

# *The Good Garden*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1<sup>st</sup> in a four-part series

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*Genesis 1:1–5, 26–28; 2:7–8*

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—<sup>2</sup>the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters—<sup>3</sup>God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. <sup>4</sup>God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.”

<sup>27</sup>God created humanity  
in God’s own image,  
in the divine image God created them,  
male and female God created them.

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.”

...<sup>7</sup> the LORD God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life’s breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. <sup>8</sup>The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed.

*Is this a bad world from which we should seek to escape or  
a good world awaiting its redemption? And what does that mean for us?*

As we come upon another hurricane season, one can’t help but wonder what new suffering the world will inflict on its inhabitants this year. Surely, Harvey was a once-in-a-lifetime event. We hope. As I write, scores of Greeks are dying in wildfires. There are ever present reminders around the globe that so-called “natural” disasters are a fact of life, inflicting pain and misery on millions. And there is more, what place does a children’s cancer ward have in a world made by a good and loving God?

The simple question is “Why?” How could this be? Where is God in all this? Could it be that God isn’t really as good and loving as we think? Or perhaps God would like to do something about it, but can’t. Perhaps God isn’t really as powerful as we think. Over the years, such questions have come to my mind many times and I’m sure the same is true for you.

In 2011, we considered some of these questions, beginning with a close reading of the creation, stories led by Terence Fretheim, a highly-regarded Old Testament scholar. Here is some of that walk-through.

*A good world, but not a perfect world*

Fretheim begins by asking us to take a closer look at the creation story. He contends that the world was created good, but not perfect; that the world was created with the expectation of change and growth. In other words, the cosmos created by God was built to be dynamic not static, from the beginning. The dynamism had nothing to do with sin and rebellion; it is just the nature of the fabric from which our world was made.

Here’s some of the evidence from the creation accounts.

- God pronounces creation “good” and “very good” at the end of each creating day. But what does it mean? It can’t really mean perfection or finality, for after God creates the man, we learn that God recognizes that “it is not good that the

man should be alone” and God resolves to make the man a helper (2:18). When the animals prove unsatisfactory helpers, God fashions a woman, using the man as raw materials. All this speaks to growth and change, even to elements of the “not good” being present in the “good” creation.

- When God gives the humans a beautiful garden in which to live, they are also told it is theirs “to till and keep” (2:15). Thus, the garden itself is a place of growth and change that must be tended and worked. It is good but it is not “perfect” or even “complete.” In the context of a garden that must be worked, I’m not even sure what “perfect” means, but it can’t mean static or unchanging.
- The most direct evidence of a “good not perfect” creation is from Genesis 1:28. God gives the humans this charge: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and master/subdue it.” Master it?<sup>1</sup> A creation which still must be subdued is far from perfect or complete. Fretheim suggests that the best sense of the Hebrew here is “to bring order out of continuing disorder.” The result of this “subduing” must be that the creation came to look far different than it did on the seventh day, just as it continues to look different each day from the day before.

What is the result of all this? A remarkable statement of God’s choosing to make humanity partners in the on-going processes of creation. From the beginnings of creation, the humans are given responsibility for God’s creation and participate in its on-going dynamism and growth. Fretheim puts it this way: “From the beginning, God chooses not to be the only one who has creative power and the capacity, indeed the obligation, to exercise it. . . . God is a power-sharing God, indeed a creation-sharing God, and God will be faithful to that way of relating to those created in the divine image.”

In grappling with the difficult theological issues created by natural disasters, we have to begin by recognizing that the cosmos was created as changing and dynamic, even wild and hostile, needing to be subdued. This is a far cry from the placid and idyllic Garden of Eden that is portrayed by most artists. Further this dynamism and wildness is pronounced “good” and “very good” by God. This is how God designed the cosmos and, thus, God is pleased with his creation. How could it be otherwise? Nonetheless, this challenges some of our long-held notions of God’s creative activity as well as our own participation in it.

#### *Good (not perfect) but marred by sin*

So, yes, God’s creation is good though it needs to be mastered. Just think of all the human energy and wealth has been devoted to slaughtering other humans that could have been focused on overcoming diseases and disaster. God’s creation has been marred by human sinfulness, both by commission and omission. Thus, Paul gets it exactly right in Romans 8:18-21 when he speaks of creation awaiting its own redemption. When? When Jesus returns and the weight of human sin is lifted.

Of course, Jesus hasn’t returned . . . yet. So the question is what do we do as we too await the consummation of his kingdom? The answer lies in understanding that we are all called to do all we can to overcome extend and build upon the goodness in this world. This is the work of us all. It is a ministry God has given to each of us.

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<sup>1</sup> This verb (translated “subdue” or “master”) and its derivative occur fifteen times in the Old Testament. It is evidently related to Akkadian *kabāsu* “to tread down,” and Arabic *kabasa* “to knead, stamp, press” (cf. also Arabic *kabasa* “to seize with the hand”). In the Old Testament it means “to make to serve, by force if necessary.” *kābaš* assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place. (Taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Harris et al., 1999)

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Does the notion of a “good not perfect” creation strike you as a bit odd? How about a universe in which change and growth are built into its structure? Even further, how about this business of humanity needing to subdue a wild and hostile world? How different is all this from the ways you’ve thought of the creation stories and the Garden of Eden? How might this affect how you understand God’s work in the natural world? Finally, what can we learn from God’s handing over so much responsibility and power to humanity? What does it say about us? About the God we worship?

## Daily Bible Readings

*This week: More on creation and new creation*

**Monday, Genesis 1:1-2:4a** God creates the good creation.

**Tuesday, Genesis 2:4b-25** God creates the humans and the good garden.

**Wednesday, Romans 1:18-23** God’s power and nature can be seen in his creation.

**Thursday, Isaiah 65:17-25** God’s glorious new creation

**Friday, Romans 8:18-25** Creation groans awaiting its own redemption.

**Saturday, Revelation 21:1-8** A new Jerusalem, a holy city, comes to earth.

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Jonah.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Ten things you don’t have to believe to be a Jesus-lovin’, Bible-believin’ Christian.* This is a trip through some of the non-essentials of the Christian faith.