

**Bound & Determined**, by Jeanene Reese  
*Christian Men and Women in Partnership*

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## The Creation Account in Genesis

The most natural starting point for developing a theology of partnership is an examination of God's intention for men and women from the beginning. The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 indicate that God made all humankind, male and female, to bear the creator's image. Mysterious and profound, human beings were formed so that something of the plurality

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and complexity of God's nature was (and still is) reflected in both. Being female is as much about Godlikeness as being male. Yet many of us did not grow up with this understanding. Reading the creation accounts or telling it to children often means attention given to the activity of each day, to the actual length of a day, or to where the dinosaurs fit in. All important things, and worthy of consideration. Still, our focus tends to be more on what God did than on who God is. No wonder, then, that we miss a sense of bearing God's image. Yet the first two chapters of Genesis are windows that allow us to see who God is and who we are in relationship to God from two distinct perspectives.

Genesis 1 describes an unfolding and powerful scene of God creating and ordering the world. God spoke and something came to be where previously nothing had been. One of my favorite teaching experiences in a children's Vacation Bible School was designing a time travel machine to tell the story of creation. With limited technology (it was the '80s) and a great deal of imagination, we "traveled" back in time to before the earth was formed. Each time we made the journey, the children, who ranged in age from kindergarteners to fifth graders, sat absolutely still in anticipation. Flashing lights, sound effects, and well-placed props helped them experience the creation of light, of vegetation, of animals.

Not once, however, do I think those same children experienced one of God's greatest works: the formation of humanity—male and female—in God's image. As chapter one concludes, God blesses the newly formed human beings and gives them work to do. They were jointly to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion together over all things—cultural mandates that give them a great deal of "latitude for creativity and variety."<sup>2</sup>

The narrative of the second chapter alters the order of creation significantly. As a child, I loved to play in the mud, especially at my grandmother's house. An avid gardener, she was always preparing the ground, planting seeds, or harvesting produce. She often put my love

for the soil to good use. At other times, I simply made buckets full of “dough” and enumerable “mud pies.” These images are always in my mind as I read how God gathered dust, formed the first man, and breathed life into his body. God then placed the man in the garden with orders to tend to it. Recognizing the man’s need for partnership, God created the rest of the world and brought all living creatures to be named by the man. Yet none of the animals were suitable partners for the man, so God anesthetized him and performed the first surgery—removing a rib from his side and forming a woman. Some would argue that because the male was created first, God intended for the man to be the leader and the woman the follower. But nothing in the text supports this presupposition. In fact, pastors at wedding ceremonies across denominations routinely use this biblical passage to speak of God’s wisdom in making the woman from the man’s side instead of his head or his heel, as a sign of her partnership with him. Still others suggest hierarchy in the male/female relationship because the man named the woman as he did the animals, but they miss an important element of the story. According to Marrs:

When Adam names the animals, the grammatical construction reflects the traditional defining, ordering, and controlling. When Adam names the woman, the grammatical construction changes and the element of exclamation appears. Interestingly, as he excitedly “names” this creature “woman” (*ishshah*), he simultaneously names himself “man” (*ish*).<sup>3</sup>

From the moment he sees her, the man is aware that he has been given a special gift and is appropriately responsive. In naming her and then himself, he immediately recognizes their similarity, their compatibility. Instead of teaching the subordination of woman to man, Genesis 2 demonstrates God’s intention for the beauty and uniqueness of mutual interpersonal relationships.

In the creation narrative, the woman is designed to be a helper/partner to the man. Interestingly, it is the man that God commands to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife (2:24). This directive countermands the impulses of patriarchal structures and cultures that insist it is the woman’s role to leave her family and join her life with the man’s.

Also contradicting patriarchal tradition, the word “cleaving” in the Hebrew Bible almost always describes Israel clinging to God, the weaker to the stronger (e.g., Josh. 23:8; Ps. 91:4), but not the other way around. Years ago, I remember seeing a picture during a hard-hitting hurricane season that made the front page of many national newspapers. It showed a man desperately holding on to a lamppost while his body was whipped around and brought to a fully horizontal position. His life depended on his ability to hold on to something stronger than himself at a time of great vulnerability. From the beginning, strength and equality were implied in the role of woman as helper/partner to the man from whom she came. As creation was surveyed at each phase in chapter one, God declared that it was good, but when reviewing the creation of human beings, God called it “very good.”<sup>4</sup> The only time something was pronounced “not good” was when the man was alone and no helper/partner had been found suitable for him. The man appears to have had no knowledge of, or participation in, the creation of the woman, yet when he awakens from the surgery, he marvels at God’s handiwork and immediately recognizes her as his flesh and bone. It is their similarity that the man finds striking, not their differences.

The role of helper/partner is invaluable to the overall design of God’s creation. In this context, both partners serve as co-workers. This understanding is consistent with the use of *ezer*, Hebrew for “helper,” as it is used in numerous Hebrew Bible passages to describe God’s help to Israel (see Exod. 18:4; Ps. 20:2; 33:20; 54:4; 70:5; 86:17; 118:13; 146:5).<sup>5</sup> In these passages, God helps the people by “protecting, supporting, shielding, delivering, comforting, giving hope and blessing. God’s ministry of help is described in connection with action words indicating strength. Being

a helper is neither a lesser role nor a weaker role. Helping is certainly not a passive role.<sup>16</sup> Marva Dawn further emphasizes the point when she suggests that the title of helper “contradicts a patriarchal culture by elevating woman’s imaging of God, the Helper Superior. The woman is called a Helper Corresponding [*ezer kenegdo*], imaging the care of God in a human, rather than divine, way.”<sup>17</sup> The mutuality of the helper/partner relationship between women and men is also consistent with the very character and person of God presented in three distinct persons, yet always a wholly unified one. The Trinity gives us a perfect example of difference in function but quality in existence. Likewise, even though men and women may be different in person and function, they are designed to live in mutuality, harmony, and unity.

When Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit, their sin shattered the perfection of God’s creation and God’s intentions for it. The ripple effects of their sin are seen first in Genesis 3, but the consequences continue: Cain kills Abel (Gen. 4); God destroys the world by flood because of the prevalent wickedness (Gen. 6); the earth’s population gathers to build a tower to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11); and so on. Yet in each instance, God’s providential love and mercy are also evident. God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden to keep them from eating from the tree of life and living forever in a state of separation and death. God provided clothing for them as they left, much like a mother would in caring for her children. When Cain murdered Abel, he was sent from the presence of God, but God placed a mark on him for protection. Noah and his family were saved even as God destroyed the rest of the earth. After God confused the language of humanity and dispersed the people across the face of the earth, God made a covenant with Abraham, offering hope for future generations and the promise of a new land.

The effects of sin were broad and devastating—nothing God created was unaffected. They were also close and painful—every relationship was altered. The disobedience to God’s command went well beyond the

simple act of eating forbidden fruit: it was a matter of intention, attitude, and relationship. Eve and Adam, unwilling to trust God completely and live in perfect relationship with their creator, chose their own desires, sought their independence, acted on their self-determination, and faced the consequences. Among other devastation, sin radically changed the relationship between Adam and Eve as man and woman; it marred the relationship with and between their children with hatred, jealousy, and even murder. The whole world, then as now, participated in the sin that was unleashed in the Garden.

God had to respond to the first humans’ behavior and decisions, as God does to ours. Many of us know the pronouncements in Genesis 3 all too well. The question, however, is whether those declarations are to be taken as prescriptive or descriptive. If they are prescriptive, then the fall is still in full force today, directly affecting our lives and reflecting God’s ongoing will. If they are descriptive, then what happened at Eden is still with us and yet does not reflect God’s will. Understanding God’s words in Genesis 3 as descriptive rather than prescriptive is consistent with what other Scriptural passages reveal about God’s nature and response to sin. For example, in Exodus 20, the second commandment instructs Israel to have no other gods and not to make idols of any kind. The rationale for these commandments flows directly from God’s nature: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod. 20:5b–6; cf. also, Exod. 34:6–7, Num. 14:18, Ps. 103:8–14).

I grew up in an alcoholic home. My father, a drunk for fourteen years, sobered up when I was only two years old. From that time on he struggled to live by the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for over forty-seven years. In second grade, I discovered that not everyone went to AA on Saturday night and church on Sunday. It is easy to speak of Dad’s ongoing recovery, to acknowledge the many ways he helped

others. It is far more challenging to speak of the scars that my siblings and I bear from his drinking, his selfishness, his sin. Please understand that I in no way intend to dishonor my father. In fact, I have spent much of my life also in recovery trying to become a woman whose life honors those around me, especially my family. Yet I still bear those scars, and the generations that follow may, as well.

Many of my family members share a propensity for addictive/obsessive behavior that must be surrendered to the Lord—we do not have to act upon it. The faithful witness of my father and others in the family let us know that it is possible to overcome sin. It does not have to define us or determine how we live. I know that my selfishness and sin have scarred others, and I feel that sorrow and pain. But the theological truth being revealed in the creation account is that the consequences of sin are not endless. The point of the third and fourth generation is not necessarily to formulate how long the consequences of sin will last but rather to contrast them with the blessings of faithfulness to the thousandth generation, which are forever.

In Genesis 3, God pronounced two curses—one on the ground and one on the serpent.<sup>8</sup> Although the first man and woman also obviously felt the effects of these curses, they were not cursed. Instead, the pronouncements of God indicate that they suffered the consequences of their sin. Unfortunately, when I survey college classes I teach about whether they grew up believing they were cursed because of the first sin, many of my female students raise their hands; few males, if any, ever do. The sense young women have of feeling cursed directly relates to their feminine identity and sexuality. The consequences God gave were gender specific. Eve would endure increased pain in childbirth and a longing for her husband. Adam would work harder and suffer in that labor, contending with the earth that is now under a curse.

Adam became subject to the soil from which he had been taken. Eve became subject to Adam from whom she had been

taken . . . As a result of Satan's work, man was now master over woman, just as the mother-ground was now master over man. For these reasons it is proper to regard both male dominance and death as being antithetical to God's original intent in creation.<sup>9</sup>

Much attention has been given to what it means for women to have increased pain in childbirth and to have a greater desire for her husband who will rule over her. Anatomically it seems obvious that delivering a child through a narrow opening had the potential to be at least uncomfortable, quite possibly painful, even before the fall. Rather than speaking of increased physical pain of the woman in childbirth, however, I am convinced that the pain Eve experienced was grief and shame over her own sin and its effects on the lives of her children and grandchildren.<sup>10</sup> Giving birth to my children was physically painful, but the far greater anguish has been seeing how my unfaithfulness has hurt and damaged them.

Julia Kristeva understands the nature of the pain women suffer through childbirth. She writes, "One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous. Obviously you may close your eyes, cover up your ears, teach courses, run errands, tidy up the house, think about objects, subjects. But a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the desire that Eve felt toward her husband, who would now rule over her, also has been greatly misunderstood. God does not seem to be describing a sexual desire that Eve would have for Adam, an emotional longing for her husband's companionship when he was away at work, or a vengeful wish to dominate him instead of being dominated (all three interpretations offered by contemporary scholars). Rather Eve's longing, I believe, appears to be one of sorrow and regret that her sin and Adam's had distorted the mutual, harmonious, and unified wholeness of the relationship God intended for them. Understandably, she longed for what she had once had and was unlikely to gain again with her husband.

Adam, on the other hand, was destined to till the ground in hard labor. Not only did the sin of the first man and woman cause their expulsion from the beautiful garden God gave them, a place where work would be required but not onerous, but it also disrupted the nature of their God-intended relationship: "The ruler/subject relationship between Adam and Eve began after the fall. It was for Eve the application of the same death principle that made Adam slave to the soil. Because it resulted from the fall, the rule of Adam over Eve is viewed as satanic in origin, no less than is death itself."<sup>12</sup> Equally devastating is the fact that the two sons who naturally would have toiled with him were gone as a result of sin. Anyone growing up in a farming community knows the importance of having strong sons to work the fields, a job too large for just one person. But Adam's sons were both gone: he lost one to death and the other to exile. He was alone and I am confident that each time he tilled the soil, he was reminded not only where he came from but also how terribly he messed it all up. As in the rest of Genesis, Adam and Eve felt the effects of their sin in their relationships with God, each other, their offspring, and future generations.

But as faithful people believe, sin never has the last word. Even as God punished Adam's and Eve's sin and delineated the results, God still acted with characteristic redemption and mercy. When God pronounced judgment for the woman's sin, God also offered hope by relating redemption to motherhood:

The woman's offspring will crush the serpent who is the embodiment of evil . . . The three aspects of this redemptive motherhood revealed in the account of God's response to the sinful disobedience of the man and woman are characteristic of the overall biblical paradigm for prophetic ministry: struggle, suffering and servanthood.<sup>13</sup>

Enmity between the serpent and woman were characteristic of the classic struggles between good and evil, life and death. Through the painful

process of giving birth, the woman would suffer yet also offer hope for the eventual birth of the redeemer.

And finally, even though the effects of Adam and Eve's sin were felt for several generations within their lifetimes, God offered them immediate hope of renewed life in their ancestral lineage. At the birth of Seth (Gen. 4:25), Adam recognized that it was God who had given him another son. The sin of Adam and Eve, like all sin we commit, had consequences felt for three or four generations but not necessarily beyond. With Enosh, Seth's son, people began "to call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26). From the beginning God placed limits on the dominion of sin but not on the blessings received by those who lived in love and faithfulness. God's steadfast love is promised endlessly to those "who love and keep my commandments" (see Exod. 20:5b-6).

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## Thoughts on Working Together

"I started the semester with the idea that a partnership was just being really good friends that work together. In this situation we did become friends, but the partnership we gained was not just becoming friends. I thought that partnership was a function of a friendship. While this is somewhat true, it's more than that. Partnership develops when we are intentionally open with one another, when we make things work, when we deliberately set aside differences to reach a common goal, and when we force ourselves to be accountable to each other. A godly partnership develops when we are deliberate and intentional about observing spiritual discipline in all areas."

—Male Student

