

# Introducing. . . God

## GENESIS 1:1

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips  
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 1, 2015

---

In the beginning, God. . . (Gen. 1:1).

**D**uring the years 1642-1647, a group of leading theologians (known as “divines”) met in Westminster Abbey to devise a doctrinal statement for the churches in England. The result was the Westminster Confession of Faith, with its Shorter and Larger Catechisms. The character of the Westminster Assembly is indicated by how they approached the second question of their Shorter Catechism, which asked, “What is God?” Historian William Hetherington relates that “each man felt the unapproachable sublimity of the divine idea suggested by these words. . . All shrunk from the too sacred task in awestruck, reverential fear.”<sup>1</sup> The suggestion was made to show humility to God by having the youngest member present to offer his view first. This younger minister sought to decline, but when he was pressed he asked permission to pray aloud. Hetherington reports: “Then in slow and solemn accents he thus began his prayer: ‘O God, thou art a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in thy being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.’ When he ceased, the first sentence of his prayer was immediately written by one of the brethren, read, and adopted, as the most perfect answer that could be conceived, -as, indeed, in a very sacred sense, God’s own answer.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1878), 369.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 369-70. Hetherington suggests that the young minister was George Gillespie, but records indicate that Gillespie had departed from the Assembly before this question was taken up.

## ON KNOWING GOD

This vignette illustrates two vital points to be made about the knowledge of God. The first point is that knowing God is the highest endeavor of mankind. We can see this when we open our Bible and turn to its first words: “In the beginning, God.” Set before us is the great subject of the entire Bible and all of life. Jesus stated this point in his great High Priestly Prayer: “this eternal life, that they may know you the only true God” (Jn. 17:1). When the Scriptures take us back to the beginning we find that God is there. In the first thing that happens in all of history, God is the actor; in the sentence of Genesis 1:1, God is the subject who goes with the first verb, telling us that he “created.”

Throughout history, faithful church leaders have emphasized the priority of theology, that is, of the study of God. For instance, in 1854, Charles Spurgeon began his historic 38-year pulpit ministry at the New Park Street Chapel in London, which produced 63 volumes of printed sermons. In the very first sermon, the 19 year-old Spurgeon began by declaring the central importance of knowing God:

The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father. There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. . . . But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. . . . Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.<sup>3</sup>

It is little wonder that, springing from these opening words, Spurgeon’s ministry would be so remarkably blessed by God’s power.

While Spurgeon points out the value of studying God, theologian J. I. Packer notes the peril to those who neglect to know God:

The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, . . . Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold,

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit*, 6 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 1:1-2.

as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to noting the importance of knowing God, the Westminster divines made a second vital point. As they turned to God in prayer, they also noted that God himself is the only true source of the knowledge of himself. The chief reason for the Bible's existence is God's own revelation of his being, person, will, and works. Therefore, whenever we study the Bible, whether in the church, in a small group, or privately, the one question we must always ask is, "What does this teaching tell me about God?" As we begin to study the book of Genesis, it is therefore most fitting for us to ask this question about Genesis 1:1.

## GOD TRANSCENDENT

When we begin thinking about God, our first thought should concern the infinite distance between the Creator and the creation. We refer to this as the *transcendence* of God. People sometimes refer to God as the *Supreme Being*, which is certainly is. Compared to all other beings of every kind, God is categorically and infinitely above them all.

God is transcendent over everything else in terms of his *nature*. The Song of Moses asked, "Who is like you, O Lord... ? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). The point is that there is nothing to which we may suitably compare God, and for this reason theology often relies on negative statements. Unable to declare adequately what God *is*, we resort to stating what he *is not*: God is infinite, not finite; independent, not dependent; immutable, not capable of change. The reason for this transcendence of nature is evident in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God." God existed prior to and wholly apart from his creation, so therefore nothing in the creation can encompass who and what he is.

John Calvin devoted the first book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to the knowledge of God, pointing out that while we cannot know God perfectly we can know true things about what he is like by

---

<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 14-15.

studying the creation. And yet the first thing for us to learn about God is that for all that he reveals, “His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought.”<sup>5</sup> Thus it is that we use a variety of terms to express God’s surpassing nature, calling him sublime and majestic. Paul extols God as him “who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16).

God is not only transcendent in nature but also in time. Genesis 1:1 declares that in the beginning God already was, which presents him as an *eternal* being. Peter Lewis writes: “Before there was matter, time and space there was God: God who has no succession of moments in his own Being, God who alone is infinite and eternal, the uncreated Creator, unique in his eternity and all-sufficient in the infinite resources of his Being, the fullness of light, love, joy and meaning: ‘From everlasting to everlasting you are God’ (Ps. 90:2).”<sup>6</sup> Contemplating such a God, believers find awe in worship and comfort in faith. Thus it was that Abraham, in the midst of his otherwise perplexing journeys, “called. . . on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God” (Gen. 21:33).

## GOD IMMINENT AND PERSONAL

Genesis 1:1 not only pulls our thoughts infinitely far away in contemplating God’s transcendence, but also draws our hearts near to a personal God who is also imminent. The very fact that “[i]n the beginning, God created,” indicates that he wills to be known and possess a relationship with those outside of himself. The reason for this is that God is *personal* as well as transcendent. Being personal, God is known not merely in terms of impersonal characteristics, the way an object is measured, but in personal attributes.

In opposing the knowledge of God, unbelieving thinkers labor to support the idea of an impersonal original for all things, such as the Big Bang Theory. The reason for this quest is that a personal Creator implies that there is a divine will and purpose. We must relate to the God of the Bible on personal terms, and since he is our Creator this

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Message of the Living God*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 28.

requires worship, submission, and obedience – the very things our rebellious world desires to avoid. Paul perfectly anticipated this situation in Romans 1:21, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” A personal God is honored and thanked for the great and good things he has provided, and this precludes us from acting as our own gods. Denying God’s personal existence, Paul adds, mankind “became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

The very fact of *creation* indicates a *personal* Creator, with will and intelligence. God is not a mere force, mindlessly emanating from his being. This truth is being powerfully shown by scientists involved in what is called “Intelligent Design” theory. These scientists are pointing out that nature involves complex creations, such as the human eye, that show an unquestioned design that could not be random products of evolution. In making this point, Intelligent Design theorists today are echoing the reasoning of ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, as well as the medieval scholars who laid the foundations of modern science. Isaac Newton, for instance, stated: “This most elegant system of the sun, planets, and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Genesis 1 shows God acting in a conscious manner according to a careful plan. Francis Schaeffer points out that everything that we know about creation points us exclusively towards a personal Creator:

scientific study demonstrates that the universe has an express form. One can go from particulars to a greater unity, from the lesser laws to more and more general laws or super-laws. In other words, as I look at the Being which is the external universe, it is obviously not just a handful of pebbles thrown out there. What is there has form. If we assert the existence of the impersonal as the beginning of the universe, we simply have no explanation for this kind of situation.<sup>8</sup>

Since the impersonal cannot convey personhood, the greatest proof of God’s personal nature is our self-awareness as persons. We have thoughts, feelings, and will, and all of these are possible only because they are also true of the Creator. The denial of this is the

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Wentzel Van Huyssteen, ed., *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 621.

<sup>8</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, in *Collected Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 2:11.

depersonalizing not only of God but also of ourselves. Schaeffer notes: “The assumption of a impersonal beginning cannot adequately explain the personal beings we see around us; and when men try to explain man on the basis of an original impersonal, man soon disappears.”<sup>9</sup>

In reality, since we are personal in our very nature, our deepest needs and longings can only be met by knowing the personal God who created all things. It is only a relational God who can guide us in pursuing loving human relationships, building just societies, and flowering a culture of beauty and honor. Once God the person is abandoned, all basis for love, justice, and beauty are gone.

The Bible teaches that God exists in a unique form of personhood known as *trinity*: a single divine being who exists eternally in a perfect, harmonious community of persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This means that within God himself are things like love, fellowship, acceptance, and communication. These things happen to be the key to our own fulfillment as persons. God made mankind for relationships not only with one another but with himself. It is as trinity that God fulfills this purpose. God the Creator made us with his own hands for a face-to-face personal relationship: “the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, became incarnate we might see what God is like, taking up our own nature while remaining fully God. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9), Jesus said. It is then because of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence that “man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7) and that we may be illuminated inwardly for a spiritual relationship with God. Putting together the contributions of the entire Trinity, Paul thus speaks of the personal relationship into which we are called through faith in the triune God of the Bible: “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

---

<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer, *Collected Works*, 2:11.

If you are hearing this then you are God's created person. He desires that you would enter into a personal, saving relationship with him through his Incarnate Son, by the power of his Holy Spirit, so that through faith the Creator would become your Father in heaven.

## GOD ALMIGHTY

A third characteristic of the God revealed in Genesis 1:1 is seen in His ability to create all things out of nothing. God is, therefore, *omnipotent*. He is the Lord *Almighty*. These words mean that God possess infinite power to do whatsoever he pleases. As the creation story unfolds, we find God's power glorified in both the difficulty and scale of what he accomplishes and in the ease with which he does it, namely, by means of his mere word. The psalmist marvels: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:6, 9).

God's power, like himself, is *infinite*. There is literally nothing that he desires to do that he is not able to do. This omnipotent is necessary to his divine nature. A. W. Pink writes: "He who cannot do what he will and perform all his pleasure cannot be God. As God hath a will to resolve what He deems good, so has He power to execute his will."<sup>10</sup>

Christians rely utterly on the infinite power of God the Creator to fulfill all that he has promised and achieve everything according to his Word. This attribute was on the mind of Jerusalem's King Jehoshaphat when he gathered the entire Israelite nation to pray for God's help when a horde of invaders appeared out of the East: "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you" (2 Chron. 20:6). God responded to that prayer of faith by wiping out the entire enemy army by his own might alone.

Without God's infinite power, none of his other attributes could succeed in expression. Stephen Charnock writes:

---

<sup>10</sup> A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 46.

How vain would be the eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. Without power His mercy would be but feeble pity, His promises an empty sound, His threatenings a mere scarecrow. God's power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible: it can neither be checked, restrained, nor frustrated by the creature.<sup>11</sup>

No wonder, then, that Christians praise God especially for his power,. I mentioned earlier the Song of Moses after Israel passed through the Red Sea, in which they praised God's transcendence as God. Israel also praised God for his almighty power: "The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. . . . Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy" (Ex. 15:2, 6).

God's power is not only infinite, but it is *sovereign*. This means that God's eternal will, empowered by his infinite might, is the ultimate cause and reason for everything that is. People sometimes recoil against the idea of God being absolutely sovereign over all things. But consider the God of Genesis 1:1, who made all things according to his own will and infinite power. A. W. Tozer writes: "Sovereignty and omnipotence must go together. One cannot exist without the other. To reign, God must have power, and to reign sovereignly, He must have all power. And that is what *omnipotent* means, having all power."<sup>12</sup>

The greatest biblical illustration of God's sovereignty is Paul's description of God as the potter and the individual person as his clay: "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (Rom. 9:21). Paul used this illustration to reinforce his teaching of God's predestinating will. Many people reject the idea that we are but clay in the hands of the divine Potter. But Genesis 1 declares this to be exactly the case, so that the opening verse of the Bible is one of the strongest declaration of God's absolute sovereignty: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

Moreover, God's manner of wielding power is *creative*. God's will and desire does not have the effect of destruction, but rather God builds

---

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Charnock, cited in Pink, *Attributes*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961, reprint 1992), 101.



up and he creates in marvelous wonder. William Still writes: “His nature is to create and therefore it is impossible to come into contact with him and not encounter his creative activity. This gives scope for the widest exercise of our creative powers of thought, imagination and inspiration, though always strictly within the canons of truth.”<sup>13</sup> In his creative wisdom, God has power not only to move great objects but to design and fashion stars, planets, puppies, flowers, waterfalls, and the human eye. Out of his creative personality, God had power to create the spark of romance between a boy and a girl, the surge of nobility within the human heart, and the compassionate desire to sacrifice for others in need. These are all creations of God. In coming to know God better and in glorifying him, it is therefore only natural for Christians to be lively and creative people who use God’s gifts in line with the precepts he has provided. Still comments: “Therefore, a Christian ought never to be dull nor the Christian life ever drab.”<sup>14</sup> Christians honor God by employing the powerful creative gifts that he has given, through scientific study, artistic expression, and the exploration of the human condition through literature.

We now live in a time when a usurper and destroyer lurks in God’s good creation. The Devil has no creative power of his own; his realm is purely that of corruption and destruction. Whereas God made us to make beautiful music, uplifting art works, and faithful explorations of science, the Devil seeks to use these very creative means so as to subvert God’s design and rebel against God’s rule. Thus in deliberate opposition to God, artists today cultivate the ugly and offensive, scientists proceed from irrational presuppositions, and music is used to degrade our minds and hearts into patterns of sin. How great, therefore, is the need for Christian art, creativity, and science, not distinct in kind from our unbelieving counterparts but different in aim and approach, honoring God by pursuing, as Paul urged, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, [and] whatever is commendable” (Phil. 4:8).

Finally, the Bible goes on to show that God’s power is *redemptive*. God glorifies his power in the highest extent not in the raw scope of

---

<sup>13</sup> William Still, *Theological Studies in Genesis and Romans*, (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

creation and its creative genius but in his saving power to overthrow sin in the lives of those who he would save. God's omnipotence declares him able to do all things according to his will. But what if God's will is to love and restore rebellious and guilty sinners to himself, while still honoring his perfect justice? Is God able to do that? The answer is that God's power to overcome sin is glorified in the marvel of redemption through Jesus Christ.

In an achievement that boggles our minds far more than the greatest and most distant galactic star cluster, God sent his Son to become man, in order to pay the penalty of our sin on the cross. Paul writes: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). God's saving power is seen in Paul's remarkable formula: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20). Moreover, God has the power through the Holy Spirit to change the hardened heart (Eze. 36:26), giving life to the spirit that was dead in sin and unbelief, so that we believe and enter into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. You will experience the power of the Creator in his highest work, *redemption*, if through his Spirit you believe his gospel message and gain the forgiveness of your sins through faith in Jesus Christ.

## A GOD TO BE ADORED AND PRAISED

Already we have learned so much about God in just the Bible's first **A**verse. He is transcendent, personal, and almighty. Imagine how much we will learn about God if we keep reading his Word from beginning to end! In Genesis, we will explore many other attributes of God as he moves forward from creation to life in Eden, the Fall of Adam, and the covenant of grace through Abraham. In these, God will be seen as good, just, wise, loving and full of grace. But already in Genesis 1:1, we are able to agree with Paul's assessment in Romans 1:19:20, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. . . , ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."

Having met God on the doorstep of the biblical revelation in Genesis 1:1, how should his creatures respond to these things? Bruce Milne writes: "Clearly they call for a deep self-abasement of ourselves before

his awesome majesty, and highlight our obligation to offer him an adoring, submissive worship. Truly, ‘Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise’ (Ps. 96:4).”<sup>15</sup> In one of our beloved hymns, Christians since of the praise to God for his creation:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made,

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power thro’ought the universe displayed

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:

How great thou art, how great thou art.<sup>16</sup>

When we get to the end of the Bible, we find that this impulse to worship God as Creator is fulfilled by the heavenly beings in glory: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11). This makes the point that our calling to worship God is grounded in the fact of God as our Creator. For while Christians have *abundant* reasons to praise God for our redemption, everyone has *every* reason to glorify God as our Maker. Pink exclaims: “The wondrous and infinite perfections of such a Being call for fervent worship. If men of might and renown claim the admiration of the world, how much more should the power of the Almighty fill us with wonderment and homage.”<sup>17</sup>

Just as the Bible concludes with praise to God, our Creator and Redeemer, so also will history consummate in worship:

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home,  
what joy shall fill my heart!

Then I shall bow in humble adoration, and there proclaim, my God, how great thou art.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:

How great thou art, how great thou art.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven and Hell*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart K. Hine, “How Great Thou Art,” 1949.

<sup>17</sup> Pink, *Attributes of God*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Hine, “How Great Thou Art.”