

Genesis 1
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Prof Bob White

Beginnings of books are important. Apparently we decide whether or not to read a book on the basis of just the first page or two. So authors generally work really hard on that opening paragraph, just to get us hooked.

On one sabbatical we lived by the sea on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. We were next door to Michael Palmer. He's a doctor who writes medical thrillers. He told us that one summer he was on the beach and was excited to see a woman sit down with a copy of his latest book. Apparently she picked it up, and opened it at the first page. But after about one minute, she yawned, closed her eyes and stretched out in the sun instead. He said he was gutted.

Well, I wonder whether the creator God sometimes feels that way about the book he has written to tell us of his purposes. Tonight we heard the first chapter of the first book of the Bible read to us. And that first chapter of Genesis is crucial because it sets the foundation of everything that comes afterwards. If we are Christians we need to listen carefully. If we are really God's creatures, created by him, then we can only know what his purposes are if he tells us.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah points out how stupid we are if we think we can tell God why he made us rather than listening to him.

Isaiah 29:
*'You turn things upside down...
 Shall what is formed say to him who formed it
 'He did not make me'
 Can the pot say of the potter,
 'He knows nothing'?*

The creator God claims to tell us of his purposes in Genesis, so we do well to listen. What does God say through this chapter about his purposes and our places in the Cosmos? I want to highlight just three significant things about what God says in this chapter about his purposes and our place in the Cosmos.

The first is that God created the world – *'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'*

And in the opening lines of John's gospel in the New Testament it says exactly the same thing.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He[that is Jesus] was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John says it twice just in case we missed the point.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

It might sound obvious that God created the world. But it is in direct opposition to what many people thought when Genesis was written. There were popular views in currency that the earth was just the fallout from battles between gods or monsters in the heavens above, who made men and women to be their servants or their playthings. Or maybe that the earth and indeed humans are just a meaningless happenstance. Not so different actually from what many folk unthinkingly accept today – that we are just accidental products of an immensely long evolutionary process in a meaningless universe.

Well Genesis gives the lie to that right in chapter 1 of the Bible. It proclaims that creation is purposeful, by the will of God ('he spoke and it happened'), and that it is ordered, bringing order out of chaos.

The **second point** that Genesis makes is that **God's material creation is good**.

If we had read right through the first 23 verses of Genesis 1, we would have found this point coming through again and again.

- On day 1, God separated the light from the darkness, and saw that it was good.
- On day 2, he separated the water from the dry land and it says 'God saw that it was good'.
- Day 3, he made vegetation, and it says again 'God saw that it was good.'
- On day 4, he made the sun, moon and stars, '*and God saw that it was good*'.
- On day 5, he made the sea creatures and the birds, and it says '*God saw that it was good*'
- On day 6 he made the animals

We can't fail to get the message: God's material creation is good.

Incidentally, just an aside, we can see that Genesis is a theological statement, and not a scientific account. The sun and the moon were worshipped at the time (think of the Egyptians and their sun-worship). So just to avoid any suggestion that the God of the Bible is only one among many other gods, the writer didn't even use the well-known names for the sun and the moon in case they were misconstrued as deities.

He said instead that God created '*the greater light to govern the day, and a lesser light to govern the night.*' That emphasises their function – to give light.

And by the way, he says, almost as an afterthought '*He also made the stars.*' All 10^{24} of them. All million, million, million, million of them. What a sign that is of God's creativity. He flung stars into space. And its in those stars, formed during the 9 billion years before the earth was formed, where the very atoms were formed of which our bodies are made. If it wasn't for all of those stars, all that time, we ourselves wouldn't be here. And what a counterblast to those who put their trust in astrology – God is sovereign over the stars as well as everything else says the Bible.

So the picture we get from Genesis 1 is that the material stuff of this universe is **good**. God says so. Christianity is a very materialistic religion in the sense that it is rooted

in the material world. God came to earth as a human in a specific place in the Middle East at a specific time, when it was under Roman rule. There is no place here for the sort of religion that says we should strive for some higher spiritual plane, that the material things of this world are of themselves bad and to be striven against.

So God says unambiguously that **he made the world**, that it is a **good world**, and that God made us to live and interact with it.

The third point is that God **sustains the world continually**.

In the second reading, Hebrews 1:3 we heard that '*Christ ... sustains all things by his powerful world.*'

Colossians 1:17 says the same: '*in Christ all things hold together*'. It's a recurrent theme in scripture – that ultimately God is in control.

The picture is not of a distant deity who set the world going, then left it to its own devices, as many today might say. It is a picture of God continually upholding the world, day by day, minute by minute, microsecond by microsecond.

It is as if we were watching a drama on TV – maybe The Virgin Queen that's on tonight. You can engage with the story, follow the twists and turns of the plot, empathise with the heroes and heroines, hate the villains. It has a reality of its own. But if the flow of electrons to the television screen stopped, all you would see and hear would be a blur of meaningless noise. God's sustaining support of the universe is a bit like that. It is as if God is holding the world in the palm of his hand. And if he let go, the whole thing would collapse into chaos and meaninglessness.

I take it that it's a sign of God's grace to us that he created a universe in which we can live and feel at home. Its not a place where things happen randomly and inexplicably: apples don't one day fall to the ground, the next float off into the sky. Its a consistent, ultimately understandable world. And that's why we can do science; why we can investigate and understand and use the created order for the good of humankind.

So to summarise God

- **created the world**
- he pronounced it a **good world** (though it is marred by sin as we all know)
- and in his grace **he sustains it moment by moment**

God is deeply engaged in his world, though of course he exists separately from it. If the universe ceased to exist tomorrow, God would still be there.

Finally, perhaps the most important question in the light of God's creation, is where do we, humankind, men and women, fit into it? The Bible is quite clear that humans were created at the pinnacle of God's creation. After God had made the world, and prepared a fit place where we live, it says in v27

So God created man in his own image,

*in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

And finally in v 31

*God saw all that he had made, and it was **very good**.* He made the light, the dark, the water, the dry land, the vegetation, sun, moon, stars, sea creatures, birds and animals and said that they were good. Then he made humankind and said that was **very good**.

There is no doubt that humans are special – they are not just animals, though they are that as well – they have something more. They are made in God’s image. I take it to mean that being made in God’s image means that we share, albeit in a pale and mere shadow of God, some of the attributes of God. Such as a sense of justice, a sense of right and wrong and the ability to live in a moral universe. A sense of bountiful and artistic creativity, of generosity in making. And the ability to love, to build relationships with other people and with God himself. The ability to take responsibility for our actions.

The Psalmist David said a similar thing about the place of humankind in God’s creation in Psalm 8. Imagine the shepherd boy David sitting there on the hills at night gazing up at the stars, all on his own.

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?*

I am just a tiny nothing compared to all this, says David. And yet, David goes on, talking of humankind:

*You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;
you put everything under his feet:*

And right there in Genesis chapter 1, verse 28, right at the beginning of history, God gives humankind a mandate to have dominion over the earth – better translated perhaps as to steward the earth. It’s a command to use the earth’s resources and our ability to understand something of the way it works for the good of others.

That’s a great mandate for us as members of a university, and especially for those of us in that community who are Christians. It’s a command to use our gifts and our knowledge and our opportunities of understanding this world for the good of others. That perhaps is obvious if we are learning to be doctors or to do research in the medical profession; or if as scientists we are striving to understand the way this creation works.

But it is equally true of those in the arts and humanities, who are engaging with understanding how human society works, who are learning from history, who are endeavouring to develop better legal systems for the good of society, or who are using their creativity in music or art or literature to reach out and communicate on a deeper level both with other people and with God.

It is by working in God's world in this way that we truly worship him, not only on Sundays here in chapel or church with beautiful music, but in the everyday application of our skills and knowledge, or our love and sense of justice, which are there because God made us that way.

Lets Pray

Thank you Father that you have made yourself known to us, both in your creation and in the person of Jesus. Please help us to live in your world in a way that pleases you. And with David we say *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!* Amen.