

HOW GREAT THOU ART!

Genesis 1:1-25

Key verse: 1:1

“In the beginning God created the heavens the earth.”

Genesis 1 deals with the origin of all things and addresses fundamental questions, “What or who is God?” “Where did we come from?” “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” The answers to these questions are not just abstract philosophy but have a profound impact on how we live. If there is a caring God, we can know him and have meaning in life. We can also know that nothing is impossible with God and have a new beginning. I pray that through this passage we may meet our awesome Creator who is responsible for the amazing creation around us.

I. In the beginning (1a)

First, the necessity of faith.

Genesis 1:1 proclaims that in the beginning God created all things. No one knows for sure what happened in the beginning because they weren't there. In the book of Job, God said to those debating, “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!” (Job 38:4-5a) We have some clues about what happened, but we can only come to a conclusion about it by faith. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” It takes a kind of faith to be an atheist, but basic Biblical faith starts with understanding that God created all things.

Second, faith and science.

Genesis' main purpose is to reveal truths about God, how we can know him and his purpose, and at its periphery gives us information about the material world. What about science? Science focuses on empirical data about the material world. It attempts to confirm hypotheses and postulates about their meaning. Genesis and science are two different ways of approaching our understanding of the universe. They are not mutually exclusive. Einstein said, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” With both, we can gain a fuller understanding of the material world and continue to grow spiritually.

The realm of faith is valid because science is far from figuring everything out. Today cosmologists don't know what 96% of the observable universe is and how it

works.¹ “Dark matter” got its name because no one knows what it is. It can’t be directly detected, but its measurable influence comprises most of the mass or gravitational force of the universe.² “Dark energy” is another unknown that causes the ever-accelerating expansion of the universe.³ We have much to learn about the universe around us and how God holds it all together.

Third, the reality of faith.

Genesis 1:1 tells us that time and space had a beginning. Today nearly everyone agrees that time and space began with a tremendous and mysterious force. The prevailing cosmological theory is that the universe was an initial “singularity” that may have been smaller than a grain of sand with infinite density, energy and mass that contained all the space-time of the universe and it seemed to explode out of nothing. Wow, that is absolutely amazing! God is a plausible explanation, but it takes a “mustard seed of faith” to accept it.

Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes for Health and leader the Human Genome project, was an atheist graduate student, finding no reason to believe any truths outside of science. But while he attended medical school he encountered the life and death issues of patients. He was amazed that many Christians had great peace. A patient challenged him, "What do you believe, doctor?" He began searching for answers, going where the facts led him. After reading C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, he realized a strong case for the existence of God could be built on rational grounds. But the intellectual argument alone was not enough. He knew he had to decide by faith one way or the other but couldn’t make up his mind. Then while on vacation hiking in the Cascade Mountains he was overwhelmed by the stunning grandeur around him. He decided to say “yes” to God by faith. He became a Christian and authored the best-selling book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.

In this cynical world, may we embrace faith based on facts. May we learn much about the world around us while experiencing the blessings of faith.

II. God (1b)

¹ “What’s 96 Percent of the Universe Made Of? Astronomers Don’t Know” Space.com, May, 2011.
<https://www.space.com/11642-dark-matter-dark-energy-4-percent-universe-panek.html>

² “What is Dark Matter?” *Scientific American*, June 1, 2018.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-dark-matter1/>

³ “Dark Energy: The Biggest Mystery in the Universe”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, April, 2010.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/dark-energy-the-biggest-mystery-in-the-universe-9482130/>

We can learn several things about God from Genesis 1.

First, Elohim. The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 1:1 is Elohim, a plural noun treated as a singular entity. It may be a reference to the triune God fully revealed in the New Testament. It is also a clear reference to the majestic eternal God, who was and is and is to come. God is the subject of 1:1 and is at the center of creation. When we see God as the center of the universe rather than ourselves, we can humbly acknowledge our place in the grand scheme and begin to see his good plan. Such humility is good in many respects. According to the Bible the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Pr 9:10).

Second, the Spirit of God is a manifestation of God's presence. The initial world was formless, empty and dark. But in this chaos, there was hope because the Spirit of God was hovering over it. In Hebrew, "Spirit of God" means, "the wind of God." As wind is invisible but its results are obvious, so the Spirit of God is invisible but his work is manifested in powerful ways (Jn 3:8-9). The Spirit of God is always present and hovers over darkness and chaos, ready to do amazing work. This gives hope that God is doing his mysterious work in every situation.

Third, God is a person. Verse 3 starts, "And God said..." This is the first of 10 times in Genesis 1 where "God said" is repeated. God is one who speaks, implying he has intelligence, reason and personality. The God of the Bible is not an impersonal force, but a person. Human beings have consciousness and personality, so why not also God from which everything came? God cares about every aspect of his creation, including each individual person. He communicates to us in many ways including through other people, through the creation, through the Bible. But God's most robust communication is through Jesus Christ. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." In Christ, God fully revealed his love to us. Christ died to bring forgiveness and rose again so we can be restored eternally. Often it seems that no one really cares. They just want something. But only God loves unconditionally and wants to bless us to abundantly happy, not burden us.

Fourth, God's word comes to pass. Another repeated phrase in Genesis 1 is, "and it was so." Whenever God said something, it came to pass. A recent survey showed that Americans believe that there is more lying and misuse of facts by politicians

and the news media than ever before.⁴ Today there is a crisis of trust. Who are we to believe, lying leaders or fake news? The good news is that we can trust God's word because it has been proven true over the ages. For example, there are over 300 Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament fulfilled by Jesus. The probability of one person fulfilling these prophecies is at best 1 in 10¹⁷. God's word will also come to pass in each of us. May God help us to find truth amidst of all the lies today by listening to and being transformed by God's almighty word.

Fifth, God is light. The very first words of creation were, "Let there be light." Light appeared even before the sun and stars. In fact, science has discovered that just after the universe came into being, a blazing light filled it, with a remnant existing today called the "cosmic microwave background" or CMB. This ubiquitous light is one proof that the universe had a common beginning. The light dispelled darkness and began to bring order out of chaos. Light revealed a beautiful, majestic universe made up of distinct shapes. God saw that the light was good and separated the light from the darkness.

"Let there be light" has a deeper meaning than the physical light emitted at the beginning of time. The word "light" appears more than 250 times in the Bible and appears in its first and last chapters. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." God's word reveals the way out of the darkness of sin and death. Jesus said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The presence of God is like light driving out darkness. When one person was a freshman in college, the darkness of his father's death hung over him. He was also tempted by the hedonistic party life. But through Bible study the light of God shone into his dark soul. He met Jesus so much so that although he got a master's degree in mechanical engineering degree from Northwestern University, he decided to be a full-time Bible teacher. Now he is Associate Pastor of Chicago UBF and his name is "all-bright" because he shines the light of Jesus.

III. ...Created the heavens and the earth (1c)

First, the process of creation.

God made the atmosphere for the earth, as well as the sea and the land. God made the sun, moon and the stars. The earth teemed with life. Plants filled the earth, fish

⁴ Fake News, Filter Bubbles, and Post-Truth Are Other People's Problems, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/Fake-News-Study>

filled the oceans, birds filled the sky, and living creatures filled the land according to their kinds. And although the sun is 100 times the size of earth and burns at 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, God put it at perfect distance so that we can live and prosper.

The narrative style of Genesis 1 is an ancient literary convention intended to communicate spiritual meaning using symmetry and parallelism.⁵ It may not be the kind of scientific chronology we are familiar with today. The parallel symmetry among the days of creation can be represented in a diagram with the first 3 days forming the basics and the second 3 days filling in the corresponding detail. God starts with the basic environment and fundamental elements, and then he fills in the details. So God is an environmentalist. Today we need combat physical pollution of the world but we also need to do something about spiritual pollution and let God make a good spiritual environment to do his work. That is why Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” Many have found that when they let God do his foundational work in them, then they experience God’s “filling” work in their school, families, jobs and other facets of life.

Second, the miracle of life.

The origin of life remains a great mystery. The Darwinian theory of gradual evolution is not supported by the sudden appearance in the fossil record of complex life and most basic phyla.⁶ Even the most renowned atheist scientists have no answer for the mystery of how life developed and no one is close to making it in from scratch the laboratory.⁷ A common theory is that long ago there was a pond on the Earth. It sat there for many years until the mix of chemicals was just right. Then the first cell came into existence. But some have said the likelihood of life emerging randomly like this is the same as a tornado sweeping through a junkyard to assemble a Boeing 747 with its complex controls. It is greater than zero over a large amount of time, but highly unlikely. Have you ever seen a miracle? All you need to do is look at the person next to you or look in the mirror.

Today we know that DNA, the double-helix structure, is a key to life. In a highly sophisticated self-replicating process, DNA provides the instructions for all life on

⁵ “The Six Days of Creation,” The American Scientific Affiliation: A Network of Christians in the Sciences, <https://www.asa3.org/ed/Chapter2.pdf>.

⁶ Cambrian explosion, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambrian_explosion

⁷ See “Life in the Universe,” Stephen Hawking, <http://www.hawking.org.uk/life-in-the-universe.html>.

earth, like computer code. Wow, God was the first coder! Consider the creation of animals. God's creative genius in the design of animals is absolutely fascinating.

God is not done with his creative work. The God of Genesis gives people their own genesis or new beginning by his mighty power. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" Several people in the Bible had their names changed: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. They got new lives in God. Many of our missionaries took new names when they came here because they had new lives in Christ.

In the future, God has even greater creative works in store. Revelation says that God will bring a new heaven and a new earth, and the first heaven and the first earth will pass away. There God will dwell with his people. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Sin, corruption and death are at work in this world. We get old and pass from this life. Life can be sorrowful. But our creator God will give us new bodies and eternal bliss with him by his power which is greater than death. We can greatly rejoice in this.

This is the beginning of the New Year. Even if we completely messed up in 2018, the God of Genesis can give us a new start in 2019 and a new joyful hope.

IV. The purpose of creation

If the universe developed as a result of random of chance, what is its purpose? Philosophers like Nietzsche suggested that by removing God, life is without objective meaning. This has given rise to postmodernist views of no objective truth, reality, value, and so forth- only social constructs and narratives competing for supremacy.

However, according to Genesis, the universe is not an accident and has a purpose. What then is its purpose? Six times in verses 1-25 God declared "it was good." "It was good" establishes objective good and reveals God's good purpose. The purpose of creation is for God to look at it and say, "it is good." Psalm 19:1-4 describes it poetically, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." God made all creation to reveal his glory. When we see creation, we find

that God is speaking to us through it about his mighty power and infinite wisdom. And when we really take time to mediate on it, we can only say along with the hymn writer, “My God, how great Thou art!”

Paul said something similar to this when talking about our motivation to do things. In 1 Corinthians 10:31b, “...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” A self-indulgent, easy-going lifestyle does not make one happy, as evidenced by the misery of many rich and famous people. But when we live for God to say “it is good,” we can even find meaning in suffering if it is for God’s glory. Innumerable pastors, missionaries and lay people have found meaning in the midst of their everyday lives with the motivation to live for the glory of God.

I was an atheist and thought that Bible study was for weak and uneducated people but I came to UBF anyway to check out the nice Korean ladies. Meanwhile, I struggled in school socially and academically. I lost motivation in my studies and got kicked out of Northwestern. I felt life was an accident. I despaired to the point that I wanted to commit suicide. But one thing about Bible study resonated with me- if God exists then he has a purpose. As long as there was any chance of that, I didn’t want to end it all. Then I met Jesus in Bible study who died for my sins and rose again. The experience was more real than any scientific theory. The grace of God gave me a new start to life. I found that my life is not an accident but God has a good purpose for me in all things. I was motivated to work hard to get a bachelor’s degree and help needy people even at the place I hated, Northwestern, for the glory of God. I went back to school and got a PhD in engineering from the place I got kicked out of. Now I am a staff and adjunct professor at NU. I serve the students and community because of God’s love, and this former atheist is an elder in the church. I still mess up a lot, but the God of Genesis gives a new beginning each day, and a hope that my aging body will be clothed in immortality one day.

All praise be to our almighty creator God! We can only wonder in amazement at his great creative power and say, “How great Thou art!” May God give us a new beginning in this year and look forward to his marvelous creative acts in the future.