

BEFORE “IN THE BEGINNING” (1)

When There was Nothing, Except the Triune God and His Glory

I'd like to take you back to the time just before the “In the beginning” of Genesis 1:1. However, even in speaking of the “time” prior to creation I'm not being entirely accurate, since there wasn't any time, because God hadn't created it yet. This is hard to fathom, but there was a time when nothing existed...nothing that is except the Triune God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever tried to contemplate nothingness? You probably haven't since it's beyond our comprehension, but let's give it a shot. We're told by scientists that the universe is finite—it has a limit. This harmonizes with Scripture, since the universe is a created entity, and only God is infinite—without limits. If this is so, what exists two feet beyond the edge where the universe ends? The answer is nothing (whatever that is, or should I say whatever that isn't) except God, because only God is infinite. We might picture space beyond the edge of the universe, but even that “space” is something.

Isn't the thought of absolute nothingness mind-boggling? Periodically, I'll ask my kids, “What are you doing?” And they'll say, “Nothing.” But that's impossible. They couldn't do nothing, even if they tried. So what exactly is nothing? Some wit has said, “Nothing is what rocks dream about when they're sleeping.” Dealing with this whole concept of what was going on just before “In the beginning” stretches our thinking to the breaking point.

The concept of God's existence also challenges our puny brains. About the age of four, most children ask, “Who created God?” They'll reason, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God created everything that exists, but who created God? Where did God come from?” Theologians answer these questions by referring to the aseity of God. Aseity comes from the Latin *a se*, which means from himself. Mom or dad will probably forego the Latin and simply say, “God created God. But this never happened at a point in time. God has always existed.” Psalm 90:2 says, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

One of the most important revelations of God was given to Moses at the burning bush. This revelation of God came through His personal name. Up until this juncture in redemptive history, God had never revealed His personal name to Israel. Now for the first time God is going to tell His people what His name is. “Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’...This is my name forever” (Ex. 3:14-15). God's name reveals the truth that His existence is a self-existence or an eternal-existence.

One of the greatest and most mysterious realities in the universe is sheer existence. Once again, this defies our imagination, but every-thing that exists, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or do-minions or rulers or authorities had a beginning, except God. God and God alone simply *is*. God says, “I AM.” This is what it means to be God.

In light of God's self-disclosure in Exodus 3:14, ponder Jesus' answer to the Jews in John 8:58: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’” If Jesus was only claiming to exist before Abraham, He could have said, “Before Abraham was, I was.” But He didn't say, “I was,” He said, “I am.” The revelation that He is unveiling about Himself is that, like His Father, His existence is also a self-existence or an eternal-existence. And of course the Jews understood that Jesus was claiming to be equal with God Himself. This was a blasphemous statement to the Jews, and they responded as you might expect: “So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (vs. 59).

In John 17:11, Jesus prays in His High Priestly prayer for His disciples: “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” God's name is I AM, pronounced Yahweh or Jehovah in Hebrew, and He has given His Son His name, so that Jesus is also the great I AM, who before the earth was formed is from everlasting to everlasting. Since God is the great I AM, He is the only being who is truly self-sufficient. We may talk about raising our children to be self-sufficient, meaning not dependant on other people or the government, but we are all God-dependant. So apart from the grace of God we will not even take another breath.

BEFORE “IN THE BEGINNING” (2)

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From all eternity—before “In the beginning”—the Triune God lived in perpetual joy and love, basking in the glory of one another. In Jesus’ High Priestly prayer toward the end of His life, He said, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (Jn. 17:4). The one great motivating factor in all that the Son does is the glory of the Father. Jesus went on to pray, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed... Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (vv. 5, 24). Before the creation of the world, the Father loved His Son, and as a result He crowned His Son with glory. Then the Son reciprocates with love for the Father and does all that He does for the glory of the Father. And, wonder of wonders, Jesus returns to heaven to once again enjoy that glory, but now He asks His Father that we, His elect, be given the privilege of also basking in that glory.

If we’re going to understand why God created the heavens and the earth, and the fullness thereof, including ourselves, we must see it all in relationship to Trinitarian glory. The glory of God is the linchpin that holds it all together. Answer seven in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* states, “The decrees of God are His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” That is to say, all that God causes to happen was planned, by Him, in eternity past to display His own glory in the future. There is one ultimate answer to all such questions as: Why did God create the universe? Why did He create angels and humans? Why did He permit sin and evil to occur? Why did He choose the nation of Israel? Why does He elect some from all the nations for salvation? Why does He not elect others? The answer to all these and similar questions is that “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” for the glory of His name (Ps. 135:6). The whole universe emanated from glory and will culminate in glory, when all the nations that God has made shall come and worship Him, and shall glorify His name (Ps. 86:9). We look forward to the day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14); the day when we will forever enjoy His glory in the kingdom that He had prepared for us, before He laid the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

There is no mention of the creation of the angelic beings in the creation account, but when the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, He stated that during the six days of creation, “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God (i.e. angels) shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). Apparently some time before the “In the beginning” of Genesis 1:1 God created the angels. John Piper tries to picture this memorable moment described by Job: “God cannot resist, it seems, mentioning what the mood of heaven was like at the moment of creation. ‘All the sons of God shouted for joy.’ All the angels had evidently been created before the universe. And it is not hard to see why. God meant there to be an audience when he created the world. I am sure he said, ‘Watch this!’ when he spoke the galaxies into existence. Imagine the awe and wonder that exploded among the angels. They had never seen or even imagined matter. They are all ‘ministering spirits’ (Hebrews 1:14) and have no material bodies as we do. When God brought material stuff into existence with all its incredible variety and utterly unheard-of qualities of sight and sound and smell and touch and taste, this was totally unknown to the angels. God had made it all up. It was not like the unveiling of a new painting made of all the colors and paints we are all familiar with. It was absolutely, totally, unimaginably new! And the response of the sons of God was to shout for joy” (John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 83).

The angels responded to the creation of the universe, like we respond to fire works on the fourth of July—with oohs and aahs. Can’t you hear the angels? God said, “Let there be light” and it immediately sprang forth, with the multitude of angels letting out a reflexive and corporate shout for joy, as they stood in awe of what their Creator was doing before their very eyes. “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their hosts... Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps. 33:6, 8-9).

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