

FREEDOM *to* FLOURISH

The Rest God Offers
in the Purpose He Gives You

ELIZABETH GARN



Elizabeth has given us both a commentary and a devotional on Genesis 1–3. Though this may be familiar territory for some, readers will be truly inspired as she takes us deeper into these chapters than most of us have gone before. I hope many groups will study this together and be inspired in community to live out their gifts in the image of God.

—**Wendy Alsup**, Author, *Companions in Suffering: Comfort for Times of Loss and Loneliness*

Sometimes, you really do need to back up and start at the very beginning. Sometimes, knowing who you are begins with remembering *whose* you are. In *Freedom to Flourish*, Garn calls us to remember that the joy and fulfillment we seek cannot be uncoupled from our calling as God’s image bearers. Offering readers a better story than traditionalist gender tropes or the try-harder-do-better mantras of secularism, she invites us into true freedom—the freedom of becoming our truest selves through Christ.

—**Hannah Anderson**, Author, *Made for More: An Invitation to Live in God’s Image*

It’s not every day that you read a book and sense God causing your heart to feel simultaneously rested *and* stirred toward loving action. This is the twofold impact of *Freedom to Flourish*: Elizabeth Garn has taken a careful look at Genesis 1–3 and in these pages shares the fruit of long hours spent gazing at Christ and what it means for us to be image bearers of God through him. If you’re tired, bent down under shame, or just plain confused about what it means to be a faithful Christian woman, read this book and allow God to draw you closer to himself, then compel you outward . . . to flourish and rest through life as a loved image bearer.

—**Ellen Mary Dykas**, Women’s Ministry Director, Harvest USA

Who am I? This is one of life's most important questions. For many women, including myself, the answers we've heard have only left us confused, unanchored, and empty. In *Freedom to Flourish*, Elizabeth Garn takes us through Genesis 1–3 and shows us the glorious purpose for which we were created. Sisters, read this book with joy as you receive the gift of purpose, crafted for you by the Maker himself.

—**Christina Fox**, Counselor; Writer; Retreat Speaker; Author, *A Holy Fear: Trading Lesser Fears for the Fear of the Lord*

Elizabeth Garn's wise, careful exposition of Genesis 1–3 leads us to see the story of creation with new eyes. Her lively, well-organized prose provides fresh insights about what it means to be an image bearer; how sin destroys but God binds up and restores; and how God calls us to join him in his work of redemption and community. *Freedom to Flourish* is infused with grace and the soul-rest that our creative, redeeming, restoring God provides.

—**Maria Garriott**, Author, *A Thousand Resurrections: An Urban Spiritual Journey*

In a world where self-determination and independence are the air we breathe, *Freedom to Flourish* is a life-giving invitation to be rather than do. Its pages bring a fresh perspective of what it looks like for women to thrive in their creation design.

—**Karen Hodge**, Coordinator of Women's Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America (PCA); Author, *Transformed: Life-Taker to Life-Giver* and *Life-Giving Leadership*

Like an excellent optician, Elizabeth Garn accurately calibrates our vision so that we can more clearly see what it means for Christian women to be image bearers of God, who is our Creator and Redeemer. Centering both our identity and our purpose in this clarified reality, Garn enthusiastically calls Christian women

to renewed engagement in a life that wholeheartedly promotes flourishing in the world around us.

—**Stephanie O. Hubach**, Research Fellow in Disability Ministries, Covenant Theological Seminary

So many books for Christian women focus on the roles we inhabit. While that can be helpful for navigating the complexities of life, what happens when we no longer inhabit that role? What does the Bible say to me if I'm single or no longer married? Who am I if I am not a mother or I find myself an empty nester? Though roles shift and change over time, our identity is secure. Are we preparing women to think outside these roles and embrace a calling that moves beyond what fills our day-to-day life? Elizabeth Garn does an excellent job of reminding us of what we were created for. She encourages our hearts with the truth that God has called us to be his image bearers, to fill the earth with his glory as imitators of our great God. We were made to create, restore, and rescue. What a high calling! I truly appreciate Elizabeth's care for all women in every age and stage of life. She speaks with compassion and teaches our hearts to embrace the One who created us in his image and likeness for his great purposes.

—**Abby Ross Hutto**, Director of Spiritual Formation, Story Presbyterian Church, Westerville, Ohio; Author, *God For Us: Discovering the Heart of the Father through the Life of the Son*

Freedom to Flourish is a breath of fresh air for any woman who feels exhausted from the try-harder-do-more pressures of life. Elizabeth Garn carefully explores the first three chapters of Genesis and unpacks the good news of what they reveal about our identity and purpose. Writing with biblical wisdom and insight, Garn warmly invites women to rest in God as they faithfully fulfill their calling.

—**Melissa Kruger**, Author; Director of Women's Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition

Genesis 1–2 is often described like a symphony, and reading this book is like sitting next to a friend who understands the piece and points out how each note sings of God’s grace and love, personally inviting you to enter the music at a life-changing level! In these pages, Elizabeth honestly shares from her own struggles and invites us to reconsider our calling as image bearers, lovingly exposing misconceptions and constraints so that we are freed to glory in who the Lord is and to embrace our purpose to reflect him in the world.

—**Meaghan May**, Women’s Ministry Regional Advisor for the Northeast, PCA Discipleship Ministries; Trainer and Local Network Leader, Parakaleo

Freedom to Flourish is a must-read for men who love Jesus, the Bible, and the church. Elizabeth Garn makes a compelling, fair, in-depth biblical case for what it means to bear God’s image and the implications and emancipations that image bearing ought to bring to our daily lives. This book gives men an opportunity to listen in, respectfully, and to learn and to grow in empathy for many seldom-discussed struggles commonly experienced by half of the body of Christ. These pages contain insight and biblical exposition that men as well as women in the church would do well to study, discuss, and absorb.

—**Paul May**, Church Planter and Senior Pastor, King’s Cross Church, Ashburn, Virginia

Through a faithful and challenging interpretation of Genesis 1–3, Elizabeth Garn offers an insightful and hope-giving understanding of God’s design for human flourishing, the effects of sin, and the restoration offered in the gospel. Both men and women will be instructed and edified by *Freedom to Flourish*.

—**Eric Schumacher**, Coauthor, *Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women*; Cohost, *Worthy* podcast with Elyse Fitzpatrick

Have you ever felt worn out or confused about what it looks like to be a “woman of God”? If so, you will welcome the gospel-rich refreshment and sound theology of Elizabeth Garn’s *Freedom to Flourish*. Join Elizabeth in discovering God’s delight in you as his beloved creation. Rest in the sure hope she shares: even though you may still struggle with sin, you have been restored in Christ, and he is making you more loving and more lovely every day. Pick up this book, and discover your freedom to flourish in God’s design.

—**Elizabeth Reynolds Turnage**, Bible Teacher; Gospel Coach;
Author, *From Recovery to Restoration: 60 Meditations for Finding Peace and Hope in Crisis*

Elizabeth Garn provides a compassionate and winsome voice for those struggling with their calling as Christian women. Her focus on the image of God as a truly holistic call is a welcome antidote to voices and assumptions that seek to shrink its scope. She rightfully insists that women as well as men are made in God’s likeness to serve him and their neighbors in all sorts of ways. And best of all, she reminds readers repeatedly that their worth in God’s sight does not come from their own efforts but as a gift from him, who bestows on us all the privilege of imaging our Creator.

—**David VanDrunen**, Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, Westminster Seminary California

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To my husband, Steve.
There is no one else I would rather walk through this life with.
Thank you for loving me well and living the
image of God in my life.

And to my children.
You are a constant source of encouragement and enthusiasm,
and I thank God every day that he let me be your mom!

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INTRODUCTION

A woman of God is . . .

. . . calm and quiet. She speaks with wisdom and faithfulness. She is gentle. Kind. Meek. She doesn't gossip, doesn't quarrel. . . She pretty much doesn't speak at all . . .

The words came, unbidden, forming a list that echoed through my mind.

. . . she is pure and chaste. She is never tempted. She doesn't sin. She doesn't think about sex. Doesn't want it. Would never have it. Until she's married. Then . . . she keeps her husband satisfied, loves sex, and pretty much wants it all the time.

She is married. She cares for her husband. She cares for the house. She does the laundry, the dishes; she cooks, she cleans, she has a career, and she stays home. She studies her Bible every day . . . every morning . . . every night. She sort-of never even goes to bed.

Each word, each contradiction, brought fresh condemnation to my heart, but try as I might, I couldn't make them stop.

She is a mother. She loves her children, is never annoyed by them, never wants time away from them, and gives thanks every time she hears, "Mommy . . . Mommy . . . Mommy . . . Mommy . . ." She home-schools. She private schools. She public schools. She formula feeds. She

breastfeeds. She cooks organic. She grows organic. She wears organic. . . . Is that even a thing?

She does it all. She is practically perfect in every way, and she's probably writing a blog about it too . . .

And that's when I started crying in earnest.

I sat on my bed, crumpled over, a mess of tears and mascara. All the things I was supposed to do to be a godly woman ran through my head with the thundering, repetitive crash of a sledgehammer on drywall. The force of the words ripped at my heart and tore away my hopes of ever being a "real" woman of God. They left me a shell of crumbling two-by-fours and destroyed plaster cleverly disguised as a young woman, a new wife.

I was in college when I got married. We had the overwhelming support of our parents and pastors, but our friends were shocked. I was still a student; why would I want to add "wife" to the mix? Why would I even want to try? But Steve and I were best friends and madly in love and couldn't think of any good reasons to wait any longer to start our lives together. I had all these picture-perfect ideas about the kind of marriage we would have and the type of wife I was going to be: the kind of wife good Christian women were *supposed* to be. I was going to do everything good Christian women did and would prove that I could handle this! Because I could. I knew that if I worked hard enough, I could do it.

As soon as I said, "I do," I started *doing* everything I thought I should do to be a good Christian woman. I got up early and went to bed late. I cooked three meals a day. I read my Bible. I cleaned. I did the laundry. I finished my degree, spent time with my new husband, led Bible studies, volunteered at church . . . and then I cried. Which is saying a lot for me. In all the years Steve and I dated, he had seen me cry only one other time. I'm not a crier. I'm a doer. After all, there's no time for emotions when your goal is to be a Proverbs 31 woman! At least, that's what I thought.

It took one year. One year into our marriage and I was ready

to give up, throw in the towel, and go to bed. Oh no, I wasn't giving up on our relationship. I didn't want out, I wanted a break . . . and possibly a good night's sleep and some chocolate cake thrown in for good measure. What was wrong? I was not the perfect wife. No, it was deeper than that: I was a lousy Christian woman. I was sure of it. If it were just about being a wife, I might have been able to cope a little bit longer. But this was more than that. All those things I was supposed to do, all those expectations, had become intertwined in my mind with who I was as a Christian and as a woman. Failing to do all the right things was equal to failing as a person. It wasn't just about my role anymore; it was about my identity.

I grew up in the church; I'd heard all about biblical femininity or womanhood or whatever you want to call it. I'd been to the retreats, Bible studies, conferences, and Sunday school classes. I studied Ruth and Hannah and Mary and, of course, that infamous woman at the end of Proverbs. I thought I knew what it meant to be a woman of God, but the truth was, so much of what I had internalized for all those years was confusing and conflicting. I had come to believe that the Christian life was about what I *did*. Holiness amounted to doing more and trying harder and running myself ragged in between.

As a young woman, I didn't want to think about all the ways I was falling short, but I also didn't know how to stop that list from repeating in my head over and over and over again. It was all I knew about the Christian life, about God's plan for me. So I clung to it, hoping that I had done enough. Hoping I was enough. Oh sure, I knew God loved me. I knew Jesus had died for me and saved me. I knew I was God's child. But sitting there I felt lost, alone, and completely unsure.

Have you ever felt like that?

Many Christian women have heard messages about our worth, our value . . . our purpose. Maybe not as overtly as I had, or

maybe even more so. And as a result, many women in the church today are under the impression that the heart of God's plan for us is lists and doing. We have been told or have come to believe that if we try hard enough, we can measure up; that if we have enough children, we have arrived; that if we do the right studies and read the right books and volunteer more, we will have done enough. It's a belief that lies deeply ingrained in us, sometimes without our even knowing it's there, and it's a belief that is wounding the hearts of women in the church. When we don't have a solid understanding of who God created us to be and how he planned for us to live out our purpose together, we will flounder and create plans for ourselves instead.

We long for lives of meaning but are inundated by failures instead. Our hearts cry out for more, so we scrounge through the Bible and search for any indication that we have a higher purpose than simply doing. We cling to other accounts in the Bible of women of worth, and we study their lives hoping for a clue to our own value. It becomes easy, then, to read about the woman in Proverbs 31 and see only a list of things godly women ought to do. We read about Ruth and cling to the idea that if we just stay faithful, we'll have done enough. But just in case, let's do more. Without even realizing it, we've created a works-based pseudo-salvation that's leaving us hurting, discouraged, and exhausted. Not that our work will save us—we know or have heard that our salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone and by grace alone. But we think our role is rooted in our work. Or even worse, our value is based there. We've misunderstood the truth of God's plan for us, and it's left us exhausted, isolated, and drowning in shame.

It was that deep-rooted but unrealized belief that my purpose was rooted in what I did that led me to that moment all those years ago when I sat on my bed and wept. I thought God's plan for me was all about me and what I was doing, and that misunderstanding was crushing me. I had no idea that his plan didn't

start and end with *me* but was all about *him*. I didn't realize that it wasn't about doing more to somehow qualify as a woman of God; it was about living out his image on the earth. It was about bringing flourishing to the world around me.

I don't know if you can relate to any of that. But if you can—if you've ever felt the pull between being the woman you are and being the woman you think you're supposed to be, if you've ever believed that the heart of God's plan for us was doing more and trying harder—then this book is for you. I spent years and years tangled in the idea that I needed to measure up to the women around me, that I needed to fit in and look the part and check the boxes all to somehow prove that I loved God enough, that I was godly enough. I didn't understand who I was created to be or how I was to live that out, and, as a result, I was left sinking in shame instead. But that is not God's plan for us. His plan is not for shame but for freedom, not for comparison but for flourishing; his plan is that we be his image.

And that's what this book is all about: image bearing. Not the image of the women around us, though, or the lists we've created in our heads. No, this is a book about what it really, truly means to be an image bearer of God and the amazing, life-changing, heart-healing freedom that we've been given to live out our purpose today. It's a book about being freed from our misunderstandings, from the shame and comparison that bind us so tightly. Because we weren't created to be just "good Christian women"—we were created to be image bearers of God. My prayer is that the pages of this book will bring you hope in your own life as you come to see, maybe even for the first time, who it is God created you to be, the amazing purpose he created you with, and the immense freedom that comes from living it out.

If you're a notetaker or outline sort of person (I am, so I'm right there with you), you'll see from the table of contents that the book is divided into two parts: Created and Restored. In the

first part, we'll look at God's purpose for creating us and his plan for us to live as his image bearers on the earth. In the second, we'll look at what went wrong in the garden and how God is restoring all things to himself, even his very image in us.

To do that, we're going to go back to the very beginning and dig deep into the creation account. We're going to sit in Genesis 1–3 and soak in the promises that were spoken in those first moments of creation. We're going to rest in the hope of who God is and his amazing plan for us. And then we're going to look at what all of that means for us now. Because God's purpose for us really is bigger than fake smiles and to-do lists, and his call to us is more freeing and more amazing than many of us have ever realized.

We don't have to live tangled up in confusion and misunderstandings anymore—we have been freed to live as the image of God!

PART 1

CREATED

1

THE LOVE OF GOD

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:2)

Then God said, "Let us make man." (Gen. 1:26)

"Do you know what?" I looked down at the tiny button nose and the impish grin on my daughter's sleepy face and smiled.

"What?"

"I love you!"

She sighed and flopped her arms on the fluffy comforter that was tucked up around her. "Mommy! I know that! You tell me every day!"

She was right. This was a common conversation in our house—one that was repeated over and over again in different ways and at different times but always with the same message: you are unconditionally loved. Her eyes met mine as she waited for what always came next.

"And is there anything you could ever do to make me love you any less? To lose even a single drop of my love?"

"Nope!"

“What if you said not-nice things? Or were really mean to your brother and sister? What if you smashed all my stuff and told lots of lies?”

She looked suitably horrified—these were pretty big infractions—but she laughed along with me and shook her head.

“And is there anything you could ever do to make me love you *more*?”

This one stumped her. It was a new addition to our script, an addition that I realized in that moment was just as important as everything that we had said thus far.

Her eyebrows pulled together, and she tilted her head to the side. “No . . . ?”

“What if you made your bed every day and cleaned up your room perfectly? What if you helped to set the table and colored me a picture every day? Would that make me love you more?”

“No,” she said, a bit more confidently this time.

“What if you were the nicest girl in the world and always obeyed the first time, every time, and with a happy heart? Would I love you more?”

“Nope!”

“You’re right. Why do you think that is?”

She shrugged.

“Because you have all my love right now! All of it! You can’t ever lose it, and you can’t earn any more because you already have every last bit of it!”

There were tickles and giggles and hugs at that point, and the conversation moved on. Eventually, after goodnight kisses and bedtime prayers, I slipped out of her room and closed the door softly behind me. Standing in the hall, I let the import of those words sink into my heart as well.

I’ve always known about unconditional love, especially the unconditional love of God. After all, “Jesus Loves Me” is practically required learning for kids who grow up in the church. But

while I had known that God loved me and that I couldn't lose any of that love, I had never thought about how I couldn't earn *more* of it either. And while I would love to say that fact was obvious (salvation is a free gift, after all), the truth is, I was living like it wasn't and like I could.

This idea of earning God's love goes way back for me. I was a churchgoing girl from the beginning, and I took wearing my Sunday best, putting my quarter in the offering jar, and reading my Bible a little bit every day very seriously. As a teen my attempts to earn God's love morphed into having official "quiet times," attending youth group regularly, and listening to only "Christian" music. As an adult, I tried to make myself look as godly as the women around me—leading ministries, attending conferences, posting verses on my Facebook wall. All of those are fine things—good, even—but when you do them because you're hoping to earn favor with God, they become less acts of worship and more like bargaining chips. I wasn't worried that God was going to turn his back on me, but I was worried that if I didn't do enough, I would be missing out. Missing his blessings. Missing his presence. Missing his love.

For much of my life, I have operated, sometimes without even realizing it, as if I could earn more of God's love. As if the love he loved me with at the cross was just a baseline amount and more love was available for those who worked hard enough. That if I was good enough, life would be better, or if I tried hard enough or prayed hard enough, things would go well and he would be happy with me. But the truth is, children of God can't earn more of his love any more than we can lose it, which is to say, not at all.

When we don't understand the depth of God's love for us, when we think or feel like we need to do certain things to earn more of his love or live in fear that we might lose some, we've missed the heart of both who he created us to be and how he planned for us to live that out. It's a confusing, exhausting, depressing way to

live. This misunderstanding pushes us into shame and prevents us from living in the type of community we so desperately need.

But God does not operate that way, and this is not his plan for us! And while there are many, many misunderstandings out there about what it means to be a woman of God, we can't start with them. No, the problem is bigger than that. In order to untangle the mess and get back to the heart of God's plan, we have to go back to the beginning.

Not to the beginning of our own stories. . . . No, we need to go all the way back to *the* beginning.

THE CREATOR

I have always been fascinated with opening lines. Books, movies, plays, poems, even speeches. No matter the medium, the opening line is one of massive significance. It sets the tone. It creates the mood. It tells the audience a lot about what's going to happen. In fact, I got a little book a long time ago that was simply a compilation of opening lines. I loved it! I loved it so much that, as a teenager, I forced my family to play a game in which I would read a line, and they would have to guess what it was from. They didn't like it as much as I did. In fact, I'm pretty sure they only tolerated it once. But the fact remains, I thought it was awesome! Opening lines are important, and good writers put a lot of thought into where and how to start.

The opening line of Genesis is a perfect example. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). It's so simple, so well known (it was in the book—in case you were wondering), yet these simple words convey a ton of meaning. With these words, we find out what the focus of Genesis—of the entire Bible, really—will be: God.

With these first words of Genesis, the Holy Spirit crashes onto the pages of Scripture with a triumphant declaration that this is

God's story. He is the one who creates. He is the focus, the subject, the foundation on which all else depends. He is the beginning; before anything else, he was. He is the main character—not us, not our sin, and certainly not Satan. This is not our story! What we do, what we accomplish (or don't), what man-made standard we live up to, is not the point! We are not center stage, the lights are not focused on us, and that, my friend, is a really good thing. There is so much freedom and so much hope in that truth. And, as we will see, there is so much love.

This is God's story. Every sentence, every moment, is centered on him and him alone. "In the beginning, God . . ." They are little words, but they fill every page of the whole Bible. They flow through every story, gird each chapter, and drape themselves over every second of every day of all time.

As far as opening lines go, this is the best. Not just because it is masterfully written but also because it brings the hope our hearts need and sets the stage for what's to come. It is so easy to skim past it, but it is radical, filled with thunder and power. God is God!

Were we talking about anyone else, this opening line might fill us with dread. But this is the Lord! He is not some authoritarian dictator or narcissistic ruler—this is God who, as we will see, is both loving and love itself. When he created the world, every detail flowed from his abundant love.

THE CONTEXT

Have you ever played around on Google Earth? Maybe started with a view of the earth as a whole and then scrolled in until you were looking at the satellite picture of your home? It's fun to see the big picture so quickly followed by the details.

The creation account in Genesis is written like that. It starts with the super-huge big picture and then moves closer to show us a more detailed view. Moses, under the inspiration of the Spirit

of God, does not jump around to show us different things that happened, nor does he give us a bulleted, chronological account. Rather, he zooms in a little at a time, showing us an increasingly detailed picture of the days of creation.

Genesis, which means “beginnings,” is the title of the book. It’s derived from the first words of verse 1, “In the beginning . . .,” and is a fitting title for a book that is about to tell us the beginning of all things! In fact, the verse goes on to say that exact thing: “. . . God created the heavens and the earth.” Verse 1, then, is sort of like a title and subtitle. It’s as if Genesis is called *The Book of Beginnings: Wherein God Creates Everything*. Then we get to verse 2, and the creation account kicks off: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

I don’t know about you, but Genesis 1:2 has always sort of confused me. At times it’s felt out of place or simply didn’t make sense to me. But this verse is incredibly important!

First, it focuses our attention on the place of God’s creative acts. From the whole of the universe, Genesis 1:2 zooms in on the specific location of Earth itself. “It sets the scene, making the earth our vantage point.”¹

Second, Genesis 1:2 serves as an overview of the creation event. This is not step one of creation. It’s not that when God started creating things, he took some primordial goo and began forming it. Not at all. Instead, this verse describes the process of creation. In his commentary on Genesis, John D. Currid wrote, “The universe, and particularly the earth, is now pictured as it appeared in the process of creation.”² It’s a big-picture view of the events that will unfold in greater detail in the verses that follow.

1. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 44.

2. John D. Currid, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1:1–25:18*, Evangelical Press Study Commentary (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2003), 60.

Third, this verse presents the themes of the creation account. It draws our attention to three things we need to understand for anything else in the creation account to make sense to us: (1) the earth was without form, (2) it was void, and (3) the Spirit of God was hovering.³

1. The word for “without form,” or formless,⁴ carries with it the idea of chaos. Of wildness. It’s the picture of a vast, untamed wilderness that God is bringing under control.
2. The word translated “void,” or empty,⁵ means completely devoid of all living things. In fact, later in the Scriptures (Isa. 34:11; Jer. 4:23), it is used to describe an utterly barren wasteland. It paints a picture of a vast, silent nothingness that God then fills.
3. The word for “hovering” is used later, in Deuteronomy 32:11, to describe a mother bird, her wings spread protectively over her young. It’s the beautiful image of the Spirit of God—active and present—stationed over his creation to love and nurture it.

Chaos to order. Empty to full. The loving, personal presence of God. Keep those things in mind as we go on.

In verse 3, Moses moves another step closer, and the details come into focus. Now we get to the actual events of creation! God, by the power of his word alone, calls all things into being. Through this concert of colors, sounds, shapes, and smells, the three key elements bind the creation account together.

With each verse, we see the three points of verse 2 unfold. Derek Kidner put it so well when he said that “God’s normal

3. Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 16.

4. The Hebrew word *tôhû*.

5. The Hebrew word *bôhû*.

method is to work from the formless to the formed. The whole process is creation. . . . Indeed, the six days now to be described can be viewed as the positive counterpart of the twin negatives ‘without form and void,’ matching them with form and fullness.”⁶

God deals with the chaos, the “without form,” by bringing order. He creates time, days, nights, stars for charting seasons and paths. He separates the land and the seas. He gives everything a place and a name. He brings order because our God is a God who delights in order; he cares for his creation, and every part of it has a place.

But God doesn’t just bring order to the chaos in creation; he also deals with the emptiness, the “void.” He fills the earth with every form of life. Creatures of all sizes and shapes emerge at his call. Plants grow and flourish. His creativity overflows into the brightest blues and pinks, the richest scents of flowers, the chest-rattling boom of thunder, and the soul-lifting silence that comes after a rain.

And through each moment of creation, the Spirit of God is present, active, personal, and loving. When Moses gives us the three themes of the creation account, he isn’t just helping us to see the pattern of creation (filling and ordering)—he is also showing us God’s heart toward his creation. God is a personal, loving God.

The days of creation form a grand symphony. Each moment adds new instruments as the music builds. With each beat, we see “And God said . . . ,” and something amazing appears, and “. . . it was good.” The pattern repeats over and over again but with growing complexity and beauty. The great conductor draws in each player, and the air fills with the rising sounds of nature’s worship. As the music swells, we know that the best is about to come. We sit in edge-of-our-seat expectation. And God said. And it happened. And it was good!

But—

6. Kidner, *Genesis*, 45–46.

But suddenly the conductor stops.

The interruption in Genesis 1:26 is, in itself, dramatic. The silence is deafening. “Why would you stop?” our hearts cry out. Did something go wrong? But the conductor isn’t upset. No, like a giddy new dad showing off home videos, he turns to the audience and says, “Get ready—this is the best part!”

THE TRIUNE GOD

Each member of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—has been present in creation, but here they stop, invite us in, and discuss what they will do next: “Let us make man” (Gen. 1:26).

To be honest, many of us often breeze past the fact that all three members of the Trinity speak in communion with one another. But it is so important because here, in the opening verses of Scripture, we see that God is Trinitarian, and knowing he’s Trinitarian changes the way we see what has just happened in creation, what he’s about to do, and what it means for us to live as his people in the world. We saw that he was loving in the way he created and cared for his creation, but now we see that love is a foundational aspect of who he is. Love is what prompted him to create in the first place.

To see that, however, we need to quickly clarify a few things about this idea of “Trinity.” Let’s start with the fact that the word *Trinity* isn’t even used in the Bible. It’s a word that was used years later to encapsulate the progressive revelation of the whole Bible’s teaching of who God is.⁷ But the problem is, words are seldom simple or clear, especially when they need to distill something as huge and complicated as the Trinitarian nature of God! Because of that, we need to hit on a couple of points to make sure we’re all on the same page.

7. John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 46.

First, God exists as the Trinity. He is not *like* a trinity or *in* a trinity—he *is* the Trinity.⁸ In saying that he is the Trinity, we are saying that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one God, three persons. Not three different modes of being, or three different gods working together—not at all.⁹ The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of one substance (or nature) while at the same time three distinct, unmingled persons.

Second, while each member of the Trinity performs different functions throughout Scripture, it is also equally true that all three members participate in every action.¹⁰ We cannot, and should not, try to sharply separate what they do. We see this more clearly when we read about the life of Christ in the New Testament: the Father sent the Son, the Son lived and died in our place, and the Spirit revealed him to us. All three persons of the Trinity worked together to accomplish redemption. And that’s the same premise at work in the early verses of Genesis. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all work together in creation. Without announcing that God is three persons, Genesis 1 shows all three present and active.

Finally, the names we have for the members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—in no way imply, or should be taken to mean, that there is a power hierarchy between the members of the Godhead. All three persons are absolutely equal, and there is no natural subordination between them.¹¹

God is Trinitarian. The question, then—as I’m sure you’re wondering—is, why is that fact important in verse 26? Why does

8. “The Eleventh Council of Toledo on the Trinity,” in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 201.

9. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 49.

10. Leith, 50.

11. John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith Commentary* (Signal Mountain, TN: Summertown Texts, 1992), 28.

it matter that God declares himself to be Trinitarian in the same sentence that he declares he's going to make people?

THE OVERFLOWING LOVE

When God speaks in Genesis 1:26 and says, "Let us . . .," he speaks as the Trinitarian God: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit existing in perfect relationship within himself. This means that relationship is a huge part of the nature of God; he has existed, and does exist, and always will exist in relationship. Moreover, he dwells in relationship perfectly, because he is God and he is perfect. There is perfect unity among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit: no vying for power or position, no loneliness, and no lack. That little word *us* declares that God is Trinitarian and dwells in perfect loving relationship. This brings us to the next point we need to see: God doesn't need us.¹²

Can we sit with that for a second?

We are not needed! If God the Father were without the Son or Spirit, we could say that maybe he was lonely. Maybe he created us because he needed a friend? Or perhaps he longed for creatures to worship him or stroke his ego? He is God, after all. But because God exists in perfect relationship within himself, none of that is true. God doesn't need us. In fact, because we know from elsewhere in Scripture that God is love,¹³ we know that he *must* exist as a trinity because perfect love cannot exist on its own; it must have both someone to love and someone to share that love with.¹⁴ God isn't lonely!

12. Gerstner, Kelly, and Rollinson, 27.

13. "So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16).

14. "Richard of St Victor on Love within the Trinity," in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell

He doesn't get lonely, he doesn't need someone to hang out with, and he didn't create us to fill some lack that he had; God is perfectly satisfied within himself. So when God calls us into his presence in verse 26 and says, "Let us create man," we can know with absolute certainty that it is not *need* that prompts his actions—it is *want*.¹⁵ He creates out of his own free will, motivated by his overflowing love. He didn't need to create us, but he chose to; it wasn't lack that prompted him but abundance.

The perfect love that exists within God himself, that drives and connects him, overflowed in abundance, and he chose to create beings on which to lavish that love, because perfect love is always outward focused. That abundance—that overflowing, outward-facing love—led him to create you. He wanted you. He isn't a lonely being, longing for someone to love him back. He isn't manipulative, twisting our affections to fill some emotional void. He is the King, perfectly sufficient in himself but exceedingly generous and with love abounding.

God didn't create you because he needed you to do something for him. He doesn't have a to-do list of errands he needs someone to run or a bunch of tasks to be accomplished. He has no lack for you to fill. He doesn't need you, but he wanted you. Do you feel the love in that?

That night as I left my daughter's room and listened to the blankets rustling softly as she settled down to sleep, I was reminded of this great love. A love that is so much bigger and better than mine. I love my children, and I can sit in their rooms at night and whisper words of hope and remind them that my love is unconditional, but I also know deep in my heart that I can't fulfill that promise or keep those words—at least, not on my own. The

Publishers, 2001), 204.

15. Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 9–10.

day will come, possibly even the very next day, when my selfishness and their actions will collide. There will be times when I will allow my hurts or fears or longings to twist my reactions, and I will, I know, allow their actions to influence the way in which I love them. I will be tempted to hold their choices against them and make them earn my love back. And while I wish my love were unconditional, I know that sin prevents that. To love my kids—or anyone, for that matter—well, I must cling to the source of love, to the One who is love.

But God's love isn't like mine. His overflowing love prompted him to create humans, and, as we will see, his specific love moved heaven and earth to bring us back when everything went wrong. His love truly is abundant, full, and all-encompassing. It is not something you can earn by doing all the right things or by being the woman you think you're supposed to be. And in Christ, it's not something you can lose by failing to live up to whatever standard you think there is. It is perfect because he is perfect.

In Genesis 1:26, God declares that he's going to make people, and in saying that, he declares that he's going to make them out of his abundant love. But he doesn't stop there! In addition to both of those truths, he declares that he is going to make them for a *reason*. He is going to create image bearers. Creatures made in his image to be like him. Creatures who could exist in loving, personal relationship with him. Creatures he could pour his abundant love upon. Creatures who would image him by bringing that outward-facing love into the world and bringing flourishing in his name.

In the following chapters, we will look at what it means to be made in his image and how we are called to live out our image bearing. But as we do, hold on to this truth: you were created out of the abundance of God's perfect love. The ways in which we are invited to live that out are gifts of love from him meant to bring us flourishing. We do not live as image bearers to earn God's love, nor do we obey out of fear of losing it. In other words, his love,

not our actions, is the foundation. We are image bearers, we are children of God, and we are deeply, powerfully loved.

SCRIPTURE TO CONSIDER

Genesis 1:1–26

Deuteronomy 32:10–11

Psalm 33

Ephesians 3:14–19

FOR REFLECTION

1. Describe a time when you felt like you could earn more of God's love. What are some things that you have done or seen other people do to earn his favor?
2. Describe a time you worried that you could lose God's love. How did that affect the way you interacted with him?
3. God's presence is an aspect of creation that will grow increasingly important as we move forward. Read Deuteronomy 32:10–11. How does the picture presented here, combined with what we saw in Genesis 1:2, illustrate the presence of God? What does it tell us about his disposition toward his creation?
4. Write a list of words or ideas that come to mind when you think about the love of God.
5. God didn't need to create us, but he wanted to; he was motivated by love. How does this understanding of his love change the way we relate to him? How would your life change right now if you truly believed that you couldn't earn more or lose any of God's love?