



God Prepares a Home

(Genesis 1)

To Moses and those for whom he wrote, the process of creation and the scientific nature of things were shrouded in mystery too deep for man to comprehend. What was important was that God created everything, and that He made man in His image. How He went about doing it was His business, as Job was to discover (see Job 38–39).

If we approach Genesis 1 as though it is God’s revelation of scientific truth, we stumble immediately upon difficulties: How was there “evening and . . . morning, one day” (v. 5) when the sun had yet to be created? How did the fruit trees grow and bear fruit before there were days and nights, or seasons? And how do we reconcile creation in six literal twenty-four-hour days, with modern geological science?

Approach Genesis 1 as divine revelation of spiritual truth, and these troubles evaporate. Genesis is more like a hymn than a treatise. It uses poetic language, with symbols and images, to relate the history of the created universe. As such, it concerns itself not with how created beings developed over time, but how they came to exist at all, and by whose decree and to what purpose. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, “[The first three chapters of Genesis] express in their solemn language the truths of creation—its origin and its end in God, its order and goodness, the vocation of man, and finally the drama of sin and the hope of salvation” (*Catechism*, no. 289).

Like all good poetry, the language of the first chapters of Genesis is packed with layers of meaning. Only a slow, careful reading of them will reveal the depths and riches of truth they have to offer. We are in no hurry. We want to soak in as much as we can about who God is, what and why He created, and who we are and our purpose on earth. So let us return now to the time when time itself began.



“He Opened to Us the Scriptures”

Before we read God’s Word, we ought to take a moment to humble ourselves before Him, remembering that His Word is primarily a conversation with us, not a textbook. “Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:10) can be the prayer on our lips. Then, read all the way through Genesis 1. Think about what you understand and what you don’t understand in the chapter. Make a simple response to God in terms of what you do understand. Write your prayer in this space:

Now, ask for His help as you work on the questions below.
(Prayer hint: “*Thank You, O Lord, for the goodness of Your creation.*”)



Questions

Revelation about God and the Universe

☞ Read Genesis 1

1. Genesis 1 may be very familiar to you, but do not skip this step. Read the whole chapter again out loud, noticing its poetic structure and rhythm. Go back and underline phrases that are repeated throughout the chapter.

a. What are they?

b. What do these phrases and repetitions help us to understand about God and His creation?

2. Read Genesis 1:2.

a. Who else, besides God, was present at the beginning of creation?

b. What was He doing?

3. In verse 26, God said, “Let us make man in *our* image.” What does this use of the plural suggest about God?

4. *Challenge question:* Read John 1:1–5, Colossians 1:15–18, and Hebrews 1:1–3. How do these New Testament references to the creation of the world expand the picture that we get from Genesis 1?

5. The action of Genesis 1 seems to build up to verse 26, where God says, “Let us make man in our image.” Review your answer to Question 1 above. What characteristics of God would you expect man to have if he is going to be in the image and likeness of God? (See also *Catechism*, no. 357.)

6. God created man “in His own image . . . male and female” (v. 27). What does this tell us about the essential equality of male and female?

7. *Challenge question:* Note that the very first thing God did for the living creatures (v. 22) and for man and woman (v. 28) after creating them was to *bless* them. In the context of this first chapter of Genesis, what did it mean for man and beast to have God’s *blessing*?

8. God gave man a charge to obey as well as a blessing (v. 28).

a. How did the charge given to man differ from that given to the animals?

b. God told man to be fruitful and to have dominion over the earth. How do these two commands that God gave to man confirm that he was indeed made in the image and likeness of God?

“Lights in the Firmament of the Heavens” (Gen. 1:14)

In verse 16, “God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” Note that the sun and moon are not named. In the ancient world, the very words “sun” and “moon” were synonymous with the names of deities. In contrast, Genesis teaches that the sun and moon are not powers to be feared, but created things with a God-given purpose in the universe. They were put in dominion over day and night. These lights in the firmament are the only elements in creation, besides man, that have dominion. They “rule” over the night and day, but they have no jurisdiction over man or the earth. Psalm 19 tells us of another function they serve—to tell the glory of God. When we gaze at them, we should recognize the power and beauty of God who made them.

The text says these lights (sun, moon, stars) are to serve as “signs” and to mark out time and seasons. What might they be signs of? Think of the star that the magi followed to find the newborn King in Bethlehem. Think also of the eclipse of the sun on Good Friday. God uses these elements to communicate with His creation. Think also about the description of Mary that we see in Revelation 12:1: “And a great portent appeared in the heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars.” Is it any wonder that the Church understands Mary to be the Queen of Heaven, since, in this heavenly vision, she wears as garments the elements of dominion that we first meet in Genesis?

9. After blessing man and the animals and giving them their responsibilities, God gave gifts to them all.

a. What gifts did God give them (vv. 29–30)?

b. What kind of relationship between God and His creation did this provision establish?

10. God, perfect in Himself, needs nothing to make Him complete or happy. As you read through Genesis 1, what appears to have been God’s motivation in bringing the universe into existence? Read especially verse 31.

Timelessness

If God created time and space, as we see here in Genesis 1, He lives outside of them. It is a difficult concept to comprehend, isn’t it? And yet Catholic life is pervaded with an element of “timelessness.” That is because Catholic piety and liturgical life are deeply rooted in “remembering,” an action that is as close to timelessness as humans can get. Because our minds make memories, some things that happened in the past are still alive to us. God built His relationship with His people, Israel, on the foundation of the human mind’s ability to remember. For example, from the time of the Passover, when God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, He commanded them to continually “remember” His great works on their behalf. This was not just a pious recollection of their departure from Egypt. It involved offering up a sacrifice of a lamb every year at the same time the deliverance had occurred, although the blood of the lamb was not painted on the doors again. A festal meal of the sacrificed lamb would follow, in which each element would make present again for the partakers the circumstances of that wonderful night of deliverance. This memorial erased the boundaries of time. It was as if, for all Israelites, time had stood still.

Catholic life enables us to experience this very same thing—timelessness—every time we go to Mass. We understand that, during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Jesus, made once for all on Calvary and offered continually before the throne of God in heaven, is made present to us sacramentally. At that point, we are not bound by time or space. In this moment of intense communion with God, it is entirely appropriate that we, mortals though we are, encounter Him in a way that is outside of time and space, since we can see from Genesis 1 that He dwells outside of them. Likewise, in our liturgical calendar and in many of our pious works (praying the Rosary, doing the Stations of the Cross, etc.), we are continually revisiting episodes in the life of Jesus, blinking past all the years that separate us in time from them. As Catholics, we are blessed to have many experiences of the eternal Now.



“Did Not Our Hearts Burn?”

Our hearts will burn with joy when we consciously open them wide to God’s Word. Scripture memorization is a good way to get that started. Here is a suggested memory verse:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

—Gen. 1:1, 31

Continue to welcome Him into your soul by reflecting on these questions:

From the dawn of human history, men have marveled over the beauty and majesty of the creation, and the God from whom it comes. Read, as a prayer, Psalm 104. Join your voice to the ceaseless praise of the power and greatness of God, which rises up from the work of His hands.

For some of us, to “subdue the earth” means washing a pile of dirty dishes or changing the oil in a car. These are actions we take in order for life as we know it to be maintained on the planet. Think of what you will do this day to “subdue” the earth. How can knowing that you are living out your God-given calling make a difference in the way you do that work?



“Stay with Us”

Reading the first chapter of Genesis is an experience different from reading any other passage of Scripture. Think about the significance of the fact that the beginning of our human story is told in poetic language. As Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has written, “These words, with which Holy Scripture begins, always have the effect on me of the solemn tolling of a great old bell, which stirs the heart from afar with its beauty and dignity and gives it an inkling of the mystery of eternity.”¹ Just as human poetry

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1990), 11.

seeks to take the reader beyond the limits of ordinary language to a place of exquisite meaning, so this account in Genesis communicates to us something far more than science or chronological historical narrative could ever do. By the time we've read it all the way through, we find ourselves in a kind of beatitude. We are surrounded by the goodness of God in His creation, reflected in His careful ordering of all its elements and represented most clearly in His blessing of that which breathes the breath of life. The universe exists today through the imagination, power, and love of God. Genesis 1 convinces us that no other explanation fits all the data.

Yet the details of this chapter go beyond even that. They give us our first clues about the unique relationship that exists between God and man, the "crown of creation," as the psalmist calls him. We recognized that in the action of the Blessed Trinity during creation, there was an intimation of a splendid communion within God. And as the verses in the chapter continued in their cadence, we discovered that man was to be included in this communion ("let us make man"). We saw that man, male and female, was made in the image and likeness of God, reflecting God's own nature in the vocation of fruitfulness and dominion. By sharing His image with man and imparting to him His goodness, God made clear that this communion is one of love. Only love can explain the condescension of God to man. Only love will qualify as the appropriate response to it.

Lesson Summary

- ✓ Genesis 1 is far more than an account of our beginnings. It is the introduction to God's written revelation of Himself, and as such, it introduces us to God, the awesome, powerful Creator of the universe. It illustrates the power of His Word, the goodness of all of His works, and the deliberate, orderly intent behind His creativity. It shows Him to be the only, eternal, omnipresent source of life, and of all that is needed to sustain it. Together with His Word and Spirit, He creates and sustains all by His will and by His love.
- ✓ God's created universe is altogether good and perfect and well-ordered. In its beauty and splendor, goodness, order and infinite variety, it reflects the One who made it. Each piece reflects a different aspect of the Creator and together gloriously reflects the whole. The universe is designed as a great household, a habitation for an enormous variety of life, ruled over by God's crowning creature, mankind.

✓ Man and woman were created in God's image and endowed with His very life. Mankind is thus set apart in a unique way from the rest of creation. The image of God in man means that he has a will and can act freely. He is able to reason, to create, and to appreciate goodness. He has a capacity for eternal life, since the God whom he reflects dwells outside of time. In his vocation, which is to be fruitful and exercise dominion over the earth, he carries on the work of God begun in creation. God's delight, satisfaction, and pleasure in man are verified by His blessing. Every single human being can look at Genesis 1 to comprehend his place and meaning in the universe.

For responses to Lesson 1 Questions, see pp. 105–7.