

Grace In Genesis (i)

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to Genesis chapter 1. Genesis chapter 1. The book of Genesis is the book of beginnings.

It records events which happened in distant antiquity. Some think that what happened in the past should stay in the past, and all that's important really is today.

But I would hope that we all agree, we cannot really understand what is happening to us today unless we understand how we got here in the first place. The famous Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer was once asked, if you had an hour on a plane to speak to someone about the gospel, what would you say?

Schaeffer quickly replied, I'd spend 55 minutes of it talking about Genesis. He insisted that unless we learn what Genesis teaches us concerning who God is and who we are, we will never understand today's world.

Furthermore, Schaeffer suggested that without Genesis, Christian salvation makes no sense. Without Genesis, the cross of Jesus makes no sense. Without Genesis, the doctrine of salvation makes no sense.

[1 : 17] Without Genesis, heaven makes no sense. More than anything else, without Genesis, the grace of God makes no sense. That's why I maintain the book of Genesis is founded upon and filled with grace.

From beginning to end, the history of the world is that of God's undeserved love and overflowing generosity toward his people. Genesis has no less grace than revelation.

And so over the next few Sunday evenings, I want us to explore together the theme of grace in Genesis. When I use the word grace, of course I'm referring to the Christian gospel, that through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God does not treat us as we deserve, but treats us as Christ deserves.

That through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God both draws near to us and draws us near to him.

That through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God gives us eternal life. That grace, perhaps best defined and described in the New Testament, is founded upon and fills the whole book of Genesis.

[2 : 42] This book of beginnings. And so we may say, that not just does the cross of Jesus make no sense without Genesis, but that Genesis makes no sense without the cross of Jesus.

Well, there are a few more contentious passages of Scripture than Genesis 1. And I've got no intention of causing contention this evening, because without ignoring the details of this passage, I want us to drive straight into the central teaching of Genesis 1, namely, God's grace in action at the beginning of what we call time and space.

The cross of Jesus looms large, even from Genesis 1, verse 1, and the stage is set for God's grace to dominate the history of the universe.

I want us to explore together three themes from this chapter. The grace of God is committed grace, the grace of God is kingly grace, and its contradictory grace.

And my hope for our explorations is not that we would just read Genesis differently from now on, but that we'd all learn to rest more in the all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

[4 : 07] First of all, we learn that the grace of God is committed grace. The grace of God is committed grace. As I said earlier, there are a few more passages of Scripture which have, over the centuries, caused so much contention as Genesis 1.

Genesis 1, verse 1, has been the cause of endless arguments, given that it attributes the existence of time and space to the creative activity of God.

The universe did not appear out of nothing, nor is it a fresh expression of something which existed previously. Rather, the universe was created by God.

Genesis 1 simply states, in the beginning, God created. God created the land and the seas, the light and the sun, the stars and the sea creatures, and the climax of his creation, God created the human race.

While the rest of Genesis 1 has been no less controversial, Christians have fallen out with each other over the course of centuries about whether the universe was created in six days or six billion years, or whether Genesis 1 is to be understood as scientific literature or as literary framework.

[5 : 27] God's method of creation has become a shibboleth in many quarters, with sincere Christians becoming judge, jury, and executioner, depending upon whether you lean upon scientific or biblical explanations.

And I have no interest in igniting debates among us which all too often generate far more heat than light and distract us from the central theme of Genesis 1, which is, there is grace here from the very beginning, no further back, even from the very beginning of time and space.

Because the question we've got to ask is this, where did this universe come from? To what or to whom do we attribute that which we call time and space?

Genesis 1 tells us, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The answer is God. God created all things. And not just any God, but the one true and living God.

The same God who called Abraham out of the land of Ur of the Chaldees and made him into a great nation. The same God who worked powerfully in Joseph's life to bring him to a position of prominence in Egypt.

[6 : 47] The same God who rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt. The same God who so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This God created all things. The God whose first act of covenant commitment to his covenant people was to both create a world for them and to create them.

You will know that Moses wrote the book of Genesis and he wrote it for the Israelites as they made their 40-year journey from Egypt to Canaan.

Moses wanted them to know their history as a people. But at the very beginning, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wanted the people to know that the God who delivered them from their slavery in Egypt is the God who created all things.

The hills and the sand and the seas. The God whose presence goes with them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

[7 : 58] The God who comes near in the ark of the covenant at the heart of their encampment in that strange tent. The God who is with them fighting against their enemies.

He's the God who created the stars in the sky. He is not their enemy. They may be hated by the surrounding nations, but their God sits on the throne of the universe and he is for, not against them.

He is the almighty creator of the moon and the sun. God's created, God's committed grace is expressed in his creation of all things and especially of his people.

So throughout the Psalms, God's creative activity is consistently linked to his covenant commitment to his people. So for example, in the most, in the Psalm we know best, Psalm 100 verse 3, we read, know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. And so when we read Genesis 1, rather than immediately focus on controversy, we worship the God who created the heavens and the earth for his committed grace to us.

[9 : 23] This world, though there may be hazards and dangers, it's God's world. The lion is God's lion, the shark is God's shark, the virus is God's virus. I'm not saying that the world as it now is, is benevolent and kindly toward us and there's a reason for that which we'll come to in Genesis 3.

But what I am saying is that the creator of the heavens and the earth, the Lord of the whole show of creation, he is filled with love and grace toward us.

We walk up the highest mountain in Scotland, Ben Nevis, and we say, my gracious Father made this mountain. We descend to the deep ocean trenches of St. Kilda and we say, my gracious Father made these ocean trenches.

From where did this all come, this thing we call time and space, the mighty universe. It was not created by any God, but by our God, the God whose face we have seen in Jesus Christ.

And this was the first expression of his grace toward us. many of you here are studying in university or school. The question is this, what are you studying?

[10 : 41] Answer, you are studying the grace of your heavenly Father in his creation of all things. It is the work of God, your Father, you are learning about, not an impersonal creator or a series of random events.

It is the geometry and the culture, the law and the language and the science of the God who is for us and whose creation was the first expression of his grace toward us.

Committed grace, that's the first thing Genesis 1 teaches us. Second thing, kingly grace, kingly grace. The word king may not be used in Genesis 1, but it's written all over the text.

God is the almighty king by whose royal command the heavens and the earth come into being. He speaks and it is. His spirit hovers over the waters of the deep and he brings form from the emptiness of the void.

Our God is the king of grace whose almighty power creates a universe which at every level you see from this chapter he calls good. Again, I'm suggesting to you that the heart of Genesis 1 is this covenantal committed grace of God toward his people.

[12 : 03] And his kingly grace is seen in two ways in this chapter. Two ways in which the almighty creative power of God works in grace in Genesis 1. First, it's sovereign grace and then it's supreme grace.

Sovereign grace first of all. Let's go back a little while. Let the power of verse 1 wash over us again. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

What caused the universe? The stars and the sun, the seed-bearing plants, the vast ecology of the rainforest. Genesis 1 tells us God is its cause.

The heavens and the earth owe their existence to God. That creation was not the next stage in an inevitable process involving quantum mechanics or the random occurrence of all the right elements at all the right times and all the right order.

No, the explanation of all things, the existence of all things, ourselves included, lies in God. And what I'm saying here is that it was God who decided to create all things.

[13 : 15] That in the last analysis when we ask the question why does everything exist? We must answer because God decided to create.

We've already quoted Psalm 103 where the psalmist writes, know that the Lord is God, it was he who made us and we are his. And that verse contains an alternate translation and we sing that every time we're singing this psalm from the Scottish Psalter, know that the Lord is God without our aid he did us make or know that the Lord is God it is he who made us and not we ourselves.

In other words, God took the initiative and our creation is entirely the decision of his sovereign will and purpose. we owe our existence to the will of our God and Father.

The consistent teaching of scripture is that God takes the initiative in our salvation. That grace precedes our response.

He took the initiative in calling Abraham to leave the land of Ur. He took the initiative in sending his one and only son. He took the initiative in opening our eyes to the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

[14 : 42] In Ephesians 2 we learn that even the faith with which we believe in him is a gift of his grace. We owe everything about our creation and our salvation to the initiating sovereign grace of God the Father.

it is not merely he who made us and not we ourselves it is he who saved us and not we ourselves.

Genesis 1 draws us to the inevitable conclusion you see that the grace of God is entirely sovereign it's not forced in any way. That to use the words of Psalm 115 our God is in the heavens and he does whatever pleases him.

So it pleased him to create the heavens and the earth as the first expression of his committed love toward us as his people. And it pleased him to shine the light of his salvation into our hearts to make of us a new creation.

It's all from beginning to end the story of his sovereign grace at work. His grace is sovereign. That's what this passage teaches us but it also teaches us that his kingly grace is supreme.

[16 : 04] Supreme. As I said this passage was written by Moses to the wandering Israelites as they made their way from Egypt to Canaan. And during these 40 years as we learn from other portions of Moses' writing in the first five books of the Bible these Israelites were tempted to follow the gods of the nations.

they had left Egypt which worshipped primarily the sun god Ra and all around them were nations which worshipped the stars and the great creatures of the sea.

The storms bow the storm god and the trees of the forest. Genesis 1 is genius. mocking all the gods of the nations and insisting that they are no gods at all.

The sun is not a god called Ra. The sun is just a sun. And the stars are just stars they're not gods. The sea creatures are just sea creatures.

And the trees of the forest are just trees. the only true god is the one who created them. Moses is saying to these people don't go worshipping the gods of the nations when your god is the one true and almighty god.

[17 : 37] He reigns supreme over all the other objects people worship as gods. Yes, even over the mighty sun and the many stars. We confess every Sunday morning as we recite the apostles creed together in this church.

I believe in God the father almighty maker of heaven and earth. As opposed to the Babylonian accounts of creation God did not fight a mighty battle of chaos to bring order into being.

Rather it was by the power of his word he created all things. And the sun never turns round to him on the fourth day and says I don't want to be created. I don't want to shine.

I want to remain forever in nothingness. The power of God was supreme and there was no other force which could defy his creative word. He was not overpowered in Genesis 1 by anything at any time.

Rather the supremacy of his will was supreme in this first expression of his grace in that he created his people. In Romans chapter 8 verse 31 the apostle Paul emphatically states if God be for us who can be against us?

[18 : 57] If God's verdict over sinful men and women who by grace have been saved is they are justified who can condemn us? Who can overpower his spirit at work within us?

Can life or death can heaven or hell? Can angel or demon? Can height or depth? No because the God who created all things is the Lord of all the things he created.

There is a reason that we Calvinists want to speak about the irresistible grace of God. It's because the grace of God cannot be overwhelmed or overpowered defied resisted or defeated.

that grace which justifies is supreme and none may snatch us from the hands of the God who created hands. Knowing this kingly grace of God, that grace first expressed in the creation of the heavens and the earth but ultimately demonstrated in the cross of Jesus as we'll see, knowing that grace brings confidence to the Christian and assurance of faith.

death, not my doubts and not my sins, not my weaknesses and not my confusions, nothing.

[20 : 18] As the hymn says, no power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hand. There is no supreme court of appeal above God because he is the almighty maker of heaven and earth and his method of salvation is in Christ alone through faith alone by grace alone.

Who then shall countermand this? If he be for us, who can be against us? Genesis 1 lays the groundwork for Jesus' miracles.

He has authority over death and demons, over illness and over the natural elements at the power of his voice in the gospels, the demons flee and the lame walk. The bread is multiplied.

The dead are restored to life because after all the sun is just a sun. The stars are just stars. And the creatures of the sea, they're just sea creatures and the trees of the forest, they're just trees.

And Jesus and his kingly grace reigns supreme over them all. Yes, even over my guilt and over my shame and over my sin.

[21 : 40] It's kingly grace. But then thirdly and briefly, Genesis 1 teaches us that the grace of God is contradictory. Contradictory.

We could point to so many aspects of the grace of God at work in the creation of the heavens and the earth, not the least of which is the creation of humanity with a triune. God says to himself, let us make man in our image.

Proceeds to place us in a paradise of unspeakable beauty. We could explore the grace of God and the discipline of what we would call anthropology, the study of humanity.

But given time restraints, I want to conclude this evening by considering the greatest contradiction in the Bible. Well, contradiction perhaps, paradox, definitely.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John is the New Testament's commentary on Genesis 1. And in John chapter 1, we learn of the role of our Lord Christ in creation.

[22 : 45] We read, through him all things were made. Without him nothing has been made that was made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

Genesis 1 you see is the description of the creative activity of God the Son. As through him all things are made and live.

And who is this Son, this word, according to John? He is the word, the word by whom God said let there be light, and there was light.

The word by whom God created. And furthermore, who is the word according to John chapter 1? This word was with God, John says, because this word was God.

Where then, in the latter portions of the gospel of John, do we see the word of God himself, through whom the whole universe was created?

[23 : 53] Where do we find him? We find him dying on a Roman cross. He through whom the Romans were created, the wood from which the cross was made was created.

The metal from which the nails which were driven into his hands and feet were created. He became flesh and died on a hill outside Jerusalem which he created.

he who created time and space died in time and space. This is the greatest contradiction in the universe, something which perhaps from Genesis 1 we might not have suspected.

You see, the first expression of God's grace toward us is in our creation. The ultimate expression of God's grace toward us is in our redemption.

God's grace toward us is in his giving us life. The ultimate expression of God's grace toward us is in giving us eternal life through the death of his son.

[25 : 06] This is our great covenant God, the God who is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably committed to us in covenant love. Perhaps, perhaps in the light of the covenantal nature of the God we find in Genesis 1, perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised that he was willing to give his one and only son to save the people he loved.

This is the great paradox and seeming contradiction of Genesis 1, that this almighty king who created the heavens and the earth gave himself in weakness for us, that having created us in grace, he redeemed us with an even greater grace, the death of his own son.

In Psalm 8, we are told, you have set your glory above the heavens. Yes, indeed, the glory of God is greater than the heavens and the earth. That glory veiled behind the likeness of human flesh, which he himself had created.

That glory which hung humiliated on the cross, which he himself had made. He was not dying there to set something right that he had made poorly in his creation in the first place.

He was dying as the sacrifice for the sin we had introduced into his creation. That grace for us. Not just the creation, but all the more so the cross on which his son died.

[26 : 40] What then shall be our response to Genesis 1? Next week we'll look at Genesis 3 and we'll see how when we talk of Adam and Eve's fall from grace, we're really talking about Adam and Eve's fall into grace.

But what shall be our response to Genesis 1? Shall it be to train our guns on those who don't share our precise system concerning how God created? Or shall it be to train our hearts upwards in worship to the God of all grace, whose commitment to us, whose kingship over us means that his redemption of us demands our life, our soul, our all, our careers, our choices, our relationships, our plans, our dreams.

Genesis 1, you know, isn't nearly as controversial as we think. Rather, it's more challenging than we think. It challenges us to put God first, even as from the very beginning he put us first, to turn our eyes and our hearts upon the Jesus who, though he created us in the beginning, died on the cross for us.

Genesis 1 is not cosmology as much as it is doxology, the glory of God and his commitment to us, his kingship over us, and his love for us on the cross.

grace. And for that, at least, we shall worship and praise him for his sovereign grace. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for the majestic form of Genesis chapter 1, and we can understand now perhaps why it is that Schaeffer said that if you had an hour to speak to a fellow passenger on a plane about the Lord Jesus Christ, he'd spend 55 minutes talking from the book of Genesis.

[28 : 36] We thank you that without Genesis there is no grace, there's no cross, there's no need for your son to sacrifice himself, there's no context in which your grace is set forward and your love for us is projected into our lives.

Lord, we pray this week in all our studies and in all our work and in all the choices we make that you would help us to put you first, you'd help us to remember the cross in which Jesus died to justify us and make us righteous.

And more than anything else, oh Lord, we pray that for those of us who have doubts or are confused or troubled, those of us who are filled with sorrow in our hearts, did you give us that confidence that Stuart Townend and the Gettys talked about when they said no power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hand.

Lord, that we're secured in Jesus Christ, we ask these things in his name and for his sake alone. Amen. Amen. Thank you.