

## **“BACK TO THE BEGINNING”** **(Genesis 1:1-2)**

After studying Matthew – the first book of the New Testament – for over two years – we begin a new study this morning of Genesis – the first book of the Old Testament and the very first book of the Bible. Specifically, we’re going to study the first eleven chapters of Genesis – which lays the foundation of everything else we read in the Bible.

One of the deepest desires we have human beings is to know where we came from, and one of the big trends in recent years is people getting DNA tests and researching their genealogies, so that they can discover as much as we can about origin and family heritage. I know Warren LaVille has traced his back to the 1500s. There’s something about knowing where we came from, who we belong to, and what our family story is – that helps us understand ourselves and why we’re here.

Having raised two adoptive children, I know that there were gaps in Matt and Abby’s stories that we could not fill, and being able to meet some of their birth parents and siblings have helped them understand why they look like they look and how they acquired some of their unique mannerisms. I read about one woman who was tormented by the fact that her mother – after giving birth to her in a hospital in Idaho – simply walked out of the hospital and left her behind. For years she hated the mother she never knew and dreamed of the day she could meet her and tell her exactly what she thought of her.

Through the use of DNA testing, she was able to locate several siblings who had also been abandoned by the same mother. She found out that her mother had severe mental issues and had died several years earlier. Knowing the back story changed her feelings about her mother, and she was able to forgive her. Filling in the gaps of where she came from gave her a whole new perspective on life.

Sooner or later we all ask the big questions of life: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? How we answer these questions becomes our worldview, and everyone – whether they realize it or not – has a certain filter through which they look at the world. Our worldview shows up in what we do with our time, how we spend our money, how we treat people, how we vote, and how we think about the cultural issues of the day.

3500 years ago, God used Moses to write the book of Genesis – the first of five books he wrote that are known as the Pentateuch. The word “Genesis” is the Latin translation of the Hebrew word that means “beginnings” or “origins.” We don’t know exactly when Moses wrote the book of Genesis, but it was sometime during the period of Israel’s exodus from Egypt after 400 years of bondage. After so many years in a foreign country, they knew very little of their history as a people, and the purpose of Genesis was to take Israel back to her roots and help them understand who they were. They were about to begin a whole new life back in the Promised Land, and Moses wanted them to understand their identity as God’s chosen people, so that they would trust and obey Him.

The story of how the nation of Israel came to be does not begin until chapter 12 of Genesis, but the first eleven chapters tell us the story of how the human race came to be and the origin of just about everything: The origin of the world, the origin of man, the origin of gender, the origin of marriage, the origin of work, the origin of sin, the origin of death, the origin of language, of nations, and of race. Without these eleven chapters, the rest of the Bible would not make sense. And without these eleven chapters we would not be able to make sense of the current issues of our day that we read about every day in the headlines. These chapters set the foundation for all we believe as Christians and our view of the world.

This morning I want to talk about the first two verses of Genesis, which some have called the most important verses in the Bible. Every syllable of these verses ooze with importance, and we need to take the time to soak up the many truths that are in it. Let's read these verses together: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." You can't begin more majestically than that.

Genesis 1:1 declares three big things: When something happened – “in the beginning”; who did something – “God.”; and what He did – “created the heavens and the earth.” A well-known scientist named Herbert Spencer said that everything knowable can be placed into one of five categories: time, force, action, space, and matter. He probably had no idea that He has just described Genesis 1:1...

- “In the beginning” – that's time.
- “God” – that's force.
- “Created” – that's action.
- “The heavens” – that's space.
- “And the earth,” – that's matter. Everything that could be said about everything that exists is said in Genesis 1:1.

When Moses says, “In the beginning,” he's not talking about the beginning of all things, but the beginning of the physical, material world – the world that we live in, and the universe that we look into – all had a beginning point. One of the big questions we naturally wonder is: When did God create the world? How old is the world? Some say the world is really, really old – perhaps as old as 13.7 billion years ago – and others, on the opposite end of the spectrum say that the creation of the world is quite recent – anywhere from 6,000 to 20,000 years old. It's a subject that will be debated until the end of the world, and brilliant scientists from both ends of the spectrum strongly disagree with each other.

Next week I want to delve a little deeper into these issues – not because I want to, but because what science says and what the Bible says becomes a conflict for some and even a barrier to faith. We'll get into that, but for right now it's important to keep in mind that Genesis is not written as a scientific textbook to explain all the nuances and timing of creation, it's written a declaration... In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Verses one and two of Genesis 1 tells us three things about God, and in turn, these three things tell us something about ourselves and the world. First, verse one us that God is **self-existent**. The Bible doesn't begin with philosophical arguments for the existence of God. It doesn't try to prove God's existence. It simply says, “In the beginning God.” His existence is assumed and declared. God is the only one who can tell us about the beginning because He was the only one who was there.

You and I exist, but we aren't self-existent. We didn't come to be by ourselves – we came to be by our parents, who came to be by their parents, and we all originally came to be – going all the way back to our origins – by God's act of creation.

And once we come into this world, we are dependent on food and water and air to continue existing. But God is not dependent on anything – He is self-sufficient and self-sustaining because He always has been. Thomas Aquinas referred to God as the “uncaused cause.” Everything that exists has a cause – someone built the chair I'm sitting in – but God is the uncaused cause. He is the cause of all other things.

Don't miss the fact that the Bible begins with God, not us. He is the main story of the Bible and the central character, not us. This helps shape the way we view the world and our place in it. When Copernicus in 1543 established that the sun, and not the earth, was the center of the universe, many scoffed at this perspective. In the same way, we were never meant to be the center of things – we were meant to reflect God's glory. Just as the earth has no light source on its own, but reflects the light of the sun, so we too reflect the glory of God.

This doesn't mean that we're not important to the story. We are God's highest creation – His masterpiece – fearfully and wonderfully made to reflect His glory. We are important to the story, but to make sense of life we must start with the fact that God is the center of the story and He is the hero.

If you try to remove God from the center, the result is that we put ourselves in the center. This is no better illustrated than in a book called *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne that has sold 20 million copies, and is advertised as the book that changed the world. Here's what she writes: "The earth turns on its orbit for you, the oceans ebb and flow for you, the birds sing for you, the sun rises and sets for you, the stars come out for you, every beautiful thing you see and every wonderful thing you experience is all there for you. Take a look around – none of it can exist without you. No matter who you thought you were, now you know the truth of who you really are – you are the master of the universe – you are the heir to the kingdom – you are the perfection of life – and now you know the secret." 20 million copies. There are rows and rows of books in bookstores espousing this same worldview.

In stark contrast, the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:16... "In him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." One of the reasons there is so much chaos in the world is because people live as though God does not exist and see themselves as the center of the universe. But the real secret is that God is the center of the story – and when we grasp that truth and make Him the focus of our lives – things begin to make sense and our purpose for being here is realized.

Secondly, Genesis 1:1 tells us that God not only is self-existent, He is **eternal**. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. While everything in the universe had a beginning, God has always been. Moses writes about this in Psalm 90:2, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." I remember as a kid asking my dad, "When was God born?" It's a logical question. Everyone has a birthday – a day we arrived in this world. When was God born? The answer, of course, is that God has always been. Have you ever let your mind dwell on that? We are locked in space and time and can't comprehend how God has no beginning. If you think too hard about it, it will literally make you head hurt.

God transcends space and time and is not locked into the past and present and future – He lives in the present moment. He has no past because He's always been and He has no future because He always will be. With God there is no time as we think of it. He is eternal.

Because God is eternal, it means that He existed before He created the heavens and earth. A question that naturally comes to mind is: What was God doing before the creation of the material world? Did anything happen before Genesis 1:1? The answer is yes. One of the things, we read elsewhere in the Bible, is that God created the spirit beings that make up the spirit world – including the angels. The world is not just made up of the physical world that we see, but the spiritual world that we can't see.

Passages like Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 tell us how God created Lucifer, the highest archangel, and closest to the throne of God. But pride was found in Lucifer's heart and he rebelled against God, wanting to take God's place. Satan, along with other angels who rebelled with him, were cast from heaven – and today make up a vast dark, unseen, demonic force that seeks to wreak havoc on the world. We find out more about Satan and evil in chapter 3 of Genesis.

We also know that before the world came into being, there existed love and relationships. In John 17:24 Jesus said, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." Before time existed, God existed in three persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and they existed in perfect fellowship and harmony, which is a picture of what God created us to enjoy with Him.

We also know that before time began God thought of us. Ephesians 1:4 says, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Then there is 2 Timothy 1:9 which says, "He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." Think about that! You can write above Genesis 1:1 – God knew me before this. Before the world came into existence there was love and relationships and a grand plan to create you and me.

All this explains why love and relationships are important to us, things that science cannot explain. We are made in the image of God, who is personal and relational and emotional – and that's why we have friends and get married and help assist people when natural disasters strike. We are hard-wired from before time began to bear God's image and be in relationships.

Genesis 1:1 tells us that God is self-existent and eternal, and third – that He is **creator**. God created the heavens and the earth. The word "created" is the Hebrew word *bara* and means to shape, fashion, or create something from nothing. Beginning in verse 3 we see how God's creation unfolds in the six days of creation, but here is a declaration that God created the heavens and the earth. God is the uncaused cause that brought the world into being.

When you and I create something – like a backyard deck – we go to the lumber yard and get the materials to make it. When we paint a picture, we buy a canvas, some paint, and a paintbrush. Everything we create starts with something. But when God creates, He creates out of nothing. Something didn't exist and then it did exist. Hebrews 11:2 puts it this way, "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." God not only created the world, but He created the materials that make up the world.

Next, we see the scope of creation... God created the "heavens and the earth." This is a phrase the ancient Hebrews used as a way of saying, "The whole universe.... Everything." God created it all. The earth, of course, is the globe we live on – and the heavens refer to all that surrounds the earth. Ancient Hebrews used the term "heaven" to describe three different "realms" – the atmosphere around the earth where the birds fly; then outer space where we see the moon and the stars; and then the spiritual heaven where God dwells, which Paul referred to as the "third heaven."

In verse 2 we come to a fascinating description of the condition of the earth when creation began... "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." The condition of the earth is described in three phrases. The first phrase is "the earth was formless and empty." The Hebrew word for "formless" word *tohu* elsewhere means a wilderness – a desolated place – a wasteland. God created the raw materials for the earth, but the raw material did not have any order or design or functionality.

The Hebrew for “empty” – *bohu* – means the earth had nothing on it – no inhabitants. When you put formless and empty together it describes an earth that is unshaped and unpopulated. The raw materials are there, but there is no mountains or trees, and there are no animals or people. It is barren, desolate, and empty. In verse 3 God begins shaping and populating – forming and filling the earth.

The next phrase in verse 2 to describe the condition of the earth at creation is that “darkness was over the face of the deep.” What an interesting phrase. The Bible says that God is light, but up to this point there was no created light, only darkness. “Darkness was over the face of the deep.” What does that mean? In the Bible “deep” is a synonym for the waters of the sea. The entire surface of the earth is water – like a huge primordial ocean – and there is no land. In order for there to be functionality and order, there must be light and there must be land.

In verse 3 God says, “Let there be light,” and separated the light from the darkness. He makes the earth functional. In verse 9 God gathers the water into one place so that there is dry ground. The dry ground He called “land,” and the gathered waters He called “sea.” On subsequent days of creation, He will fill the earth – populate it – with plants and tree, with birds and fish and animals, and finally – with people made in His image.

The picture here is that God is like a potter with a formless, useless lump of clay in His hand, and as He places the clay on a wheel, He begins to mold and shape and form the world exactly as He wants it to be. As the weeks unfold in our study of Genesis, we will see the marvelous order and design of God’s creation and how all of society is blessed when we live according to His order and design.

The third phrase in verse 2 says, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Here the Holy Spirit of God – the third person of the trinity – is hovering over the formless and empty earth, engulfed in water, and surrounded by darkness. The word “hovering” is used elsewhere of a mother bird who is fluttering over her unhatched eggs, spreading her wings out over them to protect them. It tells us that God is intimately involved with His creation – and like a mother hen He is watching over His creation. God is not an abstract force or impersonal entity. He doesn’t leave the earth formless and empty, but He has a plan for it.

It also tells us something about the expectation and anticipation of creation – the Spirit of God is hovering – something is about to happen – He’s about to do something with the formlessness and emptiness and darkness and do something magnificent. What’s He going to do? What will His creation look like? Anticipation is in the air.

When Queen Victoria – who ruled England from 1839-1901 – was a young girl – her parents kept her from knowing that she would one day rule over England. When her teacher inadvertently let it slip that she would one day be queen, she let this news soak in a bit, and said, “Then I will be good!” From that point on, no matter where she was or what she did, Victoria was governed by the fact that she would one day sit upon the throne of England, and the knowledge of her identity and destiny gave her life purpose and meaning.

That’s what verses one and two of Genesis 1 are meant to do for us. Our identity is wrapped in the knowledge that God is the creator and we are His creation. He is the main story of the Bible – He alone was there in the beginning and He is the originator of all things. For His glory and His eternal purposes, He created you. We did not just randomly arrive or evolve from nothing – we are fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s image. We are created to live in fellowship and harmony with God, as Adam and Eve did perfectly in the garden before sin entered the world.

Once our fellowship with God was broken, He set in motion a plan to send His Son to earth to die for our sins and restore us. Meaning in life is found when we acknowledge our sin and brokenness, and trust Christ to save us and bring us back into a right relationship with God.

The first two verses of the Bible also declares that if God is creator and I am His creation, then my life is His. I am not an independent agent. He is the potter, I am the clay. I may live independently and act like God does not exist, but ultimately, I am accountable to Him. As God's creation I am meant to live according to His design and His order. And why wouldn't I? When I cooperate with His perfect design – I can't go wrong. But when I fight and resist His design and order, I will always be paddling upstream and wondering why life is falling apart.

More than ever, I believe people are searching today for meaning and purpose. Deep inside they know something is missing – that there is more to life than this material world. The French philosopher, Pascal, said that inside the heart of every man there is a “God-shaped vacuum.” God made us to know him, and designed is so that we would not be happy unless He fills the void. Augustine said, “Lord, you have made us for yourself. Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has put “eternity in the hearts of men,” meaning that the longing for ultimate answers comes from God himself.

Once we realize who God is and who we are, life begins to make sense – and God, in His love and grace, has seen fit to reveal Himself to us and declare that in the beginning He created all things. It's the beginning of a grand story – a story that He invites you and me to be a part of.