Creation as Cosmic Temple

Genesis 1:1–2:3

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Rethinking the Gospel, Genesis Session 1

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Welcome to the Study

All right, welcome to Session 1: Genesis 1. This is an extended Bible study that starts tonight, and we'll keep going until we've covered the entire Hebrew Scriptures. I'm probably going to follow the Jewish order for it. The Hebrew Bible doesn't run from Genesis to Malachi the way ours does; it actually ends with Second Chronicles. So we'll follow that pattern.

Tonight I hope to lay out some of the ground rules for how we're going to approach this study. My hope is that we don't only fill the mind. That is important. But I want it to translate into something that helps us realize what God has called us to, our overall purpose, and how we can live that purpose out in this world. Knowledge alone just puffs us up. We start using what we know to defeat an opponent or win an argument. A lot of the time I'll show you several people's perspectives, then where I think it lands, and we'll step through it together. But at the same time I hope to show you the powerful, motivating force the Word of God has to transform our lives, so that we become the people God originally created us to be. And what better place to start than Genesis 1?

I won't do this every time, but let me show you the website. It's called Rethinking the Gospel, and I built it. Under the Sermons tab are the messages I've been collecting over the last several years, somewhere between 72 and 75 talks. I've edited the transcripts of those messages

and grouped them into four volumes: *The Hidden Mercy*, *The Lion Who Is the Lamb*, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, and *The Multitude No One Could Number*.

Each of those titles answers what I think is a surface reading that people have tripped over in the Scriptures. *The Hidden Mercy* answers the indictment against God that he's an angry God, that the God of the Old Testament is angry. Through the years I've tried to show that many of those texts, when you look at them the right way, show something different. *The Lion Who Is the Lamb* comes from Revelation 5. *The Upside-Down Kingdom* is about a kingdom you'd expect to come by force, power, and violence, but the kingdom of God comes through sacrificial love.

And *The Multitude No One Could Number* comes from Revelation 7. John hears the numbering of the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve thousand from every tribe. A Jewish reader would immediately think of the census of Israel's soldiers, numbered tribe by tribe to go out to battle. But when John turns to see what he heard, he doesn't see Jewish soldiers from every tribe. He sees a multitude from every nation, kindred, tribe, and people. Do you see the inversion? A multitude no one could number.

You can click on any of those messages and read the edited PDF or listen to the original audio. That's the sermons. These sessions are grouped by book, so this is Genesis, Session 1. We'll meet Thursday nights. When there's a wedding or something else here on a Friday, we'll probably move to Saturday, and now and then we may have to skip a night.

On the session page for tonight, "Creation as Cosmic Temple," you'll find the session materials. The student guide is a PDF that holds more than I can give you tonight. It captures my references from the commentaries and books I've been studying on this topic for years, and especially to prepare for tonight. At the end you'll find the references in APA format for the

people I've read and been influenced by, and then a bibliography of the books themselves so you can research it yourself. If you don't want to buy a book, you can borrow it from me.

There's also a teacher's guide, in PowerPoint and in PDF. Those are there so small groups can teach this. My vision is that this is simply free content. Eventually, with tools like ElevenLabs and other AI capabilities, we can translate it into other languages, even my audio from tonight, so that anyone who wants to can lead a small group somewhere in their own language.

And not that what I'm going to present is all mine, because none of us is an island. Any one of us, combining the thoughts we've received, might come up with a perspective of our own. I'll present those things, but we've all built on many, many minds and hearts that came before us.

So that's it in a nutshell. Every session will have a basic outline of what we're going to cover. In the study guide I use the Berean Standard Bible, and for the Apocrypha the World English Bible. Both are open translations, so I can use them freely without copyright problems. When I'm speaking, though, I'll be reading from the New King James Version. And that's all I've got to say about that.

That took seven minutes, and I have more content than we can probably cover in the time we have. If at any point you think, "This is not what I signed up for, Rob, this is too much," you're not going to hurt my feelings. If you need to go, go. This session will probably be more robust than future ones, because it's about the beginning of everything. I don't know that there's a single passage in this Bible that doesn't have some root in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and chapter 1 sets the tone.

The Road Map

So, Genesis 1 as the creation of a cosmic temple. People hear that and ask, “What are you talking about?” Let’s just go through it.

First we’ll introduce Genesis: its name, who wrote it, when, and what genres are in it. Genre is important, and we’ll get into that.

Second, it’s not a science book. This is going to be freedom for some of you. If you’ve ever sat in a high school or college class trying to reconcile what the science teacher said with what you read in Genesis 1, understand that Genesis 1 was not written as a science textbook. We have to ask what questions Israel was asking.

Third, we’ll walk through it verse by verse, from chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 2, verse 3. That’s the first section. I’ll say this now because I won’t say it later: I really appreciate our Christian forefathers who versified the Bible. It helps us find our place. Paul had to write, “One testified in a certain place, saying.” He didn’t have chapter and verse. And when Jesus, as his custom was, went into the synagogue, he was handed the scroll of Isaiah and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” He didn’t say, “Turn with me to Isaiah 61.” So we were given these verse divisions, but the scholars who gave them to us didn’t always capture where a thought begins and ends.

Fourth, we’ll discuss the problem of *tohu vavohu*: the unformed and empty world, the earth “without form, and void.” Then forming and filling. Some of these things we’ll go over lightly, and you can dig into the detail yourself.

Fifth, the seventh day: rest, trust, blessing, and what blessing means. And Sabbath, and how Sabbath plays out through the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the rest, the blessing,

and the Sabbath that the Messiah was to bring, all things being fulfilled in him. The Hebrew Scriptures promised that, and we see it fulfilled in Jesus.

Sixth, the ancient Near East. If you know the name, the authorship, and the date when a thing was written, you understand the argument that's going on in it. This is exciting stuff, because it shows us our own commission as a people: to engage the culture in a meaningful way, to hear what the culture is saying about how the world works, and to answer with the way God says the world works.

Seventh, echoes of Genesis 1 across the Hebrew Scriptures, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament. I'll only show you one or two, but for every verse in Genesis 1 the student guide has detailed passages where you can follow the quotations, echoes, and allusions. I'll explain what each of those is and why it matters. And then we'll wrap up.

Introducing Genesis

The Name

Genesis is a book of origins. It's named after its first word in Hebrew, *bereshit*, which means "in the beginning." It's the first word of the Hebrew Bible. The English transliteration on the screen reads left to right, but if you decide to become a Hebrew scholar, remember that Hebrew reads right to left.

About two hundred years before Jesus was born, Jewish scholars, tradition says seventy of them, translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, because the Greeks ruled the world at the time. We call that translation the Septuagint. Sometimes in the margin of your Bible you'll see the letters LXX. That's the Roman numeral for seventy, and it means the Septuagint translated a word differently; the note gives you the alternative reading.

The Septuagint named this book *Genesis*. Later, as the church grew under Rome, the Bible was translated into Latin, the Vulgate, and it kept the name *Genesis*. In English we've kept it too. That's how the title reached us.

What It's About

So what is it about? The origins of humanity. Who we are and what we're here for. What our purpose is.

The first eleven chapters are about humanity in general: the problems that come from humanity, the spread of humanity, the building of cities. Then the book turns to the people of Israel: how God called them out to bless them and make them a blessing to the nations, so that those nations would become what God originally intended them to be. So it's about Abraham and his family. It's about a calling, and about relationship: how God wants to dwell with his people and be with them.

When we get to Genesis 2, you'll see God walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. It's a relationship that gets broken. The rest of the book is about how that relationship is put back together, and the rest of Scripture is about how the promises to Israel are fulfilled through the Messiah, and how the plan of God is finally resolved.

Who Wrote It?

Genesis doesn't have a title page that says "written by Moses." It's anonymous. There's no author and no date on the scroll.

But Jesus himself, in Mark 12:26, Luke 24:27, John 5:46, and other places, refers to these books as written by Moses. On the road to Emmaus, after his resurrection, he began "at Moses and all the Prophets" and expounded the things concerning himself. So Jesus and the Gospel writers believed Moses was the author.

But when you dig into the hints within Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the five books of Moses, which Jewish scholars call the Torah, or the Law, you start to see things that point to other hands as well. Deuteronomy 34 records Moses' death. Another passage says Moses was the meekest man on the earth. And right after Joshua takes over from Moses, Deuteronomy 34 says, "Since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses." That reaches back to Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18:18, where Moses says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me... Him you shall hear." At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses goes up in the land of Moab and dies, and no one knows where his grave is, "to this day."

Then there are passages like Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham, which says, "And the Canaanites were then in the land." That's a strange thing to say. Whoever wrote it was saying the Canaanites were in the land *then*, but they aren't now. It wasn't until the reign of David that the land had rest and the full promise was fulfilled, so that points to around 1000 BC. And later in Genesis, in 36:31, in the line of Esau and the kings of Edom, it says these kings reigned "before any king reigned over the children of Israel." Somebody already knows there are kings in Israel. There are many little things like that. So people debate authorship.

But here is what I want to point out, and it's common ground. The reason we don't dismiss Mosaic authorship is that there are things in Genesis that are clearly older than the law Moses gave. The patriarchs plant sacred trees and build altars the Law would later forbid. They marry multiple wives, take concubines to have children by them. Those things were forbidden in the Law. So however this book came to us whole and complete, it came in an ancient form that isn't afraid to contradict the laws Moses gave. It isn't afraid to say that way back in the day Abraham took a concubine, that Jacob built a stone altar at Bethel, that Jacob took two wives and two concubines and had children by all of them. Later the Law says, "You're not going to do that

kind of stuff." That's the mindset to bring to these books. They were delivered to us whole and complete, telling a full story that is sufficient for us to understand the will of God for his creation.

When Was It Written, and Why Does It Matter?

It was either written by Moses when Israel left Egypt, a people who had been enamored with the sun gods of Egypt. Remember the plagues in Exodus: each was poured out on the gods of Egypt. In Exodus 12 it says plainly that this was a battle, a cosmic battle, between Yahweh, the God of this slave people, and the gods of Egypt that the Egyptians had put so much confidence in.

If it was written to that world, then Genesis 1 contradicts it. Egypt said only Pharaoh is the image of the sun god. Genesis 1 says that all humanity, male and female, is created in the image of God. All people are. Think about it: what story would you tell a people who had spent four hundred years in slavery? You'd want to tell them they were never meant to be Pharaoh's slaves, that he is not the only one in the image of God. You'd tell them they are all in the image of God, so begin to act like it. Don't live at Pharaoh's beck and call. Live directly with God and be the people he's called you to be.

Or it was written around the time of the Babylonian exile. As we go through this study over the next ten years, you'll see that the return from Babylon always riffs off the exodus from Egypt. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel keep looking back to the deliverance from Egypt.

And what messages were the Israelites hearing in Babylon? That Marduk killed his grandmother Tiamat, split her body in half, used one half to hold back the waters in the heavens, and made the earth from the other half. Order came into the cosmos through violence. That's what Israel heard in captivity.

But what does Genesis 1 tell us, and the rest of the Scriptures? That it was Israel's God, not Babylon's, who tamed chaos, and he did it with words, not violence. Not with a fight, but with a word. I just love that. And then his Messiah comes, and we call him the Word of God. I'm always jumping to the end of the story, but look at Revelation: a sword comes out of his mouth. He doesn't fight with a sword in his hand. He fights with the sword of his mouth, with words. That's how the God of creation and his Messiah bring the world back into order.

From Genesis 3 on, you'll see that chaos has to be tamed, and the God of creation has a plan. The plan is the seed of the woman, the faithful one who will finally have rule and dominion over creation. But this is just the preamble, so I'd better move on.

Responding, Not Borrowing

Israel's neighbors influenced them. But Moses, or the writers of Genesis, weren't echoing those neighbors. They weren't saying, "Oh, that's a good idea. Waters above and waters below, let's take that from Marduk, from the Enuma Elish. Sounds good. Write it down." No. They lived in their culture, just like we live in ours, and you can't help but use the language of your culture to communicate. They used the same imagery as the myths, but their account was a response to false ideas about how we got here, what our purpose is, and where the gods stand. Does that make sense?

The Genres

Genesis 1 is exalted prose, liturgy. It's written in a form like other ancient accounts such as the Enuma Elish and the story of Atrahasis. But don't be thrown by the variety of genres in the book. You'll find narrative: Eden, the flood, the patriarchs, Joseph. You'll find genealogies. There's a word, *toledot*, used ten times in Genesis: "These are the generations of." Before there were chapters and verses, they set the cadence of the book with trigger words and phrases like

that. There's poetry. There are blessings, oracles, and covenants, like Genesis 12:1–3, which is my favorite, and chapter 18. I love those.

The big picture is that the story beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12 starts with blessing. When we read the creation account, you'll hear it: "And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply." He blesses the creatures, he blesses humanity, and finally he blesses the seventh day. And that blessing ties straight into Genesis 12, where the story of Abraham begins: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There's also a sound-play between the Hebrew word for "create," *bara*, and the word for "bless," *barak*. When God blesses his creation, it's as if creation keeps going through blessing. Hopefully I'm not giving you too much detail.

Why Genre Matters

Has anybody ever told you, "Just read the black-and-white text, Rob. You don't need all that mumbo jumbo, the Enuma Elish and Atrahasis and the sun god of Egypt. Just read the Bible"?

Well, we don't live there. We don't think in their terms. We're materialists. We're Westerners. We live thousands of years from when this material was written and compiled. When they say "create," do they mean material creation? We're going to find out.

That's why genre matters. If I send my wife a love poem and say, "Your eyes are like pools of water," I don't want her to read it literally. I mean her eyes are beautiful. A parable is not a news story. A poem is not a medical report. Psalm 104:2 says God stretches out the heavens like a curtain, like a tent. Nobody asks what fabric the sky is made of. Elon Musk wouldn't be getting very far if his rockets were slamming into a solid dome up there. We're not supposed to read this as science.

Genesis 1 is a carefully patterned hymn, not a laboratory report. Why didn't God just tell the Hebrews, "You know what? These Babylonian and Egyptian myths are foolish. Don't they know about photons? Don't they know the earth is round?" There was no context for any of that. Genesis isn't talking about the material of photons or atoms. It's talking about purpose.

Not a Science Book

A Hymn, and a Temple

Why do I call it a hymn? Because of its rhythm. It's written in a way that draws you into the story as worship. And the title of tonight is "Creation as Cosmic Temple" because Genesis 1 is the building of a temple, and it takes seven days.

Let me jump ahead a little. When Solomon builds the temple in 1 Kings 6, he gathers the materials: stones cut at the quarry, gold and silver, tapestries. He starts framing it up. Is that the temple yet? No, those are just stones. It took seven years to gather and build. The materials existed, but the temple did not yet function as God's dwelling on earth.

David had wanted to build that house. In 2 Samuel 7 he says, "I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells inside tent curtains." God tells him through Nathan that he won't build it; it's his son who will build God a house. (Later David says it was because he had shed much blood.)

Here's the point. Solomon's temple is like a horizontal model of the vertical picture we're about to read in Genesis 1. In the courts you have the great bronze Sea and the altar of fire. You pass through the veil, which is like a firmament. Inside, the walls are carved with palm trees, flowers, and living creatures. There's a gold table with twelve loaves of bread. There's a seven-branched golden lampstand shaped with almond blossoms, which looks very much like the tree of life in the garden of Eden that we'll see next week in chapter 2.

Then you come to the golden altar of incense, with smoke rising. Now you're near the next veil, the firmament of the sky, and the smoke reminds you of clouds. On the Day of Atonement the high priest took coals from that altar, filled the next room, the Holy of Holies, with incense, and entered that cloudy space. And what was worked into that space? Cherubim, with wings, and their wings touching over the ark of the covenant, which Scripture calls the footstool of God. That's in the notes if you want to look it up.

What is all that imagery showing? The same thing we're about to see in Genesis 1, only laid out horizontally instead of vertically: two firmaments, one separating you from the waters outside and one separating you from the heavens.

The Questions Israel Was Asking

The question Israel was asking wasn't "What is the material substance of the universe?" They couldn't have cared less. They were asking about purpose.

Which God is responsible for the world? All their neighbors had a god responsible for the world, and each had a story of how that god brought order. Think back to Western Civilization 101: what made civilization sprout up? (Pun intended.) The ability to control water, irrigate land, and grow crops so people wouldn't starve. Everything in these ancient accounts is about how the gods gave people the ability to manage that.

What is the world for? It's an ordered home, fit for life, first for humanity, but also a dwelling place for God.

And what is a human being? Not a slave of the gods, but God's own image, blessed to rule.

Signs That This Is Not About Material Origins

On day one you have light and darkness, evening and morning, and the sun, moon, and stars haven't been made yet. The point is that God, not the sun as the Egyptians thought, is the one who brings light. Sequence isn't the point. The writer's concern is the importance of humanity, not chronology. Humans are the goal of creation.

So don't match scientific theories to these days. Don't try to say, "Day one, how could that work? There must be some scientific play there." That's not what the text is answering. The seven days are a literary framework, a priestly hymn. The priests thought in seven-day cycles. And so, by the way, did the temple dedications of the other ancient Near Eastern peoples whose stories competed with Israel's vision of God. You put the materials together, went through a seven-day cycle, and dedicated the temple. It wasn't inaugurated until the god came down to dwell in his image within his temple, and almost all of them were dedicated on a seven-day cycle.

Israel follows the same kind of pattern, but each of its days makes a point, and one of the major points is that humanity is the reason for everything, made to be the source of good for the world as God's vice-regents.

Let me close the loop on Solomon. It took seven years to build. The materials existed before the temple was complete and inaugurated with the presence of God. And when it was dedicated, the priests came in, with 120 priests sounding trumpets, and the cloud, the glory of God, the Shekinah, filled the house. The whole point of a temple is that God has a dwelling place on earth. That's the framework, and we'll get much more into the details later.

The Ancient Picture of the World

Israel pictured a flat earth under a dome that held back the waters above and the waters below. When we get to the flood in Genesis 7, it says “the windows of heaven were opened.” We’ve sung songs about the windows of heaven being open and meant that blessing is coming. But the first time that phrase shows up, blessing is not what’s coming. The picture is of a firmament with windows in it that water could pour through. We’ll get into why later.

Let me step through this quickly. John Walton, an Old Testament scholar at Wheaton College, has written many books on what he calls functional creation. The ancients didn’t think about creation mainly as material creation. They thought of something being created when it was given a function. If they didn’t know what a thing did, it didn’t really exist. To exist is to function. To name something is to own it and have authority over it.

Walton affirms that God made all matter. That’s not the question here. But look at where Genesis 1 starts in verse 2: the earth is without form and void, darkness is on the face of the deep, the Spirit of God is hovering over the face of the waters, and then God says, “Let there be light.” To create, in this sense, is to assign function. On days one to three God establishes three great functions of life: time, weather, and food, all oriented toward humanity. On days four to six he fills those spaces with their functionaries. When God declares something “good,” it means it’s working the way it should. And then God rests in his cosmic temple, and resting means he begins to reign.

Here’s the ancient picture. In Genesis 1:7 God separates the waters with a firmament and calls it heaven, or sky. His throne sits above it, in the heaven of heavens: Psalm 29:10, Psalm 104:3. And Isaiah 66:1 captures all of it. Let me pause and read it.

"Thus says the Lord: Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist," says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."

If you're thinking about the universe as a cosmic temple, a place God chooses to dwell, that verse captures the whole thing. Remember what Jesus said in all three Synoptic Gospels: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of thieves." The house he meant was the temple. And in Isaiah, God says: heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool, I made all of it. Isaiah was writing before the temple was destroyed, while the glory of God still dwelt there. And God says, in effect, "It's a person I want to dwell in. A human being."

So in this picture you have the waters above and the waters below. You have the great deep, which in Hebrew is *tehom*, and that word becomes very interesting when we look at the ancient myths and Tiamat; they're playing off the same word. You have the stars, the greater light, and the lesser light, which we'll get to in a second. There's the realm of the dead, Sheol. There's the expanse, the firmament, which older translations picture as a dome over the earth, with the sun, moon, and stars set in it, and the waters above like an ocean behind the dome.

When we get to Genesis 6 through 9 and the flood, you'll see that the flood is an undoing of creation. It's uncreation. The windows of heaven open and the earth is filled with chaos again. And God's throne is above it all.

Don't Dismiss It, and Don't Force It

So don't dismiss Genesis 1 as quaint and old-fashioned, as if the ancient Israelites were silly people who didn't know science and we're so enlightened in our materialistic age. And

don’t force it to say what we think, either. Go back fifty years. Did we have the same physics we have today? Go back a hundred. We keep growing in our understanding of the creation God has put in place, but that’s not what Israel was talking about. We know it happened. We know God did it. Let’s not force it.

In fact, belief in a good, ordered creation helps science. Men and women believed God was an ordered God and his creation was ordered, so they looked for patterns and predictability, and that is a root of the modern scientific method. The Scriptures are not at odds with science. Science is going to change. Scientists are wrong about something today; they just don’t know what yet. They were wrong yesterday, and now we know. Our understanding will keep growing as we keep measuring.

Verse by Verse: Genesis 1:1–2:3

The Patterns

Look at the rhythm. “God said” appears ten times in this passage. “Let there be,” eight times. “And it was so,” seven times. “God made,” seven times. “God saw that it was good,” seven times. Naming or blessing, seven times.

And then the bookends. Genesis 2:1–3 repeats the key words of Genesis 1:1, “created,” “God,” “the heavens and the earth,” in reverse order. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 2:1–3 says, “Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” The bookends tell you this is one unit.

This is also where the chapter break misleads us a little. As our understanding of Hebrew grammar grew, we began to see where the real units are. In fact, the translators of the Septuagint saw places where a closing line seemed to be missing, one of the sevens, and they added it. The Hebrew doesn't have it, but the Septuagint added it because they thought it was needed. We have to be careful about adding things we don't know are needed.

Verse 1: In the Beginning

Because of the bookends, "in the beginning" isn't pointing to a single instant. It's a period of time, a season in which God creates order and gives function to the material universe.

The word "create," *bara*: God is always the subject. It's used about fifty times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it's never used of anyone or anything else. Only God creates in this sense.

"The heavens and the earth" is a merism: two extremes that together mean everything. It's inclusive.

And God has no origin story. In the ancient Near Eastern myths, the gods all have origin stories. Even the gods emerge from the murky primordial waters. But not our God. He's beyond all of that, and he is the Creator.

Verse 2: Without Form and Void

"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."

The starting condition when God begins to create is *tohu vavohu*, "without form" and "void." There's debate about what that means. Did material forms need to be created? It did need to be filled, because it was empty.

The Spirit hovers like an eagle hovering over its young, the same picture as Deuteronomy 32:11. But think about the long view. Where do we see this next? Jesus goes down into the waters of baptism. He comes up out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove and rests on him, and he's driven into the wilderness to be tempted. Do you see it? The New Testament's new creation in Jesus Christ follows the same pattern as the original creation. Darkness over the deep, the watery abyss, and then the Spirit hovering, and a new creation emerging. I'm getting ahead of myself again.

Ruach can mean wind, breath, or spirit. Jewish translations tend to say "wind." On the Christian side we like "Spirit," because it fits our New Testament vision a little better. But look at Genesis 8. When God begins to dry up the waters of the flood, he makes a wind pass over the earth, and the waters subside. And what happens? The land appears. Noah sends out a raven, and it doesn't come back, because it can light on any dead thing floating out there. Then he sends out a dove. The first time it comes back with nothing. The second time it comes back with an olive leaf in its mouth. There's life on the land again. So you can see the imagery building as we go.

Days One to Three: Forming the Realms

"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."

Here's another sign we're not talking about materiality but function. If we were talking about matter, how do you separate light from darkness? As soon as there's light, the darkness is gone. They weren't mixed together. This is God bringing light into a chaotic universe, creating a space of light, assigning a function.

Verse 5: “God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.” Now he’s naming. There’s no sun or moon yet. And evening comes first, because the Hebrew day began at dusk.

Verses 6 through 8: “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.” Picture it: all there is, is a big, dark, watery soup. That word “darkness” is used throughout Scripture. Sometimes it describes the fearsome presence of God, darkness and tempest, but most of the time it describes evil forces, things that aren’t right, things acting out of order and opposing God. And God makes a firmament, something solid that covers and separates the waters under the firmament from the waters above it. “And it was so.”

“And God called the firmament Heaven.” That can be misunderstood. If you’re a Platonist, you hear “heaven” and think, “Oh yes, the plexiglass paradise, that cool place people go after they die.” But this is the sky. It’s the space created between the firmament, with God’s throne above it, and the waters below. “So the evening and the morning were the second day.”

This is important to get. When we come to Leviticus, you’ll see the priests constantly teaching the people how to separate: what is clean, what is unclean. Separating and ordering is a godly thing. We’ll see more of that in Leviticus. Here, firmament, waters above, waters below. The firmament he called heaven. I like “sky” here better.

Verses 9 and 10: “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And the gathered waters he called Seas. Another naming. “And God saw that it was good.” Now it’s ordered. The waters that were chaotic, God now calls good. That’s very important. Tiamat, so to speak, is now something good, under his control.

So days one, two, and three create realms, spaces. Now God is going to fill them.

This last Sunday I talked about God creating space through order and then filling it. When we were in chaos, dead in trespasses and sins, as Ephesians 2 says, we were the chaotic waters. And the ultimate chaos, by the way, is death. But God speaks into that life. He creates space, we're cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, and now we can receive. He fills us with his Spirit, and we become the temple of God. Later in Ephesians 2, Paul says you are members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, a building growing into a holy temple in the Lord. We are now the temple of God. That's a powerful thing. Once we come out of our chaos, we can be filled. But that's the rest of the story; Genesis 1 isn't saying that yet. I just want to leave you breadcrumbs. If I gave it all to you straight, you'd be saying, "Rob, we're already an hour into this thing."

Days Four to Six: Filling the Realms

Day four: lights, not gods

Notice the sun and moon go unnamed. Verse 14: "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years."

That word "seasons" is the Hebrew *mo'adim*. Later in the Hebrew Scriptures it refers to the appointed feasts God ordained through Moses, when the children of Israel came together at set times to worship the Lord. That's interesting, isn't it? The lights are for signs and appointed times.

Then: "God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also." Oh, and by the way, he made the stars.

Why does that matter so much? Because the Hebrew words for "sun" and "moon" were the same words Israel's neighbors, their close cousins in language, used for the sun god and the

moon god. Genesis 1 deliberately avoids them. Not gods, not the sun god or the moon god, just lights. Lamps. And all of it is functional for humanity: for time, for seasons, for our feasts, for our times to gather.

He just calls them the greater light and the lesser light, and "He made the stars also." That was poking the ancient Near East right in the eye, because they governed their lives by the stars. They were astrologers. "I wonder what that means? Something cosmic is going on. Did you see where Saturn was today? Uh-oh."

Think about the five lights that wander. Every night, when I take Atlas out before bed, I look up and see Orion's belt rising in the east. It shifts a little with the seasons, but Orion's belt stays Orion's belt. Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus, and Mercury, though, each follow their own path. They do strange things in the sky. They didn't know we're spinning and moving around the sun, and that the planets are moving around it at different speeds, making those odd patterns. So those five wandering lights, plus the sun and the moon, make seven lights.

And the word "lights" here is the same Hebrew word used for the lamps of the golden lampstand in the Holy Place that Moses built. You see the images being rebuilt over and over. It's a demotion of the ancient Near Eastern view of those lights. They were gods. Remember what happened with Paul at Lystra? He heals a man, and the crowd says, "The gods have come down to us," and they call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes. Not long after, they're stoning Paul. We go from gods to being worthy of death pretty quick. I hope some of this is landing with you.

Day five: the waters teem

Verse 20: "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures." God says, "Let." In the ancient Near Eastern myths, Mother Nature does it. You'll see the same thing on day six: "Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind." That's another

indictment of the myths, where the earth itself produces life out of itself. Israel says no, it's by the voice of God. And interestingly, most ancient Near Eastern accounts hardly even mention the animals.

"And let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens." What's the firmament? It's the dome where the sun, moon, and stars are set, and the birds fly across the face of it. Do you see the perspective? This is the Word of God, but it's written from the vantage point of a human being standing on the earth looking up. The God we serve is about us. He creates what matters to us. The gods of the ancient Near East wanted to be served, or wanted their king, emperor, or pharaoh served by the slaves of their kingdom. The God of heaven wasn't about that. He was about serving his people. His vision was service to us as human beings. It's a totally different perspective. It's a gift from God.

"So God created great sea creatures," the *tanninim*. That word is used elsewhere for the great sea monster, the dragon. I'll give you more detail later, but in the myths, this was the monster that had to be slain to bring order to the chaotic waters. To God, it's just another creature. A great sea creature swimming in the waters he made. "And God saw that it was good." They're not evil. Everything answers to God.

Day six: livestock, and then humanity

Day six: cattle, creeping things, beasts of the earth. Same vision as the sea: "Let the earth bring forth," at the call of God. But no blessing is spoken over the land creatures.

And then humanity: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." This is the first time God announces what he's about to do before he does it. Every other creative act has simply been "And God said... and God said... and God said." But when he gets to humans, he

declares it. He's winding up for this creative act, and this act gives purpose and function to the human being.

If we don't value humanity, not just our own group but everyone else, we've missed this. We aren't the only ones filled with the Spirit and made in the image of God while everyone else bears some other image.

This passage answers the questions: What are we here for? Why was I born? Who am I? What should I do in this world? Those are important questions. If you read Carl Sagan's *Pale Blue Dot*, you see an insignificant speck in an infinite blackness, where these little humans live like a plague on the earth. Read modern nihilistic thinkers and that's the perspective you'll get. But if we come at this from ancient Israel's view of God, we will exalt humanity, and that includes the humans you disagree with, even the ones you find detestable. "Let Us make man in Our image... male and female He created them. Then God blessed them."

He creates both male and female in his image, not just male. He blesses them and gives them their task: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion."

Subdue and have dominion. Now, think about the classic Christian picture of the original creation. If everything was created perfect and nothing needed to be done, what was there to subdue? What were the first man and woman, made in the image of God, created for? To subdue and have dominion. Because when a temple to a god was set up in a land, it meant that god owned that territory, and the territory was to be expanded. God finished his work, and his people were to keep expanding his territory. Later, Israel will have plenty of trouble with its neighbors, the Assyrians, who will say, "Your God is weak. Our god has given you into our hands. Give it up."

The Seventh Day

Genesis 2:1: “Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished.” That’s the same expression used in Exodus 39:32, when the work of the tabernacle was finished according to the pattern God showed Moses on the mountain. Completed. I have that written right here in my notes; if I’d just read my notes, I wouldn’t repeat myself so much.

“And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work.” So does God need rest? Or does this mean he has now taken his place? He’s seated in his temple. He’s in control, and now the work of ruling begins.

Notice the seventh day doesn’t say “evening and morning.” It’s a continuing day. God continues at the controls of creation. His purposes are pushed against, rebelled against, seemingly thwarted, but God is at rest, reigning. Passage after passage shows that. When David gathered materials for the temple and wrote about it in the Psalms, he said, in effect, “We have houses to live in, but we want a resting place for God.”

The Problem: Tohu Vavohu

So: the formless and the void, darkness over the deep. This total chaos is the opposite of an ordered, inhabited world.

God’s purpose for creation is stated in Isaiah 45:18: “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 (*tohu*), who formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord, and there is no other.” He did not create it to be empty. He created it to be filled, and he created it to be worked.

Jeremiah’s Uncreation

Now look at Jeremiah 4. This is why we know the imagery of Genesis 1 is being picked up by later writers. I’ve always loved this passage, because it shows that at any time our lives can

take on pre-creation characteristics. If we give ourselves over to sin, if we give up the purpose God created us for, we go back to formless and void.

Jeremiah 4:22: “For My people are foolish, they have not known Me. They are silly children, and they have no understanding. They are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.”

Next week, in Genesis 2, we’ll read about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and two foolish children who, instead of listening to and trusting God, disobeyed his command and were cast out of God’s good dwelling place, his garden, away from his life. And then their son went out to the land of Nod, the land of wandering. We’ll read about that.

You can see what’s in Jeremiah’s mind. He’s carving straight out of Genesis 1 and 2: “Remember the chaos? Remember the foolishness of our first parents, Adam and Eve? That’s you.” Verse 23: “I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled.”

They looked across their flat earth at the mountains and pictured them as pillars holding up the firmament. Jeremiah says the mountains are trembling. The firmament is about to give way, and everything is becoming formless and void again.

Isaiah talks about the overflowing scourge, the flood of enemy armies that will come and destroy Israel. These images get used later to describe people and their condition. Foreign armies that didn’t honor God, oppressors, come in like an overflowing scourge, like a flood. And Jeremiah is saying: the mountains are trembling, the firmament is going to give way, the waters of your enemies are going to come flooding down on top of you.

“And all the hills moved back and forth. I beheld, and indeed there was no man.” That’s Genesis 2: there was no man to till the ground. “And all the birds of the heavens had fled. I

beheld, and indeed the fruitful land was a wilderness." All the fruitfulness God brought out of the land, good for food, no more. Just a wilderness, a trackless empty void. "And all its cities were broken down at the presence of the Lord, by His fierce anger."

Do you see how these writers used those images? Why would we, as Christians, rob Genesis 1, 2, and 3 of what Jeremiah was so clearly riffing on, to describe the condition of his own people and the dysfunction coming into their lives? Why would we make it only about material creation instead of the beauty of the function and order God was bringing into the world? And by our continued rebellion, we keep bringing dysfunction and chaos back in. That's what he's talking about. Get into the richness of these Scriptures, and everything you read from then on begins to make sense.

The King Who Restores: Psalm 72

I'm going to have to skip some of this. We may have to do it in two parts, because I can see everybody thinking, "Dude." In about eight minutes I turn into a pumpkin.

Psalm 72: "Give the king Your judgments, O God." Remember the vice-regents God created in the beginning, male and female, told to rule and have dominion over the works of his hands. In the ancient Near East, priests would build a temple, set up an image, and perform a seven-day ritual, sprinkling the image and inviting the life of their god to inhabit it. Genesis 1 says the life of God inhabits his image, and his image is all of humanity. What a powerful thing: we are to be kings and priests to our God.

So in this psalm of Solomon: "Give the king Your judgments, O God." Verse 2: "He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice." The mountains will bring peace. Verse 4: "He will save the children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressor." The chaos God was quelling at creation, this king will quell.

What is our job as image-bearers of God, ruling and having dominion in this world? It's not to destroy. It's not lording it over others. True rule is not domination. To have dominion does not mean to dominate and strip the world of its resources for our own benefit. This psalm says the king will bring justice, bring peace, judge with righteousness, save, and break in pieces every oppressor.

Verse 5: "They shall fear You as long as the sun and moon endure." Verse 6: "He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing." He's creating the conditions for growth. Verse 7: "In His days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace." Verse 8: "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea." There's the dominion. But for man and woman created in the image of God, dominion does not mean domination. Dominion means salvation, peace, justice, growth, showers of blessing.

Verse 11: "All kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him." This king will be served and worshiped. Verse 12: he will deliver. Verse 13: he will spare. Verse 14: he will redeem. Verse 16: "There will be an abundance of grain in the earth, on the top of the mountains; its fruit shall wave like Lebanon." Do you hear all that creative power? "They of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth." What do you think is in Solomon's mind as he writes this? Genesis 1.

Verse 17: "His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed." That's an allusion to Abraham, Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 18: in you all nations shall be blessed. And then, "Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel."

Sin unmakes the world. God's word remakes it, through his king.

Five Verbs

Here are the five verbs of God's solution: speak, separate, name, fill, bless.

I'll tell you what: we're called to speak. To discern between good and evil. To take the authority God gives. In Genesis 2, God brings all the animals to Adam to see what he will call them. He's giving him authority. To name a thing is to have authority over it; in ancient Near Eastern thinking, to name a thing is to create it. And to fill: that's the blessing.

The Seventh Day: Rest, Trust, Blessing, and Sabbath

The blessing of the seventh day says God blessed it and sanctified it. On that day they were to do no work. The Sabbath was a non-working day. Leviticus 25 says that in the seventh year the fields were to rest, and in the Jubilee, after the forty-ninth year, going into the fiftieth, everything was to be given back. And God promised that the blessing of the sixth year would be enough. When he gave manna in the wilderness, he gave enough on the sixth day to cover the seventh. So the seventh day asks: how do we live into trusting God?

The blessing of God is fruitfulness. "God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply." He blessed the birds and the fish, he blessed humanity, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth," and then he blessed the seventh day.

So we have to recognize that the God we serve created all of this for humanity so that he could dwell with us in a cosmic temple. That temple was the tabernacle Moses built. It was the temple Solomon built. And now it's the temple of the people God has brought in through his Spirit. When he baptizes you with the Spirit, you are the temple.

The Pattern Repeats

I've covered forming and filling, and the seventh day: God's rest, heaven as his throne, trust, the Sabbath pattern. I just want you to start putting this pattern in your mind, so you see it when you read the Scriptures.

When God gives Moses the instructions for the tabernacle, there are seven speeches: seven times "the Lord spoke to Moses." The Spirit hovering over the face of the deep is like the Spirit coming on Bezalel, the craftsman God filled with his Spirit to make all the elements of the tabernacle. Then comes the finishing, the blessing, and the filling. When Moses finished the work, once the materials were in place, once order had been set and things had been given their function, Exodus 40 says the cloud covered the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filled it, and Moses could not enter because of the presence of the glory of God filling his dwelling.

God had departed when he sent humanity out of the garden. Now he returns, in the tabernacle and then in the temple. And then Jesus died, rose again, and on the day of Pentecost sent his Spirit on the 120. By the way, how many priests sounded trumpets at the dedication of Solomon's temple? One hundred twenty. And it says the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud. But what happened at Pentecost? The 120 in the upper room could stand and minister. Filled with the Spirit, they began to speak the wonderful works of God to people from every nation under heaven. Boom! Man, I love that stuff. We'll get into all those details later.

The lamps I already talked about. Solomon's temple: built in seven years, dedicated in the seventh month, at the seven-day feast, a house as a resting place for God, 1 Kings 8. It all comes together. The temple, the creation, the ordering of the cosmos, and the creation of

humanity for its purpose are now being lived out in a people called Israel. You can dig into that more later.

Against the Ancient Near East

I want you to dig into this. In the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian account, the gods are born from mingled waters. Marduk splits the sea goddess Tiamat to make the sky, and humans are made from the blood of a rebel god. Do you see how the writer of Genesis is answering these things? Next week we'll see God form man from the dust of the ground and breathe his own breath into his nostrils, and man becomes a living being. But in Marduk's world, no order comes without violence.

And isn't that how we live today? This is why I'm so wary of strong, self-seeking actions. We do see that the king will stop oppressors, and there is room for that. But we need to measure twice and cut once when it comes to violence, because order is rarely established through violent means. Rarely.

In Atrahasis, the lesser gods rebel against digging the canals. They don't want to dig anymore, and they start complaining, so humans are made from a slain god's blood mixed with clay to take over the labor. In their world, and in the world of materialism, you're only a cog in the machine, there to produce more. A slave to a cosmic machine, not made in the image of God for a purpose.

And in the Egyptian tradition, the world rises from the dark waters of Nun, the sun god rules, and Pharaoh is his only image. But you and I were all made in his image.

Unless you understand this, you'll miss it. It's a polemic, a method of teaching. It isn't Israel adopting the ideas of its neighbors. It's Israel answering false ideas about God and false

ideas about the purpose of humanity. The nations said humanity was created for slavery. God says you were created to rule.

I covered that pretty quickly. For every verse in Genesis 1, if you want to dig in, I've put notes in the guide that tie the verse back to an ancient Near Eastern myth and show how the writer of Genesis was pushing against it. And we're called to do the same today: to push back against the culture where it goes against the will, nature, and character of God, and against the purposes God has for creation and for humanity. As co-rulers we have a right, and an obligation, to speak against those things. Go through those at your leisure.

Echoes Across Scripture

All through the guide you'll find echoes of these verses. Nehemiah picks it up. Second Maccabees: God made them "not of things that were." John 1:1–3: "In the beginning was the Word." You can see how the prophets and apostles riff off the earlier writers. Jeremiah 4, which we went through. The Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha: "your all-powerful hand that created the world out of formless matter." Second Peter 3:5.

On the slides, the left side shows a passage from Genesis 1, say verses 3 through 5, and for each one I give one reference from the Hebrew Scriptures, one from the Apocrypha, and one from the New Testament. In the student guide you'll find ten or twelve verses for each. That's the entire timeline of Jewish and Christian thinking, continually going back to Genesis 1 to ground their ideas for the times they were living in. You can trace it through every section: verses 1 and 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 8, 9 to 13, 14 to 19, 20 to 23, 24 to 25, 26 and 27, 28, 29 and 30, 31, and Genesis 2:1–3.

Whoo! There was no way I was going to get through all of that.

Wrap-Up

But you can see I've been thinking about this a lot. Here's why it matters. If you can ground yourself in God's purpose for creation, and in what he called Israel to be, a blessing, and then you realize that the Messiah promised in Psalm 72 was meant to establish all the blessing intended in Genesis 1, that was the Messiah's purpose. And Paul says in Galatians 3 that in Christ all the promises to Abraham, and so all the promises made to Israel and to that Messiah, are fulfilled in Jesus. And you and I have been called into that.

There are some questions at the end of the guide. If you're a high school student, homeschooled, and you want credit for this, answer them. They're provocative. I'll grade them, and you can get credit.

For this week:

Read Genesis 1:1–2:3 again. Then go through the details in the student guide. It's twenty-three pages. That's not too much. (The student guide, not the slide deck.)

Pick one row in the chart of echoes. You'll see a quotation, an echo of an earlier passage, or an allusion: a little word, a little riff. We do it all the time. I brought this up a couple of weeks ago. If I say, "Inconceivable!" or, in a dramatic voice, "It's happening! It's happening!", and you picture Michael Scott running around in that meme, you know exactly what I'm talking about. That's an allusion, a reference to something in our culture that means something to us. Look for those, and pick one.

Take one Sabbath-style pause. Notice what it's like to trust God. Be quiet. Take the day off. Put the phone down. No doomscrolling, for one night. See if God can speak to you and bring order out of chaos in your life.

And the sources are there if you're interested. I've got these books, and I'm happy to share them with you. And that's all I have to say about that.

That was an hour and forty minutes. And I'm not sorry it was an hour and forty minutes; I'm sorry *for you* that it was an hour and forty minutes. It would have been two hours and forty minutes if I'd covered all the content. Thank you all for your attentiveness, and I promise not to be as long in chapter 2.

Transcript of a teaching session at New Life Fellowship, White House, Tennessee, lightly edited for reading. Scripture quotations in the talk are from the New King James Version. Session materials, including the student guide and teacher's guide, are free at rethinkingthegospel.com.