

**GENESIS 1:1–3. (EHV)**

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was undeveloped and empty. Darkness covered the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

“Once upon a time.” “A long, long time ago.”

When a story begins with a line like this, we know that the storyteller is taking us back many years, to a time before anyone’s memory. When we hear an opening line like that, to whom do we expect to be introduced? If we’re not introduced to a fictional character, we expect to be introduced to someone like Martin Luther, one of the Caesars, Alexander the Great, or one of the pharaohs.

But what if the story begins this way? “In the beginning.” To whom do we expect to be introduced then? We expect to be introduced to God. And that is in fact the One to whom Moses introduces here in the opening verses of the first book of the Bible. In fact, he tells us quite a lot about God in just the first three verses.

Let’s listen as Moses introduces us to God.

**1. God is eternal**

“In the beginning God.” Those four words alone tell us a lot about God. They tell us that God is eternal, that he exists outside of time. At the beginning of all things, God was already there. He was not born. He did not come into being. Otherwise, this would not be the beginning, but the birth or appearance of God would have been the beginning. He also does not grow old or tired, wear out, or die. Those things all require the passage of time, but God exists apart from time. He has no beginning and no end.

That also means that it is pointless for us to ask such idle questions like, “What was God doing before the beginning, before he created the universe?” We sort of have to talk about time before the beginning in order to begin to understand God’s eternity, a characteristic that goes beyond our finite, time-bound understanding. That’s why Moses says in Psalm 90, “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” But technically, it is improper to talk about what God was doing *before* the beginning, because *before* is a time word. If there was not time before the beginning, then there really is no such thing as *before* the beginning of time. The beginning is a time-wall beyond which we cannot go. We cannot imagine God sitting around twiddling his thumbs for thousands of years until he created the universe, because there were no seconds, hours, days, or years before he created the universe. There was God, and then there was the beginning, because God made the beginning.

This characteristic of God tells us something else about God, that he is incomprehensible in his essence. Yes, there are things we can know about God because he has revealed them to us, but ultimately the full story of who God is goes beyond our understanding.

Sometimes theologians describe God’s eternity by saying that God lives in the eternal now. How awesome is it that the same God who was there in the beginning, who alone witnessed this most incredible phenomenon of the creation of all things out of nothing, is the same unchanged and unchanging God who sees you at work in what you maybe think of as a boring

job, who hears you praying, who takes an interest in your life, who already knew back then what was going to happen today and knows just as well what will happen tomorrow!

## 2. God is active

“In the beginning God created.” Notice that the Bible does not say, “In the beginning God was there. And then God created.” No, from the very first moment of time, God was working. He is not idle, but active.

## 3. God is triune

We also learn something else about God here, but not in English. So I have to teach you some Hebrew. The Hebrew goes, “בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים [Bu-ray-SHEET bah-RAH el-oh-HEEM].” What’s fascinating is that *Elohim*, the word for “God,” is plural, but *bara*, the word for “created,” is singular. So literally, the verse translates into nonsense English, something like, “In the beginning **he** who **are** God created.” The one who does the creating is referred to as more than one, yet the creating itself is actually done by only one being. So already in the opening words of Genesis we have a hint that the true God is a trinity—three persons in one God, and one God in three persons.

## 4. God is loving and gracious

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Some people think that Moses is just summarizing here, as if he were saying, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now let me tell you how he did it.” But clearly that’s not true, because Moses goes on to say that “the earth” from “the heavens and the earth” had waters but was “undeveloped and empty.” And then he goes on to say how he filled it up, including by creating what we know as the heavens or sky on Day 2. So when Moses says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” he is actually talking about God’s act of creation. But what then are “the heavens” here, if they are not the sky?

Jesus helps us answer this question when he talks about Judgment Day in Matthew 25. There he says that on that day he “will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you *from the foundation of the world.*’” These heavens are the heaven of heavens, the residence of God himself, the residence also of the angels whom God will soon create.

Isn’t it amazing to think about the fact that, even though God is going to create a perfect and beautiful home for Adam and Eve, he already knows they are going to fall into sin and drag all of humanity into sin with them, and he has already planned to send them his Son to save them from their sins—and so the *very first thing* God creates is the eternal home where all those who believe in Jesus will dwell in his presence? He didn’t create it for himself. He doesn’t need a home. He didn’t even prepare it primarily for the angels. He created and prepared it *for you*.

So we also see from the opening words of Genesis another characteristic of God—his love and grace.

## 5. God is all-powerful and all-wise

We also see God’s omnipotence, his all-powerfulness, and his wisdom. Everything we make, we make from something else, using mind and abilities that have been given to us, based

on a pattern that itself is based on past patterns or things that already exist or have existed. Even when J. R. R. Tolkien created the fictional land of Middle Earth in his popular *Lord of the Rings* series, it had characteristics and features of our earth. Even when we come up with a make-believe animal, we imagine it within the framework of animals that do exist or have existed.

God created the heavens and earth out of absolutely nothing, and he had no pattern to work with, just as he had no pattern when he went on to create sky, land, seas, vegetation, animals, fish, and humans. Think, for instance, of the symmetry and beauty of a human face; God had no face to pattern our faces after. God first creates a pattern for the heavens and the earth and everything else in them in his own wise mind, if it wasn't already there, and then flawlessly executes his creation on the basis of that pattern.

And if God's pattern for all creation was in his own mind, then we should expect it to be a spiritual pattern first and foremost. The Germans have a proverb: The craft praises the craftsman. That's true with God too. The physical and visible world tells us something about the invisible Creator; it reflects spiritual realities and truths. So, for example, Jesus was able to illustrate how God's word works by comparing it to a farmer sowing seed. But it isn't as though God created seed and seedtime and harvest and then realized, "Hey, that's a good illustration for how my word works! Sweet!" No, the other way around: God created seed and seedtime and harvest exactly the way he did as a physical reflection of how his Word works spiritually. The more we are familiar with the Bible's truths, the more we will see them beautifully reflected and illustrated in the world around us. That's not coincidence; God made the world that way by design. He is all-powerful. He is all-wise.

## **6. He is a God of order and beauty**

"The earth was undeveloped and empty. Darkness covered the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters." We already talked a little bit about this. After talking about God's initial creative act of the heavens and the earth, Moses now focuses our attention on the second of those, the earth. God deliberately created it as an indistinguishable mess of raw materials, so that he could demonstrate for us another of his characteristics: He is not a God of chaos, but of order. He is going to take this indistinguishable watery mass of raw materials, and bring inexpressible order and beauty to it.

We would do well to remember this act of God on the first day of creation when our lives seem to be a mess. God may have deliberately placed the mess there precisely so that he can show himself to you as a God who brings indescribable order and beauty out of ugliness and mess.

This verse also introduces us to one of the persons in God, one of the persons in the Trinity, "the Spirit of God." This verse isn't talking about some inanimate force; inanimate forces don't hover. But what exactly was the Spirit doing by hovering? The Bible also uses the word *hover* to describe what a mother griffon vulture does, a type of ancient eagle, after nudging her young eaglets out of their nest to give them their first lesson in flying. She hovers over them to protect them, ready to swoop down and catch them at a moment's notice when they tire. The Spirit of God wasn't physically hovering in some location, because by very definition *spirit* is the opposite of anything physical. God is using this word to describe his Spirit's protection of his

creation from the beginning. The Spirit is ready to act at a moment's notice in harmony with God the Father and God the Son to create and bring order to this formless mass of material.

### **7. God is personal**

“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” These words tell us that God is personal. Until after he created man, there was no particular need for him to speak. Who was there to hear him? Who was there to write down what he said? Even still he spoke. God is not the force of Star Wars; forces do not speak. He is a personal God.

### **8. God's word is light-bearing and light-giving**

Note what God uses as he begins to bring order from disorder, to bring beauty from formlessness, to bring light to the default state of darkness. He uses his word.

What power and wisdom there is in his word! The first thing it brings into existence, apparently also from nothing, is light. Notice that light comes before the sun, moon, and stars, before fire or lightning or electricity, before anything else that gives off light. He later will apply the light to these things, but at first there is simply light, by the power of his word.

Even today, scientists can use a lot of fancy words like bioluminescence and electroluminescence. They can tell us that a flame is a mixture of reacting gases and solids. They can talk about sunlight coming from a nuclear fusion reaction. They can talk about waves of light and how fast they travel. But they are merely *describing* a phenomenon, not getting to the source of it.

Where does light come from? Some light comes from the sun. Why? Because it is a ball of burning chemicals and gases. Okay, but who or what set those chemicals and gases on fire? And why is it that chemicals and gases can burn? And why is it that flames from burning chemicals and gases give off light? Light is filling this room right now, yet it is not pressing down on us or distracting us as its waves rush by. It is simply there.

And we need light in order to live. The less time a person spends in the light, the more he is liable to be sickly. There used to be an academy for troubled teens affiliated with our church body in Florida. It was founded there on purpose. The sun shines in Florida a lot more—between 60 and 70% of the year. The sunshine put the teens in a better mood and just plain helped to improve their physical state of mind.

Again, this creation of light is a reflection of a spiritual truth. The apostle John tells us that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). Thus we will always be spiritually sickly and ignorant unless we listen to the word of God that created physical light.

Note also how his word works. It goes out into the nothingness and creates a something that hears and responds. And it can only be received by humans by faith, faith that also must be created by God's word. For even Moses who wrote what God first said was not there when God said it. No one was. God had to tell Moses, and God's word had to convince Moses's heart that what he was telling him was true. Like Moses, we know and believe God's word is true, but only because it is God's word that tells us what God has done. God's word had the power to make light shine out of darkness, so it also has the power to enlighten our dark hearts and minds so that we know the truth.

### **9. God is separate (transcendent)**

The fact that God speaks light and everything else except mankind into existence also tells us more about him. It tells us that he is separate from his creation, since he does not merely silently will it into existence as an extension of himself. No, he speaks it into existence separate from himself.

### **10. God is close (immanent)**

Yet God speaking light into existence also tells us that he is close to his creation, since what he creates is directly connected to his word. The light comes into existence only wherever his word reaches and no farther. Somewhere out there beyond all the stars and galaxies, there is a place where there is no light—only God is infinite—and there is no light there because God’s word did not go there when he spoke light into existence.

### **11. God has a Son**

Finally, here Moses also introduces us to the Second Person of the Trinity—not explicitly, but implicitly. We know he is here because the same Word tells us so elsewhere in Scripture. The apostle John begins his Gospel the same way Moses begins Genesis. But John continues differently: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; he was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1–4, 14).

We would go too far if we imagined Jesus as the very words God spoke themselves, as if the Second Person of the Trinity were coming out of God the Father’s mouth in spurts as God said, “Let - there - be - light.” But we know that whenever God speaks, the Second Person of the Trinity, God’s Son, is present and at work, because it is God the Son who makes God the Father known, just as our words make us known.

How’s that for an introduction to God in just three verses?

Over the next few months, we’re going to be getting better acquainted with this God through a service and sermon series on Christian doctrine. I pray that you now see how beneficial it is to grow closer to this God, to get more and more exposure to the light of his word. He is eternal, active, all-powerful and all-wise, a God of order and beauty, personal, separate, close, light-bearing and light-giving, triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and he is loving and gracious, a God who at the very beginning created a beautiful home where you could live with him eternally. May God help us not to be satisfied with just an introduction. May he give us a thirst to know him better and better until we see him face to face. Amen.