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Introduction to Genesis - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - webteam

John Stott explains why we must have the firm foundation of Genesis in place if we are ever to build our understanding of Scripture.

Transcript

[Music] We must regard Genesis primarily not as a book of science, because science changes constantly, but as a book of salvation, which is man's abiding, universal, and unchanging need.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot. As the most respected clergyman in the world, according to Billy Graham, and one of the 100 most influential people in the world, according to Time Magazine, there's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stot.

An extremely humble man, known affectionately to many as Uncle John, it was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the global church. From his home church of all souls Langen Place in Central London, he preached over 600 Simmons. We are marking John Stott's centenary by condensing 60 years of preaching into one year, starting with one of his earliest, known recordings, and finishing at the end of the year with the last sermon John preached at all souls church.

It's also appropriate that we are beginning with an introduction to the book of Genesis. In the early days, John was not in favor of his sermons being recorded as he preached them in church, so would have them recorded afterwards as you will hear today. Although John was a young man at this time, his understanding of what God was saying through the Bible was astounding.

You'll find it helpful to have your own Bible open to Genesis chapter 1. Nothing is more beautiful than Genesis, read Luther, nothing more useful. I think we should agree with his assessment. The narrative of Genesis is very beautiful and the message it conveys one of great practical usefulness.

It's not for nothing that the book is called Genesis, meaning a source or origin, because here at the very beginning of the Bible is the spring from which many of the great doctrines of the Christian faith flow forth like rivers. The sovereignty of God as the creator of all things. The original nobility of man is the only creature made in the image of God.

The dignity of work and of marriage as creation ordinances. The entry of sin into the world and of death through sin. The severity of God's judgment and the glory of his grace.

Also the promise of a Savior who bid the seed of Adam and Eve on the one hand and of Abraham on the other through who seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. These central doctrines of Christianity are laid out in the early chapters of Genesis like massive foundation stones. The superstructure of biblical theology rests upon them and if the foundations are neglected the superstructure cannot stand.

What I want to do today is to try to answer two introductory questions. The first is what should be unapprehended in the book of Genesis as a whole and the second is what is the main thrust of its opening chapter. First the book of Genesis and our approach to it.

We come to our study of it as Christian people with Christian presuppositions. We have a presupposition about the God of Genesis, that the God of creation and the God of redemption, the God of science and the God of Scripture, the God of nature and the God of grace are the same God and there is no distinction or conflict between them. We have another Christian presupposition about the book of Genesis, namely that it is part of Old Testament Scripture so that it shares the nature of the rest of Old Testament Scripture and what may be said of the Old Testament as a whole may therefore be said of the book of Genesis in particular.

Let's consider then the second epistle to Timothy chapter 3 verses 15 to 17 for this passage is one of the clearest expositions of the doctrine of the Old Testament. It calls the Old Testament holy scriptures, sacred writings. Writings which are separate from other writings because they are sacred, writings that are unlike all other writings because they are unique.

It refers in particular this passage to the origin of the Old Testament where it came from and the purpose of the Old Testament what it is meant for. Seems to me very important that we should consider this because the students of Genesis in the last century and indeed at the beginning of this century have tended to concentrate so much either on the literary problems of Genesis. The supposed documents usually known as J, E, D and P that they have missed its divine origin.

Oh they have concentrated so much on scientific problems of Genesis, problems of geology and evolution for example that they have missed its practical purpose. Let's

consider these two things further. Let me bring you these two points.

First as part of Old Testament scripture Genesis has a divine origin. To Timothy 3 16 all scripture is given by inspiration of God. And there's five words represent the one Greek word literally translated God breathed.

All scripture is God breathed. The biblical concept of inspiration is not that God breathed into the writers or their writings but that their writings were breathed out by him. They are regarded as emanating from his mouth said that some of the prophets could say the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

There are thus his words his spoken utterances and this is the view of the Old Testament held by Jesus Christ and his apostles and it is therefore their view of Genesis. In fact the first twelve chapters of the book of Genesis are quoted from or directly alluded to in the New Testament 35 to 40 times even narrative portions and comments by the human author are regarded as being the word of God. Now that doesn't mean that Genesis have no human authors nor does it mean that the work of these human authors was obliterated by the process of inspiration.

It simply means that through their human words God breathed or spoke his words. Then you may ask where the human authors. I expect you're familiar with the documentary Hypothesis regarding the origin of Genesis which was first elaborated in detail by Julius Valhison in the 1870s in which he tried to isolate these four supposed documents that are called by the letters J, E, D and P. And this documentary hypothesis with some changes still holds the field in the schools and colleges of our country.

This is not an appropriate occasion for me to examine the hypothesis critically nor indeed do I have the technical competence to do so. But there are four things which I think I must say before passing on. The first is this.

Although the name of Moses has been linked with the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, by a very ancient tradition indeed, and although he figures said prominently in these five books, especially from Exodus onwards, that obviously he was a primary source of much of what these books contain, yet this does not imply that he rented all. For instance, presumably he did not write the account of his own death, now to learn his own epitaph. Two, we have no difficulty in agreeing that Genesis, which tells the story before the life of Moses, is a compilation from various sources.

Some of these sources were evidently family archives introduced by the formula these are the generations of, which occur some ten times in the book of Genesis. The earliest of these family archives were probably brought by Abraham himself from Mesopotamia when he came into the land of Canyon, for we know that literacy and culture were already very far advanced in Mesopotamia in Abraham's day. Thirdly, we cannot accept the theory that parts of Genesis are virtually forgeries.

The writing back into patriarchal and mosaic days of events which never happened, and of ideas which belonged to a later age, we cannot accept that. Fourthly, we cannot accept a reconstruction of Genesis based on the theory that Hebrew religious ideas evolved from primitive and mystic beginnings, because we believe that Hebrew religion, that is the religion of the Earth Testament, was revealed by the living God. We believe in fact that although Genesis no doubt was a compilation from different sources that were written and edited by men, it is yet like the rest of the Old Testament the God breathed word of God.

So much then for this first point about Genesis that is part of Old Testament Scripture, it has a divine origin. The second point regarding our approach to the book of Genesis is that as part of Old Testament Scripture, it has a practical purpose. If I may bring you back to 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 15, you will see that Paul told Timothy that from a child he had known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make the wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

And then verse 16 that this God breathed Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction and righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect or complete thoroughly furnished unto all good works. Going back to verse 15, you will see that the Holy Scriptures are able to instruct us for salvation. That is the grand end and object of Scripture.

And salvation must be understood in its all-embracing sense, including not only the justification of sinners by which they are accepted in the sight of God, but their centrifocation, the process by which they are made righteous in their character and conduct. Something you see, the Scripture presents Christ to us so that we are justified by faith in Him. It makes us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

And then it goes on to be profitable for doctrine, reproof, etc. that we need a thoroughly furnished unto all good works. I want to draw your attention to this reference to faith in Christ in verse 15 and good works in verse 17.

It tells us that the practical purpose of Scripture is to save us by faith unto good works. And this is true of all Scripture. All Scripture is God breathed and all Scripture is profitable.

And therefore, if it's true of all Scripture, it's true of Genesis. We must regard Genesis primarily not as a book of science, because science changes constantly, but it's a book of salvation, which is man's abiding, universal, and unchanging need. In and through the early chapters of Genesis, God's purpose is not to disclose by special revelation scientific truths, which could be discovered by empirical investigation, but rather to reveal religious and moral truths, which, if not revealed by God, could and would never be known.

What we say about these chapters is not that they're unscientific and may be contradicted by science, but that they are non-scientific, their purpose being different from the aims and objects of natural science. We sum up then our main approach to the book of Genesis. It is twofold.

One, since these chapters are God breathed and have a divine origin, we must study them with reverence, listening, humbly to God's word as he speaks it through these chapters. Two, since these chapters are profitable and have a practical purpose, we must study them with obedience, resolved to be not any hearers, but doers of God's word. So much for our approach to the book of Genesis.

Now, the second section of this first address concerns the manthrust of the first chapter of the book. We're going to go into greater detail next time, but I want now to give you a brief bird's eye view of chapter 1. And as we look at it as a whole, there are three major truths which stand out. First, in the beginning, God.

Thus one, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now, reader can fail to be struck by the majestic simplicity of this opening sentence. God is introduced with art apology, without explanation, without proof or definition.

The author is, of course, writing to believers in Israel. And his aim is to affirm that the God of the covenant of Israel is the God of creation. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt, is an empettied tribal deity, equivalent to Kimosh, the God of the Malabites, or Milcom, the God of the Ammonites, but the true and living God who created the universe and man on earth.

The opening words of Genesis, declaring that God is the creator of all things, the heavens and the earth, dispairs of all the various alternatives which have ever been suggested. The universe has its origin, not to some heavenly warfare between the gods, as the pagan creation stories affirmed with what Alexander McCarran calls the monstrosities and pure relatives. Nor to an eternal conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, as some dualistic systems have affirmed.

Nor to the operation of blind, irrational forces, some unexplained evolutionary process as unbelieving humanists would have us believe today, but to a free and sovereign act or succession of acts of the creators will. Moreover, God created these things, all things, and the universe out of nothing. Oh, not that, in Charles Wesley's famous hymn, at his voice creation sprang at once to sight, not that the whole universe came into being instantaneously, but that when God began, he had no raw material to work upon.

There was nothing in existence but himself. For in the beginning, that is, in the beginning of time, God created the heavens of the earth. Therefore, before this beginning, there was no creation.

There was only God. This is, in fact, the consistent teaching of Scripture. God inhabits eternity, not time.

Isaiah 57, 15. He is the great I AM, the eternal is self-existent, one. He alone has immortality.

Against our 90 verse 2, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hast formed the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. So then God is not dependent on the universe. He existed eternally before he met the universe.

Rather is the universe dependent upon him, and it was with his first act of creation, the time and history began. This truth is also implied by the Hebrew word that is used in verse 1 of the universe, in verse 21 of the origin of animal life and in verse 27 three times of man. According to the commentators on the Hebrew text, it is a very special word.

It's never used of making or manufacturing material things. Outside the Bible, apparently it is used at the work of artists, that in the Old Testament it is reserved exclusively for the creative work of God. Deilich has written in his commentary, "The Colonel of the Nation expressed by Barra, B-A-R-A," the Hebrew word, is the origination of the absolutely new.

Von Rad, a contemporary Lutheran commentator writes, "It contains the idea both of complete effortlessness and of 'Crayartio X Nihilo' that is creation art of nothing." This is the first truth that stands out of chapter 1 of Genesis in the beginning, God. The second truth is this, "In the end, man." What is planned from Genesis 1 is that before the process of creation began, there was nothing in existence but God, and when the process had finished, there was man. The whole chapter leads the reader on and up to man.

Man is presented as the crown, the climax of creation, the end product which God had already conceived before the work began and to which he was gradually working. And man's uniqueness is emphasized in the chapter. Although God created all things, both animate and inanimate, only man was created in his image and after his likeness.

And then man was appointed the lord of the lower creation. He was told to fill the earth and to subdue it, and he was given dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves over the face of the earth. Thus man, God like in his intelligence and his authority, is set forth as the masterpiece of God's creative plan.

So in Genesis 1, the first truth that is emphasized is in the beginning God, the second is in the end man, and the third is in between ordered stages. That is straight away the striking contrast between verses 1 and 2. Thus 1 speaks of the creation of the heavens

and the earth. That is the universe.

But verse 2 speaks of the earth only. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. It is recognized that God is the creator of the universe and that the earth is only a tiny part of it.

But the Bible is the story of God's dealings with earth, and especially with the man he made to develop an earth. So Genesis 1, like the Her Bible, is a geocentric book. It centers upon earth and life on earth.

It focuses attention upon earth, and it only describes the rest of the creation in its relation to earth and to man. Next verse 2 comes the description of earth's primeval chaos. The earth was without form and void, etc.

Some people have propounded the theory, made popular in the Schurfield Bible. That verse 2 describes not the state of earth when God made it, but the state to which he reduced it by a subsequent act of judgment. They point to Isaiah 45, verse 18, which uses the same Hebrew word for chaos and says on earth that God did not create it a chaos.

Some people further embrace this theory because they believe that the days, the six days of Genesis 1, are to be interpreted literally if periods of 24 hours, and they are then in trouble because they need a long period of time for the rocks and the fossils to form. And so they argue that between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis 1 there was a prehistoric fall, either of angels or of some pre-adamic race or of birth, which led to the ruin of the earth by divine judgment. If that were the case, as they argue then verses 3 onwards describe not the original creation, but the re-creation or reconstruction of earth after some prehistoric disaster.

Now although this theory seems still to be held by quite a number of Christian people, it is really pure speculation. It depends on changing the words and the earth worlds without form and void to what the earth became without form and void, which is not what the text says and apparently is to force the Hebrew words. Moreover, all Isaiah 45, verse 18, and the Hebrew says is that God did not create the earth in order to remain a chaos, but created it in order to be inhabited.

You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stort on Genesis chapter 1, which he will conclude at the same time next week. During his lifetime John wrote over 50 books, many of which have become classic works with some being translated into 60 languages. He wrote the manuscripts by hand at his retreated whales by the light of an oil lamp, as he did not have electricity connected there until 2001.

Many of the sermons we are featuring in these centenary bookcasts form the basis of his books, and today's recommendation is entitled "God's Word for Today's World." Details

of this and all John's books can be found at premier.org.uk/JohnStort. The legacy of John Stort lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stort, who donated all his bookworlds to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries John Stort founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStort. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stort.

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