

Creation

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[0 : 0 0] Today we are beginning a new series called The Story of the Old Testament, and for the next 10 or 12 weeks or so we're going to be looking at several of the big moments that take place in the Old Testament. As we do that we hope that we'll learn more about what happened at these big moments. We want to explain how all these fit together across the Old Testament and above all we want to see how it all points forward to the coming of Jesus Christ in the new. Today we start at the start. Our title is Creation, our text is Genesis 1-1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now when we come to Genesis 1 often our attention is drawn to the question of origins. Where did the universe come from? How old is the earth? What about evolution? And it's possibly the case that the chapter in the Bible that causes the most controversy is the very first one and equally I think it's likely that many people reject the whole book because they reject what they read on the first page. Can we really believe what the Bible says about the origin of the universe? Well I don't want to spend the whole sermon on this question but I don't want to dodge that question either. As I'm sure you know there are lots of different views about where the universe came from both in the church and in the scientific world but I think we can summarize these views under three headings. Number one, all Bible no science. So that basically takes Genesis 1 very literally and if anything in the scientific community contradicts that then you say well basically science has got it wrong. Number three is the opposite.

All science no Bible. So it begins with a belief that God doesn't exist and the belief that we can trust our senses and our minds to figure everything out for ourselves and it accounts for the origin of the universe in purely naturalistic terms. But number two is Bible and science. This approach avoids the idea that science and the Bible are enemies and instead both are used to inform each other. Now within that there's a spectrum so I put the lines quite far apart because there is a range of views within number two. Some people weigh the Bible more and interpret science accordingly others will weigh science more and interpret the Bible in light of that. Two important things I want us to note. One, none of these have all the answers. Every approach has strengths and weaknesses and there's elements that are hard to explain in them all. It's a reminder that the best theologians and the best scientists are those who are always ready to say there's still a lot we don't yet know.

Interestingly just the other day I was looking at the BBC News website and I saw an article talking about how Charles Darwin struggled to explain why the fossil record presented evidence of a very sudden appearance of plant life during the formation of life on earth and he called that an abominable mystery.

And I read through that and at the end of the article the reporter concluded by saying has this mystery been solved in a word no and it remains a puzzle.

Now I know that BBC News is not a peer-reviewed journal but neither is it inclined to do Christianity many favors and it's a reminder that all of these approaches still have questions none of them has all the answers. So that's the first thing I want you to remember. The second thing I want you to remember about all of them is that they all require faith. So one, two and three all depend on trust either of the Bible or of our senses or of our methodology or of the work of others. The starting point for all of these is faith which of course is true for every area of knowledge. I want to ask two questions in relation to these before we move on. The first one is this, intellectually which of these three is the least acceptable? For me without hesitation I would say number three and that is because number three cannot escape being grounded on the assumption that nothing can produce something and I think that intellectually it is much easier to conclude that that doesn't happen than it is to try and claim that it does and interestingly if you look at the great thinkers of history from Aristotle to Aquinas to Newton to Kant not many of these people have tried to dogmatically endorse that kind of position. Second question is theologically which is the most acceptable and for me again without hesitation I would say number two. Our theology does not place the Bible in one camp and science in another as enemies. It's the opposite. Our theology tells us that God is not in a corner that needs to be defended. Our theology is telling us that God reigns over every square inch of the universe. That means that every discovery of science, every advancement of technology, everything we learn about the universe around us is all under his lordship and it's all pointing us to the

[6 : 03] God who's created us. Indeed this very chapter in Genesis we see that God gives humanity the opportunity to intelligently and responsibly explore the world that he's made. That means that what we discover in science informs the Bible but it also means that what we read in the Bible sets boundaries around within which the advancement of science can progress. The key point is that in terms of explaining the origins of the universe the Bible and science work hand in hand. Now the precise details of that, of how that balances it out is an area where we all have different views and there's still a lot to be learned but the differences in detail don't undermine the principle that the most satisfying answers to the question of our origins will only come when the theologian and the scientist listen to each other and work hand in hand. But as I said while I don't want to dodge that question I don't want to spend too long on it either and the reason that I don't want to dwell along on that question is because it's not the question that matters most. If we come to Genesis 1 and immediately ask the question where did the universe come from then we're missing the most important question. So what question should we be asking? Well let me give you an example. I'm going to show you something so wait there.

Okay so here is an object that I want you to look at. Some of you might recognize it. I hope that most of you won't. Looking at this you could ask yourself where did that come from? And so you could say well there's wood so that wood has obviously come from some kind of workshop. Somebody has bought that wood and cut it into shape. They might have bought it from maybe a supplier, a sawmill. The sawmill must have got it from a forest because this must have been part of a tree somewhere if it's made of wood. The forest where did that come from and so on and so on. So there's wood. There's also metal down here probably some kind of steel where did that come from? Well again it must have been like a blacksmith or something but he must have got it from a refinery or something because originally it would have been dug out of the ground as iron ore and where did that come from? And so we could ask loads of questions about where this thing has come from. But none of that is the most important question.

The obvious question is not where did it come from? The far more important question is what is it? And in this case this is what you call a tarashkar. It's a tool for cutting peats and so it functions a little bit like a spade but you use it for cutting peats and laying them beside the bank to dry. Tarashkar, a garlic word that you should all know. So that's that. Let me put it away. What I'm trying to highlight is that exactly the same principle applies when we come to Genesis 1. The most important question is not where did the universe come from?

The most important question is that when it comes to the universe what is it? And when it comes to humanity what are you? And these two questions are two headings for the rest of the sermon. So the universe what is it? Well there's loads we could say. I just want to highlight four key things for which I've picked out four key words. First word, created. God created the heavens and the earth. That seems so simple. Why is it important? Well it is one of the most important statements ever written because it's telling us that the universe is created therefore it is a creation therefore it has a creator. The universe is God's handiwork. That establishes two very important things.

One, it immediately states a distinction between the creator and the creation. So we don't look at the universe and see it as some kind of God with a sort of pantheistic view. We look at the universe and recognize that its creator is distinct from it. That means that God is above everything else, above space, above time, above history. He is the uncreated absolute of all reality.

[11 : 03] He's the explanation for all other reality. So instead of arguing that something came from nothing the Bible is saying that the source of the universe is the God who is there. And the second thing it tells us is that there's a relationship between God and the creation. So the universe is the workmanship of God. It's His design, His construction, His handiwork, His fingerprints are everywhere. And that instantly gives the universe a meaning and a purpose that is utterly profound. Second keyword is order. So verse 2 tells us that the earth was formless and void covered in darkness. But from that point Genesis 1 gives this beautiful description of order being established. Again two things I want to highlight. One, separation. God creates an orderly universe by separating things. Light from darkness, day from night, land from sea. Later plants and living creatures are brought forth each according to their kinds. So the universe is not a kind of chaotic swamp of stuff just splodged together. And this separation that we see is of course why we can categorize scientific subjects like physics, chemistry and biology. Second thing alongside separation is progression. Genesis 1 gives a beautiful description of progression from simplicity to complexity. So first the habitats of land, sea and sky are created and then these are filled with life. That life doesn't just ping into existence from nowhere. It's formed from the existing materials that are in the earth. And that's why it is no surprise to the theologian when great similarities can be observed in the genetic makeup of humans, animals and plants. Nor is it a surprise to the theologian when science observes evidence of progression in the formation of life on earth. The universe is a beautifully ordered creation.

Number three is potential. Verse 20 God says, let the sea swarm, let the birds fly in the sky. Verse 22 He calls for them to be fruitful and to multiply and in 28 the same command is given to humanity. That's telling us that the universe is full of extraordinary potential. God has not created a fixed monument, he's not created a static machine, he's created a universe bursting with life and abounding in potential, potential for growth, for discovery, for advancement. He's created a place where amazing things can happen. And then our fourth word is good. As each creative act is done or in the language of Genesis one at the end of each day, God sees that the universe he's made is good. That means that this universe has value, beauty and meaning. That's why a sunrise can take your breath away. That's why it's amazing if you see dolphins jumping in the sea and that's why when you reach the top of a Monroe on a clear day and look at the view you say wow. The universe is not random, it's not chaotic, it's not worthless and it's not pointless. It's good. So if in terms of the universe we're asking the question what is it, then Genesis one is telling us that it's God's creation, it's beautifully ordered, it's abounding in potential and the finished work is good.

But if we're asking that question what is it, can we answer that in one word? Is there a one word answer to the question what is the universe? Well I think there is but I'm not going to tell it to you just yet because first of all we need to ask our second question. As humans what are you? What am I? Again there's a lot we could say. I just want to do exactly what I just did for the universe. I want to say four things and I've picked out four key words. So word number one is unique. As you go through Genesis one there's a great sense of momentum being built up. So you have light and dark, land and sea, plants, sea creatures, birds, animals, evening morning, evening morning, the momentum is building but in verse 26 that you have on the screen there you have a pause and you have a remarkable moment of divine thinking out loud where God says let us make man in our image after our likeness. And that moment of trinitarian pause to deliberate is hinting to us that something unique is about to happen. The triune God, Father, Son and Spirit is about to make the crowning part of his creation, humanity. And that humanity is utterly unique because it's the only part of creation, the only part of the universe made in the image and likeness of

God. So if you ask the question what am I, the fundamental answer to that question is that you are the image of God. Now we need to stop for a moment and recognize what an utterly astounding truth that is. If you think of God as the all-powerful creator, the almighty ruler of all, the ground and source of all that is good, the fact that humanity is made in his image means that the aspect of the universe that is most like God is you. And we see that in lots of ways. So God is creative, so are you. That's why humanity alone has advanced so spectacularly and it's why humanity alone has this vast department of our experience called the arts. God is self-determining, so are you. So you're able to make decisions and these are not just animal instincts that you can't control. God makes moral judgments, so do you. That's why you care about right and wrong. God has a standard of justice, so do you. God is communicative, so are you. God appreciates beauty, so do you. And instead of basing our existence on survival of the fittest,

God knows that it is far more important to be ready to defend the weakest. And so do you. And this unique status is shared by every human, no matter what our race and no matter what our status is in society, no matter what our beliefs or opinions are. So if you care about equality, then I hope that you can see that the very first thing the Bible says about humanity serves to give the most profound confirmation that absolutely every human is equal. Because we are all made in the image of God. Second word about humanity is relational. Humanity is made for relationships. With God first and foremost, He's our Creator. We owe our existence to Him, but as chapter 2 reveals, God has created us to walk with

[19 : 30] Him, to live in ongoing fellowship with Him. And that's why humanity is made to enjoy a relationship of intelligent and intimate worship towards God. But we also have relationships with each other. And so within our equality, there's diversity.

Different people are all unique. Verse 27 also highlights the distinction between male and female within humanity. And these differences are part of what makes humanity wonderful. It means that we can relate to one another as those who are equal and who are part of a common group. And yet at the same time, each member of that group is a unique individual. And we can enjoy wonderful relationships with one another. And of course, in particular, as these verses hint, a man and a woman can enter into the most intimate relationship of all as husband and wife. It's all telling us that humanity is not made to be solitary or individualistic. We're made for relationships. And that, of course, is why friendship is so precious and why separation is so hard. The third word is responsible. So verse 26 is also telling us that humanity has a unique role. We are given dominion over the rest of creation. Now that does not mean that we have this kind of tyrannical domination whereby we can exploit everything. It means that alongside the privilege of being the only part of creation that bears God's image, we also have the responsibility to look after that creation and live out our lives as image bearers. So that means that the same care, attention, and wisdom shown by God in creation should be visible in us as well. We have a delegated responsibility from God and we rule and care for the earth on His behalf. And we must never forget that that responsibility is a fundamental aspect of our humanity. That's why the way we treat each other matters. That's why we must not exploit our environment for short-term gain. That's why a criminal will never be acquitted if he stands before a judge and says, you can't jail me for committing this crime because I was just an animal when I did it. And above all, it's why for every single one of us there's never a moment when we are not accountable and answerable to God. The last word about humanity is the word very. Now that might sound a bit strange but this word is so important because it confirms the uniqueness of humanity. The whole of creation is good but once humanity is made, it's very good. That tells us that a fundamental truth about humanity is that you are precious. To God you are unique, valuable, beautiful, capable, responsible and so, so precious. And so is every other human being that has ever lived. That's a truth you must remember when you feel flat and worthless when you look at yourself. It's also a truth that we need to remember when our colleagues or neighbors are infuriating. And this of course is why the Bible and science go hand in hand. Science will teach us a lot about how God has brought forth life on earth but it'll never tell you how precious you really are. So what

is the universe? It is God's ordered, beautifully ordered creation bursting with potential. What are you? You are a human. The unique relationship, responsible, bearer of the image of God. Creation is good but with humanity in it, it's very good. So these then are our two questions but I want us to come back to what I said a moment ago. When it comes to the universe, when we ask the question, what is it, can you answer that question in one word? Is there a one-word answer to the question, what is the universe? Well I think that is, now this is just just my suggestion so I'm not saying that this is like absolute you know universal theological opinion, this is just my suggestion but I hope it's helpful. What is the universe in one word? It's a homeland. Now I've chosen that word carefully. I don't just mean a home like a house, I mean a homeland. A homeland is of course a home so we dwell there and the universe is a place for us to dwell but a homeland is also a place where we work and the universe that God has created is a place for us to work and serve and achieve things. A homeland is also a place of community and the universe God has made is a place for human friendship and relationships to thrive. A homeland is also a place of adventure. Think of all the amazing things you can do in Scotland alone. The world around us is a place for us to explore, to discover and to enjoy. A homeland is also a place where we worship. Now today many people worship idols in their homeland or they might even make their homeland an idol. Either way they're still worshipping and the Garden of Eden created by God was made to be a great temple where God was worshiped, glorified and enjoyed and a homeland is a place where we belong and God's creation was made to be just that. A place where we can be with him and be with each other. A place where we all belong. The universe, the world around us is a homeland created, sustained and given by

God to you. And this is where we see that the question what is it is far, far more important than the question where did it come from. In fact the answer to the question what is it informs the question of origins because if the universe is created to be our homeland then it's a no-brainer that it has a creator and in terms of humanity the question when did the first humans live can only be answered if we first considered the question what is a human. But maybe you doubt all of that. Maybe you think no I'm not buying any of this. Well if you do I want you to think about the question what is it in relation to the universe because really there's only three possible answers. In the 19th century free church theologians like William Cunningham and Rabbi Duncan presented a three-fold choice about Jesus. They said he's either deluded or he's an imposter or he is the son of God. A hundred years later C.S. Lewis made the same argument he said Jesus is either a lunatic a liar or he is Lord. That kind of trilemma that people have applied to Jesus also applies to the universe. It is one of three things. It's either a wasteland where everything is random pointless and nothing has any real meaning or it's a fake land where the things that we value like love and kindness and joy and hope family friendship togetherness these are ultimately just empty fleeting. They're social illusions that just mask the fact that it's just a big machine that you're just a cog in. The universe is either a wasteland a fake land or a homeland created sustained and gifted by God to you. He's given it to be a wonderful place to live a place where we all belong. There's only these three options. Every one of us has to make our choice. So what is the universe? It's God's amazing creation made to be your homeland. What is humanity? Humanity is the crown of that creation. The creation was made to be our home where we can dwell together where we can serve worship and enjoy our amazing God. And so the Old

Testament begins by telling us what the universe is and by telling us what we really are. But from that point what's the story of the Old Testament? It's the story of rebellion against our Creator. Instead of walking hand in hand with God humanity shook its fist at him. It's the story of a cursed creation where sin destroyed the order, beauty and harmony of the homeland that God gave us. It's the story of disintegration where humanity becomes hostile and bitterly divided and where the great potential for good in us becomes a tragic potential for evil that is all too often realized. It's the story of broken people. People who make terrible mistakes and people who are on the receiving end of awful actions from others. Where humanity, the best part of creation, becomes capable of doing the most awful things. It's the story of lostness where humanity becomes alienated from God from one another and where intelligent worship of God is exchanged for irrational worship of idols and humanity is left disorientated in a homeland that now feels like no man's land. In many ways the story of the Old

[31 : 43] Testament is a tragic one. But through it all the story of the Old Testament is the story of a God who will not give up. We must never forget the miracle of Genesis chapter 4. Now I don't mean a miracle recorded in the chapter that isn't one. What I mean is the fact that it is a miracle that the Old Testament doesn't stop at Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis 3 humanity rebels against God. God could so easily have walked away. But the whole reason we have an Old Testament is because God does not give up. And everything that God does across the pages of Scripture from Noah to Abraham to Jacob right through the Old Testament and into the new with the coming of Jesus Christ is all because despite the brokenness in humanity and in the world around us God has never forgotten what he created you to be. He has never forgotten how precious you are and he will never give up on you. So if you are weary of a broken world around you if you feel lost and alone if you're confused and frustrated like many of us are if you feel like you've made so many mistakes and that God and everybody else has every reason to abandon you if you feel like that then you need to learn about the God who never gives up. You need to learn the story of the Old

Testament. Amen. Let us pray. Father thank you for your amazing creation. Thank you for what you have made us and for the amazing privileges that you've given us. We remember also our responsibilities and pray for your help to fulfill these. We acknowledge our sins before you but we thank you so much that you are the God who does not give up and how we pray that all the precious humans across the face of this earth how we pray that they would hear that that they would know you and that they would be saved. Please have mercy on us oh God you are our creator you are also our Savior and we love you. Amen.