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Sydney Missionary and Bible College, Australia

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—David J. Jackman, former president, Proclamation Trust, London, England

THE
GOD
WHO IS
THERE

Finding Your Place in God's Story

D. A. CARSON



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Preface

If you know nothing at all about what the Bible says, the book you are now holding in your hands is for you.

If you have recently become interested in God or the Bible or Jesus but quite frankly you find the mass of material rather daunting and do not know where to begin, this book is for you.

If you have been attending a Christian church for many years in an indifferent fashion—it's a nice extracurricular activity now and then—but have recently come to the conclusion you really ought to understand more than you do, this book is for you.

If you have quite a few of the pieces of the Bible stored in your mind but have no idea how the exodus relates to the exile or why the New Testament is called the New Testament, this book is for you.

If in your experience the Bible has lots of data but you do not see how it conveys God to you or introduces Jesus in a fashion that is utterly humbling and transforming, this book is for you.

This book is not for everyone. The person who does not want more than a bumper sticker introduction to Christianity may find this book a bit much. What I have tried to do here is run through the Bible in fourteen chapters. Each chapter focuses on one or more passages from the Bible, unpacks it a little, and tries to build connections with the context, drawing the lines together to show how they converge in Jesus. By and large I have assumed very little prior acquaintance with the Bible. What I do assume, however, is that a reader will get hold of a Bible and have it near at hand. In the first chapter I will tell you how to find your way around in a Bible.

I have presented the material in these chapters as talks in various places. Most recently, however, I gave them as a series spread over two weekends in the Twin Cities. The series was videorecorded and is available on DVD. Each individual

talk can also be downloaded as a free video file from thegospelcoalition.org. The video series fairly closely parallels the chapters of this book. In addition, *The God Who Is There Leader's Guide* (also published by Baker) corresponds to this book and to the video series for those who want to organize a small group discussion of the material and find additional resources.

My warm thanks to those who have helped bring this series together. The list of names could be surprisingly long, but I'll especially mention Lucas Naugle and his video crew for their competence and professionalism, the various staff members at Desiring God Ministries for organizing the talks in the Twin Cities, Andy Naselli for the initial transcription, and Ben Peays, the executive director of The Gospel Coalition, for tirelessly working out details. I am especially thankful for those who have listened to parts of this material on earlier occasions and asked probing and intelligent questions that forced me to be a little clearer than I would otherwise have been.

I must tell you right away that I do not pretend to be a neutral bystander, coolly weighing what some will think of as the pros and cons of the Christian faith. I will try to be as careful as I can in handling the Bible, but I must tell you I am a Christian. What I have found of God in Jesus Christ is so wonderful, I am eager for others to know it too—and to know him.

Since in this book I try to explain things instead of taking them for granted, I'll begin with a small explanation right now. For years I have usually placed after my name, in the prefaces of the books I have written, the Latin phrase *Soli Deo gloria*, and I am about to use it again. The phrase means “Glory to God alone” or “To God alone be glory.” It was one of five phrases developed about five hundred years ago to summarize a great deal of Christian truth—in this case the truth that everything that is done should be done for God's praise, to the exclusion of human self-glorification and pomposity. The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach appended the initials of the phrase, “SDG,” to the musical manuscripts of each of his cantatas; it was similarly used by his contemporary George Frideric Handel (best known for what we commonly call “Handel's Messiah”). It is a small acknowledgment of something found in the very Bible that we are about to read, in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” And if you do not know what “1 Corinthians” means, read on!

Don Carson
Soli Deo gloria

The God Who Made Everything

Before plunging into the first passage of the Bible, it might be helpful if I tell you where we are going in this series.

There was a time in the Western world when many people had read the Bible reasonably thoroughly and therefore knew how it was put together. Even those who were atheists were, shall I say, *Christian* atheists. That is to say, the God they disbelieved in was the God of the Bible. Their understanding of the God whom they found unbelievable was in some measure shaped by their reading of the Bible. But today, of course, a rising number of people really do not know how the Bible works at all. They have never read it, or at least have never read it closely. So the first place to begin in trying to understand what Christianity is, and who Jesus is, is to start again to read the Bible.

There are many ways by which we could introduce Christianity. We could, for example, do a brief survey of the history of the Christian church. Or we might start analyzing what Christians in various parts of the world believe. But the best way to get at it is to examine Christianity's foundation documents. There are sixty-six of them. They vary in length from one page to small books. They were written over a period of 1500 years in three languages. The biggest part was written in Hebrew; a very tiny part was written in a language like Hebrew called Aramaic; and the last part was written in Greek. So all of our Bibles today—the Bibles that we hold in our hands and pick up and read and treasure—are translations of what was originally given in these languages.

These sixty-six foundation documents are highly diverse in form and literary genre: some are letters; some are oracles from God; some are written

in poetry; some are laments; some contain genealogies; some reflect intense mental and spiritual wrestling as believers try to understand what on earth God is doing; some are written in a genre that we just do not use anymore called “apocalyptic,” which uses astonishing symbolism that is visually striking. Moreover, these sixty-six documents, often called the “books” of the Bible, are surprisingly varied in terms of accessibility: some parts you can read very easily, while other parts are full of archaic symbolism, symbolism that has to be explained because it belongs to a time and place very different from our own.

Now all of these foundation documents, these “books,” have been put together to constitute “the Book.” That’s all “Bible” means. It’s the Book. It’s the book of Christianity’s foundation documents, and we who are Christians insist that God has disclosed himself supremely in the pages of these documents. Because most people do not read the languages in which the Bible was first written (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), they read them in an English (or some other language) translation. There are many translations of the Bible into English. For our purposes, it will not make much difference which translation you choose. Common ones today are the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), and Today’s New International Version (TNIV). You can remind yourself of these abbreviations on the copyright page at the beginning of this book. If at some point the translations differ in an important way, I’ll take a moment to explain the difference.

In these chapters I shall sketch in what the Bible says so as to make sense of what Christianity means and looks like if it is constrained by its own foundation documents. Sometimes Christians themselves abandon these foundation documents and thus betray, sometimes unwittingly, the very heritage they have received. The Christian claim, however, is that this Bible discloses the God who is there.

In this first chapter we reflect on “the God who made everything.” We begin with the first book in the Bible, called Genesis. The books of the Bible are organized by chapters and verses; that is, if you open the Bible anywhere, you will find a break with a big number (that’s the heading of a chapter) and then some small numbers (those are verses). So a reference such as “Genesis 3:16” means the book of Genesis, the third chapter, the sixteenth verse. If you are not familiar with the Bible, the easiest way to orientate yourself to its organization is by opening up the first few pages where you will find the table of contents listing the names of the books of the Bible in order: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and so on, all the way through—all sixty-six of them. Then you will be able to find the page number so you can locate the book, and when you turn to the book you will be able to find the chapter number and verse number. Over the course of these fourteen chapters, I shall refer to a lot of books of the Bible and a lot of specific passages. If you want to look them up, you will be able to do so. But usually we shall focus on one passage

at a time, and work away at it—and in that case it would be best if you find the passage in your Bible and follow along.

One more small detail. A casual glance at the table of contents of a Bible shows it is divided into two unequal parts. The first two-thirds of the Bible is often referred to as the “Old Testament,” and it is made up of thirty-nine of the sixty-six books. It sweeps through from the creation to the period before Jesus. The last third of the Bible, give or take, is called the “New Testament” and is comprised of the remaining twenty-seven books. It starts with Jesus and steadfastly focuses on him. The books of the New Testament all spring from the first one hundred years of the common era, even though what is found there also points to the very end of history. As for the expressions “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” they will be explained later in this book.

Genesis 1–2

So we begin with Genesis 1. You might want to read through these two short chapters, because in what follows I shall be picking up parts of them. This is what the opening line of the Bible says:

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Genesis 1:1–5

Then in successive days, various things are created by this God who says, “Let there be this” or “Let there be that.” And occasionally a refrain is added: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10). So eventually you get to day five, and the water teems with living creatures and birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky (1:20). “God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind” (1:21).

And then the sixth day: “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind” (1:24). Again, at the end of the description: “And God saw that it was good” (1:25).

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the

livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

¹Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

²By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Genesis 1:26–2:3

Then the rest of chapter 2 offers a kind of expansion on the creation of human beings that we’ll come to in due course.

Genesis 1–2 and Science

Because much of twenty-first-century culture is convinced that contemporary scientific thought is fundamentally incompatible with the opening chapters of Genesis, I had better say something about the approach I adopt here. Four things to note:

1. There is more ambiguity in the interpretation of these chapters than some Christians recognize. Some Christians are convinced, for example, that this pair of chapters, read responsibly, insists that the world is not more than four thousand years older than the coming of Jesus. Others insist that it is entirely compatible with vast ages. In particular, some think that each “day” represents an age. Others infer that there is an enormous gap between verse 1 and verse 2 of Genesis 1.

Still others see the seven-day week of Genesis 1 as a literary device: creation week is symbol laden and focusing on other points of interest rather than describing a literal week.

Others devote their energy to comparing these two chapters with other creation accounts in the ancient world in which the book of Genesis was written. In the Babylonian era, for example, there was a document called the *Enuma Elish*, which describes the creation of the world. It has been argued

that the biblical account is basically shaped along the lines of those Babylonian myths.

In short, there are significant differences of opinion among Christians, let alone among those who want to write the entire account off. What shall we do with this?

I hold that the Genesis account is a mixed genre that feels like history and really does give us some historical particulars. At the same time, however, it is full of demonstrable symbolism. Sorting out what is symbolic and what is not is very difficult. How we shall negotiate this tension I will tell you in a moment.

2. There is more ambiguity in the claims of science than some scientists recognize. Recently, of course, the media have focused on the fresh literary adventures of people like Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), and others. Together their writings comprise what is now sometimes called “the new atheism.” Correspondingly, robust responses of various sorts have been written. One thinks, for instance, of R. Albert Mohler (*Atheism Remix*); of David Bentley Hart (*Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*); of Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (editors of *Contending with Christianity’s Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors*); or of an essay by William Lane Craig that interacts, in particular, with Dawkins (“Five Arguments for the Existence of God”).

All the books of the new atheism are based on the assumption of philosophical materialism: all that exists is matter, energy, space, and time—nothing else. So anything that claims to go beyond that or belong to some domain that cannot be reduced to these realities must necessarily be dismissed, even laughed at, as the trailing edge of a superstition that was declared foolish a long time ago and should immediately be abandoned.

And yet I personally know many front-rank scientists who are Christians. I have spoken at many universities, and one of the interesting things I discover is that if I attend nearby local churches and meet some of the faculty in the universities who belong to these local churches and who are committed believers, their numbers tend to be made up of more science and math professors and the like than arts, psychology, and English literature professors. It is simply not the case that anyone who is a scientist cannot be a Christian. So I am happy to recommend to you some books that talk about scientists who are Christians: for example, the little book by Mike Poole, *God and the Scientist*; or another one edited by William A. Dembski, *Uncommon Dissent: Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing*; or the volume by Li Cheng, a Chinese atheist and scientist who became a Christian, *Song of a Wanderer: Beckoned by Eternity*. More debate is going on than is sometimes perceived.

Even if your understanding of origins belongs to the dominant modern paradigm in which our entire known universe developed out of a big bang that took place something like fifteen billion years ago from an unimaginably condensed mass and became our universe, there is an obvious question to ask. Whether or not you subscribe to the view that this big bang took place under the guidance of God, sooner or later you are forced to ask the question, “Where did that highly condensed material come from?”

This is where some theorists display great cleverness. Alan Guth has written a book called *The Inflationary Universe*. He proposes that this very condensed material that ultimately exploded in the big bang emerged out of nothing. And if you say that the physics doesn’t work, he says, “Yes, but at the big bang, there is what physicists call a ‘singularity.’” A singularity is an occurrence in which the normal laws of physics no longer operate. That means that we no longer have any access to them. At that point it’s the wildest speculation, which causes a critic named David Berlinski to write, “A lot of stuff that gets into print is simply nonsensical. Alan Guth’s derivation of something from nothing is simply incandescent [horse manure]. [Now he uses another word for “manure,” but I spare you.] Don’t tell me you’re deriving something from nothing when it’s transparently obvious to any mathematician that this is incandescent nonsense.”¹

In other words, there are complications in the domain of science that suggest that science does not constitute a solid wall or barrier that makes it impossible for Christians who bow to the authority of Scripture and Christians who really want to learn from science to talk intelligently with each other.

3. Whatever one makes of current debates over intelligent design—one of the dominant debates of the day—there is a version of it that I find almost inescapable. Let me explain. During the last twenty-five years, various groups of people—mostly Christians but some non-Christians as well—have pointed to what they call “irreducible complexity,” that is, structures in nature and in the human being that are so complex that it is statistically impossible that they could have come to be by chance. To appeal to a chance mutation, or to the mere selection of the fittest, or to any of the other appeals on offer in the various heritages that spring from Darwinism, simply makes no sense. Living systems have an irreducible complexity to them that makes it statistically impossible that all of the necessary but highly improbable steps were taken at the same time—and without such statistically impossible simultaneity, life could not be. What this suggests, it is argued, is the need for a designer.

Some argue back—many unbelievers and some believers—“Yes, yes, but such unlikely simultaneous advantageous developments might simply mean that we do not understand the mechanisms. If you start inserting God wherever we do not have an explanation, then you end up putting God into the gaps of our ignorance, and as we learn more, the gaps get filled in and God shrinks.

We do not need a God of the gaps. A God of the gaps is not only bad science, it is bad theology.” And so the debate continues.

Whatever you make of that debate—and the literature is already voluminous—what I find interesting is that many writers who do not in any sense claim to be Christians sometimes speak of their marvel at the unimaginable complexity and splendor of the universe—a marvel that rises to the level of what might be called “worship.” For example, I think of a fascinating book by Martin J. Rees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces That Shape the Universe*. If the physical realities that these numbers describe generated a little higher number or a little lower number, the universe as we know it could not exist. There must, for example, be just exactly the right distance between one particle and another particle at the subatomic level to balance the various forces at play. Just six numbers, so tightly constrained in their upper and lower limits, make the physical universe possible. How did *that* happen? Other writers describe the astonishing complexity of the eyeball, and although they may be unabashed philosophical materialists in their orientation, they are so impressed by the complexity and glory of it all that they almost begin to treat nature as a god.

From a Christian point of view their instincts are jolly good—except that there is a God who has disclosed himself in the glory of what we call nature. I am not sure that it is right to argue from the complexity and glory of the six numbers, or from the stiffness of the woodpecker’s tail feathers, or from the irreducible complexity of a cell or of the eyeball, to the conclusion that God exists. At the end of the day God is not merely an inference, the end of an argument, the conclusion after we have cleverly aligned the evidence. But if you begin with this God, the testimony to his greatness in what we see all around us is heart stopping. It takes an enormous act of will on the part of even the most cynical of scientists instead to look at it all and say, “Ah, it’s just physics. Stop admiring it. Don’t do that. There’s no design. It’s just molecules bumping into molecules.”

4. Finally, let me say where I am coming from as we work through these texts. About thirty years ago a Christian thinker named Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book called *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History*. He argues that one of the ways to minimize some of the endless debates that cloud discussions of origins is by asking, “What is the least that Genesis 1 and the following chapters must be saying for the rest of the Bible to make any sense?” So I will refrain from telling you everything that I think that these chapters are saying. It would take too long in any case. What I want to suggest to you is that however complex the debates over the symbolism and literary genre of Genesis 1–2 and however debated their relationship to contemporary science, there is an irreducible minimum that these chapters must be saying for the Bible to have any coherence at all, and that is what I shall lay out for you in the next few pages.

So what do Genesis 1–2 tell us?

Some Things about God

1. *God simply is.* The Bible does not begin with a long set of arguments to prove the existence of God. It does not begin with a bottom-up approach, nor does it begin with some kind of adjacent analogy or the like. It just begins, “In the beginning God” (Gen. 1:1). Now, if human beings are the test of everything, this makes no sense at all because then we have the right to sit back and judge whether it is likely that God exists, to evaluate the evidence and come out with a certain probability that perhaps a god of some sort or another exists. Thus we become the judges of God. But the God of the Bible is not like that. The Bible begins simply but dramatically: “In the beginning God.” He is. He is not the object whom we evaluate. He is the Creator who has made us, which changes all the dynamics.

This way of looking at God is bound up with some developments in Western thought that we should pause to appreciate. Right through the early part of the Renaissance (roughly fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) and down through the time of the Reformation (sixteenth century), most people in the Western world presupposed that God exists and that he knows everything. Human beings exist, and because God knows everything, what we know must necessarily be some small subset of what he knows. In other words, all of our knowledge—because he knows everything—must be a subset of what he knows exhaustively and perfectly. In this way of looking at reality, all of our knowledge must come to us in some sense by God disclosing what he knows—by God disclosing it in nature, by God disclosing it by his Spirit, or by God disclosing it in the Bible. That was simply presupposed.

But the first half of the 1600s witnessed the rise of what is now called Cartesian thought (under the influence of René Descartes and those who followed him). The traditional way of thinking about knowledge changed. More and more people based their knowledge on an axiom that Descartes made popular: “I think, therefore, I am.” Every first-year philosophy student today is still introduced to Descartes’s axiom. Descartes himself thought that this axiom was a foundation for all human knowing. After all, if you are thinking, you cannot deny your own existence; the very fact that you are thinking shows that you exist. Descartes was looking for a foundation that Christians and atheists and Muslims and secularists and spiritualists and spiritual types could all agree was indisputable. From this foundation and other approaches, he then gradually built up an entire system of thought to try to convince people to become Roman Catholics.

But notice how his axiom runs: “I think, therefore, I am.” Two hundred years earlier, no Christian would have said that very easily because *God’s* existence and *God’s* absolute knowledge were already givens. *Our* existence was seen as dependent on him, and *our* knowledge a mere tiny subset of his. It was very widely thought proper to begin with God, not with the “I” in “I think, therefore, I am.” If we exist, it is because of *God’s* power. Our knowledge,

even our existence, is finally dependent on him. But this side of Cartesian thought, we begin with “I.” I begin with me. And that puts me in a place where I start evaluating not only the world around me but also morals and history and God in such a way that God now becomes, at most, the inference of my study. That changes everything.

But the Bible does not run along those lines. God simply is.

2. *God made everything that is non-God.* God made everything else. This introduces an irreducible distinction between Creator and creature. God is not a creature; correspondingly, in this absolute sense, we are not creators. If someone were to ask, “Yes, but where did God come from?” the answer the Bible gives is that his existence is not dependent on anything or anyone else. My existence is dependent, finally, on him; *his* existence is self-existence. God has no cause; he just is. He always has been. By contrast, everything else in the universe began somewhere, whether in a big bang or in human conception—somewhere. God made it all. That means that everything in the universe apart from God is finally dependent upon God.

3. *There is only one of him.* This emerges strongly in the Bible. God openly says, “Let there be this,” “Let there be that,” “God made everything,” “He saw that it was very good.” Later on in the Bible this point is stressed again and again. For example, in verses that Jews reverently recite to this day called the Shema (found in the fifth book of the Bible: Deuteronomy 6), we read the words, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4).² There is only one of him.

Yet even in this first chapter of the Bible there is a hint of complexity to his oneness. It is just a hint, and it is hard to know exactly what it means, but it is quite striking. We read through the account of creation “God said this,” “God said that,” “God said the other.” Then when it comes to human beings, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make human beings in *our* image, in *our* likeness’” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added). That could be a “royal we.” If you listen to BBC broadcasts, you might have listened to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II saying “we” and “us” where she is clearly referring to herself. Even the comics pick it up and picture her saying, “We are not amused.” The Bible could conceivably be using a kind of editorial “we” here. But it is striking that it is introduced here when human beings are made and that the text goes on to speak of the first person plural not only when God says, “Let us,” but also in the expressions “in *our* image, in *our* likeness.” We dare not build too much on these details just yet. It is strange language just the same, however, especially in a Bible that insists again and again that there is but one God and that God is one. Could it be that already there is a hint that this one God is a complex being, a complex unity? This is something that will draw our attention repeatedly as we press on in the Bible.

However we understand the plural, the Bible here says that God makes creatures who bear his image. Here again is Genesis 1:26–27:

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷So God created human beings in his [singular] own image, in the image of God he created them [plural]; male and female he created them [plural].

We shall come back in a moment to what being made in God’s image might mean.

4. *God is a talking God.* The first action that is described under this general rubric “God created the heavens and the earth” is “God said, ‘Let there be light’” (1:3). I suppose one could understand this to be a kind of metaphorical way of saying that God brought the heavens and earth into being by his power and that he did not actually utter any words; the expression is metaphorical. Fine. Could be. Except that once Adam and Eve are made, then he actually addresses them and gives them some responsibilities: “This is what you are to do. This is what marriage will look like.” He *speaks* to them. So the God of the Bible in the very first chapter is not some abstract “unmoved mover,” some spirit impossible to define, some ground of all beings, some mystical experience. He has personality and dares to disclose himself in words that human beings understand. Right through the whole Bible, that picture of God constantly recurs. However great or transcendent he is, he is a talking God.

5. *Everything God makes is good—very good.* As the account progresses, you discover that there is no hint in Genesis 1–2 of death or decay, of butchery, malice, hate, one-upmanship, arrogance, pride, or destruction. There is no hint of any of this. Everything is very good. Regardless of all the difficulty we have understanding God’s sovereignty in a world where there is suffering and evil—we shall come back to such themes as we make our way through the Bible—the Bible insists that God is good, and the foundations of this claim are already here in the first chapter.

6. *God comes to an end of his creative work, and he rests.* That is, he stops doing his work of creation. When we are told that God rested from his work, the Bible does not mean that God says, in effect, “Phew, am I tired. I’m glad that’s over. I’ve really got to sit down and put my feet up.” That is rather misreading the text. He comes to the end of his week of creation—however we understand this “week”—and at the end of his creative work he stops. He rests and designates this seventh day in a special way, a way that will be picked up later.

7. *The creation proclaims his greatness and glory.* Another facet of God’s self-disclosure in these first two chapters of the Bible is only implied in the account, but it is teased out in later chapters of the Bible. When you hold a Stradivarius violin in your hands, the more you know about the history of violin making, the more you are impressed by the craftsman who built the

instrument you are holding. Similarly, the more we know about the created order—its vastness, its complexity, its physics, the ability of a tiny hummingbird to travel 1500 miles in migration and return to the same tree, the sweep from the unimaginable dimensions of an expanding universe to the minuteness of subatomic particles with incredibly short half-lives—the more our response ought to be adoration and genuine awe before the Creator. This response surfaces many times in the Bible. For instance:

¹The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
²Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
³They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
⁴Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Psalm 19:1–4

These are some of the things about God that these opening two chapters say right on the surface of the text. They also tell us some things about ourselves.

Some Things about Human Beings

1. *We are made in the image of God.* Because human beings are creatures, it is not surprising that we have many attributes in common with other creatures. We know this today from genetics. What percentage of my genes are shared with a chimp or a piglet? When the piglet dies and returns to the dust, it does exactly what I do: I return to the dust too. You and I are part of this created order.

If you keep stressing only the continuity human beings share with animals, then eventually you might come out with the kind of position that Peter Singer at Princeton University adopts. He argues, in effect, that all animal life ought to have, more or less, exactly the same kind of rights that human beings have; conversely, human beings are not intrinsically more important than, say, dolphins or chimpanzees. After all, genetically speaking we are mostly the same stuff. We are physical beings; they are physical beings. They are born, they live, they die; we too are born, we live, we die. But Genesis does not see things quite that way. It insists that human beings and human beings alone are made in the image of God.

As you can imagine, that expression “image of God” has over the millennia generated endless discussion. What does it mean to be “made in the image of God”? Philosophers and theologians have written long tomes saying, “Well,

it has something to do with the facility of language, or with our self-identity, our reasoning processes, love that might be altruistic, our capacity to know God,” and so on. But if you were reading the Bible for the first time and did not know anything about these debates, I suspect that your approach to this “image of God” language would be a little simpler. It becomes a kind of master concept that is filled in as you read on in the Bible. The point at this early juncture is that as God’s image-bearers, we reflect God. The ways in which we reflect God will get filled in as the Bible unfolds.

In what ways do human beings start reflecting God, even in this first chapter? God is a talking God. He speaks to human beings, *and they speak back to him*. There is a commonality of speech, propositions, and knowledge that is not merely felt but can be articulated.

There is also something of creativity. Of course, our creativity is not like God’s. In this chapter, God makes things; *he* makes things out of nothing. We cannot do that. But implanted in human beings, as a reflection of God, is a certain creativity. We work with our hands. My wife does spectacular needlepoint, silk and metal thread work; she makes quilts and dresses for little girls. My daughter is an inventive and creative cook. I like working with my hands in wood. Some write. Some are remarkably creative in their physicality. I have a son who studies every new physical challenge that comes along and plunges in, and he is almost an artist as he learns scuba diving or spelunking or whatever the new challenge is. Where does this creative urge come from? By and large creativity is not characteristic of elephants, black widow spiders, or rocks.

Human beings enjoy a capacity to work. God is depicted as engaged in the work of creation week, which ends in “rest” as he comes to the end of it. What he gives to the man and the woman is certain responsibilities to work in this world, to tend the garden. Work is teased out throughout all of Scripture as something intrinsically honorable. Christians should never descend to the place where working on the manufacturing floor or working as a secretary or working driving a bus or doing research chemistry is “secular,” somehow divorced from God. We are not to say, “I work as I must to pay the bills, and then Sunday is when I am supposed to be spiritual. Monday I go back to trying to develop a new chemical that will fight cancer. That is work, and it has nothing to do with God.” Rather, if this is God’s universe and we are made in his image, then as we work, our work too reflects him and is offered back up to him with integrity and gratitude. Work is significant because we are made in the image of God. Work carried out in this way changes our perspective about who we are.

We must recognize, of course, that there are unbridgeable differences between God and us. We have already seen that he alone is self-existent; we are not, for like everything else in the creation we are dependent creatures. God never tells us to be something we are intrinsically incapable of being.

He never says to us, “Be self-existent, for I am self-existent.” Later on, when the Bible unpacks God’s omnipotence—that is, his unlimited power—he does not say, “Be omnipotent, for I am omnipotent.” Nevertheless, in many domains, precisely because we *have* been created in the image of God, we are *supposed* to mirror him. That is why, later on in the Bible, God will say, “Be holy, for I am holy.” (We’ll glimpse a little later what holiness is.) We are to reflect God in certain ways. In these chapters, God is presented not only as the Creator but as the sovereign ruler over all. And in some small measure, God’s function as the sovereign ruler is to find his image in these created human beings, this man and this woman, for they have been put in charge of the rest of the created order—not to rape it or exploit it or to become economically selfish with it, but to be God’s own stewards over the good world that God has made. We have been made in his image and charged with the responsibility of looking after his creation. In so doing, we are reflecting something of God.

Even the capacity to know God, to delight in him, is wonderful. Peter Williams wrote a book called *I Wish I Could Believe in Meaning: A Response to Nihilism*. Nihilism is the view that life has no intrinsic or objective meaning. Many paths wind their way toward nihilism, but none is more seductive than that which says human beings are nothing more than a usefully arranged collection of molecules, beings who have arisen by sheer chance from the primordial muck. Where is the meaning in beings of this sort? From the Bible’s point of view, however, meaning in life is bound up with the fact that we were made by God, in his image, and for God, with an eternal destiny. This radically changes our perception of what human beings are. Otherwise we slouch toward what one philosopher has called “self-referential incoherence.” What he means by this is that we compare ourselves with ourselves. We have no external standard by which anything should be judged; we cannot find an anchor for our being anywhere. So we drown ourselves in temporary pleasures or pursuit of money or self-promotion, but we have no anchoring that locates us and gives us a meaning beyond ourselves. There is no scale.

Human beings were made in the image of God, and as his image-bearers we were made to work, to rule, to serve as God’s stewards, to be surpassingly God-centered.

2. *We human beings were made male and female.* In Genesis 1, where the creation account is first given, we are told, “So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (1:27). But in Genesis 2, where the creation of humans beings is expanded upon, not only what they hold in common but how they are different is exposed: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (2:18). Older English versions have “I will make a *help meet* for him,” and from these italicized words we have derived our word *helpmeet* and hence *helpmate*: “a helper suitable for him.”

¹⁹Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²²Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

²⁴For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Genesis 2:19–24

So while the opening chapters insist that human beings, male and female, were equally made in the image of God, they also insist that the woman was made as a helper. But the man and the woman come together in one union, a sexual union, a marriage union. A pattern is set, Genesis 2 tells us, in which, generation after generation, the man will leave his family, the woman will leave her family, and the two will settle into a new relationship, a new marriage, the two becoming one.

This is a rather different picture of marriage than some others offer. The man and the woman are not simply animals having it on; nor is this a picture of, say, an ancient Near Eastern harem with the most powerful monarch possessing the most women, while each woman is nothing more than property, a decidedly and intrinsically inferior being. In the biblical picture she comes from the man. She is one with him. She is different, transparently—for a start, she is not identical but his sexual and emotional counterpart, so that in marriage the two become “one flesh”—but here there is a vision of marriage that ultimately becomes a model of other relationships unpacked in later chapters in the Bible.

3. *The man and his wife were innocent.* We read in the last verse of Genesis 2, “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (v. 25). I’m sure you’ve seen some line-drawing cartoons of Adam and Even in the garden, with a little snake coming down a branch and an apple hanging down from somewhere. In these line diagrams, you don’t want to make them indecent, so the woman’s hair covers her breasts appropriately, and fig leaves and other branches cover the man in the appropriate spots. Some one-liner is attached to the cartoon, and we all giggle. But what does nakedness signify here at the end of Genesis 2?

Do you know that there is a theory to nudist colonies? Oh, I know that some nudist colonies are merely an excuse for sexual orgy. But the best nudist colonies—if I may speak of nudist colonies on a moral scale—have a certain philosophy to them. The idea is that if you could be completely open and transparent in one part of your life, then sooner or later you could foster openness and transparency in every part of your life. So we begin with physical transparency—complete openness, nakedness—and maybe down the road we’ll all become wonderfully open, candid, honest, caring, loving people. It never works. But that’s the theory. The reason it never works is that we have so much to be ashamed of; there is so much we need to hide.

In this account, however, Adam and Eve have nothing to hide and therefore nothing to be ashamed of. Tell me, you men, would you like your mother, wife, or daughter to know absolutely everything you think and feel? You women, would you like your father, husband, or son to know absolutely everything you think and feel? We hide all kinds of things, don’t we? Why? Because we have so much of which we ought to be ashamed. What would it be like never ever to have told a lie? Never ever to have nurtured bitterness? Never ever to have succumbed to controlling lust? Never ever to have burned up with hate? Never ever to be puffed up in arrogance—but to always love God with heart and soul and mind and strength and always love the other as yourself? Then you would have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. You could afford to be naked. No wonder the very word “Eden” means “delight.”

Some Things about How Genesis 1–2 Fit into the Whole Bible and into Our Lives

Here I am merely going to prime the pump. These few paragraphs will prepare the way for some of the things teased out in the rest of the book.

1. *These two chapters constitute the necessary background to Genesis 3.* Without understanding how good everything is, we cannot fully grasp what happens in the next chapter, which depicts what is sometimes called “the fall,” the onset of massive rebellion.

2. *This doctrine of creation actually surfaces again in the Bible, in passages written after the coming of Jesus.* However, this notion of creation is transformed: what is promised is a new creation and ultimately a new heaven and a new earth. The biblical vision of the future looks back to the old creation, which tragically succumbed to rebellion, hatred, idolatry, and sin. What is finally needed is for God to do a new creative act, to begin again, to create people over again, to create a new existence. In some of the New Testament writings, that prospect is called “new creation.” We press toward a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. We shall examine that prospect more closely in the last chapter of this book. The terminology for it, however, is drawn from Genesis 1–2.

Likewise, Adam is depicted as the ancestor of the human race, our race, which falls away in ugliness, decay, and idolatry. Much later, Jesus is called “the second Adam”—that is, Jesus begins another humanity, a new race, that works on quite different principles. Christians must belong to this second Adam or all that the Bible speaks about as “the gospel,” the good news, makes no sense at all. Similarly, the theme of rest and the theme of the garden will also continue, as we’ll see.

3. *Above all, this vision shapes our worldview.* For example, in pagan polytheism (that is, in views of the world in which there are many gods), the gods have different domains of operation: there is a god or goddess of war, another of the sea, another of love, and so forth. Here is one God who has made it all. This differs, for example, from hedonism, where the point of human existence is, quite simply, to find as much pleasure as you possibly can, by whatever means possible, before you die. But here the pursuit of pleasure is bound up with God himself. We were made initially *by* God and *for* God, and the best and highest pleasure is a God-centeredness that secular hedonists cannot possibly imagine. Their pleasures are too fleeting, too small, too narrow.

Alternatively, pantheism teaches us that the entire material world and godness are all part of the same thing. There is no differentiation. Thus I am god and you are god and we are all in this god-existence together. “I am really quite a spiritual person, you know, and for me it is the vibration of crystals that enables me to be in sync with the universe and makes me feel transcendently other.” This is a frame of reference that many adopt. It simply is not the worldview of the Bible. God made everything, and we human beings who have been made in his image find our greatest fulfillment, purpose, happiness, and integrity in being rightly related to him.

4. *What the Bible says about creation is what grounds the notion of human accountability and responsibility.* Why should I obey God? If he wants to take me in directions that I do not like, who is he to tell me what to do? Surely I am free to choose other gods or invent my own. I can belt out the popular song, “I did it my way.” Who is he to boss me around? I defy him.

Unless he made me; unless he designed me. In that case I owe him everything—life and breath and everything else, such that if I do not see it that way then I am out of line with my Maker. I am out of line with the one who designed me and with what I am designed by God himself to be. I am fighting against myself as well as against the God who made me. All of human accountability and responsibility before God is grounded in the first instance in creation. He made us, and we owe him. If we do not recognize this simple truth, then, according to the Bible, that blindness is itself a mark of how alienated from him we are. It is for our good that we recognize it, not because he is the supreme bully but because without him we would not even be here, and we will certainly have to give an account to him.

Now we are set up for the Bible’s analysis of what is wrong with us.