

In the Beginning

Genesis 1:1

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

¹ בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

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Introduction

Significant Words: The Bible opens with seven Hebrew words in one of the most beautifully poetic, succinct, and powerful sentences in history.

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- In these few words, God sets the stage and lays the foundation for the story he is telling. We see that story told clearly through his Word, the Bible. These words are an introduction to the Bible and the description of God's creative work in Jesus. They make sense of his design, his plan, and the current state of affairs in which we find ourselves.
- These words are a description of reality.

Genesis: This is a book of beginnings, a book of origins. The first eleven chapters serve as the historical foundations for the people of God. They set the stage for the covenant of God and explain the purpose of his creation and how it all fell apart. This is the opening of the story of God. These seven words are the introduction to the first foundational section of the first book of the most important part of the Bible of which the rest of the Bible is interpreted and explained by the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and the church).

- Let's remember that the Bible is a book (book of books). It is divinely inspired *literature*. Amid its incredibly diverse authors, genres, context, time periods, etc. is the **cohesive story of God**.
- It is really important to a story to understand not only the *end* but the *beginning*. The end might give you the resolution but the beginning helps you understand the what and (more importantly) the why.
- All of us exist in life like "a scientist on a boat in the ocean trying to study the ocean" (Bockmuehl). God's revelation through his word allows us to understand more clearly who we are and how we got there. It helps us to see things we can't see any other way.
- And it just makes sense. When you're teaching a kid Algebra you don't open up to Chapter 6 and expect them to understand. You start from the beginning because **it all builds on itself**. Many Christians are like this with the OT (e.g., Matt 1:1, cf. "son of David, son of Abraham; or Jn 1:1, "in the beginning was the Word").
 - This grand story of Scripture is better than bare propositional facts at equipping us, challenging us, and shaping our lives (cf. Wright).

On the Banks of the Jordan River: And these words serve a foundational role for God's people. Imagine yourself as a member of God's people, the Israelites. You've just escaped from

slavery in Egypt, wandered through the desert, and are now on the banks of the Jordan River about to cross into the land of Canaan. You've been in this place before with Pharaoh's army on one side and the Red Sea on the other, but it doesn't make it easier. You know the covenant that God made to Abraham to make your people great but you're scared.

- **Looking back to Egypt.** What God reminds his people is just how unique their position is. In Egypt, they were under the rule of Pharaoh, who, like many kings in history, claimed divinity for himself. Though his obvious lack of divinity was betrayed by his capricious and arbitrary nature. And he wasn't *the* God but merely *a* god. Egypt was full of idols in the form of bulls, rams, crocodiles, etc. that represented a myriad of gods. Each god controlling some facet of life and needing to be worshipped and appeased.
- **Looking ahead to Canaan.** Moving ahead into Canaan, the Israelites were confronted by a variety of people worshipping a variety of capricious deities. All of these deities claim some level allegiance.
- **Can't Go Back, Can't Go Forward:** So behind them is the oppressive bondage and idolatry of Egypt and ahead of them is the promised land, occupied by a completely different set of idolaters.

But Moses is reminding the people of God that their identity and their path is different than these people because they do not worship false gods made of wood and clay but the one true God who created all things. **There is only one God**, whose word is almighty. He has only to speak and the world comes into being. The sun and moon are not gods in their own right but are created by the one God. This God does not need feeding by man, as the surrounding nations believed they did by offering sacrifices, but he supplies man with food. God cannot be manipulated by human gifts not does he destroy from annoyance or pettiness.

Against Idols: One of the often-overlooked and most significant functions of the Torah is its polemic against idolatry (e.g., *Against the Gods*). This is the point of the prophet Jeremiah when he reflects on God as creator amid the idols of the land: "Thus shall you say to them: 'The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens'" (Jer 10:11). And the Psalmist: "For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (Ps 96:5).

- The Bible is not simply "monotheistic" it is "anti-polytheistic."
- Creation is not a conflict between various competing gods (like the surrounding nations envisioned).

The Way Forward is Back: The Israelites live in a world dominated by superpowers like Egypt. They live in a world of competing gods and demanding idols and they are trying to obey the calling of God as his chosen people to be blessed, to be a blessing, to inherit a land where they can dwell and experience his goodness in that land.

- If they can't go back to Egypt or the wilderness they must go forward. But forward seems impossibly difficult. What does God do? He reminds them of **the beginning** because, in the beginning, they can make sense of the end.

- This is why we must pause and “remember.” We need to refocus on the foundational truth of all existence. We don’t serve a general deity, one of the many options of idolatry, but *the* creator of the universe.
- Whatever “new thing” God is doing flows out of his character and being revealed in creation. **The way forward is to go back to the beginning.**

Who is God? Who Am I? Why Are Things the Way They Are?: The better we understand God, the better we understand ourselves because *he created us* (along with all things).

- He is the hero of the story (we can compare ourselves to other people and maybe find a few against which we display more mercy, kindness, love, etc. but not when compared to God. God is the only perfect measuring stick against which we can accurately discern who we are.
 - The knowledge of God and the knowledge of self go hand-in-hand.
- And, like the Israelites, we have a choice whether we will worship the God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who took on flesh and dwelt with us -OR- the god of the nations and the idols of our culture.
 - We still have this choice.

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1. Creation tells the story of God. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Reality is the Story of God: It is too important of a point to overlook because of it’s obviousness but creation (by definition) points to the creator. **God made us and all things.**

- A good painting or a good story serve a purpose, they bring beauty and make a point. But to ask the question “what did the author mean when they said...” or “what did the artist communicate by...” shows the silliness of trying to determine anything about from its **created purpose.**

Anti-Narcissism: This should disabuse all of us of our narcissistic tendencies. When all we have is ourselves as the lens through which to interpret the world, we end up with no ability to work together to a greater purpose.

- As one hilariously observant teacher and speaker once remarked at a high school graduation: “Across the country no fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating.” That’s approximately 37,000 high schools. 37,000 valedictorians. 340,000 swaggering jocks... “Even if you are 1 in a million, there are at least 7,000 [people] just like you. Your planet, I’ll remind you, is not the center of your solar system. Your solar system is not the center of your galaxy. Your galaxy is not the center of the universe. In fact, astrophysicists assure us, the universe has no center. Therefore, you cannot be it. Neither can Donald Trump (someone should tell him)...”
- **You and I are not the point.** All of this was made by God and for God.

The Bible is the Story of Reality: The Bible is a book about God. If we want to know ourselves then we need to focus on knowing him. I promise, if you open your Bible to see God you will see the world, humanity, and yourself more clearly. However, if you open the Bible to first and foremost see yourself you will be tempted to turn and twist the Bible to confirm what you want to believe and support what you already feel. You will become your own idol and will try to twist the Bible to do your bidding.

- And what a terrible story it would be if I was in the center of it. I surely can't be the hero that our world needs. I surely cannot find hope and salvation in my own pettiness.
- But this story is about the infinite, eternal, loving God who created all things out of an overflow of his love. His creation beautiful reflects his glory and experiences a loving relationship with him. We'll learn that the selfishness of his creation (humanity) to disobey and fail to trust perverted creation with sin. But rather than throw it away he came to rescue us by paying the penalty of our sin and restoring us to relationship with him. So now, we can trust him and have eternal life.
- So the story of God starts with perfect creation worshiping in a garden-sanctuary and ends with redeemed creation worshiping around the throne in a new garden.
- So if we are going to be a **people** fit for the journey ahead of us we need to know this story. We need to know where we come from and where we're going.

"In his book *The Mission of God*, Chris Wright shows that the [story of the Bible] is 'all about'... God's mission to save a people for himself through Jesus Christ... This radical, God-centered perspective, 'turns inside out and upside down some of the common ways in which we are accustomed to think about the Christian life... It constantly forces us to open our eyes to the big picture, rather than shelter in the cozy narcissism of our own small worlds'" (Chester, 35).

- We ask, "Where does God fit into the story of my life?" when the real question is "Where does my life fit into the great story of God's mission?"
- We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives, when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.
- We talk about "applying the Bible to our lives." **What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible** instead, [understanding] the Bible to be the reality—the real story—to which we are called to conform ourselves?
- I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should be asking **what kind of me God wants for his mission**.

Deeply Theological: The Hebrew Bible starts with the most profound theological statement. That "God created all things" is deeply theological. There are scholars who argue that Judaism isn't really theological at all (cf. it's all about action, obedience, laws, rituals, tradition, etc.). I just don't know how one could make an observation like that from the text of the Hebrew Bible.

- "Theology" (i.e., "the study of God") seems to be basically "who is God and what is his gospel" (a.k.a., his story)? What is the story God is telling?

- That's why the foundation of obedience is the declaration of God as "I am." It is the eternal existence, the being of God that precedes everything else. **Who he is** comes before anything he does or anything we are called to do.
- If we do not know God rightly we cannot worship him rightly. And worst, if we worship false gods we are worshipping idols (i.e., created things).

2. Creation Proves the Eternality of God. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Beginning of Everything: In this verse, we see the *beginning* of all things is created by God. God existed before the beginning. He has always existed. He is the only thing to exist eternally. God alone eternal and all else owes its origin and existence to him.

Unbound: Think about this, God is eternal. God is outside of time. God created time (insert *mind blown* here). We have a hard time understanding this because we are so bound by time (definition of finite). I am a slave to my schedule (my iPhone and iCal are my brain. We are late (the NRBC bus is always 10 minutes late). We have to use our time carefully. We have to budget our time. Time is a scarce resource for us.

- God has never been late, he's never been early. There's no project that God started he won't finish on time. There is never something that God leaves incomplete. We serve an "on time" God.

On Time God: God is never late, you can trust him to be on time in our lives. Your limitations should only further push you to trust God.

- "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" (Ecc. 3:11).
- "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5a).
- Too often we are trapped in our pasts or worried about our futures. God is neither. He is not stuck in your past and he knows your future.
- You can't thwart God's covenantal promises. His plans and promises are not thrown off because he knows the future.

Omniscient: I am often reminded of just how little I know. No matter how hard I try and plan, we can't see everything. News story of family that named their daughter Elizabeth Anya Jane. When she turned 2 and they started calling her "Liz" it became a problem (Liz Anya = Lasagna). Why would we place our trust in our own knowledge, righteousness, plans, intuitions, perceptions, etc.? But we can place our trust in God! He knows everything because he created it all.

Eternal Love: Because God is eternal then we have an eternal basis and unchanging foundation for his love. The Psalmist made this connection as well: We give our thanks and

praise “to him who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 136:5).

- As God reveals himself in Scripture we see just how true this is. God is an eternally loving God. We see this, for example, in the eternal love of the Father for the Son.
 - I was talking to some Jehovah Witnesses that visited our house a few months ago. I understood in vivid detail just how shallow their understanding of God was because they didn’t understand the Trinity. Because God is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit his love within the Trinity is eternal. They believe Jesus, though the most important created being, is, nonetheless, a created being. Therefore, the eternal loving relationship of God as Father came into being when he created his son. Think about it, there was a time that I was not a Father. I did not possess the love of others as a Father until my son was born. JW’s view God the same way.
 - If Jesus, as they wrongly claim, was *created* then there was a time when God was eternally alone, having no one else to love. His Fatherly love then is not eternal but created, limited in time.
 - “Such are the problems with non-triune gods and creation. Single-person gods, having spent eternity alone, are inevitably self-centered beings, and so it becomes hard to see why they would ever cause anything else to exist. Wouldn’t the existence of a universe be an irritating distraction for the god whose greatest pleasure is looking in a mirror? Creating just looks like a deeply unnatural thing for such a god to do. And if such gods do create, they always seem to do so out of an essential neediness or desire to use what they create merely for their own self-gratification. [But] everything changes when it comes to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Here is a God who is not essentially lonely, but who has been loving for all eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit. Loving others is not a strange or novel thing for this God at all; it is at the root of who he is.” Love is part of God’s eternal nature.

3. Creation shows us the care of God. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

(1) We belong to God. As creatures, we are “guests in God’s creation” (Jen Wilkin illustration of a hotel vs. staying in someone’s home). We should care about all of creation. It still boggles my mind that we treat our cars and furniture better than we treat some of the people created by God.

- More than that. Since God created, everything we have comes from him. All earthly power is delegated by God. There isn’t one political or military leader, one empire in history, one celebrity or religious official that has any power on their own. It is all derivative, secondary, flowing from God.
- Colossians 1:16-17
- For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col 1:16-17).

- Don't try to get God to submit to your agenda, submit to his agenda. God doesn't need creation (he needs nothing).
 - God is impervious to blackmail. You can't get him to do what you want by giving him your worship and love. He deserves your worship and love and is worthy of your worship and love but he has everything he needs in himself. He is not lacking anything. (can't be blackmailed by your worship/love. Has everything he needs inside of himself (e.g., *contra* my kids earning things or losing things based on behavior).

(2) We are loved by God. Remember our talk about adoption into God's family last week? Adoption is a benefit of the gospel that is central to the character of God's love. We didn't need to adopt because we were lacking anything from our other children. We chose to adopt as an outflow of our love. We receive plenty of love in return but not to fill a hole that is missing but as an overflow of the creation of a new member of our family. God doesn't need you (e.g., "you shaped hole in his heart") but he *wants* you.

- "Creation is about the spreading, the diffusion, the outward explosion of [God's] love. [He] is the very opposite of greedy, hungry, selfish emptiness; in his self-giving he naturally pours forth life and goodness. He is, then, the source of all that is good, and that means he is not the sort of God who would call people to himself away from happiness in good things. Goodness and ultimate happiness are to be found with him, not apart from him... Indeed, in the triune God is the love behind all love, the life behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty and the joy behind all joy... So next time you look up at the sun, moon and stars and wonder, remember: they are there because God loves, because the Father's love for the Son burst out that it might be enjoyed by many. And they remain there only because God does not stop loving. He is an attentive Father who numbers every hair on our heads, for whom the fall of every sparrow matters; and out of love he upholds all things through his Son, and breathes out natural life on all through his Spirit" (Reeves).

(3) We are valuable to God. Every human creative endeavor is shadow of God's creativity (I can imitate, riff off of, etc. in graphic design). God started with nothing! Every clever biochemical mechanism and every unique celestial feature came from nothing. We have colors, patterns, visuals to work with. We have letters, rhymes, and previous creations to give us inspiration. He had nothing but himself! We've never created like that.

- Yet imagine how much something means to us that we've created. I value things I create (e.g., book, art, kids, construction, etc). My kids art is valuable because of who made it. The value of the art is determined by the identity of the artist (e.g., Picasso).
- Human value is derived from God. Creation matters and (as we'll see in a couple weeks) people matter because they've been created by God. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (Declaration of Independence). If the founding fathers, most who did not have a view of God or Scripture as robust as I'm describing, see the "self-evident" nature of

human rights, then Christians, of all people, should be at the forefront of fighting for justice because we value the people God created.

- The recent discussion of racism, anti-white supremacy, etc. We all have a moral compass. We all believe things are “right” and “wrong” but without a clear understanding of morality as rooted in God’s design, being, etc. it will shift and change, we will swap one culturally created idol for another.

Conclusion

So What?: *Where do you come from? Why are you here? Why does it matter?* Everything that exists was created from God and for God. Creation points to the intelligence, power, and design of God our creator. As a result, creation acts as reflection of God’s glory, it is derivative (reflective). It doesn’t point to itself but points to God, it glorifies God. Imagine a painting telling you how beautiful, smart, creative, and talented it is. That’s how we sound as humans when we toot our own horns and point to ourselves. We are created to declare his glory. Your purpose is to be a megaphone for the glory of God. Don’t run around megaphoning the wrong thing.

- All of creation points to the glory of God. The Grand Canyon, the Aurora Borealis, the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains have no problem giving testimony of God’s creative power and eternal glory. Why do we struggle to testify to God?
- “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” (Rev. 4:11).

God’s creation proves his love for you and instills inherent value in each of us. Now, we have the opportunity to glorify him. That’s the call. Will you live for the purpose you were created to reflect and magnify the glory of God?