

## What Genesis 1 Teaches Us About God (Genesis 1:1-25)

I understand that you are beginning a sermon series through the EFCA's ten-point statement of faith. I get to start the series off with point number 1, which is about the doctrine of God. So I have one sermon in which to teach you everything there is to know about God. How hard can that be?

I'm going to take a more limited approach. Today we're just going to explore what the first chapter of the Bible tells us about the nature and character of God. Obviously there is a lot more to know than that! We are just going to be scratching the tip of the iceberg. But it's also amazing just how much Genesis 1 teaches us about God.

We shouldn't be surprised by that, because the book of Genesis is basically the introduction to the rest of the Bible. It sets the stage for everything else that happens. It's like the first act of the play or the opening scenes from a movie. To understand the story, you need to have all that basic information about the setting and the characters; about the way things are supposed to be, how things have gone wrong, and how things need to be fixed. Genesis sets the stage for understanding all these basic things about God and his purpose for the world and his plan to save us.

So it makes sense that this opening chapter of the Bible tells us some important things about God. After all, God is the main character of the Bible. Of course the opening chapter should give us a good introduction to the main character!

When we read Genesis 1, our minds might be drawn to many of the questions surrounding the creation of the world. We think about topics like evolution, intelligent design, and the age of the earth. Those questions are very important. But sometimes I think we forget that most of all, Genesis 1 is about God. Genesis 1 is not just about the creation; it's about the creator. It's not just about the world; it's about the one who made the world. Genesis 1 was written not just to tell us about how the world came into being—although it certainly tells us important things about that. The first chapter of the Bible was written to introduce to our Creator. So today I'd like to keep things simple and just ask one question: what does Genesis chapter 1 tell us about God?

By any measure, Genesis chapter 1 is an amazing piece of writing. It sparkles with the wonder and beauty and majesty of the creation. But most of all, Genesis 1 is a profound and stirring portrait of God in action. If we pay careful attention, we can learn almost as much about God in Genesis 1 as we can from any theology textbook.

### *God Alone is God—Transcendent*

The first thing we should notice about God in Genesis 1 is something that is perhaps obvious but is also incredibly important. As the curtains open, God is the only actor on the stage. Before this universe existed, there was nothing but God alone. There are not any other gods or powerful beings existing beside God. Throughout the Bible, we sometimes run into the phrase, "Know that the Lord is God." That's what this phrase is getting at—that there is no God but God alone. God alone is the creator of all things. God created everything that exists out of nothing. God is not part of the world. He is before the world. He is above and beyond the world. Theologians have a word for this—*transcendent*. God transcends us and all things because he is

the creator of all things. We must never forget that. God is God, and we are not. He is the creator, we are the creation. God is high and holy—infininitely above and beyond us, beyond the reach of our highest thoughts. God is God and we are not.

### *God is All-Powerful*

Here's a second observation about God from Genesis 1 which is closely connected to that: God is incredibly powerful. Again, that's very obvious, but also extremely important. God creates not just the world but the entire universe simply by speaking the word. He commands things to be, and they are. He effortlessly shapes his physical creation according to his good will and purposes. Now, we as humans have some amount of power. We have some ability to shape the world according to our purposes. We can refine minerals and metals and make some pretty amazing things out of them. But we can't really *create* anything. We can only move around and reorganize things that are already there. But God has the power to create something from nothing. That's infinite power—power beyond not only our abilities but even our imaginations.

This power of God that we see at work in Genesis 1 is not just about what God has the ability to do, it also is about what God has the *authority* to do. God is the creator; this is his creation. He is the potter; this is the clay. We belong to him. This world belongs to him, because he created it. He is the great king over all things. We are subject to his purposes. There is a word theologians use to describe this—*sovereignty*. God is the sovereign creator of all. He has both the power and the authority to rule the universe and all who live in it.

### *God is Personal—Imminent*

So far, we've been talking about how God the creator is very high and holy and transcendent and powerful. But Genesis 1 also presents another side to the coin to all this. It presents God as being very personal. God is infinitely above the world. Yet he is also very close to the world and personally involved with it. Here's how theologians describe the tension between these two truths about God: God is both *transcendent* and *imminent*. God is infinitely higher than the world, yet he is personally involved with it and interested in it. That's part of the wonder of what the Bible teaches us about God the creator. His act of creation sets him apart from the world, because he is the creator and everything else is the created; but this very act of creation also puts God in personal contact with the world. We see this in how God creates in a way that is willful and purposeful and free. He delights in what he is doing when he creates and says that all that he is making is very good.

And notice throughout this passage just how God creates the world: He creates not by the push of a button or by the wave of his hand, but by his voice. He says, "Let there be..." God creates by *speaking*. To speak is to do something very personal. Throughout history, there have been philosophers who have talked about God as if he is some kind of abstract principle or force, but abstract principles and forces don't *speak*. They just are. Here in Genesis 1 we see that this transcendent, sovereign God is also a very personal being.

This is a very important lesson for us about God. God is infinitely above us, beyond our understanding, yet he is a God who has chosen to come very near us, to be personally and passionately involved with his world, to reveal himself to us, to *speak to us*, even as he once spoke the world into being.

This is without even touching on God's creation of humanity, where God's personhood is shown even more. God is not satisfied with his creation until it contains a creature that he can speak to and have a relationship with. When God creates humanity as his own special image-bearers—as creatures who reflect or mirror certain things about their creator—he makes a pair of people who can know each other and love each other and are able to have a relationship of trust and obedience to God. All of this tells us how even though God is transcendent and holy, he is also personal and wants to have a relationship with his creation.

### *God is Wise*

Here's another thing we learn about God in Genesis 1. God is incredibly wise. God is not just powerful, he's also a brilliantly intelligent designer. He creates in a very logical, orderly, and purposeful way. Now, Genesis is not exactly a science textbook and it doesn't give us detailed information about creation. But there is a major contrast between Genesis and the way many people talk about the origin of life. Many people today insist that the world was formed and life on earth came about just by accident—that the universe has developed according to a purposeless, chaotic process. Nothing could be further from what Genesis describes. The world has been ordered by God's wise and careful designs. There's nothing random or chaotic about it.

Most commentators on Genesis 1 have pointed out that there's a clear logical order to the days of creation. In the first three days, God creates all the places. Then on the last three days, God fills all those places with the appropriate things. Sun and Moon have a sky to move back and forth in. Fish have an ocean to swim in. Animals have a fruitful, abundant land to live in. It's a little bit like when people build a house, first they design and build the structure of the house with all its different rooms, and then they fill those rooms with the appropriate furniture and appliances. There is a place for everything, and everything is in its place. This is what is going on in Genesis 1. This tells us something about the great wisdom of God.

### *God is Loving*

It also tells us something about the love of God. That's the last thing I'd like to list that Genesis 1 teaches us about God. Perhaps we don't see this at first glance, but with a moment of reflection, we see that the creation of the world was an act of amazing love. Part of it is what we just saw about how good and orderly the created world is. God created in a compassionate and caring way. He made sure that every creature he made had a good home to live in; a place where all their needs were met.

Just think about how God created just the right places for different animals to live and created them just rightly for those places. Fish and other sea creatures have their place in the ocean. Birds have their place in the air. Animals have their place on the land. If we wanted to talk about biology or zoology we could get even more specific about how God created many different kinds of habitats on earth—forests, deserts, jungles, and mountains—and how each of those habitats is filled with creatures that are wonderfully and creatively adapted to them. Even the parts of the world that some most inhospitable to us, like the arctic, make a good home for creatures who are specially designed to live there. Every part of this world and every creature in it is intricately and ingeniously designed for the flourishing of life. This is not random chance. This is more than just the rolling of evolutionary dice. This is all the careful plan of a good and wise

creator. God didn't make the world in a careless, indifferent way, just to amuse himself, like a child who builds a sandcastle just so he can have the fun of knocking it down. God's love is reflected in what a good world he made and how he blessed every creature he made with a good life.

But I'd like to go even a little bit deeper than that. Here's a question to ponder: why do you think God made the world in the first place? Did God *need* to have a world? Wasn't God already complete and perfect without a world? So God couldn't have made the world to satisfy some need of his own. That would be saying that God by himself is less than perfect. So why did God create the world, then? I think it must have been an act of sheer generosity; free grace; of unconditional love. It's just like God to do something like that. Remember what God did much later through Jesus on the cross. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son.*" We see that same kind of grace and generosity and love in God's decision to create a world. God did not owe it the world to create it. He did not owe it to you and me to create us. But he did anyway, because God loves to give the gift of life—whether physical life, or spiritual life. That is the God who created the world. He is the God who gave his only son. And even the very creation of the world anticipates the cross, where God lovingly gives himself just because of his generous grace.

Over and over again in Genesis 1, God looks at his creation and sees that it is good. God is interested in whether or not his creation is good because God himself is perfectly good. We see this in how God creates. We see it even in the simple fact that he chooses to create something that he didn't need just out of pure generosity and grace. Genesis 1 shows us that God is absolutely good and loving.

### *The Two-sided Nature of God*

We could maybe list more attributes of God that can be found here in Genesis 1. But I want to stop here just to observe a pattern. Maybe you've observed it, too. A lot of the attributes of God that we see here seem to come in pairs. God is transcendent, but also imminent. God is infinite, but also a personal being. God is absolutely holy, but also absolutely loving. As we sing in one hymn, God is "merciful and mighty." I also like the way David puts it in Psalm 62. *One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: "Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love."* Or we could paraphrase the Psalmist as saying, "God, there are two things that I know for sure about you: that you are powerful, and you are loving."

These things might seem to be in tension for us. Is God more loving, or more holy? More powerful, or more personal? In our human thinking, these often seem like opposites. Sometimes we try to resolve these tensions by emphasizing one side of them at the expense of the other. We emphasize God's love at the expense of his holiness, and reduce God to someone tame and non-threatening. Or perhaps we emphasize God's holiness at the expense of his love, and portray God as a kind of a bloodthirsty tyrant.

But both of those tendencies lead us astray from how God presents himself to us in Scripture. God is not seventy percent loving and thirty percent holy. God is not even fifty percent loving and fifty percent holy. God is one hundred percent loving, and one hundred percent holy. He's not holy some of the time and loving the other part of the time. God is holy all the time, and he is loving all the time. Everything that that God does is completely holy. Everything that God does is completely loving.

How can God hold all those things together? In short, because God is infinite. God is infinitely good and perfect. The creator of the universe can be nothing less than absolutely holy. But he can also be nothing less than absolutely loving.

### **Conclusion: God is Worthy of Our Trust and Worship**

There's actually much more that Genesis 1 teaches us about God. For example, if we look carefully, we can already start to see the Trinity. God the Father is the Almighty Creator. The Holy Spirit is present, moving over the surface of the water. And how does God create? With the Word of his mouth, the Word who was with God in the beginning. John 1:1 describes Jesus Christ this way: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made which has been made.*" John was looking back to Genesis 1 when he wrote this. It's as if John is saying, "Remember how God spoke the world into being? Well, the Word which he used to speak everything into being was in fact his Son, Jesus Christ." We probably wouldn't be able to arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity just by reading Genesis 1, but because we have the New Testament, we can look back at Genesis 1 and see how well this truth fits what we read there.

But without getting into all that, I think that we could summarize all of this just by saying that Genesis 1 shows us that God is profoundly *good*. He's a good God who made a good world and he has good purposes for his world. A God who is both this transcendent and imminent—who is both far above and beyond his created world, but also closely and personally involved with it—a God who is both this powerful and this loving; a God who is this wise and creative and purposeful, is the kind of being who is absolutely worthy of our trust and absolutely deserving of our worship.

That's quite simply the message that I'd like to leave you with today. Our creator is utterly worthy of our trust and our worship. That leaves us with an important personal question: do we, as God's creatures, rightly trust him and worship him? The God who can do what we see him do in Genesis 1 is big enough to hold the world in his hands; to pick up all the broken pieces and put them back together. A God who is caring enough and wise enough to create the world the way he did is a God who will be faithful to us no matter what. And what's more, he is a mighty, awesome creator who in all circumstances deserves our worship. Do we trust God like that? Do we worship God like that?

This is very important for where the story in Genesis is headed. When we come to Genesis three, we see that the first humans, Adam and Eve, decide not trust and obey their creator the way he so clearly deserves to be trusted and obeyed. That's been our problem ever since. We as humans, almost from the very beginning, failed to trust and worship the creator the way he deserves.

Is there an area in life in which you find it difficult to trust God? Is there anything going on in your life or in the world today that you find terrifying? I think we can all answer "yes" to those questions. But what difference would it make for our outlook, for how we think, for how we live, if we firmly remembered the truth about God that we learn in Genesis 1? What difference would it make if we remembered the power and goodness of our creator? Do we ever forget the magnitude of God's holiness? Do we ever forget the reality of his love?

If God is so mighty that he is able to create a world out of nothing, there is no problem that he is unable to handle. If God is so loving that he is willing to create a world by sheer grace, this is no problem that he is unwilling to handle.

Let's remember these truths today—especially as we face the fears of our world and the problems of everyday life. Let's worship and obey the holy and transcendent creator of all things. Let's put the one who came before all things first. Let's entrust our lives to the author of life. Let's give him all our trust, all our worship, and all the glory.