

# EARTH'S DUST, GOD'S BREATH

by Steve Zeisler

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Before we consider the second creation account in Genesis, I want to recall a couple of stories from the life of Jesus. Two issues highlighted in these stories will bring us back to Genesis. God created human beings with a need for two things: significance and love.

Consider the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). You may remember that Zacchaeus was a short man. Zacchaeus was also a traitor to his people, a tax-collector who served Rome. He was a heartless thief. But we can imagine Zacchaeus' life before he grew into this kind of man. It's true of many people who are belittled, rejected, or laughed at (not just for being of small stature) that they fight back to win respect even if for negative reasons. I think that was Zacchaeus' longing in life. He didn't want to be put down, to be a nobody. He was going to make all the people who belittled him sorry. And so when Zacchaeus became an adult, he was smart, ruthless, rich, and lost. He climbed a tree to see Jesus because the crowd who hated him would never let him near the inner ring around Jesus. But everything changed when Jesus stopped and addressed the tax collector: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Then he finally turned to the crowd when they objected and said, "...This man, too, is a son of Abraham." He gave Zacchaeus the significance and standing that he longed for.

Genesis 1 tells us that God—who made the vast universe, the stars of the heavens, life, and light, who separated land from water, who brought about everything—found human beings his fascination. We are the ones in whom the image of God resides, who are given dominion over the earth. The reason we have longed for significance since the fall is that God intended us to have it from the beginning. Nothing that he ever made is more important than human life. When your soul cries out for significance, you're longing for something God intended for you to have.

A second gospel story is that of a woman caught in adultery, dragged before Jesus, exposed, and encircled by a condemning mob who wanted to frame Jesus with her sin (John 8:1-11). She was someone who wished to be loved we can surmise. Most people who make fools of themselves sexually or who destroy themselves with bad choices in relationships do so because they want love. How many of us haven't been fools for love at some point? How many of us haven't done something embarrassing, longing to be connected to another, in the circle, appreciated, touched, known? Jesus was able to disburse the condemning crowd that had brought the adulterous woman with this penetrating response: "The one who is without this sin may throw the first stone."

Do you know why we long to be loved? Because God made us to be loved. That's what the second chapter of Genesis teaches. It's a different perspective on our origins, and one that will speak volumes about our need to be loved. At the end of chapter 2, which we will get to in the next message, God will say it's not good for the man to be alone. He will make a companion for Adam, a community, a family, a people to be part of. But before that, we were made to be loved by God himself, and that's what we're going to pay most attention to in this message.

## CREATION CLOSE-UP

Now let's read our passage, in which we are going to see the second of these issues brought before us at our creation. We'll look at Genesis 2:2-6 to begin:

**This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.**

**When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet**

**appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground....**

We're going back to a point we've already seen. Remember, on the third day of creation the land appeared and God said that there should be plant life on the earth. But now we're looking at it from a different perspective. In chapter 1 we looked at this from the perspective of the macro-creation, the heavens and the earth, the sky, the clouds, the atmosphere. In chapter 2 the creation story is told with a close-up view of a region of earth. Here we find that God intended to plant an extraordinary garden in Eden, and there he would put the man and the woman, and they would be able to work the garden. It is implied that if the first pair had listened to God and not rebelled, they would have had the joy of making the entire planet like the garden of Eden. Verses 7-17:

**...The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.**

**Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground-trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

**A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.**

**The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."**

We're going to stop there. We'll talk about the creation of the woman and the creation of marriage in subsequent messages.

## **FAULTY THINKING**

It may be useful to summarize some background concerning the scholarly debate over this text. One of the debates arises from the observation that different names for deity are used in chapter 1 and chapter 2, respectively. In chapter 1 the name for deity is Elohim. This is the ordinary word for God in the Old Testament. It focuses on God in the height of his grandeur and majesty, the Sovereign over all, deserving of all glory. In chapter 2 the term for deity is Yahweh Elohim, or LORD God. Yahweh is the intimate name for God. It refers to the God of covenant, the God who makes promises and draws near. There is not more than one God, he purposefully uses different designations for himself.

If you have seen billboards of Billy Graham, you'll recall a big picture of his face. He's a very awe-inspiring figure, the great seventy-eight-year-old evangelist, the century's best-known Christian leader. When I went to hear him two Sundays ago, his son Franklin was with him. Franklin undoubtedly has photographs of the man whose face was on billboards. It would be the same person, the same face, but he wouldn't be Dr. Billy Graham. He would be Dad, or Grandpa to his grandchildren. If you were to ask Franklin Graham whose picture that was, he would say, "My father's." If you were to ask me whose picture that was, I would say, "Dr. Billy Graham's." It's the same person, but he has different designations.

That's the way Genesis is written. These two chapters are not two completely unrelated documents written by different tribes, collected by an editor late in Israel's history. And they are not telling stories that contradict one another. The first and second chapters of Genesis don't tell us different facts; they focus on different elements, and they have somewhat different messages. Most of the scholarly arguments that Genesis was not originally written as a single book are based on faulty thinking, namely that you can't have two perspectives of the same

God. Of course you can have two perspectives of the same God. We know a great many things about him-at times we fall silent on our faces before him, and at times we laugh. Both can be honest responses to the presence and care of God for us.

The other scholarly issue that we might note in passing has to do with issues of evolution and whether it's legitimate to make the argument, as the Bible does, that we all descend from one human pair. And again, the short answer is yes. Humanity didn't evolve by completely naturalistic processes on different continents in a very slow process. Those who bear the image and likeness of God, who are truly human in the sense that they can worship as humans, were made at a particular point in time when God began humanity with one man and one woman and their children.

Most of the great claims of the science of human evolution are based on a very tiny amount of fossil evidence, and the conclusions change all the time. I was reading recently, for instance, that a discovery was apparently made in a dig on the island of Java last year linking homo erectus (supposedly one of the precursors to man), Neanderthals, and modern humans all in the same stratum, dating back 30,000 years. It would have been once declared impossible that those three stages of evolution could exist in the same time period, and certainly not as recently as 30,000 years ago. But now some new theory will have to take that into account.

Theories of human evolution change so often that we needn't feel any particular pressure to answer whatever is the current scientific estimation of human origins. We can wait for it to change! And we can take the Bible seriously where it is speaking historically as it is here.

Now as I mentioned before, verses 5-6 give us the perspective of the second creation story. Yahweh had drawn near, telling us his love for us, anticipating the making of a garden. This, not the heavens, is the backdrop of this story. The garden was the unique place he would prepare for his first-born, the first man and woman, to occupy.

Verse 7 is a remarkable statement of what it means to be a human being: "...The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." Two elements of our heritage are mentioned here: We come from the earth, and we come from God's breath. To be human is to have both origins.

## **CONNECTED TO THE EARTH**

In Genesis 1:24 we are told that God said, "Let the land produce living creatures...." and it was so. The earth brought forth life when God commanded that it should. As it produced the animals, the earth has produced us too. We were made from the dust of the earth, and the same chemicals that make up other living things make up our bodies. We are connected to the earth; we are part of the animal kingdom. Our physical bodies are important. There was no curse on the dust of the earth at this point. It's not sinful to have been made from the earth, it's a good thing. We didn't arrive on a spaceship from some other dimension to be given dominion over the earth. We were given dominion over an earth from which we originated.

That's why the contemporary condition and the future of creation are bound up with us as the rightful regents of earth. Consider what it says in Romans 8 about an earth that is broken because we are broken: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (verses 20-21). Everything that you care about in the created world is waiting, groaning, longing for real people to be given back to the earth so that it can be free from its decay and neediness.

## **BORN OF GOD'S BREATH**

However, we came not just from the earth. God gathered together the dust of the earth, formed it into a human body, and then breathed on it. "Spirit" and "breath" are the same word in a number of languages, including Greek and Hebrew. God's breath is his Spirit. He exhaled his breath, and the figure that he had formed inhaled it and became a living being. Human beings have not only an earthly origin but a divine origin. His image and his likeness, something that corresponds to God, was given us from the very beginning.

There is mystery in this. It's hard to know how to picture what we read here. How did God form us? I think the text invites us to imagine God in human form fashioning with his hands the dust in front of him and then breathing on it. You may remember the old song that was popular in the sixties, *A Hundred Pounds of Clay*. It's a love song in about God making a woman. The composer got the facts wrong, of course; he neglected the description of the woman's being made out of the rib of the man (which we're going to get to in the next message). But it has this imagery of God:

*"He took a hundred pounds of clay  
And then he said, 'Hey, listen,  
I'm going to fix this world today,  
Because I know what's missin'.'  
And he rolled his big sleeves up,  
And a brand-new world began."*

Perhaps something like that is what happened here in Genesis 2. God rolled his big sleeves up, and he took the clay, formed it as he wanted, and then breathed on it. And the first thing that the man saw when he awakened was the face of God, near enough to be breathing on him.

Have you ever kissed a baby awake? (I mean a three- or four-month-old baby who is old enough to recognize your face.) Sometimes you spend forever trying to get them to sleep, rocking them until they fall asleep in your arms. Then you don't want to wake them up, so you sit together until nap time is over. Finally when the little one starts to move around, you bend down with a kiss. That little face looks up at yours and breaks into a smile. I think that's the best way to regard what's happening here. God kissed Adam awake, and Adam's first vision was filled with God.

Yahweh made a garden for the ones he loved, a perfect place, Our race began in the most intimate of settings with God. And if we long to be the intimate of someone, to be connected someplace, if our hearts cry out for a life shared with someone, or if we are even fools for love, it is because we were made to be loved. The first experience that a human had was to see the face of God when he awoke. Romans 8 also tells us this: "For you did not receive a spirit [breath] that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, *"Abba*, Father."

## **A REAL GARDEN**

Verses 8-17 go on to tell us of the geography of the garden that would be planted in Eden. There are landmarks. Eden, we are told, was east of the Sinai Peninsula, if that's where Moses was writing this-somewhere on the Arabian peninsula. Cush and Havilah and the Gihon, Pishon, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers are all mentioned. The gold, stones, and resin are also mentioned to particularize this. These details make the point that this is not an imaginary place. It is not like Valhalla or some other mythical location. This event happened at a point in history at a real place on earth.

Furthermore, the description of the garden planted in Eden makes the point that it was extraordinary and beautiful. The Sinai and Canaan are both very arid regions, and yet Eden in which the garden was planted was watered by four rivers. It was abundant with life, the fruit of the trees was perfect to eat. The place that God put the first pair nourished their souls with beauty and nourished their bodies with food. Everything was provided. It was rich, engaging, interesting.

There was work to do. We're told that Adam was given responsibility to care for the garden and to work it, to understand it. Most likely, he was supposed to extend it across the rest of the globe. Though the ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17) after the Fall, and work becomes frustrating to us, this does not suggest that work itself is a curse. It's good to have something worthwhile to discover and accomplish. The responsibility to do good work is further evidence of God's love.

## **GOOD AND EVIL, LIFE AND DEATH**

Two trees in the middle of the garden are highlighted among all the others. There are many trees bearing delicious fruit. There are magnificent vistas and delightful color. But these two trees in particular deserve our attention. We're going to learn more of them before the story ends, but let me make a simple point about them here. God told Adam that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. The nature of life and the possibility of death would have been inscrutable to Adam at this time. And he, and later Eve, would have no way of knowing anything about evil. These trees represented information that was to come later in the plan of God. I'm convinced that Yahweh intended Adam to learn about good and evil by learning about God. Adam would know his Lord, his beloved *Abba*, so thoroughly that he would be able to know that anything that differed from this One was evil, because this One was wholly good. And he would learn about life, not running in fear of death, but as a richness to be savored. The end of Adam's life span would not have been death but more life. Perhaps, like Enoch, he would have been translated into God's presence.

But the opportunity existed to find out these things on his own, and these as yet mysterious concepts were given locations in the garden. One of them was prohibited to Adam: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil..." And the simple reason for the prohibition, as commentators have noted through the centuries, is that humans who were loved by God needed a way to love him back. The choice to obey or not allowed for love to be expressed. We needed a way to choose God, some means by which we could deliberately turn toward him and acknowledge his importance to us. Unlike creatures who have no choices to make, we had a choice from the beginning to love him back. That's what God longed for, just as every one of us longs for someone to love us back. God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the evening. That meant as much to him as it did to them. He looked forward to such intimate moments when they would ask him questions and learn from him.

The conclusions to draw from this have to do most of all with the God who, having given us an announcement of our significance in chapter 1, gives us an announcement of his love for us in chapter 2. This is a chapter about a father who kissed us awake, who was there holding us, making us, breathing on us, wanting us to see his own face before we would see anything else, who made provision for us that is beyond our ability to appreciate.

Beyond that, perhaps we could say that this account of what God made means that there are no real excuses for having lost it. There was nothing wrong with the garden. It was not a good garden with a few problems. It wasn't a garden that was almost good enough to have met the needs of its first inhabitants. It was an extraordinary place. And the choice to fail that the human race made was a choice against all goodness. Our frequent resort to excuse-making and rationalization is destructive. We must learn to stop making excuses for problems and start listening to the answers offered in the gospel.

This is also a story that can banish despair. If there are no excuses, there are no reasons for despair either, because if in fact we matter this much to God, and we descend into tragedy and death he'll come for us. And every time it seems to us that the gospel is too good to be true and maybe the love of God has limits, we need to remember how much he valued us when he made us. The value that he placed on us in the beginning is why he died for us.

In response, let's return to John 8:9-11: "And He was left alone, and the woman where she had been, in the midst. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' And she said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more'" (NASB).

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Fifth Message  
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