

**“GOD THE CREATOR”**

Genesis 1:1 declares that the God of the Bible - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – this God is the only God, the one true and living God, the Maker of heaven and earth. And for this reason, the opening verse of the Bible also implies that God has a claim over all people, regardless of whether they acknowledge him as God or not. This idea was just as controversial when it was originally written as it is today. In the world of the Ancient Near East, the context in which Genesis was written, almost everyone was polytheistic. That is, everyone believed in the existence of many gods, not just one. And their so-called gods were very different than the God who is introduced to us in Genesis 1:1. Their gods were petty and easily manipulated. The people who worshipped them believe that their favor could be bought at a price. They believed that an image of a god somehow participated in that god’s true essence. Everything about the gods of the ancient world betrayed the fact that they were man-made deities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the myths that the people of the Ancient Near East told to explain the origin of the universe. The most prominent of these creation myths said that the physical world came into being as a result of a battle between two rival gods, a battle in which one god killed and dismembered the other. In other words, the pagans of the ancient world believed that the universe was made out of a slain deity.

The modern world has come up with its own creation myth, though it is a secular myth that is clothed in the language of science: the theory of evolution. It is a myth that

is deeply cherished by many people, because they know that the only alternative is to embrace some theory of creation. And non-Christian people are very uncomfortable with the Bible's creation account, because the opening verses of Genesis contend that the God of the Bible is the only true God and the ruler of the universe. And if that is true, then every person on the face of the earth needs to heed the message that God reveals in the Bible. The biblical account of creation puts us all in our proper place. It emphatically sets God above us. It tells us that God is who he shows himself to be, and not whatever we might want him to be.

The book of Genesis gets its name from the Greek word for 'beginning' or 'origin.' This is very fitting, because Genesis tells us about the origins of the universe, of human nature, of marriage and family, of good and evil, and of God's plan of redemption. As far as its overall structure is concerned, Genesis consists of two distinct sections. The first, covering chapters 1-11, has to do with primeval history, the history of the world in its earliest stages. These chapters focus upon God's dealings with all humanity, dealings that center on four main events: creation, the fall, the flood, and the tower of Babel. The second section, covering chapters 12-50, has to do with patriarchal history, the history of the patriarchs (or "fathers") of the nation of Israel. Here, the focus shifts from God's dealings with humanity in general to his dealings with one particular family line: Abraham and his descendants. In these chapters, the storyline revolves around four main characters: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Some interpreters have argued that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are mythological, and are therefore not historical. They make this claim because the mythological literature of the Ancient Near East contains stories that are very similar to those found in the opening chapters of Genesis, including stories about the creation of the world, the flood, and the origins of different human cultures. While it is true that such stories exist in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, this does not require us to conclude that the events described in Genesis are mythological as well. It is just as plausible to conclude that the Spirit of God enabled the human author of Genesis to write accurately about events in early human history and that the peoples of the Ancient Near East developed mythological ways of talking about those same events. It is true that we cannot prove the historicity of what Genesis records. However, we can discern whether the author of Genesis, as well as the authors of the rest of Scripture, considered these accounts to be historical. And they very clearly did. Just to give one example, the biblical doctrines of original sin and of Christ's substitutionary atonement hang upon the representative role played by Adam in Genesis. If Adam was not a historical figure, then the Bible's teaching on these doctrines loses its footing.

The primary doctrine revealed in the opening verses of Genesis is the doctrine of creation. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Louis Berkhof defined creation as

“that free act of God whereby He, according to His sovereign will and for His own glory, in the beginning brought forth the whole visible and

invisible universe, without the use of preexistent material, and thus gave it an existence, distinct from His own and yet always dependent on Him.” [*Systematic Theology*, 129]

The doctrine of creation is absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith. It is a non-negotiable. To deny creation is to deny the Christian faith. This is why it is the very first article that we profess in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” First and foremost, our God makes himself known as the Creator God. This is underscored in our passage by the fact that the Hebrew word for “create” in verse 1 is always and only used in reference to God in the Old Testament. He alone is the Creator.

One of the things emphasized in Berkhof’s definition of creation is that God made the world without using any preexistent material. In the words of Hebrews 11:3:

“[T]he universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”

This is what is known as the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, a Latin phrase that means “out of nothing.” Before God spoke the world into being, nothing existed. As verse 2 says, God began his creative work by making matter, and this matter was “without form and void.” Then, as the remainder of chapter 1 shows, God set about the work of separating, ordering, and forming this matter into the world as we know it. God made the material

out of which he formed the earth. He made it all. This is underscored by the phrase “the heavens and the earth,” which is a figurative way of saying that God made everything. It is similar to phrases that we use to convey totality, phrases like “top to bottom” or “coast to coast.” To say that God created the heavens and the earth is the same as saying that he created the universe in its entirety, and this requires us to conclude that God made it all out of nothing.

This doctrine confronts the philosophy of materialism, a view held by many people in the modern world. Materialism says that matter is the only thing that exists, and that the universe came into existence as a result of a mixture of matter and chance. Like the theory of evolution, this philosophy is often put forth as if it were a scientific fact, but it is nothing of the sort. No one can prove that matter is the only thing that exists. That is a philosophical and religious claim, not a matter of science. And our passage confronts this claim by declaring that matter has not always existed, but that God, the only being who has always existed, brought the material world into being by his word of power.

God did not need to create the world. To suggest that he did would mean that there is something lacking in God, something that needs to be completed by what the world and its creatures have to offer. But the Scriptures clearly say that God is completely self-sufficient and independent of his creatures. As Paul says in Acts 17:25, God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything.” God is not dependent on the world. Just the opposite. The world owes every second of its continued existence to God’s power, but God himself stands above everything that he has made. Though man

often styles himself “the captain of his soul,” the reality is that we are dependent upon God for everything. We owe our lives to him. “In him we live and move and have our being.” [Acts 17:28]

This world had its beginning when God spoke it into existence. And it will reach its end when this same God decrees that it shall be so. And when that day comes, every single one of us, everyone who has ever lived, will stand before our Maker. It would be a fearful thing on that day to fall into the hands of the God who is revealed in Genesis 1; to face the just wrath of a God who only has to utter a word to cause galaxies to spring into existence. But this God is also a God who stoops low, a God who condescends to his people in love. He reveals himself not only as majestic ruler, but also as a kind shepherd to those who fear him, a shepherd who lays down his life for his unruly sheep. This is our God: he is both sovereign Creator and loving Savior. In the words of J. Gresham Machen:

“[T]he Lord who is our shepherd is also the dreadful ruler of all nature whose counsel none can tell. But the curtain had been drawn gently aside. But to whom has a look been granted beyond? Here is the wonder of our religion; here is the strange condescension of God. Not only to the wise and the mighty has a look been granted, not only as a reward for those who by the greatness of their knowledge and their diligence in research can lift themselves above details to philosophic contemplation of the

mystery of the whole, but to plain people whom wise men despise. It is not man's way but God's way." [*God Transcendent*, 21]

These two verses in Genesis 1 are the beginning of God's great self-revelation. Here we see him as the great and glorious Creator. And this helps us better comprehend the depths of his mercy and grace as the God who draws us into fellowship with himself through Jesus Christ.

*Come, worship at his throne; come bow before the Lord*

*We are his works, and not our own; he formed us by his word.*

*Today attend his voice, nor dare provoke his rod;*

*Come, like the people of his choice, and own your gracious God.*

[“Come, Sound His Praise Abroad”]