

Up From The Abyss

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[0 : 00] Well, it's very nice to see you all, and I thought if I put Lisa up to asking people who had been here a year and figured nobody knew who they were to stand up and say, we subject newcomers to that from time to time, make them stand up and say who they are.

So I thought that it would be only appropriate if you've been here a while, that you should be bold enough to stand up and do that. And the passage of Scripture, which has just been read for us, is, of course, the first verses of the whole of Scripture.

And it's the first of the five books of Moses making up the Torah. One of the commentators says that there are very definite Babylonian references in it, which suggests that it probably was in at least oral form or some kind of written form.

In fact, some students say that you can tell by the nature of the language that it at one time was imprinted on a tablet at some time, that it wasn't done with a word process.

And so that the story itself probably goes back a long time, even before Moses put it into the book of Genesis.

[1 : 36] So it's a very kind of ancient, ancient manuscript, which tells us about the beginning, the very early story of how it all began.

And, of course, if any of you have ever had a child, you no doubt have never gone through the early life of that child without having to face the question, who made God?

And that's a completely imponderable and unanswerable question. But because of your vast authority as a parent, you make some silly attempt to answer it.

And hope that your child will still believe you, even if they don't believe what you say. So that it is, I mean, it's not one of the things that we're meant to know or even would be possible for us to know. And so you get that delightful reality that we have to contend with, that whatever was in the beginning was God. And that that's where it all comes from.

[2 : 54] I've shown you before the picture of the little man who sits on here with his elbows on his knees thinking about life and saying to himself, I'd like to know what this whole show is all about before it's out.

So that this question of the beginning is a question that occurs to all of us. I mean, we can't escape from some of these really basic questions about who we are, where we came from, what it all means, what is the purpose of it.

But we live with those questions in our mind and heart the whole of our lives. And most of the world's religions, whatever they may be, try in some way to answer those questions.

And philosophers have to try and answer those questions. They're there. And we have to come to some kind of consensus with ourself about the answer to the question, what it's all about, what it means as the basis of trying to figure out who we are.

And we have a theory that we go around calling the Big Bang Theory. Is that it? Big Bang. Big Bang. But I think that the really inscrutable problem is that there is a profound and deafening silence when you get back there.

[4 : 31] And that's the kind of inscrutable nature of it when you get back to the beginning. So you get the fact that it all begins with God.

You can't get back beyond that. There's a man in this congregation, in this Wednesday gathering, who I see isn't here today, for which I'm grateful. No, I'm not grateful he's not here, but I want to just tell a story about him anyway.

You know, he's one of those people who I think one of the delights he takes in life is getting clergymen and other gullible people.

And he puts them on a spit and roasts them over the fire by saying, explain the Trinity to me, will you? And, I mean, if you don't want the Trinity explained to you, there ain't nobody in the world can explain it.

So that's how he can roast you over the fire by saying, well, how can this be? How can this be on indefinitely? That's the kind of mystery that we're up against.

[5 : 48] And yet we're up against also at the same time the hard reality that however it began, here we are. I listened to that wonderful station on the radio yesterday, the one that, I don't know, public radio.

It's full of great and mysterious and awful things, all of them together. Yesterday, we had a wonderful picture of the fact that you and I are just a collection of subatomic particles.

There you are sitting on a chair, 183 pounds of subatomic particles. And you are surrounded by an environment of subatomic particles.

And when you get right down to the level of subatomic particles, it's almost impossible to tell where you stop and where something else begins. And that you probably all belong to the cosmic sea of subatomic particles.

And so the only curse you have is that you think that you are somebody when in fact you're not. You're just part of a great conglomeration of subatomic particles that meld into one another.

[7 : 13] So that's one way out. But it's hard to believe. You see, the question is always there.

And you can't begin except with God. I mean, lots of people, I guess, suspect you can. But it's one of the things we have to be told, I think, that in the beginning, God.

But then you get this reality, which I want to just draw for you. And this is going to be one of the most precise drawings that I have ever put on paper.

I can tell you this now. So watch carefully. That expresses it perfectly.

And what it is, is what's spoken of there. It's without form, void, and dark. And that was the condition of the world.

[8 : 33] And that's what's described here when it says the earth was without form, void, and dark. And deep.

And you get that sense that this is the beginning. And then you get, like they say, like a bird hovering, if it were, over the darkness.

You get the spirit hovered over the formless, empty darkness and meaninglessness of everything. And the Holy Spirit comes. And then you get this juxtaposition of this chaos, this void, this abyss, this emptiness.

Then you get God by the Holy Spirit coming. And then you get what it says there. And God said, and the whole business of creation begins.

[9 : 47] The darkness, the spirit of God hovering over the darkness. God becoming intimately and personally and directly involved with his creation.

And speaking a word. And that word begins to give form and structure and meaning and purpose to the chaos, to the emptiness.

To the darkness. It begins to happen. The formlessness begins to take form. The emptiness is filled. The silence is broken.

The darkness is dispelled by the light. And all this is at the word of God. And it's a very, it's a magnificent, I think it's a magnificent picture.

And it's almost an inescapably fundamental picture. You've almost got to come back here to say that this is where it all began. And so that you get this kind of, what exists in our world is the tension between the purpose of God and the formlessness and chaotic nature of the world in which we begin and in which we live.

[11 : 02] And so you see the word of God comes. And in response to the word of God, there is sea and there is land and there is sky and there is light and there is seasons. And there is seeds and there is birds and there is animals.

And then God said, let us make man in our own image.

And that's the last of the work of creation. And I think it would be helpful to you as I think it is to me to recognize that that process of creation, that activity of God is still going on.

You know why we go to church on Sunday? It's because after six days, God rested on the seventh day.

Because the work that he was to have done was done. The reason we go to work on Sunday is because, go to church on Sunday, it's because to celebrate the new work that God is beginning. [12:17] We don't go to church at the end of the week when it's all done. We go to church at the beginning of the week when it's all beginning to happen.

And so we don't live in a world that is completed and finished as far as the purpose of God is concerned. We begin in a world that is still emerging as far as the purpose of God is concerned. We are anticipating that which begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. That's the beginning of something that we can't begin to imagine. So you get this wonderful picture of how it all happens, of the chaos and the darkness waiting for a word to be spoken.

Something that will bring order and meaning and light from every direction and bring it into the emptiness and the chaos and the darkness.

[13:20] I want to say this over and over again so you never forget it. And then I want you to think about that verse which a lot of people say is the verse in which the whole of the gospel is contained and it's John 3.16.

And John 3.16 reads, Now what I think perishing means is that God loved the world so that we wouldn't perish.

And that is so that we wouldn't ultimately be reabsorbed back into the chaos and the emptiness and the void and the abyss. That is not the direction of our life.

If that was the direction of our life, the most realistic attitude would be despair. Because we have only emerged to a kind of primitive level of self-consciousness and awareness only to perish, to be reabsorbed back into the chaos and the emptiness and the despair.

And a lot of people have that kind of philosophy of life. And that life consists in what you have to do by reason of money or wealth or whatever it is.

[14:56] You have to try and find some way to anesthetize yourself against the ultimate reality of being reabsorbed into the chaos and the darkness and the meaningless.

And that's why it says that God loved the world. He gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him would not perish, but would be lifted from the void.

Something would happen. And you get that picture. I think that I was reading an article about the biggest bomb that has ever gone off in London.

It was placed there by the IRA a few weeks ago. Not very long ago. And the official British attitude is to ignore it and they'll go away.

But, you know, the problem goes on and on and on. And you read about history, Ireland in the last century, and the problem was there and in the century before, and it was there.

[16:18] And it keeps going on and on and on. There's something profoundly disturbing about it. There's something profoundly chaotic about it. There's a tremendous power and resurgence, I think, of despair and darkness.

Then you see that happening in other worlds. You see the hopelessness of all the wise men of our modern world who can't solve the problem of the Serbs and the Muslims and the Bosnians and the Yugoslavians.

With all the power and all the technology and everything that we have. The problem is an inscrutable problem. And it seems to be moving back in the direction of chaos and killing and death and violence and despair and hopelessness and meaninglessness.

And that kind of thing you see over and over again in our world. So that it's very significant that right at the beginning of the Bible you have this picture.

The darkness, the void, the emptiness. And the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters and God speaks. And what God says happens.

[17:41] You know, I think a lot of, a lot of, that we don't understand is. Well, if you look at the world, most of us delight in the order of nature.

In, in, I was out early this morning and saw for the first time in my life, because I'm from the east, a, what do they call them, a yellow-headed blackbird.

And, ah, it was a lovely thing to see. And the sort of, the morning and the dew and the wind and the bright sky and everything. It was totally lovely. And you can't say, well, God, God doesn't seem to have, I mean, He seems to have finished the creation.

It's impossible to imagine perfection higher than that which surrounds you on a lovely morning like this. In this time of year, it's beautiful. But then we turn to our humanity and what we do.

And you can't but feel that there's some kind of inconsistency. There's something has gone wrong. And that, ah, that the chaos and the darkness continues.

[18 : 56] And the possibility that the whole of human history is to perish, is, is meaningless. And is, is, is, is void and empty. And, ah, that something has to happen.

And what the Bible says happens is that the Spirit of God hovers over the darkness. And God speaks the word. And the Spirit of God acts in accordance with that word to accomplish that which God said.

You know how many words we use in a day. You know that in order to survive, you have to ignore 99.999% of them.

You couldn't, you couldn't possibly respond to all the words that are addressed to you. But, ah, but the magnificence of, of the word of God is that it perfectly accomplishes what it expresses.

God said, let there be, and there was. And you see, that's what's at the heart of John 3.16.

[20 : 03] Whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. That God has spoken a word to you and to me.

And that word accomplishes that for which God spoke. You see, a lot of people think that when God speaks, we must obey.

Well, I don't want to criticize that perspective. I guess we hold together because we think that. But the really dynamic reality is that what God speaks, his word is not a word to be obeyed.

It's primarily, and in the first instance, a word that enables. So when God says love, he enables you to by saying that word.

And that's, and that's, and that's, and I think you'd be, you know, most people, you know, they, they don't want to get into religion because they don't want anybody telling them what to do.

[21 : 12] But God isn't primarily in the business of telling you what to do. He's primarily in the business of enabling you to do it. And how does he enable you to do it?

He loves the world that he gave his son, that whoever believes in him, if you were to believe in him, then you would receive his word into your life.

And that would be the means by which God was enabled then to accomplish in you that which is his purpose. And his purpose is not that you should perish, but that you should have eternal life, that you should be part of his kingdom, that he should be welcomed into your life and into my life to accomplish his purpose.

And that's, and that's what, that's what this, this story is, is about. Now, I, I, time's up, I'm, I'm sorry about that, but that, that is, that's what I, I want, I want you to see.

That, what that verse, John 3, 16 is about, which is at the, which people say is at the heart of the gospel. Is that, is that, just let me put it this way briefly, and I'll end.

[22 : 44] This is a picture of your life. Dark, empty, void, chaotic.

Now, you may be able to make some, you know, to tidy up this corner of it for a little while or something, but this is the overall reality of your life and mine.

So it's not just the whole of creation that God works in this way, but it's in us as well. And God speaks into our lives his word. And we believe that word.

And that word, by the activity of the Holy Spirit, accomplishes in our lives that which it is God's purpose to accomplish. And into the emptiness he brings the fullness, and into the darkness he brings light, and into the chaos he brings order.

And that's what it means when it says, you won't perish, but God's eternal purpose will intervene in your life as you open your heart to his word.

[24 : 01] And his word is primarily that which has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. And that word is primarily that which has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

That faith may submit to your word, Jesus Christ. And know and be a part of your new creation.

By the activity of your Holy Spirit. Accomplishing your purpose. In our world. And in our lives. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ.

Amen.