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## UNDERSTANDING WHO WE ARE

Genesis 2:4-17

By

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Genesis Lesson 6

## Understanding Who We Are Genesis 2:4-17

Henry Ford is reputed to have scoffed, "History is bunk!" But I am inclined to side with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who said, "When I want to understand what is happening today or try to decide what will happen tomorrow, I look back." He also observed, "A page of history is worth a volume of logic" (in *Peter's Quotations* [Bantam Books], p. 244). History helps us understand who we are by showing us where we have come from. This is even more true of the inspired history recorded in Scripture for our growth in godliness (Rom. 15:4).

Modern man suffers from an identity crisis. Science tells us that we descended from the apes by sheer chance. If you believe that interpretation of history, it will drastically affect the way you think and live. It cuts you off from a relationship with an all-wise, all-powerful Creator who made you in His image. It robs you of any significant meaning in life. It destroys any basis for hope for the future. If human beings are the product of random chance, the bottom line is, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).

But that view fails to explain why we are different from the apes and other animals. It has no basis for explaining the fact, as Calvin puts it (citing Cicero), that there is "no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God." As Calvin goes on to observe, even professing atheists at times "feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], I:III:1, 2). It is ironic that atheistic humanism, which claims to exalt man as the center of all things, actually degrades man as being merely the chance mutation from the apes. The biblical view of man, as presented in these early chapters of Genesis, explains both man's unique difference from other animals, in that we are created in the image of God; and man's perverse depravity, due to the historic fall of the human race into sin.

Critics have dismissed Genesis 2 as being a second, often contradictory, "creation myth," added to chapter 1 by some editor. This view assumes that because of the different name used for God, Moses did not write chapter 2. It also implies that the man who pieced the two chapters together was lacking in intelligence since he did not notice the supposed discrepancies in the two accounts. But if we proceed on the assumption that Moses wrote it and that he was not stupid, it becomes evident that even apart from divine inspiration, it is a piece of skillful literature. Genesis 1 is the big picture; chapter 2 is the detail. Chapter 1 is a chronological account; chapter 2 is a logical account, designed to set the stage for the crucial events of chapter 3. H. C. Leupold says, "Practically everything written in chapter two definitely paves the way for chapter three" (*Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], 1:116).

The chapter should begin with verse 4 (the chapter breaks were added centuries later), which states, "This is the account of ...." It translates a Hebrew word used 10 times in Genesis to introduce new sections (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, [9]; 37:2), and means, "this is the history of." It shows that the early chapters of Genesis are just as much history as the later chapters. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 give us the history "of the heavens and earth in the day when the Lord God made earth and heaven." Thus we learn from the outset that the history of earth (man) is bound up with heaven (God). Genesis 2 helps us understand who we are and how to interpret our existence on earth. We must see ourselves in relationship to God and His creation.

Our text brings out three themes: (1) We are created by God to relate to Him; (2) God has given us productive work as the means of providing our basic need for food; and, (3) God has made us to be morally responsible to Him. A fourth theme of chapter 2, which we will explore next time, is that God has provided the institution of marriage for our good. Genesis 2:4-17 teaches that ...

God created us to relate to Him, to engage in productive work, and to be morally responsible to Him.

1. God created us to relate to Him.

Moses brings out this theme in several ways. One is *the frequent use of Yahweh Elohim* ("LORD God"). It is used 20 times in Genesis 2 & 3, but only one other time in the entire Pentateuch (Exod. 9:30) and less than 10 times in the other books of the Old Testament (*Commentary on the Old Testament* [Eerdmans], by C. F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, 1:72; hereafter, K & D). It is obviously deliberate on the part of Moses to show that Yahweh, "who visited man in paradise, who punished him for the transgression of His command, but gave him a promise of victory over the tempter, was Elohim, the same God, who created the heavens and the earth" (K & D, p. 73).

Elohim comes from a word meaning "to fear," and signifies "the highest Being to be feared." It is a plural word which expresses "the notion of God in the fulness and multiplicity of the divine powers.... In this intensive sense Elohim depicts the one true God as the infinitely great and exalted One, who created the heavens and the earth, and who preserves and governs every creature" (*ibid.*).

Yahweh is God's personal name as the covenant God of Israel. It is the name by which God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:13-16). It comes from the Hebrew verb "to be," so that God tells Moses His name is, "I am who I am." It means that God is the self-existent, self-determining one, the absolute Being of all beings. It "includes both the absolute independence of God in His historical movements," and "the absolute constancy of God, or the fact that in everything, in both words and deeds, He is essentially in harmony with Himself, remaining always consistent" (Oehler, quoted in K & D, p. 75). Since Yahweh is God's personal name, it also points to Him as the God of our salvation (the above based on, K & D, 1:73-75).

Thus by linking these two names Moses is telling Israel that their God, the God of the covenant, who led them out of Egypt, is the same Creator God who made man and desires to bless all who obey Him. The God of creation is thus also the God of history and salvation, known by His people.

Another way Moses brings out the truth that we were created to relate to God is by showing *the personal attention and deliberate care that God used in forming first Adam, then Eve*. The picture (in 2:7) is that of a potter taking the clay and carefully molding it into "a liv-

ing being." While this term is also used of other animals (1:20, 21, 24, 30), it is used in a special sense here of man, directly receiving face-to-face the breath of God. This is not just air, but God's vital, life-giving breath. Life didn't happen by some accidental spark of lightning striking some primordial pond, starting a random process that, by sheer chance, some billions of years later, resulted in man. We were carefully designed by an incredibly intelligent God.

Think about the remarkable complexity of the human body. Physically, we are the result of two sets of 23 chromosomes which unite at conception. A single human chromosome contains twenty billion bits of information, which corresponds to about 500 million words, or two million pages. At 500 pages per book, this means that a single human chromosome is equal to about 4,000 volumes of information. We each have 46 chromosomes, or 184,000 volumes of 500 pages each! By way of comparison, the Flagstaff Public Library houses about 160,000 volumes in the downtown branch and in the two bookmobiles.

A person develops miraculously inside the mother's womb, emerging 9 months later with more than 200 bones, each shaped with exquisite skill to perform its function. To the bones are attached 500 muscles, some large, some small, some obeying human will, others acting apart from human awareness. Our brain has over 10 billion nerve cells connected to the body by a complex nervous system. Our skin has more than two million sweat glands, about 3,000 per square inch, to automatically regulate body temperature. In addition, there are the circulatory, pulmonary, digestive, endocrine, and immune systems; the eye, the ear, the senses of smell, taste, and touch, and our complex emotional make-up, which allows us to feel joy and sadness, delight and disgust, love and hate.

But God created more than our physical bodies. Made of dust, man is related to the other animals (2:19). Made in the image of God, receiving life from God, man has personality and rational and moral capacities which distinguish him from other creatures and fit him for communion with God. That man was made from dust (not gold dust, powder of pearl, or diamond dust, as Matthew Henry observes [p. 14]) forbids pride; that he was made by God in His image reminds us of our high purpose, lost in the fall, but regained through Christ. We need to keep both in balance. As J.

Vernon McGee notes, "We're made of dust, and dust that gets stuck on itself is called mud." A little boy came to his mother and said, "Mother, is it true that we are made from the dust and that after we die we go back to the dust?" "Yes," she replied. "Well," he said, "I looked under my bed this morning, and there's someone either coming or going!"

A third theme in chapter 2 that shows that God made us to relate to Him is *His goodness and care in preparing the earth for man* and in supplying those things which are deficient, so that man has all that is needed. Verse 5 lists some deficiencies; verses 6-17 show God's supply. Verse 18 shows man's deficiency; verses 19-25, God's supply. Everything surrounding Adam spoke of the goodness, care, and kindness of his Creator.

Some critics have said that the order of verses 5-8 contradicts the order of creation presented in chapter 1. Here man is seemingly created after the plants. But chapter 2 is not a chronological order, but a logical one. The plants referred to are not all the plants, but rather cultivated plants ("shrub of the field," "plant of the field"). The text is only saying that plants which are cultivated by man for food were not yet planted by God in the garden, because man was not yet there to tend them. Apparently, God even had installed an automatic sprinkler system!

The location of the garden is described as "to the east, in Eden" (Eden means "delight"), to the east of the Sinai peninsula, where Moses wrote Genesis. Verses 10-14 describe four rivers which flowed out of the garden, two of which we can identify today. We can assume that the earth's geography has changed sufficiently that we will never know the exact location. But it was somewhere in the area where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers begin (near eastern Turkey).

Some try to read all sorts of symbolic meanings into these verses, but I find such attempts highly subjective. But these verses tell us two things: First, the garden was not a mythical place. It could be located geographically. We're not dealing with fairy stories, but with actual history. Second, to people trekking across the barren, hot Sinai peninsula, the description of four rivers watering the garden was surely a picture of God's abundant provision for Adam before the fall. The barrenness of earth is due to man's sin,

not to God's shortcoming. He created the earth as a beautiful place and put man here to relate to God.

So by these themes, Moses is saying that God created us to relate to Him as He has revealed Himself to us. But since the fall, we are alienated from God and unable to know Him in and of ourselves. God sent His Son Jesus, who is God in human flesh, to pay the penalty for our sin, to reconcile us to Himself, and to reveal God to us. If you do not have a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, you cannot understand who you are or why you exist. But through Christ, you can!

## 2. God created us to engage in productive work.

Some people think of "Paradise" as a place where you lie in a hammock under a palm tree, never lifting a finger. But God planted a garden and put Adam there to cultivate it and keep it before the fall (2:15). God also assigned Adam the work of naming the animals (2:19-20), a "mental" job. Thus before the fall God gave man both physical and mental labor as legitimate enterprises. A Swedish proverb says, "God gives every bird his worm, but he does not throw it into the nest." Even in paradise, Adam had to work for his food.

Work itself is not the curse; the curse involved the difficulty of working against the curse on creation (3:17-19). Even though we work under the curse, there is value in working to provide for our basic needs. Working with your hands is no less dignified than working with your mind. Both are legitimate, God-given forms of labor which are necessary for sustaining human life. To slaves, whose work was menial at best, Paul wrote, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col. 3:23-24). Whether you are a janitor or rocket scientist, a housewife or doctor, you can take legitimate satisfaction in the work God has given you to do.

A few years before the fall of Communism, a joke was going around Moscow about two workmen with shovels. One worker would dig a hole every 20 feet along the street. The second worker would come along behind him and fill up the hole, and the process was repeated. A man watching them shouted, "Comrades, what are

you doing? You dig a hole, then the other fellow fills it up. You're wasting the Party's money!"

"You don't understand," one of the workers replies. "Usually we work with a third fellow, Mikhail, but he's home drunk today. I dig the hole, Mikhail sticks in the tree, and Dimitri here puts the dirt back in the hole. Just because Mikhail is drunk doesn't mean that Dimitri and I have to stop working."

Hopefully, your work isn't *that* futile! God created us to engage in productive work, and there is satisfaction in doing your work well as unto the Lord. I like how Matthew Henry expresses Adam's work in the garden, "while his hands were about his trees, his heart might be with his God" (p. 17). He further observes, "As we are not allowed to be idle in this world, and to do nothing, so we are not allowed to be wilful, and do what we please" (p. 17). This is the third theme of Genesis 2:

### 3. God created us to be morally responsible to Him.

Verse 9 gives the first hint of the test with which Adam was to be confronted: the presence of the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The direct command is in verses 16-17: Adam can eat from any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the day he eats from it, he will die. The presence of these trees show that man, by creation, has a spiritual side. They also reveal that God alone knows what is good and not good for man. James Boice observes, "The presence of this tree would have reminded Adam that he was not his own god and that he was responsible at all times to his maker" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:104).

God has built certain principles into His universe, and we violate them to our peril. When you tell your child not to touch the stove or he will be burned, you are not threatening him, but lovingly warning him. Out of kindness, God told Adam for his own good that he must make the proper choice when it came to this tree. It was a reasonable test, since God gave permission to eat of every tree except this one (2:16). But banning this one tree made Adam and Eve morally accountable to God. Moral responsibility undergirds all of life and always has consequences.

What was this tree? I think it was literal fruit to which God gave certain spiritual properties. But in what sense was it the



knowledge of good and evil? Isn't it a good thing to know good and evil? Why would God want Adam and Eve not to know this?

Ray Stedman (*Understanding Man* [Word Books], p.35) points out that when they ate the fruit, they would know good and evil as God does (3:5, 22). God knows good and evil, not by experience (He cannot experience evil), but by relating it to Himself. That which is consistent with God's nature is good; that which is contrary to it is evil. But only God can do that. Stedman says, "The creatures of God's universe are made to discover the difference between good and evil by relating all to the Being of God, not to themselves. When man ate of the fruit he began to do what God does--to relate everything to himself.... When man began to think of himself as the center of the universe, he became like God. But it was all a lie. Man is not the center of the universe, and he cannot be" (pp. 35, 36).

This is essentially John Calvin's understanding. He argues (*Commentary*, p. 20) that the tree was prohibited so that man might not trust in his own understanding, cast off the yoke of God, and make himself the judge of good and evil. He states (p. 23), "Therefore, abstinence from the fruit of one tree was a kind of first lesson in obedience, that man might know he had a Director and Lord of his life, on whose will he ought to depend, and in whose commands he ought to acquiesce. And this, truly, is the only rule of living well and rationally, that men should exercise themselves in obeying God." So by eating of this fruit, man substituted his own finite self as the standard of right and wrong, replacing God's perfect Being as the standard.

When man sinned, the result was death. In the Bible, death is not cessation of existence, but separation. Adam was immediately separated from God, as chapter 3 reveals. Also, the process of physical death was set in motion. If Adam had eaten of the tree of life, apparently he would have lived in his body forever, even after the fall (the implication of 3:22). But God removed that choice by taking man from the garden and sealing its entrance. Since Adam and Eve's fateful choice, death (both spiritual and physical) has dominated human history. And, since the fall, all men are bound by sin, unable to please God and unable to come to God apart from His sovereign grace (Rom. 8:7-8; 9:15-18).

## Conclusion

Years ago the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who did much to shape modern liberal theology, was sitting alone on a bench in a city park as an old man. A policeman, thinking he was a vagrant, came over and shook him and asked, "Who are you?" Schleiermacher replied sadly, "I wish I knew."

If you cut yourself off from the historical truths revealed in Genesis 2, that you are a being created by God to relate to Him, to engage in productive work, and to be morally responsible to the Creator, you do not know who you really are. Jesus Christ came to save us from the curse of sin and death. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Through Christ you come to know the eternal God. And, in knowing God, you come to understand who you are, why you were created, and how you should live.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is the doctrine of creation essential to knowing God?
2. Should we seek fulfillment through our work? Can a house maid be as enthralled with her work as a surgeon?
3. Why did God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden? Why did He give men the option of sinning?

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