

# IN THE BEGINNING

by Steve Zeisler

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As you cannot possibly have avoided knowing, two weeks ago the princess of Wales died in a terrible car accident in Paris. Princess Diana's royal standing, wealth, and beauty were a source of fascination and envy. Her compassion and service to others were inspiring. Her vulnerability humanized her and endeared her to millions around the world. Princess Diana's sudden death accomplished on a grand scale what death always does: It reminds us of our own mortality and awakens sometimes-dormant questions about the meaning of life. Every time death interposes itself in any kind of personal way for us, whether we want to or not we begin to wonder about our own life, our own purpose, our own mortality, our own end, and how we came to be. Death forces those questions on us.

The world looked on as Princess Diana was buried and eulogized. And probably the single moment from her memorial service that will be most remembered was Elton John's singing of the song he rewrote for the occasion:

*"Good-bye, England's rose  
For a country lost without your soul  
Who'll miss the wings of your compassion  
More than you'll ever know.  
It seems to me you've lived your life  
Like a candle in the wind  
Never fading with the sunset when the rain set in.  
And your footsteps will always fall here along England's greenest hills  
Your candle's burned out long before your legend ever will."*

A candle in the wind is a metaphor for the human spirit's surviving against all odds, yet in short-lived beauty. As those who found Diana's life compelling drew together in their sorrow, there was a poignancy about it all. We realized that we too are at best a candle in the wind, and our lives are short. If we could only make the most of it, if we could only draw together, if we could only celebrate our lives, if we could only live in someone's memory for some period of time after we die. The song raises those questions and hopes.

But that's not enough, is it? It's not enough to draw meaning from our common humanity. It's not enough to remember a complex life that had its inspiring elements. It's not enough to have the legend live on for awhile after the candle goes out. The answers that our hearts cry out for need to be bigger than that. As Christians we declare that there is a greater answer, that God is at the center of all the questions of life and death and purpose and meaning. When we start to ask these questions, then by the grace of God we come back to that assertion for an answer: What does God say? Who is he? What are his purposes? What can we know of him and how can we draw near to him?

The very first sentence of the Bible says,

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

That is the beginning point. All the other things we will say about how God interacts with his creation, making humans in his image, loving us, redeeming us, and fitting us for heaven, are based on that assertion. The very beginning finds God pre-existent, calling into being all that is. In this series on the opening three chapters of Genesis, we'll go back to the questions of origins and talk about meaning that comes from the creative work of God.

This material is among the most controversial of all the documents that have ever been penned. The announcements that have been made here have been resisted and believed and debated over and over again, especially in the last four hundred years. We're going to find that there are differences of opinion that we need to articulate. We're going to try to make sense of things that Christians have struggled with, and that have certainly divided Christians from non-Christians. In many ways there is more debate among Bible-believing Christians than there is between Christians and non-Christians about, for instance, what Genesis 2 teaches about gender or the nature of marriage. And certainly the issues of cosmology and the origin of life have been wrestled over and discussed in countless settings. So we're engaging a battle in a sense, and we can enjoy joining in this challenging discussion.

One reason this is a battleground is that we're not just talking about things that are unique to us. We're not just saying what Christians should do when they get together-how they should pray, what kind of songs they should sing, or how they should treat one another in Christian community. If that were all we were talking about, the world probably wouldn't take the time to argue about it. But what we're saying when we quote Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is that he created everything that exists, not just the life of faith. So those who believe they have other answers will find themselves required to resist.

Another reason this is a battleground is that critically important things are spoken of in the first chapters of Genesis: The nature of body and spirit, order and chaos, good and evil, the environment and our responsibility for it, the reason gender exists, the nature of marriage, the origin of murder, the beginnings of ethnic and language division, and any reason at all for hope. So these chapters are a challenge to everyone.

Thirty years ago this month I began my life as an undergraduate at the age of 18. I had been a Christian for 2 1/2 years. When I entered the university I was confronted with three dominant paradigms, among others. The university used these paradigms to describe its understanding of what was. If you were going to be a thoughtful, educated person, you had to look at life through these lenses. These three paradigms had their origins in the thinking of nineteenth-century writers, and those roots had grown a great tree by 1967. The paradigms were about the issues that confront us in Genesis. They were almost impossible to argue with. They have challenged Christians all along, very often making us hide out or retreat in academic settings, keeping our faith private, so dominant and demanding were these presumed ways of thinking.

But things have changed in thirty years. These three paradigms have lately begun to come unraveled, and I predict they will continue to be. We'll find that the world is still not going to believe God, because that takes faith, humility, brokenness, and repentance. But the notion that being a Christian is intellectually inferior is losing credibility.

As a background to our study in Genesis, let me outline these paradigms.

## **THE RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE**

The first paradigm has to do with whether the documents of the Bible are reliable. As a freshman I took a western civilization course in which we began by studying the Old Testament period. We started reading the Old Testament. Christians and Jews have believed since the Bible was first put in its current canonical form that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jesus himself attributed them to Moses. But in recent centuries scholars have found ways to slice up these books more and more finely, to date them later and later in Israel's history, to imagine more and more documents that were to have made up this book that we now read. They have essentially undermined its authority by saying it is a pastiche, a cut-and-paste by various redactors working with countless other documents, fitting them together ingeniously to preserve Israel's history, creating a book hoping to find God. The notion that Moses wrote them was considered ridiculous.

If we imagine the Bible to be a cadaver, it's a bit like surgeons standing in the surgical theater, and as one comes up and slices off a piece here and another there, and they hold up the sliced bits, the elites in the surgical theater cheer their genius. Then someone else comes up and slices another piece off the cadaver and rearranges it, taking an organ from one place and sticking it onto another.

But the interesting thing that has happened is that the body didn't stay dead. People still read the Bible. As it always has, the Bible commends itself. You read what is on the page, and its truth forces itself upon you. Of course, that has always been the problem for anyone who wanted to deny the authority of Scripture. As long as people read it they're going to be in trouble, because the Bible has its own authority. It doesn't very often need to be intellectually defended. As Martin Luther said, you don't defend a lion, you turn it loose. Lions defend themselves. The best way to argue with anyone who would deny the authority of Scripture is to ask them to read it.

But something interesting has happened in the last thirty years, and I think it's going to happen increasingly. There are a great many scholars who, while not believing that God is behind the writing of the Bible, or even caring about that, are saying this is not a cut-and-paste hodgepodge. The literary cogency of these documents—the words themselves, the stories, the insights—are so intricate, so profound, written with such genius, that they cannot possibly be the work of some redactor cutting and pasting sixteen different documents together and inventing stories to save Israel's history. There is too fine a mind at work writing these things. Whoever wrote Genesis was a figure of towering intellect, humility, sensitivity to God, extraordinary leadership. It was someone who knew people and cared about history. And when you read this description, you say, "You know, it would take someone like Moses to write that."

It reminds me of a story in Walt Kelly's comic strip some decades ago. At that time there was some debate in scholarly circles about whether William Shakespeare had really written the plays attributed to him. So Kelly parodied that with one of his cartoon figures rushing in and saying, "They proved conclusively that William Shakespeare didn't write his plays—it was someone else named Shakespeare." In the same way, if Moses didn't write the first five books of the Bible, someone else named Moses must have, because only someone of his insight, depth, and genius could have come up with them.

## **THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE**

The second paradigm that I was confronted with thirty years ago, which has also lost much of its force if not all, has to do with cosmology. Once again, at the end of the last century and early in this century, the universe was conceived of as a dormant thing that had always existed in its present form. The laws of physics had never been any different than they were. As intricate, amazing, and huge as the universe was, it would yield its secrets to scientific endeavor as we developed more and more powerful instruments and saw things more clearly. We would gain mastery over the universe.

But nobody believes that anymore. In fact, physicists and anyone who is doing work in cosmology find themselves retreating from any such arrogance. The universe in fact is not eternal. For the moment, I am not arguing that the big bang theory is accurate or not; we can get to that later. But if it were, the universe began something like eighteen billion years ago. That may seem like a long time, but remember, the government can spend that much money without even trying. Eighteen billion years is actually a fairly short amount of time for all the intricacy, balance, extraordinary diversity, and interwoven complexity of the cosmos that exists to have come into being. In fact, it's actually a big problem that all of this could have come into being in only eighteen billion years.

Further, if it's eighteen billion years old, then there was a time eighteen billion and one years ago when it didn't exist. It is a huge intellectual problem that no unbeliever has a solution for to say that the universe had a beginning. It doesn't oscillate between collapsing and exploding. The data won't allow for that. It just all of a sudden burst into being, and before that it wasn't there. And the Bible says in its very first sentence, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

The cosmos is not lying there waiting for us to investigate it, gather up its secrets, and control it. The cosmos is humbling any man or woman who would dare to study it. It is asking tougher questions than we'll ever be able to answer. It is reducing, not promoting, the arrogance of the scientists who attempt to see it as it is. Again, it may not lead to any kind of personal faith in God, because that's the work of the Spirit. But believers who say, "I know the One who existed before the universe began," cannot be called fools for using that language, because there indeed was a "before the universe began." Nobody thinks that's a nonsense statement anymore. We don't have to retreat from the language of Biblical cosmology, hide our faith, or be embarrassed

about it, as I felt I did thirty years ago at the university. My faith might not have been something that I was ever going to leave, but I didn't discuss it in class either.

## **THE ORIGIN OF LIFE**

The third paradigm that is losing its authority has to do with the origin of life. Thirty years ago, and until very recently, science insisted on a closed system, that is, one that existed without any intervention from some intelligent designer, whether you called him God or not. Given matter and energy and time and chance, life could come into being and through mutations and natural selection, or Darwinian evolution, become the species that now exist. And so believers would be ridiculed for explaining the origin of life by pointing to Genesis.

But increasingly in recent years there have been scientists who (while not defending the Genesis creation accounts) find that Darwinian evolution, working only with what is observable, cannot account for the beginning of life and its complexity. There are some very interesting books that have been written in the last couple of years by Michael Beahy, Michael Denton, and Philip Johnson, all arguing strictly on the basis of what is good science that Darwinism cannot work, it is bad science, and it is going to have to be replaced by some other explanation. It will not be able to continue into the next decade. It is going to come unstuck. The explanations are going to crumble under the weight they are trying to carry.

Further, as paradigms topple, we see aggressive efforts to make them topple. The church looked foolish in the Copernican revolution when they resisted looking through Galileo's telescope to see if the sun was indeed at the center of the solar system. I think that's exactly what's going to happen with classical Darwinism. It's going to fail, and efforts to prop it up, this time by secular scientists, are going to look more and more foolish over time.

Now, the focus of our studies in Genesis is not going to be apologetics, but worship of the Lord. So I want to spend some time talking about what we might apprehend about the living God from this first sentence of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." What insight can we gain from this about encouragement of heart and worship and a word to speak of him and his glory? Very briefly, three things.

## **THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF GOD**

First of all, God was before the beginning. The Bible articulates the same point in many other places. The beginning of the gospel of John, for instance, says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Prior to the beginning of creation, God existed in triune fellowship with himself. God the Holy Spirit, God the Son, and the God the Father were glorifying one another, displaying their glory, in love with one another. God was righteous and glorious before anything was created. God was love before anything was created. We have an opportunity as creatures to give priority to things that antedate the creation, to things that will last forever because they precede out of eternity past.

We can look at what is created and look back to the Creator who made it. We can see him in ways that are profound because of his creation. We can apprehend new things of him.

*"There's not a plant or flower below,  
But makes Thy glories known;  
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,  
By order from Thy throne;  
While all that borrows life from Thee  
Is ever in Thy care,  
And everywhere that man can be,  
Thou, God, art present there." (1)*

How can we be fascinated by the world of creation more than we are fascinated by the One who made it? Every bit of it is telling us something of him. When we see the structure of DNA, or hear a two-year-old learning to talk, or experience a thunderstorm, how can we be more fascinated by that than we are by the One

who prior to the existence of those things was fascination himself? Angels live in the presence of God and will forever, with nothing else to do but adore him. And he will never become boring or cease to be worthy of adoration. It will never strike those angels as a waste of time to forever adore him. And we have that opportunity as well. The creation ought to be less fascinating than the Creator. All it does is speak of him, and there is more than even the creation can tell.

## **GOD'S DEEP CONCERN FOR US**

A second thought to derive from God's creation of everything is that he created us with special care. He spoke into being laws of physics, matter, energy, planets, stars, nebulae. He made them just the way they ought to be. But he also created us as his handiwork. The Scriptures say that he knitted us together in our mother's womb, starting with the chosen sperm and the chosen egg to make us who we are. God chose our eye color, the pattern of our fingerprints, the day we would be born. Jesus said that God knows the number of hairs on our head. We remain his concern. God ought to be the object of our fascination, but it turns out that we are the object of his fascination. There is no day that goes by without his attention to us. There is no incident that he doesn't know of. There is no harm that doesn't break his heart. He knows and loves and cares for everything about us. That ought to say something to you about whether you can value yourself. If, before you had a heartbeat, God began fashioning and knowing and loving you, he loves you still, and there's nothing in the world that confounds him, although we're confounded all the time.

## **LIVING WITH ETERNAL PRIORITIES**

Third, remember the words of Jesus, who made some peculiar statements about how we should live: Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are persecuted for his name's sake. He was saying that to choose to live with priorities and values that come out of eternity and that anticipate eternity is wise, rather than making this world pay off. God existed before gold, governments, competitions, prizes, economies, or any of the things this world can offer us to live and die for. In the beginning God created. And we can value the things that take us back to the God who made everything. We can decide that the creation is not enough to live for. And that's exactly why Jesus made the statements that he did. He realized that this world is going to end someday. There's a new heaven and new earth to come. This is only a temporary season, as fascinating as the universe is. It's not forever. Jesus' statements make sense only if it's true that there is Someone greater than the cosmos, Someone who has been and always will be forever, Someone who rewards our choices.

Let me close by telling you about an event that took place in the fireside room at PBC a week and a half ago. A few hours after the princess of Wales died in Paris, a little boy named Jared Barrios also died. He was three years old. He had lived half of his life in a home for handicapped children. He had terrible physical handicaps, his mind didn't work very well, and his family had struggles. You could look at his life and see all sorts of sorrows. But the people at this home and others who loved him also saw him coming alive because of love, learning to communicate, when he had lived most of his life in a cave of himself. He learned to respond and smile and laugh and reach out to other people. And they too suffered the grief that the world suffered when Princess Diana died. Somebody who was loved and cared about and valuable in his own right was lost to us. Millions of people paid attention to Diana's death and burial. Only a handful of us met in the fireside room at PBC to remember Jared Barrios' life. The scale was different, but the emotions were similar. It's sad. Jesus wept at death, and we were weeping. The questions didn't have easy answers, and we did find ourselves thinking of candles in the wind. All of that is unavoidable at the unexpected loss of a young life.

But we sang a better song. We sang of the resurrection of Christ. We could say that in addition to all the human memories and feelings we shared, something else was going on. There is a God who created this life, who loved him, who was drawing this little boy to himself. His purposes are good. We were going to walk out of there trusting him. God created the heavens and the earth, and he created human beings in his image. Jesus became human, died on the cross, and rose again. We believe those facts make everything different. We sang the song *Because He Lives*: (2)

*"God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus,  
He came to love, heal, and forgive;*

*He lived and died to buy my pardon,  
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.  
How to sweet to hold a newborn baby,  
And feel the pride, and joy he gives;  
But greater still the calm assurance,  
This child can face uncertain days because He lives.*

*And then one day I'll cross the river,  
I'll fight life's final war with pain;  
And then as death gives way to victory,  
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He lives.*

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives all fear is gone;  
Because I know He holds the future.  
And life is worth the living just because He lives."*

## NOTES

1. *Sing the Mighty Power of God*, text by Isaac Watts, altered.

2. Text by Gloria and William J. Gaither, © 1971 by William J. Gaither. All rights reserved.

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Catalog No. 4550  
Genesis 1:1  
First Message  
Steve Zeisler  
September 14, 1997

[Back to Index Page](#)

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