



## THE BIG PICTURE

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On January 12th of last year, a young man in a baseball cap got off the subway at a stop in Washington, D.C. He had a violin with him, which he took out of the case. He positioned the case open on the floor near the trash can, facing commuters. He was smart: he threw in some cash of his own to make it look like he had already had some customers. Then he began to play for 45 minutes.

During that time, 1,097 people passed him by. A handful tossed some money his way. A couple people stopped to listen for a few minutes, but no crowd formed. There was no applause after each song. At the end of his time, he had earned a whopping \$32.17.

That might be about average for a street musician. But this was no average violinist. It was Joshua Bell – one of the greatest violinists in the world. Interview magazine once said that his playing “does nothing less than tell human beings why they bother to live.” The Washington Post asked him to play in the subway as an experiment to see how people would respond if they didn’t know who he was. Joshua Bell played his best in that subway station, using his multi-million dollar Stradivarius, built in the 1700s, one of the greatest violins in the world, playing a selection of classical pieces considered to be the greatest violin music in the world.

Joshua Bell has played for the president and the crown heads of Europe. The cheap seats at his concerts easily go for \$100. But down there in the subway, people just walked right past him, not understanding who he was or the music they were missing.

What a metaphor for how we ignore the greatness of God. We fail to recognize him all the time. He is worthy of so much more attention than we’re able to give him, but we don’t even see him or know who he really is.

W.H. Davies once wrote, “What is this life, if, full of care, we have no time to stop and stare.” As we begin this new year, I would like us to take some time to stop and stare at God, to take in who he is as best we can. We’ll never completely understand him, but we can definitely learn to appreciate him more fully. So over the next several weeks, we are going to examine some of the big truths about God, foundational ideas that will help ground our faith and hopefully fill our hearts with a desire to know him better and worship him more.

For years, I've had somewhat of an obsession with sticky notes. I use those little yellow Post-It pads all the time. When I was at my old job, I used to have stacks of them everywhere, and it became a bit of an office joke. Now it's fine to take notes, but my problem is that a lot of the time, my scribbling doesn't make sense. I will jot down a phone number with no name. Then two days later, that note will be lying somewhere by itself and I have no idea whose number it is. Or I will be on the phone and not paying attention, and when I hang up, I see that I've written down what I said to the other person instead of what they said to me. So I will end up with these random words and numbers all by themselves on little scraps of paper. It's hard to put the whole story together from disconnected information.

That's how we sometimes try to manage our faith. We have these little scraps of ideas about who God is. We collect random thoughts from people around us, from TV, from the internet. Sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't. They're just isolated ideas. We've got a lot of bits and pieces, but no unifying story. And that's what I hope we can begin to find in this series.

It sounds incredibly ambitious, but I'm really not wanting to do anything new. We're going to go back to see what Christians have believed about God from the start. With so many brands of churches out there, it might seem like there's not much anybody agrees on anymore. But when you drill down to the bedrock, the most important truths about God are non-negotiable. Who is God? What is he like? What's the Trinity all about? Who is the Holy Spirit? What's our connection with God? What is sin? What about heaven and hell? What makes the Bible so unique? What happens when we pray?

All these types of questions are connected, and the way we answer them can either be with random sticky notes that address individual issues, or we can begin with a larger picture to try to see how they are related and coherent.

So where do we dive in? As Julie Andrews would say, "Let's start at the very beginning." The book of Genesis. The first few chapters of this book lay out for us some of the most central truths about God and humanity, and they set the direction for the entire Bible. So let's start at the very front and work our way in.

### **Genesis 1:1-5**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Somebody has said that's the most important sentence in the Bible. If you can agree to that one sentence, if you can accept that fact about God, nothing else in the rest of Scripture will be a stretch. Miracles, Jesus coming to earth, the cross, the resurrection – they all are doable for the God who made everything.

So maybe we need to pause for a minute and take a closer look at these words. Because I think the first sentence of the Bible has become one of the most controversial verses in the past 80 years or so, thanks to Charles Darwin.

For most of the life of the Bible, that was not the case. Genesis 1:1 wasn't problematic. The choices were generally either to believe that the God of Israel created the universe, or to believe that some other god brought it about. Our origins were questions of theology or philosophy – not science.

Then, when Charles Darwin came along, he called the Old Testament a “false history of the earth.” There was no god behind creation. In fact, Darwin would say you shouldn't call it creation, because there is no Creator. We're the product of an ongoing natural process. He was able to point to specific examples of evolution, and his theories have received widespread scientific support ever since.

What this has done is turn science into some kind of enemy of the Bible or of faith. People are thrown to one side or the other, either ridiculing the Bible's version of creation as a fairy tale, or taking the opposite route and twisting science, forcing it to support what the Bible says.

For some Christians, this hasn't been a blow to their faith. They can live with the tension. But for others of us, this has posed a real dilemma: When science seems to contradict the Bible, which do you choose? Does faith mean shutting off your brain? Or do you hang on to intellectual integrity and let go of your commitment to Scripture as God's word? How we choose to navigate this issue will have a ripple effect on how we interpret all the rest of Scripture.

We're not even past the first verse and already we're tripping! But we may be tripping unnecessarily. Maybe the controversy is a misguided one. Maybe there's a third option that doesn't require us to choose between science and the Bible.

Imagine for a minute that you went to see a new play up in Seattle. Traffic was really bad on the freeway, so you got there late. You slip into your seat, tap the shoulder of the person next to you and ask, “How did it start?”

After they glare at you, you'd expect them to give you some sort of plot rundown. “Well, the prince killed his father, the princess was kidnapped by a dark knight and the peasant boy is now friends with the dragon. Now be quiet.”

But suppose you ask, “How did it start?” and the other person responds by saying, “The set was designed by Maurice Sendak and constructed out of ¼” plywood. For lighting, they're using an Altman followspot with a tungsten-halogen bulb. Do you want to know about the sound system?”

Both answers are right. But they're coming at the question from completely different angles. They're addressing different aspects of how the play started. One gives you more of the technical mechanics while the other gives you plot.

That's really what's happening with the Bible and science. They're addressing different aspects of how life began. Science is concerned with the mechanics of creation and the Bible is concerned with the plot. We try to force them into being the same kinds of answers. When Darwin said the Old Testament gave a false history of the earth, he was assuming that Genesis is attempting to convey natural history in the same way we think about it today. He was viewing it as giving a mechanical description, when that is not the primary purpose of the book. The Bible is speaking a different language than science, focused elsewhere. The Bible's approach to creation is entirely different, and we do it a disservice when we try to turn it into something it isn't. In our zeal to defend the Bible we can easily fight the wrong battles.

In his commentary on Genesis, John Walton says, "Turning Genesis 1 into a scientifically configured account of God making things is like taking your towel into the pool with you so you will have it handy when you want to use it."

It kind of defeats the purpose. The simple fact is, we will never have all the answers about how God brought the world into being. The Bible is not intended to answer all those questions. God warned Job about the dangers of presuming to know too much about the creation process, and I think it's a warning that applies to us as well.

**Job 38:4-7**

*"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone-  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?"*

God's point there is not that he actually stretched a measuring tape across the universe – his point is that creation is his domain, not ours, and we can't act like he's told us everything when he hasn't. Karin's uncle used to say that the Bible is very clear about Jesus and who he is, but as we get further toward either the beginning of time or the end of time, the details are a little blurrier. We need to not get too adamant about things God hasn't chosen to reveal completely.

The Bible speaks on its own terms and needs to be heard on its own terms. We'll explore this idea more as we go, but for now, I just want to affirm that the Bible and science do not need to oppose each other. You don't need to be afraid to embrace both wholeheartedly, because all truth is God's truth.

Let's look at the first five verses as a whole:

*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.*

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he 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.*

If the Bible is not intended to give us all the mechanics, if it speaks a different language than science, our goal should not be to compare the two, but instead to ask, what is the Bible telling us that science cannot? What do we learn in Genesis that you can't discover through an experiment?

The first thing it tells us is about **God's relationship to the universe**. Perhaps it seems obvious, but let me spell that out. If God created the heavens and the earth, that means that **He existed before creation**. God didn't come into being.

**Psalm 90:2**

*Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

God is the ultimate first source. Our minds can't even begin to comprehend what it means to have a God whose existence always has been. Everything else in life has a start and a finish. But not God. There is not a problem that can outlast him, not a hurt, not a threat, not an enemy, not a care. God is from everlasting to everlasting.

The second point the Bible makes about God's relationship to the universe is that **he is separate from creation**. Let's say I build a model train. The track I lay out is where the train has to go. It's the only way the train will work. The train is bound by the track. But I'm not. I can rearrange the track. I can change the train. I have a freedom to do what I want, because I'm not part of what I made.

God has a freedom to interact with the universe as he sees fit. He can use the tracks, or natural laws, that he has put in place, but he also can intervene and work independently of those tracks. Since we're part of creation, we tend to imagine God in restricted terms, operating the same way we do. That's why the Old Testament had such a ban on the Israelites creating any kind of image of God, because as people, we quickly fashion God after ourselves and reduce him to something created rather than the Creator. If he made everything, he is outside of it.

A third aspect of God's relationship to the universe is that **he claims creation**. It's all his.

**Psalm 24:1-2**

*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;*

*for he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the waters.*

For the Israelites, this was a reminder of God's status compared to the gods of other religions around them. You couldn't get more in charge than being the one who made everything. That gave God certain rights to do with creation as we saw fit.

Psalm 24 also says that all who live in the world are his. That calls for a more personal acknowledgment that we're not even really in charge of our own lives. I saw an interview this week with an actor who very strongly believed he was in complete control of his own destiny. He had come from a rough background and attributed all his success to his own determination. When the interviewer suggested he had somehow been "selected" or "chosen" to escape the projects, the actor bristled and corrected him saying, "I wasn't selected. I did this myself."

I have no doubt he has worked very hard to get where he is. But no one achieves anything unless God allows it.

#### **Proverbs 19:21**

*You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.*

To call him "Creator" is to acknowledge his place as the rightful one in charge of it all.

A final idea we can gather about God's relationship to the universe in this passage is that **He has a purpose for creation.** You don't intentionally make something for no reason at all. I might make a paper football because I'm bored. If you make dinner, it's because you're hungry. If you write a song or paint a picture, it's because you want to express yourself. We don't go to the bother of making something for no reason at all.

God is no different in that regard. If he created us, it's because he had a purpose in mind. That fills the universe with meaning and possibility. If we had no Creator, then we're simply the product of random chance.

Interestingly enough, although the majority of scientists have no use for the Genesis story, more and more scientific discovery is highlighting the sophisticated design built into the universe that points toward an intelligent source with a plan behind it all.

Antony Flew, one of the most influential atheists of our time, changed his mind in 2004, and came to believe there is a God. He always said he would follow where the evidence lead, and recent work in DNA and cosmology convinced him that there had to be someone designing it all.

#### **Revelation 4:11**

*Yes, our God! Take the glory! the honor! the power!  
You created it all; It was created because you wanted it.*

God made you because he wanted to. He made you because he has a purpose for you to fulfill. You are not here accidentally. God doesn't create without having an intentional plan in mind. You are alive because of his will and you have worth because he has claimed you. What an awesome thing to have a God who is our Creator.

All those thoughts are bound up in the notion that God created the heavens and the earth. The description of that earth initially is not all that appealing. It was formless. It was empty. And it was dark. This is a description of pre-creation. It's a world waiting for God to act. It's the very starting point where he is about to begin his work.

And it's here in these verses where we begin to see not HOW God made the world, but WHY. That's the beauty of Genesis – letting us see more of the mind of God. His activity from the beginning carries right through to today. And in these short verses, we can see him working on three levels that characterize his heart.

**First, God takes us from dysfunction to function.**

The earth was formless. It was chaotic. It had no shape to it, no ability to function in any way. Out of that, God brought order and an ability to be productive. The world went from being a soupy mess to being a place that could sustain life.

It's unfortunate that we think of Genesis as the "creation" story, because really, God continues to create right down to today. What he did back then was not a one time event – it's an ongoing sign of who he is and what he always does. Chaos is still trying to take over, in marriages, in nations, in poverty, in the soupy messes we find ourselves. Yet God is still in the business of taking us out of that dysfunction and bringing us to a place of order and shape where we can function and sustain life.

That's the Christian story in a nutshell isn't it? Being picked up out of the miry clay and set firmly on a rock. From God's perspective, chaos is not where things end, it's where they begin, and if you are feeling like you are drowning in the soup, know that when you cry out to God, he is not going to let you go down for the count. His heart is for bringing function out of dysfunction. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

**1 Corinthians 14:33**

*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

He wants to see order and peace in your life. He forms and shapes where there is no form.

Genesis tells us that not only was the earth without form, it was also empty. There was nothing there. It was a big vacant lot. So what does he do? As he creates birds and fish and land animals, he fills up the place. He wants the sea to teem with fish. He tells the birds to fill the sky and the animals to fill the land.

That's because **God sees our emptiness and he fills it.**

I saw a story on TV about a young man named AJ Reed. He was one of several guests on Oprah who had miraculously survived a suicide attempt. His attitude was so positive I had to find out more about him. After his parents divorced when he was 5 years old, he began to have trouble. By 13, he was in all kinds of hot water in school. He hated his life. He was so depressed and felt life was so worthless that he finally decided to end it. So he took a shotgun and shot himself in the face. It didn't kill him, but it left him disfigured and totally blind.

That would be a recipe for even further depression – the shame, the pain and the loss of eyesight would seem almost unbearable. But somehow in the middle of that, AJ found Jesus. He started going to church with his brother and eventually saw his own need for God. He says, “I prayed and prayed and decided to submit to God because I didn't know what to do with it.”

God filled the emptiness he had been carrying his whole life. Now he tells people, “I don't want my eyesight back. I'd rather live now in Jesus Christ than live how I was. People can look at me without saying a word and say, 'If he can make it, if God is with him, why can't I?'”

That blows me away. What a powerful testimony to how God fills up the deepest voids. He wants the seas of our lives to teem with his glory. He wants the air we breathe to be filled up with songs of his love and mercy. He wants our hearts to no longer be vacant lots but to be a home filled with his Spirit. God takes away our emptiness and replaces it with fullness.

There's one more description about earth at the start. Genesis tells us that darkness was over the surface of the deep. There was a thick blackness covering everything. So what is the first thing God says? “Let there be light.”

**God chases our darkness with his light.** It's almost a literal picture, because darkness seems to run from light. Think about when you strike a match during a blackout. Suddenly the darkness retreats. Light a few candles and it backs off even more.

We could spend an entire sermon on what light does for us. In creation, light is what allows life and growth. It takes away fear of the unknown. It helps us see our way and not stumble. And it gives us a clear contrast to darkness, putting a choice before us we never had before.

Scientists have had difficulty defining exactly what light is. Is it a wave? Is it matter? Probably the best way to characterize it is that it is energized atoms. Think of a glowing piece of wood in a fire. The wood of the fire has been energized by heat, and as the molecules start bouncing off each other, they begin to glow.

I like the thought of light being God's energy in our lives. Sometimes he brings that through a little heat. We begin to see more clearly in a crisis.

I think it's fascinating how the Bible has God creating light by his speech. His words translate into energy that illuminates the universe. As we're looking for light in our own lives, it's still his word that we go to.

**Psalm 119:105**

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*

God speaks to us, and his words become energy that bring clarity and insight. Sometimes that word is white hot, and it exposes things in us we'd rather not see. Other times it's a huge comfort as it breaks up the shadows. Either way, we need it desperately.

Some of you are waiting for that word right now. You're sitting in the dark, looking for a light switch somewhere. I encourage you to reach out for God's word. It's got a power in it like nothing else to illuminate and make the darkness flee away.

In a few minutes, we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together again, and I was struck this week by how much Jesus personifies these characteristics of God that we see in Genesis. He said "I am the Way. No one comes to the Father except by me." Where we couldn't function and were in chaos, he gave us a path out.

He also said, "I am the Bread of Life." When we're feeling hungry and empty spiritually, he fills us up. And then he said, "I am the Light of the World." He himself is that energy of God, scattering the clouds and piercing the darkness.

God is not only the God of creation. He's the God of new creation. And in Jesus, he offers us the hope of a fresh start and the power to bring something out of nothing.

What are you most needing from Jesus today? Do you need him to make a way, to bring function out of dysfunction? Maybe life has drained you dry and you're holding an empty plate up to him. Are you needing that bread of life? Or maybe you're sitting in a corner of scary darkness and what you really need is for the light of the world to shine on you.

Some of you may be in that place where the idea of God as creator has been a trouble spot for your intellect. It doesn't need to be. Maybe what you most need from God right now is his help in rethinking how science and Scripture relate to each other. You want to learn the language of the Bible and discover how faith and reason can coexist.

Whatever you're needing most as you come to communion, ask the Lord for that one thing. He'll meet you as your Creator, and he's ready to do a new work of creation in you right now.