

“In the Beginning”  
Genesis 1:1-2:3  
September 20, 1998

Fear can incapacitate us!

It too often keeps us from doing what we should.  
It often renders us paralyzed.

How many of us have had nightmares wherein we were attacked by some overwhelming force like an animal or stranger and we felt such intense fear that we couldn't even scream and our legs felt like lead - immovable - we couldn't run - paralyzed.

Fear not only creates that sensation in nightmares -  
but fear creates that sensation in real life.

As I mentioned last week, how many of us have been in situations that seemed impossible -

it appeared that no matter what we did we were headed for negative consequences - and fear crept in.

Fear has kept people from marrying, from having children, from quitting a job, from taking a job;

Fear has kept people from giving money, from teaching a class, from going to the mission field;

Fear has often kept people from obeying God in many, many different ways.

Not every fear is equally strong.

Not every fear totally incapacitates us -

but fear can permeate life and render much of life frightening and joyless.

Last week we looked at the account in Genesis 22 when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in an offering to God.

Throughout that sermon I had us identifying mostly with Abraham's natural fear in contrast with the faith he exhibited. I emphasized the struggle that Abraham must have had in his mind and heart as he obeyed God.

I acknowledged the text does not specifically say Abraham struggled but I believe it is implicit in the fact that it was a test and in the fact that Abraham is human.

But what is most remarkable is the fact that Abraham obeyed in spite of the struggle.

What could cause a man to obey in the face of fear and pain?

We concluded with the text and with Hebrews 11 that Abraham trusted God!

Why would he trust God?

What did Abraham know and believe about God that made it possible to trust God in such circumstances?

Here was a man with a confidence in God that enabled him to obey in spite of the temptation to fear.

When fear eats away at our confidence, and apprehension erodes our ability to act, to obey - what do we do?

As we continue our study of the book of Genesis this morning I cannot help but remember the larger context of the book:

The book obviously was not written contemporaneous with the events that occurred - for humans weren't even present in the earliest events.

We know from elsewhere in the Bible that Genesis along with the other first five books of the Bible was probably written by Moses and probably toward the end of his life.

Most of you know that by that time, a million or more people, then collectively bearing the name "Israel", were poised to enter the land of Canaan and drive out the inhabitants and claim it as their own - as God had commanded and promised.

The task before them must have seemed overwhelmingly daunting.

Fear must have nipped at the heels of their minds constantly.

Joshua became the leader of the people following Moses' death.

Joshua was a man who had seen God's many miracles performed on their behalf from the time they left Egypt, forty years earlier, to the present.

But to that man, the leader, witness to miracles, God found it necessary to say not once but several times don't fear:

Joshua 1:6-9

"Be strong and courageous... Be strong and courageous... Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go... Be strong and courageous."

Why the emphasis? Because the temptation clearly was to be weakened by fear.

Moses wanted Israel to know the God they were being asked to trust - for if they knew Him, they would trust Him.

Abraham knew God. That is why he trusted Him.

And so we come to Genesis 1 to learn about God!

If I sound somewhat defensive in what I say next, I think it is because I am feeling rather defensive.

In fact it was rather tempting to skip the first few chapters of Genesis because of the controversy over them.

Religionists and secularists argue over the very existence of God.

Historians argue about the historicity of the accounts.

Biologists and geologists argue about the credibility of the creation accounts.

Even Christians argue with other Christians about how to reconcile what we see in nature through science with what the Bible says.

Today Genesis 1 is often reduced to a battle-ground.

Christian combatants argue about how long a "day" is - is it 24 hours or is it symbolic of some longer period of time?

How old is the earth - is it young (only several thousand years) or is it old (many millions of years)?

Did human beings (as we know them today) evolve from other life forms or were they created in an instant by God at a definite point in time?

I believe these and other questions are important in our scientific age.

I am grateful for those who have spent their lives sorting through what we think we know about the earth and its changes over time.

I am grateful for those who spend years attempting to reconcile those findings in nature with what the early chapters of Genesis declare.

**But we miss the point** if we turn these first chapters of Genesis into a tract for or against one view or another - or worse yet, for or against ONE another.

As an aside, I am troubled by Christians who test other Christians' faith by whether they line up with them or not on some of these issues.

For those of you more acquainted with these debates, it is my belief that two current popularizers of the debate, Ken Ham and Hugh Ross and those who stand respectively with them, equally love Jesus, are orthodox in their faith and have the same high regard for the authority of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant word of God.

As we will see in a minute, the battle is not with other Christ-followers.

I believe that every word of Genesis 1 is consistent with factual science and factual history.

What's interesting is that it is science and history that are evolving - and as new discoveries are made, increasingly they demonstrate the scientific and historical accuracy of Genesis.

Gordon Wenham put it this way:

"The Bible-versus-science debate has, most regrettably, sidetracked readers of Genesis 1. Instead of reading the chapter as a triumphant affirmation of the power and wisdom of God and the wonder of his creation, we have been too often bogged down in attempting to squeeze Scripture into the mold of the latest scientific hypothesis or distorting scientific facts to fit a particular interpretation. When allowed to speak for itself, Genesis 1 looks beyond such minutiae. Its proclamation of the God of grace and power who undergirds the world and gives it purpose justifies the scientific approach to nature. Genesis 1, by further affirming the unique status of man, his place in the divine program and God's care for him, gives a hope to mankind that atheistic philosophies can never legitimately supply." Wenham p40

Genesis 1 lays an excellent foundation for good scientific inquiry;

Genesis 1 helps answer many legitimate questions about the how of the beginning of the world.

BUT Genesis 1 is not first of all a treatise on the science of origins.

**Genesis 1 is a message about God!**

Let me repeat myself to help clarify what I am saying:

The writer of Genesis is not primarily interested in science but everything he writes is scientifically correct.

The writer of Genesis is not primarily interested in dating creation or the events surrounding it but everything he writes is consistent with a correct historical chronology of the events.

**But the author's primary interest is telling us about God!**

Look at Genesis 1 - is any other text more filled with God's name and presence than this one?

35 times his name is given in these opening verses.

God is the subject - for the purpose that we may not fear life but trust Him.

Who is this God of Genesis 1?

I want you to stand with me now and listen to the reading of this great opening passage of the entire Bible.

Listen carefully and let it tell you about God.

READ Genesis 1:1-2:3

The author establishes his theme with the opening words:  
 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Ron Youngblood writes that in February 1971 the Apollo astronaut commander Edgar Mitchell placed on the moon a microfilm packet that contained a complete Bible and one verse printed in sixteen languages - that verse was “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (In Youngblood p22)

The phrase “heavens and earth” is a Hebrew way of saying everything.

God created everything.

There is nothing that exists that he has not created, except himself.

Throughout the chapter the author repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the God of whom he speaks is the sovereign God of the universe.

35 times he is called Elohim - a somewhat less personal name for God probably emphasizing his sovereignty - the God of gods.

This GOD speaks and worlds come into being.

This GOD acts and life appears.

The point is that there is nothing God has not made and therefore there is nothing over which He does not have control.

The author fairly shouts this foundational truth: The God the people of Israel worship is the God that is above all gods, the creator God, the God who is.

As in our own day, so in Moses' day there was more than one world-view vying for people's allegiance.

The Israelites had a choice - they could believe the view of reality posed by the nations around them or they could believe the view of reality presented by God's own word.

All around them were polytheists - people who believed in many gods.

The myths of ancient Greece and Rome were but more modern versions of myths that controlled peoples' lives for thousands of years and in parts of the world control them yet today.

The world believed in the gods of the sky, the sun, the moon, of the seas, of the creatures of the sea, of the stars, of the harvests, and they believed in gods who controlled the very birth, life and death of every human being.

These people lived in constant fear because the gods were fickle and people never knew for certain when they might offend the gods and be ruined.

And if the Israelites believed in those gods, their lives would be caught up in the same maelstrom of fear.

To get some idea of how terrifying this is - read "Spirit of the Rainforest" - an account of an Amazon tribal people living today under the spell of a form of polytheism.

But one after another, the author of Genesis is ruling out any other god.

Afraid of the god of the night - God made the night.

Afraid of the god of sky - God made the sky.

Afraid of the god of the seas - God made the seas.

Afraid of the god of sun, moon or stars - God made them all.

Afraid of the god of fertility - God made the plant life and animal life of this world and he ordered the way they reproduce - each after its own kind.

God says in effect: "Israel, when you settle in the new land I have promised, don't be caught up in their world-view.

They would have you sacrificing to and attempting to placate all their gods.

Remember who made it all and who reigns supreme - Elohim - your God."

Today it is not polytheism that WE face.  
We face "naturalism".

In the western world, including America, this other world-view has prevailed for many years.

This view is that there is no evidence for God.

We and everything we see are the products of blind chance.

Some propose that the material universe has always existed and others attempt to explain the existence of the universe in logically inconsistent ways.

In the July 20, 1998 issue of U.S. News and World Report an author writes, "Some are now proposing a theory of how existence could arise essentially from nothing; and a Mother universe, a timeless dimension that always existed and always will, bearing daughter universes."

Two Princeton physicists, Richard Gott and Li-Xin Li, write, "The first universe created itself and was its own mother..."

No matter which way you cut that - they are claiming that the world and we are the products of chance.

And if we exist and die by chance then life truly has lost meaning.

Is the future is nothing more than the product of blind impersonal forces - what difference does any conduct make?

But Genesis comes to us crying out - "NO, you are not the offspring of chance - you and everything else are created by God!

But not only is our God great but our God is good.

Throughout this chapter the message is repeated - God is making something good.

I love the structure of this chapter:

After the initial summary statement about God as the creator of everything, the author contrasts two situations:

The first one is in verse 2.

And the second one is in verses 3-31.

The first one, in verse 2, spells out a world of chaos.

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep...”

Contrary to popular opinion, we are not here nor anywhere else in the Bible told why, when or how but clearly at some point in time-past the earth, according to this verse, was in chaos -

it was without any ordered shape and it was empty or incomplete.

There is a sinister element added to the chaos when the phrase “darkness over the deep” is mentioned.

Whatever it was, it was not yet what God would make it.

Now as to the structure of the chapter note that what the author does is spend the rest of the chapter spelling out

how God takes “**formlessness**” and put shape and order to it.

And how God takes **emptiness**, uselessness and puts fullness, completion, purpose to it.

The first three days of creation are responding to the formless nature of the earth.

The second three days of creation are responding to the emptiness of the earth.

On day **one** he creates **light** and he brings order by separating light (day) from darkness (night).

On **day** two he separates the waters above from the waters below - bringing shape to this earth by **separating the earth from the sky**.

On the first part of day **three** he separates the waters of the seas from the **land** - creating place and order for what was to follow.

Having shaped the earth and corrected its formlessness God now sets out to fill the emptiness.

On the second part of day three he produces vegetation.

On the fourth day he fills the day sky with the sun and the night sky with the moon and stars.

On the fifth day he fills the seas and the skies with marine life and birds.

On the sixth day he fills the land with animals of every kind and lastly he makes human beings.

I wish I had the knowledge, skill and time this morning to describe for you again the awesome variety, complexity, and beauty of the world God has created.

Whether it is exploring the universe around us, or plumbing the depths of the atoms that make up everything, or just looking at the incredible variety of creation - we cannot help but be impressed with the God who made it all.

At a conference at Berkeley in June of this year, Allan Sandage, "one of the world's leading astronomers, told the gathering that contemplating the majesty of the big bang helped make him a believer in God, willing to accept that creation could only be explained as a miracle." (U.S. News and... July 20, 98)

Increasing numbers of scientists are seeing and admitting the design that is so evident in the natural world.

The same God who made order out of chaos, fullness out of emptiness is the God who loved the Israelites and loves his people

today and is guiding their lives and will bring them to fullness, will bring them to completion.

Their lives are not directed by blind chance but by a loving, creator God with power and will to make of them a people for himself.

**Who is the God Abraham trusted and why did he trust Him?**

Because Abraham's God was the sovereign creator God, the God who brings order out of chaos, fullness out of emptiness, the God who reigns supreme - and the God who is lovingly recreating a people for himself.

That is the God who loves you!

The gods of polytheism produce fear.

The gods of fate - blind chance produce fear.

The sovereign God of Genesis 1 produces the opposite: confidence.

My existence, my life and my future are in the hands of the almighty God, creator and sustainer of the universe and the creator and sustainer of you and me.

Who do you trust?

Watch and listen as we attempt to capture in picture and song something of what Genesis ONE is all about: In God we trust!!

**“Who filled the sky with radiant stars to glorify the night?**

**Who knows the path that leads up to the dwelling place of light?**

**Who used his words to lay out the foundation of the earth?**

**He reigns in golden splendor.**

**He purchased my forever!**

**Almighty God. Almighty God.**

