

Purpose

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[0 : 00] Well, like it or not, if you look at the movie listings in any given point over the last couple of years, you'll notice a trend.

And that is that most of the movies, or many of the movies being made now, are superhero movies. And you're either very excited about this or you are very fearful for the future of the moviemaking industry.

But either way, it's true. And one of the interesting things about this incredibly popular genre of movie is that there's a kind of subplot or a subgenre of the superhero movie that seems to be the most popular.

And that's what you might call the origin story. And if you know anything about these kinds of plots, the origin story is based on a premise. And that is that to truly understand this superhero or this character, you have to understand their origin.

And so the origin story tells you how the hero came to be. It's the story of the creation of the hero. And the idea is that if you understand the circumstances through which the hero came into being, the creation, then you understand the purpose.

[1 : 12] So you have Batman who, as a child, as Bruce Wayne watches his mom and dad be murdered by criminals. And so that helps make sense of his purpose as he becomes Batman as an adult and wages a one-man war against crime.

That's the origin story. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, as we call it, and really the first three chapters of the book of Genesis.

So when you open your Bible, this is the first thing you're going to come to after the table of contents. This section of Scripture is the origin story of the world.

It's the origin story of us and of everything that has been made. What's interesting is when you bring up Genesis these days, when you bring up the creation story, often the first association that people have is they think of the creation-evolution debate.

They think of science versus faith. They think of all of the tension and all of the ink that has been spilled and maybe in some ways the blood that has been spilled, debating science and faith and creation and evolution.

[2 : 26] That's because we read the story of Genesis through modern eyes or with a modernist lens. In other words, when we read the creation story, we want to understand the how of it.

We want to know how the material stuff came to be. What was the process? I've heard some good teaching on this before from people, some of my great influences, people like Tim Keller who's even influenced the way I've thought about this evening.

But I've also heard a lot of bad teaching. And one of the things that you notice is that a lot of the misunderstandings of Genesis come from the fact that we're reading it through the wrong lens.

The ancients, not just the ancient Hebrews, but the ancient Babylonians, the Sumerians, the other people groups from which we read creation stories, none of them were concerned with the how.

They weren't concerned with the science. They weren't concerned with the process. Somebody that's done a lot of great work on this is a man named John Walton. And he's proved, and I think pretty conclusively, that when the ancients, whether we're looking at the Genesis story or any of the other creation stories, they weren't concerned with the how, but they were concerned with the why.

[3 : 49] In other words, creation stories are all about function. They're all about purpose. If you wanted to understand your life, if you want to understand your world, if you want to understand the current contemporary issues of your day, you went to the creation story to understand why things are the way they are.

How did we get here? That's true throughout the ancient Near East. And it's very true when we look at the story of Genesis. So if we today want to understand who we are, why we're here, what life is about, if we want to make sense of things like racism or justice, if we want to understand our work and vocation, if we want to understand our relationship to the environment and the cosmos around us, if we want to understand complex issues like sex and gender and marriage, if we want to make sense of any of these things today, the Bible says we need to go back to our origin story.

And there we will find the foundations of all of these things. And we will begin to understand why they're here and what they're for.

And that's what Genesis is all about, these first few chapters. And so we're starting a series that's going to take us all the way through the season of Advent, essentially to Christmas, looking at the first three to four chapters of Genesis.

And it's called Foundations, for all the reasons that I just said. And so tonight, as a kind of introduction to this series, we're going to start by just looking at the first four words of the Bible.

[5 : 34] In the beginning, God. In the beginning, God. Let's pray. Father, such few words, but almost infinite implications.

Lord, we're humbled by our own inadequacy to understand or make sense of these great issues.

Father, we're still to make sense of you or ourselves or this world.

And yet we know that you have come and promised to reveal these things to us. And that you primarily do that through your son. And so we ask that your reality, Father, would be made known to us in your son by the power of your spirit.

And we ask this because we know that you desire that we would know you and that you've promised to speak to us. So it's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So first of all, I'll just read our passage.

In the beginning, God. Thus ends the reading of God's word. What is this telling us? There you go. What does this tell us?

[7 : 03] What it essentially tells us is this. Is that before the beginning, in other words, before anything was, before anything existed, there was God.

That God is the only thing that exists that has no beginning. That God is the only thing that exists that always was. Before time, before space, before matter and energy, before the tiniest quantum particle came into being, there was God.

And the implication of this is that everything that exists, everything that is, finds its origin in God. So everything that exists can be traced back to God and his original intention when he made it. So Blaise Pascal understood the enormity of this truth.

In his *pensées*, which is, you know, after his conversion, he began to accumulate and to write thoughts that he hoped to turn into a great work.

[8 : 08] He died, sadly, before he completed it. And so they were, all of these thoughts were gathered into the work that we now call the *pensées*. And in this, he contemplates this reality.

And he says, essentially, that what we believe about this fact determines everything else. Are we just cosmic accidents?

Or are we divinely designed for a purpose? And he says, however we answer that question, that determines everything else. He writes, it is impossible to take one step with sense and judgment unless we regulate our course by our view on this point.

So these four words, in the beginning God, what you believe about those words will determine everything else in your life and in our society and in our culture. I know this is a huge claim.

And you might wonder why. How could it possibly be so important? What difference does it make whether we believe we were created by God or just cosmic accidents? We live in a society where religious beliefs are largely seen as private matters.

[9 : 18] Why can't you believe in no God and I believe in a God? And why should it matter one way or another? I want to give you an example to maybe help clarify what Pascal and so many other people have seen about this fact and its implications.

This application or this example is actually coming from Jean-Paul Sartre. And he uses an example that involves a pen knife.

I'm going to update it a little bit and I'm going to talk about an iPhone. So this is adapted from him. But take a look at this phone for just an example. Now if I were to ask you if this is a good phone, how would you answer?

What would you base your answer on? See if you look at this phone, you can tell that it was made for a purpose. Right?

You can tell that in other words when somebody made this, it's inconceivable that somebody would have made this without already having some sense of the purpose for which they were making it.

[10:21] So the very fact of its existence means that the maker had some sense of its purpose. No one would make something like this without knowing what it was for.

Now think about human beings. If human beings have been created, if God made human beings, then he made us for a purpose. In other words, our sheer existence, if God created us, is evidence that before we were created there was some purpose for our creation.

Some reason, some design, some intention behind it. And Sartre, who was an avowed atheist, says this. He says, if you reject the idea of God, and if you reject the idea that God has created all of this, then you also have to let go of any absolute ultimate standard of good and evil, or of right and wrong.

So I come back to this question, how do we know this is a good phone? Well, in order for me to tell you whether or not it's a good phone, I have to know what it's for. So if I were to dial right now and make a phone call, and the call goes through, and the quality is reasonably clear, I would hang up and I would say, yeah, it's a pretty good phone.

But what if I tried to use it to hammer a nail into a piece of wood? Or what if I tried to use it to open a beer bottle? Or what if I tried to use it to hold my tires so I could change it flat on the highway?

[11:50] If I tried to do any of these things, would I in the same way say, yeah, it's good? No, probably not. I'd probably destroy my phone. The only way we can know if something is good or bad is if we understand its purpose.

And in the same way, if human beings are not created, if they're not created by some ultimate being, then they have no ultimate purpose.

And if that's the case, it really becomes more and more impossible to say anything that we do is good or bad or right or wrong with any ultimate sense. So Sartre says this, he says, There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it.

It is nowhere written that the good exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we're now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote, if God did not exist, everything would be permitted.

And that, for existentialism, for which he was a proponent, atheist existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist.

[13:06] Everything is permitted if God does not exist. So if you reject the idea of God, Sartre would say that you need to suck it up, which is a big point in this essay that he wrote.

He's essentially saying, here's where all the other atheists got it wrong. They tried to reject the idea of God, but hold on to some sense of a moral fabric. And he says, no, we can't have it both ways.

If you want to reject the idea of God, which he was totally for, he says you've got to suck it up and let go of any sense that there is any absolute right and wrong in the world, because there's not.

Or, as Friedrich Nietzsche said, Nietzsche said, you have your way, I have my way. As for the right way, it does not exist. Or as Richard Dawkins famously said, humans have always wondered about the meaning of life.

Life has no higher purpose than to perpetuate the survival of DNA. Life has no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

[14:06] So for Sartre and the rest, this means freedom. This is freedom. Because freedom comes when we reject the idea of any and all absolutes. And instead, we are then free to determine right and wrong, good and bad, meaning and purpose for ourselves.

And each person is, in this view, rendered free by that. So the sooner we get rid of God, the better. And I know that maybe there are some of you here who hear this, and this sounds good to you.

And maybe you'll leave tonight, and you'll think, I'm so glad that that was brought up. That's how I've thought all along. I can't believe anybody today thinks that there is actually a God.

I think belief in God is infantile and idiotic. And I think it's bad for society. And I think the sooner that we can eradicate belief in God from our society, the better off we'll all be.

And you say, this is how I think, and I'm even more convinced of that now. And you can think that, and you can walk out of here, and that's your takeaway. But then you get to the bike rack, and you realize that somebody stole your bike.

[15:11] What are you going to say? That's wrong. That's wrong that they stole my bike. I can't believe somebody would steal my bike. And you know what you're really saying? In the beginning, God.

That's what you're really saying. Now, some of you might object, and you might say, well, I don't need to believe in God to believe that it's wrong for somebody to take my bike. And technically, you're right.

Human beings can believe in right and wrong. We can believe that there is right and there is wrong. We don't need God for that. But who's to say that your standard is any more true than my standard? Who's to say that your standard is the one we should live by? Why not my standard? In other words, there's no foundation for those beliefs. You can believe what you want about right and wrong, but where is it grounded? Where is it founded?

And how are we to evaluate your standard versus my standard? There's no way to do that. So imagine that you see the guy riding off with your bike. And you say, I'm going to get him.

[16:12] And you take off, and you're running, and you're really fast. And somehow, he's not able to get away. And you corner him in an alley. And you say, I got you. And he can't get anywhere. And you say, give me my bike back. And he says, why should I?

And you say, well, you stole it. It's mine. That's wrong. And then imagine that he quotes Nietzsche to you. Which is conceivable in D.C., right?

And imagine if he kind of looks at your bike, and he kind of squeezes the brake a couple of times, and he says, you have your way. I have my way. As to the right way, it does not exist.

What do you say to this grad school dropout thief? What do you say? You think stealing is wrong, but he thinks it's totally fine.

In his moral universe, there's nothing wrong with it, right? I mean, sure, he's breaking the law. And you can say, well, you're breaking the law, and our country has established laws to maintain law and order, and we need that to function as a society.

[17:19] Where do you think the whole idea of a rule of law came from? It's based 100% in the religious concept that there is some absolute standard out there.

The entire Western concept of the rule of law comes straight out of that belief. Without God, there is no grounding for our sense of right and wrong.

There's no ultimate standard. So when you sound off about police violence and racial profiling and all of the evils that come from that, what are you ultimately saying?

In the beginning, God. When you say that we should be responding to the refugee crisis or fighting for immigration reform, you're saying, in the beginning, God. When you campaign for human rights and say, I'm not going to stop until every human being has equal rights across the planet, even if you're an avowed atheist, you're really saying, in the beginning, God.

Why not let refugees starve and die? Why not let the genocides happen as long as they're far away? Why not let the strong trample the weak?

[18:33] If life is just about the survival of my DNA, if it's just about me perpetuating my DNA, then why does it matter at all?

Why does it matter? Because we know in our guts that it's wrong. Because you know that it's wrong. And you know you don't need a standard to tell you it's wrong that your guts tell you it's wrong.

The marrow in your bones tells you it's wrong. We can deny it all we want, but deep down, in us all, we know that there is some ultimate sense of right and wrong.

And no matter what we say, we can't escape that fact. And that's why throughout history, across cultures and religions, you see these concepts of an absolute standard of right and wrong.

The Sumerian concept of Anu, right? The ancient Egyptian Amun. Plato's idea of the good. Early Hinduism's Rita.

[19:37] Or the Chinese Tao. Deep down, we know in our bones that there is an absolute, that there is a way. And Sartre, no matter how hard he tried, he could actually never escape this.

And he made moral pronouncements throughout the rest of his life, despite what he said. And what this means is this, in the beginning, God. So the Bible says that you don't find freedom by rejecting the whole idea of creation and purpose, but actually by embracing it and by living it out.

It says, do you want to be free? Do you want to, do you want to know what freedom really is? Then what is your purpose? What is God's divine intention and what was it when he made you?

If you look at a fish, a fish is free when it is sailing through the water. It is elegant and powerful and beautiful. But a fish out on dry land is pitiful and dying barely capable.

A fish in the water is free. A fish on land is not. Because when the fish is in the water, it is submitting to its design. It's submitting to its purpose. Right?

[20 : 57] A bird is not free in the water. A bird is free in the air because it's submitting to its design and its purpose as it soars in the heavens. So you and I will only be free when we understand what our God-given purpose is and submit to it.

Now that is counterintuitive. But all around us are examples of that very thing. And this is really the invitation that sits at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

The idea of some ultimate purpose or design or Tao or way is not unique to Christianity. It's not. There's nothing unique about that. Christians and Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists and Jainists and Taoists, Confucianists, Native North Americans and Mesoamericans, the original Indo-Europeans, on back to the Egyptians and the Sumerians, all believed in some ultimate standard or absolute.

All believed that there was embedded in the very fabric of creation a way, a way. and it's rooted in the foundations of the world and that human beings were made to live that out that that is our purpose.

But only Christianity is based on a man who said, I am the way. when Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[22 : 33] It's an invitation. He's saying, do you want to know what a human being is? Do you want to know what a human being is for? Then look at me.

Look at the way he lived. Look at the way he loved. Look at the way he treated his friends. Look at the way he treated his enemies. And you begin to see what a human being is and what a human being is for.

You begin to see the embodiment of this way that even the most ancient people knew in their bones exists. And then you have this Jesus dying for us and through his death making it possible for us to be reconciled to God and then calling us, those of us who believe in him, to follow him, which means we completely and utterly surrender our lives, every aspect of our lives to him.

And this is the counterintuitive, even paradoxical invitation of the gospel that by giving ourselves completely to him, obeying him in everything, that that is the road to true freedom.

The gospel is nothing less than the invitation to become truly and fully human. All of this because in the beginning, God.

[24 : 05] Let's pray. Our Father, as we contemplate this, we ask that through the power of your spirit, you would grant us, enable our imaginations to see what life might look like with you at the beginning of everything.

if we truly understood this and it truly became a part of the way we loved, the way we forgave, the way we thought about our friends, our children, our marriages, though we thought about our jobs. Lord, in all these ways, give us the imagination, baptize our imagination that we might see what our lives would look like if we truly believed that in the beginning, God.

We ask this in your Son's name. Amen.