

“In the Beginning,” Genesis 1:1-5 (Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost, August 20, 2017)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

PRAY

This morning we begin our fall study on the book of Genesis, chapters one through eleven. And I don’t mind saying that I’m approached this series with hesitation, and in fact I’ve put it off for several years because I think Genesis, particularly chapter one of Genesis, might be the toughest passage in the Bible to teach well.

You see it would be one thing to teach Genesis as if we lived in a vacuum, or as if the world outside the church didn’t exist. Or to teach it as if we lived in the year 1817 and everyone in our society agreed on the historicity of Genesis and how God created the universe and we just need to apply it to our lives.

I’m not saying that would be wrong, but I don’t think it would be all that helpful. A sermon like that will raise far more questions than it answers. Why? Because we don’t live in 1817; we live in 2017. And today, unlike two hundred years ago, we’ve all been exposed to the theory of evolution. Almost no one today reads Genesis 1 without asking the question, “What about evolution?” At least no one outside the church reads it that way, and most people inside the church in my experience wonder about that as well. It’s impossible not to, because if you’ve been to high school or if you watch the news you will wonder, “How do we understand what the Bible says about creation in light of what we’re told about evolution?”

I want you to know that it was difficult for me as a preacher to prepare a sermon that addresses this question because if you’re going to do that *it’s not enough to just know the Bible*. You must also be somewhat familiar with what’s going on in the world of philosophy, physics, chemistry, biology, epistemology. And like most pastors I haven’t really been trained in any of those areas, and almost no one (pastor or not) has been trained in all of them. I’ve worked harder on this sermon than any other in years.

Yet, here we are – studying Genesis 1. I want you to know that this sermon is going to require more thinking, more attention than most. If this is your first Sunday here, I also want you to know that rarely will the sermons be like this but it’s Genesis 1 – I think it’s necessary. Most of my sermons will have more application and be more practical, though I think this sermon will be very practical to many of you in its own way.

Maybe you are here this morning and you are extremely skeptical of Christianity and especially skeptical about a Christian preacher talking about evolution. Maybe you feel like Jerry Coyne.

He's a professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago and a prominent critic of the biblical view of creation, and a few years ago he wrote this: "Imagine for a moment that a large proportion of Americans – let's say half – rejected the 'germ theory' of infectious disease. Maladies like swine flu, malaria and AIDS aren't caused by micro-organisms, they claim, but by the displeasure of the gods, whom they propitiate by praying, consulting shamans, and sacrificing goats. Now, you'd surely find this a national disgrace, for those people would be utterly, unequivocally wrong . . . How, we'd ask, could people ignore all [the evidence for germ theory] in favor of baseless superstition? But that's fiction, right? Well, not entirely, for it applies precisely to another 'theory' that is also a fact: the theory of evolution." Maybe that's you – you're highly skeptical and I haven't even finished my introduction. I understand that, but thank you for coming anyway and I hope that at least this sermon, even if it doesn't change your views, will help you understand the Bible better – and as the Bible is the most influential book ever written in the world that can't be a bad thing. And maybe you'll even learn something new about evolution.

At this point, I need to be precise in my terms. Evolution by itself really isn't the issue. Evolution just means gradual change. You can believe in evolution and be a Christian – you can believe the beaks on Darwin's finches in the Galapagos Islands got shorter or longer depending on environmental changes and be a Christian. That's no problem. Materialism is the issue. Materialism is a view of the world that says there is no creator, there is no supernatural. Matter and energy make up everything in our universe. All the species on the planet came from a single-celled organism that arose accidentally and randomly eons and eons ago and produced the world as we know it through the process of blind, unguided natural selection. So it's that, and not really evolution, that I'll compare with the biblical account of creation this morning.

And we'll approach our study like this: first, the answers Genesis gives to big questions about our world. Second, the answers materialism gives about our world. Third, the answer to the biggest question.

First, the answers Genesis gives about our world. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good." Genesis 1:1-4a.

There are three big questions about our world that Genesis addresses. The first one is *what is the origin of the universe?* Where did the universe we live in come from? It's pretty clear: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

The universe has not always existed. It's not eternal. It had a beginning. Before the beginning, we read in verse 2, the earth was without form and void. In other words, there was nothing there. But then God spoke, and the universe we live in came into being. And then God created everything else we see in our physical universe, including life.

That may sound rather ho-hum to you but when you understand the history of science, this answer Genesis gives gets more interesting. From the time of the Greek philosophers in the centuries before Christ up until the twentieth century, most of the people who studied these

issues believed that the universe was eternal – they believed in an eternal, steady-state (basically unchanging) universe. Christians, Jews, and Muslims did not believe this (because of Genesis 1), but everyone else in the world did.

Once modern science got off the ground and divorced itself from its Christian roots in the 18th and 19th centuries (more on that in a moment), most of its practitioners also held this view. After the Enlightenment and the introduction of higher criticism in biblical studies, fewer scholars began to see the Bible as literally true when it came to a theory of the universe. Christian philosophers and scientists were really on the defensive for a couple of hundred years: they said, “From what we can tell the universe does appear to be eternal and unchanging, but the Bible says it had a beginning so we must believe that.”

Second question: *what is the order of the universe?* Let’s re-read verses 2-3: Before creation, “² The earth was without form and void [in other words, empty – there was nothing there], and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” And then the rest of Genesis 1 shows us how God filled out creation in a very orderly way. God isn’t shooting from the hip when he fills the sky with stars and creates life on earth; there’s clearly a plan, a progression as he goes about his work.

The Bible says that there is purpose to creation, there is an orderliness to it, there are moral laws that govern creation (such as, do not commit murder) and there are laws that apply to the physical, natural world. This makes Genesis unique among all the origin stories from all the civilizations of the ancient world. The other ancient myths (like Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian) held that there is no purpose or order to creation at all. Creation, they said, was the result of procreation among the gods or, as in the Enuma Elish, the death of the gods. Creation is arbitrary and random, when things happen in it it’s only because the gods are mad or cranky or want something from us, so there’s no point in studying it.

It is no accident that scientific revolution arose in Christian Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries and nowhere else, because the men who led it believed in a God who was personal, who was knowable, who worked according to fixed laws, and as those men believed themselves to be made in God’s image, they could by careful observation, analysis, and hypothesis discern the physical laws of the universe and use them to learn ever more about the creation around them.

Third question: *how should we evaluate the universe?* That’s verse 4: “And God saw that the light was good.” Genesis 1:4a. According to the biblical account, God looks upon his creation and is pleased. He says it is good. It’s beautiful. In the other ancient myths, the gods view creation as a necessary evil. They might need the food grown on earth but don’t want much else to do with it. In eastern religions creation isn’t real – it’s just an illusion we need to transcend. Only in the biblical account is it referred to as good or beautiful or pleasing.

You might think, “OK, that’s interesting about the other creation myths, but it doesn’t prove anything.” True enough; it doesn’t prove anything. In fact, I can’t prove empirically the biblical view of creation is true. It’s an article of faith for believers. That is not, however, the only consideration in the matter.

Second, the answers materialism gives us about our world. First question: *what does the materialist worldview say about the origin of the universe?* It actually agrees with Genesis that the universe had a beginning. In the 18th and 19th centuries the assumption among scientists was that the universe was eternal. But that all changed in 1915, when Albert Einstein published his theory of general relativity. And very quickly afterward the scientific consensus shifted radically, and virtually everyone agreed that the universe had a beginning billions of years ago with what we now commonly call the Big Bang. All the Christian philosophers found their faithfulness to the Genesis account vindicated. This was such a shocking change that many atheists at the time thought it would be the end of atheism, because if the universe had a beginning then of course someone had to begin it. That turned out not to be the case, but it goes to show what a big deal this was.

However, of course materialists don't believe that God created the heavens and the earth, nor do they believe God created life. Instead, they would say the universe is a cosmic accident, or they might even say that questions as to why the universe exists are irrelevant and irrational, and they would say life arose spontaneously on earth without the help of any direction from a supernatural being. Somehow the first living cell came together all on its own.

When you read the literature on origin of life you find that some chemists and a few biologists talk as if it really wouldn't be that difficult to imagine a scenario where life could spontaneously arise. Last month in *The Economist* magazine there was an article about Jeremy England, a biophysicist at MIT who by all accounts is doing groundbreaking work. The article quotes him as saying that "the existence of life is no mystery or lucky break, but rather follows from general physical principles and 'should be as unsurprising as rocks rolling downhill.'"

Others in the field aren't so sure. England's own undergraduate supervisor at Harvard, a professor named Eugene Shakhnovich, says claims that England's work has anything to do with the origins of life are "pure and shameless speculations." You kind of wonder if Jeremy and his supervisor get along after reading that. And James Tour, a synthetic chemist at Rice University, wrote this in an open letter to his colleagues: "The appearance of life on earth is a mystery. We are nowhere near solving this problem. The proposals offered thus far to explain life's origin make no scientific sense. Beyond our planet, all the others that have been probed are lifeless, a result in accord with our chemical expectations. The laws of physics and chemistry's Periodic Table are universal, suggesting that life based upon amino acids, nucleotides, saccharides and lipids is an anomaly. Life should not exist anywhere in our universe. Life should not even exist on the surface of the earth."

Second, *what does the materialist view have to say about the order of the universe?* This is where we dig into epistemology, or the science of knowledge. Materialists of course believe the universe has physical laws; many materialists devote their lives to the study and application of those laws. However, where Christians have reason to believe they can discern those physical laws because we are made in the image of God, with minds that can reason and think God's thoughts after him and therefore learn about the universe by studying it, materialists have a much harder time accounting for how this happens.

Thomas Nagel, a philosopher at NYU and an atheist, points out that according to the materialist view of the world the beliefs we have about the nature of the world around us aren't really beliefs. Rather, they are "states of the brain," and "natural selection favors brain mechanisms solely on the basis of their contribution to survival and reproduction by bringing about certain behaviors. The content of our beliefs, and hence their truth or falsehood, is irrelevant to their survival value. Natural selection is interested, not in truth, but in [behavior that leads to survival] Most [materialists] would hold that there is an innate connection between the content of a belief and its role in controlling an organism's behavioral interaction with the world . . . for example . . . a state of someone's brain constitutes the belief that there is a dangerous animal in front of him if it is a state generally caused by encounters with bears, rattlesnakes, etc., and that generally causes flight or other defensive behavior . . . Still, when our faculties lead us to beliefs vastly removed from those our distant ancestors needed to survive – as in the . . . production and assessment of evidence for the existence of the Higgs boson" [which is something in particle physics], it's hard to believe that's really just a product of natural selection.

Materialists say the universe has order, but they have no good way of explaining how, through natural selection, they have minds that can grasp that order, if our brains evolved only to help us dodge predators and reproduce.

And while Christians believe God placed moral laws in the universe and we can say with certainty that some things that are always right and others are always wrong, materialism denies there could possibly be moral laws to the universe. How can there be? In this view there is no creator who could have given them. There is no Creator who can endow us with certain inalienable rights, as the Declaration of Independence puts it. Instead, they say, whatever sense of right and wrong we have is ultimately the product of natural selection.

For example, materialism says that if you feel affection for your children, if you feel like you love your children, it's not because there is such a thing as love in the universe. There can't be – there's just matter and energy in the universe, no God who teaches you what love is. Instead, the reason you feel like you love your children is because there were two groups of cavemen two hundred thousand years ago. One groups took care of their children, and the other group didn't. The group that did not died out. The other group survived, and over time this tendency to care for children got hard-wired into their DNA through natural selection. We are all their descendants. And that's why we feel the urge to care for our children, to check on them, to feed them. It's survival of the fittest, but it's not really love.

This is also called evolutionary psychology, but you need to know it cuts both ways. Yes, it provides an explanation for why we have the behaviors that we all agree are good. But it doesn't provide a reason to change the behaviors we think are bad.

In last month's *Atlantic* magazine (not a Christian magazine, by the way – I'm pretty sure the editors there would ascribe to natural selection), there was an article titled "The Queen Bee in the Corner Office." In it the author examined the phenomenon of female rivalry in the workplace and why so many women in the workforce would rather work with men than other women. The author interview Joyce Benenson, a psychologist at Emmanuel College, in Boston, who "thinks women are evolutionarily predestined not to collaborate with women they are not related to. Her

research suggests that women and girls are less willing than men and boys to cooperate with lower-status individuals of the same gender; more likely to dissolve same-gender friendships; and more willing to socially exclude one another.” At Ole Miss we call that sorority rush.

Then we read this: “Benenson believes that women undermine one another because they have always had to compete for mates and for resources for their offspring. Helping another woman might give that woman an edge in the hot-Neanderthal dating market, or might give her children an advantage over your own, so you frostily snub her . . . If Benenson is right, women would have to struggle mightily to repair their poisonous dynamic, since it is biologically ingrained.”

But that’s not the big issue: if there is no God, and if that behavior is biologically ingrained, hard-wired into our DNA as a product of blind natural selection, *then what reason could we possibly have to struggle at all to overcome it?* Our existence, our morality, and our ethics are all the product of natural selection, where the strong eat the weak. It’s survival of the fittest. Certainly you can get ahead by trampling on other people, and there’s no Creator telling you to love thy neighbor. Why fight it?

Now, the third question: *what does materialism tell us about how should we evaluate the universe?* Daniel Dennett is one of the famed four horseman of New Atheism, along with Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and the now-deceased Christopher Hitchens. He is a brilliant man – a graduate of Harvard and now a professor at Tufts in Boston. He’s a materialist, and his most recent book is called *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*. It came out in February of this year.

His specialized field of work is the mind, and specifically consciousness. Consciousness is the experience we all have of being human, of being self-aware, of having an inner thought life.

And he wants to answer the question: how is it that we experience this thing called consciousness? If we are just the products of natural selection and matter and energy is all there is, how come we have an inner thought life and it feels like we have souls? And how come we do things like create music and paint and feel so moved by things we think are beautiful or by love?

His answer is that we don’t have souls and that human consciousness is an illusion. We may feel like we are experiencing things like beauty when we hear a piece of music or see a sunset, we may feel love for our children, but in reality we are only very sophisticated machines. He gives a powerful illustration of this phenomenon: he says that consciousness is like dragging documents from one folder to another on your computer. It looks like that’s what you’re doing, but of course you’re not. The experience is an illusion. What’s really going on is thousands of lines of code are being executed behind the scenes to accomplish the task.

When we look at the ocean or a sunset or hear a great piece of music and we are moved, it’s not because those things are actually beautiful. It’s just that through natural selection the appearance of personhood evolved and it in some ways has helped us to cope with the environment around us. However, it’s not real. Therefore, the universe isn’t good, like the Bible says – the universe just is. It’s there, it’s random, it’s meaningless, but it’s not beautiful nor is there really anything that can be called beautiful. And it’s ironic that Daniel Dennett is the one theorizing this about

consciousness because in addition to being a profound thinker and philosopher, he's also a gifted artist who is often moved to tears when he hears Bach's St. Matthew's Passion performed.

Now, what have I done? I haven't solved the problem of "Is the Christian account of creation true?" I can't do that, because as I said earlier I can't prove God created the heavens and the earth. It is an article of faith for believers. However, the materialist worldview cannot be proven either. Whether it is admitted or not, materialism is also a matter of faith. Alvin Plantinga, Yale graduate, retired professor of philosophy at Notre Dame and winner of this year's Templeton Prize, says the most that can be shown by materialists on the basis of the evidence is that we cannot rule out the possibility that the living world was produced by blind natural selection. Can't rule it out; certainly have not proved it.

I haven't solved the problem but I have set before you a question: which view of our world makes more intrinsic sense to you? One that says moral laws don't really exist, neither do things like beauty or love or justice or consciousness? One that says that when physicists and chemists and biologists do their work they're not even really doing science? Or one that says all those things are real, we do have a consciousness, there is truth, and to be truly human means you develop a more and more acute awareness of all of them?

Third, the answer to the biggest question of all. The three questions we've looked at so far are all good questions, they're all big questions, but they aren't the biggest question. The biggest question is this: why are we here? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the purpose of this universe and our existence?

We've already said that for the materialist there is no answer – the universe is the product of random, purposeless forces. But we do have an answer from the Bible: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." Psalm 19:1-2.

The God of Christianity is a triune God. The biblical evidence is that God has always existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God, each person is God, yet there is only one God. You say, "I don't quite understand that." Good; no one does. But it's the biblical witness. He has always existed; there never was a time when God was not. God has always been perfectly happy, because for all eternity the persons of the Godhead have poured love and joy into one another.

And at some point in eternity past God made a decision within the Godhead to create men and women in his image so that he could share his love and joy, and he set them in a universe he created. That universe was designed ultimately for one purpose: as a display of his glory. In other words, to display God's beauty, God's truth, God's love, God's power, so that we could know this God who created us and enjoy him forever.

Tomorrow there's going to be solar eclipse – have you heard about that? We're supposed to get something like a 91% eclipse in Oxford, but I'm pulling my kids out of school tomorrow and driving to Kentucky so we can sit in what they call the path of totality. And I already know what I'll be thinking when it's completely dark at 1:23 tomorrow afternoon. You know what it is?

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Do you know why we’re all excited about the eclipse? Ultimately because deep down within we all know there is a God and we all want to know and be known by him, and creation displays his glory.

But, you know, as amazing as the heavens are, they are not the ultimate display of God’s glory. As men and women made in the image of God we were all made to know God, to flourish only in a relationship with him. But all have sinned and rejected him. We have all said in our own way, “This is my life and I want nothing to do with you.” We’ve offended him, we’ve hurt others, and we’ve hurt ourselves.

Rather than leave us in our sins, though, God sent the Son, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ to earth as a man. God became man! The Creator became a creature! While on earth Jesus lived the life we should have lived, and on the cross he died the death we deserve to die. And if we will trust that Jesus lived and died for us, in our place, as our substitute, we will be reconciled to God. Our sins will not be counted against us. It will be as if we are perfect.

Friends, it is God humbling himself in Jesus Christ and taking our place on the cross – that’s the greatest display of God’s glory. “But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” Hebrews 2:9.

When you look at the eclipse tomorrow, you won’t be able to help it: you’ll worship. You may not admit it, but in your spirit you will cry out, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” But I also want you to be reminded of something, something you don’t know just because you’re made in God’s image, something you must learn from the Bible. In the book of Matthew we read that when Jesus Christ died on the cross, the sky went dark. We don’t know if it was an eclipse or not, but darkness covered the land from noon until three o’clock. Why?

One of my favorite hymns put it this way: “Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in, when Christ, the mighty Maker died, for man the creature’s sin.” Creation was grieving the death of its Creator. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and put us in this universe to know and share and celebrate his glory, and the supreme display of his glory is Jesus Christ, very God of very God, laying down his life on the cross for his friends. Do you believe that? I pray you do – if you do you’re a Christian. And if you do you might want to sing the rest of that hymn: “Thus might I hide my blushing face while His dear cross appears, dissolve my heart in thankfulness, and melt my eyes to tears.” PRAY.