

**September 13, 2020**

*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* The first ten words of the Bible. Most of the time, our faith is focused on what is happening here on earth between humans and our creator. Today I’m going to take you further, and explore the interaction between the heavenly and earthly realms, and how that interplay shapes the salvation story that unfolds in the rest of the Bible.

From Genesis 1:2 on the focus turns to the creative activity of God in relation to earth, and everything upon the earth. And God also created angels and heavenly beings referred to as principalities and powers. Their activity throughout the Bible is generally in delivering messages to humans from God, and sometimes intervening in human affairs according to God’s plan.

What we do know about the earthly creation story is that after all the forms of life and the parts of creation that make the sustaining of life on earth possible were finished, God created *“humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . .”* The description of angels makes clear that the “our image” is not a reference to angels, but God. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and co-eternal with the Father. Our image is a reflection of the Trinity. The final step is when God breathes the breath of life, God’s spirit, into the first humans.

Then the Biblical narrative gets particular in describing the creation of the first man, Adam. He was put in a paradise setting to have face to face loving communion with God. God said to Adam, *“You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you*

*shall die.*" The Lord then gave him dominion over all creation, and created his companion, Eve, the first woman. *"And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."*

There were two trees in the midst of the Garden. The Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit of the Tree of Life was not forbidden to Adam.

Now enters the serpent. What do we know about this creature? It was not human, so it must have been one of the principalities and powers. These creatures were created in a different realm and have a very close proximity to God. And they have free will. Most of them we encounter in the Bible serve the Lord faithfully. But some seem to have viewed themselves as equal to God. And this pits them in conflict with God's purposes. The serpent seduced Eve into wanting the fruit from the forbidden tree, and when she protested, the serpent said, *"You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Here is an angel of God's creation in rebellion against God, trying to draw the humans into that rebellion. When they eat the forbidden fruit, their eyes are opened, and they become ashamed of their nakedness and hide from God. When God asks who told them they were naked, the man blames the woman and the woman blames the serpent. The plot thickens. They now have the knowledge of good and evil.

Pay close attention to what God does next. God curses the serpent and sets it on a path of enmity between the woman and her offspring. God does not curse the woman or man. God actually takes steps to protect them. The man will till the earth to provide sustenance during their lives, and the man and woman will become co-creators of all future human life, which the woman will bring forth in pain. In every step, they will be

called to decide between good and evil. Will the man curse the ground because of the hard work needed to produce food, or will he bless it as a gift from God? Will the woman curse giving birth in pain, or bless the Lord for making them agents of ongoing creation? The drama of all human life is set in motion. At every stage, we must choose between good and evil, cursing and blessing. But so that humans will not be hopelessly caught in this struggle for all of eternity, God takes them out of the garden of Paradise, and *“at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.”*

What hope is there for humanity? Much indeed, because God created us in God’s image and breathed the breath of life into us. For the rebellious angels, there is no future hope. At the end of time, the devil and his companions of evil will be thrown into the lake of fire. There is no way for them to change their fate. But for humans, the Fall leads to the story of Redemption and Recreation.

Abraham’s descendants are children of God’s promise of redemption. After years of sojourning in Canaan and then centuries in Egypt, the forces of evil and anti-creation come together in Pharaoh, who sees God’s children as slaves for his own glorification. God sends Moses to free them, and Pharaoh hardens his heart against letting God’s covenant people go. Only by the blood of the firstborn of the Egyptians are they driven out. And still, this servant of evil seeks to bring them back to serve him in his evil empire.

When Moses stretches out his arm and the waters are driven back by a strong east wind, it says “dry ground” appeared. This is a miraculous repeat of creation when the waters of chaos were parted and the dry land appeared. Now they had to choose

between good and evil. A choice for good meant stepping out by faith into the midst of the sea on the path of dry ground. They chose re-creation and went forward. When the forces of evil followed, the dry ground became the murky sea bottom again, clogging their chariot wheels. Moses again stretched out his hand, and while the waters closed in on the Egyptians, the freed Hebrews walked on dry ground between the walls of water until they arrived safely in the other side. At that moment, they believed in the Lord and his servant Moses.

The story of God's re-creation was just beginning. God invited them into a covenant in which the ways of good and evil would be clearly spelled out in hundreds of commandments, statutes and ordinances. When they choose good, they were blessed. When they choose evil, they were punished. What eventually became clear is that they could never eradicate the pull of rebellion and evil. They could not save themselves by their own strength. What hope was there for them?

The only hope was a decisive defeat of the powers of evil and anti-creation. The rebellious angels still sought to enslave us into their hopeless situation. And God now sent his only Son into the world in the flesh of our humanity and the spirit of our eternity. We are created in the image of God, and God would not surrender us to the forces of evil.

And again, deliverance comes through the sprinkling of blood; not of lambs and goats, but the blood of God made man upon the cross of the forces of evil. When the sinless one died, death as the price of sin was destroyed. Satan's own power was turned against him. Now he can no longer ensnare us in death.

You are the image of God. God's own Son died to take away your sins. By passing through the waters of baptism, you receive the Holy Spirit and remission of all your sins. God remembers none of your sins when you give them to God in confession. They disappear forever, by God's grace and Jesus' sacrifice.

While you are living your life as a child of God, you will constantly face moments of choosing between good and evil. Every time you choose the good, no matter how hard the circumstance, you join the children of Israel in stepping out onto the dry ground in the midst of the waters of chaos. The mostly godly choice for good is to look at your fellow child of God as the Father looks at you. Nothing you do will separate you from God's love and forgiveness. You make that same choice for the good every time you forgive someone who has hurt you. And you make a choice for evil every time you do what Satan does and try to hold the other person's sin between you and God. Forgive seven times? Forgive seventy-seven times? Even if you forgive seven million times, you'll never match God's grace and love for you. But every time you forgive, you choose good and reject evil. It's a struggle, but it's the kind of struggle that make's God visible in and through you. Forgiveness is the clearest sign of being created in the image of God.

Remember the prize, as told in the last chapter of Revelation:

“**22** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is **the tree of life** with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup>Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup>they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And there will be no more night; they

need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

The Tree of Life; it's there for you. Never let the forces of evil rob you of your appointed day of salvation. Every time you choose the good and refuse the evil, God's image shines through you to another hungry soul looking for God.