

GENESIS 2:4-17

GOD GIVES US OUR STORY

What is God like? Not long ago, a study described four images of God in our culture.

* About one in three people see God as “authoritarian.” He is angry at sin, yet he is still involved in our lives and our world.

* About one in four people see God as “benevolent.” He has standards, but he is forgiving.

* About one in five people see God as “critical.” He is judgmental, yet he will not intervene to help the people he has made.

* About one in four people see God as “distant.” He is a cosmic force that started it all, then left the scene.

In the church, we believe God has revealed much about himself in the creation, and in the inspired words collected in the Bible. If we use the Bible as our guide, which of those words best describes God? We move toward an answer as we resume our journey through the story of creation. It is the first scene in the five-scene story of our lives and our world. As we read through Genesis 2, we find the writer providing more details of the creation he described in Genesis 1. The emphasis is now on the relationship between God and the people he has made.

We have a lot of information here! Some of it is mysterious to us. But this is clear: God is the main character in this scene of the story. Here we learn more of what he is like, and how that touches our stories. Most of all, we see God’s generosity. All through these words, we see God giving. We see him giving us what we want, what we need, and what we don’t want, but do need.

God gives **WHAT WE WANT**. In verses 4 and 5, the earth seems to be one big puddle. No shrubs or plants have appeared, but since rain has not yet started to fall, streams come up from the earth to water the surface of the ground. Think of how mushy everything will be when all of this snow melts, and you may have an idea of what the earth was like! Then God forms the first man from the dust of the ground. Then what?

God creates *A PLACE OF DELIGHT*. He plants a garden in a place called Eden. The writer describes Eden as “in the east,” which may mean it is to the east of where the writer is writing. We don’t know where this is, but we know what it is like. The word “Eden” means “delight.” This is a delightful place.

We get a sense of this delight in verse 9, when we read that God makes “all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground.” He creates a variety trees, and those trees are “pleasing to the eye.” They are not like a row of telephone poles - big, wooden objects that all look alike and simply fulfill some function. God plants a variety of these trees, and they are delightful.

Yet this is not just a place of delight. This is *A PLACE OF DESIRE*. Why does God create those trees? In verse 9, we read that they are “good for food.” They are not just useful for food. They are good for food. Then in verse 16, God tells the man that he is free to eat from any tree in the garden. The man has all kinds of trees, and he is free to eat from all kinds of trees. He does not have to eat the same thing every day. He can take from this tree, or that tree, or that one over there, or maybe that one way over there - whatever he desires.

It’s like a breakfast buffet. Who doesn’t love a breakfast buffet? You have your eggs, you have your pancakes, you have your sausages, you have your bacon, you have your biscuits and gravy, you have your fruit...and I will stop before we all decide to leave! You love it because you have all of those desirable things in front of you, and you are free to choose whatever you want. Maybe today you will choose this, and maybe some other day you will come back and choose that. You desire, and you are free to fulfill your desire.

God makes the creation this way. He makes this man with desires, and he gives this man great freedom to pursue his desires, as he presents him with a “buffet” of trees to choose from.

He gives what we want. He gives a place of delight, and he gives a place of desire. He gives a place of delightful desire. This is something fundamental and wonderful about our creator God. He makes us as physical creatures, and he blesses delight and desire.

Sometimes we forget this. If you were raised in a Christian home, or even in a more generally religious home, you may have been taught, openly or quietly, that the spiritual is good and the physical is bad. If that is true, then a big part of life is denying our physical desires, then feeling guilty when we indulge them.

You may see this in people who believe it is a sin to enjoy good food, as we discussed last week in Sunday School. You could see this in people who believe the only time a husband and wife should be together sexually, is when they want the woman to conceive a child. You sometimes see this in people who reject all use of any kind of alcohol beverages. You might see this in people who obsess about work, and can never play or rest.

But that is not what we see here. As the story continues, we realize we can and will misuse our desires, and we are called to control our desires. As we learned last week in Sunday School, the Christian life is not about renouncing desires, but regulating desires. Yet remember this: who gave us these bodies? Who gave us our senses? Who gives us everything we enjoy with those senses in our bodies? God does not just create telephone poles. He creates trees. We worship him for who he is, but we also worship him because he gives us wonderful gifts to enjoy.

God gives us what we want. God also gives us **WHAT WE NEED**. One of the big lessons of the creation story is that we are dependent creatures. We did not make ourselves, and we cannot sustain ourselves. It was true in the garden, and it is true now. So what does God give here? He gives provision for our bodies, and provision for our spirits.

The *PROVISION FOR OUR BODIES* is pretty easy to see. We see these trees growing out of the ground, and we see that these trees will be used for food. The man will not just eat from these trees because he wants to eat. He will eat from these trees because he needs to eat, and God will provide for his health through the fruit on those trees.

Think also of verses 10 to 14, where we read the descriptions of the rivers. Once again, we are not sure of all the details here. Different Bible students have different opinions about the exact locations of these rivers. As well, when the story progresses to the flood, we are reminded that such a huge cataclysm might have changed the course and even the location of these rivers.

Then notice the mention of the gold, aromatic resin, and onyx. We know about gold, but we are not sure about the exact nature of the resin and the onyx. But it seems pretty safe to say this: these are valuable resources. We know the value of gold, and we can guess the resin and the onyx are worth something, too.

What is the point? God provides resources that will provide for the physical needs of the people. The rivers will provide water, and these other resources will provide wealth that can be used to provide for the bodies of the people God has made. Of course, this is only a taste of what God provides. Think of all the amazing resources on this earth and in this earth, and how we use those resources to physically survive and thrive. God gives it all to us.

Yet God also gives *PROVISION FOR OUR SPIRITS*. Let's go back to verse 7. God forms the man from the dust of the ground, and he breathes the breath of life into the man's nostrils. In some ways, this is humbling. We are made of dust. Maybe if the world is a big puddle at this point, we are made of mud! As the pastor and writer Matthew Henry said, the dust God used is probably not the gold dust! We are humble creatures.

But let's learn this, too. The word for "breath" and the word for "spirit" are the same word in this language, and in many other languages. God is breathing "spirit" into this man. He is giving him a soul. He is enabling him to relate to God in a way that is unique in all the creation. So we can cross off the "distant" description of God. He did not just create everything, then leave the scene. He made us to relate to him, and just as the fruit of the trees will be food for our bodies, our relationship to him will be food for our souls.

Augustine used an image for this that is appropriate on Valentine's Day. He imagined a man giving a beautiful ring to a woman. She loves the ring and takes the ring, but she has no interest in the man who gave it to her. She says, "Thanks for the ring, but you don't need to stick around." What would we say about that woman? We might say she loves the gift, not the giver.

The Giver gave us these gifts, so that we might relate to him and love him. We have bodies, so God provides for our bodies. But we also have spirits, so God provides for them, too - by providing for us to relate to him. If he just provides for our bodies, we are no different than animals. If he just provides for our spirits, we are no different than angels. But we are not animals or angels. We are human beings. We are creatures who can depend, and do depend, on a God who has made us a certain way, then wonderfully provided for how he has made us to be.

He gives us what we want, and he gives us what we need. Do you start to see why this first scene of creation is so important? As I mentioned when we journeyed through Genesis 1, there is much we do not know about the creation process, and even as Christians, we may differ about some of the details. But at the end of the discussion, we are still left with this question: are we here by creation, or by chance? Do we exist because of a personal God who gives us delightful desires, then provides for our bodies and our spirits, or are we just a collection of atoms that somehow became organized through a cosmic accident? Your answer to that question will decide how you see your part of this story, and how you live your part of this story.

Do you have a purpose for being here? With a creator God who gives what we want and what we need, the answer is yes. Do we have any reason for saying this is right and that is wrong? With a creator God who gives what we want and what we need, the answer is yes. Can we make sense of suffering? With a creator God who gives what we want and what we need, the answer is yes. Is there real peace, real joy, real fun, real love, and real hope in this world? With a Creator God who gives what we want and what we need, the answer is yes.

So let's strike another answer off our list. God is not distant, and God is not critical. He is not a God of judgment who does nothing to help the people he has made.

Yet if we stop here, we will miss seeing all we need to see about God here. Let's notice this: God gives what we want, what we need, and **WHAT WE DON'T WANT, BUT DO NEED**. What might we not want here, but desperately need? The warning.

This is a *WARNING ABOUT LIFE*. We get the first hint of the next scene in our story in verse 9. We read of a tree called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." We wonder, why would that name be here? In the next scene, we see Satan tempting the man and woman to disobey God. Elsewhere in the Bible, we discover that Satan seems to be an angel who rebelled against God. So maybe as the man stands in the garden, Satan has already turned against God and rebelled against God.

This explains the commands in verses 16 and 17. God gives the man great freedom to eat from these trees, but he tells him not to eat from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As we saw in the last chapter, God asserts his authority over the people he has made by giving commands, and here he warns the man that "when you eat of (that tree) you will surely die."

This is a warning about life. It is as if God is saying, "Do you want to live forever? You are made to do this. You are made to prosper in a world of life, not death. But if you disobey, you will be on the road to physical and spiritual death. You will lose the health of your body, and you will lose the perfect relationship you have with me."

I have long remembered a quote from a British doctor who said, "America seems to be the only nation that considers death to be an option." In this later part of the story, we have no option about it. But in that first part of the story, the first man had an option. God clearly warned him of what would happen if he ate from that tree. God gave the man so much freedom, but he also warned him with a warning about life - and death.

This is a warning about life, but this is also *A WARNING WITH LOVE*. Do you see the love here? God has made us to relate to him, but he has also made us to submit to him. With this warning, he is not being cruel. He is being kind. A God of love is warning his creature that disobedience will bring trouble. To use the words of the other two descriptions of God, he does have anger about sin and rebellion. He does have standards. But out of love, he does not leave the first man to guess at those standards. He lovingly warns him.

He also lovingly warns us. If we obey God all the time and in every way, we gain life. But if we fail, we

become subject to death. In his love, through his written Word and through my spoken word to you today, he offers a warning with love.

When I say to my young adult son, “Drive carefully in the snow,” it is a warning with love. When a school teacher says to a young person, “Do not even begin to mess with drugs,” it is a warning with love. When a friend says to you, “You are playing with fire in that relationship,” it is a warning with love. When your spouse says, “Your anger is killing you,” it is a warning with love. When a God who gives what we want and gives what we need says to us, “I give you great freedom, but you must obey me,” he is giving us what we do not want, but what we do need, and he is giving us a warning with love.

This is why we need the gospel! As the story progresses beyond this scene, we discover that this man does not obey. As we live our story, we know we do not obey. The story of the gospel is this: Jesus, the Son of God, has come to obey where we have failed to obey. Where the first Adam stumbled, the “second Adam” triumphed. He lived in perfect obedience to his Father.

But that is not all. Through Jesus’ death, we are forgiven for our disobedience and restored to a right relationship with the Father. Through his resurrection, we have the hope of finally defeating death, through the resurrection of our bodies from the grave. Through his Holy Spirit, we are moved and enabled to start obeying. The God who warned with love, gave his Son out of love, so that we might have everlasting life.

So here is the loving warning. It cuts through all of the clutter of our hearts and our world. It moves through all of history, back to the dawn of time, and it looks ahead to every bit of your future. What is your relationship to this giving God? Do you remain in rebellion against him, or have you received the forgiveness and new life of his Son?

You may say you love God. But you show you love him, when you obey him. You may say you are saved by God’s grace, but you demonstrate that salvation as you obey him today.

It is hard to imagine today, but students of weather sometimes talk about an invisible drought. The moisture at the top level of the soil is fine, but not far below, it is bone dry. Is that what you are like this morning? Do you express faith in Jesus, but are you failing to express that faith in your life? Is everything fine on the surface, but dry where no one can see? I offer you the loving warning of God. You may fool people, but you cannot fool God.

Hear and heed God’s warning. Run to Jesus in faith - for the first time, or again. The God who gives you the delightful desires that you want, and who provides for the needs of your body and spirit, calls you back to the loving Savior.

The first two models of God - “authoritarian” and “benevolent” - each capture part of the truth. God does claim authority over us. He has standards. Yet he is also so rich in grace - so amazingly generous, as we see in this scene of the story, and in every scene of the story.

We come humbly before him, as he warns us. We offer our hearts and lives to him, through the merits and mercy of his Son. We see his Spirit conforming us into what he made us to be. Through it all, we rejoice that He is the hero of the story, and he is the hero of our story.