

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

VOLUME I—OLD TESTAMENT

Jesus said, “The Scriptures ... testify about me” (John 5:39).

We are desperately needy. If we are deprived of air, food or water we are soon compost. We constantly need life to come to us from the outside. This is true physically and it's also true spiritually. Every day we need the living Bread, Jesus. And every day the Spirit offers him in the Word.

The Scriptures are God-breathed, written to give us the kiss of life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). They are rains to water our parched souls (Isaiah 55:10-11). They are food for the famished as they offer us Christ (Deuteronomy 8:3). Therefore we come to the Bible not as a spiritual offering but in desperate need of receiving. We read Scripture not to impress God, but that, through his gospel, he might impress us. We approach our daily devotions as beggars asking our gracious Father to feed us again with the Bread of life.

Through the ages the church has seen the Bible as, more than anything else, the Spirit's testimony to the Son. It is not mainly a roadmap or an instruction manual for life. It is a biography of Jesus: commissioned by the Father, authored by the Spirit and addressed to the church.

With this in mind, *Reading Between The Lines* is not a daily pep-talk to inspire you to greater deeds. I have no idea what you face today. Most of the time, neither do you. What I do know is this: whatever you face, you need Jesus. My prayer is that you will meet him as you read the Scriptures.

I have suggested readings for each day—sometimes a verse, sometimes whole chapters. Feel free to read more or less according to what you're able to. If you're pressed for time, read Scripture not Scrivener!

I haven't suggested any "set" prayers for you to pray, but I hope that hearing God's voice might start a conversation. Before shutting this book and continuing with your day, I'd urge you to pause, reflect and respond to God in prayer. Most of all I hope that my words won't distract you but, instead, get you deeper into God's Word.

As you read and as you pray I trust that this, your greatest need, would become your daily delight: to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Colossians 3:16 ESV).

IN THE BEGINNING

On January 1st the whole world wants to be new. The magazines scream at us: “New Year, New You!”

How do you feel about the New Year? Are you ready to turn over a fresh leaf or are you dreading another year of “same old, same old?”

Today, before we consider the beginnings which we should make, first we need to consider the ultimate beginning—God’s. Our plans and priorities must take their cue from God’s agenda. So let’s press pause on the beginnings that we might resolve and let’s explore the beginning that God has already made:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:1-3).

Let’s also hear John’s commentary on that passage in the New Testament:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made (John 1:1-3).

Both Genesis 1 and John 1 get us thinking about “the beginning.” I wonder how you imagine this foundational reality.

Some people say we came from nothing. By “nothing” they usually have in mind a vast empty expanse—like “outer space” but with all the stars hoovered up. Of course that is far from “nothing.” Aristotle, the philosopher, once said that *true* nothing is what rocks dream about. (You’re thinking, “But rocks don’t dream,” and Aristotle says, “Exactly!

Nothing means **nothing**.”) But try to imagine this “nothingness.” And then try to imagine everything emerging from nothing—and for no reason. Tricky isn’t it?

But nothingness is not just difficult to imagine. It’s even more difficult to live out. Because if we really came from *nothing* then what on earth is our life all about? I suppose *we* must now make ourselves out of nothing. “Make it happen. Be a self-made woman, be a self-made man.” But it’s hard to pursue such a life with any great enthusiasm when you know that, ultimately, it’s nothing and, in the end, it will *be* nothing. If we’ve come from the void with no purpose and we’re headed to extinction with no hope it’s pretty hard to get excited about New Year’s resolutions!

So what’s the answer? Do we run from “nothing” because it’s bleak and instead embrace “God?” Well that depends. The crucial question is always **which** God? Which God are we talking about? The God of popular imagination is usually a solitary power who pulls the world’s levers from a great distance. But that’s not the God of the Bible.

According to Genesis 1, “the beginning” brimmed full with life. There was a Speaking God expressing himself through his Word (v. 3) and bringing life through his Spirit (v. 2). John speaks of the same reality: he names the speaking God as “the Father,” the Word as “the Son” (John 1:14), and the Spirit of God as “the Advocate” (John 14:26).

The God of the *Bible* is a Father eternally loving His Son in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Biblically speaking God is far closer to a “family” than a “force.”

If that’s true, then what is the meaning of our lives and of our year? Surely it’s this: to discover, to enjoy and to share the God who *is* love (1 John 4:8).

As you face a new year, know that your year and your world is not ruled by fate or a force but by a Father who calls you into the fellowship of his Son. This is the God of the Bible—the God of love—as he was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever. And it’s *his* resolution to draw you in.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Yesterday we looked at “the beginning.” In the beginning was the light, life and love of the living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But when this God creates, the equation changes. Suddenly there is something else other than God. The Father, Son and Spirit are no longer everything. God “makes room” if you like for something else to be alongside. In fact, for something else to be *drawn in*.

Yet that process is not straightforward. The second verse of the Bible says:

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 (Genesis 1:2).

This should shock us. These words—“formless and empty, darkness ... the deep,” “the waters”—are biblical words associated with sin, chaos, de-creation (Jeremiah 4:23ff.). Darkness is not a good thing in the Bible. It means fearful ignorance, death and judgment. Yet these are the very first descriptions of the earth!

In verse 1 we are so excited for light and life to break forth but there’s darkness and emptiness. Take heart though—the life-giving Spirit is there, hovering in a motherly, brooding kind of way. There is hope. But how will things be resolved?

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Genesis 1:3).

Here’s what creation needs: the Word of God to be revealed. And when God’s Word is revealed the darkness must flee.

Of course we learnt yesterday that God's Word is a Person. John chapter 1 teaches us that God's Word is not a *what*—God's Word is a *who*. God's Word is his Son, who was there in the beginning. He was the Word breathed out by the breath of the Spirit. He is the One who brings light and life to the cosmos.

“Let him shine!” says God the Father, and the darkness flees.

We tend to think of light and darkness as equal and opposite powers, but of course they're not. A battle between light and darkness is over in an instant. Wherever light is present, the darkness must give way. Darkness has no power to push back against the light. Light shines. Darkness doesn't darken. It can only have a shadowy existence. It is not a positive thing. It is a *lack* of a positive thing. And when light shines, darkness is defeated.

The whole of the first day of creation is given over to the conquering power of light. In fact, the whole pattern of “night and day” is given in these verses:

*God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.”
And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day
(Genesis 1:5).*

Do you notice when a day begins according to the Bible? It begins with evening, but the evening gives way to the morning. The light triumphs. That's the Bible's view of things.

Julius Caesar changed all that for us. 2000 years ago he decided that our days should begin and end at midnight—from darkness to darkness. Such was his view of the world and so that was how he framed his days.

But what do you think? Is darkness our origin? Is it our destination?

The Bible has good news. There is an uncreated and eternal Light. His name is Jesus and he conquers darkness. Remember today that

whatever fear is in you, the hope of Christ outshines it; whatever suffering you face, the love of Christ is brighter; whatever sin you've committed, the grace of Christ is stronger.

His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness *cannot* overcome it (John 1:5).

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Picture God-like-ness. How does it look?

Well Genesis 1:26 speaks of “the image of God” and it is one of the most discussed concepts in all the Bible. Humanity is in God’s image. No other creature shares this dignity. But what is it?

Predictably enough, people get the *image* of God wrong when they get God wrong. And people are always getting God wrong.

One misconception is to think of God as a solitary *power*. God is supremely defined as “omnipotent” (the Latin word for “all powerful”).

For such people, the divine image is all about power. And you can point to Genesis 1:26 to justify that view:

*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that **they may rule**.*

“Ah, see!” say the power people, “The image of God is about ruling!”

Well, not so fast. Actually the image of God comes first “*so that*” humanity gets to rule. The image isn’t the power. The power flows *from* the image.

So what is the image?

Well another faulty view of the image comes from another faulty view of God. Some say God’s *knowledge* is the most ultimate fact of his existence; supremely God is defined by “omniscience.” (“Omniscient” is Latin for “all knowing”). If God is, basically, an Infinite Mind, then the divine image will consist in our rational capacities.

This is how a biologist might speak (they call us *homo sapiens*—which means wise men). It’s how philosophers speak, who call us “rational animals.” But is that how the Bible speaks?

Well let’s consider Genesis 1:26 a little more closely.

First, the words “image” and “likeness” are just very basic words for “lookalike.” They’re the kind of words you would use for the statues at Madame Tussaud’s. God is not making ants he can crush. Or dumb animals for a petting zoo. He’s making creatures with whom he can share life. Forget the physicality of what I’m saying, think of the meaning behind it; God wants “face-to-face” friendship with us. He wants us to share a dinner table with him. That’s what human beings are made for.

And notice something else in verse 26. It begins: “Let us.” Here is a conversation happening among many. We met the “many” on day 1: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here is a plural God making a plural humanity—male and female. And the plurality of our human life reflects or “images” God’s life.

Just as God’s life is a loving union of three, so man and woman are meant to be united in love and so bring forth a third—children (Genesis 1:28).

God is a community of other-centered love. And we are called to “image” that life of love in the world.

So, yes, we are meant to rule the world: like God and under God. But our rule flows from love. And, yes, we are uniquely rational creatures. But that’s because we are called into deep relationship—face-to-face—with the triune God. Our rationality flows from the relationships we were made for.

So our calling is to image God out into the world. But that does not mean primarily being powerful and ruling. And it does not mean primarily figuring out life and being clever. First of all it means loving as God loves. Certainly we should use our God-given strengths and intelligence, but we do all this in the service of love.

Realize today that you are made by the God of love for “face-to-face” with him. By the Spirit of God, the Son of God invites you into a Father’s household, to know him and be known. From that will flow

all your strength and from that will flow all your wisdom. Yet, first things first: know this God. Then you will start to “image” him out to the world.

BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY

Our phrase for today teaches three things. Who is the good God? How do we live the good life? And what is the good news?

Who Is The Good God?

In Genesis 1:28, God tells man to fill and rule the earth. And He doesn't say, "Let there be a human race." He doesn't scatter an army of human beings over the face of the earth. He starts with a man. He makes for him a woman. And from the union of their love will flow the human race.

This is a window onto the character of God because human beings "image" God (see yesterday's entry).

God is Persons-in-relationship and he makes a people who are persons-in-relationship. Therefore, as humanity is tasked with filling the earth, how will they do it? Manufacture? An assembly line? Cloning? No.

Humanity will do it like God; in a deeply relational way. The filling of the earth mirrors the creation of the earth. It is loving union. It is face-to-face fellowship which, though intensely intimate, is outward-going in its fruitful creativity. The human family is to be made how the world was made—birthed out of love.

And this gives us a window into the good life.

How Do We Live The Good Life?

We often think the way to "make things happen" in life is to grit our teeth and go for it. We picture success in individual terms. Perhaps we aspire to be the corporate high-flyer or the peerless performer or the champion athlete. But lasting and true value comes as the organic product of persons-in-relationship. I'm not just talking about

“making babies.” I’m talking about what our verse from Genesis says: “filling,” “subduing” and “ruling” over all the earth. The lessons of being “fruitful and multiplying” apply far beyond baby making.

What really matters in God’s world does not come from the manufacturing model of success—individual efforts, impersonal tasks, laying brick upon brick. What really flourishes and multiplies in this world is the organic fruitfulness model: people together, united in love and common purpose.

Filling, blessing and replenishing the earth starts small. It’s not about ignoring people and performing grand tasks, the very opposite. It begins with loving that person who God has in your path right now. It’s about the pouring of person into person in committed love. This has a multiplying power to bless and replenish the earth.

What Is The Good News?

Besides everything else, this verse also preaches the gospel because, oddly enough, Adam is being treated as a plant here—with “fruit!” Apparently humanity is a crop. But as with every crop in Genesis 1, it bears fruit “according to their various kinds” (Genesis 1:11-12).

The crop of Adam is meant to “be fruitful and multiply” but what it ends up multiplying is a diseased strain of humanity. Adam was severed from his life-source in Genesis 3 and ever since, humanity has borne bad fruit.

As Jesus says in John 3:6, “Flesh gives birth to flesh.” We are not born with Spirit-life—life in connection with God. Instead we’re disconnected from true life. Thus looking for the life of God among Adam’s descendants is like looking for grapes on thorn-bushes or plucking figs from thistles (Matthew 7:16).

What we need is a new kind of plant. We need a new kind of humanity into which we can be grafted. And so the Spirit-filled Son becomes flesh and says to the world:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5).

So then...

How will we be fruitful and multiply? The Bible teaches that fruitful living is all about oneness. It’s not just babies that are made by intimacy. Whatever is truly fruitful in this world is birthed out of relationship. First we abide in the Vine—making our home in Jesus. Out of that relationship, we pour ourselves into others and so we find an organic, gradual, exponential flourishing in this world. Today, in Jesus, we can “be fruitful and multiply.”

BEHOLD, IT WAS VERY GOOD!

A good God makes a good world. Perhaps that should be the banner over Genesis chapter 1.

As we come to the end of the first creation account there are no regrets here. God doesn't say, "It's not quite what I'd imagined. It was better in rehearsals. I've kept the receipts in case you want to exchange it." No, Genesis 1:31 says:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

This is wonderfully reassuring. We are glad to know that God is happy with creation. We need to know that he's not threatened by the world, not limited by the world, not a competitor with the world, not shut out from the world. He is not kept at an infinite distance from his world. He is no prisoner of his own divine majesty.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Of course not, why should we think that?"

In the history of human religion, the gods have always had a difficult relationship with the world. Some are said to have existed forever alongside the world, some have been thought to exist apart from the world, but all such gods struggle with creation. Let's unpack that.

In some religious thought, the gods have existed forever *alongside* the world. Both the gods and the universe are eternal. In this set up, God isn't really the Creator of heaven and earth. He just has to live with it, whether he likes it or not. Usually he doesn't. Such gods are never that thrilled with the world.

In other religions, god existed before creation, but he was alone. Such a god is defined by supremacy and so he actually struggles to

relate to the world when it's made. Once again we're not entirely sure god *loves* the world.

But the God of the Bible is very different. He creates a world that he is really very happy about.

Each day he looks at creation and says, "It's good." And he is most happy when it gets to day six. Once humanity crowns creation, it bursts out of him: "Behold, it is very good!" This is what he has always wanted.

How come the God of the Bible is so happy with creation? Well he's different to all the other gods. He isn't trapped alongside a creation he never made. And he isn't trapped in his own company, shut out from the world. The Father has always had his Son and Spirit besides him. He is not socially awkward. He is very comfortable with relating to others. He is the companionable God. So of course he makes a world so that billions more can share in his family love.

We read this in Proverbs 8:30-31. Wisdom (aka the Son of God) is speaking:

*I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.*

Just as the Father has always related to his Son by the Spirit, so God now relates to the world and invites the world into this relational reality. Therefore when he makes the world, of *course* he says: "Behold, it's very good!"

There is a lot of nonsense spoken by religious folk. There is a lot of hatred of bodily things, a disdain for this world and a belief that "spiritual" means "non-material." Don't believe it. Don't retreat from

God's good creation. Fear sin, don't fear the world. To paraphrase a popular explanation of Christianity: God loves the world and has a wonderful plan for its life.

GOD RESTED

Are you able to rest? Do you have an ‘off switch’? And do you flick it? Or are you always on?

Some people put the question like this: “Do we work to live or live to work?” On the one hand we could earn our salary so we can fulfil ourselves beyond the 9-5. On the other, we simply pour our whole lives into work. So which is it? We know how we *should* answer. But so often we find we can’t rest. We feel like we need to be constantly performing, proving, producing and providing, otherwise we just don’t know who we are.

How can we learn to rest? Genesis 2:1-3 is a great place to start:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

God rested! This means when we ask God the question: “Do you live to work or do you work to live?” he gives a clear answer. *I work to live. I toil for six days but it’s all heading somewhere—it’s heading to blessed rest. God works to live.*

I think that’s a surprising view of God. Most of us assume that God lives to work. You see, for many people, “Creator” is God’s most basic job description. If he’s not fine-tuning the cosmological constants, or priming the charges for the big bang, or pulling the heavenly levers, or keeping the wheels of providence well-oiled, well then, what are we paying our taxes for anyway?! If

his role in life isn't to keep the show on the road, what could it possibly be?

I once saw Richard Dawkins respond to a question online. The questioner asked, "Could there be another role for a deity beyond creation?" Dawkins responded, "I can't even imagine what that would mean." I think that's very telling and very common. We basically define God according to his job description. We think he lives to work.

But, as with every misconception we have about God, this says more about us than it does about him. Think of our very first phrase on day one: "In the beginning." There was a time—a very long time—when God was not Creator. Originally God was not in manufacturing. He entered that vocation later in life. Yes he *is* a Creator but he's a Creator so that he can bring rest. God works to live.

So of course in Genesis he works six days and then rests. Not because he's tired but because his work has a goal—a consummation. Through the toil comes a blessed rest: enjoyment in communion with others. It's the same in the New Testament. God the Son, works, works, works, then dies on Friday, which is the evening of the sixth day. And what does he exclaim? "It is finished" (John 19:30). He rests in the tomb on the seventh day and he *lives* on the eighth! This is always the pattern: through toil to blessed rest. God works to live. How about you?

Today may be a day of work. That's good. Work is good. But the goal is not to find your worth and meaning in work. That's not how God operates. He works to live. In fact he works—through blood, sweat and tears, through the agony of the cross—so that *you* might live. He works so you might find blessed rest in relationship with him. And you don't have to wait for the weekend to know this rest. Right now Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

THE BREATH OF LIFE

Human nature is frustrating. On the one hand we have “eternity set in our hearts” (as Ecclesiastes 3 puts it), on the other hand, death racks our bodies.

Shakespeare put it like this in *Hamlet*:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene II, Lines 295-299).

There’s this duality to us. How like an angel we are? How like a dirt-bag we are. And we manage to be both at the same time. Here’s what I think Shakespeare was thinking about when he put those words on Hamlet’s lips:

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

On the one hand we have the breath of life, on the other hand a pile of dirt. That’s humanity. What a duality!

The contrast is even starker when you think that we are not just dirt-bags, we are “dust.” Dust is fragmentary. It is so quickly blown away. We are meant to think, “Easy come, easy go. Plenty more where that came from.”

More than this, Adam is not merely “dust”, he is “dust of *the*

ground.” Adam is very connected to the earth. He is made of earth. Adam has not been flown in by the angels to trouble-shoot in this new-frontier start-up called earth. The man who rules the earth will *be* earth.

And yet, notice what happens to this very terrestrial, ephemeral pile of dirt: the Lord God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. It’s the first “kiss of life”—the paradigmatic “kiss of life.” This is no clockwork God who winds up a few robots to play with. This is no zoo-keeper God who places some creatures in a pen to watch. Here is a God whose whole creation project is to make beloved creatures with whom he can share “face-to-face” fellowship. He kisses them into being, breathing on them the breath of life.

The word “breath” and the word “spirit” are the same in Hebrew. Thus the very spirit of life animates this dirt-bag, brings him to life and sets him on his feet. That’s who Adam is and that’s who the children of Adam are: made from mud, kissed by God.

How should we handle this duality? Actually Jesus is the answer. He is the Lord God—God the Son—who came as man and for man. He sums up all humanity, all earth, and he takes on himself the death that we dirt-bags deserve. Then, when he rises, he breathes on us his *eternal* Spirit (John 20:22). As it says in 1 Corinthians 15:45:

“The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.

Today we feel the frustration. We are crumbling dirt-bags. But know that Jesus died for dirt-bags, and he rose to breathe into you his own Spirit of *life*. If you feel dry as dust today, just ask Jesus once more to do what the old hymn prayers: