Understanding Our Times: A Question of Worldviews

Genesis 1-3

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This time of year we usually do the *Time, Talent, Treasure* series and we're doing that a little differently this year. I'm kind of putting it all under the umbrella of *Understanding our Times*. So the idea is we need to understand the times in which we live in order that talent would be used in order to wisely and effectively carry out our mission. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and he said, "You need to be wise, understanding the times..." Why? "...because the days are evil." Jesus said He sent out His disciples as sheep among the wolves. He said, "You need to be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves," reminding us that we have a very difficult assignment. I think a good place to start is to remind ourselves as the church that the goal is not to be popular; the goal is to be faithful. Once you start thinking the goal is for the culture to like me, to accept me, to be popular; you're bound to head down a wrong path. The goal is to be faithful. Many of us are aware of John 3:16. It's one of the most familiar verses in the Bible; but we're not so familiar with the verses that follow.

> **"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."** (*NASB, John 3:16)

But a couple of verses after that, we're reminded that we, as Christians, are the light and Jesus said:

> **"For everyone who does evil hates the light,** (hates the light!) **and does not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."** (Vs. 20)

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, "They persecuted Me; they will persecute you. They hated Me; they will hate you. Blessed are those who are insulted and had lies told about them in the name of Jesus." There is a reminder that this is a difficult assignment. There was a time, I think in American culture, where kind of pop culture and Christianity meshed in some way, and it would be easy as that's changed to lose sight of the fact that the goal is not to be popular. The goal is to be faithful. Some of you, simply by living out your Christian values, simply by your life of character and integrity, your ethics, will cause people around you in the marketplace, at school, in your neighborhood, maybe even in your own home, to dislike you, to reject you because people in the darkness ...**hate the light**. It's hard for me to imagine that Jesus or the disciples or the Apostle Paul would have been terribly concerned about how they rated in an opinion poll. We know how they rated. The contemporary culture of their day hated them and virtually put all of them to death. So we're reminded there is a difference between being popular and being faithful.

The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, said that, "The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." He says, "The cross is a stumbling block; it's a point of offense to those who don't believe." Now that makes for a difficult assignment. Our calling is to be faithful as a steward of the gospel, which is going to offend people. But what makes it more difficult is more and more we, as a culture, are moving down a path where people believe they actually have a *right* to not be offended.

Paul Helm, scholar and philosopher, wrote an article clear back in 2006 describing this movement down this path where people now not only are offended, but people actually believe they have a

right to *not* be offended. I think it flows out of a culture that has become secularized. Therefore my belief that I can be my own god; I can decide what's right and wrong; I can decide what's good and evil, and a natural outflow of that is then I believe I have the right to not be offended. And at first glance it may seem like that's going to create a culture that's a utopia—no one being offended. But Paul Helm goes down the path and says that, actually, it creates the exact opposite. Once you reach that point where people believe they have the right to not be offended, then those in power will write the acceptable script, and anyone who speaks outside the approved script will be oppressed and will be silenced. It will end in a government of oppression. I think we already see signs that we are headed down that path.

One of the challenges then is: how do we remain faithful, to be stewards of a message that is offensive? It's not that the Christian should be offensive, but the message is offensive in a culture that now believes we have the right to not be offended. When we feel that tension, there is a temptation to begin to edit the message in order to make the message more acceptable, more palatable, and so we begin to change the gospel. Paul reminds us in Galatians that when it becomes a different gospel, it is actually no gospel at all.

In order for the gospel of Jesus Christ to make sense, there must be a strong, healthy doctrine of sin. There has to be! When we diminish and dismiss the reality of sin, we diminish and dismiss the need for a Savior. If sin is no big deal, why was it necessary for the God of the universe to die on a cross? The only way our gospel makes sense is if we have a strong, healthy doctrine of sin; therefore we need a Savior.

As Christians formulating a Christian worldview, it has to include this: First of all we believe that there is a God, and God, by definition, is absolute. Out of the character of God flows, then, moral absolutes. Anyone, then, who violates God's moral absolute is guilty of sin before a holy and just God, and because God is a God of justice and righteousness, sin must be punished—therefore a need for a Savior. That is our core worldview theology as a Christian. I think when we feel this tension that is certainly there in the culture, there is a temptation to swing to one of two extremes. There are those who, in order to make Jesus more acceptable, begin to compromise truth, and then there are those who react to that—and I would suggest over react to that—and create a swing the other direction. Neither extreme is helpful in accomplishing the mission.

Now in order to kind of talk this through and make sense of it, we could stay in general terms and, frankly, that would be the safest route. But in order to actually make sense of it in the most practical of terms, I think it's helpful to pick an issue as an illustration and work our way through it both this week and next week. Now there are a lot of issues we could talk about. We could talk about racial unrest, which has been a big deal over the last year. We could talk about abortion which has been really in the news this summer. We could talk about our selfish greed as a nation. If you were to ask me personally which issue do I think will ultimately destroy us as a nation, I would say it's our selfish greed. But the topic I'm going to delicately wade through is the topic of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. That is a very relevant and confused topic in our culture. I'm fully aware of the fact that it is entirely possible between this weekend and next weekend that I could upset every single person in the auditorium. That is not my intent but it is certainly within the realm of possibility.

Here's what I ask of you. This topic has become so emotionally charged that, sadly, even Christians can't sit down and have a meaningful, productive conversation on this issue. It immediately becomes so emotionally charged that we just say hurtful things. So here's what I'm asking. Would you just give me a chance? It requires both this weekend and next weekend to work through this

and not get so emotionally charged that you shut me down. But just at least be willing to give me a fair listen and then we'll go from there.

So back to our idea of these extremes: There are well-meaning, well-intended Christians, who in order to make Jesus more acceptable, begin to compromise. And so again, you have a group of well-intended, well-meaning Christians react to that—and what I would suggest is often *over react* to that. What happens then is we go into defense mode. We dig our heels in and we begin to build our fortress. These are our roots as fundamentalism—reacting to the liberalism of the day and beginning to then define ourselves, not on the basis of what we're for, but on the basis of what we're against. We go into defense mode, and we start to think that the mission of the church is to stand our ground on issues that, "This is really what it means to be a faithful church, and we will take our stand." And we begin to divide the world up between *us* and *them*. As soon as you've made that distinction, it causes all kinds of problems to fulfilling our mission.

First of all we forget that the only difference between us and them is the grace of God. We're all sinners in need of a Savior, so the distinction is really kind of made up. Beyond that, when we start thinking *us* versus *them*, we forget that the "them" are people Jesus loves and died for. These are people that deeply matter to Jesus. We end up creating a fortress separating ourselves from and attacking the very people that Jesus would be pursuing. Jesus would never put an issue ahead of people. He was very clear. "I have come to seek and to save those who are lost." The first century Roman culture had all kinds of issues. Read the Gospels. Jesus wasn't about issues; He was about people—because that's why He came. Once we go into defense mode, once we convince ourselves that the mission of the church is to take our stand on issues and that's what it means to be faithful, what happens is we put issues before people. And as long as we have issues before people, as long as issues to us are more important than people, we are never going to fulfill our assignment to be stewards of the gospel. Some might say, "Well, don't the issues matter?" Of course they matter, but you don't change people by standing on issues. You change issues by reaching people.

So I'm going to give you a little test. Nobody else needs to know how you answer this. All I ask is you be honest in your heart of hearts. So be honest! Were you more upset and bothered by the Supreme Court decision approving same-sex marriage than you are about the fact that there are homosexuals in our community dying without ever knowing Jesus? Let me repeat. Were you more upset, more bothered by the Supreme Court decision approving same-sex marriage than you are about the fact that there are homosexuals in our community dying without ever knowing Jesus? If you were, you've lost your way. You have lost sight of the heartbeat of Jesus. There is no way, no way Jesus would be more concerned about an issue than He would be about the eternal destination of people He died for. If that describes you, you need to find the balance again that should rightly define a Christ follower.

Then what about those on the other swing—the other extreme? Again, I think well-intended Christians who are perhaps more guided by their feelings than by a thorough study of the Scriptures, —and perhaps are far more affected than they realize by a culture that believes I have the right not to be offended—believe that in order for the gospel to be relevant, Jesus needs a make-over. We have to begin to edit and change the message to make it more acceptable, more palatable to people in our culture. For some reason it's not enough that the God of the universe became a man, suffered and died on a cross for the sins of the world. Somehow that's not enough! We have to remake Jesus to make Him more likeable and more acceptable in contemporary culture, to the degree that we are actually willing to accept and even celebrate that which is clearly offensive to God.
It's easy to explain this under the umbrella of God's love, but it is not loving to fail to be truthful to people headed down a path of disappointment and disillusionment. Jesus couldn't have been more

clear: "If you love Me, you will obey Me. If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. The great commission is to go and make disciples, teaching them to *obey everything that I have commanded*." If you want to be into religion and you want to include Jesus and you kind of want to make up your own thing, that's up to you, but if you're going to be a serious Christ follower, you have to be serious about God's Word. We love to look at the picture of Jesus sitting and eating with sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors. I love that imagery; it is powerful! But we have to understand the only thing that makes that imagery powerful is there is a clear acknowledgment they were indeed sinners. That's what makes the imagery powerful. They were clearly sinners—offensive to God—yet the God of the universe who had become flesh, with grace and mercy and kindness and love pursued them, that they might know His salvation.

I know there's going to be those who say, "Well, I just don't think the Bible's that clear on that subject. You know, there are Christians that disagree and this is a gray area, and the Bible's just not that clear." This reminds me of those things that people say—that if you say it often enough, people will believe it as true. I'll give you an example of that. I bump into people all the time who say, "The reason I can't believe the Bible is it's so full of contradictions and errors." It's one of those things that if it just gets said often enough, everybody believes it. Whenever somebody says that, I say to them, "You know that's interesting. I've spent my entire adult life studying the Bible. I've never found one of those. Would you show me one?" I have never once had somebody show me one. What almost everyone says is, "Actually, I've never read the Bible." It's just one of those things if you hear it often enough, you believe it is true.

There are so many people today saying that the Bible isn't clear on the topic of homosexuality, that people eventually believe that's true. I'm here to tell you that is *not* true—it just is not true! I'd be the first one to say that there are areas of the Bible that are confusing, things that are hard to understand, things that we need to take with a great degree of humility because the Bible's not really that clear. This subject is not one of them. From Genesis to Revelation, I believe the Bible is very clear. I want to unpack this more next week, but I will say this: I do not believe it is a sin to have a same-sex attraction. I don't believe people can control that anymore than I can just conjure up an attraction to another man. But I do believe the sin is in choosing to act on that attraction and engage in a sexual relationship outside of God's purpose and intent and boundary. Again, it's not helpful if people swing to one extreme or the other, but rather to find the middle ground to be effective in accomplishing our mission.

I would suggest to you that all those issues and many more are merely symptoms of a core problem. I would go so far as to say I think we as a church make a huge mistake when we fixate on the symptoms and fail to have the conversation that really matters. Think about this in the world of health. So take someone like me for example: When I have heart problems, it shows up in symptoms. There's fatigue. There's joint pain. There's shortness of breath. If I went to a cardiologist and he fixated on my symptoms, I would be dead today. But as a good doctor would do, he traces the symptoms back to the problem, and what has to change is the core problem. As a church, we make a mistake by fixating on the symptoms and not getting to the core.

So if you have a Bible turn with us to Genesis, Chapter 1. I realize that is a really long introduction and for those who are right now panicking, (laughter) the introduction is longer than the rest of the sermon. But I do want to highlight a few things here in Genesis 1. First of all, often around this topic I hear people talk about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and they're kind of looking for things in the Gospels, but it's almost as if we lock Jesus into four books and that's all. We fail to realize actually it is the Spirit of Jesus that inspires the Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. It's all Jesus! Don't just lock Him into four books of the New Testament. We also know, for a fact, that the Elohim God

of Genesis, chapter 1, is Jesus pre-incarnate. It tells that in Colossians 1. It tells us that in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, that this is Jesus before He became a man. So it's important to remember that. Everything that we read in Genesis, they are the words of Jesus. I want to pick it up then in verse 26:

> **Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;** (Vs.26a)

And then down to verse 27:

> **And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; 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;** (Vs. 27-28a)

In order to have a Christian worldview, there has to be an acknowledgement of God as the Creator. If you want to believe we are here by random time and chance, then I suppose you're free to make up whatever you want, but a Christian worldview requires a belief in a Creator God. Now we may, as Christians, have different ideas about exactly how that played out. Was it six literal days or was it something other than that? And I think there's room for disagreement, but we all come together and say, "But there is a Creator; therefore there is design and purpose to what God has made." So you have three phrases in verse 27. The Hebrew puts the point of emphasis at the front of each of those three phrases. So the first one is that **God created**, which means there is design and purpose to what God has made. The second is: ...**in the image of God, God created**" which is emphasis on the image—that we have the ability and the responsibility to image God to the world—to represent, to picture God to the world. How is that going to be accomplished? At least in part, the third phrase: **...male and female in the image of God**. So God is saying that this imaging is going to play out somehow through our sexuality, that God has made us male and female and it has something to do with the imaging of God on earth.

So the very first command of the Bible is, "Have sex!" For those who think God's a prude, that we as contemporary culture have discovered sex and pleasure, and God is so embarrassed by all of this, Page 1—first command: "**Be fruitful and multiply**". It's just a little bit more delicate way of saying it. Now this is very important to understand: God could have created the reproduction cycle any way He wanted. He could have made it possible that all you have to do is pour water on a rock and it turns into a baby. He could have done it any way He wanted. So you have to wrestle with the design and the purpose behind the design. All you have to do is look at the design of a man and a woman and there is clarity that they were meant to fit together. There is this theology that will go throughout the Bible that marriage is meant to be this beautiful picture, this imaging of a love relationship between God and His people—New Testament Christ and His church—with the man representing God and the woman representing the church or the people of God. There is this beautiful picture that they come together and produce life, which is a picture of when we come into this beautiful love relationship with Christ, we find life.

Virtually every organ that I possess as a human, functions independent of another person, except one, and that is my sexual reproductive organ. It can only function as God intended with another person. It cannot function with another man nor will it work with two women together. It only works to produce life—one man, one woman. Now again you have to wrestle with the reality: that is God's purpose and design. God made it that way for a reason. This is a reminder that the definition of marriage is filled with so much deep, rich, soul-satisfying theology that has to do with this beautiful relationship with God. To reduce marriage down to nothing more than two people love each other, nothing more than two people having sex with one another, is to so dilute and

diminish the definition of marriage that it almost becomes meaningless. You have to wrestle with God's purpose and design clearly in marriage. Chapter 2, verse 7:

> **Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food;** (Gen. 2:7-9a)

I just want to talk about that for a minute there. Man is created—Adam is created—placed in a garden that God Himself names Paradise. The name **Eden** means Paradise. So understand that God is all about pleasure. As a matter of fact, the trees are described as being *pleasurable*, both to eat from and to look at. To understand that God is the author of pleasure, that we are actually created for pleasure—the psalmist says that our future hope is that in God we experience pleasure forevermore. But it has to be done God's way—to understand this is the essence of our salvation. For all eternity God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit dwelt in a soul-satisfying, deeply pleasurable relationship—not sexual, but pleasurable relationship. That is the essence of eternal life; it's what defined God forever.

The invitation of salvation is inviting us into the dance, inviting us into the life to experience the deep, soul-satisfying relationship that our souls long for. It's literally what we were created for! This is the essence of worship. If your view of worship is that God is an egomaniac and that God can do whatever He wants to you and you just have to put up with it, and you're expected to crawl back on your hands and knees and worship Him 'cause God has this massive ego, you have a really warped view of God. Rather the essence of worship is God knowing that you were made for pleasure, and the deepest, most soul-satisfying pleasure is found in a deeply, meaningful relationship with God. Worship is the invitation to come and satisfy your soul with the deepest pleasure imaginable. We get glimpses of that, tastes of that in this life with the promise of pleasure forevermore in the world to come.

Therefore, when I sit down with my homosexual friend, I realize it is not a loving thing to do, to encourage him to continue down that path that I know will disappoint and disillusion him, and it will never fulfill the longing that he has deep in his soul. Sometimes the most loving thing I can do for my friends is to have the courage to tell them the truth. I don't want less for them. I want *more*. I know deep in his soul he is longing for something that will finally satisfy that aching in his soul. But I know, ultimately, what he is longing for is a deep, meaningful relationship with God that will finally, for the first time in his life, satisfy the longing, thirsty soul deep within him. But for that to happen, it must be done God's way. Chapter 2 goes on; I want to pick it up in verse 18:

> **Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."** (Then skip down to verse 21) **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 the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.** (Vs. 18, 21-25)

Again, you have to wrestle with the design of the Creator. God created Adam and Eve differently. God could have easily created a thousand people and just said, "Hey, date around a little bit; find someone you like." He didn't do that. He could have also created Adam and Eve—Boom—at one moment exactly the same. He didn't do that. He created Adam out of the dust of the ground; and then in a very dramatic fashion, He created Eve out of Adam. Why? Because the man pictures God in the relationship. Just as we were created out of God, you have the man and out of the man is the woman. So you have this picture: the man represents God and we, His people, are created out of God, in His image. Even the name, **Woman**, means out of the man. In order to experience a life-long one-flesh relationship, which is the sexual relationship, and the end description is ...**they were naked and there was no shame**. It's beautiful, according to the plan and purpose of the designer. Chapter 3:

> **Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?"** (Gen. 3:1)

That phrase beginning **"Indeed...**" in the Hebrew is just virtually impossible to translate into English. Basically it carries the idea that there is a questioning of the goodness of God. This is always where temptation starts. "Maybe God's not as good as He says He is," and, "Maybe God can't be trusted." At the core of all of our temptations is the wrestling with, "Is God good or not? Can I trust Him or not?" The serpent then launches into this absolutely ridiculous lie that God has said you can't eat from any tree in the garden. I don't believe the serpent thought for a moment that Eve would buy that lie. It was just ridiculous. What I do think the serpent was thinking is: if I can take Eve out ten steps, maybe she'll only return nine steps and that means one step in the right direction, or in this case—the wrong direction. So Eve responds:

> **The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.' "** **(Vs. 2-3)**

At first we say, "Oh good job, Eve!" It seems like she's responding fairly well. But upon closer analysis, Eve actually missed it in many places. "**So the woman said to the serpent, from the fruit of the trees."** Go back and look: God said "**any tree**". She left out "any tree". "**You may eat..."** Go back and look. God said, "**You may <u>freely</u> eat**. **But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden,"** God has said, **"You shall not eat from it or touch it**." Go back and look. God didn't say anything about touching it. We consider Eve to be the first legalist. *(laughter)* She's already adding rules! And then Eve says, "**You shall die**." Go back and look. God says, "**You will <u>surely</u> die.**" In other words Eve has minimized the consequences, and she's created a context where God seems less generous and more restrictive. I would suggest she went out ten steps, but she only came back nine, which is the beginning of the fall.

> **The serpent said to the woman "You surely will not die!** (I mean, come on; God didn't mean that!) **For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,** (how?) **knowing good and evil."** (Vs. 4-5)

This is what I think the Bible refers to as *The Temptation.* Go to passages such as James, chapter 1. It doesn't talk about just temptation; it talks about *the* temptation, and this is what it's referring to. At the end of the day, every single temptation comes down to one core issue and that is the *temptation*: whether or not you're willing to submit to God as God, and believe that God is good and generous and gracious and I find my life in God, *or* I will practically function as my own god,

because I believe life will be better with me in charge. There's really no middle ground there. You either submit and surrender to God as God and all that that means, or you practically function as your own god—specifically in the text that I have the right to say what's right and wrong; I have the right to say what's good and evil. I will decide what the rules are. Well, we know where the story goes. Adam and Eve sin and create a mess and we'll kind of pick up the story there next week.

It's important to understand that, at the end of the day, issues are symptoms of a deeper problem and you don't fix the deeper problem by fixating on the issues. To be effective stewards of the gospel, the core issue is whether or not someone is willing to surrender to God as God and all that that means, or whether someone is going to say, "I will be my own god. I will say what's right and wrong. I will say what's good and evil. I will run my own life." At the end of the day, that is the core issue, and that's where the conversation needs to happen—that people would understand that God has offered salvation freely, that they might experience the pleasure that their souls long for forevermore.

As I said before, if you want to play religion, and if you want to throw Jesus in there and just kind of do your own thing, that's up to you. But if you're going to be serious as a Christ follower, you have to be serious about God's Word. We remember these words from Matthew, chapter 16:

> **Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"** (Matt. 16:24-26)

Jesus could not have been more clear: "If you love Me, you will obey Me. If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." The assignment is to make disciples, teaching them to obey everything that God has commanded!

> *Our Father, we're thankful that when we were lost and desperate in our sin, You sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. God, it's a sobering thing to realize we have been made stewards of that message, not to change it, not to soften it, but to be faithful, that those around us might come to know life found in Jesus both now and forever. God, give us the courage to be faithful. Amen.*

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