

OVERCOMING CHAOS

by Steve Zeisler

Two weeks ago the Oakland Raiders lost a football game to the Kansas City Chiefs. In the last play of the game, the only thing the Chiefs could do was throw a pass for a touchdown. The Raiders employed the prevent defense, but the Chiefs easily defeated it, throwing a touchdown pass to win the game. A day or two later there was a letter to the editor in the newspaper that commented, "It seems there are mysteries in this world that will just never be solved: the origin of the universe, how one cell can develop into a complex human being, and why NFL coaches insist on using the prevent defense."

We are mysteries indeed; our behavior is often peculiar. Why do we do the things we do? In the words of Romans 7:15, "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." What act of God is required for us to stop behaving in self-destructive and chaotic ways? The God who announced that the universe should be, gave it order and beauty, and brought life where there was no life, needs to do that sort of work for us. There is an analogy between what he did in creation and what he did in redemption. We'll come back to that in a bit.

We've begun a series of studies in the opening three chapters of the book of Genesis, and we're going to continue to discuss some of the concerns that educated people have in trying to make sense of Genesis in the face of other explanations for why things are the way they are.

In the last message we talked about the secular paradigms that are crumbling. It's a fascinating time to be a Christian and to be an educated person of any sort, because we're right on the verge of seeing what has generally been an accepted way to think about life pass away, and something new take its place. We have a chance to speak of God in the midst of this paradigm shift that's going on in the secular world.

But in this message I want to identify a debate regarding the nature of the cosmos that takes place essentially between evangelical Christians who assume that the Bible is true and is telling us about creation accurately. There are two large schools of thought, and the most strident proponents of these two schools really anathematize each other, finding it incredible that not everyone subscribes to their point of view. The two schools are known as the young-earth and the old-earth ways of thinking about things.

THE YOUNG-EARTH SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The conviction of the young-earth group is that the Bible, rightly interpreted, insists that creation was recent, and therefore the science that suggests a great age for the cosmos is faulty. The most famous starting point for all of those discussions, especially among English-speaking people, is the notation that Archbishop Usher made in the early-seventeenth-century version of the King James Bible, in which he declared that the earth was created in the year 4004 B.C. Most thoughtful proponents of the young-earth theory today argue for a creation date between 10,000 and 20,000 B.C.

The proponents of the young-earth theory make some thoughtful points that need to be taken seriously. For instance, they observe that one indicator of the age of the cosmos, the speed of light, may not be a constant. There may have been a time in the beginning of things when it was immensely faster than it is today (186,000 miles per second), which would be consistent with a very rapid rate of expansion of the universe. There are also arguments about the flood of Genesis 6 and what it might have done to the layers of sediment and rock that are used to estimate the age of the earth.

But the succinct argument for saying the earth and the cosmos are relatively young is that God created them with the appearance of greater age than they actually have. It is true that anytime you posit a beginning point of

something, you will have an immense philosophical difficulty in saying how old it is. For instance, if God scooped up some dust, made it into a man, and breathed life into him, and you showed up two minutes later, how would you know that the man standing before you was only two minutes old? He would look much older even though he had just been created. In the same way, if the cosmos exploded into being at a point in time, and you showed up thirty seconds later and started taking measurements, how would you know that the cosmos was only thirty seconds old? We can't assume, looking back toward the beginning from here, that we can get completely reliable information about how long ago that was. The only way to get it is to be there at the beginning, make observations, and keep making them. So there are reasons to argue that things may appear old without being old in fact.

THE OLD EARTH SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The other school of thought among evangelical, Bible-believing Christians accepts the conclusion of science that the cosmos is something like eighteen billion years old. But it also says that with complete integrity we can understand the Bible to dovetail with the observations of an ancient cosmos. It says there is nothing in the Bible that insists otherwise.

One very interesting, although discounted, view that explains a great age for the earth is called the gap theory. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty...." The Hebrew could be translated, "Now the earth *became* formless and empty...." If that's so, perhaps what happened is that God created the heavens and the earth, and all of the cosmos came into roughly the shape that we see it today. Then Lucifer and his angels rebelled. There was a war in heaven and the demons were cast out. There's a lot of history that we don't know anything about, and billions of years went by. During that time there was chaos on the earth. What Genesis records is God's re-creating of things after the rebellion of the angels.

Another way to understand the cosmos as essentially old is to observe that the Hebrew word *yôwm* meaning "day" doesn't have to mean a period of twenty-four-hours. It can mean a much greater length of time. There were believers who argued that way before modern science. Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and others did not believe that the days of Genesis had to be twenty-four hours in length. They may represent ages instead.

The six days of creation might also have been twenty-four-hour days that were not consecutive; that is, days in which God began a creative work that took thousands of years to finish before the next creative day was identified.

Both the young-earth and the old-earth positions are credible to a degree. There are folks in both camps who would say that the other camp is dangerous and wrong. Some will say that those who believe in a young earth would destroy modern science, take us back to the age of superstition, and not allow people to think freely. That's not true. There's no reason to fear such things from people who believe the earth is relatively young. It is said that those who hold to an old age for the earth and the cosmos are undermining anyone who wants to trust the Bible to accurately tell us what took place in creation. And that's not true either. There are people who defend the authority and inerrancy of Scripture and hold to an old-earth position. Neither one is dangerous to real Christianity, it seems to me.

I think the universe is old, myself. The old-earth arguments seem more persuasive. But to me the best argument is found in the first two chapters of the Bible itself. Genesis 2 tells us that on the sixth day of creation God made animals and then human beings. And at the end of all that activity, Adam, having met his wife, makes an interesting statement in verse 23: "This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...." The phrase in Hebrew is "this at last." He is saying, "This finally is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...." A careful reading of Genesis 2 must assume that a great deal of time went by during which Adam was investigating the nature of animals, giving them names, and learning about things. The loneliness of Adam, which is at the heart of what takes place in Genesis 2, also must have taken place over a great deal of time. So the notion that the days of chapter 1 need to be twenty-four hours long and consecutive doesn't make as much sense to me, not so much for scientific reasons but because of what is suggested by the best reading of Genesis 1 and 2 taken together.

I have one last observation about this whole business of how we hold together the observations of modern scientists and philosophers and the words of Scripture. There was a time, of course, in the history of the church when the assumption was that the earth was at the center of the heavens, and that the sun and the stars revolved around the earth. Telescopes eventually made that impossible to believe. No educated person I know today does not know that the earth revolves around the sun, and that the universe is a vastly more immense place than people once thought. But listen to the words of Isaiah (40:26) hundreds of years before Christ:

**"Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?**

**He who brings out the starry host one by one,
And calls them each by name.**

**Because of his great power and mighty strength,
Not one of them is missing."**

Now Isaiah must have believed that there were something like ten or fifteen thousand stars. That's all he could see. And God knew them all by name. We know now that there are not just ten or fifteen thousand stars, but billions of them. There are countless galaxies filled with stars. And yet what Isaiah said is still true: He knows every one of them by name, and he brings them into their correct position with each other. He arranges the universe to be exactly as it is. It is completely under his control; it has its existence because of his particular choice at every point. So what we have done by using telescopes is increase the testimony of the greatness of God.

The same thing happens if it's true that the earth is old. Listen to the words of Paul to Timothy: "God...has saved us and called us to a holy life-not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...." (2 Timothy 1:8-9.) God's grace was given to us before time began, and if that was eighteen billion years ago, then the grace of God is more relentless than we have ever understood it to be. It is never deflected or diminished. The grace of God, his determination to give us life and holiness, traveled across all of that time and still does its work today. Grace is greater than we would have ever understood it to be if time were shorter. So once again, the observations that expand things serve to testify to a greater God than we might have believed in if we had known less about what he created.

There is one thing I'm sure of: I used to have convictions about interpretations of the Bible that I now regard as childish. "When I was a child...I thought like a child...When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." (1 Corinthians 13:11.) I know that twenty years from now I'm going to see things I don't see yet. The Bible is much more profound, much deeper, much wiser than I have yet discovered. I'm paddling around in the shallows. So to insist that any interpretive observations that I would make today will not be subject to change tomorrow would be foolish. The Bible is not going to change, but my ability to understand it will.

It is also true that the "assured results of modern scholarship," what scientists and philosophers insist must be true today, will be looked at as enormous foolishness some day. The history of the discoveries that have been made in secular science indicates that we don't know today what will be known someday.

Therefore the way we put together the observations made by secular scientists and the teaching of the Bible is very likely to undergo change. None of these positions are worth fighting to the death over.

A LOVING CREATOR

All of that is to talk about debates among people who want to understand what Genesis means with modern insight. But now let's read Genesis 1:1-3:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Nothing existed, then God created the heavens and the earth. Extraordinary expanse and unbelievable intricacy all came into being *ex nihilo*, from nothing. But all of a sudden with verse 2, the perspective changes, and we find the Spirit of God hovering over a particular planet in the vast expanse. One place in the entire universe that God made receives his attention. One little ball covered with gases and dust so thick that light won't penetrate, spinning around a sun, covered with water, with no land yet formed. There is no life, only darkness and chaos; and in that place the Spirit of God hovers.

Why this one planet among all the extraordinary expanses? Why did God attend to this one place, anticipating what he would do here? Because of you. Great as the cosmos is, what mattered to him most of all the things he did was to create beings in his own image who could freely respond to his love, who could hear his voice, understand his heart, and give their hearts back to him. That's what the creation story tells us. Human beings are the crown of creation. And not just any human beings, not just all of humanity-you. The Spirit of God hovered over this planet because he loved you, and he knew someday you would be on this planet. He knew someday you would be created in his image with the opportunity to know and glorify him. He knew you by name.

In verse 3 God said, "Let there be light." The clouds that had covered the earth became translucent, and light began to flood this little planet. He was beginning to establish order, and things would never be the same. Eventually a garden would be planted here, and a man and woman would be the handiwork of God placed in that garden. And they would walk with him in the cool of the evening.

We can't read the opening verses of Genesis and not understand that God cares so much for us that everything else exists to bring about conditions that would allow him to make us and know us.

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

Now there is an analogy, as I said, between this passage and NFL coaches and why we do the stupid things we do. The Bible insists on an analogy between God the creator and God the redeemer. When the earth began it was lifeless, chaotic, and dark. And into that God began to speak and act: "Let there be light. Let the lands rise up from the sea and the waters be separated from the waters. Let the creatures teem in the ocean, and let plants and animals come forth on the earth." God began to make this place fit for human beings.

Most of us began our apprehension of God with some version of chaos and darkness and lifelessness. We began as sinners and rebels, and our rebellion had some effect on the way the world seemed to us and on the way we lived our lives. All of us on some level can say, "I know about chaos, about life that is out of control, about things that don't work. I know about hopes that fade, and foundations that crack and crumble. I know what darkness and despair are like. Existence without life-yes, I have some familiarity with that."

The same Spirit of God who hovered over the water, who came near to chaos in order to fix it, hovers near us when our lives are out of control. God is not off somewhere else. He isn't afraid of chaos. He will come near to us when life is crazy and out of control. He will come near to us in our darkness and sin and shame. He will tell us something true, just as he said, "Let there be light" and there was light. He will speak a word of love and hope and renewal for us. And his word will have its profound effect, as it always does. The story of creation is analogous to the story of redemption. It's telling us something of what we can believe about God for ourselves.

Is your life chaotic? Perhaps your sweet child has become an angry and self-destructive teen whom no one can reach. The little person you used to know is now out of control, and no voice seems to be able to reach him or her. What used to have order is now chaotic.

Perhaps some stable friendships are diminished for you because the people abruptly had to move a great distance away. Friendships over e-mail are not friendships with an arm around you. What you used to count on is not there anymore.

Perhaps a beloved parent or mentor has become too old to communicate with, and all of a sudden the rock, the one you went to when you needed help, the sage figure in your life, needs your help now. Life changes, and what was once solid is not solid anymore, and there's chaos and uncertainty.

Perhaps your beloved spouse has died, and you're alone, maybe for the first time in decades. Long-buried temptations come back with full force. Unexplained anger and fear and depression hold sway. It used to be that things made sense, and now they don't make sense anymore, and there is no firm foothold.

Is it dark? Does it seem that you live in an envelope of guilt and failure? If so, it's dark because you made it dark, because you ran from the light, because you trashed what was good. But God is at home in the dark-he's been there before. He's the one who says, "Let there be light," and there is light and forgiveness and renewal.

The Spirit of God hovered over wild and chaotic and roiling waters when the earth was created, and the Spirit of God hovers over the things that don't make sense for us. He is there, as near to us as our next breath. He cares, and he does something about it.

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