

In the beginning: God our eternal creator

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[0:00] I spent most of this week in in-service training with other Free Church ministers, and we spent our time in the book of Lamentations, which led to some reflections on worship. And there was one common, you know, the value of singing lament songs, recognizing that every week in our churches there will always be those who sit with a sense of quiet despair, a sense of grief or sadness, perhaps. Maybe God feels far away and distant from your circumstances. Well, if that's you, then God in His goodness gives us the Psalms of Lament, giving us words to bring to our God. So we're going to sing a couple of sections from Psalm 42, verses 1 to 5, and in verses 10 to 11. So as we're able, let's stand together to sing praise.

As the deer for flowing streams, so longs my soul, O God, for you. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I meet with God anew?

My tears have been my constant food, both in the night and in the day. While all day long insistent, where is this God of yours? Where is this God of yours? They say. As I pour out my soul in grief, these things I do remember still. How with the multitude I went, up to God's house on Zion Hill. In their procession I would lead, as we approached with cheerful song. And shouts of joy and thankfulness, rejoicing with the festive throng.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you so disturbed in me? Trust God, for I will praise Him yet. My Savior and my God is He.

My bones in mortal agony are groaning while my enemies say.

[3:32] Wherever is this God of yours, they scoff at me throughout the day.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you so disturbed in me? Trust God, for I will praise Him yet.

My Savior and my Savior and my God is He. Please have a seat. And let me invite you to turn back with me to the opening words of the book of Genesis, the opening words of the Bible. We're going to look at Genesis 1, verse 1 and 2, and reflect together on God, our eternal creator. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

There have been some famous first lines in story and in literature. Some of my favorites, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Charles Dickens, Great Expectations.

Here is Edward Bear coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. That's Winnie the Pooh. And one of the nation's favorites, as it turns out, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

[5:20] Jane Austen's great first line from Pride and Prejudice. But the most famous and the most significant of all opening lines are the ones we just read in the book of Genesis, in the beginning, God. God created. Because this introduces us to God and His great story of salvation.

And right from the beginning, we are led to understand He is the author, He is the main character, He is going to be the great hero in this unfolding story of redemption.

And it also begins to help us to answer some of the biggest questions that we will ever have in our lives. Questions like, who is God? And who am I? And what's wrong with the world? And is there any solution?

Is there any hope? The beginning of this story in the book of Genesis, which incidentally means beginnings or origins, is all about the God who creates.

And then as we'll see, the God who makes great promises. He is a God who attaches His future hope to certain persons and certain people.

[6:37] And ultimately we see by the end of Genesis, we'll begin to Genesis 49 and 50, that hope for the world rests in the promise that God will send a king.

And this king will be a source of blessing. So in the first few months of the year, we're going to be in Genesis 1 to 11. And these chapters really set the stage for this great story.

And it's going to enable us to hear the greatest, the truest story ever told. Of God the Father sending His Son, the Lord Jesus, into this world in order to rescue the people He has made.

So let's get into the preface of this great story as we hear verses 1 and 2. Three very simple things to say this morning, but they are huge.

They are mind-expanding truths. First of all, God is eternal. In the beginning, God. Let's start with a question.

[7:45] And it's a big question. What do you think is ultimate reality? There's an evangelist, a Christian podcaster called Glenn Scrivener, and he says, to help answer that question, you need to ask yourself, what do I believe was there in the beginning?

If we were able to scroll back through the ages of time to get to point zero, what was there? Now, many people in our culture, perhaps you're here today, and you think, well, nothing was there. No one was there. The physical universe is all there is, and random chance brought everything out of nothing. And perhaps we can sense the appeal of that, because if there's no creator, no one above us, then there is no ultimate authority, then that means you and I, well, we could be free to set our own meaning and purpose.

We would be free, ultimately, to sit on the throne and decide how life operated. But perhaps it's important that we also take a moment to see the difficulty, because if we look back to origins and we see, oh, there's no meaning, there's no purpose, and if we fast forward to the end of history and we think again, well, there is no meaning and purpose, and when we die, that's it, then we might well find ourselves looking at our lives and thinking, well, if life is random and it's come from nowhere and it's going nowhere, then life has no meaning and purpose.

And that's very bleak. And it's not the way any of us choose to live or really can live. There is an instinct with us, within us, where we think and we act as if we have meaning, as if others have meaning, as if life has meaning.

[9:44] That's because it does. And even people who want to live without God say there is no God, even they will find themselves trying to smuggle in meaning in lots of different ways.

So that we do believe that there are rights and wrongs. We do believe there is justice. And maybe we hear it most commonly at the point of death. There is the cultural understanding that someone, when they die, well, they're in a better place and they're smiling down at us.

What does that reveal to us? It reveals that we want to believe that our lives have meaning now and when we die. And that takes us to the significance of what the Bible teaches about our God and about ourselves.

And the Bible certainly presents a better answer to the question of what is ultimate reality when it says to us, in the beginning, God. Before there was time, before there was anything, God was there.

So just a few kind of brief reflections on what we learn about God and why it matters. First of all, as we recognize God is ultimate reality, we come to understand that we need Him.

[10:59] So if we were able to scroll all the way back to the moment when everything came to exist, we would discover God. We would come to the eternal God who speaks the universe into existence.

And that matters not just for back then, but for you and me today, right now. There's a truth captured by Paul as he was speaking in Romans or writing in the book of Romans, chapter 11, verse 36.

He says this of God, For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things.

To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. That the God who is without beginning and without end is the source of your life and mine, is the goal of your life and mine.

So that when we discover that we are made for God and we can know God, well, as C.S. Lewis puts it, our nature is fulfilled and our happiness attained.

[12:10] A broken bone in the universe has been set. The anguish is over. Here's another thought.

God is eternal and you and I were made for eternity. I imagine that most of us, at least some of the times, have a tricky relationship with time.

Sometimes we have that impression that life is just going too fast. Maybe it's as parents, our kids are growing up too fast. Maybe we've enjoyed a good time of rest and the holiday is coming to an end too quickly.

On the flip side, sometimes we find that time is going a little bit too slowly. Maybe that lecture that never seems to end. And church service that seems to go on and on.

Sometimes have that experience. And then we come to God and God has a perfect relationship with time. God exists outside of time. He sees all of time at one time.

[13:13] And he is the one who was and who is and who is to come. He is eternal. And in Ecclesiastes chapter 3, we discover that the eternal God has set eternity in our hearts.

That we are created for eternity. And that in large measure explains why we can be so restless in time.

You know, when we reflect and think, life is too short and time is flying or I don't want this moment to end, that is our heart saying to us, we were made for more.

We were made to live eternally and to live eternally in relationship with the eternal God. And we're going to see that as we come to think about the creation of humanity.

Another thought that becomes clear as we read the book of Genesis and the whole of the Bible is that God is self-existing. And we owe our existence to Him.

[14:22] Now when we think about the origins of the universe, it is quite likely that you have heard arguments, perhaps in a classroom, perhaps in a textbook, that the universe, you know, began with superheated particles or a singularity of pure energy, a big bang.

And the challenge or the question that I suppose arises is, well, where did those protons, particles, matters of energy, where did they come from?

And if they are regarded as eternal, and it's seen as perfectly rational that somebody should believe that a proton or a particle could exist eternally and create everything, how does that differ from Christian faith that says there is an eternal God?

And it's rational for us to believe that this eternal, personal God was there and made everything. All of us have certain faith beliefs about origins.

Genesis 1 holds out the best explanation of our world, that the God who has existed eternally, the God who is dependent on no one to give him life.

[15:39] He is the source of life and ultimate reality. Going back to Paul again, this time speaking to some great thinkers in the city of Athens.

He said, in him, in God, we live and move and have our being. God is eternal. In the beginning, God. God. And that's really important at the personal level.

Perhaps you're searching for meaning. Perhaps you're asking some big questions of life today. And if so, you're so welcome. It's a great place to be. And it's important to recognize that the answer the Bible gives from the beginning is so different from the answer we often hear in culture.

The quest to find meaning and purpose and identity doesn't come from looking inside of ourselves. It comes from looking outside of ourselves, looking up to recognize there is a God, an eternal God who made us and made us for himself.

But if you're asking these big questions, do keep coming. And if you know people who are asking big questions, why not invite them into these sermons on the book of Genesis?

[16:50] But just to recognize for ourselves that the Bible helps us to answer that question of what is the goal of your life and mine? And so often, don't we find in the busyness of life and the distractions of life, we can lose that sense of purpose.

Maybe things get hard, circumstances change. What am I here for? What's my purpose? And the book of Genesis, chapter 1, is going to remind us that we are made to know God personally. That the goal of our life is to worship the God who made us and made us for himself, to live in relationship with God, to seek his glory, to enjoy his glory.

Ultimately, to be able to sing the song of heaven we find in Revelation 4 where we hear these words, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power for, here's the reason, you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.

God is eternal. we also discovered in these opening verses, secondly, that God is, now I want you to picture this scene for just a moment. So imagine we move from Edinburgh, we move to the Arabian wilderness!

[18:09] And picture a Mr. Benjamin and a Mrs. Miriam and they're standing outside their tent and there's thousands of other tents and there's thousands of other people listening as Moses, who wrote the book of Genesis, shares for the very first time the truths that we have just read.

Now what that couple would discover in the reading of Genesis is a story so very different from what they had grown up hearing in Egypt.

So remember the people of God, Israelites, had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years and in Egypt there were multiple gods, loads of gods, local, regional, limited gods.

And they had a creation story very different to the story of the Bible. The earth, the universe, it came out of chaos, you know, fighting between gods. They heard of a great dualism.

There was two great gods, one who was really violent, he was called Seth, and one who was good and life-giving and he was called Osiris. And so they believed that there were multiple gods and the gods were all fighting together and that good and evil were eternal and they were equal.

[19:34] Now when God sets his people free from Egypt, he's also setting them free from those beliefs and introducing them to truth and reality which Moses records for us, clear, simple truth.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And Genesis 1 does this so helpfully and we'll see it in the next few weeks that God is the author of the universe.

God is the subject of all that happens in Genesis 1, 1 and 2. He's the subject of all that happens in Genesis 1, 35 times God is doing.

God is the actor, God is the author. Only God is eternal. God alone is responsible for everything that exists. So the universe is not timeless. The universe isn't here by chance.

God didn't give order to pre-existing proteins and protons. He is the creator and author of everything. Second idea, God crafted the world out of nothing.

[20:45] As we read Genesis 1 and 2, the picture language is the language of God as a great craftsman who is willing, think about how Adam was made, to get his hands dirty as it were in order to create.

He is personally involved in this wonderful creation. and he does it from nothing. Now there is no parallel in our human experience.

Think of the things that we make. Maybe we make a Lego set or we build a house or we create a great meal. All of those things require raw materials of different kinds and all of them require a set of instructions.

Only God creates out of nothing. No raw materials simply from his mind. It's a window into the power of God.

Think of that for a moment. There was nothing God spoke. There was everything. Think of the complexity and the beauty, the order in our own bodies, never mind what's going on out there.

[22:00] Nothing and no one compares with our God. But then it's important to see that from the beginning God is distinct from his creation.

God and creation are not one and the same. That's very careful and clear in verse 1 and verse 2. In the beginning there is God and then there is an action and God creates the heavens and the earth. It weren't there than it was there. In verse 2 there is the earth formless and empty, darkness, and there's the spirit of God hovering over. Not the same, hovering over.

And there's that wonderful sense of anticipation, the idea there's the raw materials and there's the spirit of God and everything's going to happen. God made the heavens and the earth, which is an

idea of a way of speaking to say God made everything.

And he made it from nothing and he is not part of what he created. So in just a few short sentences we discover the Christian view of creation and of God himself, which stands in opposition to what the Israelites were used to in Egypt and stands in opposition to what we hear a lot in our own society as well.

[23:20] So it reminds us that God the creator, that there's not polytheism, not many gods, not regional gods, not fighting and creating gods, only one true and living God.

And we don't believe in pantheism. That's found in Eastern religions. Sam Albury, who's a pastor, used to be involved in the Greenpeace movement and he would say you can trace some of this in the extremes of the environmental movement.

The universe is not divine. The rocks are not God. And the Bible also makes clear that there is no dualism.

There is no yin and yang of good and evil. Only God is eternal. Creation is not equal with God. And when evil comes into the world, and it does, we'll get there in Genesis 3, that evil is not equal with God.

And that evil is not eternal. Now, I don't know if you've thought about this. Just as an aside, there is something profoundly good about that message.

[24:35] You and I know we live in a world that is full of darkness and pain and evil. And sometimes it comes really close to us, but even when we're watching at a distance, we have that sense of grief.

But in knowing that evil is not eternal and not equal with God, we're also promised that the world that we live in will not always be like this. The God who created in the Lord Jesus, one day, Jesus will come back again at the end of history to establish what the Bible calls the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

And when Christ Jesus does that, he will bring final judgment. Evil will be destroyed once and forever. So when we find our hearts longing for a world free of sin and pain and evil, our heart is saying to us, you and I, we need to place our trust in Jesus.

He is the only hope for that world, that world that will come one day. As we come to Genesis 1 verses 1 and 2, we are being introduced to a God who is involved personally in creating this world. And there's a sense, a very real sense, in which this gets very personal for all of us. Because if God has created you and if God has created me, then that means he has certain rights.

[26:21] The creator has rights. He has rights to your loyalty. He should have the first place in our hearts and in our lives. He has the right to set our limits.

We don't get to define what is good and bad, what is good and evil. God alone has the right to do that. And when we live within his limits, actually there's freedom because we're living the world and the life that God designed for us.

He has rights to receive our love and our worship. and so I wonder as we reflect on that, is that how you and I are living today?

Even if we're professing to be Christians, are we living as if there is a God, as if he is personal and as if he has rights over our lives?

And if you have a sense where that's not how I'm living today, let me invite and encourage you to turn, to repent, to trust, or to trust again in Jesus' Lord as the way to be right with, in right relationship with, the God who made you.

[27:45] So we see that God is eternal, we see that God is creator, we're also told even just in these couple of verses that God comes near.

Now I wonder if you've had this experience of coming into a TV show or a film halfway through, or, and maybe this is a clue about what age and stage of life you're at, you start watching a film or a movie and you fall asleep halfway through, and it comes to the end, the great climax, the big finale, you can maybe find yourself asking what's going on here, what's the point, what have I missed? In the beginning of our story, God's story, we're introduced to who the main character is. He's God, he's eternal, he's creator, but even just in verse 2, we're getting ready for what this God will do. And we need both sides of the story, we need to know that God is the eternal creator, and we need to know that he comes near, and we need to know that this personal creator God will act to create

and give life.

The same principle that applies in creation, of God working to send his spirit and to bring life, is the same principle that applies when a person comes to trust in Jesus and find salvation.

[29:19] So verse 2 is a little preview of what God will do. God will bring order and form to creation.

Look at verse 2 with me, as we're introduced to see the moment of original creation. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering.

Formless, empty, dark, God hasn't yet spoken and said let there be light. Those words, formless, empty, dark, they actually become judgment words in the Bible.

The idea of being separated from God. Jeremiah uses it. Jesus will use it in parables. Remember those judgment parables where someone is cast out into the outer darkness.

God's So the earth is formless and empty. Next week we're going to see God will say let there be light. We're going to see that God is the one who gives form to the universe.

[30:24] God is the one who fills the universe. But here in verse 2 we're being introduced to the reality that God is personally going to be involved in creating and he will do so as we see it through the spirit that hovers.

God's creative energy is poised and ready. That God makes himself near in an act of generous grace.

Just to recognize in verse 1 the focus is on the universe, the heavens and the earth. Already by verse 2 the focus zooms in on the earth. And we're invited to see how generous and good God has been to us as the people who dwell on the earth.

The truth that we have here in Genesis 1 reminds us that God at the end of the day he does not need us but we need God. God did not need to make the universe.

He freely chose to and he freely chose to focus on the earth and the people who live on the earth to display his glory to. There's a goodness and a generosity at the heart of God that we see as creation begins.

[31:41] But there's an even greater grace that God will show and he will show it the next time we hear in the Bible in the beginning. Do we know what it is?

Beginning of John's gospel speaking about Jesus the eternal son of God in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

In him was life. That life was the light of mankind. And that word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and we have seen his glory.

And here we are introduced to the good news of God's story of salvation. The announcement that God the eternal creator in his son Jesus steps right into his creation.

Jesus comes so near as to become one of us, to live for us, then to die for us, to bring us God's light and to give us life with God.

[32:55] God. And as the story unfolds, we see Jesus is the one promised in Genesis, who is the source of God's blessing for us.

Jesus is the eternal king promised, who sets up a kingdom of perfect righteousness. Jesus is the promised one who alone can undo the curse of sin that brings death.

So as you and I look around, as we look into our hearts, we see there is a lot that is beautiful, but there is a lot that is also broken.

And as people, we cannot make it right. As people, we cannot restore ourselves to good relationship with God because of our sin. But in the good news of the Bible, the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God, he comes near to restore what we have ruined, to give hope of that world we all want at his return.

Our God is eternal. He is our creator, and he is personal, and he comes near. He still comes near.

[34:11] with