

Good morning. Let me introduce myself briefly for those that don't know me. We used to be quite involved here but left in 2006 to do missionary work. Our most recent role has been working at a Christian international school in Kenya for the last 6 years. My lovely wife, Kim, is here with me, as well as two of our three teenage children.

The title of this sermon is a tad long. It's: You were created to rule as God's representative under His authority and express his righteous reign.

Pastor and author Tim Keller says that any worldview must answer three foundational questions:

1. How are things supposed to be in this world?
2. What is the main problem with things as they are? Why are things so messed up?
3. What is the solution and how can it be realized?

As Christians, we spend most of our time talking about the last two questions, but not as much about the first. So that is what we will talk about today: How are things supposed to be? The last verse of Gen. 1 is a good starting place, as it describes God's view of this world after He had finished creating everything:

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

What does it mean that creation is very good? What attributes make it very good? Here's another question to give us a clue: What are the deepest longings of your heart? What would a perfect world and flourishing life look like to you? I will give you a few moments of silence to think about this. What would a perfect world and flourishing life look like to you? [pause]

I believe that God designed us to flourish when we live in a certain way, and our deepest longings are pointers to that way. In other words, when we live in the way God designed us to live, in the sort of world that He designed us to live in, our deepest longings will be fulfilled, and we'll finally find the profound joy and satisfaction that are so elusive for us. So our longings are clues that point to the purpose of God that was implanted in our hearts when He created us in His image.

I did a bit of brainstorming of my own and came up with 25 things that I think we all long for deeply. Here they are, in no particular order:

1. Love – We long to love and be loved, to be in a community of kindness and generosity, to be accepted just the way we are.
2. Peace – We long to live in a community where everyone gets along without conflict and competition. We long for unity and cooperation rather than envy or hatred. And we long to experience peace in our hearts rather than fear or turmoil.
3. Beauty – We long to experience beautiful art, beautiful scenery, beautiful music, moral beauty, and so forth. And we long to be beautiful ourselves.
4. Meaning and purpose – We long for things to make sense, for clear direction rather than confusion. We long to be a part of something that is bigger than ourselves, something that really matters.
5. Knowledge and wisdom – We love to learn new things and understand how the world works.

6. Awe – We long to experience wonder and amazement over things that are marvelous and extraordinary.
7. Significant work and fruitfulness – We long to make a lasting difference in the world, to accomplish and achieve worthwhile things in a skillful, competent way; to be productive.
8. Rest – We long for physical rest, and for rest for our souls, as Jesus calls it, rather than struggle. It might seem that this one is the opposite of #7, but we need both work and rest in order to flourish.
9. Delicious Food – There are few things as satisfying as a delicious feast enjoyed with loved ones.
10. Health – We long for a life that is no longer ravaged by sickness, pain, disability, or the infirmities of old age.
11. Immortality – We were made to live forever. There is nothing as painful as being separated from our loved ones by death. There are many evidences of the curse of sin, but death is the ultimate curse according to Gen. 3, which is why Jesus' resurrection is so crucial. He conquered sin and death and promises to give us victory over sin and death.
12. Justice – We long to live in a society ruled by justice and fairness.
13. Victory – We long to be winners, not losers.
14. Righteousness – We long to consistently do what is right and good, and live among people that consistently do what is right and good.
15. Relationship – We long for connection, to know others and be known by them. We long to belong to a group. We long for romance.
16. Freedom – We long to have the freedom to do what we want to do.
17. Safety – We long to live in a place where we are protected from all danger or harm.
18. Plenty and abundance – We long to always have more than enough of the things we need, whether they are material resources or otherwise.
19. Truth – We long to know the truth and live among truthful people.
20. Good leadership – We long to be led by people who are faithful, loving, just, creative, competent, and wise.
21. Power – We long to have the strength and ability to do the things we want to do, rather than to be limited by weakness and failure.
22. Creativity – We long to be involved with things that are stimulating, exciting, new, and imaginative.
23. Glory – We long to see magnificence outside of us and inside of us. We long to know that we are valuable and highly esteemed and respected. We long for an identity that includes greatness and significance, so that we are no longer be subject to thoughts of self-doubt, self-hatred, or self-disappointment.
24. Security – We long to know the assurance of having all the things we need forever in the future. For example, to not only have safety and plenty now, but to have them eternally.
25. Joy – Ultimately, we long for everlasting joy that is not undermined by sorrow or fear or suffering of any kind.

I will refer to this list throughout this sermon as: the 25 beautiful things. These things reflect the beauty and goodness of God's character and His image in us. They are characteristics of His righteous reign, what Jesus referred to as the KOG. These deepest longings point to the life that we were created for and His intent for the cosmos.

If I had to pick one word that best sums up the 25 beautiful things, it would be the word “shalom.” This is a Hebrew word that is usually translated “peace”, but also includes:

Shalom = peace, wholeness, completeness, health, well-being, safety, soundness, prosperity, contentment, tranquility, friendship, reconciliation, flourishing

Here’s another question to get us thinking: What story are you believing that is behind all the other stories? We have to have an understanding of the big picture of why God created this universe and what he wants our world to be like. It’s the context that will give proper meaning to all the little stories that occur in our lives. The story we believe, what philosophers call a master narrative, profoundly shapes our lives and our churches.

When my family started going to church when I was ten years old, I heard the gospel for the first time. For many years, I believed the big story was: “I am a sinner on the way to hell; Jesus died for my sins; I have to receive Him into my heart in order to be forgiven of my sins so that I’ll go to heaven.” Certainly this is central to the gospel, but it’s incomplete. The big story is a lot grander and more marvelous than that. Over the years as I have gotten a fuller picture of that big story, it has deeply shaped my life for the better.

Where and how you begin the story, and where and how you end the story, determine what story you’re believing. We are going to look at the bookends of the Bible: the first two chapters and the last two chapters. We’ll see God’s original intent for creation in the first two chapters, and His ultimate intent in the last two chapters—and see that His intent has not changed. Do you know what your mandate is? By mandate, I mean the purpose and command God gave to humans when he created us? We’ve got to understand our mandate to live well.

In Gen 1, after God creates the world, he creates life: plants animals, and humans, which have the ability to grow, change, and reproduce. Creation is developing, going somewhere. But where is it going? The plants and animals don’t have the moral or intellectual capacity to properly manage its direction. Creation needs a manager, a steward, to direct and organize and develop it.

Next, when God creates humans, three things are emphasized:

1. We were created in God’s image.
2. We were created to increase in number and fill the earth
3. We were created to rule and subdue the earth.

In this passage, I have highlighted the words image and likeness, increase and fill, rule and subdue.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our **image**, in our **likeness**; and let them **rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own **image**, in the **image** of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be **fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth** and **subdue** it. **Rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The implications of being created in the image of God are myriad, but one thing is clear: We are created in His image in order to rule over this earth as His representatives. God is a righteous, faithful, loving, just, creative, competent, and wise ruler. We were created to be like Him, so that He might entrust the stewardship of this earth to us, that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. Unfortunately, we as humans have generally done a terrible job of carrying out our mandate. Throughout its history, this world has been filled with poverty, violence, conflict, oppression, greed, and so on.

In Gen 1-2, the creation is developing and growing, and God entrusts humans with the responsibility of managing, and ordering, and guiding, and cultivating creation as His representatives in accordance with His purposes, which is why we are made in His image: righteous, faithful, loving, just, creative, competent, and wise—just like Him. The Master artist has created His masterpiece, and we are His apprentice artists, partnering with Him, co-creating with Him.

Notice the physical participation of the world in Gen 1 and 2: There's dirt and air and water and trees and animals. Notice too that there's a harmony within hierarchy. There is the sun and moon and stars, there is light and darkness, there is the sea and land, there are the plants and animals, and there are humans. God is over everything. There is a harmony that comes from the appropriate ordering of creation in accordance with God's righteous reign. There is no rebellion or discord or fear or sorrow.

Notice also that there's no concept here of dying and going to heaven, going somewhere else. God does not tell them "the goal is to leave here so you can be with me in some spiritual realm." God walks among them, as we see in chap 3. Adam and Eve aren't singing the bluegrass gospel song: "Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away." The action is here, it's not somewhere else.

Notice next that almost all of the 25 beautiful things can be seen in Gen 1-2. Peace, love, good leadership, delicious food, beauty, meaning and purpose, rest, health, significant work and fruitfulness, creativity, relationship, safety, plenty, and so forth.

Every day during this account of creation, the text says "God saw that it was good." It's like a refrain of a poem, or a rhythm of a song: boom, boom, boom, boom: God created and it was good. It was good. It was good. Then at the end of day six, God saw that it was very good. It's interesting that creation is called good but not perfect, because perfection would imply something that is ideal and can't be improved upon. So creation is very good but has the potential to get even better if properly managed.

For example, there were no chocolate bar trees or ice cream trees in the garden. God might have created the cacao plant, but humans had to figure out how to make chocolate by cooking the bean, grinding it up, and combining it with milk, sugar, and butter. God might have created milk, but humans had to figure out how to make ice cream by combining milk, cream, and sugar, and churning it while freezing it. These are simple examples of how it's humanity's job to properly develop creation to increase human flourishing.

This creation is truly magnificent. All of the 25 beautiful things are very good because they reflect God's character. We affirm the goodness of the material world.

Think about the things you love to do: it was all there in the garden--except no youtube yet, which was its main deficiency. Some people love to get in the workshop and make things out of wood, or write poetry, or sing music, or go for a walk with loved one, or make beautiful gardens. Those impulses come from the garden of Eden. You were made to rule, to cultivate, to create, to order the stuff of this world. What is it that when you do it, you think, "Man, I could do this forever; this is what I was made for"? Maybe you love to cook. Maybe you love to paint. Maybe you love to play the triangle.

This also has profound implications for our work. Many Christians mistakenly think that work is part of the curse of sin. But work came before sin:

Gen 2:15

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Work is a good thing. It is part of our mandate of ruling over and properly ordering creation.

Of course, the paradise of Gen 1-2 is ruined in chap. 3 with sin and the fall of man, which curses all of creation, so that brokenness is interwoven though all of life. Part of the curse is that our work is now painful and toilsome. However, in spite of this brokenness, creation is still very good. Death, destruction, sin, and curse are temporary intruders; they are not intrinsic to creation. No amount of human sin can erase the good. Even though His image in us has been marred by sin, it's still there, and God's plan is to restore it fully through our salvation in Christ, and restore us as those who rule over this earth as His representatives.

In the OT prophets, we see a vision of a future king and a future kingdom where this harmonious hierarchy will be restored. In the NT, Jesus shows up and says, "I am the king and I am here to establish the kingdom." In this life, we experience only a foretaste of the Kingdom. But there is the promise of the second coming of Christ, where He will fully establish His kingdom, completely vanquishing evil and healing the brokenness of this world.

The fullest description of this future age is found in the last two chapters of the Bible, Rev 21-22. Here are a few highlights from these chapters:

21:1 – [the writer says] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

21:2 – The New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth. Many people think of heaven as a place where we are immaterial, floating around in the clouds, playing harps, utterly bored. That idea is not found anywhere in scripture. It is clear we will be living with God on a renewed earth. We will experience heaven on earth.

21:3 – God's dwelling place is now among the people.

21:5 – God says, "I am making all things new!" Notice that He doesn't say, "I am making all new things", as if the new earth will be completely unrecognizable to us. He's fixing and healing all things so that they are new again.

22:1, 2 – The city has a river and the tree of life, just like the garden of Eden.

22:3 – No longer will there be any curse. [Isn't that beautiful? All of the curse of sin will be done away with. All of our brokenness will be healed. All the wretchedness and pain from Gen 3 to Rev

20 will be vanquished.] The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

22:5 – We will reign for ever and ever.

There are many similarities between the new earth described here and the old earth described in Gen 1-2, but the new earth is even more beautiful and glorious. Most of the 25 beautiful things can be seen in these two final chapters. We are not given much detail about what we'll be doing on the new earth, but Rev 22:3 says we'll serve God, and V 5 says we'll reign forever: serving and reigning. Serving and reigning.

For those taking notes, this slide has more verses that teach we will reign with God in the age to come:

Matt 25:21

Luke 19:17

2 Timothy 2:12

Revelation 3:21

Rev 5:10

In Genesis, the story starts here on earth. In Revelation, the story ends here on earth. The action will be here, not somewhere else. God will be here, dwelling with His people. There's still a physical participation, like in the garden. Serving and reigning on the new earth sounds a lot like God's mandate for humans in the garden of Eden: working, filling, ruling, and subduing. Managing, ordering, and cultivating. You were created to rule as God's representative under His authority and express his righteous reign.

If you were to take away all the chapters in the Bible that have sin and suffering, you'd have a pamphlet, four chapters: the bookends. The Bible starts with a garden, and ends with a city. And what is a city? It's a lot of well-organized gardens. There's a progression, a movement. Creation is dynamic. It's going somewhere. And God is looking for partners to help guide the progress.

So why does this matter for us today in the way we talk about sin and salvation and the big story of the universe? Here's a helpful way of thinking about sin: not only am I breaking God's rules when I sin, but I am disrupting shalom. God intends for the earth to be filled with complete shalom and all of the 25 beautiful things, to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven. But we rebel against the created hierarchy when we want to sit on God's throne and call the shots. And the result is the disruption of shalom: pain, misery, conflict, struggle—and ultimately death.

The Bible teaches that through the gospel all things are reconciled, and shalom is being restored in every dimension of life: We have peace with God, we have peace with each other, we have inner peace in our hearts, and even the creation itself will be set free from the curse of sin.

Genesis 3 is not how the story begins or how the story ends. When we tell the big story of the world, let's not make the mistake of starting with Gen 3. Sin must take its proper place in the big story. This world is so broken, and our pain can be so terrible, that we forget about the bookends of the story. We were created to rule. And God is inviting us to repent from our rebellion and return to our rightful role, to our proper place within the harmonious hierarchy, that we might

guide this earth along a path of increased shalom, as we submit to His righteous reign and spread that reign to the ends of the earth.

So: What story are you believing? Does your story start in Gen 1 or in Gen 3? If your story begins in Gen 3, the main drive of the story is getting rid of sin. If your story begins in Gen 1, the main drive of the story is not just getting rid of sin, but the restoration of shalom and all of the 25 beautiful things.

If the story begins in Gen 3, the main goal is disembodied evacuation. Like: I can't wait to leave this wretched, God-forsaken world behind and go to heaven. The Greek philosopher Plato espoused a dualism that said that the spiritual world is good and the material world is bad, so that our goal in death is for our spirit to leave behind the prison of the body. This dualism is rejected by the NT, which instead teaches a bodily resurrection and restored earth. But Christian thinking is sometimes infected with this sort of dualism anyway. Because this world is so messed up, we can start to think that the material world is bad. The material world isn't the problem. Rebellion against God's authority is the problem.

If the story begins in Gen 1, the main goal is not disembodied evacuation, but proper participation with God under His authority in the ongoing cultivating and overseeing of this world, bringing increased shalom to this world that is our home and that God says is very good. The main goal is stated clearly in the Lord's prayer: God's kingdom coming, and His will done on earth as it is in heaven. And he commissions us to be His partners in this amazingly wonderful endeavor. What could be more satisfying than joining God in extending His righteous reign to the ends of the earth and fulfilling our created purpose of ruling over the earth as God's representative under His authority?

The exciting part is that we don't have to wait for the new earth to carry out this mandate. Through the resurrection of Jesus, a whole new world is bursting forth right in the midst of this one, and everybody everywhere is invited to be a part of it. Something major is going down right here right now. In Jesus' bodily resurrection, God reaffirms the goodness of creation. We are free to enjoy it because it's good. We're free to take part in participatory physicality: ordering and managing and guiding and cultivating creation to the glory of God and the flourishing of all peoples.

If our hope is in evacuation, in the meantime we are just hanging around, helping others prepare to evacuate also. But that's not the hope described in the Bible: we have hope rooted not in escape but in restoration, not in evacuation but in reclamation, not in leaving but in healing and seeing God's kingdom come. You were created to rule.