

Bible study: Creation and Rest

Reading: Genesis chapters 1 & 2

Introduction

Tradition says that Moses wrote the first 5 books of the bible, so these initial two chapters can be seen as the beginning of his explanation of how we got to the point where he is looking over the River Jordan at the promised land (now called Israel) from Mount Nebo, knowing that he will not enter the promised land himself. Similar to other creation stories of the time (eg Babylonians, Egyptians), the universe is created in a particular order and by gods speaking. Unlike every other creation story of the time, there is one all-powerful God who creates something which is “very good” as an act of love, rather than creation being an act of violence. Human beings are the pinnacle of this creation and not slaves to warring self-interested gods; in fact we are made in God’s image. To emphasise this Genesis tells two creation stories: one about the making of the universe and one about Adam and Eve. Sin comes into the world in the next chapter, but unlike any other ancient understanding of the beginnings of the universe – what God creates is good.

These two chapters tell us a number of things about what we were created to do and to be, and the nature of rest and work; or abiding and fruitfulness.

“In the beginning” (one of those phrases that only makes sense in God) God exists alone. Genesis tells us the Spirit of God is hovering over the abyss. John’s Gospel later tells us that Jesus was there and nothing was created without him. So one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; carefully plan and make something amazing, “very good”. This takes 6 days with people as the final and best part of creation and then God rests on the seventh day. So part of the importance of this one God being three persons is that the planning for creation comes out of this abiding relationship. Then before doing anything else, God rests again. Being made on day 6; Adam and Eve’s first experience of God is that he rests and makes this day “holy”. Then out of this resting abiding time, God gives them work or fruitfulness. Take authority over God’s creation, multiply and fill the earth. So from the beginning there is a pattern: work or fruitfulness is good and part of our purpose, but comes out of rest or abiding. Rest and abiding come first. Work and fruitfulness are enabled by it. And rest or abiding is holy. In the following chapter Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the famous tree and are thrown out of the garden of Eden. They are still to have authority over the earth and to multiply and fill the earth; the difference is that working the land will be hard work and childbirth will be painful.

Questions on the passage

Think about the understanding that people being created on day 6 means that their first experience of God and relationship with him is rest. Is this a great theological insight or stretching an idea to make a point?

What could make a day of rest/abiding “holy”?

This idea of a holy Sabbath continues through the Old Testament (eg it’s one of the ten commandments, when Moses announces the plan to build the tabernacle the first thing he says is that everybody obeys the Sabbath). Why do you think God says this is so important?

What does the seventh day of rest in the creation story tell us about: God, creation and our relationship with God?

Work/Fruitfulness and Rest/Abiding

In the world in which Moses lived, there was a great emphasis on the freedom that comes from the ownership of land. This land gave people the chance to make homes to raise families and the chance of feeding yourselves by growing food and feeding livestock.

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In the world into which Jesus was born, there had been a development in what work and fruitfulness looked like. Families would have family businesses. So Jesus was a builder (carpenter), he spoke to fishermen, farmers etc. There was a whole language attached to these family businesses and they defined who you were. For most people, work and fruitfulness included hard physical work.

Our world looks very different in terms of work and fruitfulness; and our society changes very rapidly.

What does work/fruitfulness look like for us now, and how does it differ from the world that Moses lived in/the world that Jesus lived in?

What do you think rest/abiding looked like in the world that Moses lived in/the world Jesus lived in?

What do you think rest/abiding might look like in our society?

What could make that “holy”?

Additional thought about what we value

If the concept in Moses’ world was owning land to have the freedom to make home and provide for family, and the concept in Jesus’ world was family business with an attached language and identity; how different is our society in terms of what we value? As Christians is there anything we need to challenge about what we value and how we show it?