

‘God’s Divine Design’

GENESIS 1–3

INTRODUCTION

I want to talk with you this morning on the subject “*God’s Divine Design.*” Our theme for chapel this semester is “relationships.” We start today with this thought: *All relationships begin and find their ultimate fulfillment with God.*

This means that you cannot fully understand how to relate to others if you leave God out of the equation. You will not get the most from dating, or marriage, or sex or friendship.

You see, our understanding of identity and life and relationships does not spring from within us; it does not leap from a movie screen or a Web page or a textbook. We will not, we cannot, come to know who we are and how we are to relate to others simply by looking in the mirror or looking around at the world or even by looking within. The source for this knowledge is of another order, another world if you will.

So this morning, come with me as we step back across time to the very dawn of creation. The Bible begins with these familiar words, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” Then comes the Biblical account of creation, the first day, the second day, the third day and so on until we come to Genesis chapter 1, verse 26 and following:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Here and in Genesis chapters two and three that follow, we find the source and pattern for living. We cannot fully grasp our relationship to the

natural world and to others if God is not the sole sovereign Creator.

So, I say it once more, *all relationships begin and find their ultimate fulfillment with God.*

Our understanding of this principle begins with a proper understanding of this book; and this book rests upon and flows from its opening chapters. The opening book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, the book of beginnings, begins with God and ends fifty chapters later with God having created humankind and fashioned a people — with whom He has established a covenant relationship and through whom all people will be blessed.

This story of Genesis begins with creation, but then almost immediately comes the idea of relationships. *All relationships begin and find their ultimate fulfillment with God* including one’s relationship with God, with him/herself and with all others.

Here in Genesis we learn of marriage and family and neighbors and friends and enemies — it is all here in the Book. And running through this marvelous story is the truth that God’s design is for a vertical and horizontal set of relationships that reflect His character and His will.

There are 66 books in the Bible; those books contain 1,189 chapters. If you asked me to pick out the most significant chapter in the entire Bible, if I could choose only one, I would be honor bound to choose Genesis 1.

Some may say, “Now wait a minute. That leaves out the incredible story of

human history and the story of salvation through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” That is true of course. But the fact of the matter is there is no way we can understand the rest of the story if we miss the truth embedded in this chapter. Here lies the key, for here we find the roots of understanding for everything else in the Book and in life itself.

Without this chapter, we would be left rudderless to navigate our understandings of the rest of life. Our concept of God would be different if we did not grasp the truth of these verses. Our perception of our-

selves and of humanity would be altered without this revelation of who we are, and from where we came, and what our role and purpose in life is.

All of that is here.

Unfortunately, however, too often when we come to these opening verses of Genesis, we come not to find the answers to those questions (who we are and from where we came and what is our role and purpose in life), but rather we come seeing these verses only against the backdrop of modern science.

If you asked me to pick out the most significant chapter in the entire Bible, if I could choose only one, I would be honor bound to choose Genesis 1.

I think that is unfortunate. Do not turn here to learn about science; rather come here to learn about God.

I think it is a mistake to seek to reconcile these verses with science or science with these verses; and I think it is one of the places where we are too quick to let the enemy pick the battle for us.

It is not the purpose of Genesis to reconcile God to science or science to God. You see, science is a methodology and only a methodology whereby certain kinds of truth can be discovered, verified, classified and integrated into our understandings of the world. And science is very important; but it is beyond the realm of science to address what came before creation or what stands beyond the created world. That is the realm of Genesis and the realm of faith.

Science deals with the creation. These chapters, on the other hand, deal with the Creator.

Genesis one, two and three are given to us to let us know, not the nature of the creation primarily, but the *origin* of the creation. And so these chapters move you back behind (if you will), before (if you like), the creation itself.

Genesis speaks to us concerning the realm beyond science. When science has said its last word about the world around us, Genesis one still speaks.

Now if we did not have the Book of Genesis, what could we know about God?

We would have the religious literature of the world; we would have human reasoning (philosophy) and human experience, including natural science. Those things might convince us that there is a God — but those avenues cannot tell “who” that God is. So science or reason or experience are not enough — there must also be revelation.

One of the first things we learn from Genesis is that God stands apart from this physical world. He existed before anything was created. There was a time when He alone existed.

In the beginning God — period!

Greek philosophy never grasped that.

The ancient Babylonian religions never got it.

Roman thought missed that concept.

Eastern religions did not discern one God.

The truth that there is one all-sufficient, eternal, sovereign God behind and beyond all things who was fully confident and fully capable of speaking all things into existence is revealed to us here in Genesis. It is only here in the Scripture.

If we do not embrace this point of light, we will live our lives in darkness.

Where do you find the key to your nature?

To your person? Your life?

Your problems? Your situations?

Your questions?

Your relationships?

Where do you find the clue to understanding human history and what it's all about?

If we could gather the wisest folks among us as humans, and ask them: Where did we come from? Where is it going to end? What stands beyond the created order which science so well describes? They would begin by saying, “We think ...”

The Bible, on the other hand, is a clear witness that says there is One outside of creation who is responsible for it all and the key to it all is in this One who is on the outside.

The key to my research paper is not in my paper, it is in the mind in me that produced that paper. Just so, the key to you and the key to your life and your relationships is not in you or in the created world itself, it is in the One who created you and everything else in the entire universe.

- The ultimate understanding of human history is not found within human history.
- The key to science is not found ultimately in science alone.
- The explanation of human personality is not to be found in personality theories only.
- The key to humanity does not reside within us as humans.

The key is on the outside.

How do we learn about the outside? How do we come to know this God who stands apart?

We learn by revelation.

Reason, alone, can't build that bridge. Experience can't get us there. If I experience God in a particular way, you may not experience what I have experienced and say to me, “*I know nothing of that in my world.*”

If we are to know the Creator God, it will come by revelation — God making Himself known.

I do think that some level of revelation comes through the natural world. The philosopher Goethe said, “*Nature is the living visible garment of God.*” I like that, but that is revelation only in a “general” sense.

Revelation through the Scripture, on the other hand, is the place in human history when God pulls the curtain back, shows His face, lifts His voice, speaks and tells us who He is and what He desires.

That is the reason these verses are here.

They give us an understanding of God and give us an understanding of ourselves and of life, of history, of truth and value and purpose and meaning.

Genesis begins with one God —
there is One and no other.

We can only describe God in our language, but our language has criteria and categories and limits that He breaks because He is greater than they. Genesis affirms that God is not bound by the limits and categories of our created order and our experience or understanding. He transcends it all — time,

space, matter, energy, and form.

He is not a part of or a product of the natural order — rather He is the producer of it.

In the ancient world, the gods were prime forces of the natural world — fire, thunder, lightning, wind, water, the sun, moon, the Nile River. It was the creation that gave birth to primitive gods. But not so with Genesis; creation doesn't bring forth "god;" God brings forth the creation.

In the beginning God created — for God is eternal; the One who is not bound by any lines or margins. He alone exists beyond the processes and products of this world of ours.

What difference does all of this mean?

(1) It affirms that there is only one God who is the Creator and the Sovereign of the universe and so there is one way to fully understand the world. If there were a number of gods, you could choose among them.

(2) It implies that ethics are not based in the created order, but flow from the Creator. The value system of the world is not found in the human heart or mind, nor in the historical, social, or physical fabric of the world.

(3) These chapters also tell us that miracles are possible. Miracles, by definition, are not part of the created order. They stand apart from natural law. The reason some do not believe in miracles is because they have no god who stands beyond the created order. There is no one there to do it. In that case, everything has to have a natural explanation.

Some believe that the universe is a closed continuum governed by natural law alone. Every cause produces its natural effect. That shuts God out of His own world. It takes Him captive to the laws and processes He established in the first place. Historically that was known as Deism and it is not part of the historic Christian faith.

If the world is a closed continuum, there could not be a virgin birth or a resurrection, no healings — no divine intervention.

Let me go on record today by telling you plainly, I reject that.

Our salvation does not flow simply out of the historical progression of human society; it does not rest in the natural order. Our hope and our destiny and our identity come not from within the creation, but from the Creator.

And it all begins right here in Genesis chapters one, two and three.

Here is the portrait of a God who controls and governs the world because it is His handiwork — He is master of it all. God is sovereign.

Neither He nor we are swept along by the forces of nature alone or by the Gallup polls of history; for God stands at the center of it all and God *is* the center of all truth.

What is most critically at stake in thinking about Genesis

is not whether God, the Creator, acted in a seven twenty-four-hour-day creation cycle or through an evolutionary process of some kind; the most fundamental issue is to recognize the otherness of God even from the created order which reflects His handiwork.

The history of Christian thought and the position of the Church of the Nazarene allow a certain latitude of views regarding the "how" of creation. But even so, what we must not lose sight of is the clear witness of Scripture concerning the "Who" of creation.

There are some foundational issues of authority and interpretation that are not "negotiable" in a classic Wesleyan expression of Christian Faith. Put on your thinking caps and stay with me. I really want you to hear me carefully.

(1) **The Primary Authority of Scripture.** I want you to know that at Olivet Nazarene University we consider the Bible to be *the* primary and foundational authority for what we believe. Reason, tradition and experience, including scientific investigation, are valuable ways to discern truth; but they are not equal as a source of truth to divine revelation.

Certainly Scripture must be interpreted. The interaction of these other disciplines is complex and dynamic and necessary to understand the Scripture; yet it is still important to affirm the foundational authority of the Bible, which means that all other sources of authority are ultimately accountable to Scripture (not the reverse).

What about ...

(2) **The Relation of Science and Faith.** Christianity should not be viewed as adversarial to diligent science. It is not. God created the natural order and the laws which govern it. Science and faith are not enemies.

But let's go a step further. How do we respond when we come to a point of "apparent" conflict between scripture and science? I believe that at a point, Scripture takes pre-eminence.

For example, the miraculous activity of God, ultimately demonstrated in the incarnation (Jesus becoming human), and the resurrection, can never be explained by science; such events do not fit the laws of science. So if we subvert the faith to what can be explained by the laws of science alone, we fall short of the Biblical view of God and salvation.

Genesis speaks to us concerning the realm beyond science. When science has said its last word about the world around us, Genesis one still speaks.

Let me put it another way. Every time we are at a funeral at which a grieving family sits and stares through tears at a casket, we and they are asked to believe something that neither science nor reason nor experience can ever verify — that there is life after death, that there is a God who welcomes into heaven the one who has died. I can't prove that in the lab; but it is certainly there in Scripture. Which am I going to believe? I choose the Bible.

I believe that science can profitably and constructively help us discover and understand God, and particularly help us understand the world God created, but we must be careful not to “redefine” the God of Biblical faith to One who conforms *only* to that which science can verify.

So at Olivet Nazarene University, we are men and women of science and faith — and we celebrate the fact that they are compatible.

Now some may ask, “Well, what about evolution and creation?”

(3) **Evolution and Creation**

Please be careful how you hear what I am about to say.

The Christian faith and *some* understandings of evolution are not necessarily incompatible. However, I want to be very clear in saying that not every articulation of evolution will do; not at all. That is to say, ***evolution must be understood in certain ways to be compatible with Christian faith.***

Well, what does that mean?

The Christian affirmation of God as Creator affirms God as initially creating, but also continually sustaining, actively interacting, and purposefully directing creation to its culmination. All things come **from** Him, exist **in** Him, and move **to** Him. (Col. 1:15–17; Acts 17:24–31). Evolution, if it is to be held by a Christian, must be considered as a methodology of divine creation within that broader Biblical context.

Now let me say another ...

(4) **Word About Miracles.** Even if one holds to a view of some form of theistic evolution, by that I mean God using a process for creation, there must be room given for God to continually be actively involved through *and beyond* the laws of nature.

Any theory or set of presuppositions that limit God's initiative and action to only the establishment of natural laws and the beginning of the process of creation is a dangerous theory — for it, by default, precludes God's intrusion into the natural world.

If that is the case, there could be no miracles. To do this sets up the need to find “natural” explanations of biblical miracles or “supernatural” phenomena. The parting of the Red Sea, the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of the blind man and so on, under that rubric, would have to be re-interpreted as superstition, metaphor, or a linguistic anomaly.

And of course those miracles are small issues compared to the critical assertion of the Christian faith that in a supernatural event God became man.

The virgin birth is not about reproductive biology, but divine (beyond natural) intervention. To accept the divine origin of creation and then struggle with the virgin birth or the resurrection is to strain at the gnat while swallowing the camel.

To reject the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus because those things conflict with natural law is to, by extension, deny the witness of Scripture.

Science alone can make room and even support the idea of God, but only in a generic way. We must go beyond that. To be true to science and Scripture, we must make a central foundational place, not just for god — small “g” — but for **this** God, the God of Genesis, and for the incarnation of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully Man, God uniquely revealing Himself, whose life, death, and resurrection form the center of our faith and our hope of salvation. *Anything* short of this is inadequate.

Christ's birth and resurrection overturn the natural order and that is the point — we can't save ourselves. The Christian faith and our salvation hinge essentially on this, that God, himself, became Man. Christ revealed God to us and by His life, death and resurrection made our salvation possible.

... we must be careful not to “redefine” the God of Biblical faith to One who conforms only to that which science can verify.

CONCLUSION

Do not be troubled by the dynamic tension of faith and science — they are not enemies. Science does not put God in a box and it need not confine Him to the limits and laws which He, in fact, created. The God of Scripture transcends all of that.

Genesis is clear that this Creator God has formed us. He created us for His glory to bear His image and to be social beings to live in relationship with God and with others.

Beginning tomorrow we'll explore in some depth the relationships that are part of God's divine design.

Let us pray.

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