

Origins: God

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, I really enjoy going to the cinema to watch movies, and if you ever go to the cinema, you know that it is crucial to be there for the start of the film. And you can ask my family about my obsession about being seated in the cinema well before the film starts. It annoys them, but I think it is essential. And I actually find it frustrating, even on the verge of leaving the cinema, if I miss even a scene at the beginning or a piece of dialogue, I just can't cope.

And you understand why, because if you miss the start, if you miss a bit, then you're kind of lost as to what is going on. And it does just spoil the whole cinematic experience for me if I miss some.

Now, obviously, Genesis chapters 1 to 3 are at the beginning of the Bible, but they are also the beginning of everything else. And so we read in Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Ten words in English, seven words in the original Hebrew, but words that are fundamental to our understanding of everything. So the opening of Genesis doesn't just have some relevance for our lives. The opening of Genesis is, in fact, fundamental to our understanding of our human experience in this world. And that's why we've called our series in these opening chapters of Genesis Origins. Origins, because in Genesis, we do see the beginning of everything. And so the Hebrew title for the book comes from the opening word in the beginning. And our English title, Genesis, comes from the Greek word that means origins.

And so right away, we are being told this is a book about origins, because we're introduced to the creator God, we're introduced to human life, we're introduced to relationships, as well as how everything went wrong and why our world is in the mess that it is today. The book of Genesis doesn't say who wrote it, but we understand Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible, and Moses probably used other sources in recording what is said here. Because it's here, in these ancient words, that we see a continuing relevance to our lives today. Because what we see in Genesis chapters 1 to 3 actually addresses all the complex issues that matter to us, that we struggle with, and that have to do with our lives. So for example, our world is today confused when it comes to what we mean when we say the word God. Who God is, what is he like, and how do we relate to him.

Also, why the creation or our environment is a mix of beauty, as well as brokenness. We see here who we are as human beings. We see why we exist. We see why we need work and rest.

[3 : 1 5] And we see how we can have deep and lasting relationships. So the foundations for all of this are here contained in Genesis chapters 1 to 3. And so we need to read Genesis if we're going to understand our origins, if we're going to understand how we live life in this world.

And so whether you're here today and you'd call yourself a Christian or not, maybe you're just not sure what it is that you believe about God, the Bible, Jesus, or anything. Well, if you want to best understand yourself, your place in the world, your relationship with creation, your relationship with others, and most importantly, your relationship with God, the God who made you, then can you see how vital it is that we hear what Genesis says about God and our origins? But before we look at today's reading, Genesis 1, 1 to 3, let me just comment on Genesis and science, because when it comes to origins, many people will see a tension between the biblical account in Genesis about our origins and science. Because the Genesis account on the origins of the universe and on humanity, some people just think it can't be squared with things like the Big Bang Theory or with evolutionary theory and so on. In fact, there's probably no portion of the Bible that provokes more disagreement between Christian believers than these chapters in Genesis. Also, probably no portion of the Bible that gives more derision amongst the wider culture than the Genesis creation account.

And so any discussion tends towards or center around the length of days or Darwin or dinosaurs. And so all of this, all of this discussion about Genesis and science fits into a secular narrative where the assumption is that science and Christianity are incompatible, where science is viewed as some kind of all-encompassing theory that stands in opposition to Christianity or even killed God off or any need for him.

But we shouldn't see it as a case of science versus God, as some would have us believe. We don't need to buy into some kind of false dichotomy, because it's actually better to see it as science and God, as complementary rather than contradictory. So just to take a contemporary example, we are constantly told today, still on the news, follow the science, just follow the science, especially by our politicians.

So in the pandemic, follow the science. But what science? Which scientists should we follow? There's not one unified science that agrees on everything. After all, scientific understanding develops, doesn't it?

[6 : 22] It changes. Of course it does, as more is discovered. And yet science can be used or even ignored to suit political ideologies.

And so I guess when it comes to matters of, say, gender identity, what science are we supposed to follow then? Can you see how science can't claim to understand everything? It isn't trying to understand everything.

And yeah, it can explain so much, but it can't give us all the answers. Francesco J. Ayala, who's a biologist and geneticist, also winner of the Templeton Prize, he said this, successful as it is, however, a scientific view of the world is hopelessly incomplete.

Matters of value and meaning are outside the scope of science. So for example, just say that you come round to my house.

So what I do is I stick the kettle on and offer you a cup of coffee. Or if you really want, I will make you a cup of tea as well, but rather go for coffee. Now you might ask, what is going on?

[7 : 32] When I say I'm going to go and stick the kettle on, you're thinking, what's happening? So you could get a scientific answer on how the kettle works, how the water boils, or how the flavour is produced.

That's fine. If you really want to know how all of that happens, that is good. But more important for both of us is not how the coffee or the tea is made, but why I offered it to you in the first place.

And that is so that we can sit down and have a chat together. That's the reason why. And so when it comes to Genesis, and especially when it comes to the creation story, we shouldn't get sidetracked by seeking answers to the how questions, while missing the important who and the why questions.

And here's why. The creation account in Genesis is a certain kind of literature. And so it needs to be interpreted, just like the rest of the Bible does, according to the kind of literature that it is, according to its literary genre.

And so while Genesis 1, for example, is a passage where the interpretation is up for debate, it's clear that this was never written to give us a scientific account of the creation.

[8 : 50] And that shouldn't surprise us, because Genesis was written in a pre-scientific age. And so it won't satisfy all our speculation, let alone be a kind of scientific textbook that provides answers for our 21st century scientific questions.

That's not its purpose. I've looked at science textbooks. Josh had his higher exams, his prelims. I looked at his higher biology. I looked at his higher chemistry textbook. Didn't mean a thing to me.

But that's because it's a certain type of literature aiming for a certain type of audience. But what we see in Genesis is that it's a different kind of literature. And so to read Genesis well, to read any of the Bible well, we've got to take it on its own terms and not our terms.

Because what it does here is it tells us the fundamental truth that we need to know. The truth we need to know about God, the truth we need to know about ourselves, and the truth we need to know about our world.

And that is why we shouldn't think understanding the Genesis account of creation is an intellectual challenge. Science can't answer the who and the why questions, and Genesis actually doesn't go into a great deal of detail about the how.

[10 : 12] And that's why I guess we shouldn't be overly concerned, especially when we trust that God has authority over what his word says, as well as authority over what his world reveals, and what can be discovered by science.

And so what I'm saying is, the text of Genesis may be silent on many of the things that we would love to know.

And we'll see more about this next week when we look at the whole of chapter 1. But what we do see is that Genesis loudly and clearly declares that God alone created the heavens and the earth.

And so let's look at what the text says. Verse 1. Let's read that again. And this is the headline. This is the newsflash. This is the bold headline at the beginning of the Bible.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. So this is essentially a summary of the whole creation account, rather than really the beginning of the creation process, which then continues throughout the rest of chapter 1.

[11 : 20] So first of all, in this account, we are introduced to God. We read, in the beginning, God. So even before the origins of everything, there was God.

So God existed before the beginning. God didn't have an origin. God has always been. It's interesting that the Bible wastes no time in trying to prove the existence of God to us.

It simply assumes his existence. It assures us that he exists. So God has no beginning.

There has never been a time when God has not existed. God simply is. And yet when it comes to discussion about the creation of the universe, the question is often asked, well, if God created the world, then who created God?

What Genesis tells us is that God just is. God has always been. And so while everything else had a beginning, had an origin, God didn't.

[12 : 35] Because God is the creator of everything else. Which means everything, everything is ultimately dependent on this creator God. God. And this is captured in the name that's used for God.

It's the name Elohim. Which emphasizes his power and also his majesty. It speaks of his utter transcendence. That is, God is above us.

He is not like us. He is different from us. And this is emphasized in the word that we have here for created. Because the word for created here is used exclusively of God.

And every time it's used, the subject is always God. As it describes God's creative activity alone. Because creation is something only God can do.

He is the creator God who made everything, including you and me. Which means that we're in no position to evaluate God. If we are creatures and he is the creator, we can't expect him to prove himself.

[13 : 39] We can't sit in judgment of him. And we can't question any of his ways if he is the creator. So it goes on. God created the heavens and the earth.

Heavens and earth is a way of encompassing everything. Heaven and earth and everything in between. Everything that is visible and everything that is invisible is made by God.

This is the totality of the cosmos, if you like. And then we read, verse 2. 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. So here we seem to catch a glimpse of what was happening before God created.

Of what it was like before the heavens and the earth came into being. So what was it like? It was formless and empty. The Hebrew words are *tohu wabohu*.

[14 : 38] Which are great Hebrew words. But it's describing an unordered and an unfilled creation. It was dark and it was deep. There's no light and there's no land.

It's a description of primordial nothingness. It is uncreated and it is uninhabitable. Because God's creation has yet to be formed.

And then filled. Which is what the rest of chapter 1 is about. So these verses anticipate the coming of light. And they anticipate the coming of life. When God will fashion his creation.

Essentially to contain the crown of his creation. Which is humanity made in his image. And so these verses aren't saying that God somehow made the world out of some pre-existent matter.

There was nothing. And so these opening verses of Genesis imply what the other passages in the Bible make clear. Which is that God created out of nothing.

[15 : 43] Ex nihilo. But there's more going on here. Because we're told about the spirit of God hovering over the water. The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruach*, can mean wind.

But I think it's right to see this as God's spirit. God's spirit involved in the creation. There is only one God. But already we're given a hint here that this God is plural.

In other words, what the Bible later helps us to see is that God is Trinity. But this is just the beginning, of course, of God's revelation of himself.

And as the Bible story moves forward, God progressively reveals more of himself. And so we come to discover here that God has always existed.

And there's a hint that he's always existed as a plurality. Which we understand now as Trinity. As three persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[16 : 46] He is a triune God. And of course, we're not saying this is all here clearly on page one of our Bibles. It's not explicit. But if you read the first three verses, what do we read?

Verse one, God creates the heavens and the earth. Verse two, the Spirit of God is hovering over the waters. And then verse three, God creates by means of the word he spoke.

So until God spoke, nothing existed. That's why we read verse three. And God said, let there be light. And there was light.

And then it continues. And God said, and God said, and God said throughout chapter one. The word of God speaks everything into existence.

It's the word of God that puts light into darkness. It's the word of God that puts this amazing creation into what was formless and empty.

[17 : 47] And so God's word has the power to bring everything into existence. And so in Genesis chapter one, verse one to three, we see the Spirit of God and the word of God involved in the creation.

And we're not suggesting these verses right here give full significance to what word and spirit will come to later have for our understanding of God.

That does come later as God's revelation unfolds. So just to think of this, a simple analogy might be, it's like the Trinity is revealed here in bud form.

And the bud will eventually open up and fully flourish. But these verses in Genesis one really are setting the stage for how we should understand God.

And how we are to understand everything that God has created. And so the question is, well, why did God create? Why is there something and not nothing?

[18 : 50] Well, God did not create because he was lonely or because he needed to, because he was dissatisfied in and of himself and he needed some company.

That's not why God created. Because before creation, God was self-existent. God continues to be self-existent, satisfied in his three persons, the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

And so to help us understand this, that's why we read from John's gospel. Because the words of John chapter one, you'd heard them echo essentially the words of Genesis chapter one.

John chapter one, verse one to three says this. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made. The word is God the Son, Jesus Christ.

[19 : 57] He was there in the beginning because he always existed with God. He was God and is God. And he was involved in the creation. And as John goes on to say, the word, Jesus, became part of his creation.

In John chapter one, verse 14, we read, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we're told in John chapter one, verse four, in him was life.

And that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Again, can you hear the echoes in what John is saying in his gospel that hark back to what is said in Genesis chapter one?

The word, Jesus Christ, is the source of life and of light. And so Genesis one proclaims the wonder of creation essentially so that we might stand in wonder of the creator.

Because we're not just supposed to know here how the universe came to be. We're to know the God who made it. And we can through Jesus Christ.

[21 : 15] So the transcendent God we read of in Genesis chapter one becomes imminent. God with us, Emmanuel in Jesus Christ. And this is vital for us in our world because there is so much confusion around today by what we mean by God.

Is there a God? Is there one God? Are there many gods? And especially there is confusion about the God of the Bible. I know so many people, so many friends who aren't interested in Christianity, but they have rejected the idea of God or an idea of God that is nothing like the God we read of here in our Bibles.

The God who has revealed himself as our creator God. And the fantastic news is that God has not left us in the dark.

God hasn't left us guessing. We're not playing guessing games at trying to figure out who he is or what he has done. We don't need to guess why we are here or what life is all about.

And so can you see how these early chapters of Genesis, Genesis chapter one, even Genesis chapter one, verse one, give us the foundation, not just of the Bible story, but they give us the foundation for the human story.

[22 : 37] Because in the opening chapters of Genesis, we're not just told the beginning of everything, we're told why God made everything. And in hearing how God made everything, we're able to understand and make sense of our experience of life in this world.

I think C.S. Lewis, a Christian who wrote the Chronicles and earlier, he captured this well in an address in Oxford in 1944. He said, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

So accepting that the creator God made everything helps us make sense of everything else. So that is the biblical account of creation.

But of course, there is another account of how everything came to be. It is an atheistic and naturalist account of our origins. And so listen to Richard Dawkins.

I think he sums this up very well. This is his take, and he's an evolutionary biologist. He says this in a book called River Out of Eden, A Darwinian View of Life.

[23 : 52] He says, DNA neither cares nor knows.

DNA just is. And we dance to its music. That is a bleak and a hopeless perspective on the world, isn't it?

But it is all we are left with if we take this naturalistic starting point for our origins. Because if this universe is a result of no design, no purpose, but just blind, pitiless indifference, then we are nothing more than the sum total of our DNA, which neither knows nor cares.

Which means we're just a bunch of atoms thrown together, no different from a fly or a piece of dirt, with no purpose, no meaning, no value to our lives.

Is that what you want to teach your children? You're living in a world where you've come from nothing, you mean nothing, and you're going nowhere. That is what we're left with if we reject what the Bible loudly and clearly proclaims, which is, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

[25 : 23] And so a powerful and a personal God that is full of purpose and meaning and logic and justice and goodness and truth and beauty and wonder and love.

Or do we live in a universe that came from nowhere, is going nowhere, and means nothing? What's it to be? One will help us make best sense of the most important personal, social, philosophical, political issues that we face, whereas the other will just leave us in complete and utter despair.

And so Genesis 1 wants us to know the Creator God who made the universe. Everything belongs to Him, which means me and you, we also belong to Him.

And so whoever we are and whatever we presently believe about this God, we can't try to make sense of our world and our human experience without Him.

It won't make sense. We must bow before this God as our Creator. He is the only God, the God who made the universe. Let me finish with some words from Revelation.

[26 : 46] We've been thinking about the beginning of the Bible. These words come from Revelation, the last book in the Bible. And we read this, You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.

For you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. And you are, and there you are. Thank you. So the worst Your An■ and War and earth and angels