

The God Who Creates

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[0 : 00] So our reading this morning, friends, is in Genesis chapter 1 verses 1 and 2. That's page number one in the church Bibles.

Please feel free to help yourself to one there on the table at the back. It's also on the screen and it's in the bulletin as well. Genesis 1 verse 1, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Amen and may God bless to us the reading of his own precious and most holy word. We've just finished our vision and values series here at St. C's on Sunday mornings, looking at our DNA, looking at the church that we want to be over the next five to ten years.

And now we're turning for the next seven weeks to the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. Foundations we're calling it. And because we've got seven weeks to look at these two chapters, we're able to slow down, take some depth, look pretty closely.

[1 : 15] So we just read first two verses today. That's all we'll think about today is the first two verses. I think, well, this is, this is, this is a fact. This is the most translated, the most published, and the most well-known sentence in human history.

In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth. It's so well-known that in 1968, Bill Anders on the Apollo 8 mission to the moon in orbit around the moon on Christmas Eve read Genesis 1, 1 and to the whole world.

But this, this verse that we're looking at today has been read from the moon, you know? How many books have been read from the moon? Not too many probably. But this has, it's, it's an enormous and well-known, famous sentence.

I think though that it is our modern instinct, as soon as we say, we're gonna, we're gonna talk about Genesis 1 for all of us probably to say, what is he gonna say about evolution?

What is he gonna say about the days of creation? What is he gonna say about how long all of it took? And we tend in our modern time to immediately think of Genesis 1 and 2 in the lens of faith versus science.

[2 : 28] And all the questions that come with that, Stephen Jay Gould, who was a very famous paleontologist in the U.S. that died about 20 years ago, he, he read this, that religion and science are two separate spheres.

They should never cross paths. Now, here's the translation of that. What he meant was, science tells you the truth, religion tells you myth and fantasy. That's what he meant.

And instead, I think one of the things we're gonna see more next week than this week, but throughout the whole series is that physics and biology are so important.

And they can tell you how something exists. And they can tell you the composition of that thing that exists. But they can never tell you why something exists.

They can never tell you who you are, what you're for, and what you should do today. And that's why religion and science are never at odds. They're always together, always. Because one can tell you what something is, but it can never tell you why.

[3 : 30] And when you come to Genesis 1, you have the why. You have that the world has created, that there is a creator, and later on we'll see in the series why you exist and what you're for.

And that's what Genesis 1 is here for. And so instead of immediately jumping to the faith and science thing, we're gonna try to just listen to the text and let it take us exactly to the places maybe that God wants us to see.

That the world was created, that there is a God who created it, and who we are and what we're for. That's really what Genesis 1 wants us to do, I think. And so Genesis 1 is a symphony.

It is a triumph of literature. It is the Word of the Lord. It's so important. Two things this morning from these two verses. First, there was a beginning.

Very important to say. Secondly, we'll think then about the God who made that beginning, just for a few minutes. So we're gonna spend most of our time a few minutes on the first point and then close on the second point.

[4 : 33] First, there was a beginning. The very first thing we read when you open page one of the Bible is in the beginning. This little prepositional phrase.

And in Hebrew, this little phrase is only one word. And this one word shows up four other times across the Old Testament. And when you read the scholars on this, they say something very important.

The grammar is difficult, but they say when you look at the grammar closely of this little prepositional phrase in the beginning, it's an absolute phrase. What do they mean by that?

Here's what they mean. They mean that it shouldn't be translated something like, when God began creating. Now, why does that matter?

And here's why it matters. Because if you say something like, when God began creating, there's an idea there that there's one thing that might have existed at the same time as God existed.

[5 : 32] And that is time. That in the beginning, there already was time. In the beginning, there was something existing alongside God, like space and time.

And God took the space and time and he wielded it and moved it around and made things out of it. And when they say that in the beginning is an absolute phrase, what they mean is it should be translated or understood something like, when time itself began.

So in the beginning, there was a beginning to the beginning. Yeah? In other words, in the beginning, God made time.

God made space. God made all the dimensions of existence. That's what this little phrase means. There is no pre-existent matter. There is nothing existing alongside God that he took like we take Legos and craft something else.

Not at all. That it's an absolute beginning by the absolute God. And then it says in the beginning, God quote, created. And last little bit of Hebrew focus here, but this word created, the text that stands behind the English is Hebrew.

[6 : 43] And in the Hebrew text, the original text, this word created is never used of any human being in the whole Bible. Only ever used of God. So sometimes we will talk, we will say, you know, I created a wonderful invention.

I created a Lego millennium Falcon this weekend. Right? That would have been a great weekend. I didn't actually do that, but it would have been fun.

You might say, I created a gorgeous cake for lunch today. The Bible never speaks like that. Never. It never uses the word creation for anybody but God.

It uses different words when we take stuff and make other stuff out of it. And that's to say, you put all this together and what you have is the doctrine, the pronouncement of Genesis one, that God created the world ex nihilo from nothing.

He created it from absolutely nothing. And so John Calvin, the great reformer, he says, created here means from nothing. And for the last couple hundred years, scholars in the academy have often laughed at that.

[7 : 51] They've said, you know, you can't open page one of the Bible and say, God definitely created the world from nothing. It doesn't say that. There's different ways you could translate it. There's different ways you could think, oh, there is something alongside God from the beginning that he wielded into creation.

And people, the scholars oftentimes made fun of Calvin's pronouncement until in the 20th century, the greatest 20th century Old Testament scholar.

This might be super boring to you, but Gerhardus von Rod, a Dutchman, thought to be the greatest voice of Old Testament scholarship. Not in any way in the lineage of John Calvin, far from it.

He came along and he writes this in his commentary. He says, the word created here means from nothing. There it is. Von Rod, the greatest of the academy.

He said it too. And now it's recognized. That's exactly the intention of Genesis one, one creation from nothing out of nothing. Now what does this mean? What does this matter to us?

[8 : 53] How does this matter? This is not new, of course, to anybody in this room that Christianity makes this claim, but it's really important to say this. Will you take a minute just to reflect on this with me?

And here it is. All that exists or has ever existed or ever will exist, including space and time and all the dimensions I have no idea how to talk about.

All of it was made, created by God, every bit of it. And that means everything. It means everything. Here's what it means.

On the one hand, it means nothing in this world, nothing in our existence is necessary. We are not necessary. None of us here today need to exist.

None of us who only God is necessary. None of us are. We're relative. On the one hand, on the other hand, it also means that the God who did not have to make anything chose to.

[9 : 50] And that means that while we are not necessary, we are so relative. On the other hand, we are not an accident. God was very purposeful in what he did. And when you put those two things together, here's what you can say about it, that creation, our existence, my existence, the existence of everything around us is a gift.

Prime reality, fundamental nature, the principle that is behind everything is a gift. Given. We don't own it.

It's given. And that is so unbelievably important. There is pretty much universal agreement nowadays that one of the things that Genesis One is doing, and we'll see more of this next week, is Moses is writing to repudiate, to argue against all the pagan cosmologies in the ancient world.

So stories of origin, origin stories from the ancient world. That's one of the reasons Genesis One is here to push back against them. And one of those is very well known now called the Anuma Ailish. It's the Babylonian story of creation. It's very, very old. It could go all the way back to the Tower of Babel about the same time. And we have many copies of it nowadays, and I read it this week.

[11 : 08] And it says that in the beginning, from the beginning, when there was no heaven and there was no earth, there were no gods, but there were two, Absu and Tiamat.

So these two prime gods. And then it says that they beget all the other gods, the many gods that exist. And then when they did that, all the gods started fighting each other and killing each other. And then a bunch of the gods teamed up against the two primal gods, especially Tiamat, and they killed Tiamat. And what happened was, is they cut her open and out of her body flowed the world, the earth.

And humans were told in the ancient Babylonian story came from the guts of Tiamat, the slain goddess. And so if you're living in the ancient Near East, the biggest, widest, most well-known story for why you exist is that you are an accident.

And you are the guts of a fallen goddess. And everybody in Babylon understood that human beings are the slave race to the gods. And all the ancient Near Eastern stories are like this.

[12 : 18] Now maybe you come from an Eastern religion, the Eastern religions, what do they say? Many of them, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, for example, they all say that in the beginning there were two great principles, good and evil, and they were battling it out.

And that's still what we're living under. If you go to the Greeks in the ancient world, they say that this world was an accident and that it's a prison. And so physicality, pleasure, comfort, good food, prison, and the goal of salvation, the goal of your life is to escape, is to get out of this, is to be an ascetic, to leave the comforts of the body, to live in the desert, to deny the flesh because the flesh is evil.

That's the Greek view. Come to the modern view, the modern scientific view. And the modern scientific consensus, as we're told, is that this world exists by way of chance along an infinite series, that you are an accident.

And in the beginning there was a dense, unimaginably hot singularity. That's the story. And that singularity has always existed.

It's eternal. And all of a sudden, out from it comes everything. Now in every one of these stories, here's what Carl Sagan says, the famous atheist in the States.

[13 : 35] He says, the cosmos is all that was and all that ever will be. It's all that was, it's all that ever will be. Now listen, Christianity comes in and says no and gives a different story to every single philosophy, every single religion.

The modern scientific consensus shifts it in a big way and it says this, the world is not necessary, but it is not an accident. It's a gift.

It's purposeful. And I think, I just want to say to you today, that acknowledging this basic truth will change your life. It will flip your life upside down.

Look if the pagan cosmology is right, you are an accident and a product of violence. If the Greek story is right, pleasure, physicality is evil.

If the Eastern principle between good and evil is right, then that means that fundamental reality is a violent conflict. And you do not know whether good or evil is going to win out.

[14 : 38] And if the modern scientific consensus is right, ever since at the beginning, the only reason that you're here is because your ancestors were better at killing.

You are a product of being read, everybody had to be read in tooth and claw. That's the only way the single cell organisms were going to win out and become humans. And look, if you look at every single philosophy, every single way of putting it, here's what we have.

One thing, the world is a product of violence. Every single origin story except Christianity. The world is a product of violence. And in the beginning, God created in the heavens and the earth comes to you and says, it is not a product of violence, it is a gift.

And that fundamental reality, prime reality is love, not violence, not conflict. Just think about it and we'll move on to the final point.

The modern scientific consensus, Carl Sagan, he says the world was a complete accident, a singularity that got too hot and blew up. And you are an accident on top of an accident, on top of an accident, read in tooth and claw, conflict after conflict after conflict, and that's why you're sitting here today.

[15 : 47] That's the only reason. And so love your neighbor. You know, treat everybody with equality.

Everybody deserves rights, human rights. We should all have rights. And you can see that it's a bad syllogism. One does not follow from the other. You know, our kids sing at school, all the kids in Edinburgh, maybe beyond the, what did they say?

They say, you are a star, just the way you are. I started to sing it, but I stopped myself because it would have been rough. But you, that's what we sing.

That's the school, that's the school music. You are a star. You're an accident. You're a product of conflict. That's the fundamental reality, but you're a star, right?

Let me just suggest, only Christianity makes real sense of this world. Only God, the maker of heaven and earth, can make sense of reality as you actually experience it.

[16 : 44] And boy, long for Carl Sagan and other, the many others and Dawkins to see this. If you deny the existence of the maker of heaven and earth, one of the greatest losses you have is the possibility of gratitude.

Gratitude in this life is the key to joy. But if you don't believe that God made the heavens and earth, who can you be grateful to? Relatively to your parents, relatively to a teacher, a coach, maybe, for a little while, until they upset you.

But who do you have to be grateful to? And gratitude is the key to all joy in this life. And friends, Christianity says there is a reason you can actually be grateful and get outside of yourself.

The world is a gift and gratitude is the only right response to that gift. I hope you know today, wherever you are in life right now, that you're not an accident.

The world says you are an accident. The consensus says you're an accident. You're not an accident. You're an object of the love of God, the maker of heaven and earth. And briefly, finally, the world had a beginning.

[17 : 52] God created the heavens and the earth. Secondly, let's think for just a moment about the God who created the heavens and the earth. Who is this God? We've already said some things.

He's necessary. We're not. He's purposeful. He created the world. It was not an accident. He's a gift giver. He's love, we could say, from the very beginning.

In the language of the interverse one is God made the heavens and the earth. And that's sort of like a title. It's like a superscript you see in the Psalms.

Heavens and earth there, everyone agrees, summarizes just everything that exists. Things that are up, things that are down. Things that are visible, things that are invisible. It's a double entendre in that way.

It just means everything. And so Terry Eagleton, this is maybe a way to summarize the whole of what we've just said. And he says, this is balm for all human arrogance.

[18:50] Because what we see here is the world is not our possession to be molded and manipulated as we please. No, God made the heavens and the earth. Now we've got a problem at my house.

And the problem is that we have public Lego boxes at our house. We have lots of boxes of Legos. Anybody can use them.

Anybody. We don't even play Legos. But what happens in our house is that certain people in our house build things from those Legos like spaceships.

And as soon as the next person who may or may not be of their flesh and blood comes along and takes apart pieces of that spaceship, because they need it for their spaceship, the first one comes and says, what are you doing?

I made it. It belongs to me. And they're bumping up against these two conflicting principles of a relative creatureliness. One is you can own stuff in this life.

[19:53] The other is, but none of it's ultimately yours. Right? You see that? We've also, it's hard to share in other words. That's the story. It's hard to share. We have to.

Now look, but we know the principle. We know the instinct of a five year old. I made it. It's mine. And there's something really true about that. And when you come to this passage, it says God made the heavens and the earth.

He made everything. And let me just say, what do we learn about this God? We learn that he is absolute. He can do that. And if he can do that, if he made it, he owns it.

Only the absolute God could claim total ownership over that, which he has made. And that we see that he's King. He's almighty. He owns it.

Second thing we learn here in final thing. And at the same time, in verse two, we're told the very first thing in the creation act is the spirit of God came down and hovered over the face of the deep.

[20:53] We'll come back to the language of formless and void next week. So I'm not skipping over that, but let me just focus on this as we close. The spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep. That's the next thing we say.

The world in the beginning was a watery surface. That's what we're being told. And the spirit of God condescended and hovered. That's the word that's used now. This word hovered to flutter or hover is only used one other time in the exact form that we see here.

And that's in Deuteronomy 32 verse 11 exact same verb by the same author, Moses. And it's a reference there to an eagle or to a bird.

It could be any number of birds, a mother bird who has hovering over her young. And it says that the eagle, like an eagle nourishes her children.

It's the same exact verb. And so the metaphor that we're being given here in the beginning is that the Holy Spirit of God came down and hovered like a bird, a mother bird who nourishes, who cares for, who protects.

[21:57] And so what we see here is two things. One, the God who is absolute and holy other, who has the power to make everything and own it is the same God who immediately comes close and shows up like in nourishment, in protection, who wants to be near unto us.

And so immediately you see why were you created? And the very first thing we learned from verse two is this. The God who made you is the God who wants to know you.

Is the God who wants to be close to you. Is the God who wants to be in your presence and you and his. That's the very first principle we learn from the beginning. Now Christopher Watkin, one recent writer, he says it like this.

If the world had a beginning, then reality is shaping up from page one of the Bible to look remarkably like a story.

See the very first word that we have in the Bible is the beginning. That's the first word. And that means that we're about to read a whole book, this book, that says, that suggests the world, the history of the world is a story.

[23:04] And if you have a beginning, you know, if you've got a beginning, you're going to have a middle, you're going to have an end. And so the reason that we see our whole lives in the form of narrative, in the form of story, history in the form of narrative, in the form of story is because God created the world to be a story.

A history is story. There's a beginning, there's a middle, and there's an end. And the story is simply this. God made this world and he owns it and he gave us this gift of life to return gratitude towards him, to be near him as he wants to be unto us.

And we are not grateful. That's the story of the world. God made us to be infinitely grateful to him, and we're just not grateful.

And so from the very beginning, we replaced gratitude with unbelief, gratitude with dishonor. Gratitude with hatred for God.

Gratitude with everything that is its opposite. And that's the story of the world. I know that I was chatting with somebody this week connected to our congregation and one of the things they mentioned to me was they had grown up in the church and one thing they really struggled with, maybe this is you today, was the idea of sin.

[24 : 23] A lot of people in our city will struggle with the concept of sin. And to understand that, for them, they said, you know, sin, when I hear the word sin in a pulpit from a church, the thing that it raises in my mind and heart is someone dressed very formally who is very angry pointing their finger at me.

You know, the sinners, the good people and the bad people. But that, let me just say, that's culture. That is not what the Bible means by sin.

And here's what the Bible means by sin, maybe I'll frame it this way. Have you really thought about this? Imagine an orphan, a little bitty baby, who is left for dead, disowned, not wanted at all.

And that baby is rejected and left to die in the cold. And in the night, a man and a woman, a future mom and dad, they come along in the street and they see this little baby wrapped up in this basket, left to die.

And they pick him up and they bring him home. And they don't have a lot, but they make a go of it and they adopt this little baby and they nurse him back to health and they scrap and they scrape throughout their lives to give the baby everything it needs and he grows up and he becomes a little boy and he becomes a kid.

[25 : 52] And they sort of go to the ends of their means to love this child. And they say, we want you to do great things in life, but you know what? We love you no matter what.

Unconditional love here. So no matter what you end up doing in your job, in your career, you have our love. And years later, one day, the phone rings and this young man, this middle-aged man, he gets the call and they say, it's you.

You're the prime minister of the United Kingdom now. You've just won the Nobel Peace Prize. Pick your great achievement. And you say, wow, what a story.

Left for dead and a little orphan and now look at the prime minister of the United Kingdom. And you find out that this young man, this middle-aged man who's become this, a month goes by, a week goes by, a year goes by and he never called.

He never picked up the phone and called mom and dad to say thank you. Never. Didn't acknowledge him. And you would say, would you say something like, you know, he is a great person.

[26 : 59] He's achieved a lot, but boy, he's an ungrateful sinner. You say in your heart, you know, you would say, you would recognize, how could you not call your mom and dad and say, thank you so much.

You saved my life. You rescued me. You gave me everything. You would say that he lacks gratitude. And I think if you look down at the bottom of your soul and push away every sense of sin that the culture has offered you and just simply say this, God made everything and he owns it and it's all a gift that maybe you'd be able to recognize the truth in your life.

I am ungrateful. I have rebelled. I do not acknowledge him in the way he deserves. The middle of the story, the story has a beginning, middle and end and then the middle.

God himself, the maker of heaven and earth became a wiggly little baby to do exactly what the spirit did over the waters and Genesis one, two, to get close to you. To make a way, to fix it.

And do you know that at the cross, Jesus Christ, Son of God, we'll see this next week, the maker of heaven and earth himself, the very word of creation. He was decreed.

[28 : 14] The one who had the power to create, he underwent utter chaos. He was decreed. He got everything that never should have been at the cross.

Creation that God would dwell with humanity forever. Jesus lost it. He took our place in that. He took our ungratitude, our lack of gratitude. He took our sin.

He took our injustice. And he was decreated at the cross so that today, well, can you say today, despite my indifference, despite my rebellion, despite my lack of gratefulness to the Lord, I can say today, my father, almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, my God.

That's an invitation. Let's pray. Father, maker of heaven and earth, we thank you. We come before you now and just repent and confess our lack of gratitude.

We forget. We don't care. We are indifferent. Lord, we run away from and we suppress the truth that you made us and we are yours. And so, Father, I just pray today that you would strike us in the best possible way in the heart and reframe us that we would know we are recipients, stewards, not masters and owners of this life.

[29 : 30] Boy, how that would change our lives. Lord, bring it to us. Lord, that we might stop saying my rights, my choices, my life to do with whatever we please.

Lord, take that away from us. Take away our self-centeredness and return to us a heart of stewardship. And we pray for this in Jesus' name.

Amen.