

# The world we all want

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Please do join with me as I pray. Heavenly Father, you say, let there be light, and there was light.

And so today we thank you for your powerful word that does bring light and life, and we pray that you will enlighten our minds and enliven our hearts, that your word might truly be spirit and life and like honey to us today.

All this we pray for the name and for the glory of your name. Amen. It's Christmas Eve 1968, and the Apollo 8 crew are 68 hours into their mission, orbiting the moon.

NASA has scheduled a live broadcast of this orbit, and an estimated 1 billion people are watching. That's a quarter of all humanity alive at that time. During the fourth orbit, the commander rotates the spacecraft.

And as he does so, this image of the Earth, rising above the lunar horizon, begins to fill the small windows of their spaceship.

[ 1 : 0 7 ] Now, the astronauts had anticipated this moment. They knew a billion people were watching, and so they wanted to make sure they, at the very least, wouldn't say something stupid.

But upon actually seeing the Earth, they were overwhelmed. What words were sufficient to match the majesty of this occasion?

In the end, following the earlier suggestion of a friend, they decided to say this. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

They read the first ten verses of Genesis 1 from the King James Version. Striking, isn't it? Here are three astronauts in outer space, representing the pinnacle of scientific achievement, and yet, as they pondered God's creation, they found themselves in awe, and found that the most appropriate words to express that awe came from an ancient text.

And my hope this morning is that by the time we finish with Genesis 1, we will have the same reaction as the astronauts. We will be in awe and wonder.

[ 2 : 4 4 ] We will fall in worship. Because that is precisely what Genesis 1, verse 1 to 25 is designed to do. It's meant to move us to worship.

But unfortunately, ever since the 19th century, Genesis 1 has not moved us to worship, but to debate. That's because we Christians have become confused about the purpose of Genesis 1.

Thanks to Charles Darwin and the rise of evolutionary theory, many have ended up approaching Genesis 1 as if its sole purpose was simply to tell us about the mechanism by which God created this world, rather than its very nature and meaning.

Many approach Genesis 1 as if it's there only to answer the how question, without touching on the who, the what, and the why question.

But is that the right approach? After all, who was Genesis 1 written to? Answer, Israel.

- [ 4 : 02 ] In particular, Genesis 1 was written for the generation that had left Egypt and were on their way to the promised land. But as they made that journey in the wilderness, they had some questions on their minds and it had nothing to do with evolution.
- For one, they were asking, who is our God, really? After all, the place we just left, Egypt, had plenty of gods.
- The sun god and the river god and so on. And the place we are going to, Canaan, will turn out to have plenty of gods as well.
- So, who is our God? Is he someone we can depend on? Someone we can trust? And they were also asking, what's my place in this world?
- Where have I come from? What's my real identity? After all, some of them have grown up knowing nothing but wilderness wandering. And where is this place?
- [ 5 : 14 ] This promised land God is bringing me to? Is it really that great? After all, we've never seen it. And aren't these questions actually very contemporary?
- Isn't that what we all ask at some point? Who is God? What is he like? Is he dependable? And why am I here on this earth?
- Where am I going? And here is the good news. Moses wrote Genesis 1 and 2 to answer those very questions.
- He wants to reassure his readers by revealing who our God really is and what his design for the world and hence our lives is really like.
- And once we understand this, we can see why treating Genesis 1 as if it's merely about the mechanism by which God created the world is the wrong approach.
- [ 6 : 18 ] It misunderstands the purpose and actually the kind of writing Genesis 1 is. As if Genesis 1 is a modern scientific textbook designed to address modern scientific questions.
- It's not that there is no place for such questions. But if we only ask that, we will misread Genesis 1.
- We will major on the minus. We will miss out on the actual good news of Genesis 1. God wants to communicate to us.
- So let's recalibrate. Let's read Genesis 1 in a way it was meant to be read. Let's look at these 25 verses and as we do so, we will discover three ways it calls on us to respond.
- Firstly, Genesis 1 calls on us to worship our big, big God. We all know how the story starts, don't we?
- [ 7 : 26 ] In the beginning, God. And it's no mere coincidence that the Bible begins with God. God is the first subject, the most important character, and the driving force of this story.
- In fact, by the time we are done with chapter 1, you will have heard God mentioned 35 times and he is going to be there all throughout.
- And by the time we get to the end, in the book of Revelation, there is going to be a new creation, but the same God of Genesis 1 verse 1 will still be there.
- So Genesis 1 makes clear from the outset who is at the center of this universe. It is not us. In the beginning, God.
- And what do we learn about this God? Remember, that's what the Israelites are wondering. Well, Moses makes clear that he is a big, big God.
- [ 8 : 37 ] For if the Bible starts with, in the beginning, God, that means God was already there before the beginning. The Bible simply assumes this.
- It never sees the need to defend the existence of God. And if this universe is a Jenga tower, he is the foundation block.

You just can't get any more foundational than him. Remove him, and everything comes crashing down. In the book of Genesis, every once in a while, the narrative gets interrupted by a genealogy of a key character.

This is the family line of Noah. Read on a bit. This is the family line of Isaac. And so on. But, there is no genealogy of God.

God did not originate from somewhere. He already existed before there was time, before there was matter, before there was space. That is how unlike us, he is.

[ 9 : 52 ] So Genesis 1 begins with the fact that there is an eternal, self-existing God. But of course, I haven't even finished reading verse 1 yet.

It actually says, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. In other words, this eternal God is the singular source of everything that came into being.

Without any pre-existing materials to work with, without consulting architects, planning commissions, or geologists, the God of the Bible spoke, and the universe came into existence.

It's crazy how Genesis 1 verse 3 to 25 is narrated almost casually, isn't it? Anything big you can think of? The moon, the sun, the giant sea creatures, you name it, God made it.

In fact, verse 16 has got to be the most crazily casual line in the Bible. God made the greater light, that's the sun, and the lesser light, that's the moon, and then at the end of the verse, it says, oh, he also made the stars.

[ 11 : 18 ] It's as if God said, oh yeah, by the way, just for fun, since I've already made the sun and the moon, I throw in the stars just as an extra as well. No problem. That's how big God is.

And does not that show how he is fully deserving of our worship? You see, the first sentence of Scripture also shows us something really important we must always keep in mind.

And that is, all of reality is divided into God and everything else. there is a creator and there is creation and there is always a distinction between the two.

God is not just the larger, smarter form of a created human being. If that was so, that would still put him in the creation circle in the diagram on the screen.

But no, he is in a different mode of existence to the rest of us. I think of it this way. Apart from God, we simply cannot exist.

[ 12 : 32 ] But apart from us, God can and does continue to exist. we are creatures wholly dependent on him.

But God is the creator, wholly independent of us. And so whenever we elevate anything in creation, no matter how beautiful and good that thing is, to the level of God himself, we have forgotten Genesis 1, verse 1.

Or whenever we downgrade God such that he becomes more like a human, like when we think of God as someone who needs sacrifices to maintain his status as in some traditional religions, we have forgotten Genesis 1, verse 1.

And all this would have been mind-blowing to the Israelites listening. You see, if we've been Christians for a long time, we might think, ah, this is familiar stuff.

But for the Israelites, this is radical. During their time, they would have heard all sorts of creation stories from all the different nations around them, be they Egyptians or Babylonians or Sumerians.

[ 13 : 58 ] And in those stories, the gods are always more like us. And the heavens and the earth are way more insignificant.

Take the Babylonian epic Enuma Elish, for instance. Now, the basic storyline goes something like this. In the beginning, there were two gods, a male called Apsu and a female called Tiamat.

And they began reproducing, creating another generation of gods. However, there was one gigantic family breakdown, and they all started fighting one another.

One big battle in particular was between great-grandma Tiamat and a young punk god called Madhuk. And eventually, Madhuk won, cut Tiamat's body into half, and one half of the body became the heavens and the skies, whereas the other half of the body became the earth.

In other words, how did creation come to be? By pure accident. It was unintentional.

[ 15 : 14 ] and why did it come about? As a result of bloody conflict between self-centered gods who couldn't care less about the earth.

And you might think, okay, it's just some funny myth. No one believes such things nowadays. But consider how many people today still think of the world as a place where there are competing gods whose attention we need to get.

Apparently in Taiwan, many young educated Taiwanese have increasingly been turning to different folk deities like Masu, the goddess of the sea, to help guide them through life.

And so they put on all these parades and so on to get his attention. Or how many people think of this world as a random, unhappy, accident?

More than we think. Look at the suicide rate. The form might change, but the same stories are still around today.

[ 16 : 27 ] But today Moses is telling us here's the good news. There is only one true God. He has no rivals.

And you know what? he didn't need to create. He's completely happy in himself. But he wants to. And when he does, there is no fighting or frustration involved.

Creation is no accident or an afterthought. Creation comes from a perfectly happy place, so to speak. And this has far reaching implications.

You see, in the end, there are only two possible sets of views about the universe we live in. At his heart, this universe is either personal or impersonal.

In ancient times, the Babylonians and other nations thought of the universe as an unintended consequence of the fight between animal-like gods who can die and decay.

[ 17 : 32 ] In modern times, some scientists suggest that the most fundamental substance in the universe is perhaps string theory or quantum fields or mathematics generated by a big bang.

Now, the Babylonians and the scientists might seem far apart at first glance, but they share this in common. They see the universe as ultimately impersonal.

But in Genesis 1 verse 1, we get something far different. before we get any mention of the universe, we are already introduced to a person.

And this person, God, cannot be broken down into something more fundamentally impersonal, like atoms or molecules.

Therefore, the heart of this universe is personal. personal. What an amazing thought. Do you sometimes feel like you live in an impersonal universe?

[ 18 : 39 ] To the government, you are an IC number. To the inland tax revenue, you are a tax identification number. To Facebook, you are data for their algorithm. But if Genesis 1 verse 1 is true, that means the creation we live in at its heart is personal.

And that means you and I as created beings must mean far more than just numbers or DNA. And if it is personal, it is relational.

Creation becomes a place where relationship with our creator is possible, even desirable. What good meals that is.

But Moses has more good meals to share. He says to Israel, do you realize this personal creator, whom we can be in relationship with, is more powerful than anything else in creation?

if you are not certain, then read verse 3. God said, let there be light. And there was light. Look again at verses 6 and 7 and 9 and many more besides.

[ 20 : 01 ] Do you notice again and again the pattern? It's very simple. God says, animals. And it was so. God says, sea.

And it was so. God this is the big, big God we worship. Sure, nowadays we can say, hey Google, play this song.

Or hey Siri, switch on the torch. And our smart devices also can make it happen. But if you say, hey Google, suspend the laws of gravity, I think you're going to have a big shock when you jump off the balcony.

But that is the kind of power God's word carries. He talks and stuff that doesn't even exist yet pops up. He shapes his world in accordance with his word.

And it always accomplishes what he wants. Whenever I do something simple like try to cook, the dish usually never comes up the way that I imagine it to be.

[ 21 : 11 ] You know, the spaghetti bolognese ends up looking like brown misoie or something. But when God speaks, what appears is exactly what he has in mind.

And that is good news, is it not? Imagine being in the wilderness. Imagine being surrounded by uncertainty, perhaps even enemies as Israel was.

And you ask the question of Psalm 121 verse 1. I lift up my eyes to the mountains on the screen. Where does my help come from?

But as you do so, you lift up your eyes to the mountains, you begin to remember the mountains creator. you look at that majestic mountain and you realize God simply spoke it into being.

And so you can cry out Psalm 121 verse 2. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

[ 22 : 22 ] Have no fear. The God who made this universe is my God and my helper. So worship our big, big God.

And acknowledge not just his power but authority. Did you notice how he names things in this universe? In verse 5, he calls the light day and the darkness night.

Or verse 10, he calls the dry ground land and the gathered waters seas. And that is because the universe belongs to him.

If you started a cafe, you get to call it whatever you want, don't you? You own it. It belongs to you. It's why parents get to name their children and not just any random person on the street.

They belong to them. And God has all the naming rights in the universe because it belongs to him. That's what Genesis 1 is signaling to us.

[ 23 : 33 ] But again, what good news that is, isn't it? The Israelites, they're in the desert. But it's God's desert. It doesn't lie outside his sovereignty.

He's still in charge. And the land God has promised to give to them, God can do that because it's God's land. He is not a scammer promising something that he doesn't have and therefore cannot give.

For this is God's will. He owns it all. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it, Psalm 24, verse 1.

The heavens are yours and yours also the earth. You've founded the world and all that is in it, Psalm 89, verse 11. Your money, it's not really yours.

It's God's money. Your time, it's not really yours. It's God's time. Your children or your parents, even they ultimately don't belong to you.

[ 24 : 42 ] They belong to him. Creation exists for God and his glory. And so Genesis 1 is asking us, will you worship our big, big God with all that belongs to him?

But that is not all. Secondly, Genesis 1 moves us to give thanks for his good, good will. I'll skim through verses 3 to 25 again and marvel how incredible it is, isn't it?

It's a masterpiece. And what a difference it is from verse 2. In Genesis 1 verse 2, we're told the earth was formless and empty.

The Hebrew phrase is *tohu wabohu*. Some of you might remember that being taught in our Good Friday service a few years ago. And it is a phrase that elsewhere in the Bible describes a barren, unfruitful, uninhabitable wilderness.

And Israel wandering in the wilderness would have resonated with that image straight away. The first term, *tohu*, refers particularly to a lack of order.

[ 26 : 04 ] And the second term, *bohu*, refers to the barrenness resulting from the lack of order. That is how it was at the beginning before God rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

formless, empty, unfruitful. But look at what God does over the course of the six days.

He begins to reverse the condition of *tohu wabohu*. He forms and he fills. Notice how much care and thought God puts into this.

Look at the table on the screen. Notice how on days one to three, God begins to bring form to what was formless.

And then on days four to six, he fills what was empty. And so on day one, for example, he brings order, form, to time.

[ 27 : 05 ] Because we can now tell apart the light from the dark, we can now track the passages of the days, the seasons, and the years. And then on day four, in parallel to day one, he fills what was empty, as he fills that same realm of light and dark with the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Or take day two and five, also in parallel. On day two, God separates the areas of sea, sea, and sky, and on day five, he fills the sea with the fish, and the sky with the birds.

the point is God is being very intentional and purposeful here. He has a plan for creation. And if I had more time, I'll show you that the whole passage is even more deliberately structured in the Hebrew, with the number seven, and its multiples all over the passage.

For example, verse one is seven words in the Hebrew. The phrases, and it was so, and God saw that it was good, occurs seven times. Verse two is a multiple of seven, 14 words.

The earth and the heaven each gets mentioned 21 times, another multiple of seven. Again, the simple point is, God has made creation to be ordered and purposeful, and the way Genesis 1 is written reflects that.

[ 28 : 35 ] So, give thanks, because Genesis 1 stresses to us, the universe is not meaningless. God never meant for our world to be chaotic and random.

And while the highly literary nature of Genesis 1 suggests to us that we shouldn't read it like a science textbook, but as true history dressed up in the language of poetry, it does give us the basis for science.

You see, science can only function on the assumption that there are orderly laws of nature which we can observe, and study. And that is exactly what Genesis 1 says God has built into our world.

Faith is not the opposite of science, but the foundation for science. The scientists of past centuries understood this.

Johannes Kepler, who was a great mathematician and astronomer from centuries ago, said this, the chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony which has been imposed on it by God and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics.

[ 29 : 50 ] And that is why over the main entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory, which is the home of the Department of Physics of the University of Cambridge, lies the words of Psalm 111 verse 2.

Great are the works of the Lord. They are pondered by all who delight in them. Doing science is simply another way to worship our big, big God by studying his good, good will.

And did you notice how generous God is? I wonder if you noticed that the words all and every are repeated often. Verse 21, for example.

So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it according to their kinds and every winged bird according to its kind.

Or also in verse 29, just outside our passage today, then God said, I give you every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it.

[ 31 : 07 ] God isn't Marie Kondo. His creation is not minimalist. What a diverse world of abundance it is.

It is not all one kind of animal, one kind of plant, one kind of colour, one kind of food. Imagine if you could only eat kolomi every day.

Even the biggest fan of kolomi would get tired. But God's world isn't like that. The British biologist J.B.S.

Haldane once joked that God must have a great fondness for beetles. What he meant was that he encountered so many different species of beetles alone that he couldn't keep up.

But that is our God. A God who delights in an abundant and a diverse world. And so yes, God created this world orderly, but he also made sure it's filled with beauty.

[ 32 : 07 ] And so no wonder over and over and over again, God keeps saying, this world is good. And that is what we should affirm even in a world marked by the presence of sin.

Certainly the psalmists live in a fallen world like us, but that doesn't stop him praising God for creation. If you have a free ten minutes this afternoon, you can read through the whole of Psalm 104.

And Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 4 that everything God has created is to be received with thanksgiving. So give thanks for that game of football or pickleball that you play this afternoon.

Give thanks for the music you get to listen to during your drive to work. Give thanks for sunrises and sunsets you take pictures of. And give thanks that the sun is predictable, that it will rise and set each day, thanks to God's good order.

Don't deify creation, don't make it God. but don't denigrate it either. Instead, as Paul says, let creation bear testimony to our Creator.

[ 33 : 18 ] Let creation move you the way it did those astronauts on Apollo 8. Let creation move you to worship. Now we could end our sermon here, I've spoken quite a bit already, but I don't think I can because besides worship, I think there is one other purpose Moses was inspired to write Genesis 1 for us.

You see, the thing is, Genesis 1 speaks of a created world of goodness and order and life, but here's the problem. Right now, today, that is not our experience.

Today, right now, what we often experience is not order, but disorder. There are disruptions in the climate, there is confusion over gender, there is us, the creature, thinking we can place ourselves over the Creator, there is the existence of pain and ugliness and death, just think of that stabbing of little children that happened in England this past week.

And so, in such a world, what is the point of Genesis 1? How can Genesis 1 be anything but just a utopian fantasy, an unreachable dream, a world we all want, but can never get?

But here is the thing. Thirdly, Genesis 1 caused us to long for the world we all want and trust that God can give us the world we all want.

[ 34 : 58 ] Genesis 1 isn't written with the intention of getting us wistfully to look back at a bygone era. It's actually written to get us looking forward.

You see, what does the first three words of Genesis 1, in the beginning, imply? It implies there is also a middle and an end.

Human history is not locked in an endless cycle. It is going somewhere. Genesis 1 is setting up the storyline to follow.

Think of a K-drama. Why do you watch episode 1? Because episode 1 sets up the direction of the story, it introduces the big themes, and it moves the action forward, so that you can follow the story all the way to the end in episode 16.

You could almost say the end is the point of the beginning. And so it is with scripture. That's why when you turn to the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, you will find some striking parallels with Genesis 1 and 2.

[ 36 : 10 ] You will find that it's all about creation again. But this time, Revelation 21 verse 1, it is about a new heavens and a new earth. You will find in Revelation 22 verse 1, a river again, but this time not flowing out of Eden, as in Genesis 2, but from God's throne.

You will find a tree of life, but this time not in a garden, but in a garden city, Revelation 22 verse 2. And there are many more parallels, but perhaps most importantly, Revelation 21 to 22 shows us God the Creator dwelling with his people.

In other words, it shows our big, big God not abandoning his good, good world of Genesis 1. Instead, Revelation 21 to 22 shows us where the world of Genesis 1 and 2, it was always heading.

By the end of the story, we do get the world we all want, and not even sin and death can stop that. Episode 1 is there to set up.

Episode 16. But the question is, given our present-day experience, how can we be sure we'll get to the end, to the world of Revelation 21 and 22?

[ 37 : 33 ] Well, that is where we come back to Genesis. And I think Genesis 1 is not written merely to call us to worship, but to faith. And this becomes clearer when we understand the book of Genesis as a whole.

You see, who is the central human character of Genesis? It isn't Adam, actually. It's Abraham. The whole book is about him and his descendants.

And in Genesis 15, we're told about the point in his life when he is full of doubt. God promised he will have children, and through his offspring, God is eventually going to redeem and bless the world, just like how it was in the beginning.



But right now, Abraham is experiencing nothing but barrenness. His wife's womb is formless and empty and unfruitful. So what does God do?

He says to Abraham, look up and count the stars. That's how many offspring you are going to have. I mean, that's a crazy big promise, isn't it?

[ 38 : 49 ] But Abraham did look up and he believed God's word. He had faith. And the apostle Paul picks up on this incident in Romans 4.

And he says this, you know what? When Abraham looked inside, he saw nothing but barrenness. But when he looked up, he believed God would fulfill his promise.

And what did God show him to help him believe? It was the stars. It was the cosmos.

It was the work of God's creation. As he gazed at the stars, he was reminded that this God is the God who calls into being things that are not.

That's Romans 4 verse 17. This is the God who creates out of nothing. This is the God of Genesis 1. And so Romans 4 verse 21, he was fully persuaded God had the power to do what he promised.

[ 39 : 55 ] He made this very stars, almost as an aside, did he not? So why can he also not resurrect a sinful, dead world?

So when we look at the stars, when we consider how our creator God made the sun and the moon and everything else besides in Genesis 1, have faith.

Trust our creator will also be our redeemer. If you are Israel leaving Egypt, trust him to get you to the Eden-like promised land. And if you are Christian today, trust him to make this creation new and bring you to it.

And you can trust him because you know God did fulfill his promises to Abraham. How so? Well, turn with me to John 1 verse 1. Once again, it tells you about the beginning.

Once again, it tells you about God. Once again, it tells you about the word. But this time, it is told in an unexpected way. John 1 verse 1. In the beginning, was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

[ 41 : 09 ] This is like Genesis 1 remix. And then further down in John 1, there's an even bigger twist. Verse 14. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Just like in Genesis 1, God is revealed to be personal, personal, but this time, he becomes personal in a brand new way. The creator enters his creation.

And while he is here on earth, in many ways, the truths of Genesis 1 are reinforced. When Jesus speaks, storms die down. When Jesus speaks, disease is gone.

He speaks, and it was so. And like in Genesis 1, this word gives life, he speaks, and a dead girl is raised. But here is the biggest twist of all.

He gives life to the fool ultimately by dying. And as he rises again, he declares that nothing can ever get in the way of God's creation project being completed.

[ 42 : 15 ] By his resurrection, he is effectively guaranteeing that the world we all want will be inherited by all who trust in Christ. So my brothers and sisters, would you stop looking at yourselves?

Would you look up from your smartphones? Would you look at creation? And then look up to the one whom all creation is pointing to. For that is the purpose of Genesis 1.

I honestly really don't care that much about whether God made the world in six literal 24-hour days or not. It really is not the point of the text. No, the point of Genesis 1 is to call us to have faith in a creator God who is both powerful and personal, who has made a world we all want and can give us the world we all want.

And the point is to worship this big, big God for his good, good will which can be ours forevermore. For God has said, let light shine out of darkness, his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Let's pray. Now, Father, there is really nothing much more to say in the face of Genesis 1, but we pray that we will stand in awe and we will worship you.

[ 43 : 47 ] so help us to do that and then help us to have faith in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.