

In the Beginning

Message 1

The Beginning of the Universe I

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Psalm 148:1-14

The Beginning

Have you ever walked in while your friends were in the middle of a movie? You sit down and see people working and playing and fighting and loving, but it doesn't make sense. The behavior of the actors doesn't mean anything to you. Why should one man attack another? What attracts the blond to the skinny guy? How did these white people get into a jungle in the first place? No matter how well acted and filmed the movie, it will be frustrating unless you see the beginning first.

How many of you have entered a class a week or two into the term? Unless you already knew the material, it is a difficult and somewhat frightening experience to join a class when you missed the first lessons. As a freshman I took a geometry class and soon discovered that the other students were mostly seniors. I got a D on my first quiz, and didn't get on track until one of the older students tutored me on the concepts I had missed in intervening classes.

Whether it's understanding a storyline, mastering an academic subject, developing as an athlete, or learning a craft, you can't succeed unless you begin at the beginning. This principle also applies to your spiritual life. You may meet Jesus, you may follow Him, you may begin living a Christian life; but unless you understand the beginning of God's work in the world, you will not make much progress as a Christian. You will always be like the guy who came in at the middle of the movie. He may think he knows what is going on, but he doesn't. And if he joins you in discussion of the movie later, his ignorance will be evident to all. Fortunately for us, God has not left us in the dark. He has given us the beginning of the story of His work in the world.

Who is God? What is the universe like? Where does man fit into the universe? These are the biggest questions of all time. Everyone wonders about these things, from the poorest slave to the wisest philosopher. People have answered these questions by creating myths, religions, and philosophies. Their answers shape their cultures and influence the course of history. But they all conflict. The Babylonians had Marduk, the Egyptians had Ra, the Greeks had Zeus and Socrates, the Germans had Thor and their attendant myths and religions. Obviously most of these stories of the beginning must be false. Into this alphabet soup of mixed up creation stories came a story 3,500 years ago that was entirely different than all the rest.

The God Who Is

Who is God? Where did He come from? How did He get His power? In every creation myth, at least the near eastern ones, the ruling god came from some pre-existing god or some primordial matter. All these ancient creation myths featured a battle between the gods. The Babylonian creation epic begins with two monsters, Apsu and Tiamat. They bring forth other gods, who become so powerful Apsu and Tiamat plot to kill them. In the ensuing battle Tiamat is killed. Her body is split in two. The upper half is made into the heavens and the lower half into the earth. This sort of original battle is typical of all ancient creation myths. The story Moses wrote violates all preconceived ideas about the beginning, for there is no battle! It was as shocking to the ancient world as a Super Bowl featuring only one team would be to us!

Who is God? Where did He come from? How did He get His power? The ancient world answered these questions with elaborate stories and justifications for God's origin and power. Modern man answers these questions by denial. There is no God, He is a figment of our imagination, and the only power He has is that which we give Him. The book of Genesis makes no effort to rebut these ideas directly. Instead it audaciously declares the true God as He really is and expects us to believe in Him.

“In the beginning God...” By these words God reveals three essential characteristics about Himself. First, He is self-existent. Everything else has a cause, an origin. God is the only uncaused being. He has no origin, because nothing caused Him to exist. This means that God is unanswerable to any other being. He defines reality, including good and evil. God is the only fundamental reality, and everything else is derived from Him. When there was nothing else, there was God.

Second, God is self-sufficient. He depends on nothing else for His existence. God exists without anything else – without the universe, without man, without spirits. He needs no helpers, and in fact is not assisted by anyone. It’s true that God enlists men in His work, but He doesn’t need to. He enlists us to help Him because He enjoys our company, not because He needs us.

Third, God is eternal. When we say He existed before anything else, we are saying He has no beginning. In fact, the best way to think of this is to realize that God created time itself. God exists in a dimension that transcends time. God is eternal in that He lives in a constant present. Before there was anything else, there was God.

Who is God? God is the eternal, self-sufficient, self-existent one. Where did He come from? This is an invalid question. He is the source of everything. Everything comes from Him. There is nothing before Him from which He could come. How did He get His power? All power comes from Him. There is no power apart from God. We would not know what power is unless we knew God. In short, God defines reality. We cannot adequately describe Him because He is beyond the bounds of knowledge and understanding. But we can know Him because He reveals Himself to us.

People everywhere have rejected God’s revelation about Himself, either by making other creation myths or by denying creation altogether. For many it is too difficult to accept a God who defines reality. People want to define reality to suit themselves. They are offended at the idea that they cannot understand the world in themselves. They are offended that they are dependent upon God to explain things to them. So they make up stories that they can control. What about you? Do you believe the story that God tells, or do you have certain standards that God must measure up to? Let’s see as we continue the creation story.

The God Who Creates

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

As we move into the account of creation we immediately see five more characteristics of God. First, He is a creator. He has the knowledge, He has the power, He has the desire to create. Put all these together and we see that creating is a fundamental characteristic of God’s. Now God’s creation is essentially different from any creating we do. We speak of creating when we make a work of art or compose a symphony or write a computer program. But all our creating uses pre-existing materials. God creates *ex nihilo*, from nothing. God is the only one who can create from nothing.

Second, we notice that God is a spirit. Some people think that the Holy Spirit was introduced in the New Testament, or at least no earlier than the time of the prophets. But right here at the very beginning we have God revealed as spirit. The significant point in this is that the Spirit is present at the creation and is involved in creation. He is not just providing the lighting and sound effects for the show. The spirit is actively participating in the work of creation.

Third, God works by speaking. This is so bizarre to modern man, most of us miss how profound it is. We tend to minimize the significance of words, especially in America. We are more interested in what

someone does than in what he says. “Talk is cheap,” we say, by which we mean that you can get away with saying any old thing, but you can’t fake tangible results. But even by human standards this is false. Words are effective in giving you knowledge. How else would you learn anything, except by reading or hearing someone speak? You expect that by devoting four years to the words you hear at Lehigh you will have sufficient knowledge to get a good job and earn a decent wage. Words also affect your emotions. How often has your day been totally changed by the uplifting or cruel words someone said to you? Words most surely *can* hurt you as much, or more, than sticks and stones. And words can change your will. You can be persuaded to change your course of action by a persuasive argument. In all dimensions of human behavior, words are powerful.

All this is true of God as well. He affects our minds, emotions, and wills by the words that He speaks. But that is only the beginning. God’s words have a power that transcends ours because they are divine. Our words have a certain effect, but it is tempered by other environmental factors. But God’s words always have an unconditional effect. When God speaks, reality changes. You might say, “I desire a lamp,” and your words might stimulate your friend to bring you one. But when God says, “Let there be light,” light is created – from nothing. The point here is not only that God creates, but that His voice is the means of creation. God didn’t mix stuff together. He didn’t heat or cool or cut. He just spoke. This is extremely significant because it carries numerous implications about the nature of reality. For example, this is the basis upon which God later said that when His message is preached to people, it always accomplishes something. That means that when you tell God’s word to others, you change their lives forever. That means that you have been altered permanently by your coming here tonight and hearing God’s word. God’s word is more than sound waves. It is a power that changes the universe.

Fourth, this passage suggests that God is a plural entity. Notice I said it suggests this. It’s not until the New Testament that God clearly reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But here at the beginning we can see a suggestion that God is not a monolithic being. For one thing, the Hebrew word for God is plural. Now Hebrew sometimes uses the plural form to indicate majesty. But the consistent use of the plural for God along with singular pronouns indicates there is something different about God. Furthermore, God is revealed as Spirit and word. We know from the gospel of John that Jesus is called the Word of God. So when God creates by speaking, we are led to think of God as the Word. Then later in the passage God says, “Let us make man in our image” – with plural pronouns. All these are hints that God is a trinity – one being in the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Fifth, all this lead us to see God as a person. He creates, He speaks, He wills – God is not the force of Star Wars. He is not the Uncaused Cause of philosophy. He is not the watchmaker god of the deists. He is a person. He lives, He thinks, He loves, He has a memory, He talks, He acts. Most Christians know this and believe it at some level. But most Christians – judging by the way we live – act as though God is impersonal. We devise ways to determine or to change God’s will – as though He were a machine we could program. We ignore Him most of the time and expect Him not to notice. When we pray we have these ridiculous habits designed to produce results – as though by banging on the side of the soda machine you could get a free Coke. We think that we can get what we want from Him by better worship, or better devotions, or better spiritual gifts, or more evangelism – not thinking that God is a person with His own plans. If you treated other people the way you treat God, you wouldn’t have any friends! Right at the beginning of the Bible, God shows us that He is not a machine to be manipulated, but a person to be known.

The Creation of God

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good...”

As we move through the creation story God repeatedly declared His work to be good. This is the first indication of a moral component to the universe. There is good, and there is evil, the opposite of good.

Why is this the case? Because God is a moral being. God is good, and He is the definition of good. Anything that is like Him is good, and whatever is opposed to Him is evil. The universe is good because God said it is good, but also because the One who made it is good. A good God does not make anything evil. As we shall see later, evil is one response of the creation to its creator.

There are several immediate implications of God's moral evaluation of the creation. First, any attempt to deny the moral order is impossible. It's childish to say that good and evil are constructs of the mind, or that good and evil are relative. Those who say such things expect us to believe the absolute truth of their statements, thus contradicting themselves. We may misunderstand what is good, we may disagree over what is good, but we can't deny that morality is an essential element to the universe.

Second, if God said the creation is good, then it must be good. There was a significant strain in Greek philosophy that taught that matter was evil – only spirit was good. No. Matter is good. Christians have not created a theology of the evilness of matter, but we have often behaved as though it were. At various times the church has frowned upon food and drink and fun and sex. We live in a day when we err on the side of too much food and drink and fun and sex – but that does not mean we should consider them evil. The world is good and has been made for us to enjoy. The issue is to enjoy it rightly – in obedience to God.

The story of creation reveals a moral order in God and in the universe. It also reveals a structural order. God created the universe in seven days. He could have done it instantaneously, or He could have done it haphazardly. But no, God had a specific plan which He followed. Next week we will discuss what we make of the seven days, but tonight it is sufficient to note that there was a clear sequence to His actions. Furthermore, the sequence itself displays a specific order. God used the first three days to create the superstructure of the universe, and he used the second three days to fill and rule it. Did you see that God created light on the first day, and created the lighted bodies on the fourth? On day two He made the sky and the sea, and on day five He filled them with animals. God made the dry land on the third day and created the land animals that fill it on the sixth. We could develop this point at great length, but can only note in passing that this is a pattern in all of scripture. God creates a structure, then fills it. Human government is one example, and the temple is another. Structure is a vital aspect to all of God's work.

An empty building is pretty boring. God doesn't build structures for their own sake, but to be useful. The orderly world He created was soon filled with a profusion of amazing things. He made plants that could bear seeds and reproduce themselves. He made animals that likewise could produce more like themselves. The world God made was soon filled with all sorts of wonderful creatures. Which brings us to our final point about the creation. It was alive! God could have made the world dead, like the rest of the universe, but He didn't. The earth is bursting with life – trees that scrape the sky, plants that catch bugs, huge whales, tiny insects, funny monkeys, ferocious lions, wise-looking owls, brilliant parrots, the lush green of the jungle, the resourcefulness of the desert creatures. "All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all."

Finally at the pinnacle of creation, God made man. In two weeks we will discuss at length the nature of man and the meaning of his creation. But for now we will make three key observations. First, man was made in the image of God. This sets him apart from the rest of creation. In ways we will discuss more fully later, man is a representation of God. There is some sense in which we see God when we see man. Second, man is sub-sovereign. God alone is completely sovereign. He rules the heavens and earth according to the pleasure of His will. Man also rules the earth, but under God. He cannot absolutely anything he pleases, but within God's law, he can do all he pleases. The sun, moon, and stars rule the night; the birds rule the air; the fish rule the sea; and the other animals rule the land. But man rules over everything. Third, man is sexual. He was created in two different modes – male and female – and with the ability to reproduce. This was necessary to be able to fill the earth and to rule the whole thing. After God made all the plants and animals

in all their astonishing beauty, delicacy, and power, God finished His work with a creature whose glory far surpassed all others. Man was the glorious finishing touch to creation.

The Gospel in Creation

Where is the gospel?

Creation is an act of grace.

The Word which created us later came to save us.

Creation's Response to God

Application: praise

Psalm 148

- 1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; *
Praise Him in the heights!
- 2 Praise Him, all His angels; *
Praise Him, all His hosts!
- 3 Praise Him, sun and moon; *
Praise Him, all you stars of light!
- 4 Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, *
And you waters above the heavens!
- 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD, *
For He commanded and they were created.
- 6 He also established them forever and ever; *
He made a decree which shall not pass away.
- 7 Praise the LORD from the earth, *
You great sea creatures and all the depths;
- 8 Fire and hail, snow and clouds; *
Stormy wind, fulfilling His word;
- 9 Mountains and all hills; *
Fruitful trees and all cedars;
- 10 Beasts and all cattle; *
Creeping things and flying fowl;
- 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples; *
Princes and all judges of the earth;
- 12 Both young men and maidens; *
Old men and children.
- 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, *
For His name alone is exalted;
His glory is above the earth and heaven. *
- 14 And He has exalted the horn of His people,
The praise of all His saints; Of the children of Israel, *
A people near to Him. Praise the LORD!

