



in the beginning...

Winter Theme: ALPHA

*Where did we come from? How did life begin? What were we created for?
Do we really have a purpose? What's the point of it all?*

These are the questions that humanity has been asking for millennia. And to find the answers, we need look no further than the first pages of God's Word, the Bible. This winter Cowboy's Rest will take students back to the Beginning ... the beginning of Scripture, the beginning of time, the beginning of the greatest story ever told. And it's a story in which we are all invited to play a role. So journey with us as we delve into the Word of the One who knows the beginning from the end ... the Alpha and Omega.

Friday Evening

The Beginning of the Universe

Key Texts: Genesis 1:1 - 2:3, John 1:1-3

We begin our study of the Beginning at the very beginning of the Bible, with **Genesis 1:1**. This single verse asserts a truth that we must either accept or reject; namely that "*God created the heavens and the earth.*" We can (arguably) debate how long the process took or how many millennia ago it happened, but on this first point the Bible is crystal clear. God and God alone created this planet, this solar system, this galaxy ... in short, this everything. Believing this truth does take faith, but as we hope to establish in later sessions, it does not take blind faith.

Moving into **verses 2 and 3** of our text, we find all three members of the triune Godhead involved in the act of creation: The Father speaks, The Word acts, and the Spirit moves across the waters. We know from **John 1:1-3** that the Father was not alone in the creative process. Indeed, the very first thing created was light, and that Light has its source in the Word. (**John 1:4**) At any rate, it's important that we recognize the strong support for the doctrine of the Trinity in these very first verses of the Bible; support which continues in **Genesis 1:26** and **3:22**.

As the remainder of the creation narrative unfolds, we come across several more exciting truths, as well as a few intriguing questions. First, what does it mean that God created plants and animals "*after their kind?*" It seems that God has placed fixed boundaries upon His creation; boundaries which can never be transcended by reproduction and mutation. Whether these boundaries are along the lines of species, genus or family, we're not sure. But that they exist cannot be denied. In Genesis 1 alone, Scripture specifies ten times that each organism reproduces only after its kind. So what does all that say about the theory of evolution?

Another interesting question arising from Genesis chapter 1 is that of man's rule over creation. In verse 28, God commands humanity to "*be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over ... every living thing...*" Later, in **Genesis 2:15**, the LORD adds cultivation and "keeping" (or protection) to these responsibilities. We'll discuss the place of mankind in the created order at

much greater length in the next session. For now, let us ask whether these instructions apply to us as descendants of Adam and Eve today. (See **Psalm 8** and **Hebrews 2** for further discussion.) If so, how should we handle our role as stewards of God's "very good" creation? How should we respond to the environmental conservation movement and its concerns over global warming? And, as Christians, how should we care for this earth, even though we know it will one day pass away? These are some rather controversial questions without a plethora of clear-cut answers. Have fun!

Finally, one more issue raised by the creation account is that of the sabbath. **Genesis 2:2-3** records that after completing all His work, God rested on the seventh day. In doing so He "*blessed the seventh day and sanctified it.*" Of course, the LORD later commanded the Israelites to "*remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.*" (**Exodus 20:8**) But that commandment is not repeated for Christians in the New Testament. So, is Saturday still a sanctified day? Does it really matter which day we set aside for rest and worship? And why did God rest in the first place? Was it for His benefit, for ours, or for both? The answers to these questions may change the way we spend our time every day of the week.

In closing, the first chapter of Genesis is as mysterious as it is straightforward, and there are a number of different issues to explore beyond those mentioned above. However, the main message of the passage is unmistakable: God is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. It is our privilege to worship Him as such this weekend.

Saturday Morning

The Beginning of Humanity

Key Texts: Genesis 1:26-28, 2:4-25

As we read the creation account in **Genesis 1**, we notice a certain pattern emerging over the course of the first five days. God simply says "let there be..." and there is. His divine proclamations are direct and to the point. However, in the middle of day six, this simple rhythm comes to a halt. Suddenly, we find the members of the Godhead involved in a conversation with Each Other. (**verse 26**) And then, instead of creating just another animal after its kind, God creates man in His own image, according to His own likeness. Clearly something special has just occurred.

Genesis chapter 2 goes even further in delineating mankind's uniqueness amidst creation. In this chapter, the entire creative process is reviewed from humanity's perspective. Plants, animals, gardens, and rivers -- all appear on the scene as gifts from God for mankind. And man himself is portrayed as God's most intimate creation. Not only does the LORD stoop down to form the first man from the dust. He also personally breathes into Adam "*the breath of life,*" giving of Himself to make Adam "*a living being.*" (**verse 7**) Humanity is clearly very unique in the created order. But what exactly is it that makes us so distinct? What is it that sets us apart from the other creatures introduced on the sixth day? Well, as the old slogan goes, "Image is everything."

Imago Dei. The image of God. Countless pages have been written on the subject, and it is not our intention to plumb its depths here. Rather, we simply need to ask, what exactly does the phrase "image of God" mean? And how does the fact that I am an "image-bearer" change the way I live today?

The image of God is, simply stated, every way in which man is a reflection of God, or like God. It would be difficult to identify just one human trait that constitutes God's likeness in humanity. Therefore, let us focus on the many ways in which man is uniquely similar to his Creator. Spiritually, man is an immortal creation who will exist forever. Mentally, man can reason, think abstractly, and make willful decisions. Physically, man is capable of sight, hearing and symbolic, intelligent speech. Creatively, man can imitate God in acts of sub-creation, such as music, literature, art, technology, and

industry. Positionally, man is placed above the animals and given authority to rule over the earth. Relationally, man is capable of loving and communing with those around him in a self-sacrificial manner. And the list goes on. Suffice it to say that in all of these ways, and in many more, humans differ greatly from the other inhabitants of this planet. In all of these ways we are much more like the One who made us.

Of course, many theological issues remain regarding the image of God. An important one stems from **Genesis 1:27** where the text reads, “*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*” This passage has intrigued scholars for centuries, and some have argued that the most complete likeness of God is to be found in the way the feminine and masculine genders complement and balance each other. At any rate, it’s important to note from this verse that both men and women are made in the image of God. Both sexes are therefore on equal spiritual footing before the Creator (see **Galatians 3:27-28**), though their roles in the church and in marriage differ.

Speaking of marriage, it should at least be mentioned here that this union of man and woman is a divine institution, not a human invention. **Genesis 2:18** gives us God’s reasoning behind the creation of marriage: “*It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.*” And **Genesis 2:24** provides us with God’s blueprint for the marriage relationship: “*For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*” One husband and one wife for one life; that’s the LORD’s design. Of course this teaching session isn’t primarily about marriage. But in a culture that seems dedicated to redefining (i.e. destroying) one of God’s earliest gifts to mankind, these passages have proven to be of extreme importance.

Okay, now that we’ve explored the meaning of “the image of God” (as well as chased a proverbial rabbit or two), it’s time to draw some applications for our every day lives. Does this doctrine really impact how we live at work and at play, at home and at church? The answer is a resounding “yes.” And it should do so on at least two different levels.

First, the principle of *imago Dei* has profound impacts on how we view and interact with others. If every human being -- male or female, young or old, Christian or non-Christian, healthy or unhealthy, born or unborn -- bears God’s image, no matter how imperfectly, then each of us is imbued with dignity and importance in God’s eyes. Human life is sacred, and murder is such a grievous sin because it robs an image-bearer of this life. (See **Genesis 9:6** for God’s own declaration of this principle.) Likewise all offences against our fellow man are also sins against the Creator of man. We cannot love God and then hate those who reflect what He is like. (**I John 4:20-21**) We must not praise God and then curse or slander His highest creation on this planet. (**James 3:7-12**) And we should not objectify (or use for our own benefit and pleasure) the eternal beings that God has created for His own glory and pleasure. (**Isaiah 43:6-7**) All in all, the fact that humans bear the image of God should radically change how we love and respect those around us, both as individuals and as a society.

Second, God’s image should also change the way we view ourselves. How awesome it is to know that we are the culmination of God’s majestic creation. How humbling it is to think that when He desired to make something more like Himself than anything in existence, He created us. And how reassuring it is to be convinced that He crafted every individual human with a unique capacity for serving Him and reflecting His glory. (**Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 5:16**) Yes, these thoughts should encourage and comfort us.

They should also challenge us. Since we are created in God’s likeness, we are uniquely accountable before Him for our actions. We also have the blessed potential to grow to be better image-bearers: clearer reflections of who the Creator is and what He is like. We’ll discuss both of these points at greater length in future sessions. For now, let us praise and worship our Father for the amazing right that He has given us to bear His image. And let us resolve to do so with humility, integrity, and clarity by His infinite grace.

Saturday Evening

RE: eVOLUTION

Key Points: In stark contrast to the Bible's inspiring doctrines of divine design and *imago Dei* are the secular humanists' rather depressing theories of origins and macro-evolution. In this session we will be comparing and contrasting these two belief systems through a number of lenses. First, in the world of science, which view really holds the most weight? Is there actually sound evidence to support macro-evolution? What about Intelligent Design? Then, in the sphere of philosophy, which worldview does a better job answering the basic questions of life? What are the moral ramifications of adopting the humanistic viewpoint? What about the theistic? Finally, in the realm of faith, which origins account actually takes more blind faith to believe? "In the beginning God created..." or "Slime + Time = You." You decide.

Sunday Morning

The Beginning of Sin

Key Texts: Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-24, Romans 6:23, 8:18-23, I John 2:15-17

When studying the tragic account of Adam and Eve's rebellion and separation from God, we come across several truths that apply directly to our own lives.

First, when the original man and woman disobeyed God, the penalty for their sin was indeed death. This death was both eventual and physical (separation from the body), as well as immediate and spiritual (separation from God). As sinners all of us deserve this same punishment. From birth we are alienated from our Heavenly Father due to the sin nature we inherit from our first parents. Throughout our lives we fall short of God's standard and become enslaved to sin ourselves. Finally, left in our current state, we will face what the Bible calls the second death, and spend all of eternity apart from the One we were created to be with. (**Revelation 20:11-15**) For the unbeliever, this topic should raise serious questions about how to be saved; questions that will be answered in the next session.

Second, the image of God in man was severely marred at the Fall. However, it was not completely lost. Human beings still retain the status of image-bearers, if not the holiness and glory we once possessed. Creation was also subjected to futility after man's sin, and death and corruption entered the world. The pain, suffering, calamity and even natural disasters we observe on this earth are a consequence of man's original and continuing decision to rebel against the Creator. When bad things happen, instead of blaming God, we can usually point the finger right back at ourselves.

Third, the methods that Satan used in tempting Eve are the same ones he attempts to ensnare us with today. Notice his techniques in **Genesis 3:1-5**. He questions God's Word and portrays the LORD's commandments as super-strict and unreasonable. (Eve assists him in verse 2 by adding on to what God has actually said.) The devil downplays or denies the consequences of sin, and attempts to cast doubt on God's goodness and generosity. Finally, the Liar appeals to humanity's pride and desire to usurp God's rule in our lives.

Of course, our own lusts also contribute to the temptation process. **Genesis 3:6** states that "*the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise...*" We realize that not much has changed in the way humans are tempted when we compare the Apostle John's list of worldly lusts: "*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*". (**I John 2:16**.)

So, having studied how sin began in the human race, and having observed its deadly effects on this entire world, let us recommit to fighting the battle against it in our own lives. Clinging to God's

Word as our only weapon, and relying on His grace and strength, may we conquer sin each day before it sprouts anew in our hearts.

Of course, no matter how fiercely we struggle against sin, our efforts will never amount to anything without the blood of Jesus Christ. But for more on that, you'll have to come back tonight...

(Here's hoping no one dies on the sledding hill Sunday afternoon.)

Sunday Evening

The Beginning of Redemption

Key Texts: Genesis 3:15, 3:21, Romans 8:28-30, II Corinthians 3:18, Colossians 3:10

The previous session ended on something of a somber note; explaining humanity's sin problem and exposing our utter hopelessness in overcoming it. This session reveals the hope available to all sinners, the hope that God Himself held before the foundations of the world.

Even in that dark hour when God separated Himself from Adam and Eve, He hinted at the manner in which He would one day redeem, or buy back, all of mankind. In **Genesis 3:15**, while cursing the serpent, the LORD states, "*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.*" This is ultimately a reference to Jesus Christ, who was not born of the seed of man, but of a virgin woman. Satan would one day score a seeming victory over the woman's seed when Christ was crucified. However, three days later Christ would rise again, breaking Satan's power, and crushing death and sin in victory. (**I Corinthians 15:56-57**) And so we see the entire gospel prophesied right here in Genesis 3:15.

But the foreshadowing doesn't end there. **Genesis 3:21** records a small detail of the story which proves to be of great significance. "*The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.*" This verse is a bit ambiguous, but it is not at all unreasonable to conclude that God slaughtered an animal (or animals) to provide these skins. In doing so, He spilled innocent blood to provide a covering for Adam and Eve's shame. This then is the first example of blood atonement in Scripture. Centuries later, God would establish the Levitical sacrificial system to cover His people's sin and allow them at least temporary fellowship with Him. And finally, a millennia and a half later, in the fullness of time, God the Son would shed His own blood to cleanse us of sin completely and bring us into permanent fellowship with the Godhead.

Thus, in Genesis 3 we find two previews of redemption. And that's what this session is all about. These verses can be used as an "on-ramp" to sharing the gospel. Other passages that might be cited include **Romans 5:12-21** and **1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 45-49** where Adam and Christ are contrasted (Adam bringing death through his sin, Christ bringing life through His obedience, etc.) However, the main message for the unbeliever should be clear: "*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved...*" (**Acts 16:31**) For any who do not know Christ as LORD, this session is a straightforward presentation of the plan of salvation and a call to decision.

But the seasoned Christian shouldn't just check out at this point. For as we discuss redemption through the lens of Genesis we need to ask a few more questions. Is the recovery of the human race now complete? Has man fully regained what was lost at the Fall? Has the image of God been completely restored in him? When viewed from this perspective, we understand that our redemption is not suddenly over the moment we receive Christ as Savior. It's an on-going process; a process called sanctification.

Scripture tells us that Jesus Himself is the "*image of the invisible God,*" (**Colossians 1:15**) and the perfect revelation of the Father. (**John 1:18**) The Apostle Paul informs us in **Romans 8:29** that the very reason God predestined and called us was "*to become conformed to the image of His Son.*" But

this conforming doesn't occur all at once. It happens throughout the course of our Christian lives as we are "*renewed according to the image of the One who created*" us. (**Colossians 3:10**) In **II Corinthians 3:18**, Paul describes it this way: "*But we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*"

So, Christian, are you content to simply sit and enjoy your salvation, or are you determined to become more and more like your Savior? How much of God's image has been restored in your life? And are you fulfilling the destiny to which God called you?

Monday Morning

The New Beginning

Key Texts: Luke 21:27-28, I John 3:1-3, Revelation 21:1-8, 22:1-5

We conclude our study of the Beginning with a sneak preview of the End. And as we turn our gaze toward the end of time, what we find is a glorious new beginning. The last two chapters of the Book of Revelation describe how God will someday bring His work of redemption to completion and make "*all things new.*" (**Revelation 21:5**) The goal of this session is not to delve too deeply into the details of eschatology. If the LORD tarries, there will be time for that later. (See below.) Rather, this topic should remind us all of the blessed hope we have in Christ. And that hope should inform every aspect of our lives.

So, painting in broad strokes, what will the new creation be like? Well, in many ways, it will be very similar to the original, un-fallen world. **Revelation 21:4** promises that "*there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.*" All of these evils are symptoms of the curse, and **Revelation 22:3** tells us that the curse itself will be done away with. The same chapter goes even further in drawing parallels between the old and new creations. While describing the holy city, New Jerusalem, **verse 1** mentions a new life-giving river, this time flowing not out of Eden but from the throne of God Himself. (Compare this with **Genesis 2:10**.) And more exciting yet, the tree of life is back, and better than ever. It's so colossal that it straddles both sides of the river, its fruit changes varieties every month, and its leaves heal entire nations. If the first creation was "very good," then words cannot begin to describe the quality of the second.

And all of this is made for us. Jesus promised that He would prepare a place for His followers (**John 14:2-3**), and this is His glorious finished product. The amazing thing is we won't be out of place in this holy city, for we too will be perfected. The process of transformation that Paul describes in **II Corinthians 3:18** will finally be complete. Humans will once again perfectly bear the image of God, for we will finally be like His Son. Here's how John puts it in his first epistle: "*Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.*" (**3:2**)

And that is the most exciting and beautiful promise of all: we will see God. Just as Adam and Eve walked with their Creator in the coolness of the garden, so too will their redeemed descendants commune with their beloved Savior in the holy city. **Revelation 21:3** proclaims, "*Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.*" And **Revelation 22:3-4** pledges, "*His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.*" Finally, we will worship our LORD face to face, and the fellowship with Him for which we were designed will grow deeper and deeper throughout eternity. Like the *Gloria Patri* jubilantly declares, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; world without end. Amen! Amen!"

So, what does all that have to do with Joe Teenager from Podunk, Nevada? A whole lot, actually. If Joe knows the LORD, he's already become a new creation himself. (**II Corinthians 5:17**) And now his main concern should be to prepare his heart and the hearts of those around him for the promised new creation on a universal scale. He needs to make sure that his life is pure, just as his coming Savior is pure. (**I John 3:3**) He needs to make the most of his time with his unsaved friends so that they all can hang-out with Jesus in the New Jerusalem. (**Colossians 4:5-6**) And, finally, Joe needs to get together with his brothers and sisters in Christ and help them kick it into gear, especially as he sees the day drawing near. (**Hebrews 10:24**)

Perhaps Joe has been slacking on some of this. Perhaps he's lost sight of his true mission and the end toward which this world is hurtling. Well perhaps today can be a new beginning for him. Perhaps it can for all of us.

NOTE: I am very much indebted to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* (Intervarsity Press, 1994) for suggesting much of the above. Another invaluable resource has proven to be Henry M. Morris' *The Genesis Record* (Baker Books, 1976).

NOTE 2: For Junior High, Evolution talk can be presented Saturday before dinner on DVD and the final talk presented/teased in morning cabin devo's.

coming next winter ...

