

175 and Counting: What's at Stake in the Beginning?

Genesis 1:1

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 1. We're going to give our attention today to one particular verse and the truths that we learn from it. Genesis 1:1. It provides such an important foundation for the whole of the Christian faith. And one of the reasons we're going to do that today is to understand what is at stake in what Christians believe about the beginning, what is at stake in what the Bible asserts about creation. And there is indeed much at stake.

You may have been following the writings of the new atheists. Do you know who I'm talking about? The four most prominent new atheists' authors are Richard Dawkins, who is a professor at Oxford University at the center for the study of public Christianity in public science; it's the center for the study of public science. He worked at the University of California of Berkley and then went back to Oxford. Sam Harris is another of the new atheists who wrote a book called *The End of Faith*; studied at Stanford University, argues that religion is inherently evil and that if we are going to survive as a species and thrive in the years to come we are going to have to jettison all religious belief which is the root of all evil in humanity. All wars and conflicts can be traced to religion. Then there's Daniel Dennett, a very famous philosopher of the mind who teaches at Tufts University, the center for cognitive science and has made arguments for religious consciousness and for the existence of religion itself from an evolutionary, atheist standpoint. And then most popularly, perhaps, Christopher Hitchens who wrote a book called *God Is Not Great* in the wake of the attacks upon the United States in September the eleventh of two-thousand one.

And as you read these new atheists, one argument that you encounter in their writings is that the Christian account of creation is in irreconcilable conflict with science and reality. That is, that you cannot be a Christian and affirm reality as we have come to know it through the study of science and therefore science itself has undermined the truth claims of Christianity. And many young Christians have encountered this very kind of attention as they've entered into junior high school and high school and college and graduate school and studied in the various hard science, sciences, and come into intellectual and spiritual and theological tension while they try and put two pictures together. On the one hand there is a picture of

the universe and its origins and of humanity and our origins, which they are learning from a scientific worldview. And on the other hand there is a picture of the universe and its origins and of humanity and our origins, which they have learned in Sunday School and in Vacation Bible School and from their Bibles and from their Catechisms and they begin to try to put those two things together and they experience enormous intellectual and spiritual and theological tension. And they wonder whether Christianity is viable in light of the truth claims of science. So there is a lot at stake in the beginning and we want to consider that today.

There've been various reactions to this. Some Christians have argued that what we need to do is we need to accommodate Christian belief to science. If science has proven that the Bible's view of human origins is wrong then we need to just acknowledge that the Bible's view is wrong and go on being Christians. Or, if science has called into question Genesis 1's claims about God creating the heavens and the earth and in fact science has shown that that is not the case, we need to just jettison that part of the Bible and go on being Christians. It's an accommodation of strategy. And one thing that I want to say loud and clear is that that does not work. The argument has been made repeatedly over the last two centuries that we can acknowledge that the Bible is wrong in matters of history and science and even some aspects of morality and still the kernel, the essence, the seed of faith and of Christianity can continue on. We can continue to embrace Christianity and be Christians and followers of God in the world even though the Bible is wrong in these areas. Everywhere that has been done, everywhere that has been done, without exception, Christianity is dying. There have been whole hosts of denominations that have followed that strategy and they are either already in the graveyard of history or they are headed there rapidly. So that's one strategy — an accommodationist strategy.

The other strategy of course has been to jettison Christianity. Science has proven Christianity to be wrong here and therefore Christianity must be rejected. And we see this happening amongst the younger generation in numbers that are beyond anything that we've ever seen before. This is a very significant struggle in our culture today. But what I want to say is that the Bible, the Word of God, God's truth claims in the Scriptures, actually holds up very well, even in this modern world where, thank God we know so much and we've learned so much from the pursuit of the various sciences. And in fact, because we believe, as believers, that God's truth coheres with reality, we do not in fact have to believe against reality in order to affirm the Bible. And so I want to look at this issue with you together today and let's pray before we do.

Heavenly Father, as we read Your Word we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things in it and not only to behold those things but to understand those things and their significance in such a way that we firmly believe them, that we firmly believe and trust You, and that we can articulate our belief in a respectful and loving yet clear and firm way in a culture which has, in its own mind, discarded the foundational beliefs of Christianity in the dustbin of

history. We want to give an answer according to Your Word for the hope that is in us. So help us to be able to do that, we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

Let's hear the Word of God now in Genesis 1 verse 1:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Now I want to suggest to you today that there are five things that we can learn about creation from that one verse alone. We learn about the source of creation in that verse, we learn about the scope of creation in that verse, we learn about the sequence of creation in that verse, we learn about the story of creation in that verse, and from the exposition of that verse in the New Testament, we learn about the Savior of creation. And so I want to look at those five things with you very briefly this morning - the source of creation, the scope of creation, the sequence of creation, the story of creation, and the Savior of Creation.

THE SOURCE OF CREATION

The first thing that we see as we look at Genesis 1:1 is the source, the author, the cause of creation. How does Moses put it? “In the beginning, God created...” God is the source of everything else. This was a radical idea in the ancient Near Eastern world. In the ancient Near Eastern world, very often the world is viewed either as something that is co-eternal with the gods or it is the product in some way of the conflict amongst the gods. But Moses, in Genesis 1:1 and in the rest of the chapter, speaks of a God who is distinct from the world. He is not intermingled with the world. He doesn't articulate some sort of a pantheism or a “panentheism” in which God is in and part of the world. God is distinct from the world and He brings it into being by speaking it into being. He is the source of everything there is. This was a dramatic statement for Moses. Think of this — the children of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. The chief god worshiped by the Egyptians was Re, the sun god. In this passage later, Moses will say that the God of Israel who made the world didn't even get around to making the sun until the fourth day, showing the sovereignty of the one, true Creator God of Israel over all of the false gods.

In fact, it's interesting, Moses only speaks of one God in Genesis 1 and everywhere else in the book of Genesis, whereas, if you look at all of the other creation stories from the ancient Near Eastern world, they speak of multiple gods. Do you know where the only place that other gods are mentioned in the book of Genesis? They're mentioned in the story of Jacob and Laban because, you remember, Laban had household idols, gods, called terraphins, sprinkled throughout his house, and his daughter stole one of them as Jacob was

departing from this uncle and father-in-law, Laban. And he had to go pursue her. That's the only other place other gods are mentioned in Genesis. Moses is making it clear that there is one God and He brought the world into being. And so Genesis 1:1 speaks of the source of creation. It is the one God; He spoke the world into being.

THE SCOPE OF CREATION

But Genesis 1:1 also speaks of the scope of creation; not only the source of creation but the scope of creation. What did God create? We read in Genesis 1:1, "He created the heavens and the earth." Now that's a Hebrew way of saying He made everything. "The heavens and the earth" is a phrase that is designed to encompass absolutely everything. He made this, He made everything in it here, and He made everything up there. In the upper world and in our world God is the Creator of absolutely everything. This is an assertion of the comprehensiveness of the creation. And notice how it's picked up in the New Testament. If you turn in your Bibles with me to John chapter 1 verse 3 you will read these words. John chapter 1 verse 3: "Without Him was not anything made that was made." In other words, there's nothing that exists that He didn't make. And Paul, not just John, the disciple who laid his head on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper who says this, Paul in Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 and 16 says that God made everything visible and invisible. In other words, again, it's another way of saying that God comprehensively created everything. So here at the outset of Christian revelation is an assertion that God is the source of everything and He made absolutely everything. There's nothing in the universe that is co-eternal with Him. He alone is eternal.

THE SEQUENCE OF CREATION

So there is the source of creation and there is the scope of creation, but we also learn in this verse the sequence of creation. Look at it again where we read, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Now Hebrew scholars argue over what the Hebrew word, "bara," means. Does it mean, "to create out of nothing"? Well, I have an opinion on that but it doesn't matter. All you need is your English Bible to understand this argument. Whatever that verb specifically means, it is obvious from the context the sequence of creation. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Now in that sentence, what is Moses saying? Who came first? Everything or God? And Moses' answer is very clear: God, then everything. There is a sequence to creation. Creation does not exist and then God evolve from it or within it, but God creates and brings everything else into being. And so this little verse speaks to the source of creation, it speaks to the scope of creation, and it speaks to the sequence of creation.

Now, what is the significance of this? Understand that it is the Bible's doctrine of

creation which causes us as God's creatures to owe allegiance to Him. If He made us, we owe Him worship. If He made us, we belong to Him. One of the things that we say from the Scriptures, often in the call to worship, comes from the psalm where we say, "It is He who has made us and not we ourselves." Or perhaps it's to be translated, "it is He who has made us and we are His." It is God's creation that lays a claim on all humans that have ever lived to worship Him. Take away God's creation and there is no basis for our loyalty and worship of Him. This is a foundational truth which you cannot take away.

THE STORY OF CREATION

And that we see more clearly when we see our fourth "s" because this verse not only speaks of the source of creation and the scope of creation and the sequence of creation, it speaks of the story of creation. The Bible story is over God's creation, our fall, His redemption, and consummation — creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. That is the four-fold rhythm of the story that the Bible tells. God created us and everything else. We rebelled against Him the Garden and fell into sin. In His kindness He sets forth at the very dawn of human history a plan of redemption which culminated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ who died in our place to save us from our sin and one day He will bring about a glorious consummation in which He ends sin and death in the human experience and we reign with Him forever in the new heavens and the new earth. Creation, fall, redemption, consummation.

The Christian story does not make sense if you take creation out of that. The Christian story does not make sense if you take the Fall out of that, and yet we hear very often because science now knows, we are assured, science now knows how this world came into being, therefore God is no longer necessary. And therefore, you must either reject Christianity or you must modify Christianity to give a new meta-narrative, a new grand story that no longer includes the claims that God is Creator. But here's the problem: the rest of the Christian story does not make sense unless God is the Creator. It doesn't work that way. You must either embrace that or reject that. But has science, in fact, brought those things into a position where no intelligent person can any longer embrace the Bible's truth claims? Absolutely not. In fact, I would argue to you, as much as I respect and appreciate and praise the things that we have learned from modern science, modern science is actually not competent to ask the question of ultimate origins.

Why do I say that? Because there are some questions that have to do with the origins of the universe and with the origins of humanity that the scientific method cannot answer. For instance, why is there something and not nothing? The scientific method can't answer that question. You've got to fall back on some philosophy and on some theology and Christians who are not experts in quantum mechanics and quarks can talk about that issue just as competently and

sometimes more so than scientists who are brilliant in their understanding of cosmology and astrophysics and quantum mechanics and biology and many more. Why is there something and not nothing? That question requires more than the scientific method to answer it.

Or, people will say, “We no longer can believe that the human race descended from an original Adam and an original Eve because the study that we have done in the human genome has led us to understand that our DNA could not have come from simply an original pair. Well I must tell you, as much as I'm appreciative of the human genome project and the things that are coming out of the study of DNA, I just don't know how science can make a competent claim on that particular point. It strikes me as akin to the question, “Did Adam have a belly button?” because when Christians make claims about creation we clearly are acknowledging the miraculous nature of creation and we have never claimed that we had to be able to explain a miracle in order to believe it. In fact, the very foundation of our faith is a resurrection of a dead man and I don't see scientists lining up, “scientists in favor of resurrection” out there.

And yet we believe that truth not only because of its attestation in history, not only because of its attestation in Scripture, but because we believe that we live in a supernatural world, that this whole world does not operate according to mechanistic principles. And so the beliefs that we are descended from a miraculously created Adam and Eve is not out of accord with the rest of what we embrace about reality. It does not cause us to reject reality. Scientists can happily go on studying the human genome and they can happily go on studying the Big Bang because Christians have always believed, and you can check me out on this — if you turn in your hymnal to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the third chapter on the decrees, Christians have always believed that God, who is the first cause of everything, uses second causes to bring things into being. And you saying that you understand how something happens, proves that God didn't do it, does not make sense within a Christian framework.

Let me do a little thought experiment with you. Let's say that we could go with Dr. Who and transport ourselves back into the 16th century onto a south sea island and take with us a brand new Lexus and leave it there on the beach and then disappear. And let's say for four hundred years those south sea islanders studied that Lexus and somewhere around the year 2004 after studying that Lexus for four hundred years they figured out how it worked. They figured out how the engine worked; they figured out how the steering worked. They'd studied it for four hundred years. If they said to you, “We now know how the car works therefore there is no need for someone to have created this car,” would that have made sense? Not at all.

Knowing how something works doesn't mean that there is not a designer. And so the argument that we understand how something works, whether it's a claim that we know how the world came into being, doesn't mean that there is not an

intelligent designer behind the world which we are now claiming to understand how it works. And so the claims I am arguing that are often made against Christianity as to creation, as to the origins of the universe, as to the origins of humanity, very often are beyond what the scientific method can actually afford us, can actually give us. The scientific method is a wonderful thing. I'm so thankful for the medical doctors in our congregation who use the scientific method regularly. But the scientific method cannot answer every question like, "How do you know that your wife loves you?" There's not a scientific experiment that can yield that result. It is a much more complex issue than that and it's answered in a different way.

There are different ways that we know things, and by the way, there are different reasons why we reject things. You know there are a lot of people who say science will lead people to reject Christianity and yet it's had the opposite effect. Richard Dawkins said, "My study of science led me to reject Christianity." Alister McGrath says, "My study of science led me to embrace Christianity." There are different reasons why people reject belief. Henry Schaefer, the Nobel Prize nominated chemist at the University of Georgia, rejected Christianity when he was an undergraduate student but it had absolutely nothing with his study of chemistry or physics or biology or any of the hard sciences. It had to do with the fact that after he went to college his mother and father stopped going to church and one December break when they were home talking about an ethical question, Henry Schaefer said to his father - he had been reared in a nominal Presbyterian home - he said to his father, "Yes, but the Bible says this," about that particular ethical question and his father said, "The Bible is wrong." And he said he realized at that point that his parents had only been taking him to church because they thought that was the right thing to do to rear nice little moral children but they really didn't believe in God and that his father did not accept the authority of the Bible that he thought that the Bible was bunk and that led Henry Schaefer to reject Christianity. But a faithful, Bible-believing Christian shared the Gospel with Henry Schaefer and he embraced Christ for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel. He's still a Nobel nominated chemist and his science did not lead him away from faith, it was actually something else that caused the faith crisis in his life.

THE SAVIOR OF CREATION

So as believers, what I want to say is that science does not pose a threat to the credibility of Christian faith but there's one last thing that I want to say before I go, my fifth "s" - the Savior of creation. We've talked just a little bit about the source of creation, we've talked about the scope of creation, the sequence of creation, the story of creation — creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. One last thing — the Savior of creation. The New Testament makes it clear that it is not just God the Father who brought this world into being. The boys' choir this morning sang, "This Is My Father's World," and that's true and we say that every

time we say the Apostles Creed. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” But you’ll notice one verse down that the Spirit is brooding over the darkened creation and in the New Testament, go back and look at John chapter 1 verse 3 again, in the New Testament we're told that Jesus brought this world into being. In John 1:3 we read, “All things were made through Him” — who is the “Him”? Well, go back one verse. “He was in the beginning with God.” Who was that? Go back a verse. “In the beginning was the Word.” And who is the Word? Go down to verse 14. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” And then of course John identifies the Word made flesh as Jesus.

So what is he saying in John 1:3? “All things were made through Him, the Son of God, “and without Him was not anything made that was made.” That is exactly what Paul says in Colossians 1:15 and 16. It's exactly what the author of Hebrews said in Hebrews 1 verse 2. Jesus created this world. That means if you deny the Bible teaching of creation you are denying the Jesus of the Bible because the Bible says the Son is every bit as much the Creator as the Father and the Spirit. Jesus the Savior is the Savior of creation and He cannot be Savior of all as He is depicted in the New Testament if what the Bible says about God's creation is not true. So there's a great deal at stake in the beginning.

Now there are many folks in our congregation that wrestle with questions like this. It may be studying genetics or DNA. It may be studying physics. It may be studying cosmogony or some other discipline. I would be delighted to talk with you if you're wrestling with something that's bothering you that's undermining your faith or simply something that you want to know how to answer so that you can speak to other people. I would be delighted to talk with you about that and so would many of our other ministers and elders. We have a number of professional scientists that sit on our Session. We would love to talk with you about these things because what we believe about the beginning matters eternally.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for Your time in the Word, the time that You have given us in the Word this morning. Bless it to Your glory and to our everlasting good, in Jesus' name, amen.

Now let's sing of our belief in God's creation of the world in using number 115, “All Creatures of Our God and King.”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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