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Genesis 1:1

First Message

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# IN THE BEGINNING GOD

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

Today I begin a new series after spending the past six years preaching through the book of Revelation. Fifteen months ago I decided that my next series would be Genesis 1–11. I was teaching through these chapters in a classroom setting. In light of the questions that arose and the discussions we had, I decided that the whole congregation needed to be in on the discussion. Besides, since I have successfully navigated my way through the controversial book at one end of the Bible, I might as well tackle the controversial book at the other end. I know this means doing the two ends in the wrong order. But there is an advantage to doing it this way: you already know how the story ends; you know the great goal towards which God is moving his creation. Indeed my last few sermons on Revelation have prepared for today's sermon.

I am entitling this series “Our Story of Origins.” Over the next few years I intend to cover the first eleven chapters of the Bible, up through the call of Abraham. In these chapters we'll find foundational truths that explain why the world is the way it is. They also provide the backdrop for the call of Abraham, which we'll see is God's answer to the sin and death of chapters 3–11. Through Abraham God births his people, Israel. Genesis 1–11 is the account given to Israel for her to understand her origins. We as the church are still the children of Abraham, the people of God. These early chapters of Genesis are for us also. They are our story of origins.

Today I take just the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”—one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible. Actually I'm taking just the first half of the verse: “In the beginning God.”

What does that word “God” conjure up in your mind? What do you think about him? A. W. Tozer opens his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with this arresting statement: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>1</sup>

Who or what is God? There's a hymn that starts, “Great God of wonders, all thy ways are matchless, godlike and divine.” But to say that God's ways are godlike and divine doesn't get us very far! The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is God?” The answer: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Theologians conventionally divide God's attributes into those that are incommunicable and those that are communicable. His incommunicable attributes are those which only God possesses; attributes which he does not communicate or grant to any of his creatures: his omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence; the “infinite, eternal and unchangeable” of the catechism. Here we have a problem: it's much easier to describe what God is not—what the theologians call apophatic theology. We've just sung that God is immortal, invisible; that he is indescribable, uncontainable, untamable. In sum, God is not like us. Nevertheless, there are attributes he does share with, communicate to, his creatures: the “being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” of the catechism. But

we don't possess these attributes in an infinite, eternal and unchangeable way.

It is not, however, my intention today to give you an exposition of the attributes of God as developed by systematic theologians. Instead I want to use the Nicene Creed to guide our thinking about God. This is *the* ecumenical creed, the creed accepted by all three major branches of the church: Eastern, Roman and Protestant. It was first developed at the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325, then modified into its current form at the second council in Constantinople in 381. Throughout the fourth century the bishops of the church wrestled to come to an understanding of the Godhead. Out of these debates they formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. It might be argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Bible itself. But the creed is an attempt to formalize the teaching of Scripture; each statement in the creed is built upon Scripture. The creed has stood the test of time: for over 1600 years now no one has come up with a better formulation.

The creed begins,

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

The first thing to note is the opening verb: “We believe.” A creed (from Lat. *credo* “I believe”) is something believed. This is not a matter of believing impossible things, as the White Queen who said to Alice, “Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”<sup>2</sup> A creed is something we accept as fundamental truth, as bedrock truth.

“We believe in God.” “In the beginning God.” The Bible opens with God already there; it makes no attempt to prove the existence of God. God is beyond proof. The one who says in his heart, “There is no God” is dismissed by the psalmist as a fool (Ps 14:1; 53:1). This would be the psalmist's verdict on Richard Dawkins and his current book, *The God Delusion*. “We believe”: all our enquiry about God must begin from a position of faith. As Anselm famously put it, “faith seeking understanding” (Lat. *fides quaerens intellectum*). We don't seek understanding so that we can believe. Rather, it is from a position of faith that we seek to understand.

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Much attention is focused on how to reconcile Genesis 1 and science. But this is the wrong debate. Genesis 1 should be read not against current science books but against other stories of origins, especially the stories of the cultures surrounding ancient Israel: the Babylonians, Canaanites and Egyptians. Genesis 1 is best read as a polemic against these stories. Beneath some superficial similarities the Biblical account presents a profoundly different understanding of God, the world and humanity.

“In the beginning God created.” Here we have an immediate profound difference from the other creation stories. In the Biblical account there is no theogony, no account of the creation of gods. There is no primeval struggle between good and bad gods. There is only one God, and he is already there as the curtain opens on the beginning. Belief in one God, in monotheism, was a bedrock of Israelite faith, as expressed in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). We affirm it in the creed: “We believe in one God.” There is no multiplicity of gods. God himself is not created; there is no theogony. There is only cosmogony, creation of the cosmos. There is thus a fundamental divide between Creator and his creation, between the Maker and what he has made: heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible. All of creation owes its allegiance and worship to its creator.

The creed continues its statement of what we believe:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Though we affirm one God, we also affirm belief in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is himself fully God. This status of the Son was the primary issue being debated in the fourth century. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, was teaching, “There was a time when the Son was not.” No, the councils insisted; the Son is himself eternal. There was never a time when the Son was not. He is begotten, not made. Though begotten, he is eternally-begotten, and in such a way as to share one substance with the Father.

Here we are treading on holy ground. John’s gospel especially highlights the relationship between the Father and the Son. In a clear echo of Genesis 1:1, it begins,

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3 TNIV)**

Four times in John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), Jesus is called the *monogenēs*, the “only begotten” (NASB), “the one and only Son” (TNIV). God has always been a Father, and he has always had an only-begotten Son. This Father-Son relationship lies at the very heart of God. The Son is “in the bosom of the Father” (NASB), “in the closest relationship with the Father” (TNIV; John 1:18). The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20), indeed has done so since before the creation of world (John 17:24). The Son shared the Father’s glory before the world began (John 17:5). The Son is in the Father and the Father in him; the Son and the Father are one (John 17:21-22).

After Jesus’ baptism, the Father spoke from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). On the Mount of Transfiguration he again spoke from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7; cf. Matt 17:5).

The Son is the Father’s only-begotten, and he is the Father’s beloved. The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the engine driving everything is the love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father and does his pleasure. They bask in shared glory. And they have done so since before the beginning.

Being there in the very beginning, the Son was involved in creation:

**The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. (Col 1:15-17, 19)**

Next week we will see that God spoke the cosmos into existence. From John’s prologue we learn that that word was the Son himself. God created all things in him, through him and for him.

Alongside our faith in one God we declare our faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, the eternally-begotten and beloved Son who is himself God. One of the most remarkable things about the early church is its worship of Jesus Christ. The early Christians were all Jews, staunchly committed to monotheism, to the Shema’s declaration that “the Lord is one.” Yet they immediately began to worship Jesus alongside God, indeed as God, without sacrificing their monotheism.

There is still more to the creed. It continues with a third statement:

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son];<sup>3</sup> who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.

God’s Spirit was also present at the beginning of creation (1:2). It is clear from the rest of Scripture that the Spirit is in a closer relationship to God than even the most exalted angels or cherubim—that he is God.

Who is God? God is triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son eternally begotten of the Father; the Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and or through the Son. This is the core declaration of the creed.

The statement “In the beginning God” invites the inevitable question, “What was God doing before the beginning?” This is an age-old question. It was already a standard question when Augustine wrote *Confessions* (398). He notes that the standard answer to the question “What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?” is “He was preparing Hell for people who pry into mysteries.”<sup>4</sup> Augustine himself refused to give this answer, noting that since God created time itself the question is irrelevant: before God created time there was no “then,” so how can we ask what God was doing “then”? Instead Augustine heads in a different direction.

What was God doing before the beginning? The triune God was basking in mutual love and glory. The Father loved the Son; the Son loved the Father. In his treatise *On the Trinity* (399-419), Augustine notes that there are three components to love: the lover, the beloved and the love itself.<sup>5</sup> He then identifies the Father as the lover; the Son as the beloved; and the Spirit as the mutual love flowing between Father and Son.<sup>6</sup>

The three persons of the Trinity coinhere: they are mutually involved in each other while yet remaining distinct. The past two decades have seen a great resurgence of interest in this way of understanding the Godhead. The main term used for this coinherence, this mutual loving involvement in one another, is *perichoresis*, the Greek term used by John of Damascus, one of the Greek Fathers.

There are some important implications of this. The triune God was fully satisfied within himself before the beginning. He has always been a loving and relational God. God is love. The archetypal love is the loving relationship between Father and Son. He has no

need for anything else, being fully satisfied within the Trinity. The theological term for this is *aseity*: God is fulfilled from himself (Lat. *a se*). Nevertheless, God chose to create a cosmos. He did so not out of any need, but solely for his good pleasure. Each day he looked on what he had made and saw that it was good. God himself is “the eternal Beholder of creation...the divine Spectator of the world he’s created. God looks at everything in admiration; and whatever he admires, he simply lets be.”<sup>7</sup> God didn’t have to make the world; “it’s the overflow of the totally unnecessary love of the Trinity as they tell each other how delicious they find things.”<sup>8</sup>

This aseity of God is actually very good news. He is not codependent or contingent. He made this cosmos not because he had to but because he wanted to. God likes this world he has made. It’s because he is the Creator who takes pleasure in his creation that he goes to such great lengths to redeem it. God as Redeemer is predicated on God as Creator. Both creation and redemption flow out of the shared love within the Godhead.

Likewise, God made us humans not because he had to but because he wanted to. Here is another big difference between the Genesis account and those of the surrounding cultures. In the Babylonian account, *Enuma elish*, humans are created because the lesser gods, who are themselves created, make so much noise pestering the greater gods to make some laborers to do the grunt work for them; the greater gods make humans to get some peace. But Genesis shows that God makes humans because he delights to do so. He likes us. Even when we sin he puts up with us and sets to work to bring us back to himself. We so easily think of God waiting with a two-by-four to whack us over the head when we step out of line. But to Moses he revealed his glory and proclaimed his name: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). And this just after the golden calf incident! To Israel he revealed himself as a lover wooing back his adulterous wife. Why? Because he needs us? Because we’re deserving? Because he owes us? No, because he loves us. The model for that love is the love he has for his Son, which he freely chooses to extend to us, to do so in his Beloved, even at the cost of his Beloved, his one and only.

God makes us because he delights to do so. When God creates humans on the sixth day as the climactic act of his creation, he makes them in his own image. There is a heavenly model for this image, for the Son is the express image of the Father. It has been aptly said that in the beginning God made man in his image and man has been returning the compliment ever since. God critiques the wicked in Israel, “you thought I was altogether like you” (Ps 50:21). There are many ways in which mankind makes gods in his own image.

Walking around Athens, Paul was grieved as he saw a city full of idols, even an altar to an unknown God. He therefore proclaimed to them the God of whom they were ignorant:

**“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else...Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill” (Acts 17:24-25, 29)**

The most obvious way of making gods in our image is worshiping a man-made, manlike statue in a man-made temple. Speaking

through Isaiah to the Jewish exiles in the idol-filled city of Babylon, God ridiculed the idol-worshiper: taking a tree, he burns half of it for warmth and to bake his bread; the other half he makes into an idol, to whom he prays, “Save me; you are my God” (Isa 44:9-20).

I’ve lived in countries where people do prostrate themselves before man-made statues in man-made temples. The Western world is too enlightened, rational, sophisticated to do that. But we are still very good at creating idols. We too easily give our devotion to that which has not created us. But more subtly, we align God to our programs rather than aligning ourselves to God’s program. This is what happens when our thinking begins with self not with God. Donald McCullough writes of this in *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*.<sup>9</sup> The cover displays the word “God” on a big yellow campaign button, illustrating the point that we so easily try to co-opt God into our own program. When asked during the Civil War whether he thought God was on his side, Abraham Lincoln replied, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.” McCullough identifies some of the ways in which we co-opt God as God of our cause. As “God of my comfort” we treat him as the Great Therapist who is obliged to make us happy. As “God of my success” we treat him as our Personal Trainer who will coach us to prosperity. As “God of my nation” we treat him as Guardian of Christian America. In these and many more ways we trivialize God. We fail to begin our thinking with God. We fail to start with the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God.” It is a tragedy because God is up to things far grander than my comfort, my success, my nation. He doesn’t promise me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He invites me into his love, the love which he has shared with his Son since before the beginning.

In this love he has created us to know him. The oracle at Delphi said, “Know thyself.” But knowledge of self is only true knowledge within the context of knowledge of God. Calvin begins his *Institutes* with this statement: “Nearly all the knowledge we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> The two play off each other: knowledge of God enhances knowledge of self and vice versa. Knowledge of God begins with this first verse, “In the beginning God.” God is the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Creator, but what most characterizes him is the relationship of mutual love within the Godhead. Our response is worship, to “love and sing and wonder.” But then we look at self, seeing not how good we are but how bad we are. We are driven to despair until we look up again and see God. Reminded that nevertheless God loves us in Christ, we are again “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” Rather than co-opting God into our programs, we see ourselves raised into God’s program. And as we contemplate the Lord we find ourselves “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

This double knowledge of God and of self has been a key to healthy spiritual life for most of the church age. Alas this is not the popular view today. We have everything backwards. Rather than seeing how we fit into God’s great plan, we focus on how God can help us achieve our great plans. And so we fret and worry, seeking the right formula for success. We fail to begin with God. Tozer writes, “The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems.”<sup>11</sup> David is a great example of this sort of life, of a man who thinks rightly about God. Many of his psalms are laments, written when he was far from comfort and success, but he always ended by looking on God. In Psalm 34, for example, he

wrote, “Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Ps 34:9). I especially like the rendering of this verse in the metrical psalms of Tate and Brady (1696):

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then  
have nothing else to fear;  
make you his service your delight;  
your wants shall be his care.<sup>12</sup>

If your thinking does not rest on God but on yourself, if you forget “In the beginning God,” if you have too small a view of God or too high a view of self, then you are placing too great a burden on yourself, a burden you were not made to carry. It then depends upon you to get God onto your side. Fear God and you will have nothing else to fear. Don’t fear God, and you will have everything else to fear. Come to a right belief about God and you’ll be relieved of 10,000 temporal problems.

The Bible begins, “In the beginning God.” It ends, “Come, Lord Jesus,” the prayer for the glorious return (parousia) of the eternal Word, to bring in the completion of the stories of creation and redemption. The story begins with the triune Godhead as a community of perfect love; it ends with God drawing his people into that communion of love. It begins with God in eternal glory; it ends with God and his people in eternal glory. At the center stands the cross where God revealed his glory through his Son—his Son on whom he periodically shone the radiance of his glory, declaring, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” At the end God will welcome us into his presence, saying, “I will be his God and he will be my son” (Rev 21:7). He will shine the radiance of his glory on us and say, “This is my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased.” The love between the Father and the Son mediated by the Spirit is the engine which drives the stories of creation and redemption. He extends that love to his creation not because he has to but because he delights to do so.

**See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ... Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)**

“In the beginning God.” May he be our vision.

1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978 [1961]), 1.

2. Lewis Carroll, “Wool and Water,” chap. 5 in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

3. The creed as originally formulated states that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Over time the Western Latin-speaking church, based in Rome, added a single Latin word (*filioque*), stating that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This remains a divisive issue between the Eastern and Western churches.

4. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 11.12.

5. “Therefore there are three things—he who loves, and that which is loved, and love” (*Tria sunt, amans, et quod amatur, et amor*). Augustine, *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)* 9.2, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Philip Schaff; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) 3:126.

6. “There are three things—the lover, the loved, and the mutual love” (*Tres sunt, amans, amatus, et mutuus amor*).

7. Robert F. Capon, *Genesis: The Movie* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 60.

8. Capon, *Genesis*, 60.

9. Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.1 (ed. J.T. McNeil; trans. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35.

11. Tozer, *Knowledge*, 2.

12. Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, “Through all the Changing Scenes of Life” (1696).

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