

Genesis 2:15-25

Lesson 5

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

In verse 15 the writer picks up the narrative from verse 8 in a fashion common in Hebrew literature by repeating a phrase. This technique is used to demonstrate a connection between this verse and the previous narrative at verse 8:

God **puts** the man in the Garden, he was created elsewhere.¹

It should be noted that from the very beginning mankind has a purpose and he was not created for idleness and without purpose.

Work is a gift from God and not a punishment. Even before sin entered into the world humanity had duties to fulfill, there was purpose. The terminology that is used here in Genesis to describe the duties of humanity is used elsewhere in the Torah to describe the activity of priests. Waltke would go so far as to say that the only usage of this

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1 in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 67.

terminology in the Torah is to describe priestly duties. Part of this duty was to guard the Garden against encroachment by the serpent. According to Waltke, the serpent should have been driven from the garden; instead he ends up getting them driven out by destroying the balance.²

This section of Genesis is perhaps one of those that has been emphasized in recent years too little. This section indicates the original design of God and I believe this theme is picked up again in the New Testament by Peter as he describes the restored people of God at 1 Peter 2:9³. This is the purpose of humanity, to be priest before God, to worship, to serve and to protect what God has created from the touch of all evil.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;

These, the first words of God to mankind assume their freedom to choose and therefore that there is some kind of

² Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 87.

³ **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**

moral capacity inherent from creation.⁴ The assumption here as in the earlier chapter seems to indicate that early humanity was vegetarian.⁵ This verse indicates the bountiful care of God for humanity in freely giving of the trees of the Garden to eat.⁶

17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

In this verse the restriction not to eat of this tree is very blunt and clear. The restriction here resembles the form of the Ten Commandments. It literally means “you shall not eat” with the idea of “never eat.” Appended to the end of this prohibition is a motive clause, “because in the day that you eat it “you will die.” The form given here is not the form used in Hebrew to describe a death sentence in a legal setting. The prohibition here is characteristic of divine or royal threats in narrative and prophetic texts (Genesis 20:7; 1 Samuel 14:39, 44; 22:16; 1 Kings 2:37, 42; 2 Kings 1:4, 6;

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 87.

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 21.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 67.

Ezekiel 33:8, 14).⁷

This understanding of what is being communicated here is important for a number of reasons. One, the fruit is not poisonous as sometimes has been suggested. They did not die from toxins in the fruit.⁸ Secondly, this understanding is important because it helps us to understand the nature of the prohibition. Would Adam have understood what death was if he had never seen it? Perhaps not, but he should be able to understand that disobedience would have incurred divine disapproval. Since the death penalty was nowhere rescinded by God that does not appear to be the nature of this injunction. If this were indeed an indication of “if you do this you will immediately die” then with the events that follow either death should have come upon eating, shortly thereafter, or some sort of proclamation of a commuted sentence would be expected.⁹

What then is being communicated here? What does the phrase “you shall die” mean? Perhaps the best possibility

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 67.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 67-68.

⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 21.

for the meaning of this phrase is that humanity would be excluded from access to the “tree of life” and therefore his mortality would take its course and he would die.

Therefore the immediate consequence of disobedience to God’s command is expulsion from God and removal of access to the “tree of life” the result being that humanity remains mortal.¹⁰

A part of the Paradise imagery given here in Genesis chapter 2 is living in obedience to God and is not rooted in pleasure and freedom from suffering as is often the imagery given by the myths of the nations that surrounded the people of Israel.¹¹ It should also be noted that this prohibition is often perceived as the pivotal point for the fall of humanity, but this is an idea foreign to the context of Genesis and far too mechanistic at linking sin and death in a manner foreign to Hebrew thought. This account is also often linked with the origin of evil entering the world with the serpent being the embodiment of that evil in this newly

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 21.

¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, Revised ed. (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 80-81.

created world.¹²

This text is concerned with the reality of God and it even here sets the stage for the gospel message. That message is that God pursues restored relationship with humanity. A restoration to the ideal of God being trusted, His commands followed out of trust, and love, with humanity acting as priest before God, ascribing both worship and serving. This interpretation fits well with Paul's writings.¹³

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

It is quite a curiosity that no other extant literature of the ancient Near East preserves an account of the creation of primordial woman. It is also of note that the creation of man is told in one verse, the creation of woman is described in six verses. This emphasis is very important and demonstrates the significance accorded this event. With the

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in the Interpretation Commentary Series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 40-47.

¹³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, Revised ed., pp. 80-81.

creation of woman, creation has reached completion.¹⁴

God narrates this verse and declares “it is not good that the man should be alone” and this contrasts with the positive affirmation of 1:31 where everything is declared to be “very good.” Note that this statement in chapter 1 comes only after the account that they were created “male and female.” Man is not complete without woman.¹⁵ In the Jewish Midrash, *Genesis Rabba* a man without a wife is considered somehow even to diminish the image of God. This perspective very much is counter to Christian teaching but certainly expresses a high view of woman within Judaism.¹⁶

The term, “helper” used here is not in any way a denigrating designation. This same word is often used in describing God in relation to mankind where God is described as the “helper” of man.¹⁷

19 So out of the ground the LORD God formed every

¹⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 21.

¹⁶ *Genesis Rabba* 17:2 “Whoever has no wife exists without goodness, without a helpmate, without joy, without blessing, without atonement ... without well-being, without full life, ... indeed, such a one reduces the representation of the divine image [on earth].”

¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 21.

animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

Here the relationship between humanity and the animals is highlighted, but also the sovereignty of the man over the animals as he is allowed to name the creatures and what he calls them becomes their designation. This role of naming is a very important role indicating mankind's dominion over the animals. This dominion is to be the benevolent and caring dominion that God demonstrates from all of creation and not a dominion that gives any rights to abuse.

²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

In this very picturesque set of verses you can imagine as the animals are brought before Adam he must realize that for each there is a corresponding mate and none of these animals are found to be a suitable mate for him.

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon

the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

In this creative act things are very different from all those that have gone before. First of all God causes a deep sleep to come upon the man. This mysterious sleep allows the mystery of God's creative act to retain a sense of the enigmatic while at the same time making the man insensible to the pain of the surgery. This surgical act is another extraordinarily different element of this creation.¹⁸

The indispensable role that the woman ideally plays in the life of man is described in terms that are indicative of this intertwining of lives by the fact that she is created out of the very essence of his body.¹⁹

²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he built into a woman and brought her to the man.

The Lord God "built" the rib He had taken from the man

¹⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 22. Amos 9:6
**who builds his upper chambers in the heavens
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth—
the LORD is his name.**

into a woman. Only here and at Amos 9:6 is the creative activity of God described using this terminology.²⁰ The imagery of God bringing the woman to man may be reminiscent of the attendant bringing the bride to the groom as in a wedding. Sarna says, “Without doubt, the verse conveys the idea that the institution of marriage is established by God Himself.”²¹

**²³ Then the man said,
“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.”**

The man breaks out into poetic ecstasy upon seeing the woman and here we have recorded the first actual words spoken by Adam. The notion of close kinship is clearly highlighted in this poetic recitation.

**²⁴ Therefore a man forsakes his father and his mother
and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.**

²⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 69-70.

²¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 23.

This verse does not represent a continuation of the poetic remarks of the man; this is a comment from the narrator of this story. Here attributes of this first marriage are applied to all marriages that follow. The term translated as “to forsake” describes the facts of Israelite custom. In that culture the son did not often leave the household or land of his father. He continued to live in or near the home of his parents, whereas the woman left her family.²² The man became the woman’s family and she his. In a sense this new relationship displaces the older familial relationship with something sacred and ordained by God.

The concepts of “to cling” and “to become one flesh” seem at first to contradict one another from a Hebrew perspective. “To cling” in Hebrew carries with it the idea of two distinct entities attached to one another while retaining separate identities. “Becoming one flesh” seems more intimate and less about separate identity even a merging. What is described in this latter phrase is far more than sex, animals can do that, but for this act to happen the husband

²² Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 70-71.

and wife must rise above the level of animalistic behavior and ascend to an informed spiritual, moral and mental affinity, a joining.²³

²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. ²⁴

This verse begins the transition to the next episode with a word play on “naked.” It also acts as an anticipatory hint at what is related in 3:7.²⁵ The couple feel no shame because of their nakedness. Shame has been described as one of the most puzzling aspects of human existence. It can be judged from a great many aspects, but it always must be seen as “the signal loss of an inner unity, an unsurmountable contradiction at the basis of existence.”²⁶

It can act as a protection for society and serve a noble purpose, but in this context it is meant to convey something undesirable that occurs after eating from the forbidden

²³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 23.

²⁴ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ge 2:15–25). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

²⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 23.

²⁶ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, Revised ed., p. 85.

tree.²⁷ As long as the harmony of relationship with God remained undisturbed, the pristine innocence and dignity of sexuality remained unspoiled.²⁸

Synopsis

This section of Genesis indicates the purpose for which God created humanity. Mankind was created to serve a priestly function before God. It is important to note that though God's plans appear to be delayed He never gives up. The salvation of humanity means that they will ultimately be restored to His original purpose.

Here we also are able to see an indication of the moral capacity that was built into humanity by God. God clearly has the expectation that humankind has the ability to choose. God gives them this responsibility by giving them a command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

²⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, Revised ed., p. 85.

²⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 23.

There are indications that the existence of humanity is not intended to be one of loneliness. God creates a helper suited for the man. The nature of this narrative indicates a tremendous importance placed upon the creation of the woman. In a very elaborate process God “builds” the woman for the man. The response of the man indicates his elation at God’s care and creative ordering of life. It should also be noted that no shame exists in this divinely created couple, that will only come as they go against the God given directives intended to protect them from danger.

Here God indicates the role of humanity in having dominion and responsibility for the animal kingdom. This role is one that is intended to include care an responsibility for the animals.