

Today, we begin a new 21-week sermon series through the book of **Genesis**. To begin, I'm going to say an opening line and I want you to tell me where it comes from. We'll start easy.

- "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" → *Star Wars*
- "Call me Ishmael!" → *Moby Dick*
- "It was the best of times, it was the \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)" → *Tale of Two Cities*
- A harder one: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife." → *Pride and Prejudice*
- Ok, last one: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much." → *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

There are many famous opening lines that begin some of our favorite works of literature. But there is perhaps none more famous than the opening line of the Bible. It reads,

**"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).**

Genesis is a book of beginnings. It is the beginning of the Torah, the beginning of the whole Old Testament, and the beginning of our entire Bible! It tells of the beginning of creation. It tells of the beginning of sin. It tells of the beginning of salvation. It begins the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (i.e., the nation of Israel). It begins the biblical themes of grace and forgiveness, judgment and wrath, hope and restoration, plan and promise, covenant and sacrifice, anticipating not only Israel's entrance into the land of promise but also anticipating the redemptive work of Christ! Finally, Genesis begins the gracious self-disclosure of the one, true God.

This is the subject of the Bible's famous opening line: "In the beginning, **God**." The question I want to ask and reflect on here today: ***Who is this God?***

### 1. God just **IS**

That's deep, I know. What I'm referring to is God's *self-existence*. In Genesis 1:1, before the world is made, God is just *there*. He has no origin story. He's not like Superman, born on Krypton. In Gen. 1:1, God is made out to just always have been.

Jump forward with me now to the Israelites in Egypt. They're slaves. God calls out to a guy named Moses, a shepherd. One day while Moses was tending his sheep, he saw a bush on fire but not consumed. He went over to attend to this bush, and then here's what happens: "When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am'" (Exodus 3:4). Then God tells Moses that he wants Moses to go to the great empire of Egypt and set God's people, the Israelites, free. At this, Moses is like, "Um, who am I to go do that? God, if they ask me in whose name I'm coming to set them free in, whose name should I give them?" It's in response to this that God says the following: "'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you'" (Genesis 3:14).

Isn't that fascinating? In other words, God doesn't give Moses a name per se. Essentially he tells Moses, "The God who just IS is with you."

What does God's "IS-ness" mean? What does it mean for you and me? Now, hang with me. Things get heady and hard here. I want to ask you a question. Ready?

Here's the question: "How are you?" And your answer? "I am fine." Now, notice two words: *are* and *am*. When we ask that question, we are asking about the state of someone's existence. When we answer that question, we are saying something about the state of our existence. In both statements, what we have in common is the use of the verb "to be."

There is NOTHING more common in our language than forms of the verb "to be": am, are, is, was, were, will be, etc., and behind our simple language is the profound concept of *being*. Where does *your* being, *my* being, and *all* of creation's being come from?

It's funny. You and I are called human what? *Beings*, right? Well, it's probably an error to say that we are human *beings*. I'll tell you why: I don't have life in and of myself. I don't have existence in and of myself. I once was not. There will come a day when I am not again. Every moment, I get a little older, a little weaker, a little greyer. It's probably better to call me a human *becoming*, to be honest! Same for you. Same for all creation!

Where does being come from?

When I was a kid, I picked up a copy of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, which I think scared my parents. But much to their credit, they let me at it. Dawkins makes one of his main arguments by simply asking the question: "Who created God?" That sounds smart, right? And it is—if *God* needed to be created in order to *be*. You and I needed to be created in order to be, right? Even though we refer to ourselves as human *beings*, we don't *have* being in and of ourselves.

The Bible's description of God is that He *is*. Only God has *being* in and of Himself. The only reason you or I or any facet of creation exists right now is because God is imparting existence to you, and me, and creation right now. In Bible lingo, God not only creates but He also *sustains*. In other words, God gives some of His "IS-ness" and makes it so *you is* and *I is* and *we is*. Without God giving us the "IS-ness," we'd be *out* of "IS-ness"!

You might think of God like the sun. In our solar system, the sun is the thing that everything else revolves around and the thing which gives life to everything on our planet. Without the sun, there is no life. Why? Because our world does not have life in and of itself, but the sun does! In the same way, God is like the sun, only *more so* because whereas the sun will one day give out, God never will. Right now, the only reason your heart is beating and your lungs are working is because God is holding you in existence. Take a moment and feel the weight of this. Notice your breathing. Notice your heart beating. God is making that happen, friends. He gives you life—not just once, but moment by moment. That's not just theology, that's deeply personal!

Theologian David Bentley Hart summarizes this by saying, "To speak of God properly then...is to speak of the one infinite *source* of all that is..." Or, as Jesus says in John 5:26, "For as the Father has *life in himself*, so he has granted the Son also to have *life in himself*."

So, **God just IS**. But what else can we say about His nature?

## 2. God is *INFINITE*

Years ago, I was reflecting on why it is that when I look at the ocean or mountains or stars I'm overcome by *awe*. Why am I so affected by those things but not affected one bit when I look at a pen, let's say. My conclusion? I think the reason why some things provoke awe is because those are things I can't quite

wrap my head around. A pen? Man-made. Man can conquer the pen. Mt. Everest? No way! Plumb the depths of the ocean? Not happening. Map out the entire universe? You're crazy.

And if that's true of those things, how much more true is it of the One who created them all?

Recently, Ashley and I had a date night. So, naturally, I took her to dinner and a movie I wanted to see. I'm learning so well, aren't I? We saw the new Superman movie. Anyone else? I bring this up because many times when we think about God, we picture some version of an old man with a white beard and the powers of superman: super strong, super fast, super hearing, super good, etc. but also invisible!

Now, while there may be some kernel of truth in that picture of God. It'd be a mistake to think of God as a being like us, only bigger, or better, or faster, or stronger. God is infinite, which means that He has no limits. He not only is unlimited in strength or size or knowledge, but he is also unlimited in his essence. God has no limits.

Now, think about what happens after "In the beginning, God." What happens? God creates the heavens and the earth! Now, question: What would have to be true of God for Him to create everything out of nothing? To order things in such a way to set things up for the flourishing of humanity? To exist *before* time or space or matter? He'd have to have infinite power, infinite wisdom, and so on! In other words, God would have to be unlimited and immeasurable.

We see the Scriptures gesture towards this:

- Isaiah says God is "unsearchable" (Isaiah 40:28).
- Psalm 147:5 says, "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure."
- Paul prays that you might know the "immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe" (Ephesians 1:19)
- Paul also writes of "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7).

Think of the implications of this:

- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in *power* (i.e., He's omnipotent or all-powerful)
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in *knowledge* (i.e., He's omniscient or all-knowing)
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in his *presence* (i.e., He's omnipresent)
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in terms of *time* (i.e., He's eternal)
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in terms of *His holiness*
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in terms of *His goodness*
- Because God is infinite, He's unlimited in terms of *His love*

Isn't that amazing? God is infinite, and that infinity leads me to worship!

### **3. God is infinitely *BEYOND*, yet radically *CLOSE***

For God to create the world, He must be *beyond* the world. Some people hear that and mistakenly think He's far away. Not so. In fact, it's precisely because God is so infinitely *beyond*, that He can be radically *close* to you and me.

Think with me a little. When I think of God's beyondness / transcendence, I think of the ark of the covenant. And when I think of the ark of the covenant (maybe for some of you that conjures up images of Indiana Jones and Nazis), I think of Bezalel.

Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood...Then he made two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. He made one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; at the two ends he made them of one piece with the cover. The cherubim had their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim faced each other, looking toward the cover. (Exodus 37:1-9)

After God saves Israel from Egypt, Bezalel is instructed to create the worship space. The ark was the center of the wilderness tabernacle, a visible focus for the worship of God. It was a rectangular box, four feet two inches long, and thirty inches wide and high, covered in gold. At the center was the mercy seat, flanked by cherubim with outstretched wings. But what's interesting is that the mercy seat was not a seat at all—it was an *empty space*.

Several years ago, I came across a propaganda poster created by the Kremlin during Soviet Russia roughly sixty years ago. The picture stems from the words of the Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin. He said, "I looked and looked and looked, but I didn't see God." That's not what the words in the poster say, however. They say, "There is no God." The Russians took Yuri's observations and inferred that because he did not see God, then there was no God to be found. What the Russians got wrong was the way in which they thought of how God exists. God is not really a thing in the universe like this or that object. He's different. He's transcendent.

This is what's going on with Bezalel's ark. You might have been thinking, "The point of the ark was an empty space? What's the deal?" Well, here's the deal: The reason Bezalel's ark of the covenant called attention *to* that empty space on the mercy seat was to paint a picture. It was a symbol. And what did it point to? It was a visible way to represent an invisible reality! It was a visible way to represent God's *beyondness*.

It's a bit like J.R.R. Tolkien's relationship to *The Lord of the Rings*. I'm not sure if you know this, but Tolkien is nowhere to be found in that book. He isn't Frodo or Bilbo. He doesn't show up as one of the eagles, nor is he living somewhere in Elfland. There is a sense in which Tolkien is *transcendent* to the world of Middle Earth! He's *beyond* it.

In a similar fashion, albeit in a fashion that also eventually breaks down, this is what God is like to our world. He isn't present in the world in the way that you or I are present in it (save for a particular first century Galilean). He is transcendent. But catch this: *because* God is transcendent and not bound by space and time, because God is *beyond* it all, this is the very thing that enables Him to be radically close to everything!

Think with me some more: Even though Tolkien is nowhere to be found in Middle Earth, in the Shire, in Mordor, He's transcendent to that world. There is a sense in which he is mysteriously present on every page and in every moment. There is no moment Tolkien's touch isn't present. Because they're his words and it's his story, there's no character that Tolkien isn't intimately close to or intimately familiar with. Because Tolkien is transcendent to Middle Earth, Tolkien is radically present to the entirety of the world of Middle Earth. It's life and tenor speak to his mind and heart and wisdom and *presence*.

Just as Tolkien is able to be radically present to every event, every character, every moment in Middle Earth, that same is true of God with us. Because God is infinitely *beyond* our world, He can be radically close to your world, and my world, in your hurts, and my hurts.

If God is transcendent (infinitely beyond), then this means that in your anxiety, while you're waiting on the biopsy results, when your marriage feels like it's on the rocks, He's radically close. What I'm trying to say here is that because God is infinitely beyond, this means He's radically close. And if God is radically close, this means that God isn't just near the holy places, it means He's also near the broken places.

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

Whew! That was a lot! We covered three things today: (1) God just IS; (2) God is INFINITE; and (3) God is infinitely BEYOND yet radically CLOSE.

- Because God IS, you and I have life.
- Because God's IS-ness is INFINITE, His love for you knows no bounds.
- Because God is infinitely beyond, God is radically close. He is always by your side.