

A Look at the Word "Day" in Genesis 1

[The Seven "Days" of Creation - How Long Were They?]

Introductory Comments

The seven days of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3) are mentioned four times in the Bible. Three of these passages make reference to all seven of the days, and one to just the last (the seventh) day. These passages will be examined below, in order to see how the Bible interprets the word "day," within the context of the "creation week."

It will be seen that, in *every* instance, the idea of a "24-hour time period" is the only *natural* understanding of the word "day." *Nothing* in the context of any of these passages suggests that there should be any other interpretation for the word "day," when used in reference to the events described in Genesis 1:1 - 2:3. To find any other meaning, we have to *force* it into the text.

There is one additional note we must make about this description of creation: This record is *not* part of the account given in Genesis 2:4-25. The account that begins in Genesis 2:4 is a record of events, which, for the most part, could have been observed (and described) by Adam. In contrast, the seven days of creation are described by God himself. No humans were present to witness this event - except for the seventh day and part of the sixth.

Genesis 2:2-3 [See also chapter 1]

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

As stated above, this record about creation is a historical account given by God himself. No humans were present to witness most of the events described in it. This means that *God* is the one who chose to use the word "day," and at no place in this account does he suggest that the word "day" has anything other than its natural meaning. Nor does anything within the account itself suggest that it is to be taken figuratively, or in any other way changed from the natural sense of the word.

Adam and Eve were alive on the seventh day (as well as part of the sixth). Their first full day of existence was the day that God set apart as special - a day which focused on the glorious accomplishments of their God. Nowhere in the account does God suggest that the first six days were a different length than the seventh day that Adam and Eve experienced. Nothing suggests a shift in meaning for the word "day."

Exodus 20:9-11

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Note that, in this passage, God is speaking to the nation of Israel (see Genesis 20:1). If there was any reason for him to clarify the word "day," he had plenty of opportunity to do so. Instead, when he uses the word "day" to describe the creation activity, he does so in a way that *parallels* his use of the word "day," when he makes reference to the normal week of seven 24-hour days.

In this fourth command, the people were required to follow God's example, because of the covenant (agreement) that he was making with them. God told them that, just as he worked six days, creating all that exists, and then rested from this activity on the seventh day, so also must they work six days, and then rest from their work on the seventh day. Nothing in this passage suggests a figurative use of the word "day," or a shift in the word's definition.

[Today, we are under a *different* covenant. We still have an obligation to periodically take our focus off our every-day activities, and to set aside time for focusing our attention on God and what he has done. However, we do not have an obligation to make the seventh day of the week (Saturday) the day we have such a focus. Most Christians have set aside Sunday, in memory of Jesus' resurrection. However, there is no direct command regulating this. If we wanted to, we could set aside part of *every* day!]

Exodus 31:15-17

Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

Once again, it is God who is speaking. He is the one who insists that his own six days of activity, followed by one day of rest, should be a pattern for the people's six days of activity, followed by one day of rest. Again, nothing in the context suggests anything other than a normal 24-hour day. Nor does anything suggest a change in the meaning of the word "day," half-way through the passage.

Hebrews 4:4

For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."

In this Hebrews passage, the author's main focus is on proving, from Scripture, the *permanency* of God's rest, which we enter when we trust him. He quotes this Genesis passage to prove that God entered his rest on the seventh day. The job of creating was complete, and he did not have to continue at a later time. As with the other passages which make reference to this day, there is nothing within the context that would suggest anything other than a "normal" 24-hour day. As the passage simply says, God rested from all his work on the seventh day. [Our focus here is on God's rest from *creating* - see the end of Hebrews 4:3. There is a different sense in which God *never* rests - John 5:17.]

Final Comments

When we examine all of Scripture, we discover that these are the only passages in which reference is made to the "days" of creation, as described in Genesis 1:1 - 2:3. In *none* of these passages is there any suggestion that the seven days of creation were anything other than seven 24-hour days. It is *impossible* to find any other such view or "interpretation," without first reading it *into* the text. A person must first insert such opinions into the Word, before he will be able to "discover" them there.

We do not deny that there are some places in which the word "day" is used in a figurative manner. The account of the creation of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4-25) refers to the entire event as "the day" in which humans were created.* However, when we look at the details of Genesis 1:1 - 2:3, which focuses on the *whole event* (not just the creation of humans), there is no evidence that the word is being used in a figurative way. Nor is there any hint of equivocation - a shift in the word's definition - half-way through the verses.

* Note: Some may interpret the passage as specifically referring to Day 6 (with a few generalized comments about the rest of the creation week added for clarification). Others may view the word "day" as referring to the entire "creation event," with no intended reference to the time or sequence of specific things that happened during that "event." Either way, the message communicated by this passage remains the same.