

God the Creator

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 1

Genesis 1:1-31

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Beginnings matter. In 2020, a company that was started from the backseat of two college kids' cars was acquired by Blackstone Group for 4.7 billion dollars. It was *ancestry.com*. The online service helps users trace their genealogical records back centuries—helping them discover who, and where, they come from. Why are modern people concerned about a long-forgotten past? Because our beginnings matter—they shape who we are and where we're headed.

Sigmund Freud and those he influenced developed a technique for treating patients called psychoanalysis. The basic idea is that what happened to someone in early childhood shapes who they are as adults. Even if old memories are suppressed, they continue to affect us. Why? Because, as these scholars found, what happened in the beginning shapes what's happening now. Historians know this, too. They help us better understand the founding of an institution or nation. Why? Because conceptions shape trajectories—what happened at the beginning shapes what's happening today.

Our lives are not like the fruit on a tree, new each season. They're more like the tree itself. Even as we grow, we're never entirely disconnected from our past. Where we were planted, our inner rings, the shape of our branches, all bear marks of our beginnings. So yes, beginnings matter. They shape who we are and where we are headed. The word that opens the Hebrew original of the Bible is *bereshit*, which translates, "In the beginning." The English title of this first book of the Bible is Genesis, which literally means, "origins." Genesis is a book about beginnings: the beginning of the world, the beginning of humanity, and the beginning of Israel.

Over the next few months, we're going to dive into its first eleven chapters. We are going to travel back to a beginning neither *ancestry.com*, nor the psychoanalyst, nor the historians can take us to—the beginning of life as God created it. These chapters move from the glory of our creation to the tragedy of our fall. We'll see that both our innate sense of dignity and wearying sense of incompleteness have ancient beginnings. From Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel, to the Flood and Tower of Babel, we'll also see the beginning of what may be the most precious force operating in the world today: *the grace of God*. Not only do our beginnings set us beneath the sovereignty of our Creator and Judge, but they also

soothe us with signs of His mercy and grace. And of course, we'll read these first chapters with the rest of the Bible in mind. We fully understand the First Adam—standing in the tomb of his own sin—when we read of the Last Adam—standing before the empty tomb, having defeated sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:45).

If I could offer one thought to bear in mind as we study these chapters, it would be more than remembering that God is our beginning, our Creator. It would be that God is not only our beginning but also our end. As we read in Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (Revelation 22:13).

Our Creator is our Redeemer—what He began in creating us, in Christ, He will complete in redeeming us.

We begin today with Genesis 1 and immediately confront challenges that need addressing.

I. Reading Genesis in Light of Scientific Consensus

For some, modern science has made the opening chapters of the Bible implausible and irrelevant. The Big Bang theory explains the beginning, and billions of years of mutations and natural selection explain the variety of life today. There is no intelligent designer behind life, and therefore no ultimate purpose to it. The polymath and atheist Bertrand Russell is as provocative as he is logically consistent when he writes:

"... purposeless [and] void of meaning is the world which Science presents for our belief.... man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms ... all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system...."

I'm no scientist. And I am in no way opposed to the scientific quest for understanding. However, I am concerned that a purely scientific explanation of our beginnings leaves unanswered the very questions we simply have to know.

1. *Why Existence?*

For example, it doesn't seem that a secular account of beginnings can answer the "why" question. Why do we exist? Why is there something rather than nothing? Bertrand Russell's brilliant student, Ludwig Wittgenstein, put it well: "Not *how* the world is, but *that* the world is, is the mystery."¹

Through the ages, many people believed the world always existed—this was Aristotle's view. Today both science and the Bible agree that the world had a beginning. But does telling us that a single infinitely concentrated bit of compressed matter just happened to explode one day really answer the question of why there's something rather than nothing? Where did matter come from? What was before it? Why is there life at all?

2. How This Incredible Design?

The more science helps us understand life—the more we discover its intricate design and majesty. From the cosmos above us to the genome within us, the design of the world is truly breathtaking. Again, however, does an explanation of all this as simply an accident satisfy? Doesn't the intricacy of such a design beg for an intelligent designer?

3. What of Beauty, Consciousness, Meaning?

One might argue that a First Cause generates matter, and that life moves forward based on function and purpose. But how does this explain humanity's preoccupation with the quest for beauty and meaning—what thinkers speak of as transcendence and consciousness? The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a lecture comparing the biblical view of creation to a Darwinian account, writes,

"What on earth is the conceivable purpose of Shakespeare's sonnets, Mozart's symphonies, Isaiah, Plato or the whole of the human quest for meaning? All of that, consciousness and self-consciousness ... contributes nothing whatsoever to genetic mutation and natural selection."²

4. Where Do Ethics Come From?

We could add to this list questions of ethics. Can an accidental collocation of atoms, with no ultimate purpose, and where life is based on natural selection—survival of the fittest—give us a bedrock for morality and ethics? Does nature teach us to love the sick, vulnerable, and weak?

Writing at the height of the Enlightenment in Europe, Marquis de Sade declared that:

“God was a sham. There was only Nature. The weak existed to be enslaved and exploited by the strong. Charity was a cold and pointless process, and talk of human brotherhood a fraud.... The doctrine of loving one’s neighbor is a fantasy that we owe to Christianity and not to Nature.”³

Questions of our origins are complicated. But it is simply the case that a purely scientific account of our beginnings leaves many questions unanswered. And the questions science cannot answer, turn out to deal with the very sorts of things man has got to know.⁴ Let’s turn from the scientific context of today to the biblical context of Genesis. How should we read Genesis 1? Does it help us with these deeper questions?

II. Reading Genesis in Light of Biblical Context

1. Historical Context: Moses and Wilderness Formation

The most important historical question for reading Genesis is not when did God start making the world, but *when did God reveal these truths to His people?* It all unfolded while Israel was wandering in the wilderness. Genesis is part of the first five books of the Bible, which—according to Jesus and other scripture—Moses wrote.⁵ Moses was the man God appointed to lead Israel out of Egypt, where they’d been enslaved for 430 years. The people would then wander in the wilderness for four decades in preparation to enter the Promised Land. The context in which God has Moses write down the events of Genesis 1 is that of *formation*—God is forming His people. Both Egypt and the other surrounding nations had ideas about gods and beginnings. By putting Genesis 1 in writing—as the first thing Israel needed to know—God is telling us that what we believe about the beginning shapes everything else we believe.

In this sense, when we read Genesis 1, we shouldn’t treat it like a science textbook written for university classrooms. We should see it as a revelation from God aimed at telling people *who* they are, *why* the world is how it is, and *how* they’re called to live. Genesis 1 is about *life-formation*.

2. Genre: Deep History

We also should ask about genre when we read Genesis 1. All scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), but it comes in different forms: poetry, parables, epistles, narratives, history. Good interpretation pays attention to the literary form. Genesis is clearly history—it tells of events that happened in the past. But it’s not a form of modern history mainly concerned with details. Genesis is what one

commentator calls “theological-history,” intending to tell us about the past, but also written to tell us about God and our relationship to Him.⁶

I think of Genesis as *deep history*. It’s working with more dimensions than historians deal with. It tells us not merely what happened, but the ultimate *who* and *why* behind what happened. Genesis is deep history aiming at life-formation. This matters for how we read it. If we come at it trying to find specific dates for the earth’s beginning or epochs of evolution, we are, in a sense, treating it like a science textbook—which it never sets out to be.

Consider an analogy. Imagine someone has asked to be taught about the night sky. One friend provides them with a picture taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. “This is pretty literal,” they say. A second friend, however, gives them a rendering of Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* painting. If we were to reject Van Gogh’s painting, saying it totally miscounts the number of stars in the sky, we’d be misunderstanding what the painting is trying to convey: it knows there are many stars—it’s trying to capture more dimensions of the night sky, how it makes one feel, how it surfaces a type of longing and beauty.

We must read Genesis 1 on its terms—not ours. It’s deep history. God knows how old the world is and has chosen not to leave us with specific numbers. God knows the exact *process* by which He created the world but has chosen to only give us a small window into that. We reckon with mystery when we read Genesis. As one example, consider that Christians through the centuries have understood the seven days of Genesis 1 differently. For some, they are seven 24-hour periods. Others see them as marking epochs or speaking of sequences, rather than literal 24-hour periods. The latter reason: We mark a 24-hour day by the sun, but the Sun isn’t created until day four. For God, “a day is like a thousand years; a thousand years as a day” (2 Peter 3:8). And there is that fact that God exists outside of time and is creating time itself—as such it’s hard to speak of “how long” the first events took.

Christians have wrestled with some of the mysteries of the Creation since the early church. Augustine wrote three commentaries on these chapters, and in *City of God* concluded, “I confess my ignorance about the ages which passed before the creation of mankind, yet I am certain that no creature is co-eternal with the Creator.”⁷

As we study Genesis, we would do well to keep in mind Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes:

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Mystery notwithstanding, there are truths that burst through Genesis 1 that God intends humankind not only to know but *to live by*. I want to draw our attention to two such truths. And then, finally, notice what I think is a giant question that Genesis 1 raises and only begins to answer.

Truth One: **God Is.**

Israel lived in a world of polytheism: the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Canaanites all had accounts of their gods and their beginnings. Most of them involved multiple deities who created either by warring with each other or by copulating with each other. The opening verse of Genesis thunders against all such ideas: “In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). God is God alone, there is no other. And out of nothing, God created everything. God is, therefore, sovereign and owns everything.

For modern people, this truth is just as important. God is the most important fact for you to understand. Get God wrong, and everything else comes apart. Because God created *everything*—from the galaxies to the birds to the laws of physics—through the created world we see God’s fingerprints. Paul writes:

“God’s invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).

In contemplating the significance of this, John Calvin rightly sees the created world as a theater for the glory of God:

“Ever since in the creation of the universe he brought forth those insignia whereby he shows his glory to us.... wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory.”⁸

Sometimes in nature when I see a bird gently landing on a branch, a squirrel scurrying up a tree, or a fox trotting through the snow, I say to myself, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Psalm 104:24). And my heart is very happy, as that bird and I share the same Maker.

In the beginning, *God* created. There is God. There is everything that God created. And there is nothing else. Israel must begin with this truth. And so must we.

Truth Two: **The World Is a Home.**

The second truth that flies off these verses has to do with *what* God has made. This is far more than an accidental conglomeration of atoms. This is a home. A major theme of Genesis 1 has to do with order, function, and purpose. God is *designing* something.

Structure and Design

Many note the structure here—two sets of three days. In the first set, covering Day 1-3, God creates three habitats: Light and Darkness, Sky and Sea, Land; then on days 4-6, God places in these habitats inhabitants that thrive there: Sun and Moon, birds and fish, animals and humans. Everything is designed.

We see God working in different ways: He creates, He makes, He separates, He names, He gathers, He sets. Sometimes He creates instantly—*ex nihilo*. Sometimes He sets in motion a designed *process*—so in verse 1:9-10, God separates the sea and land, then in verse 11, God commands a process to begin through the land, “Let the earth sprout vegetation.”

What does all this aim at? Humanity (who we’ll return to over the next weeks) is the pinnacle of creation. God is making for them a home—where He can dwell with them. Creation is a home—a sacred space for God and man to relate in love.

Ordered by His Word

There is one way God creates that we haven’t noticed yet that is so important: God creates by speaking, by His word. Ten times we read in this chapter, “And God said.” God creates and orders the world by His Word. What might this have meant for Israel?

By creating the natural world by His word, God is telling us that **His Word** is the agent of order—His words bring order out of chaos (1:2). And this means that for humans to live in this home with order and harmony, they must adhere not only to the physical world God’s Word creates, but the moral world God’s word commands.

Ten Words order the social world—the Ten Commandments. And Ten Words order the physical world—the Ten “*And God Said*” in Genesis 1. The point cannot be missed: **living in God’s home requires living under the order of His Word.** You water a plant so that it grows—that’s aligning with natural law. You honor your father and mother to make a healthy home grow—that’s aligning with moral law. Genesis says both these laws stem from the Word of God. Genesis 1 says God created an ordered and structured home—and He did so by His Word. Living in this Word-created world requires Word-shaped obedience. The creation of God and the Law of God are intertwined. Let me close by noting this one giant question that Genesis 1 raises but only hints at answering.

Q. ***Why did God create? Why do we exist?***

There is an ancient Jewish commentary—called a *midrash*—which explains why the Bible opens with the Hebrew letter *bet* (picture an English C). It argues that just as this first letter is closed off on three sides—above, below, and behind—man is not permitted to investigate what happened before the world was created.⁹ We aren’t able to get behind the beginning and ask God, why did you decide to make all this? How might Christian address this question?

God created because He was *needy*? But we read in Acts:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, **as though he needed anything**, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25).

God created because He was *lonely*? But Jesus says in John:

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me **because you loved me before the foundation of the world**” (John 17:24).

The classic Biblical understanding of God is that God is all-sufficient and totally perfect—He doesn’t need anything. So why did He create?

Here is where the Christian understanding of God as Triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—becomes the key for understanding the *why* behind Genesis 1. What was happening *before* the beginning: the Triune God was eternally delighting in Himself: The Father was loving the Son (as Jesus said); the Son was loving the Father; and the Holy Spirit was that love itself (see Romans 5:5), moving back and forth within

the Godhead. And there was a glory to all this, as Jesus says, “Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). **God’s creation is the overflow of God’s own love.**

Jonathan Edwards, in his work, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, uses this beautiful image: God is an infinite fountain of holiness and love, which by its very nature overflows—that overflow looks like a world created to know and love Him:

“[I]t appears that the pleasure God has in those things which [He made], is rather a pleasure in diffusing and communicating to [them], [rather] than in receiving from the creature. Surely, it is no argument of [neediness] in God, that he is inclined to communicate of his infinite fullness. It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow.”¹⁰

The question that science cannot answer—the question that the ancient myths about violent and lustful gods making the world cannot answer—is answered so beautifully by Scripture. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all involved in creation. And their act of creating a home for us—a place where we can taste of the love and glory of God—is simply an overflow of the abundance of their own love. And what’s more, for the Christian, we read that God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). Our existence—even if only tasted in part now—is, from beginning to end, a participation in the eternal love of God. Here is the beginning you need to feel washing over your life.

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Revelation 4:11).

Endnotes

1. In the original, “Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist.”
2. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Faith Lectures—Creation: Where Did We Come From?” Feb 6, 2001.
3. Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 407; referring to Marquis de Sade, *Justine*, tr. John Phillips (Oxford, 2012) 142; 84.

4. As G. K. Chesterton put it so well, when dealing with the conclusions of the secularist in his own day:
“Many things are unknowable, which are exactly the sort of things man has got to know.” G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Sam Lorode Books, TN: 1933), 88.
5. E.g., Deut 31:9; 31:24; Matt 19:8; Jn 5:45–47; 7:19; Acts 3:22; Rom 10:5; Mk 12:2
6. Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 2016), 83.
7. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XII. Chapter 17 (Penguin Classic ed., NY, 2003), 493.
8. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.
9. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:10.
10. Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*