

1. Beginnings

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Dan Bidwell, *Senior Pastor*
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1. The Beginning of God
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In 1973, the Australian Prime Minister made a very controversial decision: he approved the purchase of a painting for the National Gallery of Australia. You can see it here - the painting was Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles, a painting done in abstract expressionist style. At the time it was the most expensive painting purchased by the gallery, coming in at AUD \$1.3 million. The Prime Minister had to approve the purchase because the gallery director wasn't authorised for purchases over \$1m.

But you can imagine the controversy, can't you. This piece of art isn't everyone's cup of tea. It looks like paint spattered on a canvas, there are no discernible shapes or figures, and people questioned whether it was art at all. Especially when compared to the skill required to produce an impressionist or realist piece. And then there was the price – at the time a world record for a contemporary American painting.

This was a piece that divided opinion...

As we open Genesis 1 today, I'm aware that opinion is divided on the story of the world's beginnings. Divided about the place of humanity amongst the natural world. Divided about gender and sexuality and human flourishing. Divided about good and evil, right and wrong. Divided about so many things. And even as Christians, we sometimes find ourselves divided on these same issues.

As we start our new series from Genesis 1-11, we find ourselves staring at the painting that God has given us to understand the world. Thankfully it's not as abstract as Blue Poles. But just like every painting, what we get are the details that the artist chooses to include, and nothing more. Every brushstroke is deliberate, every element carefully selected, and our task is to appreciate what the artist has put in front of us.

Genesis 1-11 is a masterpiece that paints the foundations for who we are, and what we're to think about the world, and about the one who made it. These chapters have so much to teach us and I'm so excited to be opening them with you over the next few months.

So as we start this journey through these foundational chapters of the Bible, why don't we ask God, the master artist, to speak to us now through the words that he has left for us in the scriptures...

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the words of the Bible, for **your** words spoken to us through the pages of the Bible. Please speak to us now as we open these first chapters of your word, help us to understand our origins and our purpose and how we relate to you. Give us wisdom and insight about ourselves, and courage to respond in faith. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen*

I've entitled today's sermon *Beginnings*. That comes from the name of the book of Genesis.

When this book was originally written in Hebrew, God's people knew it by the first word of the book. That word in Hebrew means 'In the Beginning', and when the Old Testament was translated into Greek about 250BC, the Greek word chosen was Genesis – which means *beginning* – and that name has stuck ever since.

So today's sermon is really a sermon about beginnings – the beginning of what we understand about God, the beginning of what we understand about the world, and the place of humanity.

But it's just the beginning. I won't have time to say everything about Genesis 1 today, so I encourage you spend time in Genesis in your Bible reading over the next few months. We'd love you to dig deeper with us in our Bible Study groups. Make the time to hear what God is teaching us through these foundational chapters of his word.

But for now, let's jump into the text with our first big idea – The Beginning of God.

1. The Beginning of God

As we open Genesis 1, perhaps these are familiar passages that you have known since childhood, from Sunday School days. Perhaps you've studied Genesis in Adult Bible Class or a small group Bible Study. Perhaps, like me, Genesis was one of the first books of the Bible you ever read (because you opened the Bible at page 1 and started reading!) Or perhaps you're coming to Genesis today without much experience or expectation – that's OK too.

Because the Bible is like a great artwork – every time we gaze into it, we see new details, new highlights that we didn't see before. That's one of the gifts of the scriptures, that God changes us as we read his unchanging word, and it always has something new to say to us.

So what do we notice as we look at the picture that God paints in Genesis 1?

The first thing we notice is God himself. (Gen 1:1)

In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 1 is first and foremost about God. God is the subject of almost every sentence – he is the one directing the action, he is the one unquestionably responsible for the act of creation. And we'll get to the detail of creation in just a moment, but just look carefully at v1 with me for another moment, because in the first 3 words we learn something fundamental about God.

And that is that God was there in the beginning. Before time. **God is eternal**. Moses puts it like this in Psalm 90:2...

Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Now it's not just that God was there before the beginning of time. The implication from Genesis 1:1 is that God was there before the beginning of anything. God was in existence before time, before space, before matter, before atoms and elements and any other scientific word you can think of. Genesis 1:1 tells us that God was there before that. And then Genesis tells us that he created each of those things.

The expression 'heavens and earth' is an idiomatic way of describing everything in all creation. Same as if we said the 4 corners of the earth, or the 7 seas, we know that we're talking about the whole earth. Well saying that God created the heavens and the earth, it's shorthand for saying that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in between. And we see from the rest of the chapter exactly what God created - the earth, moon, sun, stars.

And God created them where there was nothing before.

If the words here in front of us are the words that God has given us to understand the world, then God wants us to understand that no matter what science can explain about the universe, everything in creation is here because God put it here.

The New Testament writer to the Hebrews explains it like this:

³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Unlike other creation stories, unlike scientific theories, Genesis 1 is very clear that the God described in this chapter is the creator of the universe. He was before creation, and he is responsible for creation.

And his means of creating is by speaking creation into being, a pattern which we see repeated through chapter 1: And God said, "Let there be..." And it was so:

- ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
- ⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water."... ⁷ And it was so
- ⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so.

And so it continues – God speaks and creation comes into being.

From these verses we learn about **the creativity of God, and creative power of his word**. When God speaks, creation listens.

When we come to the New Testament, the disciples are shocked to hear Jesus speak over the top of the storm that threatened to sink their boat. Jesus speaks, and the storm dies down, and the disciples are saved. In that moment, we see creation responding to the voice of God, as God's own son Jesus engages in a moment of recreation, as he calls creation to order, just as the voice of God did on that very first day of creation.

But we've jumped ahead, so let's come back to that first day again. Because that's where we notice a third truth about God from Genesis 1, right there in v2. It's the hint that **God exists as more than one person**. Read with me at v2:

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.

The God who speaks is somehow differentiated from his Spirit. To help us understand the difference, the spirit is pictured as a hovering bird - perhaps like the mother eagle in Deuteronomy 32, attending to its young. The Spirit of God here waits to attend to the forming creation...

St Augustine calls this “*a faint glimpse of the trinity.*” It’s our first hint that God’s spirit will play a role in shaping creation and its creatures. The Hebrew word for ‘*spirit*’ can also be translated ‘*breath*’ – so there is a relationship between God’s creative word breathed out, and the Spirit who is somehow involved in the creative process.

Again – we’re trying to just look at the text in front of us. These verses don’t tell us *how* the Spirit works in creation, but God paints a picture of the Spirit that implies his creative participation. (If we were to jump ahead to what we know of the HS, and his work in transforming us in Christ, it should come as no surprise to see the Spirit there shaping the clay of creation according to God’s will... But that’s jumping ahead again!)

So even in these first verses, we get the idea that God exists as more than one person, Augustine’s *faint glimpse of the Trinity*. That faint glimpse seems to be confirmed in v26 when God is creating humankind in his image, and he says:

“Let **us** make mankind in **our** image, in **our** likeness...

As we said before, Genesis 1 is a book of beginnings. But intricate details like these are here for a reason. And as those who’ve read the end of the story, we see here the beginnings of ideas that are revealed more and more fully as we read further into the Scriptures.

SO that’s our first big idea from Genesis chapter 1. We see the beginnings of what we know about God – his eternal nature, his creative power, and the hint of some kind of relationship within the godhead where we have both God and the Spirit of God...

2. The Beginnings of Creation

Our second big idea from Genesis 1 is what it tells us about the beginnings of the world and the universe.

As I said before, we read Genesis 1 out of a worldview that is heavily influenced by science, and scientific theories of the origins of the world. That wasn’t the case for the first readers of these words.

The Bible tells us that Moses was the author of the first five books of the OT.¹ And so we believe, as with all Scripture, that God breathed or spoke these truths into Moses around the time of the Exodus, perhaps at the burning bush, perhaps at Sinai, perhaps in the tent of meeting. We don’t know, but we trust that God inspired these words that we have regarding the early history of God’s dealings with the world.

And so if you imagine the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years, you can imagine better the context that Genesis was written into. The Israelites had just escaped Egypt with its many gods, its sun and moon gods, and its fertility rituals linked to the Nile.

And now they were wandering in the Mesopotamian wilderness – among a people whose creation story started with a chaotic sea, and terrifying monsters and the warring of gods. A people for whom

¹ A fact confirmed by Jesus in John 5:45-47

humanity is made from the blood of a god executed for treason. That story BTW is the Babylonian creation story called the Enuma Elish, from around 1700BC.²

The point is this: the Biblical account stands in stark opposition to those other creation accounts. The Bible's creation story stresses the unity of God – unlike the warring of the pagan gods. The Bible makes everything in creation a deliberate act of God. The chaotic sea of the Babylonian myth is rejected by God, for whom nothing is out of his control. By his word God speaks life into the sea (v20) and so he creates the great creatures of the sea, and all the other intricate living thing with which the ocean teems. The sea is not to be feared – (v20) God looks at it and sees that it is good. He blesses the creatures of the ocean (v22). Do you see the contrast?

And it's the same with every other detail of creation. Unlike the chaos of the pagan myths, God goes about creation in an orderly fashion. There is a progression through days 1-3 where God separates light and darkness, water and sky, then land and sea. And in days 4-6, God fills those realms – he puts the sun and moon and stars in space, he fills the sea with fish and the air with birds, and then the land with animals.

And God speaks a declaration over everything in creation – that it is **good**.

So creation is orderly. Creation is deliberate. Creation is good.

God's intention in creating everything is good also. Creation is not out of control. It was not built as the puppet theatre of cruel and fickle gods. This world is not predicated on war and terror and death and chaos – those are not the natural state of the way that God created this world.

Look again with me at the refrain that is repeated 6 times in this chapter –

- ⁴ God saw that the light was good
- ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.
- ¹² The land produced vegetation: [...]. And God saw that it was good.
- ¹⁶ God made [the sun and moon and stars] ¹⁸ ... And God saw that it was good.
- [He created the fish and the birds] ²¹ ... And God saw that it was good.
- He made the wild animals and livestock ²⁵ ... And God saw that it was good.

Are you left in any doubt about the goodness of God's creation? God wants us to know that his intention in creating the world was to create it good. At the moment of creation there was nothing that was not good. Somebody asked me the other day if there were mosquitos and flies at creation – I said I don't know, but if there were, they wouldn't have been as annoying! Perhaps they would have helped with the housework – I don't know.

The point is that God wants us to know that he created everything good.

More than that, God wants us to know that he created everything good **for our sake**.

And this brings us to our last big idea: the beginnings of humankind.

² <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/>

3. The Beginnings of Humankind.

This is where we get to the climax of Genesis 1. After doing all that forming and filling in vv2-25, now that the world was complete and teeming with sea life and wildlife and plant life, now that everything was ready, God created **us**. Humankind.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

Out of all creation, humans are the only ones created in God’s image, and that’s the topic of next week’s sermon, so we’ll expand on it then. But out of all creation, humanity is given a special dignity – being made in the image of God, in his likeness. And instead of being merely another creature within creation, God sets humanity above the other creatures, giving us the special role of ruling over creation. Again we’ll expand on that next week.

But God comes to the end of that sixth day. He looks at creation the way he has ordered it. And v31:

³¹God saw all that he had made, **and it was very good**.

In one way Genesis 1 tells us a lot about creation. And in another way it doesn’t tell us everything we want to know. One commentator I read said: “There is almost no historical particularity.” And he’s right. Genesis 1 isn’t a history text book. Another commentator said: “This isn’t a biology textbook.” And he’s right too. Genesis 1 doesn’t answer biological questions, or evolutionary concerns, or young earth issues. It’s not a systematic theology, or an encyclopedia. It simply doesn’t fit into those genres of literature.

Instead Genesis 1 is what it is. It is poetic. It’s rhythmical. It paints pictures with words, so that we can understand what the artist wants to communicate to us, perhaps as much as we can understand.

Genesis 1 is a masterpiece. It hints. It teases. It intrigues. It draws us in.

But for all the questions it raises, it leaves us with absolute certainty about God’s intention in creation. Our God is a good God, and he intended creation to be very good, with us as the pinnacle of his creation, enjoying his blessings. That much is crystal clear.

And so as we go into this week, I want us all to try two things.

First, I want us to look for the good in creation. It’s not hard to notice the bad in the world. I want us to be people who look for the good, and praise God for it. Wouldn’t it be amazing this week if we went through our week reflecting on God’s goodness and his desires to bless us, and to bless creation? I know I spoke about blessings a few weeks ago from Psalm 128, but this foundational Bible text tells us that from creation God has been seeking to bless his people. We’ll talk more about how God is faithful to that promise in coming weeks. But imagine we went through the week counting our blessings, looking for the good rather than dwelling on the bad.

That’s the first idea. Look for the good.

The second thing I want us to do is to be agents of good. That is, I want us to reflect how we can honor God with our lives, with our thoughts, with our words, with the way we treat creation, with the way we

treat others. Again we'll talk more about this next week. But in God's good plan, he created us to be good, like his good creation. And in Christ, God is *re-creating* us by his Spirit (2 Cor 5:17), God is reshaping us and conforming us to the image of Jesus (Ro 8:29). So let's seek to recapture the goodness of creation. To be agents of goodness, seeking to reshape creation around us with good and not evil, choosing words of blessing not curse, which seem to characterize so much of our public discourse at the moment.

So looking for the good, and recreating the good. That's my challenge for us this week, as we live our lives under the gaze of our good Creator. Shall we pray to him now?

Further Prayers by Joanna Bidwell 9.20.20

The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge.

We thank you, Lord, for creating such an awesome and amazing world. We are in awe of the intricate beauty of all living things. Romans 1 verse 20 tells us that since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. We pray, Father, that we would glorify you and give you thanks, our Creator - who is forever praised, Amen.

We pray as we start a new sermon and Bible study series in Genesis that, as your people, we would hunger for your word and have hearts and minds that are eager to learn more about you through your word, by your Spirit. We pray that you would use our accompanying Bible study series to grow us in unity as a church together. We give you thanks for those you meet weekly via Zoom to do Bible Study together, to share and to pray. We pray for those that do the Bible study series by themselves at home, that they would be encouraged and built up in their faith.

We continue to pray for our school and College students, their teachers and school staff. Lord, give them perseverance, patience and a heart to continue to learn. We pray for those in our church family who are sick, lonely, for those with mental illness and those that worry. Lord, help all of us to turn to you, to cast our cares onto you, knowing that you will sustain us. Thank you for your love and care for us, your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.