

Ss. Basil and Gregory on Genesis

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Please bring your Bible so that you can follow the key passages from Genesis!

Ss. Basil (d. 379) and his younger brother Gregory (d. circa 399) were two of the most important fathers of the fourth century—two of the three famous Cappadocians. They were scions of a remarkable Christian family tracing its spiritual lineage back to Origen of Alexandria. Basil was a capable pastor and administrator, instrumental in defence of the Nicene faith against the newer forms of Arianism that were prevalent in his time. Perhaps even more importantly, he authored the monastic rules, based on his own experience and his travels among the fathers of the Egyptian desert, that form the basic pattern of communal eastern monasticism to this day. His younger brother, Gregory, is regarded as one of the most profound and philosophical minds of the patristic age; his writings form the basis of the Byzantine mystical tradition.

Neither Basil nor Gregory authored a full commentary on Genesis, but one of Basil's most famous works is his *Commentary on the Hexameron (In Hex.)*,¹ a work that Gregory completed by his anthropological treatise *On the Making of Man (DHO)*. Other key sources quoted in this talk are Basil's *Asketikon*, his two homilies *On the Origin of Humanity*,² and Gregory's *Catechetical Discourse*.³ Translations come from various published translations. (The only one not explicitly cited is the Schaff NPNF series, which contains the only available English translation of the *DHO*.) Selections below come from published translations of these works, as cited, with attention to the Greek where it is helpful, and minor corrections or adjustments where it is needed.

¹ Way, *Saint Basil*; Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*

² Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*

³ Gregory of Nyssa and Green, *Catechetical Discourse*

Overview of Basil and Gregory on Genesis 1-11

- Getting started: the natural longing for divine beauty
 - St. Basil of Caesarea
 - St. Gregory of Nyssa
- The purpose of Genesis and the purpose of creation: divine pedagogy
- The importance of creation from nothing
 - temporal beginning
 - the eighth day
- Man and woman in the image and likeness of God
 - authority to rule (like Chrysostom and Ephrem, but focused on the difference between material and spiritual)
 - the purpose of human existence: glory, growth, and mediation
 - the sin of Adam

Passages Selected for Illustration

1. Accordingly, having received a commandment to love God, we have the power to love, which was placed in us as a foundation simultaneously with our first fashioning. And the proof of this does not come from outside us, but anyone can perceive it by himself and in himself. For by nature we are desirous of beautiful things, though most certainly different things appear beautiful to different people. We have affection for what is close and akin to us without being taught, and we are willing filled with all good will toward our benefactors. What, then, is more wondrous than divine beauty? What thought is more pleasant than that of the magnificence of God? What kind of yearning of the soul is so piercing and unbearable as that brought forth by God in the soul purified from all evil, and which from an authentic and true disposition says, “I am wounded by love” [Song 2,5]? The lightning flashes of the divine beauty are absolutely unutterable and ineffable; speech cannot convey them; the ear cannot receive them. The morning star’s rays, and the moon’s brightness, and the sun’s light, all these are unworthy to be mentioned in comparison to that glory, and are found greatly wanting as analogies to the true light. . . . So then human beings by nature are desirous of beautiful things; but the good is in the proper sense beautiful and beloved. Now, God is the good, and all things long after good; hence all things long after God.⁴

2. Since the most beautiful and supreme good of all is the Divinity itself, to which incline all things that have a tendency towards what is beautiful and good, we therefore say that the mind (νοῦς), as being in the image of the most beautiful (κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ καλλίστου γενόμενον), itself also remains in beauty and goodness so long as it partakes (μετέχει) as far as is possible in its likeness to the archetype; but if it were at all to depart from this it is deprived of that beauty in which it was (γυμνοῦσθαι τοῦ κάλλους ἐν ᾧ ἦν). And as we said that the mind was adorned by the likeness of the archetypal beauty, being formed as though it were a mirror to receive the figure of that which it expresses, we consider that the nature [i.e., the body] which is governed by it is attached to the mind in the same relation, and that it too is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror (κατόπτρου κάτοπτρον γινομένην); and that by it is swayed and sustained the material element of that existence in which the nature is contemplated.⁵

3. It was necessary that the rest [of creation] and this world be brought into existence, first of all as a place of instruction and a school for human souls, (διδασκαλεῖον καὶ παιδευτήριον τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ψυχῶν) and second as a suitable dwelling place for all things that come to be and corrupt. Therefore, the passage of time is bound up with the world, and with animals and plants that live in it—time, always pressing on and flowing, never stopping its course. Is not time the sort of thing whose passing by is unseen, whose future is not yet present, whose being present escapes perception before it is recognized? The nature of things that come into existence is of the same sort: they either grow or decay, but they have no clear security or stability. So it was suited to the bodies of animals and plants that something whose nature it is to change

⁴ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 113–14; Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*. (*Asketikon*, 1.1).

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *DHO*, 12.9

by acquiring a property be circumscribed by the nature of time, as if they were necessarily bound to some current and constrained by a movement that leads them to generation or corruption (τῇ πρὸς γένεσιν ἢ φθορᾶν). Then appropriately he who is wisely teaching us about the generation of the world gives his attention to an account of this, when he says, “In the beginning [he] made,” that is, in this beginning, the beginning in time.⁶

4. For thus you will discover, as the meaning of “beginning” is shown to you, whence comes the first movement in time, and then, that heaven and earth have been set out as the foundations and bases, and then, that there is an artful rationale (τις τεχνικός λόγος) guiding the regulation of visible things. You will discover that the world is thought to be brought into existence neither randomly nor thoughtlessly but for some useful end and noble purpose (πρὸς τι τέλος ὠφέλιμον καὶ μεγάλην χρείαν), if indeed it really is a school for rational souls and a place for instruction in the knowledge of God (ψυχῶν λογικῶν διδασκαλεῖον καὶ θεογνωσίας ἐστὶ παιδευτήριον). At the prompting of what is visible and perceptible, you will be given over in the mind (τῷ νῷ) to contemplation of what is invisible, and, as the Apostle says, “the invisible things [of God], known from the creation of the world by things made, have been clearly seen” (Rom. 1:20).⁷
5. Let us glorify the best Artisan for what has been wisely and skillfully made (τὸν ἀριστοτέχνην τῶν σοφῶς καὶ ἐντέχνως γενομένων). From the beauty of visible things, let us contemplate him who is beyond beautiful (ἐκ τοῦ κάλλους τῶν ὀρωμένων τὸν ὑπέρικαλον ἐνωώμεθα). From the greatness of things perceived and of circumscribed bodies, let us reason to (ἀναλογιζώμεθα) him who is boundless and beyond great, and who excels every thought in the magnitude of his power. For even if we are ignorant of the nature of things made, nevertheless that which falls entirely under our perception is so wonderful (ἔχει τὸ θαύμα) that the keenest mind is shown to be less than the least of the things in the cosmos, when it comes to being able to discuss it worthily or when it comes to rendering the praise that is due to the creator.⁸
6. Here is a preface to the teachings about the end and about the renewal of the world, a few words now handed over according to the elementary exposition of the God-inspired teaching: “In the beginning God made.” All that has been begun in time must end in time; . . . If those who study these things think that this world of visible things is co-eternal (συναἰδιον) with God, the creator of all, they will consider what is circumscribed and has a material body to be of the same glory as him who is of an uncircumscribed and invisible nature. They are unable to understand that if the parts of something are subject to corruption and change, then the whole also must at some point undergo the same sufferings as the parts. But “they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened, and although they claimed that they were wise, they were made foolish” (Rom. 1:21-22), so that some have indicated that heaven co-exists with God from eternity (συνυπάρχειν ἐξ αἰδίου τῷ Θεῷ), while others that it is God himself without beginning and without end (ἀναρχὸν τε καὶ ἀτελεύτητον), and that he is responsible

⁶ Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, sec. 4; Giet, *Homélie sur l'hexaéméron*, 26bis:110–12. (*In Hex.* 1.6).

⁷ Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, sec. 4; Giet, *Homélie sur l'hexaéméron*, 26bis:110–12. (*In Hex.* 1.6).

⁸ Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, sec. 4

for the economy of things that are divisible into parts.⁹

7. If, however, the Scripture presents to us many ages (αἰῶνας), saying in various places “age of age (αἰῶνα αἰῶνος),” and “ages of ages (αἰῶνας αἰώνων),” still in those places neither the first, nor the second, nor the third age is enumerated for us, so that, by this, differences of conditions and of various circumstances are shown to us but not limits and boundaries and successions of ages. “The day of the Lord is great and very terrible,” it is said. And again, “To what end do you seek the day of the Lord? And this is darkness and not light.” But darkness, certainly, for those who are deserving of darkness. For, Scripture (ὁ λόγος) knows as a day without evening, without succession, and without end (ἀνέσπερον καὶ ἀδιάδοχον καὶ ἀτελεύτητον τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην), that day which the psalmist called the eighth (ὀγδόην), because it lies outside this week of time (διὰ τὸ ἔξω κείσθαι τοῦ ἑβδοματικῆς τούτου χρόνου). Therefore, whether you say “day” or “age” you will express the same idea. If, then, that condition (ἡ κατάστασις ἐκείνη) should be called day, it is one and not many (μία ἐστὶ καὶ οὐ πολλάι), or, if it should be named age, it would be unique and not manifold (μοναχὸς ἂν εἴη καὶ οὐ πολλοστός). In order, therefore, to lead our thoughts to a future life (πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν ζωὴν), he called that day “one,” which is an image of the age (τοῦ αἰῶνος τὴν εἰκόνα), the beginning of days (ἀπαρχὴν τῶν ἡμερῶν), the contemporary of light (τὴν ὁμήλικα τοῦ φωτός), the holy Lord’s day (τὴν ἁγίαν κυριακὴν), the day honored by the Resurrection of the Lord (τὴν τῆ ἀναστάσει τοῦ Κυρίου τετιμημένην). There was, then, evening and morning, one day, he said.¹⁰
8. Sins are avenged seven times. Is it not written, “Anyone who kills Cain will be done away, since he is avenged seven times”? Not eight times but seven? For what reason? Wait a little, and you will discover the mystery. The first sin is avenged seven times; the second is the murder of Lamech: “So if Cain was avenged seven times, Lamech will be avenged seventy times seven. And if there is a seventh forgiveness by Peter, referring to the vengeance of Cain, there is consent by the Lord to seventy times seven, as the condemnation for Lamech is seventy times seven. As great as the transgression is, so great also is the gift of grace. Where there is little sin, there also is little forgiveness, for one to whom little is forgiven also loves little.” Where sin abounded, grace superabounded.¹¹
9. What then is the mystery? The eighth day is said to be the age of judgment, in which the sinner will be punished seven times, the extreme sinner seventy times seven times. The just person will be honored seven times, the extremely just seventy times seven times. Now the kindness of God shows us through enigmas a glimpse of the things to come, but at the time of the second coming the truth is manifest and clear; it will show who is worthy of what recompense. Accordingly the Lord grants sevenfold to us sinners the remission of our debts, if here we propitiate him through confession and repentance. So, since we know that fearful day, and since the remission of sins has been granted, as through repentance we offer a worthy compensation commensurate with the faults we have committed, may we do away with our sins, so that there we may escape the toilsome multiplication of the debt. We would call this the

⁹ *ibid.*, sec. 4; Giet, *Homélie sur l’hexaéméron*, 26bis:96–100. (*In Hex.* 1.3).

¹⁰ Way, *Saint Basil*, 46:35; Giet, *Homélie sur l’hexaéméron*, 26bis:80–86. (*In Hex.* 2.8.)

¹¹ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 56–57; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 2.10).

seventh day in relation to the consummation of the eight day in that age.¹²

10. For just as our eyes see external things but do not see themselves except where they encounter something smooth and hard, then the image reflected as if by reflux makes them see things that are behind them; so also our mind does not see itself otherwise than by examining the Scriptures. For the light reflected there becomes the cause of vision for each of us. . . . Do not despise the wonder that is in you. For you are small in your own reckoning, but the Word will disclose that you are great.¹³
11. In what sense are we according to the image of God? . . . “Let us make the human being according to our image and likeness. And let them rule the fish.” . . . But in what is the ruling principle? In the superiority of reason. What is lacking in strength of body is encompassed by the employment of reason.¹⁴
12. The human being is principally the soul in itself (ἄνθρωπος δὲ κυρίως κατ’ αὐτὴν τὴν ψυχὴν). “Let us make the human being according to our image,” that is, let us give him the superiority of reason (λόγου περιουσίαν). . . . “Let us make the human being, and let him rule;” where the power to rule is, there is the image of God (ἔπου ἢ τοῦ ἄρχειν δύναμις, ἐκεῖ ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ εἰκῶν).¹⁵
13. What then is the human being? Relying on those we have read and those we have heard, we will define him. . . . The human is a rational creature of God (ποίημα θεοῦ λογικόν), having come into being according to the image of his Creator (κατ’ εἰκόνα γενόμενον τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν).¹⁶
14. “Let us make the human being according to our image and according to our likeness”. By our creation (τῇ κτίσει) we have the first, and by our free choice (ἐκ προαιρέσεως) we build (κατορθοῦμεν) the second. In our initial structure co-originates and exists our coming into being according to the image of God. By free choice we are conformed to that which is according to the likeness of God. . . . How do we come to be according to the likeness? Through the Gospels. What is Christianity? Likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature (θεοῦ οἰμοίωσις κατὰ τὸ ἐνδοχόμενον ἀνθρώπου φύσει). [Basil proceeds to refer to Baptism in the next few lines.]¹⁷
15. “And God made the human being according to his image.” “The [masc.] human being,” says the woman, “What does that have to do with me? The man came to be, for it does not say the [fem.] human being,” she says, “but by setting forth the [masc.] human being, it implies the masculine. But that nobody may ignorantly ascribe the name of human only to the man, it adds, “Male and female he created them.” The woman also possesses creation according to the image of God, as indeed does the man. The natures are alike of equal honor, the virtues are equal, the struggles equal, the judgment alike.¹⁸
16. The language of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase, in saying that man was made “in the image of God”: for this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all

¹² Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 57; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 2.10.)

¹³ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 31–32; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin* 1.1-2.)

¹⁴ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 34–35; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin* 1.5-6.)

¹⁵ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 36–37; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 1.7-8.)

¹⁶ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 40; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 1.11.)

¹⁷ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 43–45; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin* 1.15-1.17)

¹⁸ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 45; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l’origine de l’homme (Hom. X et XI de l’Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 1.18.)

good (παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μέτοχον τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ἐποίησεν.); for if the deity is the fullness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good.¹⁹

17. For you came to be for the sake of no other thing except that you be an instrument fit for the glory of God (τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ). And for you this whole world is as it were a book (βιβλίον) that proclaims the glory of God, announcing through itself the hidden and invisible greatness of God to you who have a mind for the apprehension of the truth. . . . “And God blessed them and said, Grow and multiply, and fill the earth”. Growth is of two kinds, that of the body that of the soul. But growth of the soul is progress to perfection through things learned, while bodily growth is development from smallness to the appropriate stature. Thus “grow” is said to the irrational animals in regard to perfection of body, in regard to the completion of nature; but to us “grow” is said according to the inner human being, according to the progress which is growth into God (κατὰ τὴν προκοπὴν τὴν εἰς θεόν). Such was Paul, stretching out to the things before, forgetting the things behind. This is growth in visions, acquisition of piety, extending toward the better.²⁰
18. [return to Paradise] But the restoration after the present age will be such as was the first creation. And the human being will come again to his original condition, rejecting evil, this life of many troubles, the soul's enslavement involving life's concerns; putting aside all these things, he will return to that life in paradise unenslaved to the passions of the flesh, free, intimate with God, with the same way of life as the angels.²¹
19. I think that by these words Holy Scripture conveys (παραδίδοσθαι) to us a great and lofty dogma (δόγμα τι μέγα καὶ ὑψηλόν); and the dogma is this. While two natures—the divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes—are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the middle between them (κατὰ τὸ ἀκρότατον πρὸς ἄλληλα διεστηκότων, μέσον ἐστὶ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον); for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned—of the divine, the rational and intelligent element, which does not admit of the distinction between male and female; of the irrational, our bodily form and structure, divided into male and female; for each of these elements is certainly to be found in all that partakes of human life.²²
20. Since therefore this is the property of self-determination (τῆς αὐτεξουσιότητος), to choose at will what is desired, it is not God who is the cause of your present evils, who fashioned your nature both independent and uncontrolled, but [your] thoughtlessness (ἀβουλία), which chose the inferior in place of the superior.²³

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *DHO*, 16.10.

²⁰ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 51–52; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l'origine de l'homme (Hom. X et XI de l'Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 2.4–5).

²¹ Basil the Great and Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, 54; Basile de Césarée, *Sur l'origine de l'homme (Hom. X et XI de l'Hexaéméron)*. (*Origin*, 2.7).

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *DHO* 16.9.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa and Green, *Catechetical Discourse*, 60:76. (*Catechetical Discourse*, 5.10).

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