

# The Living Creatures

GENESIS I:20-26

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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” (Gen. 1:26).

In his book, *Pale Blue Dot*, Carl Sagan describes an image of Earth taken by the *Voyager* spacecraft from billions of miles away. In it, our planet is a tiny point of light amidst the vast field of stars. Sagan urged that the picture should persuade us of our insignificance to the cosmos: “Our posturing, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.”<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1, despite its brevity of description, does nothing to dispel the grandeur of the universe. Yet it draws exactly the opposite conclusion regarding the human race. We earlier noted that the Bible’s creation account is remarkably earth-centered. As we draw near to the end of the creation week we may say more specifically that Genesis 1 is remarkably man-centered. The great actor in this chapter is of course God the Creator. But, as John Calvin observed, “God made everything with man in mind.”<sup>2</sup>

The message of Genesis 1, therefore, is far from that of human insignificance. Rather, in all the great universe that God has made, according to his Word there is no more significant being outside himself than the human being. After all, everything made up to this point has an ultimate purpose aimed at mankind. God made a planet with a breathable atmosphere, with plenteous water and land. God

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Random House, 1994), 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis Chapters 1-11*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 73

then made plant life to serve as food and set the lights in the sky as clocks and calendars. On the fifth and sixth days, God created fish, birds, and beasts. Then, at the climax of creation, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). James Boice comments that man “is the peak of creation. Moreover, from this point on the story of Genesis is the story of man – in rebellion against God but also as the object of His special love and redemption.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Fifth Day

**B**efore the coming of man, however, God gave his attention to the creation of the animals. On the fifth day, God created the sea animals who swim in the waters and the birds who arch their flight across the heavens. These creatures correspond to the spaces prepared earlier on the second day, the sea and the sky (Gen. 1:6-8). The significance of these creatures is seen in the use – only for the second time in Genesis 1 – of the word “created” (Hebrew, *bara*): “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”. (Gen. 1:21).

The first use of the word “create” was in Genesis 1:1, where God “created the heavens and the earth.” Then, we noted that it is used only of God and involves *creation ex nihilo*: making something that had no prior existence. What is new here is the appearance of the “living creatures” (Gen. 1:20). H. C. Leupold describes these new kinds of beings as those “that breathe and are animated and have power of their own volition to go from place to place.”<sup>4</sup> The word for “living” is the Hebrew word *nephesh*, which means “soul.” In distinction from the unthinking plant-world, these sea and air creatures, soon to be joined by the beasts of the ground, have an inner awareness and will. By creating these “living creatures” the Creator displayed himself as a living God who possesses infinite power and genius.

The first category of living creatures are those that dwell in the sea: “God said, ‘Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures’”

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 75.

<sup>4</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis, Volume 1: Chapters 1-19* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1942), 80.

(Gen. 1:20). “So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:21). When verse 20 speaks of the waters “swarming” with living creatures, it speaks to the incredible variety of creatures that inhabit the seas and sprang forth at God’s command.

Verse 21 emphasizes the “great sea creatures” (Hebrew, *tanninim*), a word that can be used for various large sea animals, including snakes (Ex. 7:12), great serpents (Dt. 32:33) and dragons (Eze. 29:3). Often, it is translated as “monsters” (Jer. 51:34). The idea would include all the large sea creatures, including whales and crocodiles. Scholars have noted that Canaanite creation myths featured a great sea serpent who was the enemy of the chief god and represented the powers of chaos, which are often associated with the sea. If Moses intended such a reference, his point would have been God’s sovereignty over the sea and its most dreadful monsters. Gordon Wenham writes: “They are not rivals that have to be defeated, just one of his many creatures.”<sup>5</sup> Psalm 148:7 agrees, urging: “Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps.”

Along with the swarming fish, God commanded: “and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens” (Gen. 1:20). Therefore, “God created. . . every winged bird according to its kind” (Gen. 1:21). As with the plants and the fish, the birds were all created according to their kinds. Some of the most avid hobbyists are bird-watchers, who engross themselves in the great variety between eagles, owls, robins, and wrens. They also log the wide range of habits when it comes to flight, mating, migrating, and nesting. All of these bear testimony to the remarkable diversity in the creative beauty of God’s mind. Verse 21 concludes that “God saw that it was good.” We might not only agree but raise the pitch to “wonderful,” “spectacular,” and “awesome”!

The “living creatures” are not only specially created, but they also are the first recipients of God’s specific blessing in the creation account: “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’” (Gen. 1:22).

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 24.

God's blessing indicates God's continuing purpose for his living creatures. God designed a future for them as well as a present. Moreover, God's blessing conveyed with it the power to bring about his designed purpose. In this case, the blessing of God was the fruitfulness of the fish and birds in producing offspring so as to multiply and fill the waters and sky. Inherent to their being is the power of reproduction, so that God's desire was fulfilled as these wonderful creatures spread throughout the earth.

The blessing of God is a theme that will recur throughout Genesis. When God commands his creatures, it is always in light of the blessing he has already given. This holds true for us: whatever God commands us is in light of the enormous blessings we have received. In Genesis, God will bless the animals, mankind, the Sabbath, and then the people called into his covenant. How often this blessing will take the form of children and an abundance of offspring. We live in a time when more than a few married couples are not granted children, so God blesses them in other ways. But the biblical view of life is one that especially values children as precious gifts from God. It is an outlook that speaks not so much of the success that we can attain but the blessing that God is pleased to give.<sup>6</sup>

In Genesis 1:22, the broad principle of God's desire for life is displayed, just as it is repeatedly enacted by the fish and the birds today. The salmon drives itself into the current in order to reach the spawning ground where God's blessing may be fulfilled. John Calvin writes of the zeal of mother birds who look "like they are willing to kill themselves because of the love they have for reproducing their kind." He asks, "Where does all that come from? From the power of that word back when God said, 'Be fruitful and multiply on the earth'."<sup>7</sup> In this, the lower animals set an example for us in seeking to fulfill God's purposes. Calvin concludes: "Therefore, let us profit from the school of birds, and all other creatures. When we see that they yield themselves captive to God's word, let us individually and with all humility try hard to follow his word, which is not for our confusion

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1-11*, 81.

but for our instruction so that we will please him by accepting everything he commands.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Sixth Day

As the second day prepared the waters below and the sky above to be filled by God’s creatures on the fifth day, so also the third day prepared the land, which God filled on the sixth day with living creatures: “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” (Gen. 1:24).

The fact that the ground animals are also called “living creatures” indicates that they are part of the special creation that began on the fifth day with the fish and birds. Here, God says, “Let the earth bring forth” (Gen. 1:24). It is God who made them, yet the beasts are part of the landscape of the planet; they belong, in a sense, to the earth.

The land animals were created in three main categories. First is “livestock.” These are domesticated animals such as cattle. Their name (Hebrew, *behemah*) has the root meaning of being “dumb,” signifying God intention for them to provide lowly service to mankind. The second category is “creeping things,” which would include reptiles, worms, and other beings that crawl on or under the ground. Third is “beasts of the earth,” which refers to the wild animals, such as lions and bears. The Hebrew for “beasts” is “living things,” signifying the vitality and energy of these remarkable creatures. Even in the peace of the original creation, before death and violence, these wild beasts were designed by God to live free and undomesticated. Within these categories were all the main groups of animals, each “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:24). They were not the product of random chance or evolution but products of God’s personal design and powerful creation. “According to their kinds” also implies their created capacity to reproduce, like the fish and birds multiplying and filling the earth.

Genesis 1 does not launch into a taxonomy of the various species of land beasts. But it certainly invites this kind of study to the glory of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 82.

God. Indeed, it is through the diversity of the animals, together with fish and birds, and also the staggering complexity of the stars and galactic systems, that God displays a creative imagination that overwhelms our hearts. God not only made these wonderful things and creatures but he built into nature his creative capacity. “Let the waters swarm,” he commanded, and “Let the earth bring forth” (Gen. 1:20, 24). David Wilkinson writes: “God builds into the natural world the process of his creativity. Thus the natural world provides an intricate tapestry bearing witness to the creativity of God.”<sup>9</sup> Psalm 104:24 exults: “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

## Man and His Dominion

For all the glorious diversity of the sea, air, and land creatures, God was not yet finished in filling his earth. There was one last creature to come forth and live, a creature above all the others and designed especially for a personal fellowship with the Creator.

Genesis 1:26 reports:

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.”

Before exploring man’s special status in relationship to God, we should note that mankind was made in solidarity with the other “living creatures” of the earth. Man shares this designation with the animals, being referred to in Genesis 2:7 as a “living creature,” just as they are. Moreover, while verse 27 employs the third instance of God’s special creation (Hebrew, *bara*) in this chapter, marking off man as a new and special being, verse 26 first sees God making him in a manner similar to other living creatures. So while man is categorically different from the fish, birds, and animals, he is like them in significant ways. Like the animals, man is made on the sixth day from the earth (Gen. 1:24, 2:7), he feeds on the same food that they eat (Gen. 1:29-30), and reproduces according to God’s blessing just as they do (Gen. 1:22, 28). John Sailhamer thus notes that man “can

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<sup>9</sup> David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002),28.

well be studied partly through the study of [the other living creatures]; they are half his context.”<sup>10</sup>

Still, it is mankind’s special relationship to God that shapes our identity. We will consider the meaning of the image of God more fully in the next study. But, viewing man among the “living creatures,” we can note his *supremacy* as the climax of God’s creation. Man’s high status is seen in God’s deliberation prior to his making: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image’” (Gen. 1:26).

The question is raised as to who is the “us” to whom God is speaking. Earlier generations of Christians assumed that this was an occasion where the Trinity is seen in the Old Testament: the “us” is the Son and the Spirit together with the Creator Father. Most scholars today doubt this interpretation. Some suggest that God is speaking to the angelic court, as seen in Isaiah 6:8, where God said to the angels, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The problem is that is no mention of angels in Genesis 1. Moreover, man is not created in the image of angels, as this view would require (see Ps. 8:5). Perhaps the most popular view today is that God is using the “royal we.” He is not addressing another person but is speaking of himself in exalted tones. The problem is that this aristocratic tradition is not rooted in the Bible; there is no other example in the Bible of God addressing himself alone with the plural “we” or “us.”

This brings us back to the tradition view of God the Father addressing his fellow persons in the Trinity. After all, it is only they together, as “us,” who could create in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:27). In Genesis 1:2, we met the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and the New Testament identifies the Word of God in Genesis 1:3 as God the Son (Jn. 1:1-2). It seems best, then, to see the Creator Father addressing the Creator Spirit and the Creator Son, deliberating on the climactic moment in all creation: the creation of man in God’s image. G. C. Aalders writes: “this passage, standing by itself, would not constitute a clear proof of the Trinity. . . . But what is clearly indicated here is that God, in His unity, has a certain plurality.”<sup>11</sup> The Trinity may not be

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<sup>10</sup> John Sailhamer, *Genesis*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 volumes (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1990), 2:54-55.

<sup>11</sup> G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 1:71.

proved by this verse, but it is the Bible's explanation for God saying, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26).

It is by virtue of his special creation in the image of God that man rises above the other living creatures. Bruce Waltke writes; "Whereas the other creatures are created 'according to their kinds' (Gen. 1:21, 24, 25), humanity is made 'in the image of God.' Being made in God's image establishes humanity's role on earth and facilitates communication with the divine."<sup>12</sup> This understanding grounds the special dignity of human beings. Men and women do not claim their value on the basis of egotistic arrogance but rather by God's design in our creation. It is on this ground that God will later express horror at the taking of human life (Gen. 9:5-6). Because this teaching grounds our human identity in God that Francis Schaeffer wrote that for contemporary mankind "this phrase, *the image of God*, is as important as anything in Scripture." Schaeffer explains:

In his own naturalistic theories, . . . with an evolutionary concept of a mechanical, chance parade from the atom to man, man has lost his unique identity. As he looks out upon the world, as he faces the machine, he cannot tell himself from what he faces. He cannot distinguish himself from other things.<sup>13</sup>

How important it is, then, for the Christian to see his and her identity as grounded in God and tell the despairing world that we were made in God's image, with a dignity and value established by our origin.

In addition to showing mankind's *supremacy* over the other living creatures, Genesis 1:26 identifies man as God's *representative* on earth. To say that man was made in God's "image" and "likeness" means that man embodies things about God for the rest of creation to see. Clyde Francisco writes: "although man is like God, he is not God. Man is not deity but reflects the divine nature within his humanity."<sup>14</sup> Realizing mankind's role helps us to understand the logic of the second commandment, which forbids making images for the worship of God (Ex. 20:4-5). Man is not to worship *through* images of God but rather to worship *as* the image of God.

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 2:31.

<sup>14</sup> Clyde T. Francisco, "Genesis," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 1:125.



Ancient idolatry operated on the principle that an image could not only represent God but exercised his powers. Often the king was considered the image of God, as seen in inscriptions from Egypt and Assyria.<sup>15</sup> But it is not a block of stone and not even just the divinized person of the ruler who bears God's image: it is all of mankind – each and every man and woman – who bears God's image in the world. The spirit of this ideal was best expressed by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:14-16).

Genesis 1:26 further emphasizes the *rule* of mankind over the earth: “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.” Mankind is to rule over the world and its creatures as stewards on God's behalf. This mandate provides the basis both for man's employment of the earth and man's conservation of the earth. Our rulership of the world must be for the fulfillment of God's purposes and the display of God's glory, rather than our own pleasure or sinful self-interest. Francis Schaeffer writes: “As that which was created, man is no higher than all that has been created; but as created in the image of God, he has the responsibility to consciously care for all that which God put in his care.”<sup>16</sup>

### Crowned with Glory and Honor

**I**n Psalm 8, King David wrote a short poetic commentary on Moses' account of man's creation. The psalm begins and ends with praise to God: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1, 9). In between, David reflects on the order of the created realm. He notes that God made man “a little lower than the heavenly beings,” but also gave “him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea” (Ps. 8:5-8). In other words, David realized that man was

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 30.

<sup>16</sup> Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, 2:33.

created as a mediating being. We stand below God and above the lower creatures. As Genesis 1 teaches, we are made from the earth like the other living creatures but we are made in the image of God.

This observation raises a question that is vitally important in our time. If mankind is made below God and above the animals, in which direction are we to look? Are we to look down and think of ourselves as a slightly superior kind of animal or are we to look up and think of ourselves as the image-bearers of God on earth? The answer is given in David's statement that man was made "a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (Gen. 8:5). Notice that we are a little lower than God rather than a little higher than beasts. While we mediate between heaven and earth, we are to form our identity in terms of our higher relationship with God.

James Montgomery Boice spoke of the importance of this realization today. He wrote: "Over the last few decades I have noticed that our culture is tending to justify bad human behavior on the ground that we are, after all, just animals." Boice went on to cite examples of violence and sexual perversion in animals that has been used to justify similar behavior among humans. In one case, *Newsweek* magazine posted a picture of an adult baboon who had just slain its infant, accompanied by a headline declaring that infanticide should be considered normal for animals like us. Boice comments: "The sequence of thought goes like this: (1) Man is an animal, (2) Animals kill their offspring, (3) Therefore, it is all right (or at least understandable) that human beings kill their offspring."<sup>17</sup>

Both Psalm 8 and Genesis 1 refute this horrible way of thinking. Psalm 8:5 says that we should think of ourselves as "a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned. . . with glory and honor." We live in the world according to God's standards and will, and exercise his rule on the earth. Genesis 1:26 says that while we are "living creatures" together with the other animals. Psalm 8 agrees by Genesis 1 in identifying us as creatures who therefore must bow in humility before God: "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" David mused (Ps. 8:4). Psalm 8 agrees

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<sup>17</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 4:1552.

with our lordly calling to exercise dominion on earth on God's behalf. It tells us that as those who bear the image of God, we are to have our faces and our hearts directed upward to him: in joy, in obedience, and in worshipful awe of the Creator who placed his own image upon us.

A later interpreter of Psalm 8, and therefore of Genesis 1:26, is Hebrews 2:6-9, which not only quotes Psalm 8 but takes notice of how much our dominion has gone awry. Our problem is that "At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him," that is, the human race (Heb. 2:8). What an understatement! We do not have things under control! Our sin has made a ruin not only of the world but of our own lives, alienating us from God and placing us under his wrath. The writer of Hebrews, however, adds the solution: "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, . . . by the grace of God" (Heb. 2:9).

Perhaps the reason so many people refuse to look upward today, but seek their identity with the animals and a lower way of life, is they realize how our sin has failed God and earned his displeasure. The answer is Jesus Christ. Trusting him, we may look up to God again, having been forgiven of our sins through his death. We can humbly embrace our biblical status above the creatures and bear God's image without falling into arrogance or pride. Jesus is God the Son who became man that he might restore God's image in humanity.

The God who created all things and created man to bear his image does not intend to fail in his purpose. For this, Jesus came and exercised a triumphant dominion, overcoming the guilt and power of sin through his conquering atonement on the cross. Now, enthroned in an eternal and universal dominion, incarnate as both God and man, and "crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of [his] death," Jesus can restore us to God and our original calling. Through faith in Jesus, we will be placed not only on our high perch of dominion above the creatures, but according to God's Word we will be enthroned with Christ in God's presence, bearing God's glorious image and praising God's wonderful name not only on earth but in heaven forever. If we will trust in him whom God has sent for us, God will crown us again with "glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5). Jesus

promises to those who call on his name: “I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).