

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 7

The Doctrines of Creation and Providence

Objective: To understand the importance of the biblical accounts of God's creation and providential care for that creation, especially what it teaches us about God and the world we live in.

I. Where have we been?

- Why and How We Do Theology
- The Revelation of God
- The Doctrine of Scripture
- The Attributes of God
- The Trinitarian Nature of God
- God's Decrees

WSC Q. 7. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

WSC Q. 8. How doth God execute his decrees?

A. God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.

II. The Doctrine of Creation

a. Other Creation Narratives

The Enuma Elish (Mesopotamian Creation Story, likely c. 1750 B.C.)

In the beginning, there was only undifferentiated water swirling in chaos. Out of this swirl, the waters divided into sweet, fresh water, known as the god Apsu, and salty bitter water, the goddess Tiamat. Once differentiated, the union of these two entities gave birth to the younger gods. Apsu gets annoyed with the younger gods and wants to kill them. Tiamat warns them and they kill Apsu. Tiamat gets mad that they killed her mate and makes war on them.

From among the younger gods, Marduk emerges as the champion who swears he will defeat Tiamat. Marduk defeats kills Tiamat by shooting her with an arrow which splits her in two; from her eyes flow the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Out of Tiamat's corpse, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth and appoints the other gods to various duties.

After the gods have finished praising him for his great victory and the art of his creation, Marduk consults with the god Ea (the god of wisdom) and decides to create human beings from the remains of whichever of the gods instigated Tiamat to war. Quingu is charged as guilty and killed and, from his blood, Ea creates Lullu, the first man, to be a helper to the gods in their eternal task of maintaining order and keeping chaos at bay.

As the poem phrases it, “Ea created mankind, on whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free.” (Tablet VI.33-34)

The Hermopolitan Creation Story (one ancient Egyptian story)

The Ogdoad (eight gods) of Hermopolis consisted of four frog-headed male gods and their serpent-headed female counterparts. This divine group represented the dark, watery, unknown, and eternal state of the cosmos prior to creation. Nun and Naunet represented water. Heh and Hauhet expressed the notion of infinity. Kek and Kauket stood for darkness. Amun and Amaunet reflected the concept of hiddenness. These eight gods existed within the watery chaos of pre-creation.

Within this unchanging “nothingness,” there was the potential for creation. The Egyptians believed that from these eight gods came a cosmic egg that contained the deity responsible for creating the rest of the world, including the primeval mound—the first land to arise out of the waters of pre-creation. In some versions of the myth, the egg was laid by a goose named “the Great Cackler,” while in other versions an ibis, the bird associated with the god Thoth, is responsible for the egg. After the mound appeared, a lotus blossom bloomed signaling the birth of the newborn sun god (Ra). After the sun made its first appearance, the rest of creation could follow. In some cases, this myth further describes a scarab beetle that emerges from the lotus. The scarab is often a solar symbol, and the texts describe how this beetle transforms into a child. When this child cried, his tears became humankind.

b. The Biblical Creation Story

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so.

⁸ And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹ So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. ²⁵ And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “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.” ²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything

that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

c. Reflection

- What are the differences in how God is portrayed?
- What are the differences in how the act of creation is portrayed (including motive)?
- What are the differences in how the creation of mankind is portrayed?

III. Systematizing the Doctrine of Creation

a. Who created?

God. That verb “create” (*barah*) is not used with any other subject in Scripture but God. God alone has the power to create (Neh. 9:6; Is. 45:12; Acts 14:15; Acts 17:24-25)

Nehemiah 9:6, You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

Acts 17:24-25, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Not just God, but the God of the Bible—the only God that exists—the Triune God (cf. Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-17; Prov. 8).

“According to Genesis 1, God’s Word and Spirit are the means whereby God produces, forms, and fills all things. God *speaks* creatures into existence (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). God *names* the various creatures he brings into existence (Gen. 1:5, 8, 10). And God *blesses* the creatures he brings into existence (Gen. 1:22, 28). Along with God’s speech, God’s Spirit is also active in the work of creation, hovering like a mother bird (Gen. 1:2; cf. Deut. 32:11) over the unformed, unfilled world God produced, ready to endow it with life, energy, intelligence, and fullness by means of his life-giving presence (Ex. 31:3; 35:31; Num. 24:2).” – Scott Swain (Present), “Is the Trinity in Genesis 1?”

b. **What did he create?**

Everything. Material and immaterial; planets, stars, trees, grass, oxygen, anteaters, cows, humans, angels, water, mountains, temperature, time, space, gravity, the laws of motion, colors, eyeballs to see those colors, light, language, hairs inside the ear canal that vibrate when sound waves hit the ear; wisdom, love, patience, endorphins.

“The Bible knows only two categories of being: God and what God made. There is no third alternative.” – Joel Beeke (1952-Present), *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 2:62

c. **How did he do it?**

i. **With what material(s)?**

Ex nihilo (“from nothing”). God didn’t use any pre-existing material to create.

Hebrews 11:3, By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

“While Greek philosophy sought the explanation of the world in a dualism which involves the eternity of matter, or in a process of emanation, which makes the world the outward manifestation of God, the Christian church from the very beginning taught the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and as a *free* act of God.” – Louis Berkhof (1873-1957), *Sytematic Theology*, 126

ii. **With what instrument(s)?**

The Word of God, speech, the Son of God (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16) and the Spirit of God (Gn. 2:7; Ps. 33:6). God used nothing outside of himself.

“God’s creation of the universe by his word implies that the universe did not come from him by some necessity, like streams from a spring, but was made according to the freedom of God’s will, like a building from a builder. Therefore, God always relates to the created world freely according to his will (Ps. 115:3, 15; 135:6).” – Joel Beeke (1952-Present), *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 2:67

“God said... and it was so.”

Jeremiah 10:12, It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

Jeremiah 32:17, ‘Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.’

iii. How long did it take?

Six days. Genesis depicts creation neither as a long and difficult struggle for God (ancient mythologies), nor as an instantaneous event that then developed into all that is only over time (naturalistic evolution). Rather, Genesis tells us that creation was a process (six days).

But why is it depicted as a process?

We know that it is not because it was difficult for him and the effort required or the planning/thinking required was six days' worth ("God said... and it was so").

Since the very beginning of the church, there have been debates about the answer to this question amongst Bible-believing Christians. This debate did not begin with the popularity of the evolutionary theory.

"It is indeed an arduous and extremely difficult task for us to get through to what the writer meant with these six days, however concentrated our attention and lively our minds." – Augustine (354-430 A.D.), *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 4.1.1

The question being debated by orthodox Christians is not, "Is Genesis 1-2 true?" All orthodox Christians answer a hearty "Yes" to that question, because all believe that the Bible is the product of God's knowledge rather than man's. Rather, the question being debated is, "What does God intend to communicate to us in Genesis 1-2?"

How should we have those discussions and debates? What parameters do we set on them as a church?¹

"We have found a profound unity among ourselves on the issues of vital importance to our Reformed testimony. We believe that the Scriptures, and hence Genesis 1-3, are the inerrant word of God. We affirm that Genesis 1-3 is a coherent account from the hand of Moses. We believe that *history*, not *myth*, is the proper category for describing these chapters; and furthermore that their history is true. In these chapters we find the record of God's creation of the heavens and the earth *ex nihilo*; of the special creation of Adam and Eve as actual human beings, the parents of all humanity (hence they are not the products of evolution from lower forms of life). We further find the account of an historical fall, that brought all humanity into an estate of sin and misery, and of God's sure promise of a Redeemer. Because the Bible is the word of the Creator and Governor of all there is, it is right for us to find

¹ For a good summary of the different views, as well as views concerning the age of the earth, see Beeke, *RST*, 2:92-105. For more questions concerning the length of the days of creation and the age of the earth, see *The Report of the Creation Study Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America*, which does a good job surveying various views and also sets itself in the context of the history of Reformed Christianity.

it speaking authoritatively to matters studied by historical and scientific research. We also believe that acceptance of, say, non-geocentric astronomy is consistent with full submission to Biblical authority. We recognize that a naturalistic worldview and true Christian faith are impossible to reconcile, and gladly take our stand with Biblical supernaturalism.” – “Introductory Statement” in *The Report of the Creation Study Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America* (1999)

d. When did he do it? (a.k.a., How old is the earth?)

We do not know. This has been the source of great speculation and questions. Proponents of “young earth creationism” typically have in view something less than 10,000 years old. Bishop James Ussher (of the church of Ireland) famously calculated the creation of the world at 4004 B.C. (which you will see at the top of the page in many older Bibles). Proponents of “old earth creationism” do not typically have an upper limit on the age of the earth.

As with the above issue, the question being debated is not, “Is Genesis 1-2 true?” All orthodox Christians answer a hearty “Yes” to that question. Rather, the question being debated is, “What does God intend to communicate to us in Genesis 1-2?”

e. Why did he do it?

Not because he needed anything.

Acts 17:24-25, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

God freely (or voluntarily) created the world.

“For the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness” (WCF 4.1)

Romans 1:20, For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Psalms 104:24, O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Psalms 19:1-6, The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words,
 whose voice is not heard.
⁴ Their voice goes out through all the earth,
 and their words to the end of the world.
 In them he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
 and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.
⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
 and its circuit to the end of them,
 and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

Psalm 8:1-4, O LORD, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 You have set your glory above the heavens.
² Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
 you have established strength because of your foes,
 to still the enemy and the avenger.
³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
 and the son of man that you care for him?

“[God] has also displayed his perfection in the whole structure of the universe. So he is constantly in our view and we cannot open our eyes without being made to see him. His nature is incomprehensible, far beyond all human thought, but his glory is etched on his creation so brightly, clearly and gloriously, that no one however obtuse and illiterate can plead ignorance as an excuse. So with absolute truth the Psalmist exclaims, ‘He wraps himself in light as with a garment’ (Ps. 104:2). It is as though he was saying that when God created the world for the first time, he put on outer clothes. He hung up gorgeous banners on which we see his perfection clearly portrayed...

Wherever you look, there is no part of the world however small that does not show at least some glimmer of beauty; it is impossible to gaze at the vast expanses of the universe without being overwhelmed by such tremendous beauty. So the author of Hebrews sensitively describes the visible world as an image of the invisible (Heb. 11:3). The superb structure of the world acts as a sort of mirror in which we may see God, who would otherwise be invisible.” – John Calvin (1509-1564), *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1

f. **How did it go?**

“All very good.” (WSC 9)

Genesis 1:31, And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

The material world is not a mistake, nor an obstacle to be overcome. It is the very good result of the wise, powerful, and good creative act of our God, and (even in the wake of sin) it is a faint glimmer of his majesty and glory.

Question: Why do you think Christians sometimes have a tendency to deny the goodness of the material world?

IV. God's Providence

What did God do with his creation after he created it?

WSC Q. 11. *What are God's works of providence?*

A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.

Genesis 2:1-3, Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

John 5:17, But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

"[The providence of God is] the almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand." – Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27

A. Preserving

God doesn't begin creation and then leave it to fend for itself, or simply infuse it with what is necessary for self-preservation. He actively continues to sustain and uphold his creation.

Acts 17:24-25, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Colossians 1:16-17, For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Hebrews 1:3, He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Matthew 6:25-33, ²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

B. Governing

He doesn’t just keep us alive and keep creation from dissolving. He also directs creation toward an intended end or goal. He does this not just in a general way, in by his activity in every event and every action of every creature.

Psalms 139:16, ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

Genesis 50:18-20, ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Acts 4:24-29, ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

Romans 8:28-30, ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

“If you really do believe that your world is not out of control or driven by fate or chance [sic], but rather that it is under the careful control of one who is the definition of power, wisdom, and love, then you will live with a peace of heart, a confidence, and a hope that you could find no better way... Much of our regular anxiety, worry, fear, and discouragement is the result of thinking that when things are out of *our* control, then they are out of *of* control.” – Paul Tripp (1950-Present), *Do You Believe?*, 142

“This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father, who watches over us with fatherly care, sustaining all creatures under his lordship, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father.” – Belgic Confession (1560), Article 13

This Is My Father's Word, by Maltbie Babcock (1901)

This is my Father's world,
And to my list'ning ears,
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world:
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
The battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heav'n be one.

“God Moves In a Mysterious Way” by William Cowper (1774)

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.
He plants his footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread,
Are big with mercy, and shall break,
With blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace.
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain.
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Discussion Questions

- **Inward Application:** How does your understanding of God's providence change the way you pray?
- **Outward Application:** Most of our vocations bring us into interaction with the material world (e.g., making or selling material goods). How does being a Christian who views God's original creation as "very good" affect the way you participate in those vocations?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** Read William Cowper's "God Moves In a Mysterious Way" (above) Cowper shows that God's providence is always at work for our good, but also cautions us in a couple of ways. First, he says we often can't see the goodness in God's actions right away (e.g., the clouds you so much dread, frowning providence). Second, he says we should be cautious trying to interpret God's providence (e.g., judge not the Lord, God is his own interpreter). How should a Christian talk about God's providence in their own life? What about the lives of others?
- **Reading Scripture:** 1 Timothy 6:17-19. How does this help us to enjoy what God has given us rightly?