

Genesis 1:1-25 AM

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[0:00] Heavenly Father, as your Spirit hovered over the waters of creation, we pray he may hover now and enter into us. Give us this ancient wisdom as we look again at the beginning of the story, your story, and give us that wisdom that will fear you and turn away from evil.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we begin a nine-week series today on the story of God.

And today we start at the very beginning. It's a very good place to start. And I want to reflect with you a little bit on Genesis chapter 1.

And I don't know if you noticed what an artistic masterpiece it is. I mean, it is a remarkable day. One, two, three, match day four, five, six.

We go from heavens to waters to the earth, heavens to waters to the earth. From one creative event, two creative events. Sorry, one creative event with two aspects, then two creative events on day three.

[1:09] And the same in the second three days. Which just means that the focus of this narrative is not what happens on day six. It's not on humanity. It's on the Sabbath of God.

And this chapter is such a treasure that every century the church comes back to it and discovers new things. In the first five centuries, the church deployed this strategically because it was a small movement in a hostile world.

And all the understanding of life and reality and creation and gods and human humanity are very different here in chapter 1 than they were around about.

In the last 50 years, theologians have gone back here and it's become much more central to our understanding of global mission and to our response to the ecological crisis.

And it's even possible. And it's even possible. And I've come across commentators who are so caught up in the artistic enjoyment of the chapter that we miss how radically confronting it is.

[2:16] It is bold, compelling. It tells us that our lives and our loves and our future, our legacy, have no meaning apart from the God who created us.

And every attempt to make sense of ourselves and our world and to define ourselves apart from beginning and ending with the God who created us will lead to a dead end.

I just want you to feel how much that is the opposite of the way we think today. I mean, we think that we've got to fit the whole external world and everything that's going around us into my inner life.

It's there to satisfy and serve my inner life. And Genesis 1 flips that on its head. In fact, what Genesis teaches may even be called repressive today.

One of the ways we see that is that we're living in an age without history. I came across a university professor this week. She's written a book. Yes, she teaches history.

[3:21] And she's written this wonderful book. It's called *Priests of History*. And her argument is that Christians ought to be priests of history in this world. She asks all her students what they think the good life is.

What is a life worth living? And the answers are all about self-invention, self-discovery, self-fulfillment. That life is an endless self-creation and we're proud of ourself when we're being authentic.

And these are kids who are taking history. And so history is not just irrelevant. It has become a kind of a battleground for ideology where we just simplistically write off the past and say, well, they're goodies and baddies depending on who agrees with me.

And it's created this sense of rootlessness and disconnection and a great anxiety amongst university-aged people here in Canada. Over the past 20 years, expressive individualism in Canada has led to 90% of post-secondary students reporting feeling utterly overwhelmed and 66% reporting

feeling overwhelming anxiety.

So Genesis 1 comes as really good news to us because it gives us a true foundation which can bear the weight of all our loves and all our life.

[4 : 51] And here we encounter who God is and who we are, where it started, where it's going, what the purpose of life is, what the world is for and about a thousand other questions. But I'm not going to do an exposition today.

I'm really sorry to tell you. We did, when we last looked at this in 2006, I think it was October, I did four sermons on this passage. And I was much more happy doing that than I am today.

What we're going to do is we're going to have some reflections on how this chapter offers us foundations for the story of God. So I've got three points. And if I see anyone fall asleep, I'm going to get out Grandpa Hank.

Three reflections. The chapter teaches, number one, our world has a beginning. Simple. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

This is the bottom row of the Jenga Tower of the Bible. You know that game Jenga where the blocks are? If you pull out anything on the bottom row, the whole thing comes crashing down.

[5 : 58] In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God has no beginning. He made everything. He made us and not we ourselves.

And if the universe has a beginning, it means that reality is shaped like a story. It has a beginning. It has a middle.

And it has an end. Unlike Eastern religions that believe that history is cycles, the Bible teaches that history leads in a line from Genesis 1 to the end of the Bible, Genesis 22, and we'll go on further.

If this sentence is right, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, then this universe and matter are not eternal.

They are the creation of the God of the Bible. They have a beginning and they have an end. And this universe is not all that there is. It didn't just happen by chance and necessity.

[7 : 02] And it means that God is not part of this creation. So you're no closer to God if you hug a tree or ski down a mountainside. And it means you are not God.

And it means the universe is not God. And this universe depends entirely on the one who created it. And here in the first sentence of the Bible, there is only one God who is unmatched and unrivaled in power and will and creativity and grace, which we'll come to in the second point.

If this first sentence is true, if the world has a beginning, nothing exists apart from God's direct will. The reason you are here today, the reason you are thinking, the reason you are breathing is that God holds you and me in existence.

And if he were to forget us for just a moment, we would cease to be. And if this is true, it makes the story of God possible. The Bible starts with God creating all things.

The Bible ends with God bringing the new creation from heaven and earth. And this world is temporary. It's bound by time, just as God created using the seven days of creation.

[8 : 24] It has a beginning and an end and it has a middle. And in the middle of the story, you know what? God came into his creation in the person of Jesus Christ so that we might become part of the new creation.

It's amazing. I mean, it's so radical. This universe didn't lurch into being spontaneously. It begins in order and in harmony from the God who has a plan.

And that means that the bedrock of reality is peace and blessing and harmony. And that's why in our hearts we long for peace and blessing and harmony. We don't long for war and violence.

It's because God created the world in this way. And since in the beginning God created all things, our world and our lives depend on him. He does not depend on us for anything.

This world does not take its existence from itself. Therefore, it doesn't take its meaning from itself.

[9 : 28] Bear with me here. So the meaning of our world and the meaning of our lives does not come from us. It doesn't come inside. It comes from the one who made us.

The answers don't lie in me. The answers lie in God. And all the meaninglessness and purposelessness of modern philosophy is proof we're not listening to the voice of God in Genesis 1. Let me put that slightly differently. If the world has a beginning, it has no pivot in itself, no foundation apart from God, no centre in itself.

We cannot determine who we truly are or why we're here or where we've come from or where we are going or what is wrong with the world apart from God, the creator of heaven and earth.

This is the foundational distinction in the Bible. This is the foundational distinction when you become a Christian. It's between God and everything.

[10:30] God exists in a way everything else does not. He stands outside of nature, above all things, creating and actively engaged in making and doing within his world.

Creating this world is never used of humans. I mean, we mould and manipulate, but only God, only God is a creator. That's why the Bible starts with this magisterial announcement, in the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth.

Point one. Point two. Our world has a beginning. Our world is a gift. We've been seeing, haven't we, that the world doesn't spontaneously produce itself.

The world doesn't come from a terrible bloody battle between warring gods, as they thought in the ancient Near East. But the world is God creating freely, out of his will and out of his goodness. And what that means is that the world is not necessary. There's nothing outside God that forced him to do it.

[11:47] He didn't make it because there's something incomplete in himself. He didn't create the world because he's lonely or lacking in anything. God does not need the universe to be who he is.

He doesn't need you or me or our love to him or our worship of him to be completely fulfilled. And what that means, just think about it for a moment, that means that creation itself is an act of grace. And this world is the purpose, this world is the arena for God's glory. This is the place where God is going to reveal his love and his generosity and his greatness and his holiness and to bring us into his life so that we might share his life forever.

That's the heart of the story of God. I think you see some of this from the overabundance of what God makes. If you read through particularly day 3, 4, 5, 6, there's more food, there's more fruit, there's more vegetables than strictly necessary.

You know, there's an overabundance of colour and shape and goodness. The waters swarm and team with living creatures. And it's a great problem if you're a materialist, if you have a materialist view that says things are only there because of cause and effect.

[13:07] Just look at the world. It tells us that God has given it to us out of his own excess. And that means our lives and the cosmos are not centred on us or the cosmos but on God.

And it also means we live in a personal universe. If it comes out of God's grace and if it's a gift, our world and reality is personal at its deepest level.

And that opens up all sorts of possibilities. It opens up the possibility of relationship. It opens up possibilities for meaning and for history. And the way the chapter presents this is that God creates by using his word.

So every day we read, and God said, let there be, and it was so. In fact, a couple of times it says, and God said, and God made, the same thing.

And God said, and God created. And when God wants to add blessing, it says God blessed X and said, and then he says the blessing. In other words, the word of God is the effective way in which he creates and acts.

[14:16] The whole chapter really is an account of God speaking. So the way of God with us in this world is the way of language and words. The true narrative of your life and my life is shaped by the words of God.

Behind the reality that we see around us beautifully here in Vancouver is the breath of God. Before God spoke, nothing ever happened. Until God speaks, nothing ever happens.

So if there is a church or an individual who's not hearing the word of God, nothing will happen. And the remarkable thing is that God speaks everything into being, but there is one part of his creation he doesn't speak about.

He speaks to the man and the woman made in the image of God. That means that truth, there is such a thing as truth.

And that God has made us for a personal connection to him. And that connection comes to us as we hear his word and come to know him. It's just, it's very hopeful, I think.

[15:27] In most of the messages that we're absorbing dozens of times a day in our culture are very self-defeating. The whole idea that the answer is within you, just be true to yourself. Don't let anyone tell you what to do.

You're free. Just live as you choose. Well, the maker of heaven and earth speaks and reveals that he is the answer, that the answer is in him. And in the middle of, and in the middle of the story, this

is what Sunday school is studying today.

God sent his son who took on human flesh. The word of God, the communication of God, became flesh. He entered our world, such is his love, so that he could enter our hearts and change our story forever.

And when we share our stories with each other, you know what we're doing? We're following in the footsteps of God. So part of the celebration of a hundred years for us this year is to tell each other more of the story of God, of his love and his faithfulness, to help us hope in him for the future.

And that's point two. Point one, our world has a beginning. Point two, our world is a gift. And point three, our world has a point. Point. Ha ha.

[16:52] I mean, God shows, Genesis 1 shows, that our world is not pointless. It's not futile.

It's not meaningless. Seven times he looks at what he's done. He says, it's good. And one time he says, it's superlatively good.

It's good to the extreme. And just notice what happens there. The same word of power that brings things into existence now interprets and passes value judgment on creation because there is only one point of view that sees all.

And this word good, it's not a functional word. It's a statement of God's delight, of his enjoyment. It's like he stands back and he says, okay, what I've just made perfectly satisfies and realizes the purposes I made it for.

And that means, although we may not see it and may not feel it, and although our lives may not feel like this, the whole world and each of our lives bristles with purpose, the purpose of God.

[18:03] Not found in us ourselves, but it comes from God. If you take God, the creator, away, Bruce Waltke used to love saying, we are like actors that suddenly find ourselves on a stage.

We don't know what the play is about. We don't know who wrote the play. We don't know what the beginning is or the end is. We don't know what we're supposed to do on the stage. So it doesn't really matter if you flop on the ground or stand on your head.

There's no meaning. There's no significance. There's no flow to life. So the fact that there is a creator is such very good news. And it's as though God wants us to get a sense of this good news by pulling us up to day seven, where things get even better than good.

Things come under the direct blessing of God. And the blessing of God in day seven is a little window into God's plan and purpose for this world.

It's unlike any other day. Three times we're told it's the seventh day. It's more important than any other day. And God finished the work of his creating. And he blesses this day, this time, as he's been blessing spaces, physical spaces, days one to six.

[19:26] And now he blesses this time. And he sets it aside as holy, which is a massive invitation for us to enter with him into his rest.

So man and woman created day six. What's their first full day of living? Day seven, rest. We're supposed to enjoy him and his creation.

We're supposed to pause on the first day and say, my life is not about activity and success and being productive. There's something infinitely more important to me than my money and my success and my achievements.

It's to know God. It's to enjoy him. It's to worship him. This is where the story of God is going. This is why God has made us, that we should glorify him and worship him and enjoy him forever.

This is what Genesis 1 teaches, that our world has a beginning, that it's a gift and that it has a point. And the point of creation is Jesus himself.

[20:34] Many of you were here on Christmas Eve where we looked at that astonishing passage in Colossians 1 where the Apostle Paul writes about Jesus and says this, by him, by Jesus, all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible, invisible, thrones, dominions, rules, authorities.

All things were created through him and for him. He's the purpose of everything.

He's before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the point of everything. He's at the heart of God's purposes. He's the goal. And that's perhaps why he stopped in the middle of his ministry and he said, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest from day seven.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And this is what he wants for us now, today.

This is why we come and we share the Lord's Supper. And this is why we begin this year in Genesis 1. It's in Jesus Christ God's given us everything we need, all the riches and treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

[22 : 00] we find our meaning and our identity and our purpose, Jesus. We find our freedom, our joy, our rest. And so I think the main thing to come out of Genesis 1 for us is that as we come to Jesus, we lay our lives on him and he gives us a foundation and turns around and gives us a new life and a new image and remakes us like himself more and more.

And did you notice that day seven has no end? There's no evening and morning on day seven because the Sabbath continues which Christ fulfills.

Amen.