

Series Immanuel, God With Us

This Message God's Good Functioning World

“Immanuel, God With Us.” This phrase is repeated many times during the Christmas season. The statement is usually quoted from the Gospel of Matthew and applied to the birth of Jesus, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him ‘Immanuel,’ which means, ‘God with us’” (*Matthew 1:23*).

That theme, “God with us,” runs throughout the entire Bible. The very first theme introduced in Genesis and the culmination of events in Revelation are both pictures of God dwelling among His people, and there are numerous references in between which explain the desire and efforts of God to be close to His people. This message will focus on the first chapter of Genesis, the portion of Scripture which lies at the heart of our understanding of what the Bible communicates about God's desire and efforts to be with humans.

First, a little bit of essential background information for sophisticated American evangelicals. The ancient Israelites did not understand the universe in modern terms. They did not know that stars were suns, that the earth was a ball which moved around the sun, that the sun was much further away from where they lived than the moon. In Genesis chapter 1 God did not attempt to change their assumptions about physical realities. He communicated to them in terms of the their world view and comprehension. He did not reveal to the ancient Israelites a science that was beyond their own cultural understanding. Rather God described His creation in terms of functional characteristics. Genesis chapter 1 was described in a way that was understandable to the people of the Ancient Near East. Let me explain what I mean.

The most common way we modern people know that something exists is by its material characteristics. We know what an object is because we can see it and touch it. We can also analyze it to determine what it is made of and how it works. Physical qualities are what make things real to us, and lead us to declare “the object exists.”

However, there is another way to determine existence. How do we, for example, know what the Church is? Does the Church exist because of its buildings, or because it has documents filed with the government which provide legal status? In a limited way buildings and documents are indications of the Church. However, buildings and documents say nothing about the functions of the Church. The functions of the Church include worship, prayer, spiritual training, fellowship, and other such activities.

In Biblical thinking about creation, we need to focus our concerns on function because that is where God put the emphasis. When modern people think about the cosmos, it is almost exclusively in material terms. As a result, most of our current evangelical discussion and debate about creation is limited to its material qualities, and the “how” and “when” of creation. This is unfortunate because the emphasis of the Bible is on function, not material aspects. The important question is “why.”

From Genesis chapter 1, the people in the ancient world were able to understand the useful purpose for which God created the heavens and the earth. The ancients believed that every item in an ordered system had to contribute to the smooth operation of the system, and had to provide a benefit to some one. Of course, every object had to have physical properties before it could fulfill its function, but the crucial emphasis was its function.

Note the second verse 2 in Genesis chapter 1. This verse is a description of the absence of functions: the earth was “formless and empty.” The words, “darkness” and “waters” described a condition which was nonfunctional — a condition that was without purpose and was unproductive. Genesis chapter 1 describes “how,” but more importantly, “why,” God made His creation useful.

In beginning His work, God said “Let there be light,” and “there was light.” God called the period of light “day.” “God separated the light from the darkness,” and the period of darkness he called ‘night.’”

It was not the simple existence of light that was important but the purpose, the function, of the light. God’s first creative work established the function of time. The basis for time is the regular fluctuations between periods of light and periods of darkness. The starting condition was darkness. The creation of light was a new condition. By establishing the cycle of darkness and light, God brought time into the features of the cosmos.

On day 2: God “made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it.” The ancient peoples believed that they lived in a solid dome in which the sun, moon, and stars resided, along with water. Modern people know that this is not true, but if we are to interpret Scripture properly, we need to keep in mind that God did not attempt to change the common understanding of ancient people. Rather, He accommodated Himself to their understanding because it was His purpose to communicate truth that was functional in nature, not to introduce and teach scientific realities.

The dome had a twofold purpose. It created the space for the development of life. The second function was to serve as the mechanism by which precipitation was controlled, the means by which weather operated.

On Day Three, God didn’t actually make anything new. By separating the waters He made it possible for dry land to appear. This made it possible for the land to produce vegetation. From a functional standpoint, the soil, water, and the principle of seed bearing are all very essential to the production of food.

Let’s summarize the steps so far: On Day One God created the basis for time. On Day Two the space for living things. On Day Three the basis for food. These three functions are the foundation of life. God was preparing for His ultimate creative act, humanity. The greatest work of the Creator is not to be found in the materials that He brought together. It is that He brought materials together in such a way that they could function for the future benefit of humanity.

Remember the two conditions given in verse 2 that had to be overcome. First, the earth was “without form.” Therefore, during the first three days God gave the earth shape and form. There was a shift in His activity during the next three days. The second condition to be overcome was “emptiness.” Therefore, in days 4, 5, and 6, God concentrated on filling the newly formed earth.

On Day 4 (*Genesis 1:14-19*) God placed celestial bodies in the dome of the firmament/expanse. These bodies are linked to day 1 since they are associated with day and night. The “greater light” was designated to rule the day and the “lesser light” to rule the night. The sun and the moon had specific functions: They were to serve for “signs, seasons, days and years.” These are functions related to time.

On Day 5 (*Genesis 1:20-23*) God specified the function for the fish and birds. He commanded them to “teem” and “fly.” These are words which meant “to flourish, proliferate, multiply, become plentiful.” God wanted the fish “to fill the seas and the birds to increase on the earth.” Their function was to fill their respective realms.

On Day 6 (*Genesis 1:24-31*) the animal kingdom was created. The text indicates that animals were to function relative to their kind rather than function relative to other earthly inhabitants.

The creation of humanity was the climax of the creation account. See verses 26 through 28. “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, ... male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

Humans were given four significant functions: 1) to populate the earth; 2) to subdue and rule over all the other creatures in the creation; 3) to function toward each other as they were designated male and female. The fourth function is given in chapter 2: they were to be good stewards of God’s creation (*Genesis 2:15*).

According to the literature of the pagans of the ancient world, creation was set up to serve the gods, which is a theocratic view. The gods of the pagan world lived “out there somewhere” and had very little contact with the creatures on earth. In Genesis, in contrast, creation was set up not only for the benefit of God, but also for the benefit of humanity. This was an anthropocentric view. Generally speaking, the peoples of the Ancient Near East considered the cosmos to be a dwelling place for their many deities, but for the ancient Israelites, God made it clear that the earth was created as a special place for them to live in relationship with Himself, and that He would dwell with them.

Now we need to think about Day 7. The people of the ancient Near East would say that Day 7 was the most important of the seven days. Looked at through the aspect of functionality, Day 7 represented the climax of the creative week. Without Day 7 nothing else would make any sense or have any meaning.

What is “rest? (*mentioned in Genesis 2:2*) Most people associate “rest” with disengagement from the responsibilities, cares, and worries of life. But in the ancient world rest was the period when the routines of life were normal and predictable, when everything was functioning properly, when responsibilities could be sustained without obstacles or difficulties.

Yes, the Hebrew verb “*shabat*” (“rest” *Genesis 2:2*) can refer to the cessation of certain activities in which someone might be engaged, but it also refers to the pleasant condition of safety, security, and stability when life is progressing without any problems which require special attention.

Security and stability allow a person to relax, to enjoy circumstances. Adam and Eve were able to enjoy their perfect circumstances, and God also was able to rest (enjoy “shabat”) on the seventh day because His work was completed. Everything was functioning smoothly just as He intended.

The most central truth to this creation account is that God created the cosmos to be the place for His own presence. In order for the holy and righteous God of eternity to dwell in His creation, everything in the creation had to be perfect in form and function. There are no blemishes or imperfections in God, and neither could there be any imperfections in His creative work.

How did God describe His work in chapter 1? Each day God evaluated His work and said, “It is good.” And after the 6th day “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.” When the work was completed, the creation was everything that God wanted it to be; it was perfect in every detail. It was suitable for Him to take up residence in it and to be with His human creation.

God designed the functions of creation to meet the needs of humanity. In this sense the earth was man-centered. Primarily, however, the cosmos was created to be God’s dwelling place, the place where He could exist outside of His own self-contained spiritual nature. God constructed the cosmos to be His temple dwelling. In Scripture we read that the heavens declare the glory of God. It required the vastness of the universe to properly reflect the greatness of God. But the most remarkable aspect of God’s vast creation is that He wanted to be Immanuel, God dwelling with His people here on earth, one small part of that universe.

Adam and Eve had a unique fellowship with God, at least until the time of their disobedience. Unfortunately, the fall of Man into sin destroyed the order of God's Cosmic Temple.

Through disobedience, the perfectly functioning Cosmos/Temple was reduced to the status of dysfunction. The cosmos became the place of sin and death. The ground of the earth was cursed (*Genesis 3:17-18*). Adam and Eve could no longer associate with their holy Creator. They were expelled from the garden and sent into the wilderness where animals, weather, and nature became hostile toward them.

Fortunately, God, in His grace and mercy was not about to let the chaotic overturn of His creation and His separation from humanity be the final word on the matter. His desire is ever to be with people. Therefore He established a procedure whereby relationship and communion between Himself and people could be restored. This is the subject of the next message.

God didn't just set creation in motion, then leave it to run itself. Its ultimate function was for fellowship between Creator and creature, for Immanuel to be with us and we to be with Him.