

Creation: Forming *the* World



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:1–13, Isa. 45:18, 1 John 1:5, Rev. 22:5, 2 Cor. 4:6, 2 Pet. 3:5, Job 38:4–6.*

Memory Text: “For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it, who has established it, who did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited: ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other’ ” (*Isaiah 45:18, NKJV*).

Scientists are increasingly impressed by the fitness of the world for living creatures. And no wonder, for design and purpose are affirmed throughout the Bible, beginning in Genesis 1. Starting with a planet that was unformed and unfilled, God spent the first three days forming the world for occupation and the last three filling it. This week's lesson focuses on those first three days of the Creation week.

Some scholars have objected to the idea that God would “impose” a purpose on nature, arguing instead that He simply allowed the material world to “be itself” and to develop by natural processes supposedly inherent in itself. This is a common theme among those who promote various forms of “theistic evolution.” Yet, such ideas are not compatible with Scripture or with our understanding of Creation. The universe has no inherent will of its own. The creation is not an entity independent of God, but it is instead God's chosen arena in which He can express His love to the creatures that He has made.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 12.*

Without Form and Void

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1, 2, NKJV). What do these verses reveal about the earth before the Lord began creating life on it?

The Bible starts with the story of Creation, and the Creation story starts with a statement that God is Creator. It then describes the condition of the world when God began to prepare it for occupancy. When the story begins, the planet is already here but it is unformed, unfilled, dark, and wet. The succeeding verses describe how God first formed the world into an inhabitable place and then filled it with living creatures. The text does not tell us exactly when the rocks and water of the earth came into existence, only that the world had not always been suitable for life. The world became fit for living creatures only because God acted to make it so.

What does Isaiah 45:18 teach us about God’s intention at Creation?

When the earth was first brought into existence, it was unsuitable for life. The Bible says nothing about the time period between the original creation of the rocks and water and the creation of the environment and the creatures. Some scholars think it might have been immediate; others that it may have been after a long period of time.

The simple fact is, we don’t know, nor does it really matter. Whatever the case, the material of the earth was created by God; then, at the time of His choosing, He created a suitable environment for life. The crucial point is that the Lord, who was not dependent upon preexisting matter, used matter that He had at some point already created, something that in its “primeval” state was *tohu vabohu* (“without form and void”). Then, through the power of His Word, He created our inhabitable world.

Let There Be Light

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day (Gen. 1:3–5, NKJV). What do these verses teach us about the first day of Creation?

Numerous points can be inferred from this passage.

First, light appeared in response to God’s command. God’s word is effective in determining the state of the Creation.

Second, the light was “good.” We may wonder why the text says that God “saw” the light; is there any doubt that God sees everything? The point is that the light made by God was good, even in God’s eyes. We know that the light is good because God Himself evaluated it as such.

Another point is that God divided the light from the darkness. Both light and darkness are under God’s control, and neither one makes any difference to His activity and knowledge (see *Ps. 139:12*). God gave names to the dark and light portions of time, calling them “day” and “night.” God has the right to give names to periods of time because He is the Creator of time. As Sovereign over time, God is not limited by time. Rather, time depends on God.

Another point of this passage is that there was a period of darkness and a period of light that together comprised a day. Much has been written about the meaning of “day” in the Creation story. We will consider this question later, but we note in passing that the first day was composed of a period of darkness and a period of light, in the same way that we observe days now.

Also, light is one of the features that accompanies the presence of God. We do not need to suppose that light was invented on the first day of Creation, since God existed before the earth was created and His presence is often associated with light (*1 John 1:5, Rev. 22:5*). At Creation, light was introduced to the previously dark planet.

How, though, could there be day and night before the introduction of the sun into the Creation account? Moses surely knew the connection between the sun and daylight. Yet, despite that obvious knowledge, he wrote what he did about the light and darkness on the first day. God must have given him knowledge about Creation that, at present, we don’t understand, knowledge that cannot be discerned from looking at the natural world. Why, though, shouldn’t we be surprised that some things about Creation remain a mystery?

The Heaven Created

“Then God said, ‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.’ Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day” (Gen. 1:6–8, NKJV).

God created the firmament, appointed its function, and gave it a name, heaven. The function of the firmament (heaven) was to divide the water below from the water above it. Today, we would probably use the term “sky” and recognize the division of the sky into the atmosphere, which is a part of our environment and the space beyond our atmosphere where the sun, moon, and stars exist.

The atmosphere appears to be the portion of the “heaven” that was formed on the second day of Creation. The atmosphere provides a method for moving water uphill; water can evaporate and enter the atmosphere, where it can be transported to any place on the earth. Then it can be brought back to the surface, either through the mist, as described in Genesis 2:6, or as rain.

God named the firmament, signifying His sovereignty over it. The act of naming implies that God is Sovereign over space. Space does not limit God’s actions in any way, because He created and rules it. As with the lighting of the world on the first day, the creation of the firmament was completed before the end of the second day, another dark period of evening and a light period of morning.

Much discussion has centered on the meaning of the word *firmament*. The Hebrew word *raqia* is sometimes used to describe a sheet of metal that has been hammered into a thin sheet, hence the term “firmament.” Critics have argued that the ancient Hebrews actually believed there was a hard surface above the earth; thus, they argue, because no such thing exists, the biblical account is wrong. But this is faulty reasoning. The use of the word *firmament*, in that context, simply applies to the sky above—both the atmosphere and space itself. We only have to look at the immediate context to know what is being talked about. In Genesis the birds are described as flying on “the face of the firmament” (Gen. 1:20, NKJV), and in another place the firmament is where the sun and moon are seen (Gen. 1:14). Obviously, the birds don’t fly in the part of the *raqia* where the sun and moon are.

Whatever the mysteries of the Creation narrative itself, one point comes through very clearly: nothing is left to chance. Why is that point important for us to know, especially at a time when many believe that chance played a big role in our creation?

Space for Living

Read Genesis 1:9–13. Try to envision the incredible creative power of God as He is doing that which is described in this text. How does this account give a logical answer to the old question, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”

Previous to this time, the earth was covered with water. In order to provide living space for the humans that God planned to create, He changed the surface of the earth to produce basins that received the water and formed seas, allowing continents to appear. This involved a third division of the physical features of the earth. (The first division was between light and darkness; the second division was between waters above from waters below; and the third division was between dry land and seas.)

Also, for the third time, God gave names to the things that He had divided. The dry land was called “earth,” and the gatherings of waters were called “seas,” once again illustrating God’s sovereignty over space. God examined the arrangement of land and seas and declared it “good.”

A second Creation event is recorded for the third day of Creation. The dry land provided space for God to place a food supply for the creatures soon to be created. God called forth plants from the dry land (earth). Grass, herbs, and fruit trees are mentioned specifically. These were to be the sources of food for terrestrial creatures. The text does not indicate how many different kinds of plants were created, but it does indicate that there was a diversity of plants from the beginning. In fact, from what we see today, we know that there must have been an incredible variety of these life forms. Also, Scripture is clear that there was no single ancestor here from which all plants evolved; instead, right from the start, there was a diversity of plant life. The concept, fundamental to evolutionary biology, of a single plant ancestor is contradictory to the biblical account.

Look at the incredible diversity of fruit and vegetables and other edibles. How do they present powerful evidence of God’s love for us? Why is it absurd to think that all these things were created, as evolution teaches, by random processes?

God’s All-Powerful Word

What do the following texts teach us about the power of God’s word?

2 Cor. 4:6 _____

Isa. 55:11 _____

2 Pet. 3:5 _____

The Bible teaches that God created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by the power of His Word and without conflict or resistance in any form. This view of creation is unique to the Hebrews among all the peoples of the ancient world. Most nonbiblical creation stories tell of conflict and violence in creation. For example, the ancient Babylonians had a creation story in which the monster Apsu and his consort Tiamat produce a generation of deities that they then attempt to destroy, but Tiamat is killed in the battle. Her body is divided into two parts, one that forms the heavens and the other that forms the earth.

Modern men have also created a popular story of creation through violence. According to this story, God willfully created a world in which resources would be in short supply, causing competition among individuals, with the result being that weaker individuals would be eliminated by the stronger. Over time, according to this modern story, organisms have become more and more complex, ultimately producing humans and all other living organisms from a common ancestor.

Yet, the “gods” of evolutionary theory (random mutation and natural selection) are not the same as the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is the Defender of the weak and the generous Provider for all creatures. Death, suffering, and other evils were not caused by God; on the contrary, they came as a natural result of rebellion against His good rulership. The gods of evolutionary theory use competition and elimination of the weak by the strong in order to create. Even worse, they are responsible for death and suffering; indeed, death and suffering are their very means of creating.

Thus, Genesis 1 and 2 cannot, in any way, be harmonized with modern evolutionary theory, which at its core opposes the biblical account of Creation.

Further Study: Though Scripture doesn't explicitly say it, we have good biblical reasons for believing that the universe existed long before life on earth began. First, in Job 38:4–6, God states that there were living beings who shouted for joy when God formed the world. This implies preexisting beings who lived in the universe before the earth was created. The reference to an on-looking universe in 1 Corinthians 4:9 may refer to the same group of beings. Second, the serpent was present in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned. In Revelation 12:9, the serpent is identified as Satan, who was thrown out of heaven. Jesus said that He saw this happen (*Luke 10:18*). Ezekiel 28:14, 15 describe the covering cherub, who was perfect at first but eventually rebelled. This implies that there was a period of time before Satan's rebellion and that presumably Satan lived in the universe also. These texts indicate that Adam and Eve were not the first beings created.

“As the earth came forth from the hand of its Maker, it was exceedingly beautiful. Its surface was diversified with mountains, hills, and plains, interspersed with noble rivers and lovely lakes; but the hills and mountains were not abrupt and rugged, abounding in terrific steeps and frightful chasms, as they now do; the sharp, ragged edges of earth's rocky framework were buried beneath the fruitful soil, which everywhere produced a luxuriant growth of verdure. There were no loathsome swamps or barren deserts. Graceful shrubs and delicate flowers greeted the eye at every turn. The heights were crowned with trees more majestic than any that now exist. The air, untainted by foul miasma, was clear and healthful. The entire landscape outvied in beauty the decorated grounds of the proudest palace. The angelic host viewed the scene with delight, and rejoiced at the wonderful works of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 44.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Identify as many features as you can that show that the world is designed.
- 2 What reasons can you give to show how the theory of evolution cannot be harmonized with the biblical doctrine of creation?
- 3 Without doubt, there are elements in the Genesis Creation account that we can't explain. Why, though, is that not a reason to reject it as a literal account of the way in which God created our world?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Isaiah 45:18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Acknowledge the importance of design in our understanding of Creation.

Feel: Recognize that God acts purposefully, with specific intentions, even for each individual's way of life.

Do: Seek to know God's designs for his or her life and to submit to them.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Important Role of Design in Our Understanding of Creation

A What evidences of divine design and purpose can be found in the Creation story?

B What are the ways in which God forms and fills in the Creation narrative?

C If God creates through processes devoid of purpose and design, what kind of God would we have?

II. Feel: Appreciation for Divine Design

A What difference should Creation with design make in your spiritual life?

B How can you cultivate a deeper appreciation and reverence for God's creative and regenerative power?

III. Do: Submit to God's Creative Power

A How does your life reflect God's creative power?

B What does God need to form and fill in your life, and how can you cooperate with His purpose to transform you?

► **Summary:** Our understanding of divine design in Creation is important because it dramatically affects our view of God and hence how we relate to Him.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: In Genesis 1, God is shown as Creator with specific purposes and designs for His creation. If we believe that God creates through random, purposeless processes, this view changes our understanding of God in dramatic ways.

Just for Teachers: Share or express in your own words the thoughts contained in the short essay below. Use it to instill in learners an understanding of the importance of divine design in their lives.

A number of scholars have observed that the six days of Creation fall into two sections: forming and filling. During the first three days, God forms, in rough features, our cosmos with light, water, and dry land. In the final three days, He fills with more details that which He formed. Hence, the light is filled with sun, moon, and stars; the waters and earth are filled with various life forms, culminating with the creation of man on day six.

Forming and filling provide evidence of a plan and design being implemented by God in the creative process. The sun and moon were designed to help to mark and define times and seasons. Plants and fruits were designed to be food for animals and humans, and thus predation seems to be excluded from the original design. Lastly, by creating two humans of differing genders and uniting them in marriage, God appears to have set forth a design for familial structure and relationships.

Design means that God created things with specific intentions and purposes. God has a right to prescribe how His creation operates and the ways in which it is used. Thus, design is closely related to God's right to govern over that which He makes. Forming and filling, then, provide a simple template from which we can explore the importance of divine design for our spiritual lives.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Your task is to explore why design and purpose in creation make a difference in the Christian's life.

Bible Commentary

I. God of the Galápagos (*Read Genesis 1:14–18 with the class.*)

In Genesis 1 we find evidence that God created with specific purposes and goals in mind for His creation. In our key text, for example, the heavenly lights were made to govern time—days, months, and seasons are defined by celestial luminaries. Today, however, belief in the theory of evolution challenges the idea of a design in nature. Darwin’s observations from the Galápagos Islands played a key role in his development of his theory of origins, a theory that was fueled by natural selection and devoid of design and purpose. Capitalizing on the Galápagos connection, David Hull asks an important question: “What kind of God can one infer from the sort of phenomenon epitomized by the species on Darwin’s Galápagos Islands?” He eventually answers, “The God of the Galápagos is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical. This is not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.”—David L. Hull, “The God of the Galápagos,” *Nature* 352 (August 8, 1991), p. 486. But what kind of God would create through evolutionary processes devoid of design?

Some theologians argue that God is not indifferent to natural evil, but, rather, God is limited in His very nature so that He is good but limited in power. Hence, while He desires to do something about the pain and suffering in the world, He is unable.

A second option offered asserts that while God is all-powerful, His greatest desire is the complete freedom of the cosmos to self-create and self-determine. This freedom is said to be more important to God than imposing some kind of order or design on the universe. Advocates of this view tend to express God as being in a power-sharing relationship with the universe, with the universe participating in its own creation.

A third option is Deism. In this view, God launches all the natural processes and then absents Himself like a disinterested, absentee landlord. While this God may have all power, He shows little or no personal interest in the affairs of humankind. In this construct, God is highly unlikely to personally interact or intervene with any particularity in the affairs of earth’s history.

For each of these three options, one must ask, “Why, then, should I pray to such a God?” If God is limited in power, at most, prayer would allow God to be a sympathetic but useless sounding board. In option two, if God has renounced plans and purposes to establish and preserve our freedom, why pray? He would not want to infringe upon our freedom by intervening. Why intervene if there is no purpose or design? Finally, in the Deist option, why pray to a disinterested God?

Biblical Creation is grounded in divine design, which makes it possible for God to care, intervene, and hold humanity accountable. Biblical theism thus gives us a God to whom people can be inclined to pray. Prayer presupposes a God who cares and who has plans and purposes that create a sense of that which ought to be. Thus, we pray because we believe God has designs and purposes, and we want His help in order to bring them to fruition. Hull appears to be correct. A God who eschews design and creates by random, undirected processes would indeed be one to whom we would not be inclined to pray.

Consider This: What attributes of God do you see in the Creation story that would make Him a God to whom you would be inclined to pray?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: What we believe about the way in which God created affects other beliefs. Use the question to probe how believing that God created through a designless process impacts other areas of biblical theology. Discuss the following question and its elements. Feel free to add other issues besides the ones listed.

Thought Question:

If there is no design in creation, how would the ensuing view of God inform our understanding of:

• Prayer _____

• Scripture (Revelation and Inspiration) _____

• The Nature of Truth _____

- Sin _____

- The Sabbath _____

- Justice _____

- Final Judgment and Accountability _____

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: Emphasize to class members that what we believe about design affects our view of worship.

Activity for Discussion: At opposite ends of the spectrum of faith lie a religious belief that conforms to a prescriptive divine revelation and a faith that is merely a communally constructed collection of spiritual ideas. How does design in creation affect our view of our faith? What difference would creation by design make in the way that we worship God?
