

“The Creation”
Genesis 1:1-2:3

April 12, 2015

SI: We’re going to take a break from our study of the Gospel of John.

For the next few months, I’m going to preach on Genesis chapters 1 through 11. John Calvin said that every Christian ought to know three chapters of the Bible inside and out—Genesis 3, Romans 3, and John 3.

Genesis 3 is about what went wrong, mankind’s fall into sin.

Romans 3 is about how God is setting things right, his plan of salvation.

John 3 is about how Jesus Christ, the son of God, came to accomplish that plan.

We could expand Calvin’s thought and say that those three books of the Bible—Genesis, John, and Romans are the most important for the Christian faith.

Not that the other books of the Bible aren’t inspired or valuable—

but these are the three that are absolutely foundational to understanding life in this world God has made and how we are to see it.

INTRO: If you go to Lowes, there is a rack of How To books just as you walk in the door—every sort of do-it-yourself project you can dream of.

How to lay tile.

How to build sheds.

How to do electrical wiring.

How to raise chickens.

Let’s imagine you pick up a book titled “How to Have a Perfect Lawn.”

What would you expect to find in that book?

Types of grasses, fertilizer, weed poison—that sort of thing.

You wouldn’t expect to find chapters on photosynthesis, or the cellular structure of plants, or long Latin classifications.

You wouldn’t take it back to Lowes for a refund because it didn’t answer all the questions for your college botany class.

It’s not that the book contradicts botanical science, but it’s written for an entirely different purpose than to answer scientific questions.

It is written to tell you how to have a perfect lawn, so you can enjoy the pleasure of cool, green grass under your toes.

Here’s the point: The creation story of Genesis has a purpose, it has an agenda.

It’s not intended to be a scientific textbook.

It's not in conflict with science, in spite of what some people say—
but it was written to answer more profound questions about life in this world.
Over the years I've preached on Genesis chapters 12 through 50.
But I've never tackled chapters 1 through 11.
The reason is I've never felt up to the task.
These chapters are so grand and so packed with important themes and doctrines
that I didn't think I could do them justice. And I still don't.

And there is another reason I've been reluctant to preach these chapters.
A lot of the discussion about Genesis in Christian circles in recent years
has been issues like the length of creation days, age of the earth.
Were the days of Genesis 24 hour days, or long ages of time?
Is the world 10,000 years old or is it 4.5 billion years old?
Christians and Christian organizations come down strongly on different sides.
Often say, if you don't adopt our view, you've abandoned Christianity.
I'm not talking about Darwinian evolution. There is no debate there.
That's a belief system that utterly contradicts Genesis.

These other debates that have produced so much heat are intramural debates.
It's mostly Christians duking it out with other Christians.
I've read books on both sides. But I don't have firmly held views.
So I've shied away from these early chapters. What will I say about days, etc?
I feel intellectually incapable of addressing those questions in sermons.
But I've decided to go for it and preach on these chapters anyway.

And one of the main reasons is that several months ago I read a good book,
recommended to me by Dr. Nyquist, called *The First Chapters of Everything*.
The author, Alasdair Paine, is a pastor in Cambridge, England.
And in his book he focuses like a laser on the question:
What is the purpose of Genesis, especially these early chapters?
He says unapologetically: It's not to answer these sorts of intramural Christian
questions about the length of creation days or the age of the earth.
Not that they are unimportant, but they can distract us from the real purpose.

Here's how he puts it:

“The opening chapters of Genesis interpret and account for universal human experience. They explain why life is such a strange mixture of the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the tragic, the fulfilling and the frustrating. They show us why our world is orderly—the basic truth

underpinning all science—and yet also strangely disordered. They dig into who we are, and what makes us distinctive as humans. They tell us what the good life is, and where to find it. Above all, they introduce us to God: not as a distant, hazy being but in breathtakingly sharp focus. Genesis shows us how he made us to know him, but also how this most important of relationships has gone wrong. And these chapters also hint of a solution which is more radical, intelligent and effective than we could ever have dreamt.”

And what I really appreciate about Alasdair Paine’s book is that he sees Genesis, from the very first chapter, as pointing to Jesus Christ.

Christ-centered preaching, grace-centered preaching. That’s what we love.

So I’m going to piggyback on his good book for my sermon series.

You ought to consider reading it yourself.

It’s short and you could read it for your devotions.

So let’s look at this grand opening passage of Genesis. It has a two-fold purpose.

1. To challenge all false gods
2. To introduce us to the one true God

MP#1 The creation story of Genesis challenges all false gods

Bible scholars in recent years have noticed more and more how this opening creation story is a literary masterpiece that deliberately attacks the prevailing pagan views of the Ancient Near East about the origin of the world.

There is a name for this kind of literature. It’s a polemic.

A polemic is a strong written or verbal attack.

That’s what the first chapter of Genesis is.

It is a strong written attack on the predominant pagan creation views of its day.

Let’s back up a little bit and set the stage.

Who wrote Genesis? The Bible tells us it was written by Moses.

He wrote it around 1500 years before Christ.

He may have used oral traditions or written accounts passed down by God’s people through the generations before. It would seem that Abraham and the patriarchs had a knowledge of the true creation story, even if didn’t have Genesis. But Moses was the one who put it in the written form we have today.

And the first people who read it were the Israelites.

Israel was a new nation. They had just come out of Egypt.

They were a small nation of former slaves.

They were surrounded, in the Ancient Near East, by large, sophisticated, educated

pagan nations that had their own views and beliefs about the origin of the world. Genesis takes on those pagan views and beliefs. Let's get down to some details.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

God. One God. The Creator.

All the nations of the Ancient Near East were polytheistic.

They believed in many gods who ruled over various aspects of the world. But Genesis asserts that there is only one supreme God.

Furthermore, Genesis has no interest at all in where God came from. The creation stories of the Ancient Near East talk about the origin of the gods from primordial forces. Genesis takes his eternal existence for granted.

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

The pagan creation stories started with chaos, and how by doing battle with the forces of chaos, the gods brought forth the world.

Genesis starts with God creating formless material, and then out of that forming it into something orderly and good.

That's the way he always works. That's how he has worked in each of our lives. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

In the pagan creation accounts, the world emerges from the gods and it does so out of a scene of tremendous conflict between opposing forces.

Nothing could be more different from the way God creates.

First it is in his mind, then he speaks and it comes into existence.

It is highly personal. There is no strife, no resistance, no forces of good and evil. God's power is absolute. Everything is calm.

And look at the orderliness of the creation.

Six days arranged in two groups of three that compliment each other.

The first three days speak of the separation of the elements into two spheres.

The second three days fill those spheres.

Day One separates light from darkness. Day Four fills them with sun, moon stars.

Day Two separates sea from sky. Day Five fills them with fish and birds.

Day Three separates land from sea. Day Six fills them with animals and people.

And as God separates and fills he also names.

Which is a way of confirming his absolute ownership.

And he gives to his creation the power to generate and reproduce life.

All of this is radically different from the pagan view of the Ancient Near East.

They deified and worshipped these different spheres of nature and their power.
There were storm gods and fertility gods.
But not Genesis. Here all of nature is subject to the Creator God.
He determines its place. He gives it purpose and power.

This is dramatically illustrated in the fourth day.
Did you notice when the sun and moon are created, not mentioned by name?
They are just called the greater light and the lesser light?
Why is that? Because the sun and moon were primary deities of in the ANE.
All the pagan nations worshipped them.
Genesis deliberately does not even name them.
That's a powerful way of saying that they are not gods—
they are creations of the One True God and are merely light-givers for mankind.
God made them to serve us, not the other way around.

And also on the fourth day is that simple line—“He also made the stars.”
It's almost a throwaway line. Oh yeah, he also made the stars.
Astrology was part of the pagan world view. The stars govern our destiny.
Genesis says no—they are merely lights for man's enjoyment. Not fates, forces.
And there are many other examples we don't have time to point out.
So why is this important to us?
How does it help us to know Genesis 1 is a trumpet blast
against the prevailing creation myth of the Ancient Near East?
Because that is always the role Genesis 1.
It opposes the dominant creation myths and false gods of every age, even our own.

Back then it was that the world came into existence by battles of the gods,
forces of order overcame forces of chaos and produced the something.
Today the myth is materialism and Darwinism.
The world came into existence by random, chance happenings of matter and
energy, and life sprang from blind forces and evolves through random mutations.

So we shouldn't be surprised that Genesis will always be controversial.
There is a lot at stake with creation myths. People are invested in them.
They build their lives upon them. That's why they defend them so vigorously.
George Bernard Shaw wisely said “the world leaped at Darwin.”
A great many people desperately wanted a creation story without a creator God.
Because that means I'm god. I'm the master of my life and answer to no one.

I determine my own morals and identity.
Folks aren't going to give that up without a fight.
They feel threatened by the truth claims of Genesis.

So whether it is 1500 years before Christ and the time of Moses
or 2000 years after Christ in our day, the creation story of Genesis 1
challenges the prevailing view and brings us face to face with our Creator.

That brings us to the next point . . .

MP#2 The creation story of Genesis introduces us to the true God

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Who is this God?

It's impossible not to bring all our biblical and theological knowledge to bear when
we read Genesis 1. We're read this thinking about Jesus. But let's try for a
minute to look at the creation story with fresh eyes and ask—

What are the very first things it tells us about God?
What did God want to communicate about himself
in this first written record of his revelation?

Alasdair Paine has an early chapter in his book titled “Meet Your Maker.”

He identifies four characteristics of God that stand out in the creation story.
First, God is personal.

He speaks. He sees. He acts. He gives names. He blesses.
He takes pleasure (he sees that all is very good). He rests.
These are all things that persons do.

So God is not just a force, or an impersonal power.

Several of the Founding Fathers of our country were Deists, like Jefferson.
The deists used the image of God as a clockmaker who wound things up,
set natural laws in place to govern universe, then left the room.

Many religions and philosophies view God in a similar way—
as an impersonal force or power.

But in Genesis, the Creator God is a personal being. He sees me in a personal way.

When I was a child, there was a song we sang in Sunday school.

O be careful little eyes what you see, O be careful little eyes what you see;

There's Father up above who is looking down in love. O be careful little eyes what you see.
O be careful little lips what you say . . . little feet where you go, little hands what you do.
The Fatherhood of God not yet revealed, but He is a person who sees me.

And that brings us to the second characteristic. He is a God who speaks.
Genesis definitely wants us to get this. Nine times the expression is used:
“And God said.”

Why is this so important? Because if God speaks, that means we can know him.

Have you ever called a service number and gotten a computer?

Not an answering machine, but one that says: What is the purpose of your call?

If it's about an order, say “Order.”

If it's about billing, say “Billing.”

Isn't that maddening! You say: I want to talk to a real person!

Even if it's someone in a call center in Bangalore, better than a machine!

When I speak with a person there is a meeting of the minds.

And 258 times in the Bible the phrase is used: “the word of the Lord.”

This is a fundamental truth about God that is so important it is introduced
in the very first chapter of the Bible in the creation story itself.

God speaks—and he speaks to us—so we can know him.

The third characteristic of God revealed in the creation story is that he is sovereign.

He is in absolute control of all things.

This is emphasized in several ways.

Seven time we are told that God saw all that he had made and it was good.

That means it came out exactly as he wanted it to come out..

Unlike my home improvement projects that never quite turn out like I had hoped.
His sovereignty is also emphasized in that he merely speaks for things to happen.

And God said, and it was so . . . is the way Genesis puts it.

Even in the human realm we recognize that the more powerful a person is,

the greater weight his words carry. He tells his minions to get it done, it happens.

But look what God controls.

He gathers together whole oceans. He brings continents into being.

His making of the stars described as almost an afterthought.

And as I already pointed out, this was a criticism of astrology—

the belief that stars control our destiny. No, God who made the stars controls all.

Even though we live in this world and are subject to natural forces, those forces are entirely in the hand of God. He directs them.

Now we come to the fourth characteristic of God in the creation story.

He is the God who brings light and order.

There is much that is mysterious in this first chapter.

It is told in such broad strokes and with such grand style that it leaves us wanting lots of details to be filled in.

One of those places is verse 2.

“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.

What does that mean? Is this first material God made before formed earth?

Is this some sort of pre-creation creation? What are the waters? What is the deep?

Whatever it is, it sets the stage for what happens next.

And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Out of this darkness, out of this emptiness and formlessness—

God brings order and light. That’s who he is.

That’s what he delights to do.

He’s the God who sorts things out that are confused and who illuminates darkness.

Isn’t this exactly what he has done in our lives through Jesus? Paul thought so.

Look at the verse on the front of the bulletin.

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

When Paul was looking for a way to talk about the power of God in Jesus to change our lives, he went right back to the very first verses of Genesis.

Alasdair Paine puts it this way:

“Are we a bit too early in Genesis to be talking of God’s capacity to reorder broken lives? After all, do won’t get on to a world that needs rescuing until Genesis 3. But perhaps Genesis just cannot wait to start pointing us to the God who alone can deal with the state we are in. For a messy world is where we live, and any thoughtful person will long for an answer.”

And we know the answer:

The personal God who made this world, who speaks to us through his Word and Spirit, who has communicated to us fully in his Son Jesus, wants to come into your life and bring light and order.

Have you opened your heart to him? Have you asked him to come in?

He made you. He sees you. You can know him.

For all of you who do know him and have experienced his illuminating work—
drink deeply of this creation story, the foundation of all we believe,
and worship your creator God.