

KNOW THE TRUTH
Lesson 4 - The Doctrine of God (2 of 2)

Outline is drawn from pages 95-118 of *Know the Truth - A Handbook of Christian Belief* by Bruce Milne.

KEY CONCEPTS FROM CHAPTER 7 - THE WORK OF CREATION

- I. Introductory Remarks
 - A. "Creation is that work of the triune God by which he called all things that exist, both material and spiritual, into existence out of **non-existence**." (p. 95)
- II. Creation Out of Nothing
 - A. God created the physical and **spiritual** universe at the first 'out of nothing' (Lat.: ex nihilo). (p. 95)
 - B. It was particularly significant in the struggle of the early church against gnosticism, which regarded matter as **evil**, having its origin in some inferior **deity**. (p. 95)
 - C. Our experience of creating is of the **rearrangement** of previously existing materials into new forms and patterns; so an 'action' which brings both space and time into being is strictly beyond our comprehension. (p. 95)
 - D. There is an important analogy of creation ex nihilo in redemption (2 Cor. 4:6). New life in the Holy Spirit is not a repair job but the creation of a radically **new** being (2 Cor. 5:17). (p. 96)
 - E. Positively, this doctrine implies God's free and sovereign transcendence and also the utter **dependence** of all things upon him. (p. 96)
 - F. Negatively, it implies:
 - 1. God did not make the universe out of **previously** existing primary matter... (p. 96)
 - 2. God did not make the world out of '**nothing**' (as if nothing were a substance). (p. 96)
 - 3. God did not make the world out of **himself** (contra pantheism). (p. 96)
 - 4. 'Creation out of nothing', which we may call primary creation, does not cover every **occasion** of creation. (p. 96)
 - 5. Today the idea of 'creation out of nothing' has **received** significant endorsement from the fields of astronomy and astrophysics, as well as thermodynamics. (p. 96)
- III. Continuing Creation
 - A. The biblical view of God as Creator includes his **continuous**, unbroken sustenance and renewal of the world. (p. 97)
 - 1. This is expressed in the idea of **upholding** (Heb. 1:3, *pherōn*, lit. 'carrying along'; Col. 1:17, *synestēken*, lit. 'stand together' or 'cohere'; cf. Acts 17:25). (p. 97)
 - a) "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," (Hebrews 1:3, ESV)
 - b) "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17, ESV)
 - c) "nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." (Acts 17:25, ESV)
 - 2. It is **implied** in the Hebrew participles used for God's creative work (cf. Job 9:8f.; Ps. 104:2f.; Isa. 42:5; 44:24; 45:18). 'The [Hebrew] participle active indicates a person or thing conceived as being in the continual uninterrupted exercise of an activity' (Gesenius-Kautzsch, Hebrew Grammar). (p. 97)
 - 3. This continuous creative activity can be illustrated by the way the Bible refers to what we call the '**natural**' order [as the work of God]. (p. 97)
 - 4. To put the position more philosophically, God has called the universe into being out of nothing, and hence at every moment it '**hangs**' suspended, as it were, over the abyss

of non-existence. If God were to withdraw his upholding Word, then all being, spiritual and material, would instantly tumble back into nothing and cease to exist. (pp. 97-98)

IV. A Question of Language

A. Nature vs. Supernatural

1. In the biblical view, 'natural event' such as rainfall and 'supernatural event' such as 'quailfall' (Exod. 16) are both the action of God. (p. 98)
2. To summarize, the doctrine of creation asserts two things: the free and sovereign **lordship** of God with respect to his world, and the utter and unqualifiable dependence of all things upon God. (p. 99)

V. The Scientific Enterprise

- A. In practice, scientific investigation, and its harnessing of natural processes technologically, is founded upon the essential **order** and predictability of the universe, which is finally a reflection of the inherent order, rationality, self-consistency and faithfulness of the divine Creator. (p. 100)

VI. Miracle

- A. In terms of the Christian understanding of God and the world, God's universe is open before him; he is sovereignly free at any point to order his world in a **different** way. Will he so choose? (p. 100)
 1. The answer depends on a further question: why did God create the world? Part of the answer here involves God's creating humankind to whom he could manifest himself, with whom he could enter into relationship, and in whom he could be glorified. (p. 100)

VII. The Question of Origins

A. Introductory Remarks

1. What is the relation between the Bible's account of creation (Gen. 1 – 2) and the explanation given by natural **science**, which in some cases denies a 'beginning', or sets it at a point in the infinite past? (p. 102)
2. The opening chapters of Genesis are as fully **inspired** by the Holy Spirit as any others in Scripture. Our Lord and the apostles clearly saw them in this way and it is instructive to note how many NT passages allude to them... The divine origin of the universe is therefore not in question; the real issue is the correct interpretation of the biblical teaching. (p. 102)

B. Various Interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2

1. One position is to take the language **literally**: the universe was formed by God out of nothing through six distinct decrees over six successive 24-hour periods. (p. 102)
2. A modification of this sees the 'days' as eras or successive '**stages**' during which God formed the cosmos (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). (p. 102)
3. Another refers the 'six days' to a six-day period in which creation was **revealed** to the biblical author or was subsequently expounded to the people of Israel. (p. 102)
4. Others see the whole as **pictorial**, the details being unimportant beside the central claim of the passage, that God created everything in the universe. (p. 102)

C. Hermeneutics

1. In Part 1 we stressed that the Bible should be **interpreted** in terms of its literary form (poetry as poetry, history as history, etc.), and that the writer's intention must be taken into account. (p. 102)
2. This means asking of these Genesis passages:
 - a) What is the literary **genre**?
 - b) What is the writer seeking to **convey**?
 - c) Is this a poetic-religious passage,
 - d) Or is it an attempt to describe within the **images** of the day the cosmological origins of the world?
 - e) Or is it a bit of **both** of these, an account of real events couched in poetic-religious form? (p. 102)

3. The presence of something close to the '**poetic**' in the Genesis creation accounts has been noted by a number of scholars. One refers to its 'exalted, semi-poetic language'; another notes the rhythmic counterpart in Genesis 1 between days one and four, two and five, and three and six, and describes the passage as 'a story, not only a statement'. Many speak of it as a 'hymn'. But does that exclude its conveying genuine information about events? (p. 102)
4. Four things to note:
 - a) Biblical language is in general **popular**.
 - b) Biblical language is '**phenomenal**', i.e. it relates to what immediately appears, and describes things from the viewpoint of the observer.
 - c) Biblical language is non-**theoretical**.
 - d) Biblical language is cultural, communicating its divine revelation primarily through the **culture** of its time. All these factors need to be weighed carefully before dogmatizing about the correct interpretation of Genesis 1 – 2. (p. 103)
5. Further Considerations
 - a) The creation of **time** raises a special difficulty.
 - b) The coming into being of space and time implies an 'event' of **unique** character. (p. 103)

VIII. Creation of the Spiritual World

- A. God's creative work is not limited to the physical, observable universe, but extends to the creation of a **spiritual** world (Ps. 148:2, 5; Col. 1:16). The time of its creation is not stated in Scripture, but Genesis 1 – 2 may imply that it came into being at the same time as the physical universe (Gen. 1:1; 2:1; though cf. Job 38:4–7).
- B. The **beings** who inhabit this world are variously described: angels, spirits, demons, cherubim, seraphim, sons of God, principalities, powers, thrones, dominions (Isa. 6:2f.; Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12f.) (p. 104)
 1. Two are identified, Gabriel and Michael (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 12:7). (p. 104)
 2. These beings do not have material bodies (Heb. 1:7)...
 3. [They] are normally referred to as being very numerous (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17; Matt. 26:53; Mark 5:13; Rev. 5:11).
 4. Among their functions are the worship of God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4), the execution of God's will (Ps. 103:20), and ministering to 'those who will inherit salvation' (Heb. 1:14). They are particularly connected with the ministry and mission of Jesus (Matt. 1:20; 4:11; 28:2; John 20:12; Acts 1:10f.). (p. 104)
- C. Two Dangers
 1. One may virtually **ignore** this teaching, as happens in much modern theological writing...
 2. Or else **overemphasize** it, particularly with reference to the demonic. (p. 104)
- D. Evil Angels
 1. These too are **creatures** of God, held in being by him, and finally servants to his purpose. It seems clear that they were not created evil (Gen. 1:31; cf. 2 Pet. 2:4). Like humankind, their fall may have been due to pride (Jude 6). (p. 104)
- E. In recent years there has been considerable **interest** in spiritual agencies, not only among Christians but also in the wider culture. (p. 105)

KEY CONCEPTS FROM CHAPTER 8 - THE WORK OF PROVIDENCE

- I. Introductory Remarks
 - A. Providence is 'that **continued** exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end' (Berkhof). (p. 107)
 1. The biblical doctrine takes its name from Genesis 22:8, 'God himself will **provide**'

2. [Providence] is classically expressed in the story of Joseph whose abduction and deportation to Egypt were seen subsequently as the divinely intended provision for the later needs of his famine-stricken family (Gen. 45, 50). (p. 107)
- II. The Extent of Providence
- A. Scripture witnesses to the **universal** range of God's providence; God acts in all things (Ps. 115:3; Matt. 10:30; Eph. 1:11). Natural events such as winds and rain, even seeming disasters (Luke 13:1–5), are part of his ordering. Even evil is under his hand and he uses it for his own ends (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; Phil. 1:17f.) (p. 107)
 - B. In order to lessen the moral problems raised by this doctrine, some theologians have asserted that God operates in a general '**background**' sense, providing the essential 'input' for life which then operates according to its own relatively independent principles. (p. 107)
 - C. Against this understanding of providence we can set Calvin's: 'God is deemed omnipotent not because he can indeed act, yet sometimes ceases and sits in idleness, or continues by a general impulse that order of nature which he previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so **regulates** all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation.' (p. 107)
 - D. The God who acts in his providence 'sustaining', 'operating' and 'directing' is the triune God. This is crucial in distinguishing the Christian view from blind, **impersonal** causality or fate, such as was taught by Stoicism and, in practice, in Islam. (pp. 107-108)
 - E. The '**appointed** end', with a view to which God acts in the world, is his redemptive and sanctifying purpose centred in Jesus Christ. (p. 108)
 - F. Thus the assertion that 'in all things God works for the good' of his people (Rom. 8:28) must be **understood** in terms of this good, the separating and transforming of the people of God into his likeness (v. 27). (p. 108)
- III. Necessary Distinctions
- A. A distinction is sometimes drawn between the primary and **secondary** causality of God (p. 108)
 - B. A similar distinction is sometimes drawn between God's directive will and his **permissive** will. (p. 108)
 - C. 'Open Theism'.
 1. In particular several writers have raised the possibility that God is not **sovereign** over all things in the sense of either in any effectual degree predetermining them, or even in his exhaustively knowing of events and the details of the lives of his people in advance. (p. 108)
- IV. God's Providence and Evil
- A. How do we **reconciled** this providential rule of God to the fact of evil and sin in the world? (p. 110)
 1. The Bible recognizes an ultimate mystery as far as evil and sin are concerned (2 Thess. 2:7). (p. 111)
 2. As far as human nature is concerned, the Bible speaks unambiguously of humankind's fall into sin (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12f.). (p. 111)
 3. As for the destiny of humankind, Scripture sets evil and suffering in the context of the future triumph of God's purpose for humankind. (p. 111)
 4. In the person of Christ God took our flesh in its vulnerability and weakness, another supremely important dimension of the Bible's response. (p. 111)
 5. In the light of the resurrection we see the triumph of God over all the forces of evil and darkness. (p. 112)
 6. In the light of the return of Christ we recognize that the present order of sin and suffering is not the final reality. (p. 112)