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GENESIS 1:1

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In spite of its name "Genesis," which means "beginning," and in spite of its position as the first book in the Bible, the Book of Genesis isn't the beginning of everything. Genesis 1:1 reminds us, "In the beginning God." So, before we study the basics that are laid down in Genesis 1-11, let's acquaint ourselves with what God did before what's recorded in Genesis. After that, we'll examine what He did that's recorded in Genesis, and finally, what occurred after Genesis. This will give us the kind of broad overview we need to study the rest of God's revelation in the Bible.

1. Before Genesis: redemption planned

What was happening before God spoke the universe into existence? That may seem like an impractical hypothetical question, like "How many angels can stand on the point of a pin?" but it isn't.¹ After all, God doesn't act arbitrarily; and the fact that He created something suggests that He must have had some magnificent purposes in mind. What, then, was the situation before Genesis 1:1, and what does it teach us about God and ourselves?

God existed in sublime glory. God is eternal; He has nei-

ther beginning nor ending. Therefore, He is totally self-sufficient and needs nothing more than Himself in order to exist or to act. "God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made," wrote AW. Tozer, "but He has no necessary relation to anything outside of Himself."² God needs nothing, neither the material universe nor the human race, and yet He created both.

If you want something to boggle your mind, meditate on the concept of the eternal, that which has neither beginning nor ending. As creatures of time, you and I can easily focus on the transient things around us; but it's difficult if not impossible to conceive of that which is eternal.³ Contemplating the nature and character of the Triune God who always was, always is, and always will be, and who never changes, is a task that overwhelms us. "In the beginning God."

Moses wrote, "Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God" (Ps. 90:2, NIV). Frederick Faber expressed it like this:

Timeless, spaceless, single, lonely,⁴
 Yet sublimely Three,
 Thou art grandly, always, only
 God in unity!⁵

"Process theology," an old heresy in modern dress, affirms a "limited god" who is in the process of becoming a "greater" god. But if God is God, as we understand the word, then He is eternal and needs nothing; and He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere present. In order to have a "limited god," you must first redefine the very word "God," because by definition God cannot be limited.

Furthermore, if God is limited and "getting greater," then what power is making Him greater? That power would be

greater than "God" and therefore be God! And wouldn't that give us two gods instead of one?⁶ But the God of the Bible is eternal and had no beginning. He is infinite and knows no limitations in either time or space. He is perfect and cannot "improve," and is immutable and cannot change.

The God that Abraham worshiped is the eternal God (Gen. 21:33), and Moses told the Israelites, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27, NIV). Habakkuk said that God was "from everlasting" (Hab. 1:12, and see 3:6), and Paul called Him "the everlasting [eternal] God" (Rom. 16:26; see 1 Tim. 1:17).

The divine Trinity was in loving communion. "In the beginning God" would be a startling statement to a citizen of Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham came from, because the Chaldeans and all their neighbors worshiped a galaxy of greater and lesser gods and goddesses. But the God of Genesis is the only true God and has no "rival gods" to contend with, such as you read about in the myths and fables from the ancient world. (See Ex. 15:1; 20:3; Deut. 6:4; 1 Kings 8:60; 2 Kings 19:15; Ps. 18:31.)

This one true God exists as three Persons: God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. (See Matt. 3:16-17; 28:18-20;⁷ John 3:34-35; 14:15-17; Acts 2:32-33, 38-39; 10:36-38; 1 Cor. 12:1-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 1:3-14; 4:1-6; 2 Thes. 2:13-14; Titus 3:4-6; 1 Peter 1:1-2.) This doesn't mean that one God manifests Himself in three different forms, or that there are three gods; it means that one God exists in three Persons who are equal in their attributes and yet individual and distinct in their offices and ministries. As the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) states it, "We believe in one God—And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father—And in the Holy Ghost"

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I once heard a minister open a worship service by praying, "Father, thank You for dying for us on the cross." But it was God the Son, not God the Father, who died for sinners on the cross; and it is God the Holy Spirit who convicts lost sinners and brings them to repentance and salvation. To scramble and confuse the Persons of the divine Godhead is to change what is taught in Scripture, and this is a dangerous thing to do.

The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't clearly revealed in the Old Testament, because the emphasis in the Old Testament is that the God of Israel is one God, uncreated and unique, the only true God. Worshiping the false gods of their neighbors was the great temptation and repeated sin of Israel, so Moses and the prophets hammered away on the unity and uniqueness of Israel's God. Even today, the faithful Jewish worshiper recites "The Shema" each day: "Hear [shema], O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5, NKJV). The God revealed in Scripture has no peers and no rivals.

But the Old Testament does give glimpses and hints of the wonderful truth of the Trinity, a truth that would later be clearly revealed in the New Testament by Christ and the apostles. The "let us" statements in Genesis (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; see also Isa. 6:8) suggest that the Persons of the Godhead worked together in conference; and the many instances when "the angel of the Lord" appeared on the scene indicate the presence of the Son of God. (See Gen. 16:7-11; 21:17; 22:11,15; 24:7; 40; 31:11; 32:24-20; Ex. 3:1-4 with Acts 7:30-34; 14:19; 23:20-26; 32:33-33:17; Josh. 5:13ff; Jud. 2:1-5 and 6:11ff.)

Messiah (God the Son) speaks about Himself, the Spirit, and the Lord (Father) in Isaiah 48:16-17 and 61:1-3; and Psalm 2:7 states that Jehovah has a son. Jesus applied verse

7 to Himself when He challenged His enemies who did not accept Him as the Son of God (Matt. 22:41-46). In Genesis 1:2 and 6:3, the Spirit of God is distinguished from the Lord (Father), and this same distinction is found in Numbers 27:18; Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 40:13; 48:16; and Haggai 2:4-5.

Though the word "trinity" is nowhere used in the Bible, the doctrine is certainly there, hidden in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament. Does this profound and mysterious doctrine have any practical meaning for the believer today? Yes, because the three Persons of the Godhead are all involved in planning and executing the divine will for the universe, including the plan of salvation.

The divine Trinity planned redemption. The wonderful plan of redemption wasn't a divine afterthought, for God's people were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 17:8) and given by the Father to the Son both to belong to His kingdom (Matt. 25:34) and to share His glory (John 17:2, 6, 9,11-12, 24). The sacrificial death of the Son wasn't an accident, it was an appointment (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28); for He was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

In the counsels of eternity, the Godhead determined to create a world that would include humans made in the image of God. The Father was involved in Creation (Gen. 1:1; 2 Kings 19:15; Acts 4:24), but so were the Son (John 1:1-3,10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) and the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30). God didn't create a world because He needed anything but that He might share His love with creatures who, unlike the angels, are made in the image of God and can respond willingly to His love.

The Godhead determined that the Son would come to earth and die for the sins of the world, and Jesus came to do the Father's will (John 10:17-18; Heb. 10:7). The words Jesus spoke were from the Father (John 14:24), and the works He

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did were commissioned by the Father (5:17-21,36; Acts 2:22) and empowered by the Spirit (10:38). The Son glorifies the Father (John 14:13; 17:1, 4) and the Spirit glorifies the Son (16:14). The Persons of the Holy Trinity work together to accomplish the divine will.

According to Ephesians 1:3-14, the plan of salvation is Trinitarian: we are chosen by the Father (vv. 3-6), purchased by the Son (vv. 7-12), and sealed by the Spirit (vv. 13-14), and all of this is to the praise of God's glory (vv. 6,12,14).⁸ The Father has given authority to the Son to give eternal life to those He has given to the Son (John 17:1-3). All of this was planned before there was ever a world!

It's important to see that all three Persons in the Godhead share in the salvation of lost sinners. As far as God the Father is concerned, I was saved when He graciously chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world; but I knew nothing about divine election until after I was converted.⁹ As far as God the Son is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on the cross, and I knew that great truth from the earliest days of my life. But as far as God the Holy Spirit is concerned, I was saved in May 1945 when the Spirit of God convicted me and I trusted Jesus Christ. Then what God had planned from eternity all fell into place in my life.

Spiritual birth is something like human birth: you experience it but it takes time to understand it! After all, I wouldn't know my own birthdate if somebody hadn't told me. It's after we've been born into God's family that the wonder of it all is revealed to us from the Word, and then we want to share it with others.

When you seek to fathom the depths of the divine eternal counsels, you will be overwhelmed. But don't be discouraged, for over the centuries, good and godly scholars have disagreed in their speculations and conclusions. One of my seminary professors used to remind us, "Try to explain

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these things and you may lose your mind; but try to explain them away, and you will lose your soul."

Moses said it best: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29, NKJV). The important thing is not knowing all that God knows but doing all God tells us to do. "For we know in part" (1 Cor. 13:9).

2. Genesis: Redemption promised

When He wrote the Bible, God didn't give us a ponderous theology book divided into sections labeled *God*, *Creation*, *Man*, *Sin*, and so forth. Instead, He gave us a story, a narrative that begins in eternity past and ends in eternity future. It's a story about God and His dealings with all kinds of people and how they responded to His Word. As we read these narratives, we learn a great deal about God, ourselves, and our world; and we discover that our own personal story is found somewhere in the pages of Scripture. If you read long enough and honestly enough, you will meet yourself in the Bible.

In our versions of the Bible, there are fifty chapters in Genesis; but the original Hebrew text isn't divided. After describing the Creation (1:1-2:3), Moses listed eleven "generations" that comprise the Genesis narrative: the heavens and the earth (2:4-4:26); Adam (5:1-6:8); Noah (6:9-9:29); Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1-11:9), with an emphasis on Shem, father of the Semites (11:10-26); Terah, father of Abraham (11:27-25:11); Ishmael (25:12-18); Isaac (25:19-35:29); Esau (36:1-8), who is also Edom (36:9-37:1); and Jacob (37:2-50:26). These are the individuals presented in Genesis.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with *humanity in general* and focus on four great events: Creation (1-2), the

fall of man and its consequences (3-5), the Flood (6-9), and the rebellion at Babel (10-11). The rest of Genesis focuses on *Israel in particular* (12-50) and recounts the lives of four great men: Abraham (12:1-25:18), Isaac (25:19-27:46), Jacob (28-36) and Joseph (37-50).¹⁰ We call these men the "patriarchs" because they were the founding fathers of the Hebrew nation.

As you study Genesis, keep in mind that Moses didn't write a detailed history of each person or event. He recorded only those things that helped him achieve his purpose, which was to explain the origin of things, especially the origin of the Jewish nation. Genesis 1-11 is a record of failure, but with the call of Abraham, God made a new beginning. Man's sin had brought God's curse (3:14,17; 4:11), but God's gracious covenant with Abraham brought blessing to the whole world (12:1-3).

You will also notice in the Genesis record that when man does his worst and reaches his lowest, God gives him a new beginning. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said that the cycle in Genesis is "generation, degeneration and regeneration."¹¹ Cain killed Abel, but God gave Seth to continue the godly line. The earth became violent and wicked, so God wiped out humanity but chose Noah and his family to carry on His work. Out of pagan Ur of the Chaldees, God called Abraham and Sarah and gave them a son, Isaac; and the future of God's plan of salvation rested with that son. Isaac and Rebekah had two sons, Esau and Jacob, but God rejected Esau and chose Jacob to build the twelve tribes of Israel and inherit the covenant blessings.

In other words, from beginning to end, Genesis is the story of God's sovereign will and electing grace. This doesn't suggest that the persons in the story were mere robots, because they made mistakes and even tried to thwart God's plans. But whenever people resisted God's rule, He over-

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ruled and accomplished His divine purposes anyway. "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11, NKJV).

What begins in Genesis is developed throughout the Bible and then finds its fulfillment in the Book of Revelation, as you can see from this summary:

Genesis

The first heaven and earth

The first garden; the Tree of Life guarded

The first marriage

Satan tempts Eve to sin

Death enters the scene

Babylon built

The Redeemer promised

Revelation

The new heaven and earth

The "garden city" and the Tree of Life available

The last marriage, the marriage of the Lamb

Satan thrown into the lake of fire

"No more death"

Babylon destroyed

The Redeemer reigns

There are many more comparisons and contrasts between these two books, but this gives you some idea of how important Genesis is to an understanding of God's program and the rest of Scripture.

3. After Genesis: Redemption accomplished

God revealed His great plan of salvation gradually. First, He gave a promise (Gen. 3:15), the first salvation promise found in the Bible. It's the promise of a Redeemer who would be born of a woman, defeat Satan, and bring salvation to mankind. The promised Savior would be a man and not an angel and would save humans and not fallen angels (Heb. 2:5-18).

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Where would this promised Redeemer come from? Genesis 12:1-3 answers that question: the Redeemer will be a Jew, from the people of Abraham. Through a miracle of God, Abraham and Sarah had Isaac; and Isaac was the father of Jacob. But Jacob had twelve sons who founded the twelve tribes of Israel. Which of them would give the world the Savior? Genesis 49:10 tells us: the Redeemer will come from the tribe of Judah.

The Book of Exodus tells how God built the great Hebrew nation as they suffered in the land of Egypt, and then delivered them by His great power. They should have claimed their inheritance in Canaan, but in unbelief they disobeyed God and ended up wandering forty years in the wilderness (Num. 13-14). Joshua led the new generation into the land and there established the nation.

After the tragic era of the rule of the Judges and the reign of Saul, recorded in Judges and 1 Samuel, God anointed David as king and revealed that the promised Redeemer would come from David's family (2 Sam. 7). He would not only be "the son of David," but he would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David (Micah 5:2). Through Isaiah the prophet, God announced that the Redeemer would be born of a virgin in a miraculous way (Isa. 7:14; see Luke 1:26-38).

Of course, throughout the Old Testament ages, Satan did all he could to thwart the plans of God. Cain belonged to the devil (1 John 3:12) and killed his brother Abel, but God gave Seth to continue the godly line (Gen. 4:25-26). During the Flood, God preserved Noah and his family, and from the family of Shem, Abraham was born, the father of the Hebrew nation.

On at least four occasions, the godly line was threatened with extinction. Twice Abraham lied about Sarah his wife and she was taken by pagan rulers (12:10-20; 20:1ff), and his

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son Isaac committed the same sin and jeopardized his wife Rebekah (26:6-16). During the dark days of the later Hebrew monarchy, the wicked Queen Mother Athaliah had all the royal sons slain, but one little prince, Joash, was rescued to continue the Davidic line (2 Kings 11).

How did it all end? "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 5:4-5, NKJV). The angel announced to the shepherds, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

The promise had been fulfilled! And it all started in Genesis!

Now let's join Moses and read his magnificent inspired record of the creation of the heaven, the earth, and human life.