

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Seven Days of Wonders

Part 1 of 4 : In the beginning

[Please note : English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Today's talk is the first in a series of four, with the overall title "Seven days of wonders." All that I'm aiming to do in these four talks is to go through the first 34 verses of the Bible with you, that is, from Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 to Genesis chapter 2 verse 3.

These verses cover the entire "Creation week", as it is sometimes called, the six days in which, according to Exodus chapter 20 verse 11, God created everything that exists, followed by the one day on which He rested.

Before starting to say anything about these verses, I intend to read the entire passage. I intend, in fact, to do that at the start of each of these talks. If anyone wants to accuse me of being too repetitious in this, let me, in defence, draw attention to the instructions which Paul gave to Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of scripture¹. I do believe that this shows that just reading the Bible in public, without necessarily making any comment on it, is in itself something immensely valuable. It brings glory to God, and blessing from God to those who hear.

And of course, there can hardly be any better way of reading the Bible in public than to read it on the radio. So let's now read from the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings (because that's what Genesis means) chapter 1 verse 1, finishing with chapter 2 verse 3. I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth 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.

And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

And God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, 'Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.' So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.' And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

Introduction – the two motives for these studies

At the outset of this series of talks, I’m going to try to spell out the two reasons why I believe that it is immensely important, not only to read, but to really study these first 34 verses of the Bible.

The first of these is to do with the unique period of history in which we live. The whole of today’s talk is going to be taken up with the very first verse of the Bible, with that very simple, yet immensely profound, statement that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And ever since the events recorded just a little further on, in chapter 3 of Genesis, when our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and brought sin into the world, the human heart has really resented that statement, or at least resented its implications. If there is a Creator God who made us, then it is entirely plausible that He will care about how we live, and indeed, that He may not approve of how we live.

Because of this, most of the human race has lived, throughout history, in such a way as to push God to the backs of their minds. But, until comparatively recent times, those who gave serious thought to the question were always obliged to admit that the evidence for design in the universe, and in particular in the living world, would admit of no explanation apart from that opening statement of the Bible.

What makes today’s world so different is the train of events set in motion by Charles Darwin. In the decades following his publication, in 1859, of *On the Origin of Species*, faith in the accuracy of the Bible, and faith in the Creator God of which it speaks, has, for most people, been superseded. What has superseded it is not, as is popularly supposed, “the findings of science”, but is in reality an alternative faith. This new faith, for that is what it is, is the great modern creation myth, commonly called Evolution.

From Darwin’s time forward, the human race has set about constructing for itself a vast edifice of supposed knowledge, resting on the supposed truth of evolution. This evolutionary framework of thought claims to be able to explain everything from the origin of the universe itself to the intricate perfection of living things, as simply the out-workings of chance natural processes.

In reality, this edifice is a house of cards, the most spectacular achievement of wishful thinking ever seen. Yet it is in this edifice that people today hide. The teaching of the evolutionary view, accepted as fact by most of the world’s population, has effectively inoculated the human mind against accepting the Bible for what it claims to be. Man has made himself immune to the gospel, and the first reason for studying these verses is to redress the balance and, as it were, to give God the right of reply.

But there is a second reason. At first sight, we might think that these verses are simply an account of how God made the world, the opening paragraphs of the God-given history of the cosmos. I very much hope I can convince you that they are far more than that. But we have to begin by appreciating what the Bible really is.

Although it was written over many centuries by a very diverse team of authors, the Bible forms one harmonious whole. The Holy Spirit, who directed and guided those authors as they wrote, is the greatest Communicator there ever was. And so, as the greatest Communicator of all, He knows exactly how to introduce, at the beginning of His revelation, the great themes which are going to

run and run as the story unfolds. In these 34 verses, then, we can read not only the great story of Creation, but also the setting out, one by one and in perfect order, of the foundational truths of God's revelation.

The laying down of these foundations starts in verse 1, which we will now look at in detail.

Genesis 1 verse 1 as the Foundation of God's revelation

If you tried to write a 'statement of faith' - a list of the basic fundamental truths that Christians believe - what would you include? The truth about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the truth about man - created in God's image but ruined by the fall, the truth of course about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ (truly God whilst truly Man) and His atoning death, His rising again and His future return in glory? These are some of the basic doctrines which you will find spelt out in various creeds and 'basis of faith' documents which Bible-believing Christians have, for various reasons, felt it necessary from time to time to draw up.

Yet it always seems to me that there is one fundamental doctrine which should be placed in a class of its own, not because it is more important, but because it's more fundamental! The doctrine I'm talking about is the belief in the inspiration of scripture. That is, the belief that the Bible was 'inspired' or God-breathed and therefore is all completely true (no errors, no contradictions) and completely reliable.

This doctrine is in reality the only one which you have to "just believe" (although there are plenty of compelling reasons to believe it). Once you do believe it, all of the other fundamental doctrines follow. The point is that we believe all of those other basic, central Christian doctrines because "the Bible tells us so." It's not because we have worked them out for ourselves. Believing in the inspiration of the Bible is really, I would say, the only doctrine which is actually fundamental. It alone is the foundation. All the others are the ground floor.

Now then, surprise surprise, what do we find here in the opening breath of the Bible? We find a stupendous claim which, if you think it through, is none other than an assertion of this "most foundational" of all the foundational truths - that of the divine inspiration of the Bible. The writer simply states, without any kind of justification, that in the beginning God created. There is not the slightest hint that he is putting this forward tentatively. It's not a suggestion. It's not a proposition. It's a statement of fact. Yet he wasn't there to see it, so how does he know?

By making this totally authoritative statement that something took place about which he could not possibly have had any first-hand knowledge, he actually stakes a claim in our minds, as readers, for this most fundamental of all truths. In effect he is saying "I know God created because I am writing with divine authority."

So the Bible begins with this profound statement which at one and the same time "says it all" about the fact of Creation, but also asserts the truth upon which, if we will accept it, all the rest of the structure of Biblical doctrine is built.

The name God uses first

But there's much more than that in this amazing opening verse of the Bible. Let's look next at the word for "God" which is used here. The Old Testament contains many names for God, each with its own particular significance. Looking into which one He chooses to use first, the name by which He first introduces Himself, is surely going to tell us something.

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, we find that God has revealed Himself as El, Eloah, Adonahy, Yahweh (or Jehovah) and its shortened form Yah (as in hallelujah) and several other

names and combinations of these. But the name which is used here, by which God first introduces Himself, is the name Elohim.

I find that scholars don't all seem to agree as to what Elohim is the plural of, I don't think anyone disputes that it is a plural, and because we're talking here about the Hebrew language, the fact that it is plural is deeply significant.

In English the plural form of a word tells us only that two or more of the things in question are being referred to. If I were to tell you that I was kept awake last night by cats in the garden, you would have no way of knowing whether there were two, three or thirty, although you would probably guess there were no more than two. But Hebrew is different. Whereas English has only two "number" forms for a noun, singular and plural, Hebrew has three such forms. It has singular, dual and plural. In fact there is an example of a dual form in this very verse. The word for 'heavens' is dual. There are, apparently, two heavens in the created universe. But the staggering thing is the implication that in Hebrew when the plural is used it means, not two or more, as in English, but three or more. Three or more - do you see the point? Isn't it rather amazing that God should cause the opening words of His revelation to be originally written in a language which possesses this distinction, and should then choose to use a name for Himself which drops a very broad hint, right at the beginning, that there is something threefold about Him?

Now the fact that, although God exists in three Persons, He is still one God, is actually shown by the grammatical form of the sentence. Amazingly enough, whilst the noun Elohim is plural (three or more) the verb 'created' is singular! So we might say that the opening sentence of the Bible shows Trinity acting in Unity!

Now of course all this is not what we might call conclusive proof. It's far from the full unfolding of the truth which we describe by the word "Trinity." That has to wait for the New Testament, and the coming into the world of the Son, in order to make God fully known. The important point is that God introduces Himself by using a divine Name which strongly hints at His triune nature. This suggests that the fact of the Trinity (which we later learn involves loving relationships) is the very first thing God wants to tell us about Himself.

Next let's notice another very basic idea which this verse teaches us. The great faiths of the world may broadly be divided into two classes. Some of them, notably the great religions of the East, really see God as intimately bound up with the Creation. To them, God is part of Nature.

The opening verse of the Bible is therefore a great watershed, for it leaves no room for that kind of notion. Here we have a God Who exists entirely outside of, and apart from, the Creation. It didn't exist at all until He determined that it should.

Now in conclusion, what are we to make of the twofold division of the Creation which this verse describes? It doesn't say that God created everything that exists, or some such all-embracing term. It says He created the Heavens and the Earth. This suggests to me that the distinction between Heavens and Earth is another truth which is vitally important, and that God wants us to take it on board right at the start. It's significant enough to merit a place right here in the very first sentence of God's inspired word.

I believe that God wants us to understand the distinction, in His dealings with the human race, between the earthly and the heavenly. On the one hand, God has an earthly people, the nation of Israel, who have an earthly destiny, and on the other He has a heavenly people, the Church, whose destiny is heavenly. I happen to believe that we Christians live in the greatest day of all, the day in which God's richest thoughts are being shared with mankind through the "gospel of the grace of God"² which is being announced today. For us, there is a heavenly calling rather than an

earthly one. It's no surprise then, to me at any rate, that the opening sentence of the Bible should also draw attention to this vital distinction.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 in our series entitled Seven Days of Wonders - talk number T1357.

¹ 1 Tim. 4:13 ² Acts 20:24

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