

Short Studies in
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY



THE NEW CREATION
AND THE STORYLINE OF SCRIPTURE

FRANK THIELMAN

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“In this concise study, Frank Thielman helpfully explains how the Bible is framed by two acts of divine creation that are intimately connected. Moving judiciously from Genesis to Revelation, he shows how God’s blueprint of salvation for a world gone awry centers on Jesus Christ, the servant-king, who establishes God’s new society of love, justice, kindness, and peace in anticipation of a glorious new creation. For anyone wishing to understand better the overarching story of God’s plan for the whole creation, this is an excellent introduction.”

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“A succinct and brilliant study of the interlacing tapestry of biblical theology. Frank Thielman is the kind of scholar we need more of—he writes with clarity and devotion and always brings us closer to Christ.”

Timothy George, Distinguished Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“Frank Thielman proves to be the ideal guide for a tour of the Bible. Taking *new creation* as an organizing theme, he directs attention to the critical junctures in the biblical story. Without getting bogged down in excessive detail, he uses his expert knowledge to spotlight the big structure that holds the Bible together. The result is a book that is as easy to read as it is illuminating. Readers will come away with a deeper love of God and a greater sense of gratitude for his salvation.”

Sigurd Grindheim, Professor, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

“Frank Thielman’s *The New Creation and the Storyline of Scripture* is a remarkable achievement. He has distilled the vast reservoir of information provided in the Bible on the subject to its essential elements, while packing his 120-page presentation with a remarkable amount of Scripture. This handy volume challenges Christ followers to live as transformed creations in this age and heightens our anticipation of life with God in the world to come.”

Daniel I. Block, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Wheaton College; author, *The Triumph of Grace* and *For the Glory of God*

The New Creation and the Storyline of Scripture

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The New Creation and the Storyline of Scripture

Frank Thielman

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*For Isaiah James Thielman
and for his wonderful parents, Jonathan and Emily*

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Series Preface

Most of us tend to approach the Bible early on in our Christian lives as a vast, cavernous, and largely impenetrable book. We read the text piecemeal, finding golden nuggets of inspiration here and there, but remain unable to plug any given text meaningfully into the overarching storyline. Yet one of the great advances in evangelical biblical scholarship over the past few generations has been the recovery of biblical theology—that is, a renewed appreciation for the Bible as a theologically unified, historically rooted, progressively unfolding, and ultimately Christ-centered narrative of God’s covenantal work in our world to redeem sinful humanity.

This renaissance of biblical theology is a blessing, yet little of it has been made available to the general Christian population. The purpose of *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* is to connect the resurgence of biblical theology at the academic level with everyday believers. Each volume is written by a capable scholar or churchman who is consciously writing in a way that requires no prerequisite theological training of the reader. Instead, any thoughtful Christian disciple can track with and benefit from these books.

Each volume in this series takes a whole-Bible theme and traces it through Scripture. In this way readers not only learn about a given theme but also are given a model for how to read the Bible as a coherent whole.

We have launched this series because we love the Bible, we love the church, and we long for the renewal of biblical theology in the academy to enliven the hearts and minds of Christ's disciples all around the world. As editors, we have found few discoveries more thrilling in life than that of seeing the whole Bible as a unified story of God's gracious acts of redemption, and indeed of seeing the whole Bible as ultimately about Jesus, as he himself testified (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The ultimate goal of *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* is to magnify the Savior and to build up his church—magnifying the Savior through showing how the whole Bible points to him and his gracious rescue of helpless sinners; and building up the church by strengthening believers in their grasp of these life-giving truths.

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt

Preface

My hope for this short book is that it serves as a basic introduction to the plotline of the Christian Scriptures. There are many interesting and valuable ways to approach the Bible. The Scripture is filled with exciting stories and heart-stirring poetry, so it is not surprising that some people turn to it for cultural enrichment. It is also a book full of historical significance, giving valuable evidence, some of it unparalleled anywhere else, for the political and cultural world of Middle Eastern antiquity. Historians find it indispensable. The Bible raises a host of moral and ethical issues, so people with questions about how life is best lived often want to know what particular passages say about this or that philosophical problem.

None of these approaches to the Bible do it a disservice, but none of them are focused on the message of the Bible itself. It is true that the Bible is a collection of texts written over a wide span of time, but it also has a basic storyline and a basic meaning. Taken together, these texts ask to be read in a particular way and claim to be saying something of great importance for all humanity and for each human individual. My hope for this book is that it functions as an introduction to this story and this message.

In describing the Bible's message, I have focused my attention on its interest in the "new creation." This is a phrase that appears only

twice in the Christian Scriptures, but it summarizes the Bible's plot-line neatly because it takes in the sweep of the world's history from the Bible's perspective. To call the world a "creation" assumes that it has a Creator, and to refer to a "new creation" implies that something happened to the world that makes its renewal necessary. Within its first several pages, the Bible tells its audience who this Creator is and how his creation perfectly reflected his character. It also describes how the only part of creation that God made in his image rebelled against him and set the world on a downward spiral that is vividly reflected in the suffering that now mars the existence of every human being. Because God's character is gracious and merciful, however, he did not leave his human creatures without forgiveness or hope but immediately began to work toward their rescue and the renewal of all that he had made.

This book is an introduction, so I have treated not every biblical text but eight parts of the Bible that move its storyline forward from creation to new creation in particularly long strides: Genesis 1–4, Isaiah, Matthew, Acts, Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Revelation 21–22. Although I occasionally reproduce the texts I am discussing, readers will find it easier to follow the book's argument if they read it with a copy of the Bible close at hand for reference. It will also be helpful to take some time to read liberally around whatever passage is under discussion. The introductory nature of the book also means that the footnotes occasionally record my indebtedness to other interpreters, but they mainly point the reader in the direction of literature that will be helpful for further study. I have provided an alphabetical list of those works in a section at the end titled "For Further Reading." I am grateful to Miles Van Pelt, Dane Ortlund, and David Barshinger for their careful reading of this book and helpful recommendations for revision. It is a better book because of their

involvement, and I deeply appreciate the time they took to help me with it.

I have dedicated this book to my sweet little grandson, Isaiah, who is so aptly named, and to his parents, Jonathan and Emily. Although Isaiah has spent a lot of time in the hospital during his first two years, he is a smiling, laughing, sociable toddler who brings joy to everyone he meets. Jonathan and Emily have simply been wonderful parents to Isaiah, and I thought constantly of their faithfulness, courage, and trust in God as I wrote on the new creation.

This book took shape during a summer that my wife, Abby, and I were able to spend with Isaiah, Jonathan, and Emily thanks to the hospitality of my brother and sister-in-law, Nathan and Margaret Thielman, and our friends Rick and Sonya Hove. I could write another book describing all that each of these wonderful friends and relatives means to me. Suffice it to say that I owe them—especially my dear wife, Abby—an enormous debt of gratitude for their Christlike example of self-giving generosity, not least in carving out time and space for me both to work on this book and to enjoy being with Isaiah.

Frank Thielman

Advent 2019

A Good World Goes Awry

The Scriptures are clear that the one God, who is himself perfectly good, created a perfectly good universe, and that the crowning achievement of his creative activity was the formation of two perfectly good human beings in his own image. The Scriptures communicate this truth in the opening paragraphs of the first book in the Bible, Genesis 1:1–2:3. Unfortunately, the Scriptures also make clear that the world did not remain the way God created it, and they tell the story of what happened to God’s good world in Genesis 2:4–4:26.

A Good God and His Creation

Genesis 1:1–2:3 is an intricately crafted narrative whose form serves its message, and that message is clear. One transcendent being, God, designed the world, and his design was ordered, balanced, and good.

As students of this narrative have often observed, it is itself meticulously designed to emphasize the number seven. There are seven words in the Hebrew text of the first sentence (1:1). The narrative’s climactic concluding paragraph (2:1–3) features God himself resting on the seventh day, and it expresses this act in thirty-five Hebrew

words, a word count that is equal to five times seven.¹ Seven, then, is clearly the number that in some way corresponds to God.

Seven, as it turns out, is also the number that corresponds to God's creative activity, the story of which appears sandwiched between the first sentence and the last paragraph. Seven times, God's creative word ("Let there be light. . . . Let there be an expanse. . . . Let dry land appear. . . . Let the earth sprout vegetation. . . . Let there be lights. . . . Let the earth bring forth living creatures . . .") or his provision ("I have given every green plant for food") is matched with the phrase "And it was so" or, in 1:3, its equivalent (1:3, 6–7, 9, 11, 14–15, 24, 30). This pattern communicates that what God intends actually comes to pass and that both what he intends and what comes to pass in creation correspond to who he is.

Who is he? He is good, as the sevenfold repetition of the phrase "And God saw that it was good" demonstrates, especially in its more emphatic form at the end of the sixth day: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The goodness of creation reflects the goodness of God.

The goodness of creation also appears in the order and balance of the creation narrative. The six days of creation are neatly ordered in two groups of three, with the first, second, and third day in each group corresponding to each other. God creates light on day one and the heavenly bodies that give light (sun, moon, and stars) on day four (1:3–5, 14–19). He creates sky and sea on day two and the animals that inhabit the sky and sea (birds and fish) on day five (1:6–8, 20–23). He creates land and plants on day three and the creatures that inhabit the land and will eat the plants (animals and human beings) on day six (1:11–13, 24–31).²

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 4; Gordon J. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11: Gateway to the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 5.

2. Sarna, *Genesis*, 4; Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 4.

There is also a balance between plants on one side and animals and human beings on the other side in the narrative. God gives instructions to be fruitful and multiply only to the animals and human beings, and only to them does he give the plants for food (1:22, 28). Human beings are to eat the plants that yield seed and the fruit of trees, whereas animals on the land and in the sky are to eat “every green plant” (1:29–30). Everything inhabits a peaceful order, and the emphasis on the provision of plants for the food of every living creature hints that there is no violence among the creatures that have “the breath of life” (1:30).³

Within this peaceful order, human beings, both male and female, inhabit the most important place. Before creating them, God summons the other transcendent beings in his presence—or perhaps the other persons in the Trinity—to join him in what he is about to do: “Let us make man,” he says, “in our image, after our likeness” (1:26).⁴ Human beings alone, in their two genders, are made in God’s image (1:26–27). Moreover, they alone receive from God the authority to rule over all the earth and its animals, a mandate so important that the narrative mentions it twice (1:26, 28). The second mention is its fullest form:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

Only after the final creative act of bringing a man and woman into existence and giving them this critical mandate is God’s work of creation finished. God can then pronounce all his creation not merely “good” but “very good” (1:31).

3. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 16, 27.

4. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 14–15.

It is not the sixth day, the day of humanity's creation, however, that is the most important day. That honor goes to the seventh day. God blesses the seventh day and sets it apart from all the other days because it is a day of rest for him after the work of creation is finished (2:1–3).⁵ This move implies a second mandate for human beings, and it is closely related to the first mandate. If human beings are created in God's image, then their raising of human families and their exercise of dominion over the earth correspond naturally to God's work in six days. God's rest on the seventh day implies that they, too, should not work constantly because they are designed for regular periods of rest.⁶

According to Genesis 1:1–2:3, then, God created a world of perfect harmony and peace with human beings as the crowning achievement of his creative work. This world corresponded to God's own peaceful and gracious character. It was ordered under the watchful care of the man and woman whom God had made in his own image and for whom he had generously provided. God in his goodness gave the man and woman the meaningful role of ruling over the animals, and he supplied the green plants as food for them all. Also in his goodness, God provided his human creation a pattern to follow in doing the work that he had given them. They were to work for six days, and then, on the seventh day, like him, they were to rest.

What Happened to God's Good Creation?

The next major section of Genesis (2:4–4:26) describes how this perfect world became the world as all humanity experiences it—a place of hostility between humans and animals (3:15), of pain in child-bearing (3:16), of difficulty in obtaining food (3:17–19a), and of

5. Cf. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 16.

6. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 16.

death (3:19b), anger, violence, and oppression (4:1–26).⁷ The section begins by returning to the period before God finished his creative work and focusing in greater detail on God’s creation of and provision for human beings (2:4–25). By putting this section of God’s work under the microscope, the narrative supplies the necessary background for its description of human disobedience to God and the suffering that this fateful decision entailed.

The first part of this new section, then, describes God’s creation of the first man and of a beautiful garden within the otherwise uncultivated and largely arid land that he had previously created. God fashions the first man from the “dust” or the “clay” of the earth like a potter might make a pot on the wheel. Then, unlike any other potter, God breathes on his clay man, and he comes to life (2:7).

The rest of this first part of the story is told to emphasize the lavish way that God provided for humanity’s well-being.⁸ God provides a home for the man in a special enclosed area within the land of Eden. This park or garden contains “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (2:9). A river flowing into the garden supplies plentiful water, and the area in which the garden is located is rich with beautiful metals, aromatic resins, and stones—gold, bdellium, onyx (2:12; cf. Ezek. 28:13). The most important provision for the man, however, is the woman God made from the man’s rib. She is a suitable helper for him (Gen. 2:20) and affords the complement necessary for humanity to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (1:28). Working together, the man and woman will “work . . . and keep” the garden (2:15) and continue to exercise dominion over the animals (1:26, 28), a project Adam started when he named them (2:19–20). The man and the woman are naked but not ashamed.

7. Sarna, *Genesis*, 16.

8. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 26; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 87.

Later, nakedness in the presence of others will be embarrassing, and it will be improper in the presence of God (3:7; Ex. 20:26; 28:42–43), but now, because the man and the woman are in exactly the relationship with God and others that God created them to have, there is no hint of any impropriety in their nakedness.⁹

This part of the story implies two further mandates for the man and the woman beyond the mandates to rule over the animal world and to rest on the Sabbath. A third mandate is to trust in God's goodness. This mandate emerges from the command that God gives to the man after he has created him and placed him in the garden. God had created two special trees in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:9). The tree of life conferred immortality on those who ate from it (3:22). In the same way, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil must have had some real power to confer knowledge on Adam.

What is this knowledge? The text does not explicitly say, but in subsequent years, after Adam and Eve have eaten from the forbidden tree, knowledge does grow among their descendants, some of it good and some of it evil.¹⁰ Adam and Eve figure out how to cover themselves by sewing fig leaves together (3:7). They gain knowledge of evil when their son Cain kills his brother Abel and when Cain himself becomes a fugitive, far away, east of Eden (4:1–16; cf. 4:25). A descendant named Jabal becomes “the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock” (4:20). His brother Jubal becomes “the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (4:21). Their half-brother, Tubal-cain, develops “all instruments of bronze and iron” (4:22).

Knowledge, then, does increase, but why does God consider it wrong to desire such knowledge? The text does not say explic-

9. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 72, 87–88.

10. Sarna, *Genesis*, 19.

itly, but it seems likely that God wants his human creatures to be satisfied with the provision he himself has made for them and to continue to trust him to provide for them in the future. As Gordon Wenham has argued, God especially wants the man and woman to trust him with the knowledge of what is morally best for them—to realize, in the words of Proverbs 1:7, that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” and that only “fools despise wisdom and instruction.”¹¹ To seek knowledge of good and evil on their own, therefore, is to seek autonomy. It is to say to God that human beings can survive very well apart from God’s provision and instruction. Eating the forbidden fruit and seeking the knowledge it supplies is a movement away from God and toward independence from him. It is, in the words of the serpent later in the narrative, an effort to be “like God” in the sense that they will make decisions about good and evil for themselves (Gen. 3:5). God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is, therefore, both sensible and gracious.

The form of the command itself reveals something about God’s character and the nature of his instruction to human beings. It begins with a positive emphasis on all that God has provided for his human creatures, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden” (2:16), and then moves to the prohibition, “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 surely die” (2:17). So the form of the command is designed to encourage the man’s trust in God. God has lavishly provided for his needs and generously permitted him to eat of nearly every tree of the garden. We learn later that even the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is “a delight to the eyes” (3:6). So every tree is beautiful and pleasing, and every tree but one is permitted to the man for food.

11. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 63–64.

When God moves to the prohibition against eating from the tree, therefore, the man has every reason to believe that God has made the fruit of this tree off limits for the man's own good. The prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is essentially a mandate to trust God, and especially to trust that the instructions he gives his human creatures are for their own good.

The fourth and final implied mandate in the creation narrative comes just before the story takes a sinister turn with the introduction of the crafty serpent. It is a mandate that describes what should be the human response to God's creation of humanity in two perfectly complementary sexes, male and female, man and woman. This complementarity is worked out most fully in marriage, a bond so strong that it breaks the bond of previous family loyalties and creates a new family unit. Wenham points out that the words "a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife" (2:24) are "an astounding declaration in a world where filial duty was the most sacred obligation next to loyalty to God."¹²

In marriage, then, a single man and a single woman, each from his or her own family, become one flesh, and a new family begins. The mandate here is not that every man and woman should marry, nor is there any suggestion that a man or woman is not fully human unless married. Rather, the mandate is that human beings generally should be fruitful and multiply by means of family units established in marriage and that the same harmony existing in creation should exist in these family units as husband and wife complement each other.

In Genesis 1:1–2:24, then, God both creates and lavishly provides for human beings, the crown jewel of his creation and the only part of his creation made in his own image. He provides both their physical

12. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 88.

needs and their need for purpose and guidance. He gives them food to eat and gives them the responsibility of exercising dominion over the animals. Their food comes to them in the form of plants, and therefore without violence, and their work is regularly interspersed with rest, and therefore without greed and exploitation. Their living environment is beautiful, and God gives them free range within it, with merely one limitation. The first man and woman, moreover, like all men and women after them, are to work together in harmony and establish new family units through monogamous marriage.

In 3:1–4:26, the narrator tells the story of how all this changes, and the focus of this next part of the narrative is on the first couple's disobedience to God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man and the woman shift their trust from God to one of God's creatures and then to their own ingenuity. In the process, they assert their independence from the Creator of all things who has so graciously provided for them.

The narrative is clear that the serpent who approaches the woman is one of the "beasts of the field" that "the LORD God had made" (3:1, 14). Later, the Scriptures identify the serpent with "the devil," or "Satan" (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), but here the focus is on his status as one of the land animals that God has formed out of the ground and over which God has given the man dominion (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:19). Here the serpent disturbs the order of creation and, very incrementally, exercises dominion first over the woman and then, in a chain reaction, over the man.

God presumably made the serpent "crafty"—not necessarily a bad quality (see Prov. 12:16; 13:16, where the Hebrew word for "crafty" is translated "prudent")—but the serpent uses his craftiness to upset the divine order.¹³ It is clear from his first comment to the

13. On the term translated "crafty" here, see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 72.

woman that he intends to lead her to disobey God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In accord with his craftiness, however, he never actually instructs her to disobey.¹⁴ His approach is much more subtle. He simply misquotes what God actually said to the man in the prohibition and implies that since God has "said" this, he is not gracious and generous but miserly and insecure in his own position.

God had said this to the man:

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 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 surely die. (Gen. 2:16–17)

The serpent, however, misquotes God with a hint of feigned amazement:

Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"? (3:1)

The serpent is not asking whether he has understood God's command correctly. He is subtly misrepresenting both the nature of God's command and the nature of God himself. What God "commanded" the man becomes in the serpent's mouth something that God merely "said."¹⁵ His misquotation of the command itself, moreover, wildly distorts God's gracious character, and he then expresses surprise that God would be so tightfisted. Like a politician who brazenly accuses his opponent of weakness on precisely her strongest point, the serpent has shrewdly left out the positive and gracious preface to the actual prohibition. On the serpent's lips, God's gracious command becomes an expression of Scrooge-like stinginess.

14. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 88.

15. Sarna, *Genesis*, 24.

The woman's reply to the serpent shows that his subtle strategy has already started to work. She does correct the serpent's "misunderstanding," but the serpent's suggestion that God is miserly has influenced her. As Wenham points out, her correction tones down the generosity of God's original statement, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden . . ." (2:16), so that it now becomes the less lavish "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden" (3:2).¹⁶ God *did* make *some* fruit trees available to them, she seems to be saying, whereas actually God had made *every* tree in the orchard available to them but one.

Even that tree, moreover, was available to them for everything but food. God had said nothing about not touching the tree, only about not eating from it. The man and woman were presumably welcome to enjoy the "delight" of its beauty (3:6). The woman, however, characterizes God as stingier than he really is: "But God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die'" (3:3). She is beginning to take her view of God from the serpent.

Perhaps emboldened by his success, the serpent directly contradicts the sanction that had accompanied God's command.¹⁷ God had said of the tree, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (2:17), but the serpent tells the woman, "You will not surely die" (3:4). He then supplies a reason for the obvious question, "But why would God lie about this?" The reason he lied, according to the serpent, is that God knew that the fruit of the tree would give knowledge of good and evil to the man and woman, and this would make them like God. The serpent seems to assume that the man and woman are not like God and that God does not want them to be like him. This, in turn, implies that God's unique position of power and authority in

16. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 73.

17. Sarna, *Genesis*, 25.

the universe were conferred on him by his superior knowledge and that he is insecure in this position. The serpent seems to think that God, the man, and the woman are separate and competing individuals and that God feels threatened by the possible encroachment of the man and woman on his space.

This is a far cry from reality. God created the man and the woman in his own image (1:26–27; 5:1). In this sense, he created them to be “like him.” He enjoys their company as he interacts with them (2:19) and walks among them (3:8) in the garden he has graciously provided to meet all their needs. It is true that they are not like God with respect to his knowledge, but God withheld the knowledge of good and evil from them for their own good. He arranged things so that they would rely on his goodness for their well-being and have a relationship of trust with him.

When both the woman and the man eat the fruit, therefore, they assert their independence from God. They demonstrate their desire to make their way in the world on the basis of their own knowledge, apart from God’s provision for them, including his revelation to them of what is best for them. Most significant of all, they end their relationship of trust with him.

The immediate impact of their disobedience is alienation from God and alienation from each other. Their alienation from God is evident in their fearful efforts to hide themselves from him (Gen. 3:8–10). Their alienation from each other is clear from the blame game that ensues when God asks the man, “Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (3:11). The man immediately tries to shift responsibility to the woman and to God: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (3:12). Although the man was present during the entire interchange between his wife and the serpent (3:6), he spares the serpent and himself, blaming everything first on God, who gave him

his wife, and then on the woman. The delight that prompted him to cry out, “This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh” (2:23), now turns to self-centeredness as he tries to throw his perfectly suited companion under the bus. The woman, more sensibly but with no more inclination than the man to be honest about accepting the blame, fingers the serpent as the culprit (3:13).

The death that God had said would ensue on the day that the man ate from the forbidden tree now begins, and God describes what form this death will take for them all—beast, woman, man, and all their descendants (3:14–19).¹⁸ It is not a literal death before the sun sets but the beginning both of human mortality and of the spiritual death that accompanies banishment from the presence of God.

Now, rather than harmony between the human and animal world, there will often be enmity, typified in the enmity between the serpent, the woman, and the human offspring that will come from her (3:14–15). Rather than the delight and partnership that once characterized man and wife (2:20–25), there will be selfish desire and the tendency to dominate (3:16). Rather than receiving vegetables and fruit for food easily and focusing on their task of exercising dominion over the animals (1:26, 28–29; 2:9, 16), God’s human creatures will work hard for their sustenance. The earth will work against them, producing thorns and thistles that will choke their crops, and they will be able to control the earth’s opposition only by hard manual labor. In the end, however, the earth will win. God will not permit the man and woman to eat from the tree of life (3:22), and so they will die physically, returning to the dust from which God had fashioned the man (3:17–19; cf. 2:7).

After pronouncing these judgments, God expels the man from the garden. The garden had been a holy sanctuary—a sort of temple—

18. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 83, 90.

in which God met personally with his human creatures.¹⁹ But they chose the path of alienation from their Creator, and in accord with this choice, he expels them from his presence.

As the story of creation's beauty and brokenness draws to a close, the narrative reveals not only the fulfillment of God's curses on the serpent, the woman, and the man but also the trajectory of human relationships with God and one another, which, if God does not intervene, only move from bad to worse.²⁰ Cain is not merely afraid of God, as was Adam (3:10), but is angry with God (4:5). His unjustified anger leads not merely to blame shifting, as it did with Adam (3:12), but to murder (4:8)—and a murder that completely ignores God's warning about sin “crouching at the door,” desiring Cain and ready to consume him (4:6–8). Neither Adam nor Eve complain about God's punishment of expulsion from the garden for their disobedience, but Cain whines bitterly that his similar punishment “is greater than I can bear” (4:13).

Near the story's end is a brief account of Cain's descendant Lamech, who illustrates how far humanity has traveled from the ideal of existence in the presence of God in the peaceful garden he had provided. “Lamech took two wives” (4:19), a violation of God's implied mandate that human society should be organized through the peaceful partnership and complementarity of one man and one woman (2:24). The snapshot we get of Lamech's life and character does not bode well for these women—or anyone else in his field of power. He blurts out a trash-talking poem, addressed to his two wives, whom we can imagine cowering in terror as Lamech announces that he killed “a young man” (perhaps a child?) for merely hitting him and

19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 90; Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 28–29. See also G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 66–80; T. Desmond Alexander, *The City of God and the Goal of Creation*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 16–20.

20. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 100; Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 21–22.

that if anyone tries to harm him, he will retaliate ten times more severely than anything associated with his ancestor Cain (4:23–24).

Why would Lamech say this to his wives (“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; / you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say,” 4:23)? Is it perhaps a warning to them of the domestic violence they will experience unless they do exactly as he says?²¹ This is a far cry from the beautiful piece of delighted poetry that the first man sings about, and presumably to, his wife on their wedding day in 2:23:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.

Adam and Eve, therefore, through their failure to trust the goodness and generosity of God, pointed humanity in a direction that would lead to ever-greater distance from God and his instructions about how he created human beings to live. This alienation from God and his word would, in turn, lead to the increasing alienation of human beings from one another and from the earth that God created to sustain them.

Hints of Hope

There are, however, hints of hope within this sad story. One of the main hints lies simply in the character of the God who created the world. His immense generosity in providing for his human creatures and his clear desire to live in a close, trusting relationship with them suggest that God is unlikely to give up on humanity after their act of defiant self-assertion. This notion receives confirmation from the ways in which God continues to communicate with and help his

21. I owe this suggestion to my pastor, Brad Allison.

creatures despite their banishment from his presence. Before he sends them out from the garden, he makes proper and substantial clothing for them from animal skins (Gen. 3:21) to replace their flimsy fig-tree leaves, incompetently sewn together to hide their nakedness.²²

God's expulsion from the garden of the man and woman (now called Adam and Eve) is probably also a merciful act. To allow them to prolong their lives forever in their state of alienation from God and discord with each other by eating from the garden's tree of life will bring only endless suffering. Like Gollum in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, man and woman will be in danger of devolving into an ever-deepening and destructive self-centeredness as the generations pass.

The Lord's willingness to accept Abel's offering (4:4), his attempt to provide Cain with instruction about the insidious nature of sin (4:6–7), the mercy that he shows to Cain even after Cain has refused to pay attention to him (4:15), and the kindness of the Lord in granting Adam and Eve another child after Abel's murder (4:25–26) all indicate that God has not abandoned even those who have rejected him. In addition to kindnesses such as these, God's human creation continues to bear God's image, to possess God's mandate to rule over the earth's animals, and to benefit (when they obey them) from God's mandates to balance work with rest and to organize human society around the marriage partnership of one man and one woman.

Although in Psalm 8 God has enemies that must be stilled (8:2), the psalmist can still praise the majestic name of the Lord on the basis of his creation (8:1). He can still express amazement that God has crowned human beings with glory and honor (8:4–5) and given them dominion over the animals (8:6–8). Similarly, in Psalm 104, the psalmist praises the Lord for the wonders of the natural world,

22. Wenham says that the attempt to sew fig-tree leaves together as clothing suggests "urgency and desperation." *Genesis 1–15*, 76.

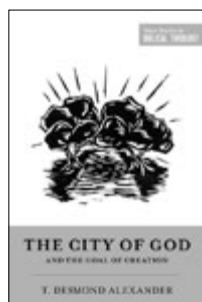
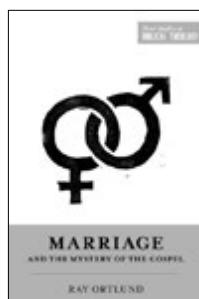
including the blessings that God has provided to human beings in creation—plants to cultivate for their food, wine to make their hearts glad, oil to beautify their faces, bread to give them strength, and the moon and sun to regulate their work (104:14–15, 23). Psalm 104 ends with a prayer that “sinners” will be “consumed from the earth” and “the wicked” will “be no more” (104:35), but the world is still a majestic and wonderful place that points to its Creator and to the grace and goodness he has shown humanity.

Conclusion

By the end of Genesis 4, then, the world is a complex mixture of God’s gracious, undeserved blessing and the grim results of human rebellion against God. The man and the woman have turned away from the trust that they once had in God and his goodness and have placed their confidence instead in their own ingenuity. God has allowed them and their descendants to go their own way with all the consequences that doing so entails. They can no longer live in God’s presence, and discord among themselves has gone from bad to worse. The direction of humanity by the end of Genesis 4 is clearly one of ever-greater alienation from God and more and more social violence and disintegration. Their newly gained knowledge of good and evil has not improved the lot of human beings but pushed humanity far down the road of self-destruction.

Human society, left to its own devices, has not improved in the many years since that fateful conversation with the serpent. Despite the beauty and blessing of our world, it is still a place marked by an unwillingness to trust in, or often even to believe in the existence of, God. Human society, moreover, is characterized by greed, hatred, and violence on a scale so massive that the health of the entire planet is threatened and that there seems to be no end in sight to human suffering. The Scriptures, however, do not leave us there.

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FRANK THIELMAN (PhD, Duke University) is Presbyterian Chair of Divinity and professor of New Testament at Beeson Divinity School. He is also an ordained Presbyterian (PCA) minister and the author of many books and commentaries.

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