

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 2, Creation, Genesis 1:1-2:3

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session number two, Creation, Genesis 1.1 to 2.3.

Session 2 is the creation account in chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 2, verse 3, and there are five things for today.

First, the structure of the creation account.

Second, the interpretation of the keyword “day.”

Third, creation and blessing for humanity.

Fourth, Sabbath.

Fifth, theology. What do we learn about God and his creation? First, the structure of the creation account. Well, it is probably very obvious that we have a six-day plus one structure when it comes to creating an account.

What I mean by that is we have six creation days, and then, in chapter 2, verses 1 through 3, we have a seventh day. And this is a day of cessation, a day of rest when creation has been completed at the end of the sixth day. So that's what I mean by a six-plus-one arrangement.

To look at the specifics, what are we to do with verse 1? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And when it comes to the heavens and the earth, there we have in literary parlance, we have what is known as a merism, figure of speech, m-e-r-i-s-m, merism. A merism is where you have opposites that indicate totality or inclusion.

So, when it says the heavens and the earth, it is saying that God created everything. And that's our lead statement. In effect, what it is saying is that God created everything at the beginning, the substance, the material out of which will come the organized, created order.

And then we have a description of what the earth was when God said in verse 3, let there be light. So, this is also a preliminary step to understanding this first creation speech, so let it be light. So, I understand verse 2 as somewhat introductory and yet the setting for the first day of creation.

And there are three expressions, descriptions found in verse 2. The earth was formless and empty. Another way of saying that is that the earth could not sustain life. It certainly did not sustain human life.

So, when it says it's formless, then here we have that it is uncreated in a disorganized fashion, and then it's empty. There is no created life. The second description is that there is darkness.

This darkness includes, if you'll notice, the deep—the waters, the surface of the deep. The third is the presence of the Spirit of God, who was circumscribing, hovering over the waters.

In other words, even though it was formless and empty, it was not organized in such a way that it could produce or sustain life; it was not out of control. The Spirit of God was hovering over and therefore preparing for what occurs in verse 3. Then, we have three days to bring the form where there is the formless. And so, the first day, second, and third days.

Let's look at those three days. So, you have light, as you can see, that is separated from the darkness. Separations are very critical to the creation account because by separations, you have organization and a design, and we will see there will be progression.

Then we have, on the second day, we have a separation having to do with waters. And there's what is described here as an expanse. This expanse is difficult to understand specifically, but this would be an atmospheric separation between waters above and waters below.

The waters above would be what we understand to be atmospheric waters. The waters below, of course, would be that on the earth. So, on the second day, we have the separation between the sky and the waters in verses 6 through 8. On the third day, verses 9 through 13, here we have the separations between the waters on the earth and the dry ground.

So that is this separation where the dry ground is called land, verse 10, and the gathered waters, seas. Now, one way in which land functions is that it can also mean earth. Here, it's clearly land.

It's the same Hebrew word. And there are two creations on the third day. Notice what follows in verse 11.

Let the land produce vegetation, seed-bearing plants, and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it according to their various kinds. So, and this is important in verse 12, the land is a mediator. The land produced vegetation.

So, God instructs the land as a mediator to produce vegetation. So that which was formless and could not sustain life has been reversed. Now you have organizational form, and you have now life producing the vegetation.

So, the first two days you will have one creation event. The third day you have two creation events. Now this brings us to days 4, 5, and 6. And we will find that verses 4, days 4, 5, and 6 are parallel with days 1, 2, and 3. And this is addressing the emptiness that is described.

There's not life. And so God produces life. Since the first three days could sustain life, now we have a life coming from God's word.

Now, the striking thing is when I speak of life on the fourth day, and that would be verses 14 through 19, it's speaking of the light-bearing objects that are in the expanse of the sky. Now, there's a separation here, obviously, between the day and the night. It says to let them serve as signs to mark seasons, days, and years.

So that's their function. How they function is in the interests of the earth and, ultimately, the human family. We also find that references are made to the sun and to the moon, but not with that language.

It says God made two great lights, the greater light, and then we are told the lesser light. And this, therefore, provides the emptiness of the expanse with luminary bodies. Now we say, but luminary bodies aren't alive.

This is true; we know this, and the Hebrew people didn't understand it to be alive. But the author places it as filling because of the movement of these bodies. Then we come to the next day, the fifth day, and here we have the waters and the sky.

So, you can see that this parallels the separation between the sky and the waters that occurred on day two. And so, with the waters, you have, it says, the living creatures, the fish. And then you have the fowl, or the birds, in the sky.

The next day, the sixth day, is that God said, let the land... Remember, the third day had two creation accounts. We have the first is the separation between the ground and the seas. And here we have the production, the creation of the land animals, the various kinds of livestock, creatures that crawl on the ground.

You can see these categories that are listed for us. Then we have the second creation event on day six. And this is also on the land, and this would be humanity.

And so, in verses 26 through 28, we have the creation of God's own image. The man and the woman were created in His image. The last day is the seventh day.

And, of course, those who were reading the creation account, or hearing the creation account, would have understood Sabbath as referring to Sabbath. The word Sabbath does not actually occur here. But the seventh, whether it be a seventh day, or a seventh month, or a seventh year, or a multiple of seven, that would be 49 years, and then the year of Jubilee.

The Hebrew people would have certainly understood that Sabbath was in mind, so that's why I refer to this day as Sabbath. But actually, it says seventh day, and this is not a creation day.

This is distinguished from the opening sixth day, days one through six, rather. So, that would be a good working understanding of the structure of the creation account. The reason why we want to end the creation account in chapter 2, verse 3, although what follows in chapter 2, verse 4, is a second creation account.

The reason why we want to end it is because of what follows in verse 4. The first occasion of the toledoth expression. So, this is the generations, this is the language that's used, toledoth from Yarod, this is the generations. Or if you'll notice, the account is probably a better rendering, since what follows is a narrative telling of a second creation account.

And what I would like for us, and much more, will be said in our third session; what I'd like for us to recognize is that the second creation account that follows in chapter 2 is not in contradiction, even though there are differences. What we find in chapter 2's creation account is complementary because it gives us two perspectives of the same event. The first has to do with the general description of what occurred in the general categories.

Now, when we come to chapter 2's creation account, it's going to zero in on that sixth day where we have the creation of the garden in which we find the man and the woman who are created, and also it refers to the creation of the animals. And then, it ends with the union of the man and woman. Now, notice chapter 2 verse 4 says, and this is important for us, it says, this is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

See, that's an echo of chapter 1 verse 1. It's clearly referring to it. In the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. I'd like for us to pause right there and notice that there is a reversal.

Whereas in 4a it reads heavens and earth, now notice what's been reversed in 4b. The earth and the heavens. The reversal is probably a clue that the focus now is going to be on what becomes of the human family on the earth.

And now, we zero in on that particular aspect of the creation on the sixth day. So, although chapter 2 speaks of creation topically, it is not a contradiction so much as it is a topical arrangement for special emphases that would be complementary to the creation account in chapter 1. Now, let's talk about this term that is used throughout and that is the word day. The Hebrew word is yom.

And so, we know from earliest times that there were problems in interpreting this word day, yom. And by problems I mean that there were differences of opinion as to whether this is the normal solar day, what we would call a 24-hour day, or whether or not day had a figurative meaning. So, this did not arise with modern science, although it became an acute problem with the rise of modern science, in particular geological history.

Today, earth scientists believe that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old. And so there have been efforts made to understand how it is that we could have solar days in mind in these six creation days, as opposed to how the word yom might be used in a figurative way, a figurative notion. Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it, why many would interpret this as solar day, because of the language that is used.

It says that at the end of each of these six days, there was evening, and there was morning on the first day. And this is taken as a solar day. Then we know that wherever a day occurs in the Hebrew Bible with the language of a number, in this case, the first day, second day, or third day, is referring to a solar day.

A second way in which to understand yom would be in this figurative idea, and that is day would be a long period of time, and that it would not be so interested in telling us about time or how creation occurred, but rather who is the creator. And so, there have been attempts to draw a close connection between geological history and these six creation days. Others see a loose connection, some progression, a logical progression, in the telling of these six days, just as there's some logical progression in geological history.

So that has been one attempt to understand it, in which case the word day is found within Genesis itself to refer to other than a solar day, if a solar day is intended at all. So, an example of this would be if you'll look with me with chapter 1, verse 5, God called the light yom. God called the light day.

He probably could not refer to the whole solar period, given that what follows is the night. And then I think another example that is important for us is to look at chapter 2, verse 4. And we were looking at it a moment ago. In chapter 2, verse 4, it reads in 4B, literally in the Hebrew, in the day, in many translations, it's simply translated as a temporal, when the Lord God made, but it does mean in the day.

And here, quite clearly, day refers, doesn't it, to the whole of the creation, all six days. So, for that reason, or these reasons, some have taken this as periods of time, that could accommodate a longer period of geological history. Although, they would have to raise questions about the billions of years, especially when it comes to the history of human life on the sixth day.

Now, another approach to this would be that we have solely a story. The problem with this is it's thought that this would be a story about telling us about God. And so, it would be revelatory, not so much giving us specifics about God and creation.

And the problem with that position, which I don't think I'm comfortable with when it comes to interpreting Genesis, that you can't learn anything about creation or history. That there's no connection between the Genesis creation account and actual material, physical, geological, and human history. So, I think the requirement of the genealogical language that is used, binding together the various stories, these are the generations that occurred 11 times, indicate to us that there is a historical connection between the stories of creation and early humanity.

Just as genealogy is historical, and just as the patriarchal accounts clearly portray themselves as historical, the genealogy language that's used as a superscription is the way in which the author is saying that the primary or primeval history and the patriarchal history intersect as one historical account. Now, as far as the options of taking the day as a solar day or referring to longer periods of time, I would lean toward the second approach as opposed to the solar day. And I think that exegetically that is required of me, and here is why.

This is not only because of the flexibility of the word day that we have seen but also because you cannot have what we mean by solar day when it comes to interpreting day until there's a sun. How can you have a solar day without a sun? And that occurs on the fourth day. So, when it uses the language evening and morning, here I take it that it is a descriptive way of portraying the progression from darkness that occurs in verse 2 to light that occurs in verse 3, and that this pattern is used for literary purposes to segment the creation account into its six days.

So, what I see it as a rhetorical device as opposed to be taking as a solar day, a 24-hour day. Now there is a second reason additionally that I would see that a solar day is not in mind, and that is the last day, the seventh day. In chapter 2, verse 3, if you will notice, verse 3, it reads, And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

The seventh day then does not have the device, there was evening and there was morning. In other words, it is suggestive that the seventh day is not to be taken as a literal day, but it is to be taken as literal plus more. In other words, the seventh day does follow these six creation days, but it implies that the seventh day continues.

And this has a theological and spiritual meaning to it. And the writer of the Hebrews, and you'll notice this in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, will speak of how the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest that's still available because it's a spiritual day of rest. And I can say more about that in a moment.

So, for the reasons I've indicated, I think that what we have here is a different way of telling a story that is historical in the sense that it's actually real. It's a real event, not just a story event. And also we can learn something about the actual material, physical, human world in which we live.

So, the creation account can be told in a different way. It's told in the sense of what we call phenomenological language. Phenomenological language is where you have a description of what appears in the way it is seen by the human eye as opposed to scientific, precise language.

We're accustomed to this. The most common example is your weather person, who does not give you a detailed scientific explanation when he or she uses the language of sunrise and sunset. It's the way it appears.

And we all understand that. We all accept it. We don't consider it an error or misleading.

It's just a different way in which what we know to be true is portrayed. And I think that's what's going on with these days. It's as though someone's standing on the surface of the earth and is observing all of these creation events.

Now, let's then look at creation and blessing for humanities. Here we'll be talking about the unique creation of humanity. And so, what we find is, as I mentioned in our first session, that whereas God speaks about what he creates, and even blesses where we have the animal life that is created, the water life, the expanse life or sky life, the birds, and then the animal life, they are said to be blessed by God.

But when it comes to humanity, God actually speaks to humanity. He gives them a privileged position as being created in his image. Now, of course, there's a great deal of discussion about what the image of God is, but I think on the basis of this kind of context and what follows in chapter 2, that we can say that it does have to do with the creation of men and women as persons, identities.

So, let's use the terminology relationship. What is important when it comes to the creation and blessing for humanity is that scholars have tried to wrestle with what is human nature versus that of an animal. And why is it that humans are so prized by God? So, let's take a look at verse 26.

Then God said, Man, in his own image, in the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And then God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number.

Fill the earth, subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living creature that moves on the ground. Now, when it says image and likeness, these two words are different in Hebrew, but they do overlap somewhat because both of them have to do with representation. Image is especially important for our study because it is commonly used for idols.

But image and likeness are used as synonyms in Genesis chapter 5, verse 1, and then also in Genesis 9, verse 6. So, in effect, image and likeness should not be divorced but rather seen as a poetic expression, a repetition, whereby you have both speaking of how they, that is, the man and the woman, represent God. Now, when it comes to the description of, well, answering the question, what is the image of God? The reason why there is somewhat of a struggle regarding this is because this passage doesn't tell us what is the image of God. Rather, what it tells us is what the image of God does, and that is the image of God rules, the image of God procreates.

What I think the author has in mind here is drawing on the language of the ancient Near East in a couple of ways. First of all, he draws on the language of the royal families because the descendants of the royal household would also be, of course, royal figures who would then be identified as the sons of the king or the king himself would be seen as, here's the language, the sons of the gods. And that either with Egypt, the king was actually God, he was Horus, or in Mesopotamia and Canaan, there you would have the king as semi-divine.

When it came to Israel, of course, the Israelites, their king was neither God nor semi-divine, but rather representative. And this is where the image also comes into play, where a king in conquering a land on many occasions would erect a stone pillar, a stela, in which the king would describe the various battles, conquering the land, and may even have an image carved in the stone pillar of himself. And so that was his way of staking claim on that land as his own.

If we bring this together then, God may well be saying that the men and women, they are my handprint, my pillar, saying that I own heaven and earth, that I am the author of all of life. And then also that the man and the woman are representative of God's rule. In other words, they have derivative authority.

This comes into play when we look at the language rule in verse 26. And then also in verse 28, rule, or to subdue, that's the language of kings. And so what it is saying here, very important theologically for us, is that the man and the woman are representative of God's rule over the earth and that the man and the woman,

therefore have a derivative authority invested in them, like vice-regents over the earth, and are accountable to God for the way in which they caretake the earth.

Verse 27 is also instructive for us. So, God created man. Let's pause right there just as we found in verse 26.

The language man is a generic term used in the Hebrew, and you're familiar with this, adam, meaning humankind. So, God created humankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created him.

I want you to notice the poetic reversal here. It begins with God created man, and let's go ahead and say humankind, because as we'll see, it includes male and female. So that would then be followed by, in his own image, and then it says again, this is where it's reversed, the image of God, and then lastly, he created him.

So, the way that this could be understood in terms of its parallel parts, so God created man, that would be A, in his own image would be B, in the image of God would be B matching, and then he created him, would be A matching. A B, B A. Why is that? Well, probably to emphasize the idea of the image. Now, the third poetic expression in verse 27 details humanity, humankind, that's found in 27, and this tells us that humanity is made up of two different genders, male and female; he created them.

Male and female, he created them. So, it is telling us that both male and female are created in the image of God. I also want to point out to you that while we're talking about the blessing for humanity, and that is, it's important for us to see that whereas in the ancient Near East, the kings and royal figures were considered either the sons of God or the sons of God.

But when it comes to Hebrew theology, Hebrew idea, and Hebrew perspective, it is a democratization that, by that, I mean that all men and all women have this elevated status in the eyes of God, who is not just the king, but all men and all women, all human beings, all those created in the image of God have this relationship to God and enjoy the blessing of God and the fruit of this blessing, giving them derived authority, just like kings, just like royal figures, over God's terrestrial creation, his terrestrial sphere. Now, going back to this whole idea of human nature, human nature, what do we mean by nature? And that's important for us to get straight. Human nature, then, if you were to, say, take birds and humans, we have somewhat overlap in our essential being; that's what is meant by nature, your essence, your essential being, and what characterizes that.

So, for example, birds have eyes, and humans have eyes. Birds sing, and humans sing. But birds do things, and humans do things that the other does not.

So, the birds can fly, and we do not fly. So, it would be wrong to say that we have the nature of a bird or a bird has the nature of a human being. Now, whereas our essence, our being, is different when it comes to human life, we all share in humanity the common nature, a common nature.

However, that doesn't mean that we are all carbon copies. No, not by any means. Because we have unique identities, or you could say persons, and that takes precedent over human nature.

Let me give you a suggestion about how this might be. Say, for example, we defined human nature as a person who is expressing an intellect, someone who has intelligence. But what happens at the end of life, or at another time, but we typically think of it at the end of life, with dementia, when a person loses that expression of intelligence because of a health disorder, or someone who is born disabled in their mind.

Does that mean they're not a human being? No, because the image of God concerns personhood, and whether it be a person with dementia or someone who is, for example, in a perpetual coma, that person has an identity. And that takes precedence over one's nature. God has made you and me humans but with particular identities, particular persons, having personhood, but persons.

And why has he done this? Because he wants a unique relationship with each person. So, each person is blessed with personhood, but that personhood is designed to have a special, unique relationship with God. And each one of us can enjoy that special blessing that comes from God.

I have mentioned next, the Sabbath, and when it comes to the Sabbath, you can see it as a holy day. It's the only one that is said to be a holy day. And as a special day, it's when read through the eyes of Israel's experience with God at Sinai, in covenant relationship with God, you can see how it would be implying a celebration.

And because the Sabbath days, of course, were days set aside for the purpose of worship and enjoying God's blessing by a cessation of work, it's a special day, set aside in the sense that it is a holy day, set aside for focused worship. And that's what's ongoing here, I think, is that there's an implied invitation for all of creation to enter into his Sabbath rest and enjoy him on this day of celebration. It is a day that is set aside for this refreshing, renewal presence of God in the life of his people and in the life of creation.

The writer of Hebrews says that the Sabbath rest I mentioned earlier is still available. And we enter into that by faith, and we are invited by our Lord Jesus Christ, and we must respond to that invitation to enter into his life, his Sabbath, his rest, that's

available to all those who will repent of their sin, as the writer of Hebrews tells us. And then we'll enter into that rest by faith.

Last, I'd like to say a few things about theology. What does this teach us about God, and what does it teach us about his creation? When we come to the opening verses of this chapter one, I want us to recognize, very importantly, critically importantly, that the way in which creation is made by God is not like that that you would find in the ancient world, whether it be in the ancient Near East, or in the Greco-Roman world. Here, creation is not an extension of God's being.

It is not an emanation, and by emanation, I mean it's not an outgrowth of his being, whether God and creation are totally separate entities, so we can say confidently that we don't have a divine creation. In the mind of so many religions, there is Father Sky and Mother Earth, that Father Sky and Mother Earth are alive divine beings, but not so with the worldview that's presented by the Bible. In the ancient Near East, you had three ideas.

One would be how creation came about by self-generation, that the creation gods just generated themselves, and then they populated and created the universe. The second is the warrior motif, which depicts the gods of chaos, the gods of water, the gods of death, opposing the gods of the cosmos, where there is life. This struggle is won by a hero-god, and he is made king of the gods.

Of course, this is not the case in Genesis 1. There's no battle against God. He just authoritatively speaks, and everything behaves, and it was so, and it was so, and it was so, and it was so. And he controls any and everything that could possibly be unruly, such as the dark and the deep.

And so there is no motif of God here being a warrior god who's opposed by deities that represent anything that would be opposed to him and his authority as creator. The third motif is procreation. Here, you have the birth imagery of male deities.

These would be the primeval warrior deities and the female deities, the goddesses, who come together and have a sexual relationship, a union that produces the gods, and then the gods in turn produce the created order. There, of course, is the most striking aspect of the creation account when you read it in the context of the creation accounts of its day in the ancient Near East, and that is, there is no female deity. This is so countercultural.

This is so dramatically different than the worldview of the ancients in the ancient Near East. And then, when it comes to the Greco-Roman world, Plato or Aristotle, the great Greek philosophers in all of the philosophy schools, understood the gods as distant from time in history. And really, it was not personal.

It's not god in persons. But in order for the god to be separate from personal history, human history, it is to use the expression to show this personal relationship; sometimes, you'll hear people speak of I and thou, referring to God or a different human person, I-thou relationship. But with the Greek philosophers, it's I-it.

God is really a pure act of thought, a pure act of thought as opposed to a personal being. And this is dramatically different than what we find when it comes to God of the Bible. When we come together for our third session, I'm going to move into chapter 2, verse 4, the garden story.

But I am going to couple chapters 1 and 2 together to talk about how God is depicted as a triune God, or more accurately, we might say, how God is one in unity, but within that unity, there is found a plurality. So, session 3 will begin with the garden narrative. And we'll be looking at chapter 2, verse 4, all the way through chapter 3.

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