

June 13, 2021  
Adams Center Baptist Church  
Interpreting Genesis 1

We've been in a series of messages around answering some of the biggest objections people have to Christianity.

What about Hypocrites in the Church?  
The Bible is Full of Errors  
The Bible is Full of Contradictions  
Reasons to Believe in the Resurrection  
Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?  
How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?

And then, last week, we talked about the question, "Has Science Disproved Christianity?"

One of our sub points was to look at the question, "Doesn't Evolution Disprove the Bible?" You see when most people think about Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, they think almost entirely about the creation-evolution debate. There really is so much more to the doctrine of creation, but for this morning, I want us to take a look at how to interpret Genesis, chapters 1 and 2. As believers, how we interpret Genesis, chapter 1 and 2, will largely determine where we stand in relation to science. Will we be in Conflict with Science? In Dialogue with Science? Will we Integrate with Science? Or will we be completely Independent from Science? What we believe and teach about this will have a tremendous impact on our children and it will have a huge impact on the way that we interact with the people around us who have questions and doubts about Christianity. If you think you've got it all figured out, what I'm asking is that you take a fresh and humble look at the Scriptures again.

So, let's look at Genesis 1 and the beginning of chapter 2.

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he 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.

6 And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water."  
7 So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. 12 The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. 16 God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. 17 God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, 18 to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." 21 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. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." 23 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 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. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

**2** Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Beautiful portion of Scripture. For this morning, let's talk about "Creation out of Nothing," and then I want to give you just three basic principles of interpretation that we should apply to any text of Scripture and especially Genesis 1 and 2. Then, in coming weeks, we'll look further at various interpretations that Christians have surrounding Genesis 1 and 2.

So, let's talk about Creation Out of Nothing. One of God's essential attributes is what we call aseity; that is to say, His self-existence. God is the only uncreated being. He is the sole ultimate reality. There is nothing apart from God that is uncreated. I'm going to try and say this in multiple ways so you get it. Everything that is real that exists other than God has been created by God. This is the doctrine of creation out of nothing, and it lies at the very heart of the doctrine of creation.

The phrase in Latin – *creatio ex nihilo* – means literally "creation out of nothing." But when we say that God has created the world out of nothing, we don't mean that He has created it out of something and that is nothing. That would be to treat nothing as though it were something. Instead, when we say that God created the world out of nothing means that He created it but not out of anything. Everything that exists has been created by God. Creation is out of nothing; it is not out of anything else that is uncreated [outside of] God.

The Bible begins with the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" With this short but majestic statement, the author of Genesis makes a distinction between his viewpoint and all of the other viewpoints of Israel's neighbors. The expression "the heavens and the earth" is a Hebrew phrase meaning the whole of the universe. There was no word in Hebrew for the totality of physical reality, but this idiom, this phrase "the heavens and the earth" expressed the totality of physical reality. Notice that in verse 1 there is no preexistent material present. There's no stuff that God uses to create everything else. There are no warring gods and no primordial dragons as you have in pagan creation myths. Instead, there is simply God who creates the world. The word for create in Hebrew is *bara*, a verb which has only God as its subject. Only God can *bara* something.

As we saw, Genesis 1:1 is a statement of God's creation of the entire universe ex nihilo. Beginning with verse 2, the first chapter of Genesis then goes on to describe God's creation of a wonderful environment for human beings to live in – a habitable Earth where man might live.

In order to interpret this passage, or really any passage, correctly we have to follow some fundamental hermeneutical principles, or principles of interpretation. The first fundamental principle that is important in this regard is interpreting a writing according to the literary genre or literary type in which it belongs. Considering genre is absolutely critical to the interpretation of a literary text because if the genre of that literary text is of the sort that isn't intended to be taken literally then you will misinterpret it if you do interpret it in a literal fashion. For example, when the psalmist says, "Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together," he's not trying to teach earth science. This is the genre of poetry, and it would be a disastrous misinterpretation of the Psalms to apply a literalistic interpretation to what the psalmist says.

Or, again, think how inappropriate it would be to apply a literalistic hermeneutic to the book of Revelation where the monsters and other figures represent nation-states or alliances of nation-states. They are symbolic. As you begin to understand the type of literature that the book of Revelation is, then you understand that Jewish apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic, and it is figurative, and that therefore it would be a mistake to take it literally. If you interpreted the book of Revelation literally you would fundamentally misunderstand it. So when we come to Genesis chapter 1, considerations of genre will be important in deciding how to interpret it correctly.

Another hermeneutical principle or interpretive principle that we should observe here is to try to determine how the original author and audience would have understood the text. We should examine the text on its own basis as the author and original audience would have understood it. A great many Christians today follow an interpretive principle that has been called concordism. Concordism involves reading modern science into the text of Scripture. For example, some Christians have claimed that the Bible predicts the invention of television because it says that when Christ returns every eye will see him, and that's impossible on a round Earth and therefore the Bible must be predicting the invention of television which will televise the second coming of Christ so that everyone will be able to see him. They're reading modern science into the biblical text.

Or, again, more relevant to Genesis 1 and the creation account, some Christians read texts like the Lord stretched out the heavens to be a reference to the expansion of space predicted by the contemporary Big Bang model according to which space is expanding as time goes on. It seems to me that it is absolutely wrong-headed to think that this is what the original author had in mind. When he said that the Lord stretched out the heavens, he's probably thinking of a tent which is spread out, and in the same way that the tent has been erected so God is responsible for creating the heavens overhead.

The obvious danger of concordism, the danger of reading modern science into the text, apart from misunderstanding the text, is that it runs into the danger of reading obsolete science into the text. You can imagine some 17th or 18th century Newtonian physicist reading the Scripture in light of Newtonian physics which are now out of date so that that understanding of Scripture would be obsolete. Every generation would be reading its science into the text. Rather, we need to understand the original text as its author and his audience would have understood it. The first thing we have to do is interpret the text itself, and we don't want to impose what we think we know about modern science onto the text. We want to take what we know or think we know about modern science and set that aside, and try to read the account as it would have been understood by the original people who read it. I think when we do that, a number of different competing interpretations of the Genesis account emerge.

Finally, one more principle of interpretation. We let "Scripture interpret Scripture." So what do we really mean when we say "Scripture interprets Scripture?" Simply put, it means that as we engage in hermeneutics (the art of interpretation), we interpret the implicit by the explicit and the cloudy through the clear. The clear passages of Scripture are used to interpret more difficult passages.

Here are two key phrases to keep in mind in the pursuit of faithful biblical interpretation. "Context is king," and, "a text without a context is a pretext." What we strive to do is allow the context of a given passage to help dictate how we interpret it. We begin with the immediate context of the phrase or sentence, then move to the paragraph, then the chapter, and then the book. Finally, because Christ himself claims all of Scripture as a testimony to himself, we allow the Old Testament to be interpreted in light of the New Testament. As St. Augustine famously said, "The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed."

Here's what we're going to do in the coming weeks. We're going to look at what we might call the Literal Interpretation, the Gap or Day-Gap Interpretation, the Day-Age Interpretation, the Functional Interpretation, the Literary Framework Interpretation and the Mytho-Historical Interpretation. I'm going to do my best to present these to you and develop the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation.

Here's an action step for you. I want you to check out this website: <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/creation/report.pdf>. This is a website that is put up by the Presbyterian Church in America which reviews the history of interpretation of the creation account in Genesis and provides a good survey of the history of interpretation and the various alternative interpretations that have been offered down through the years.

And then, one final word. Whenever we engage with God's Word, we do it with deep humility. We don't begin believing that our 21st-century ideas and interpretations are somehow more enlightened. Holy Scripture was given by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit to reveal divine truth to fallen man. But this is not just another set of divine "truths" to follow. This is the revelation of truth itself in the account of the promised Messiah and Savior of the world, the

crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. As Martin Luther wrote, “the Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid.” Let’s pray.