to communicate with.
God has created us as personal creatures,
we are made for relationships,

supremely so that we might know him and love him,
and so magnify his own glory ever more.

This is the first movement of our first act--
The story begins with the glorious God who acts in creation.

We read at the end of Genesis, chapter one, that
"God saw all that he had made,
and it was very good."

It was a beautiful creation, untouched, unspoiled by evil of any form.
The Lord God planted a garden and there put the man he had formed.
The only deficiency in this good creation was that Adam was alone,
and so the Lord made a helper suitable for him.
The man received her with joy,
and the man and his wife were both naked,
and they felt no shame.

Created as the very image of God himself to rule over creation,
the man and the woman were free,
and in the exercise of their freedom they were good.
They basked in the sunshine of the glorious liberty they enjoyed
as children of God.
All that God created was good.

But quite suddenly, into this idyllic world a new character emerges--
a tempter.
He is depicted in the Genesis story simply as a serpent, a snake--
a mere creature.
He is described as a "crafty creature,"
but certainly he was no rival to the sovereign rule of the Creator.

But where did this first evil in the cosmos come from?
We are left with a mystery, which reflects the mystery of evil itself.

Certainly, God couldn't have created this snake as evil,
for all that God made was good.
There are hints elsewhere in Scripture² that may point
to a primordial rebellion among the angelic beings,
that resulted in this embodiment of evil--
but that still doesn't tell us why evil entered into the world.
It just pushes its entrance, and the mystery itself, still further back.

Here the tempter just appears,

²Cf. Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:1-19.

and his role in the story emphasizes, I think,
 that there was nothing in human beings themselves
 to prompt them to rebel against God's rule.
 There was no natural cause of evil within the human race.
 There was simply freedom,
 a freedom reflecting God's own freedom.
 And it was toward this freedom that the tempter directed his efforts.

God had said to that first man Adam in Gen. 2:16--
**"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;
 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, . . ."**

But the serpent made this liberal permission with a single prohibition
 seem totally restrictive and restraining:
**"Did God really say,
 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"** he asks (Gen. 3:1).

Through the temptation of the snake,
Eve and then Adam after her decide that God's goodness toward them
 cannot be trusted.

They refused to believe that God knew what was best for their lives,
 that his ways were right,
 that he and he alone had the right to determine what was good and true.

In their own pride, wanting to become like God themselves,
 they rebelled against his rule,
 and they disobeyed his only command.

The results were disastrous--
 first there was **shame**--
 suddenly they were ashamed of their nakedness, and they covered themselves.

Their shame was followed by **fear**--
 they hid from God for the first time--
 this fear arose from feelings of **guilt**.

But instead of facing their guilt
 they sought to **evade their own responsibility**.

The woman blamed the serpent,
 and the man blamed the women--
 and indirectly, he blamed God himself who gave her to him.
"Playing the victim" is not just a modern phenomenon!

But the final result of this disobedience is **judgment**.
 God, the glorious Creator,
 reveals himself also as **God the Righteous Judge**.

God curses Adam and Eve for what they have done--
 they are banished from the garden and forced to live in Exile, east of Eden.

And ultimately they died.
They died, and their children died.

In fact, the sin which began so innocently with the bite of a single piece of fruit
 quickly escalated in the next generation into murder,
 as Adam's son Cain killed his brother Abel.

Do you see what this story means?

We are not only created beings,
 we are also commanded beings.

We live under moral obligation
 to a just God who stands over each human conscience
 and who transcends every human culture.

Make no mistake--there is great dignity in this condition.

The fact that we are morally responsible gives meaning and significance
 to our choices.

After all, my dog didn't stand under the judgment of God.

Being morally accountable to God may give meaning, but also it brings guilt.

For we are all like Adam—we share the corruption of his nature.

We all fail to live up to that moral obligation--
 all of us have refused to trust in the goodness of God
 and have instead sought to determine what is good for ourselves.

Ours is a fallen world--it is a pale reflection of the glory which it once had--
 yet we still have a collective, corporate memory as human beings

of the glory and the joy which was once ours.

God has put eternity in our hearts.

We instinctively feel that death is an intrusion--it is not natural.

God created us to live in his presence.

We have within us a longing to return to that garden
 and to share in the tree of life.

But is that possible?

We turn now to the **third movement** of the Old Testament story--

and you may well be saying to yourself right now--

this guy is supposed to be telling us the story of the entire Old Testament,
 and he's only got through the first few chapters of Genesis.

At this rate we won't get out of here before midnight!

Well, I just want to assure you that we are, in fact, two thirds through--

For the story of the rest of the Old Testament
 flows out of these first few chapters.

For the glorious God who acts in Creation,

and the righteous God who acts in Judgment,

is also the merciful God who acts in the promise of redemption.

As I said, those first few chapters of Genesis paint a pretty grim picture.
The first sin was quickly followed by another--as Cain murdered his brother Abel.

By chapter 6 of Genesis, we're told that
the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become
and that he was grieved that he had made human beings at all.

The earth was corrupt and full of violence, and he could bear it no more.
God's patience gave out, and he said, "Enough"
and he sent the judgment of the great flood.

Only faithful Noah and his family found favor with the Lord.
Noah believed God and built a great boat
and he and his family were spared.
And when the waters of the flood receded,
God blessed Noah--and commanded him to be fruitful and fill the earth.

It seemed like a new beginning, a fresh start.
But no sooner than they got off the boat,
Noah gets drunk and has a run-in with his son Canaan,
and then in an act of arrogance, motivated also by fear,
men tried to build a great city with a tower, the tower of Babel,
reaching to the heavens to glorify themselves,

And the Lord again acted in judgment,
confusing the languages of the people
and scattering them over the face of the whole earth.

At this moment in the story,
you have to be wondering what hope there can be for this world.
God has poured out his blessing
but each time it has been scorned--
God has been mocked,
his authority defied,
his mercy refused.

Is there any way to redeem this fallen world so polluted by human evil?
Is there any way to overcome the powerful effects of sin unleashed
by the rebellion of Adam and Eve?

Will that goodness, that blessing of creation, ever be regained?

And it is at just this point that the plot-line of the biblical story takes a decisive turn.
The Lord in his grace calls a man named Abram,
who is renamed Abraham--

Gen. 12:1--

"The Lord had said to Abram,
 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household
 and go to the land I will show you.
 I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;
 I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.
 I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all the peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you.' "

This is God's plan--
 to bless this one man, Abraham,
 and to make Abraham into a great nation.
 God would create a new people to whom he would reveal himself,
 and through this new people, he would reveal himself to the whole world.

This is **the covenant of grace**--
 it is a covenant in that it is God's agreement, his promise,
 to work out his purposes through Abraham and his offspring.
 and it is of grace because there is nothing Abraham did to deserve it.
 It comes entirely at God's initiative.
 The message of the Bible is not about man seeking God,
 but of God seeking man.
 Human beings are always running away and hiding--
 it is God who seeks us out.

God simply gave Abraham a promise--a promise of redemption--
 and he believed God--
 he trusted God and left his own homeland
 with only the word of God to go on.

The biblical story tells us how that faith of Abraham was put to the test--
 more than once.

And sometimes Abraham failed--
 but God continued to work out his gracious plan through him.

And that covenant promise passed to Abraham's son Isaac,
 and to Isaac's son Jacob--
 and this Jacob, who had twelve sons,
 was renamed Israel--
 and these twelve sons, in the providence of God, ended up in Egypt
 where their descendents increased in number,
 but became enslaved to the Pharaoh,
 the Egyptian king.

But the promise continued--
 and the descendents of the twelve sons of Jacob,
 were now the twelve tribes of Israel--
 and in their suffering at the hands of Pharaoh

they cried out to the God of their fathers.

At this point this new *family* becomes a new *nation*,
 as God raised up a deliverer named Moses
 to rescue them from the slavery of Egypt.
 By the mighty acts of God, Moses led his people
 through the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai
 where the Lord revealed himself in glory and gave them the law
 by which this new nation was to be governed.

It included the Ten Commandments
 which set forth the basic demands upon this people.

The Lord gave Israel the law through Moses
 to teach them his own holiness and righteousness.
 It included an elaborate system of sacrifices
 which were to teach the people the seriousness of sin--
 as they were required to sacrifice bulls and goats and sheep
 to impress upon them that disobedience deserves death.

But at the same time God, in his mercy,
 had provided through these same sacrifices a means by which
 sinful human beings might come near to him in worship. /

But even as Moses was on the mountain receiving the tablets,
 the people down below were bowing before a golden calf,
 engaging in all sorts of promiscuous revelry.

And the problem of disobedience to the perfect law of God
 continued in the people of God.

They were required to wander in the desert forty years,
 before they settled in the promised land,
 but even there they did not live at peace--
 for they did not live faithfully before the Lord.

They longed to be like the nations around them,
 rejecting the Lord as their invisible King, wanting a human king instead.

The Lord gave them King David--
 to whom he again gave his word of blessing,
 renewing his covenant promise.

David united the nation, established Jerusalem as its capital city,
 and made plans to build a glorious temple,
 but unrighteousness was found even in his heart--
 as he committed adultery with a young woman named Bathsheba,
 and he had her husband killed.

when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,
 because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, "
 declares the LORD.
 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,"
 declares the LORD.
 "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God, and they will be my people. ...
 I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

Ezekiel gave this promise this way:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean;
 ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;
 I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
 And I will put my Spirit in you
 and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."
 (Ezek. 36:25-27)

"I myself will be your shepherd," the Lord said (Ezek. 34:11).³

The story of Israel demonstrates the depth of human sin--
 even with the most perfect of laws,
 the people continued to rebel against God's love.
 Something more than mere messengers was needed,
 only something greater than instruction could deal with this problem.
 Only a work of God himself acting to take away their sin
 and change the human heart from the inside
 would do.

But God's purpose of grace would not be extinguished,
 and the promise of just that kind of work continued—
 the promise of a Savior, a Messiah.

This is the message of the Old Testament--

The first act of the grand biblical story--
 an act with three movements--

- **First, the work of God in creation--**
 revealing himself as a powerful God
 who wills the existence of all that is;
 revealing himself as personal God,
 creating us in his image--
 so that we might enjoy a personal relationship with him.
- **Second, the work of God in judgment--**
 revealing himself as the one who alone
 can determine what is good and right;

³Though cf. 34:23 where David will come as shepherd.

revealing himself as the one to whom
we must each give an account.

- And third, **the work of God in redemption**--
revealing himself as the gracious and merciful God,
who begins a work of grace in choosing one man,
one family, one nation,
as his means of revealing himself to the whole world;
revealing himself as a God of great patience with a hard-hearted people,
continuing to promise to restore what had been lost by their sin.

This is the story--
paradise created,
paradise lost,
and the promise of paradise regained by God's grace.//

Psychologist William Kilpatrick
described the shock to the citizens of Argentina in the 1980s
when they lost the war to the British in the Falkland Islands.
All along they had thought they were winning the war
because they had only heard the government-controlled news
and had no other story to make them question it.

He wrote,
"What can happen with news stories can happen also with life stories.
You can be left with only one version of reality."⁴

What about you, have you been listening to the wrong story?

The Bible calls us to this one story--
The Bible calls us to understand our lives in the light of this story,
and to come to know the Author of this story.
The Bible calls us it calls us to join in this story.
This is a grand divine drama in which God calls us to play our part.

As one writer put it:
"I cannot answer the question, 'What ought I to do?'
unless I first answer the question, 'Of which story am I a part?'"⁵

There's more to come in the two weeks ahead--
but perhaps even from what you've heard this morning
you're saying,
this story makes sense--
it makes sense of the world I live in,

⁴Cited in Keyes, *True Heroism*.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216

it makes sense of my life, my own soul--
 You know in your heart that this creation must have a Creator;
 you know in your heart that there is something wrong with this world--
 something wrong with your own soul--
 and you know that your only hope is the promise of God--
 the promise of his grace.
 You believe that this story is your only hope to find a home for your homeless soul.
 The object of your hope is our subject next week---
 he is the our Savior, our Lord--Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Prayer

Closing Song: *How Firm a Foundation*

Benediction

Rom. 15:4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,
 so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures
 we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement
 give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,
 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify
 the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What the Bible Is All About
Part I, 9/10/17

**“Creation, Fall and the Promise of Redemption:
The Story of the Old Testament”**

What story tells you who you are? The Bible gives us a story that encompasses all of creation—past, present and future, and it is a story that gives meaning to our lives. This morning we begin with the story of the Old Testament in which God reveals himself in three great movements—

I. The Glorious God who acts in Creation—

II. The Righteous God who acts in judgment—

III. The Merciful God who acts in redemption—

A. **Abraham** and the covenant of grace

B. **Moses** and the giving of the law

C. **David** and the failure of the kingdom

D. The **prophets** and the continuing promise

Next Week: How the promise is fulfilled.

Discussion Questions:

**“Creation, Fall and the Promise of Redemption:
The Story of the Old Testament”**

- What are the "stories" that circulate in our culture seek to explain who we are as human beings? Why are they believed?
- What makes the biblical story so distinct as a way of understanding the world and ourselves? What about the biblical story is most significant to you as you seek to understand yourself and the meaning of your life?
- What would you say are some of the major themes of the Old Testament? Why is the Old Testament necessary for the understanding of the Jesus? In other words, why was it necessary that Jesus was born as the son of Mary rather than the son of Sarah [Abraham's wife]?
- How would you explain the message of the Old Testament to someone who knew nothing about it in just three minutes? Practice doing that with someone in your group.
- Pray for the International Friends ministry as it reaches out to many who have never read the Bible and who know nothing of it. Pray that many may come to the Bible Discussion group, and pray as the leaders seeks to teach the truth of the whole Bible to the students who come.