

IN THE BEGINNING GOD—

A Sermon Preached at Dunn, August 5, by Rev. Ronald E. Wall
from the First Verse of Genesis as a Text.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Gen. 1:1). Someone has called this the most sublime sentence of all literature. Surely it is one of the greatest verses of the Bible. It contains the key word to the Old Testament—"God." This first verse of the Bible is full of meaning and has a remarkable significance, which shows that it was not placed at the very beginning of the Holy Scriptures by mere chance or accident. This is its logical place, for if we keep in mind the truth of this verse, many otherwise perplexing problems will vanish into insignificance.

Dr. John R. Sampey, that incomparable Old Testament scholar and teacher, has said: "The first verse of Genesis lies at the foundation of all the theology of the Bible . . . Back of all things, before all things, above all things stands God, the great First Cause, the Creator. A hearty acceptance of the fact that God actually created the heavens and the earth without the use of pre-existing materials, would lift one above the malaria of most modern heresies. He who begins the study of religion with this simple truth lays a solid foundation for all his future thinking." (The Heart of the Old Testament, p. 15).

The Acceptance of the Truth of this Text Subverts Numerous Heresies.

Atheism—Someone has pointed out some of these heresies or theories of men that are denied by this first verse of Genesis. In the first place, it denies the theory of atheism, for it assumes the existence of God. The Bible never undertakes to prove His existence; it makes that basic and necessary assumption. I do not understand how any man possessed of sound mental faculties can look at God's creation and say that it is merely an accident and just happened by chance. Every intelligent thinking person must admit that there is a First Cause, an intelligent God, back of this universe. Belief in a God or gods, belief in a Creator or creators, is practically universal among the races of men. Man cannot otherwise account for the existence of the universe or for his own existence. I think that if we had no Bible, if we had no revealed Word of God, even then the fact of the existence of a universe like this, governed by perfect law and order, would compel us to declare that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." I can understand how there can be differences of opinion about the nature of God, but I cannot understand how any sane person can believe that there is no God. No doubt most of the so-called atheists are like the one who was crossing the ocean. During the first part of the voyage he had told his companions that he did not believe in God, that the world was merely an accident. But when the vessel was out in mid-ocean, a terrible storm arose. The winds blew and dashed great waves against the ship. The lightning flashed keenly and the thunder roared. Many thought that the vessel would sink into the billowy deep. Soon someone saw this avowed atheist down on his knees praying; so he said to him, "Why, I thought that you did not believe in any God; to whom are you praying?" The man answered, "Brother, that talk will go all right on dry land or even on a calm sea, but it won't do put here in a time like this." Yes, when we need God, we can believe that he exists. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." (Psalm 14:1). The wise man said, "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7).

Polytheism—Again, this first verse of Genesis denies polytheism, the belief in many gods, for it asserts belief in one God. It is true that the word translated "God" is plural in the Hebrew, but this is perhaps a plural of majesty or sovereignty and does not imply that there were more gods than one. The greatest minds of Israel always believed in one God. This is one of the striking characteristics of the Hebrew religion. The Jews came into contact with peoples who believed in many gods, but they never as a nation accepted these foreign deities. Their religion has always been monotheistic. One summer I was reminded of the Jewish belief in one God by seeing this inscription over one of their largest synagogues in Chicago, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, is one God."

All nature points to the fact that there is one God. Look at the universe and it cries out, "There is one God." The stars point to unity. Consider the beautiful little rose as it unfolds itself in answer to the call of the warm sun and you will hear it say, "There is one God." Someone has said: "The universe is a unit—the conception of that idea—one God—is the foundation of all science and theology. There is only one God. There is only one mind. There is only one Law. There is no schism in nature . . . Every voice of nature speaks the same truth

and attests the same fact—One God and only One. Astronomy, botany, geology, physiology, psychology, biology, history, and Scripture say One God—only one. There is only one universe."

Materialism—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This verse denies the theory of materialism, for it asserts the creation of matter. The word "created" is a translation of a Hebrew word meaning to form or fashion, to bring into existence without the use of any pre-existing materials. Hence God is above matter; He existed before matter; He created matter. I know that it is difficult for our finite minds to conceive of a time when there was no matter, but it is far more difficult to think of matter without conceiving of a First Cause, a Supreme Being who created matter. This verse declares that God was in the beginning; He created matter. If we keep this important fact in mind, we need have no difficulty with the theory of materialism.

Pantheism—Furthermore, our text denies the theory of pantheism, for it declares the existence of God before all things and beyond all things. It asserts that God exists apart from all things. We must differentiate between God and His creation. We behold the flower in the garden; we are fascinated by its beauty; we see perfect design and order there; we see the work of a Master designer; but we must remember that this flower is not God—it is only the word of God. God is not law and order; He uses law and order. He is greater than His creation and exists apart from it. Pantheism denies that God is a personal being. It puts man on a level with God and absorbs God in His own universe. It denies the possibility of divine revelation.

The late Dr. E. Y. Mullins gave some very striking objections to this theory of pantheism. He said: "It takes away freedom from God, because the universe is conceived as the necessary unfolding of a principle in the divine nature. It ignores the radical differences between matter and spirit and fails to harmonize them. It makes God the author of evil, because evil remains an essential phase of the process of development. It destroys human freedom, personality, and immortality, because man is merely a passing phase of a logical process which will be transcended in the course of time. In short, necessity rules at every stage of the process and the whole moral and personal realm collapses. All this is in direct conflict with the deliveries of our own moral consciousness and of our Christian experience." (The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression, p. 254). This theory of pantheism, which our text denies, can end only in hopelessness and despair.

Fatalism—Moreover, the theory of fatalism is here denied, for our text involves the freedom of God in His creation. It denies the doctrine that all things are merely subject to fate. The universe is not simply an accident; it is not a necessary reaction to some blind and powerful force. It did not just happen by chance. "In the beginning God CREATED the heavens and the earth."

Acceptance of the Text Estops Foolish Contentions.

This inspired statement throws light upon many otherwise perplexing problems. We do not hear so much today about the theory of evolution in creation as we did a few years ago, when bitter words were spoken by some. If all who were perplexed about this theory had realized the truth of our text, much of their confusion would have vanished. The Bible does not give the process of creation; so we may have whatever theories we desire. I think that evolution is still a theory, but if it were proved to be a fact, it would not change my faith one iota. The thing of extreme importance here for us to keep in mind is the fact that God is behind it all. To me it does not matter what process God used, for I know that the final outcome is man "in the image of God." Man, the creature, cannot question God, the Creator, concerning his method of creation. "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why didst thou made me thus?" (Romans 9:20). God had the power to create man in His own image by whatever process He desired. He might have taken millions of years to create the heavens and the earth and man, or He might have done it in one day. The fact of importance is that God was behind it all. He was in the beginning and it was he that made us according to his own plan.

His Creations Declare God's Glory.

This verse tells us that God made the heavens and the earth. What a wonderful creation! The psalmist beholds the beauty of it and gives credit to the Creator: "The heavens declare the glory of God;

And the firmament showeth His handiwork." (Psalm 19:1). Man is the crown and goal of God's creative act; yet he sings, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, The moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of Him? And the son of man, that thou visitest Him?" (Psalm 8:3, 4). When man contemplates God's creation, he feels his own littleness and insignificance. The shepherd psalmist had time to lie on the hillside at night and enjoy the beauty of the stars and the moon. There in the quietness of those Judean hills the stars sang together a song about the glory of God. The shepherd's soul was lifted up until he could forget the world and all its sorrows and sing with the stars.

Today, in this age of science, when we have telescopes and other instruments with which to survey the heavens—when we can look beyond the stars, when we can see planets that the psalmist never dreamed of, when we can begin to realize something of the vastness of the universe—something of the greatness of God's creation—we cry out with more meaning, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament showeth His handiwork."

Have you ever stood upon the mountain top and watched the beauty of a golden sunset? Have you ever beheld the glory of the sunrise? Have you ever sat and dreamed of riding upon the milk-white rapture upon the shore of the sea and been thrilled by the beating waves dashing against the shore? Have you ever awakened to find the whole earth covered with a white blanket of pure snow and the trees trimmed with silvery ice. What a wonderful creation! The stars, the moon, the sun, the clouds, the rainbow, the mountains, the hills, the plains, the seas—all declare the glory of God and the greatness of His creation. The flowers and the trees whisper of God. The poet sings:

"I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree;

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest,
Against the earth's sweet flowery breast.

A tree that looks at God all day
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree."

Did you ever examine a snowflake under a microscope? Those who have done so tell us that we can see stars, crosses, diamonds, crowns, and circles all within one little snowflake, that the architecture of the snowflake is as perfect as the traceries on the granite of some magnificent cathedral. We see design here that speaks of a perfect Designer. All creation calls for a Creator. "For every house is builded by some one; but He that built all things is God" (Hebrews 3:4).

God Greater Than His Laws.

Not only did God create the heavens and the earth and man, but he fixed laws to govern his universe. He is greater than his laws. All of our scientific inventions have been brought about by the application of these laws. Newton did not create the law of gravitation; he merely discovered it; it had always existed. Man has never created anything. He has merely begun to discover the greatness of God's work of creation. He has applied God's laws and has made remarkable discoveries. Hence all of man's inventions and discoveries declare the glory of God.

Men marveled when the telephone was invented. We stood in wonder when the aeroplane flew for only a few minutes, but now the globe has been circled by them. The mountains and deserts and oceans have been traversed by them. Some of our aviators have stayed up in the air for over three weeks at a time. We stand by the side of a giant skyscraper in some of our cities today and marvel at its size. We sit in our homes and hear musical concerts in England or we hear Admiral Byrd speaking from the South Pole. Remarkable, isn't it? All of this declares the greatness of God's creation. Mighty steamers ply the oceans; giant ships sail across the skies; great locomotives pull tons of freight across the land; submarines sail under the waters of the seas. All of this is wonderful.

Yes, God's universe, his creation, is wonderful; but the crown and goal of his creative act is man. He has crowned him with honor and glory and given him dominion over the works of his hands. He has put all things under his feet. He has given him power to build kingdoms and to sway empires.

God No Greater Than His Love.

God's love for man is as great as his creation. Indeed, it is greater. "For God so loved the world,

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