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PILGRIM'S WAY

*Journeying through the year with the Bible*

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is clearly intended to be read through the year, one day at a time. For the reader who does this faithfully, there are big rewards! For one thing, they will follow themes from the Bible for each month of the year. For another, due regard is paid to the changing seasons, and—as far as possible—the great festivals of the Christian calendar. But for those who can't, there is still the opportunity to read my personal selection of what we might impolitely call the Bible's 'best bits', not as tiny nuggets but in passages of reasonable length, with some comments about the background and context. Each reading ends with a short 'thought for the day', a reflection on its relevance to the present-day reader.

The scriptures exist, Paul tells us, to teach, reprove, correct and train us in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). They tell what we might call the 'story of God', but it is a story which is meant to change us. From first to last the Bible is a book to enrich the spirit, to introduce us to the truly good life and to draw us closer to God. My hope is that as you read it through the year, each day something of that life-giving process will be at work for you.

## January: All things new

*January is the month of new beginnings, and so our readings pick up a theme that is constant throughout the Bible. God, who created everything at the beginning, is also constantly at work renewing his creation.*

1 January

## THE FIRST DAY

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.*

GENESIS 1:1–3 (KJV)

We're all interested in 'beginnings'. 'Where did I come from?' the child asks. The cosmologist wrestles with the question of how the universe came into being. Here, in words of stark simplicity and poetic restraint, is the answer of the Bible. Before anything, there was God, and God alone is the source and origin of everything that exists.

There is significance in the choice of the verb 'create', because the author could have chosen another Hebrew word, such as 'make' or 'form', to describe what God did. A 'maker' takes what already exists and shapes it into an object. A carpenter, for instance, takes wood and glue and perhaps some nails or screws, and 'makes' a chair. But a creator starts from nothing. Before Beethoven wrote down the first chords of his seventh symphony, it didn't exist at all. Until then, there were only six of his symphonies! But from himself, out of his own will and imagination and genius, that great work was 'created'.

These verses are describing an act of creation of that kind, though infinitely greater, of course. Out of his own will, imagination and genius, God created the universe. The verses offer no arguments for his existence; they simply take it for granted. Into a formless 'void'—the Hebrew word means something like 'empty waste'—the Creator spoke, and the light of creation shone. Matter, time, space and all the endless possibilities of physical and spiritual life flow from that single creative act.

*We now know, as the ancient Hebrews could not have done, the immensity of the creation. Far from being a problem for the believer, surely that is a stimulus to wonder and praise. The greater the work, the greater its Creator.*

2 January

## THE FIRST PEOPLE

*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'*

GENESIS 1:26–28 (abridged)

During the first five 'days' of creation God has brought into being the universe, the earth, and then plants, birds and animals. Now, on the sixth day, the language changes. Until now the command has simply been, 'Let there be...'—a kind of remote control of events. Now, however, as though to signal a change of emphasis, God commands in a more personal and involved way: 'Let us make...' We feel that the Creator himself is now deeply and even emotionally involved.

The next act of creation is human beings, made 'in [God's] image' and 'according to our likeness'. Nothing like this had been said about the material or animal creation, but now, in a particular way, God is bringing into being a creature who shares something of his own nature and likeness. This doesn't, of course, imply that human beings are 'God-like' in their status or character—far from it. But it does suggest that humankind has a different relationship to God from that of the rest of the creation. People share his self-conscious existence. They can have a relationship with him. And one day, in the fullness of time, a human being would be born who would show the world what its Creator is like.

*The first thing to know about ourselves is that we are creatures, not cosmic accidents. The second is that, however inadequately, we mirror the nature of God. The third is that privilege involves responsibility. We may have 'dominion' over the earth and its living creatures but we shall answer to the Creator for their misuse.*

3 January

## THE GARDEN OF EDEN

*And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east... Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'*

GENESIS 2:8–9, 15–17 (abridged)

In the Genesis story, the man (as yet there is no woman) is given a garden as his home—Eden. It is a place of perfection, full of trees 'pleasant to the sight and good for food'. The man is also given congenial work to do, tilling and maintaining the garden.

It seems, at first sight, a place of total contentment. We can visualize Adam the gardener whistling as he works, pausing only to help himself to a ripe fruit from the trees. His freedom to enjoy the garden is total—apart from one deceptively simple command. He may eat of every tree in the garden, except for 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. If he were to eat the fruit of that tree, he is warned, he will die.

To eat of the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil' would mean the man had usurped the unique knowledge of God. He had been created in innocence, totally unaware of evil in any form. Only God (who had declared his whole creation to be 'good') knew that what had been created good could be infected with evil. Better by far, then, for the man to stay in what we might call blissful ignorance, simply enjoying the garden and being contented with his lot. In God's good time he will learn wisdom—but there are no short cuts to it.

*Contentment is one of the most elusive virtues, and even though Eden sounds very pleasant, the man foolishly wanted more.*

4 January

## THE CREATION OF EVE

*Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.'*

GENESIS 2:18, 21–23

This is not, of course, a biological or anatomical explanation of the development of human gender! Rather, it is an exploration of its meaning and significance. Without woman, man is incomplete. Surrounded by natural beauty, animals and birds, trees and fruit, there is an emptiness in his heart. 'It is not good that the man should be alone', says God. It would be equally true, we may suppose, that without man woman is incomplete. The whole thrust of this narrative is that the two human genders are two parts of a whole: 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'. Because man and woman are complementary, they can become—in what we now call marriage—'one flesh' (v. 24). It is a high view of the relationship of the sexes, one endorsed by Jesus himself (Matthew 19:6).

Later we learn the woman's name, 'Eve', which resembles the Hebrew word for 'living'. So Adam's partner is seen from the start as a bearer of life. Here is responsibility indeed.

The man was given 'a helper as his partner', not a 'helpmeet' as the old translation has it. Women were not created to be a kind of subordinate species to their male overlords. Marriage is a joint enterprise, not a solo performance with an assistant.

*Now, surely, the first humans will be happy and contented. Their environment is perfect. They are surrounded by rich beauty and abundant food. And now, at last, there is also the fulfilling joy of an innocent, loving relationship.*

5 January

## REBELLION IN THE GARDEN

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, '... God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said... 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it... you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that... the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.*

GENESIS 3:1-6 (abridged)

Eve and the apple—everyone knows the story, or thinks they do. Perhaps as a result, it tends to get trivialized. There's the talking serpent (always good for a laugh), and gullible Eve, and Adam, unable to resist the suggestion of his beautiful wife. And later on there's Adam and Eve hiding from God in the bushes, ashamed of what they'd done. It is all too easy to see it as a comedy. Yet the writer wanted to tell a tale of the ultimate tragedy. He intended to answer the most difficult of all questions: how did evil come into a world created by a good God?

Most of us can easily understand Adam and Eve's fascination with the one forbidden tree. What did it mean that it represented 'the knowledge of good and evil'? Wasn't knowledge a good thing? And, for that matter, what was evil? The very concept was foreign to them. With those questions in mind, the dialogue between the serpent and the woman sounds remarkably like the normal pattern of what we call 'temptation'; the very questions that she and Adam may have secretly asked about God's commandment took persuasive shape.

They were made in the image of God. They weren't moral robots. He wanted their freely given love and obedience. Tragically, because they thought they knew better than their Creator, he didn't get it.

*Is that the heart of all sin—thinking that we know better than God?*