

In the Beginning

by Ray C. Stedman

It hardly needs to be said that the place to begin reading a book is at the beginning. Still, many people have the habit of reading the last chapter of a book first. But if you try that with the Bible, you will become very confused indeed. The best place to begin with it is at the beginning.

- There are, however, many who find it difficult to begin with Genesis. They are thrown off by the language, which they find to be a bit stiff and somewhat antiquated, especially if they are reading one of the older versions.
- Others are discouraged because they bring to the study of this book certain infantile concepts about God and the Bible, which have been retained from their childhood. I call these “Teddy Bear” ideas. Most of us slept with a Teddy bear when we were little, but discarded it when we grew up. But unfortunately we have not discarded many of the “Teddy Bear” ideas we had as boys and girls about God and the Bible, but instead have carried them over into adult life. When we impose these Teddy Bear ideas upon the Scriptures we discover that the Bible has a tendency to turn us off, and that the book becomes dull and uninteresting to us, and understandably so.
- Still others come to Genesis rather prejudiced by the widespread rejection of this book as unscientific or primitive in its concepts. So they read the book, especially the first chapters, with a sense of distaste. They read it simply to be informed about a book that is as widely known as this. But they are already prejudiced

against it, and consequently they never really see what is here. They never really hear the words of this book.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that in this present series we attempt to read this book as though we had never read it before, to carefully note what is said here, and what is not said. We must remember, as we study, that Genesis is the first chapter of the story that ends with the presentation of the Lord Jesus Christ and the declaration of the way God has found to obtain the release of human life from despair and death, and to bring it into power, excitement, and grace. In other words, the God of Genesis is the God of the rest of the Bible.

It is a completely false idea, and one that is essentially infantile, to assume, as many do, that the God of Genesis is different from the God found in the rest of the Bible that he is an austere, stern, harsh, rather remote Being – a Creator only – that his attitude toward humanity is quite different than that found in the New Testament. But this is not true at all. The idea has come into being only because people have taken isolated texts from the Scriptures and used them to build a montage of God which presents him in this aspect. But you will find the grace of God shining through the book of Genesis as much as it does in the New Testament. The love of God, the compassion, the tenderness, the sweetness of God, are manifest as much in Genesis as they are anywhere else in the Bible.

If we read this book carefully, noting what it has to say, we will discover that the God of Genesis is undoubtedly the God of the rest of the Bible. In the New Testament he is the Father of the Lord

Jesus Christ and the Father of all those who believe in him; he exercises a father's heart. But our first glimpse of this same God is as the Creator. That is the way we are introduced to him in this beginning chapter of this beginning book of the Bible.

The word *Genesis* means "beginning," so it is a very apt title for this book. We shall content ourselves with looking only at the first verse, and this will serve as an introduction to our whole series.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. {Gen 1:1 RSV}

That has been called one of the most profound statements ever made in the hearing of men. If you think about it a bit, as we propose to do, you will see that it is true. Surely this statement is exactly where the Bible ought to begin. It gathers up in ten English words (seven in Hebrew) the answers to the four fundamental questions which every person faces when he really begins to think seriously about his life and the universe in which he lives.

Each of us began life as a baby and as such we paid little attention to what was going on around us or to what the world was like. But as we grew older we started to take note of the world – the sky, the sea, the winds, the birds, the flowers, the animals, the trees, and all of life around us. As we became aware of the world, we inevitably asked some questions about it. It is those questions which are answered for us in very brief compass here in these opening words of the book of Genesis.

What are the questions?

1. First, we ask ourselves, "What is all this?" Driven by an insatiable curiosity, man has been attempting to answer that question ever since he first appeared on earth. He seeks to explore the universe and the world in which he lives.
2. Second, we ask, "How did it begin?" The question of *how* is the question, primarily, which occupies science.
3. Then we ask, "When did it begin?" When did it all start? How long has the world been going on like this?
4. Finally, we come to the great philosophical question, "Who is behind it?" Who is back of these strange and remarkable processes?

These four questions are answered here in this verse, and thus it serves as a tremendous introduction to the great themes of the Bible.

Take the first question, the one most obvious to us – the wonder of the universe itself. "In the beginning," we read, "God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1 RSV}. There we have them – the heavens and the earth. Someone has said that this phrase is the beginning of true science because a fundamental part of the task of science is to observe and classify all that can be observed in the makeup of the world of nature. Here is a very early attempt at classification. What do you see around you? You see two great classes of things – the heavens and the earth.

One of the marvels of the Bible is that it uses language that communicates with people of the most primitive and limited understanding, while at the same time it still has significance, and inexhaustible meaning, to the most erudite and learned of men. It addresses itself with equal ease to all classes of mankind. No other book that I know of has that distinction.

This universality is evident in this phrase, "the heavens and the earth." It has meaning for a savage in the jungle, simply perceiving the land in which he lives and the sky over his head. He notes the earth, with its yield of trees, plants and animal life, and he notes the heavens with the birds flying and the wind blowing, the clouds, and the stars. That may be all he is concerned about but he describes it as 'the heavens and the earth.' On the other hand, a modern astronomer, looking out into the far reaches of the universe through a great telescope, would also use the phrase, 'the heavens and the earth,' i.e., the planet on which he lives with its relationship to the solar system in which it moves, and beyond that the illimitable reaches of sidereal space, involving vast galaxies almost unimaginably removed from one another. But either is described by this simple phrase, 'the heavens and the earth.' That is the beauty of Bible language.

The Bible completely avoids the utter ridiculousness of some of the early myths about creation and origin, found in other religions. In this creation account there is nothing that needs to be laid aside as man's knowledge increases. This is true of the entire opening chapter of Genesis – a most remarkable passage in that respect. Later, the Bible takes

these two words, the *heavens* and the *earth*, and expands both, disclosing a remarkable knowledge of nature which anticipates by many, many centuries the discoveries of modern science. That is another proof that this book is not of man. It comes *through* man, but *from* God.

It was the Bible that first said that the number of the stars is beyond computation. It declares that God “stretched forth the heavens” {Isa 51:13 KJV} into limitless expanse which can never be measured, and filled it with stars which are as numerous as the sands upon the seashore {cf, Gen 22:17}. Yet to a primitive observer looking into the heavens, the visible stars are not uncountable. They are a vast number but they do not seem impossible to count. But the Bible flatly states that the number of the stars can be compared, literally, to the number of the grains of sand upon the seashore. Modern science has now established this to be true. Man cannot possibly begin to assess the number of the stars.

It was also the Bible that said the earth is hung upon nothing {cf, Job 26:7}. In that poetic way it describes the mysterious force of gravity which no one even yet understands but which keeps the earth suspended in its relationship to the sun and the other planets. The earth literally hangs upon nothing. It was the Bible that said that “things which are seen are made of things which do not appear,” thus predating by many centuries the discoveries of modern science which finally recognized that all matter is made up of invisible energy, and that matter and energy are interchangeable.

At this point we must make crystal clear a truth that is of supreme importance in our study, and to which we will return again and again as we go through Genesis. We must recognize at the outset that it is not the intention of the Bible to be a textbook on science. If it were, the book would be much thicker than it is, much less comprehensible. Rather, the Bible is intended to be a book of redemption:

- Its purpose is not to tell us how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven.
- It declares the way out for a troubled, bewildered, and bedeviled race, and it is the only book that speaks with authority in this realm. And

- It constantly uses the physical and material to illustrate and to reveal truth that is on a higher level – the spiritual.

The supreme concern within God’s heart in giving us the Bible has been, through the centuries, that we might understand what goes on in the human spirit, affecting everything we do. He has deliberately made the physical to correspond to the spiritual in such a way as to illustrate to us what is going on within.

Let me share with you a very helpful quotation on this subject from Dr. F. A. Filby, who is the Senior Lecturer on Inorganic Chemistry at an English technical college. He says:

The material world is designed to produce parallels – parables – of the spiritual. There is indeed a spiritual law operating in the natural world, and God put us on a planet where light is separated from darkness for our spiritual education as well as for our physical needs. There is a spiritual, as well as a physical reason, for the pattern of creation and he who divorces science from true religion will never be able to come to a real understanding of the world.

Granting this to be true, then it is evident that the physical heavens and earth are used to illustrate the fundamental difference which exists between human and divine life. God is not man. He operates quite differently from man. But it is his intention that man should share his life, and live as he lives. Obviously, then, we must learn a wholly different way of living. That is the supreme subject of the Bible: how to live on a different level of life – the level on which God intended man to live.

This is declared very specifically in Isaiah 55:8 and 9, in which God says,

**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the
Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
{Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

The Apostle Paul represents the same distinction in writing to the Corinthian church. He says,

For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. {1 Cor 2:11 RSV}

If we are ever to understand ourselves, and life around us, we must understand the lessons that are illustrated by the physical universe. The universe was designed to teach these.

Let us now look at the second great question about life answered in this verse. We have not only the wonder of the universe, but the mystery of its origin is also disclosed. "God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1b RSV}.

Here we are wrestling with the great question, "How did all this come into being?" How did life appear upon it? Those who love to erect monuments on battlefields should raise a huge one on this verse. For here the armies of the evolutionists and the beleaguered hosts of the creationists have marched and wheeled and thundered and blasted away with considerably more noise than skill, producing more heat than light, to a victory that both insist they have won.

With respect to the origin of life, Darwin claimed that he knew the answer. He said it was all by evolution from a single cell existing in the primordial ooze which, by a process of division and mutation ultimately resulted in the many groups and forms of life we find existing today. But many scientists now confess great uneasiness about this theory. Some even flatly admit that it is no longer tenable, as Darwin envisioned it. Consider, for instance, these quotations:

A. S. Romer writing in the book, *Man and the Vertebrates*, says,

We have no certain fossil record of lower chordates [animals with backbones] or chordate ancestors, and very possibly never shall have. The oldest ancestors of the vertebrates are unknown and they may always remain unknown.

A scientific reviewer, G. S. Simpson, writing in *Science Magazine*, reviewing the book, *The Origin of the Vertebrates*, says,

As for the ancestry of the chordates all is left in darkness without even the dream of sixty years ago.

In an article on animal evolution appearing in the *Quarterly Review of Biology*, Austin Clarke says,

Thus, so far as concerns the major groups of animals, the creationists seem to have the better of the argument. There is not the slightest evidence that any of the major groups ever arose from any other.

These words are rather startling, when we face the widespread allegiance to Darwinian evolution that exists in the popular mind today. But the Bible even at the beginning faces this great question of the mystery of origin and proposes a solution that no science can contravene: God created the heavens and the earth.

The third fundamental question, relating to the great mystery of time, is closely tied to the second. "When did it all begin?" Says the Bible, "In the beginning," {Gen 1:1a RSV}. What a wonderful answer! We humans seem to be fascinated by this question of "When?" We are always asking one another, "How old are you? When were you born?" If we are denied an answer we become highly curious, especially about the age of women. So it is with this question of the age of the universe. Here again a fierce battle has raged. Those who say the earth is very, very old have many arguments they advance to substantiate their claims, based on physical evidence from observation of the universe. Others claim, from other lines of argument, that the earth is relatively young. On the basis of certain Biblical statements it is even printed in some Bibles that the creation originated in 4004 B.C. Some have even traced it further to October 26th, 4004 B.C., at 9:00 a.m. But, the fact is, the Bible does not say anything about the age of the earth. It simply makes no comment. It is important to remember that Bishop Ussher, who is responsible for that 4004 B.C. figure, was an Irishman who lived in the 17th century and was neither an apostle nor a prophet – his word was not inspired.

The Bible suggests in many places that time is an elusive mystery to man, and modern science is beginning to confirm that. The 90th Psalm says,

“For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past,” {Psa 90:4a KJV}. And in Second Peter we read, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,” {2 Pet 3:8b RSV}.

The Bible puts this whole matter of time and of the age of the earth beyond man’s knowledge. Jesus said to his disciples. “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority,” {Acts 1:7b RSV}. This suggests that all the clocks with which we try to determine age may be really basically wrong, whether they are scientific clocks, or those supposedly derived from Scripture. We do not know, and increasingly we are discovering that we do not know how old the earth is. But that is exactly what the Bible says.

We come to the last big question. “Who is behind all this?” The Bible answers with but a single word, “God.” There you have what is essentially the boundary of life and thought, as far as man is concerned – God. Man can never escape the thought of God. There has never been a society or civilization discovered on the face of the earth that does not have a concept of God and of worship. Man is an irrepressibly worshipful being. He must worship something, and the reason for this is very simple. It is because everything around him and within him speaks of the existence of another personality, a Being of great intelligence, power and wisdom who must exist somewhere. Man can never escape that thought.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it very beautifully:

Earth’s crammed with heaven
And every common bush aflame with God
But only those who see take off their shoes:
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

It is only by the power of rationalization – that evil power of self-deceit that man can ever rid himself of the idea of God. That is why it is usually those who, by virtue of learning, have trained themselves to a high degree of skill in rationalization who adopt an atheistic position. Man left to himself, observing the universe as it is, comes to an inescapable conviction that God exists: that behind all the design, the marvel and wonder of the universe, lies a great mind and personality and heart.

Even when we rationalize it all away, exercising the strange and evil capacity of the human mind to invent rationales to support the desires of the will, and thus eliminate God from our thinking, nevertheless we encounter experiences and times when suddenly he breaks through again. That is what the Soviet Union is discovering. They cannot legislate God out of existence for he keeps breaking through into the life of that nation from time to time, even though they seek to deny it.

Robert Browning expressed this phenomenon perhaps as well as it has ever been put. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones recounts that in one of Browning’s poems there is a young journalist who comes and tells a bishop that he has decided to put aside all the things he has been taught about God and think the whole matter through from the standpoint of his knowledge, his education, and his observation. The bishop tells him that as a young man he too had tried the same thing. He had categorized all the knowledge he possessed and had worked out a philosophy that seemingly encompassed it all. But then, as Browning puts it, the bishop said,

Just when we’re safest, there’s a sunset touch
A fancy from a flower bell; someone’s death
A chorus ending from Euripides,
And that’s enough for fifty hopes and fears
The Grand Perhaps!

Browning’s reasoning is that you can plan it all out, categorize everything, and come up with a philosophical system that accounts for everything you see. Then perhaps you will take a walk in the country and see a sunset that moves you to the depths of your being in a way for which you cannot account. Your philosophy does not cover it. Or, someone’s death strikes with shattering force and you are left with nothing but the crumbs of your philosophy. The Grand Perhaps that is God, breaking constantly into human life.

Man lives out his days, the Bible says, within the boundaries of God. God stands at the end of every path on which man is, and also at the beginning. As Paul said to the intellectuals on Mars Hill in Athens, “In him we live and move and have our being,” {Acts 17:28a}. He is the Inescapable One:

- Men of science explore the atom and come at last to a realm of mystery, where everything is

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reduced ultimately to pure energy, and man does not know what to do with it or even what to call it.

- The astronomer probes into space. He discovers the great galaxies whirling in their courses. He sees no observable limit to it but finds that it all is permeated with tremendous power and energy. He does not know what to label it.
- The doctor holds a newborn baby in his arms. He cannot explain where that life came from, what made it develop in the way it did to produce this little creature.

It is all a mystery. We are surrounded with mystery on every side – The Grand Perhaps! We do not know even a tiny fraction of a percent of what there is to be known. We hardly can put the relative amount of our knowledge in terms small enough to express it.

But who is behind all this? As Paul said to the men of Athens, “The God whom you ignorantly worship, whom you have labeled ‘the unknown God,’ him we proclaim to you,” {cf, Acts 17:23}. This is the God whom most of science attempts to eliminate from its planning and its thinking today; whom the vast majority of people take no cognizance of and try to rule out of their lives. The God whom men ignorantly worship, the unknown God, the God whom men will not name and cannot name. “Him,” Paul says, “we declare unto you.” We know his name. It is Jesus of Nazareth. “Without him was not anything made that was made,” {John 1:3}. “All things were created by him and through him,” {cf, Col 1:16}. And one day, as Paul writes to the Philippians, all creation and all things within creation shall bow the knee, and shall confess with the tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father {cf, Phil 2:10-11}. Is it not strange that though

- we cannot feel beyond God,
- we cannot think beyond God,
- we cannot move beyond God, and
- there is no way to eliminate him from our lives –

nevertheless we constantly attempt to live as though he did not exist? He is **the greatest fact of all**, yet

- we do not want to mention his name,
- we do not want to talk about his work,
- we take no cognizance of his mind, his thinking, and his wisdom.

How this shows the ignorance, the superficiality, the shallowness of human thought and life! Let us begin where the Bible begins, at the only place to begin, in order to understand the world in which we live and the life we live within it –

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. {Gen 1:1 RSV}

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that as we go on in these studies we may recognize that this book is designed to unfold and reveal to us the greatness of your Being, the love of your heart, the grace with which you deal with us who are sinful, rebellious human beings. We pray, Lord, that we may submit ourselves to these great truths – learn them, understand them, live by them – that we may come to know you, whom to know is eternal life. We ask in your name, Amen.

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