

In the Beginning

Out of Nothing (Genesis 1:1-25, 31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 2, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ I'm excited to kick off a new sermon series in the book of Genesis. Now we're not covering all fifty chapters because to do so would take well over a year. And since this is a transient congregation – where many of you are only in Houston for a season – we purposely plan shorter series, so that you can be exposed to a good diversity of sermons in both Old and New Testaments and among different genres. **So for the next three months, we're only going to focus on Genesis 1-11.** Lord-willing, we'll come back to Genesis down the road and cover more ground. But there's plenty enough to cover in these first eleven chapters.

- ❖ The word *Genesis* comes from the Greek for beginning. **So it's a book of beginnings.** The central story of Genesis revolves around a covenant family headed by Abraham. The LORD God bound himself in a covenant relationship with one man and his family – promising to bless them in order that they might be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). **So Genesis recounts the beginning of this family's story and serves as an introduction for the rest of Scripture – where this covenant family grows and expands into a covenant community that spans the entire globe.** This covenant community we call the Church, and it includes all of us who share in the faith of Abraham.
 - But that particular story doesn't begin until Genesis 12. So the first eleven chapters – the ones we're going to cover – stretch even further back to tell the story of the beginning of our world and of the universe itself. Where did we come from? Where did all of creation come from? That's the story we want to explore in this series and particularly in today's study of chapter 1.

- ❖ The story of origins fascinates everyone. On Christmas morning last week, while we were busy opening presents, NASA was busy launching a massive telescope into space. It's on its way one million miles from earth to eventually orbit the sun. Along the way, it's going to slowly and carefully unfold a massive heat shield the size of a tennis court and eighteen highly-sensitive mirrors spanning 21 feet in diameter.
 - It's called the **James Webb Space Telescope**, and it's replacing the famous Hubble Telescope, which is showing its age. The Webb Telescope will give us the highest-resolution images ever seen of stars and galaxies. Because unlike the Hubble, this one can detect infrared light, which allows it to gaze even further into the cosmos.

- ❖ The news article I read said the Webb Telescope will allow astronomers to observe light from the very first galaxies that formed 100 million years after the Big Bang. **They're describing it like taking baby pictures of the universe.** In this analogy, it's like Hubble gave us toddler pictures of the universe, but we've never seen baby pictures – what the universe was like in the beginning. According to astronomers, the pictures to be sent back, if everything goes well, *“will help answer fundamental questions about our existence, the fabric of space, and the universe at large.”*¹ That's pretty impressive. All of that will cost an estimated \$11 billion. **\$11 billion to help answer questions about our existence and the origin of the universe.**

¹ see online: <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/editorials/article/Editorial-Baby-photos-of-the-universe-will-be-16732054.php>

- ❖ Don't get me wrong, I'm excited to see what this telescope can do, and I'm amazed by the science behind it all. **But I'm just shocked that we're paying \$11 billion to answer questions that the Bible has been answering for free for thousands of generations.** The most fundamental things we need to know about our existence and where the universe came from can be found in Genesis 1. That's what's so amazing about God's Word! **So let's highlight five fundamental truths about creation and its relationship to God.**

Creation is Utterly Dependent on God

- ❖ The first fundamental truth to consider is how utterly dependent creation is on God. **God doesn't need creation to be God.** He would still exist and would still be supremely glorious and worthy of praise – even if he never created a single thing. But creation, on the other hand, needs God to exist. **Everything in creation would be nothing if not for God.**
 - The Bible begins with these famous words, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”* Implying that God existed before the beginning of creation. God doesn't have a beginning, but the universe does. That's a huge claim stated right off the bat. **It sets Genesis apart from the various worldviews that see the universe as eternal, as always existing.** There are various pantheistic religions that treat the universe as somehow divine. And they view time and history as circle. So, in that sense, there would be multiple beginnings.
- ❖ But it's not just pantheistic religions that view the universe as eternal. **In the first half of the twentieth century, cosmologists would have held to something like a steady-state theory of the universe.** In that theory, the universe has no beginning or end and always stays the same in the amount of matter out there. In other words, the universe was considered eternal.
 - But by the 1950s, it was replaced by the Big Bang theory, which argues for a beginning. The idea is that all matter in the universe originated from a point of singularity and has been infinitely expanding ever since. **So the dominant view of science now affirms what Genesis 1:1 taught all along.** Creation has a beginning.
 - **That's why, according to the biblical worldview, time and history are viewed – not as a circle – but as a line.** Which raises the natural question: *Where is that line pointing?* The answer comes later, but right in the beginning of Genesis we're given a hint that the universe has a point, a purpose. And that means life in this universe also has direction and purpose.
- ❖ But before we go there, let's focus on how much creation depends on God. Think about it – **the universe needs a Creator God because the universe couldn't have created itself.** If the universe has a beginning – as the Bible and Science suggest – then how can something that once did not exist suddenly, come into existence (i.e. have a beginning) all by itself?
 - If there once was no universe, then it makes no sense to suggest that suddenly the universe created itself. **Something that does not exist cannot bring itself into existence.** That's illogical and irrational.

- ❖ **If the universe has a beginning, then something that preexists the universe; something that exists outside of the universe; something without a beginning – must have created the universe.** Something – or Someone – without a beginning must have ignited the Big Bang from which the universe continues to grow and expand.
 - The Bible’s answer is God. Scripture doesn’t teach that the universe is eternal but that God is. **And this Eternal Being with no beginning created everything that has a beginning.** In other words, he made the universe *ex nihilo*. That’s Latin for “out of nothing”. God created everything out of nothing.

- ❖ Now someone could argue that that’s still a matter of faith. But at least it’s not irrational. Within the confines of logic and rational thought – it would be irrational to believe that creation created itself. You either have to believe that creation itself is eternal (which is pantheism or that steady-state view), or you believe that an Eternal Being without a beginning created everything that has a beginning.
 - **I grant you that the Bible’s answer to the universe’s origin is mysterious but at least it’s not irrational.** You might still refuse to believe in an eternal spiritual being who exists outside the material universe. But at least concede that’s a presupposition you brought to the question. You’re starting off your pursuit of an answer already ruling out potential options. But if you keep an open mind, then it makes a lot of sense to suggest that the universe is not eternal in itself and that it did not create itself – but rather the universe’s existence utterly depends on a Creator God.

- ❖ **It’s important for us to maintain this distinction between the Creator and his creation.** Many aspects of creation are so beautiful and glorious that we’re tempted to worship them. The celestial stars. The ancient mountains. The thunderous storms. The towering trees. They all reflect God’s glory but must not be substituted for his glory. We must learn to enjoy and respect creation without worshipping it. **To find pleasure in creation but not apart from a grateful recognition that it comes from the creative hands of God** (Neh 9:6; Acts 17:25)

Creation is Personally Fashioned by God

- ❖ That leads us to the second fundamental truth about creation found in our text. Creation is personally fashioned by God. He didn’t just wind up the clock of creation and let it unwind and develop of its own. No, the LORD played an active and direct role in fashioning creation according to his sovereign will. **This idea of one Creator God making all things differs dramatically from the Ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation where the universe erupts as a consequence of a divine struggle between gods.** It was a byproduct of battle.
 - The Canaanites, for example, believed their supreme god, Baal, engaged in battle and defeated the goddess of chaos, Yam. Which in Hebrew means *sea*. **Now to appreciate the significance, you need to understand that, among ancient cultures, the sea was deified as a god or goddess of chaos set over against a god of order.** So in Canaanite mythology, Baal banishes Yam (the Sea) below the earth. And that’s their story for how dry land was formed.

- ❖ Now compare that to the creation account of the Israelites. They used similar symbolism but with different circumstances. **In Genesis, there is only one God. There are no rivals for him to battle.** Now we are told that, in the beginning, the earth was filled with chaos. It was covered with primordial waters. It 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.*” (Gen 1:2)
 - The earth was filled with one big sea of chaos, but then God speaks and order is established. The seas roll back and dry land appears. See the difference? **Pagan gods derived their authority to rule by virtue of conquest. But the LORD God derived his authority by virtue of creation.** By being the Creator of all, he is Lord of all. **He is ruler of all things because he created all things.** He personally fashioned it.

- ❖ Now many have helpfully pointed out that Genesis is not intended to serve as a scientific textbook. So if we’re expecting it to answer all of our scientific inquiries, then we’re asking it to function beyond its literary intent. **That’s why it’s good to remind ourselves that Genesis 1 is more concerned with the Who and Why of creation.** Who made all things and for what purpose? Those questions are at the forefront of our text.
 - But that’s not to say that the How of creation goes unaddressed. Granted, it leaves out a lot of details. **But the text does say that God made everything by speaking.** In multiple places in chapter one, we read “*And God said . . . and it was so.*” (1:6-7, 9, 11, 14-15, 24, 29-30). **Hebrews 11:3** reaffirms that this is how God created, “*By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.*” **In other words, the universe is a product of divine speech.** The Word of God created it all (cf. Ps 33:6, 9)

- ❖ Now that doesn’t answer all our questions. **It doesn’t answer the age-old question about the age of the earth.** I don’t think there’s a definitive answer in Genesis 1. It’s a legitimate point of disagreement between Christians. One that should not divide us.
 - The text could support a **young earth**. Where God spoke everything into being in six 24-hour days and created it all with the appearance of age. Or it could support an **old earth**. Some suggest that God spoke creation into being in six epochs or time periods. Or that he did create in six literal days but with unspecified lengths of time in between each day. Or that there’s a gap of millions of years between vv1-2 that could explain geological and astronomical age.
 - **But whether you arrive at a young or old earth, the one thing we can agree on is that God created the heavens and earth by speaking them into existence.** There’s much more to be said and to be explored about the How of creation. But at minimum, we should affirm that God used divine speech.

- ❖ **This is why it's hard to reconcile what's taught in Genesis 1 with modern evolutionary theory.** Some have suggested that God spoke creation into existence – but only a primordial, undeveloped form of creation. So he was directly involved in v1 but then was hands off for the rest. He let natural, random processes take over, so that an undeveloped earth “*without form and void*” was gradually populated with more complex and diverse species.

- ❖ **But the idea of random processes being the underlying force driving the development of creation doesn't seem to fit the narrative in Genesis 1.** I'm not saying random mutations and natural selection have no place whatsoever in explaining the diversity of life on earth.
 - **But we end up ignoring what Genesis 1 actually says if we don't acknowledge God's direct and active involvement in the entire creation account.** When it says in v11 that God created all the plants and trees "*each according to its kind*"; or the sea creatures and birds "*according to their kind*" (v21); or the living creatures on earth "*according to their kind*" (v24) – **you get the impression that God was directly and actively involved in creating the actual kind of plant or animal.**

- ❖ But a harmonization of modern evolutionary theory with theism would result in a reading of Genesis 1 that *says* God spoke a fish, bird, or dog into existence, but really he just spoke a primordial soup of biological matter into existence – and after hundreds of million of years and hundreds of millions of random mutations – you gradually get a fish, bird, or dog.
 - Again, I'm not suggesting that we should expect Genesis 1 to give a full explanation of how he brought about such a diversity of life on earth. But I am suggesting that the text does say God was actively involved in every aspect of creation through divine speech. **Which means that creation is so intricate and diverse – not because of randomness – but because of design.**

Creation is Carefully Ordered by God

- ❖ Now this idea that creation reflects divine design leads us to a third fundamental truth. Creation is carefully ordered by God. We saw earlier in v2 that the earth starts off without form and void. It's wild and empty. But then, in the subsequent days of creation, God tames the wild. **He brings order out of chaos.**

- ❖ We see him separate light from darkness on Day 1. Then he separates the waters above the sky (in clouds) from the waters below (in oceans) on Day 2. And he separates dry land from the sea (from the chaos) on Day 3. **He establishes boundaries within his created order.**
 - And then on Days 4-6, God fills the emptiness with the sun, moon, and stars; with fish and birds; with land animals; and with human beings made in his own image. And notice how in v16, the sun and moon are given authority to govern the heavens – to rule over the day and night. And in v28, humans are given authority to govern the earth – to rule over the fish, the birds, and every living thing that moves on the earth.

- ❖ **Creation is orderly. Not random and unpredictable.** The plants and trees produce seeds and fruit with predictability (v12). The sun and moon move across the sky with regularity (vv17-18). **Imagine how terrible it would be to live in a world like that described in v2.**
 - A world of chaos; without order. Imagine if you weren't entirely sure if the sun would rise tomorrow morning because most times it does but every so often it refuses. Or how could you function if you can only guesstimate that water is going to boil at 100 degrees Celsius? Most often, yes, but not always. Or what if you're only 90% sure that the gravitational force of the earth will remain constant tomorrow?

- ❖ **We shouldn't take the orderliness of creation for granted.** Especially since we know it once was a world “*without form and void*”. Thank God it's not like that now. And if your studies or profession involves you in the sciences – if you're an engineer or doctor or researcher – be grateful that the orderliness of creation makes science possible.
 - **All scientific research and reasoning assumes the orderliness and regularity of nature.** Scientific pursuits could not be undertaken without the precondition that the world is orderly and that it consistently follows a set of natural laws.

- ❖ **It's ironic that the more we learn about the orderliness of creation – about how the world follows certain laws of nature – the more some would conclude that we don't need God.** As in, we don't need a God hypothesis anymore to explain the mysteries of nature. What ancient peoples once attributed to God – like lightning bolts and thunder claps – we can now explain with the laws of science. So the explainability of nature gives some people grounds not to believe in God anymore.
 - But Genesis 1 suggests that the orderliness and regularity of nature, and thus its explainability, is actually evidence – not of God's absence – but of his wisdom, his orderliness, and ultimately his goodness towards us. Because of the goodness of his created order, we can live in a world that is habitable, where human life can flourish.

Creation is Intrinsically Good According to God

- ❖ It's this goodness that leads to our fourth fundamental truth about creation. Creation is intrinsically good according to God. In Genesis 1, we're told seven times that creation is good. By v31, we're told that God, the end of the sixth day, stood back, took in everything that he had made and declared that “*it was very good.*”
 - This might seem obvious to you, but it's not for billions of people in the world. **Because many religions embrace a dualistic worldview that rejects the material world, seeing it as inherently corrupted and evil.** That's why they portray salvation as an escape from the body into a purely spiritual existence.

- ❖ **Nowadays even the non-religious would reject the goodness of the created order. That includes the goodness of the body you were born with.** Many reject the goodness and beauty of our given body shape or facial appearance and go under the knife. Others feel great shame about their given ethnicity and fail to see its goodness. And others reject their given gender and the idea that God created us either male or female and that that is very good.
 - If you look at the sermon pew card in front of you, you'll notice that, later in the Spring, we're going to preach a mini-series called *The Goodness of Givenness*, where we'll explore these ideas even further.

- ❖ **But we should note that even Christians have sadly embraced a negative view of creation and created order.** Sometimes advocating for an unhealthy asceticism where you're beating yourself or depriving yourself of God's good gifts in creation like certain food and drink or marriage and sex within marriage.

- ❖ The Apostle Paul had to confront this in **1 Timothy 4**. There were some in the church, “³*who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.*” **In other words, creation is intrinsically good and should be gratefully enjoyed as a good gift from God.**
- ❖ Now that's not to ignore or deny the fact that God's good creation has been marred by the curse of sin. Our good hunger for food could easily devolve into gluttony. Our good desire for sex could easily turn into lust.
 - **Let's not be naive to the corruption of sin. It certainly has spoiled creation.** Now the earth produces thorns and thistles. Now hurricanes and floods damage property and steal lives. Now microscopic viruses shutdown entire nations and upend our way of life. The whole of creation has been groaning until now (Rom 8:22).
- ❖ **But even so, the Bible insists that creation is intrinsically good.** And it teaches that God's plan of redemption – not only set humanity free from the bondage of sin – but will set creation free as well. Jesus became a human to redeem corrupted humans through his death and resurrection. Similarly, he became a part of creation to redeem corrupted creation. Listen to **Romans 8:19-21**, “¹⁹*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*”
- ❖ It's a common assumption that Christians have a low view of creation and can't wait to go to heaven, thereby escaping all the pains and problems of this world. But that's not the Christian's hope. **Our hope is not escape but renewal.**
 - We don't believe that one day we will be freed of bodily existence and live as spirits in a purely spiritual plane called Heaven. No, the Bible teaches in 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21 that we will be raised to life to possess new resurrected bodies, and heaven will come down to a newly renewed earth. Because Christ will have come to make all things new. **The renewal of creation to its original state of very goodness – that's the Christian's hope.**

Creation is Uniquely Designed by God for Us

- ❖ Now let's conclude with our fifth fundamental truth. Creation is uniquely designed by God for us. **It truly is designed as a habitat for humanity.** This brings us back to the beginning of the sermon where we observed that creation has a beginning and moves from there like a straight line. And the question is: Where is that line pointing? What is the point of creation?
 - The answer is found in vv26-27, and Henry is going to dive deeper into those verses next week. But briefly, just note how the creation account comes to a climax with God making creatures in his image, after his likeness. **All of creation is uniquely prepared as a habitation for a unique creature called Man.** The only being made in God's image, like a mirror capable of reflecting God's glory to the rest of creation.

- ❖ That's the point of creation. **The sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, the seas, the dry land, all plant life, and animal life – they all glorify God.** And mankind especially glorifies God as his image-bearers.
 - Now even before we get to v26 and its emphasis on mankind's unique purpose – **notice how the creation account has already dropped plenty of hints that this world was made especially for God's unique image-bearers.**
 - If you think about it, Genesis 1 offers very selective reporting. It leaves out so many details. It doesn't tell us anything about other planets or galaxies, or black holes, or quantum mechanics, or dinosaurs! **It just focuses on the aspects of creation that are relevant to humanity.**

- ❖ Genesis 1 makes brief mention of the stars (v16), and then focuses all of its attention on Earth, our home. When it speaks about vegetation, there's no discussion about the various classifications of plant life; or how they pollinate; or how they help stabilize the climate. It says plants and trees produce seeds and fruits, which are things we eat. **As one commentator puts it, it seems to be written from the perspective – not of a botanist – but a chef.**
 - When the sun and moon are mentioned, astronomers are left wanting for more details. Genesis only focuses on how they function as huge clocks for human beings to tell time. And when it speaks of land animals, it doesn't distinguish between amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. The narrative just focuses on livestock (what we raise and eat), beasts of the earth (what we hunt or avoid), and creeping things (what bugs us or what we step on). **These creatures are classified – not based on biological distinctions – but based on how they relate to us humans.**
 - Genesis is being selective in its telling of the creation account because it's communicating a message – that God uniquely prepared a home for us where we might carry out our mission as image-bearers reflecting his glory.

- ❖ **Some will look up into the night sky and ponder the infinitesimal smallness of our world compared to the infinite vastness of the universe.** Stephen Hawking will remind you that, *“Our galaxy is only one of some hundred thousand million galaxies that can be seen using modern telescopes, each galaxy itself containing some hundreds thousand million stars.”*
 - **That'll lead some to draw the conclusion that we are insignificant in the grand scheme of things and only fooling ourselves to think that we, as human beings, are special or unique.** But King David observed the same night sky and came to the opposite conclusion in Psalm 8:3-4. *“³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”*
 - Friends, as you take in all the wonders of creation – as you glory in whatever stunning images that new space telescope is going to send back – **take comfort in knowing that you are still intimately known and deeply loved by the God of the universe.**