

***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said ...***

God said ...

Everything starts here.

God is not a partner with us in the pursuit of truth – he is not the lead consultant who knows more than the rest – he is not the most clever investigator on the team – God is not out to discover anything – God did not ask ...

...God **said**.

The Bible uses this phrase 54 times to tell of something that God said directly. 18 of those utterances occur in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Make of that what you will but it tells me that the person who wrote this document that we are now studying intended for us to understand that everything that matters started with God.

Why would God say anything? There was no-one to listen. No-one to respond in conversation. No-one even to obey in service. Why would God speak?

Can I suggest that God spoke – not because there was an audience for him – but because it is an essential part of who God is to speak – to reveal.

Some very well known words from Paul's writings back this up. ***what may be known about God is plain ... because God has made it plain ... For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made***

Do you see what Paul is saying – everything you see around you exists for only one purpose ... to declare the invisible character of God. Even if people don't hear or understand his message, the heart of God overflows in revelation of himself.

And also from another writer *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being*

When we ask the question why did God say anything then we might as well ask the question why is God the way he is. All of the history of this universe and of mankind in particular has been defined by God's manifestation of his glory – and dare I say all of the history of the universe and of mankind yet to come in future will be defined by God manifesting his glory.

If God had said nothing ... then nothing would ever have been said.

Many words have been said about this first part of Genesis – many reputations have been made and challenged on what people have said about it. But as I came to review what I should say to you this morning I could not see past the awesome fact that before anything was ever spoken by any human – before any human even understood anything – God said.

God has had many spokesmen throughout history – both self-made and officially appointed. The camp of Israel around Sinai actually verbalised what so many people since then have thought – when they said to Moses the spokesman for God *Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us.*

As history has passed, the human creature has become great in his own estimation and has taught himself to despise the revelation of God. At best he has understood God as the historical figure who got the universe started but who is now a bit out of date. At worst he has judged in his arrogant stupidity that God never existed at all.

Even Christians are so often guilty of crafting a theology that suits their particular preference ... or of bringing God in as a consultant or advisor to their plans or mission.

But if we are serious over the next few months about getting back to the foundation of our faith – if we are serious about understanding the message that has been frozen for us in the text of the biblical writings – then above all else we must understand this one fact – God said!

What did he say?

### **Let there be light**

Please don't get bogged down in trying to fit this into a scientific model of the origin of the universe. I have a painting on my wall that was created by a street artist in a town in Spain one year when I was on vacation. I watched him create the painting using spray cans, and stencils and scrapers ... and I could easily bore you with the detail of the process by which he produced the work of art – of the flair with which he twirled the spray cans in the air or turned them into a blowtorch with the aid of a cigarette lighter to dry the paint.

But I am certain that you would get much greater enjoyment just looking at the finished article hanging on my wall and discovering what was in the mind of the artist from the beauty of his work.

Yes there is a place for uncovering the elegance of the process by which the universe came into being – and I never fail to be fascinated by the evidence that is locked into the fabric of the universe that tells the story of how it came to be. I am not frightened of truth – I am hungry for truth – I want to know the whole story – I know that whatever I find will never diminish my God because everything any scientist will ever discover will only reveal more of what God put there to be discovered.

But this story in Genesis is not about that process – it is not about how the universe came into being – it is a mistake to try to align this beautiful introduction to the revelation of God with mere process – this story is about about the finished work of art.

On the canvas of his self revelation God first painted light.

John said *God is light, in him there is no darkness at all.*

- Darkness hides – light reveals.
- Darkness trips and makes us fall, light guides and makes us secure.
- Darkness terrifies but light comforts.
- Keep a plant in the dark and it will die.
- Even the small seasonal change in light level can cause serious depression in people

The first thing God said was to banish darkness with light.

### **Let us make man in our image**

What an astonishing responsibility is on our shoulders. Do you see in context what this statement means? God is setting out to reveal his glory – to tell the truth of who he is – and as part of that message he decides to paint a self portrait. Here we have the answer to the greatest question of philosophers down the ages – *why am I here*. You are here to illustrate who God is.

When Viktor Frankl was sent to Auschwitz, he'd been researching a book on Finding Life's Meaning. But when his clothes were suddenly taken from him, including the manuscript he'd hidden in his coat lining, he questioned whether his life had real meaning at all. Then something happened: the Nazis gave him the rags of an inmate who'd just been sent to the gas chamber and Frankl found in the pocket a page containing a Jewish prayer (from Deuteronomy 6:4-5): Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 'How should I interpret such a coincidence?' he asked himself, 'Other than to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?' Later he wrote, 'Nothing in the world will so effectively help you to survive as the knowledge that there is a purpose to your life. He who has a 'why' to live for, can bear almost any 'how'

I don't know what purpose you are living for – but I can tell you with certainty that if you are not living to reveal the glory of God by your life then you are missing the point altogether.

### **I give you**

God has been saying that since the beginning of time. He will go on saying it through the ages of eternity.

- Among men we give and expect a return.
- Among men we give for a season and expect an end to our giving.
- Among men we despise dependence and demand contribution.

But God is not like men.

- He expects no return – what could man give to God.
- He does not give for a season nor does he become weary of his giving.
- He does not expect us to find independence from him.

It is his glory to sustain us. After all he sustains the entire universe by his powerful word. To seek independence from him is to despise his gift to us.

When I was first dating Linda I drove an old green Vauxhall Viva. It is a testimony to the strength of her love for me that she survived the experience of being driven around in that car – and on occasion suffering the indignity of sitting with the bonnet up while I tried valiantly to make it go. There came a day when eventually I needed to replace it with something a bit more dignified – and the day after I bought my new car a friend of mine told me his car had given up the ghost. So I gave him my old green Viva. It was old but it was still going and I thought he would get some good out of it. After all I had driven it everywhere for over a year. I thought I was giving him something.

A couple of weeks later I met him again and asked him how he was getting on with the car – only to be told it was a load of rubbish and he had scrapped it.

He was probably right – it probably was a load of rubbish looking back on it now.

But let me ask you – has God ever given you anything you would scrap as a load of rubbish? God does not hand out second rate gifts – his provision is first class – enduring – wholly satisfying – complete.

## **It is not good for the man to be alone**

Of all God's gifts to man this must be the greatest. Companionship – society – fellowship. I don't propose to say much about this because we have visited the importance of life together a number of times recently.

Suffice to say that man made in God's image yearned and yearns for company. God is never alone – the intensity and fulfilment of fellowship within God is something that we humans cannot conceive or understand. But we can understand the need for that kind of completeness and we can understand the blessing of a friend who understands our heart.

God knew the yearning that would be in the heart of man and he met that yearning.

## **What have you done**

God said this to Eve in this drama within Eden during the dialogue when he forced Adam and Eve to confront their disobedience. Let us not miss what actually happened by reason of familiarity. God had placed within their reach the means for knowing the difference between good and evil. Up to this point they were blissfully ignorant of either – and he had prohibited them from acquiring this knowledge. With this knowledge comes a fearsome responsibility – and God warned them that if the day ever came that they put out their hand and took to themselves this knowledge, then in that very day they would die.

Paul explained many years later what that was like in practise. This knowledge of good and evil – knowing what is good, wanting to do it, but failing – knowing what is evil, wanting to be strong enough to resist it, but failing – this knowledge was to him nothing

other than death itself. ***What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?***

We know very well the story of their temptation and disobedience – we know that God told of a coming descendant of Adam who would crush the tempter – we know well the story of their banishment from the Garden and the curse God placed on the land.

But I want simply to talk about the confrontation between God and the guilty. God who knows all things – God who certainly knew exactly where Adam and his wife were hiding and who knew the reason why ... asked some questions. Where are you? Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat? What is this you have done?

This knowledge that Adam acquired changed humanity forever. It did not change God's plans. The work of Christ was planned before Adam ever lived. Peter said that his role as a lamb whose blood would be shed was foreordained before the foundation of the world. The disobedience of Adam did not change God's purpose at all. GOD SAID is still the final word. But there is no doubt that this knowledge of good and evil changed humanity forever.

Yet what I want to say is that faced with this reckless disobedience God did not even become angry. The man and his wife both let themselves down with their petty defensiveness – but God was full of grace and compassion – he meted out the consequences of their act but he never turned his back on them.

Do you ever hide from God? Does that shame you feel make you think you cannot face him? That is only you applying human values to God. I said a moment ago that he never stops giving. Now I say that he never stops forgiving.

Can I plead with you not to ever hide from God.



## **This is the sign of the covenant**

For the sake of time I have skipped out the entire story of the flood – how God determined to destroy mankind but appointed one family to carry on his purpose. I want to come to the end of that story for a fascinating insight into the heart of God.

Following the flood, having cleansed the world from its wickedness, having miraculously rescued Noah's family from death, having re-established the food chain and having arguably rescinded the curse he had put on the land following Adam's sin – God then takes the inexplicable step of establishing a covenant with all life on Earth – not even just human life but all animal life also. He covenants to never again destroy life on earth with a flood.

You may say that is a fairly limited covenant – there is still plenty of scope for God to destroy all life on Earth through other means. But the point remains – why would God ever enter into a covenant of any kind with his creature? Why would he put himself in a bind and restrict his freedom so voluntarily like that? Why would he commit that every time he would see the colours of the rainbow in the sky he would remember his covenant and hold back from a flood.

There was one very pragmatic reason. He needed the offspring of Noah to re-establish the rhythm of planting and harvest and they would have needed the reassurance every time the clouds opened up with rain that this was not the beginning of another flood otherwise they would have decided it was a waste of time to plan for planting and harvest.

But I think there was another wonderful reason. God was beginning the process of binding himself to his creature. Mankind

has always looked for ways to cut loose the bindings and gain their freedom. But fools that we are we failed to see that these were not bindings to restrict mankind – rather these were bindings to commit the eternal God to us.

God said all these and many other things besides – but I want to finish with a twist on this theme. ***Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said ...***

## ... They said ...

Throughout history, apart from the notable exceptions recorded in the Bible, the vast majority of human interest has focussed on what other people have said instead of on what God has said.

What was so wrong about their plan for the plain in Shinar? Just this ... They set out to make a name for themselves. They were taking God's project that was designed to reveal his glory and appropriating it to create their own glory.

Does that sound familiar?

When educator, Parker Palmer, was offered a college presidency, it meant more money, status and influence. Career-wise it required no further thought! But when he asked some trusted friends to help him verify that it was God's will, one asked, 'What would you like about being president?' Palmer replied, 'Well, I wouldn't like the politics and fund-raising, or giving up studying and teaching.' His friend persisted, 'Yes, but what would you enjoy?' Palmer writes: 'I felt compelled to give an honest answer, one that appalled even me. 'I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.' There was a long silence and then my friend asked something that cracked us all up - and cracked me wide open; 'Parker,' he said, 'Can't you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?'

Whose name matters most? Yours or God's?

God has instigated this entire universe project in order to reveal his glory – essentially to reveal and magnify his name. Is that what excites you? Or are you more interested in magnifying your own name?