

Genesis 1:1-25

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Page 1. Genesis 1. You know, if we didn't have Genesis 1, life would be like a big improv. You'd come out on stage, you wouldn't know your lines, you don't know why you're there, you don't know what the storyline is, you don't know who wrote it, you don't know where it's going, you just have to make it up as you go along. The Bible begins by introducing us to the person of the Creator. First words, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, everything, and that means that all things are by him and for him and through him, and that the most basic thing we can say to God is, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. And if you listen carefully, that's what they're singing in heaven right now. And that means that behind our world, behind our lives is not some cold, impersonal fate or chance or power, but God, the one God who speaks and makes and blesses and created the world for us, which is why life is not like improv, why life is not hopeless or meaningless, but is open by prayer and relationship and love. So we start a series today in Genesis 1 to 11, and these chapters shape and frame every possible question you can ask, where we come from, where we're going, what's the purpose of life, who am I? Every ethical issue is bound up in the creation narratives here, environmental issues, issues of sexuality, start of life, end of life, whether you should have children or pets.

Just thought I'd throw that in, show you that I've been watching the news. So, and everyone, every single person has a basic faith position when it comes to answering these questions. We have values, and the values seem obvious to us, and we hardly even know what our values are based on, sometimes what they're called. So the atheist has a faith position about the cosmos, they believe the cosmos just came from nothing, and their values come from that. The pantheist, the polytheist, the pagan, the materialist, the secularist, the average mizzly muddy west coast Canadian, we all have faith positions, and our values flow. And those of us who trust in Jesus Christ, we too have a faith position, which we're very glad to talk about given the slightest opportunity.

So the idea that God created the heavens and the earth, that little phrase I read to you, the first words of the Bible, have always been very controversial.

Not for the reasons we usually think. It has nothing to do with some imaginary conflict between creation and science. But everything to do with the fact that Genesis chapter 1 overthrows and subverts every other faith position. So it's not a nice, neutral, sentimental passage.

[3 : 27] You can't dismiss it as fantasy or simply myth, but one that has massive moral and personal and universal implications, and it's tremendously confronting and comforting at the same time.

And I think this series and this chapter comes to us today at exactly the right time. Because no sooner are we introduced to the creator in line one, then the second note is struck in verse two, which is the note of chaos. Verse two, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. So immediately after the summary statement, we're not taken up to look at the countless stars and their glories and the beauty of the galaxies. We're brought right down to earth, which is covered with darkness, and it is without form and void. It is boundless, chaotic. There's a sense of nothingness and threat and danger here.

One great commentary said this, that creation is something on the edge of nothing, bordered and menaced by it, having no power of its own to overcome it. I would say it's not just on the edge of nothingness, it's on the edge of chaos. And I think we feel that threat of chaos.

It affects us deeply, personally, profoundly, not just in the stress and uncertainty of chaos, of COVID. I was COVID, chaos COVID. But I think in the increasing hostility there is to the Christian

faith in our modern culture. It is impossible to do justice to the beauty and reach of this passage. It's just not possible to do it. So I want to look with you this morning at the two main practical implications of Genesis 1, the first 25 verses. And the first is how this chapter confronts the chaos of our culture. And number two, how this chapter comforts us in the chaos of COVID.

[5 : 48] So number one, how does Genesis 1 confront the chaos in our culture? Ross Douthat is a name known to many of us. He is a New York Times columnist who is a Roman Catholic.

He's written a number of books and he challenges the secularization narrative. You know, this narrative that's going around that the decline in religion is caused by secularism, that we've grown so much in wealth and scientific knowledge, we don't need God anymore. And that's why there's hostility to Christian belief. But he says, surveys show a very different story, that North Americans, and I include Canadians in this, are more spiritual.

That year by year, they report having more profound religious experiences, even as they abandon traditional religious beliefs. Stephen Smith is a researcher at San Diego University. He's written on this as well. And he says that the mark of all these, the common ground of all these, and I know common ground is one of those phrases, of all these religious experiences, is looking for the sacred in nature or in ourselves. It rejects any idea of the sacred standing outside us and above us, which is much closer to the world in which Genesis was first written.

And he calls it new paganism. And that's just simply a way of saying that more and more today, people believe that God is part of nature, not distinct or above nature.

So nature is sacred. I am sacred. You are sacred. And I am you and you are me and we are all together. And we touch God by touching the ocean or the mountain or the tree, because God is in creation, part of creation, just as you and I are. And Douthat says, this helps explain why our culture, our culture looks at traditional Christian belief as a kind of idolatry. We've invented, we believe in a false God who doesn't exist. And the only possible reason we can welcome Christianity in our contemporary culture is it may offer some therapeutic benefit to us.

[8 : 10] And Douthat says, and he writes quite beautifully, really, he talks about the God within silliness of Oprah and the feel good prosperity of the do it spirituality, do it yourself spirituality of eat, pray, love. I've never read this book, eat, pray, love. But evidently, this is a story about abandoning your family and running off with a new love in the name of divinity within. I don't, I'm not going to read it. And Douthat says, Douthat puts the blame for this, much of the blame at the feet of the churches, because we've preached the, we've reduced the great gospel to something therapeutic.

French Old Testament scholar Henri Blochet goes even further. He says, the basic impulse, this is very helpful, the basic impulse in pagan thinking is not just that God and nature are one, but the way to find spiritual power and reality is to dissolve all the differences and boundaries that have ever been set up. The way to encounter the sacred is to smash distinctions and boundaries and limitations. So pagan religions are based on techniques to access the divine by breaking open categories in the hope of releasing their power. So he says the orgy, the sexual orgy seeks to rejuvenate the world by plunging it back into its creative chaos. And historically, it comes with a blurring and a breaking of sexual boundaries. And you see, any view that there is one God who is our creator to whom we might be accountable is treated with hostility and dismissed as oppressive. That was Satan's main argument in the Garden of Eden. You remember that God's mean and selfish and that his limitations are his way of oppressing us. So the hostility to the biblical faith comes from a renewed paganism with culture. And Douthat argues it's neither materialistic so much nor atheistic, but it pursues divinity within the world, not outside it. So we define our own divinity by our class or by our gender or by our race, and we become more at one by reverencing nature. And Ablosa says that the tragedy is that the resentment toward the God-given shape of life, you know, the desperate desire not to be myself or not to accept how God has made me, is the yearning for communion with God who transcends our limits. Let me quote.

He says, fury against God's order feeds on the desire for God. It's a very, very profound thing to say. Once we lose communion with God, we replace it with chaos. And Genesis 1 confronts the chaos in our culture with a radically different view of God and our world. And it draws a line. And it says, on one side is the God who created everything, and on the other side of the line is everything that was created. And they are different, and they are distinct, and they are not to be confused with one another. And each day has the same shape. And God said, and there was, and it was so, and God saw that it was good. God is not part of nature. Nature is not sacred. God does not need nature or depend on nature, but all creation depends on God. It doesn't stand on its own.

Everything that exists, which is not God, owes its existence to God, you and me. The world has no pivot in itself. The world, we as humans, have no meaning in ourselves apart from God as our creator. The world doesn't pass from inside God to outside God. It's essentially distinct. The world is not a part of God, but depends on him for everything. This is the starting point of all true religion. And that's why, as the chapter was read for us by Alan, there's such a massive focus on God. 25 times in this chapter,

[12:40] God created, God said, God saw, God made, God formed. But you know that today when you say God, that's not sufficient. I mean, who is this God? Genesis 1 says he is the maker of heaven and earth who creates and transforms the chaos by his spoken word. And he moves the world from formless emptiness and chaos in verse 2. And then over at the end of the chapter in verse 31, we read, God saw that everything, God saw everything that he made and behold, it was very good. So he is a God who stands behind his creative word and his word is perfect and irresistible and effective and powerful.

And if we had time this morning, which we don't, we could see that the narrative is an exquisite poem set around seven days, the perfect number of days to show the perfect work of God. It's very clever. A week is a very ordinary human reality. It's a human way of life. And Genesis 1 is a way of bringing the immensity of what God is doing and who he is literally down into ordinary time. And the six days of creation, and there's a seventh, which is the Sabbath, the six days of creation perfectly answer the formlessness and the emptiness of verse 2. So days 1, 2, and 3, God separates and gathers together and puts boundaries and limits on things. And day 4, 5, and 6, he fills those, he fills them with blessing and life and vegetation by his word. God doesn't get out a big hammer and chisel on his bench or a lathe or a brick kiln. He speaks the word into existence. And the fact that he alone is the creator also means that he sustains things day by day in existence continually. So if all things that are made are outside of him and essentially different, we look to him for our continued existence, which means we owe him our life and breath and worship and obedience, and we are accountable to him.

And interestingly, this is so thoroughgoing, we don't think about it. Sometimes we use phrasing like we say God intervenes or God turns up. But if you say that, you mean that God's not there all of the other times, and he is. But the way of God with his world is the way of speech. So we don't access God through nature. We don't access God by a mystical absorption where we rise through various steps of discipline to unity with God. We don't access the divine by looking inside for answers, but by hearing and believing and obeying his word and by speaking to him and about him. And it also means that by itself, since it is, since creation is an artifact of his word, it means that creation does not have enough in itself for us to understand its true purpose. Apart from his word, the true nature of the world, the true nature of ourselves, the true nature of our story is hidden from us.

We all sense it has meaning, don't we? I mean, you look at the beauty of the world. Gosh, we've been FaceTiming with friends in Australia, and it's, you know, it's 30 degrees every day there and blue skies. And we hold up the iPad to the snow outside, and they just, they're awestruck.

It's beautiful. I mean, I know it's slippery and difficult, but it's gorgeous, isn't it? You look at the whales out in the straits, or the hummingbirds that fly, or the hellebores that are around right now, and the irises. We know it means something, but it's like watching a silent movie, a beautiful silent movie, and trying to make out the plot. We need a soundtrack, and it's given to us by God's word.

[16:51] And again and again and again, the Psalms rejoice in the creation of the world, and it becomes an impulse for mission. Psalm 33, let all the earth fear the Lord. Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him, for he spoke, and it came to be. He commanded, and it stood firm.

That's why Genesis 1 has always been controversial, and that's why it's confronting as well, because it only does so because of our love of chaos.

But the main purpose of Genesis 1 is not confrontation. It's comfort and strength and communion with God. So I move to the second point, and that is, how does Genesis 1 comfort us in every circumstance, but particularly in COVID? Because here we are, brothers and sisters, we've had two years, and we are weary and fatigued. And everyone I speak to feels the intensity of the disconnection and disorientation and disintegration, and it raises our anxieties and fears, and we have this personal touch with chaos inside us and around us. And Genesis 1 is such a practical help, because listen to this, the first act of creation is pictured as a work of redemption. In other words, the work of creation from verse 2 onward is God redeeming the world from chaos and darkness by his powerful word.

It is a model of God redeeming work in our lives, where our lives are full of darkness and chaos, and God makes light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of his face in Jesus Christ. You know, throughout the book of Isaiah, creation and redemption are joined together in marriage. They're two sides of the one coin. In fact, redemption is couched in terms of creation.

[18 : 56] Here is one of the things we sing during the season of Advent. Isaiah 45, verse 8.

Show, O heavens, from above. Look, creation language. And let the clouds rain down righteousness. Let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit. Let the earth cause them both to sprout. I, the Lord, have created it. And then the final redemption in Isaiah, and later Isaiah, is pictured as a new creation. Behold, God says, I create a new heavens and a new earth. Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create. For behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad over my people. And that was spoken at one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. Genesis 1 indicates that the grace of God is not just his answer to sin. It's fundamental to creation. He doesn't need to make the world. He prepares a place for you and me so that he can bring many sons to glory. And the coming of sin brings out different facets of grace and different depth of the fullness of God's grace. But God's eternal desire has always been to share his love and to bring others into personal communion with himself in a place that he has created for us. So that when it says right at the beginning, in the beginning, God created, that is what the experts call a pregnant phrase. If there's a beginning, it means that history also has an end.

It means the world is not eternal. That this world will be replaced with a new heaven and a new earth, and that nothing, nothing that happens in your life and nothing that happens in this world happens of its own accord. We are not in the end, we are not ultimately in the hands of the powerful or pandemics or any other thing beginning with P. And that means that the whole purpose of history cannot end in a mess.

What God begins, he will finish. The world will never see the annihilation of the church. It will never be allowed to believe that Jesus Christ is irrelevant.

This world will end in the triumph of Christ. And since God is personal and since he holds the world in existence as the Lord of creation, prayer makes sense.

[21 : 37] Rene Pascal said, prayer bestows on us the dignity of causality. It's how God brings his purposes about in his world.

So when we pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we're not avoiding or evading responsibility or reality. It's responding to reality that God will do as he promised and his promises to bring blessing.

The whole creation narrative is about the goodness of God and his creation. So again and again, as we read, and God said, let there be and there was. Again and again, the day finishes by this, these words, and God saw that it was good.

And that means that matter is neither sacred nor sinful. It's neither eternal nor is it illusion.

But it is there to be accepted with thanksgiving from the hands of God and used for his glory. And every time God uses the word good here, it's more than saying it's physically beautiful.

[22 : 48] It's more than even saying that it's morally good. It shows that it has a purpose and that God is a God who takes delight in what he makes.

I love this. God's not amazed by it. He's not spellbound by it. But he holds it before himself with joy. And that means that God has structured delight into the very character of reality.

Psalm 65. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy. And God creates a whole seventh day at the end for the purpose of delighting and enjoying his creation. And since he created humanity as the last act on day six, the first day of human existence is to enjoy and delight in the holy day of rest.

And in God's blessing. And that means that chaos or COVID has the final word. God intends his blessing and life to be enjoyed in the midst of difficulty, in the midst of chaos, as part of the normal flow and mystery of life.

[24 : 07] The final word on creation, of course, belongs to Jesus Christ. It's not until Jesus comes that God draws out the meanings and implications of creation more fully.

Because Jesus is the one in whom and through whom and for whom all things were made. He's the purpose and goal of creation. He was with the Father in the beginning.

And as the word, the logos, he does not return to the Father void. He comes as the light into the world. He enters the very limitation and boundaries of a God-shaped life as the full expression of God's grace.

And when he explains his death on the cross, he uses Genesis 1 pictures. He says, just as God prepared a place for us by creating all things, I am preparing a place for you in the new creation where you will have light and life and all the chaos and cruelty and corruption of this world will be no more.

Where God will rejoice over you with singing. And I know 2022 presents each of us with special challenges and opportunities. And as the Spirit hovered over the waters, he hovers over us continually, speaking the words of grace, moving us forward, challenging the chaos around us, within us, empowering us to take risks based on faith and to bear witness to the God who is worthy to receive all honour and power.

[25 : 46] And glory forever. So let's kneel for prayer.