

“THE GOSPEL: At the Starting Line”

A sermon by
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TEXTS: Genesis 1:1, Hebrews 11:1-3, and John 17:1-5

Genesis 1:1

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

John 17:1-5

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

Exams are not high on most peoples’ list of favorite things to do. We see them as a necessary evil, the price of getting a degree or passing a class. Less favorite are final exams. There, the content of an entire class or semester of instruction is measured.

Someone has created a group of humorous final exam questions in a variety of disciplines. Here are a few examples:

MEDICINE: You have been provided with a razor blade, a piece of gauze and a bottle of Scotch. Remove your appendix. Do not suture until your work has been inspected. You have fifteen minutes.

MUSIC: Write a piano concerto. Orchestrate and perform it with flute and drum. You will find a piano under your seat.

PHILOSOPHY: Sketch the development of human thought; estimate its significance. Compare with the development of any other kind of thought.

EXTRA CREDIT: Define the Universe; give three examples.

Yeah, right. John Calvin’s opening sentence in his classic work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is this, [“Nearly all wisdom we possess; that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”] If we want to know who we are, we need to

know who God is. Why? Because God created us. If we want to know who God is, we must understand who we are in relation to God. Today we are going to look at knowing God. In two weeks, we will look at knowing who we are as human beings.

OUR GREATEST NEED---TO KNOW THE GOD WHO CREATED US

The setting of this morning's Gospel lesson is Jesus' last night with his disciples before going to the cross. Jesus' words are a prayer. It is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. In it Jesus says to God, [*"And this is eternal life, that they may know you . . ."*]

We cannot understand the Gospel without the knowledge of God, because the Gospel begins with God and God's plan of salvation. This emphasis on the knowledge of God is found throughout the Old Testament.

The prophet Jeremiah writes,

["Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:24)]

The author of the Book of Proverbs writes, [*"The fear of the **LORD** is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."* (Proverbs 1:7)]

We may begin with the Gospel of Jesus, but it is much better to start at the beginning. . . the very beginning. We must start with God. That is where the Bible begins. There is a problem, though. How do you define who God is? You cannot. How does the finite begin to understand and describe himself.

Let us begin where Genesis begins. [*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . ."*]
This one little statement is packed with power. It is a proclamation. It is a declaration. It infers that before there was anything . . . time, space, matter, or energy, God is. When God creates, it is because God wills creation to be, not out of necessity, or need but because God chooses to create. This act of divine creation has a title. It is called *creatio ex nihilo*. . . creation out of nothing. It expresses fully the idea of an eternally existing God creating something out of nothing . . . no quarks, no neutrinos, no muons, no atoms, no elements, no molecules. God speaks. God wills. The universe and galaxies become.

Can we prove this? No. However, it is what we believe as people of faith. In fact, this is what the Scriptures teach. You heard correctly when the Epistle lesson was read this morning, [*"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."*]

We receive this by faith, not scientific proof. However, the proof we have leads us to believe that Scripture is true. Science does not contradict but begins an attempt to explain what is. Can science prove that 1) the universe has always existed, or 2) that the universe came into existence spontaneously? NO!!! Science can do that no more than we can prove that God created everything that is.

That, too, is an article of faith. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

In 2012, scientists confirmed their detection of the long-sought Higgs Boson, also known as the "God particle" at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland. The Higgs Boson helps give mass to all elementary particles such as electrons and protons. There is a problem, though. No one can

explain where the Higgs Boson comes from. Nor can physicists explain why, because of its own mass, the Higgs Boson did not destroy the universe milliseconds after what is euphemistically called the Big Bang.

Frankly, you either begin with God, or you do not. Your choice. However, if you begin with God, everything else in Scripture may be believed. If you fail to begin with God or allow the possibility of God, you arrive at a meaningless, purposeless existence in which humanity is no different than the other animals that populate the earth. Dr. William Province of Cornell University speaks to the logical end of evolution as a worldview. It is a worldview that he accepts. ““No life after death; no ultimate foundation for ethics; no ultimate meaning for life; no free will.”

Our greatest need is to know the God who made us.

GOD’S GREAT DESIRE---THAT WE KNOW WHO GOD IS AND WHAT GOD HAS DONE

Jesus prays, [*“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God. . .”*] Again, there is much packed in those four additional words. If there is only one true God, that infers that there are other Gods who are false.

As humans, we are good at creating our own gods. John Calvin wrote, [*“Man’s mind is like a store of idolatry and superstition; so much so that if a man believes his own mind it is certain that he will forsake God and forge some idol in his own brain.”*] That is why God desires that we know Him in his fullness. Unless we do, we settle for something that is not God, but treat it as if it is the thing that gives ultimate meaning to our lives.

There is a passage of Scripture in Ecclesiastes that is often read at funeral services and memorials. You know it. It begins, [*“To everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.”*] Pete Seeger took the words and made them into a song. The rock group, The Byrds, sang it and made it popular. The song was called, “Turn, Turn, Turn.”

In verse 11 of chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes is a truth that has to do with how we are created as human beings. It reads, [*“He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.” --- Ecclesiastes 3:11*]] I really prefer the New International Version that translates that last line a little differently. [*“He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”*]

God has set eternity in the human heart.

That means that we have a sense that this world is not all there is. Most people have a sense or even a hope that there is something beyond this life. Is there a final justice for those who never got justice in this life? We hope. Is there a place where compassion, mercy, and goodness are rewarded? Some believe so.

God created us with this yearning, this desire for something more. It is indicative of a greater desire to be connected, not only with the creation, but with our Creator.

It is the way we are wired.

I love this quote from the artist Vincent Van Gogh. He writes, [*“There may be a time in life when one is tired of everything and feels as if all one does is wrong, and there may be some truth in it- do you think this is a feeling one must try to forget and to banish, or is it 'the longing for God,' which one must not fear, but cherish to see if it may bring us some good? Is it 'the longing for God' which leads us to make a choice which we never regret? Let us keep courage and try to be patient and gentle. And not mind being eccentric and make distinction between good and evil.”*]

St. Augustine put it a different way in his *Confessions*. [*“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”*]

French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, writes, [*“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator . . .”*]

I will acknowledge that is an incomplete quote, but I will get back to that in a moment. We are wired to be in relationship with God. Unfortunately, most people settle for much less.

THE SEARCH----- “I STILL HAVEN’T FOUND WHAT I’M LOOKING FOR” (SLIDE)

Aristotle wrote, “Horror vacui.” You know the statement better as “Nature abhors a vacuum.” As humans, we cannot stand the emptiness in our lives. The result is that we try to fill the God-shaped vacuum with something. We try to re-wire the organism but fail because only God can re-wire us. Evolutionary biology will tell you that you are only an animal. It will tell you that you have only the illusion of free will. There is nothing such as sin or this hunger for God because there is no God and biological determinism rules! You are no more than the sum of the chemical reactions and outworking of your DNA.

Yeah! Somehow that doesn’t feel right. You see, that alone should free me from any sense of conscience. However, I live with me. There are certain things I know about myself. There is a soul satisfaction that I crave beyond anything that stimulates my senses. I repeatedly try to fill it with something, anything that will stop the gnawing questions that pass through my mind as my head hits the pillow. What if it is true? What if there is a God to whom we are accountable? What if this isn’t all there is?

The singer Bono and his band, U2, spoke for a generation in their song, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” The song resonates because it speaks of a human longing. The words to the second verse are profound:

*[I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her finger tips
It burned like fire
(I was) burning inside her.
I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone.
But I still haven’t found
What I’m looking for.
But I still haven’t found
What I’m looking for.]*

Ted Wright, in commenting on this song writes of the singer, “He is lamenting that no matter what he tries or what he does, ultimate satisfaction isn’t found in this world. His satisfaction must come from somewhere else. He was made for something else, for somewhere else, or perhaps for someone else. He is a pilgrim and a sojourner on this earth, “just a passing through.”ⁱ

To quote a popular Country-Western song, the very reason the singer still hasn’t found what he’s looking for is because, “He’s Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places.” C.S. Lewis gives us a clue to this pilgrimage, this attempt to fill the God-shaped vacuum in our lives when he writes, [“The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”]ⁱⁱ

This is the testimony of Scripture. There is one God. God created us. God created us to be in relationship with Him. We chose to try to live apart from God. Sin was our choice to live apart from God, to direct our lives, to live as gods ourselves. We quickly found it didn't work. Since that time, we have assuaged the hunger and longing in our lives with idols; things that are less than God that we allow ultimate meaning in our lives.

The good news, the Gospel, is that God loves us too much to leave us there.

GOD'S GREATEST WORK---MAKING GOD'S SELF KNOWN IN JESUS (SLIDE)

I told you the Pascal quote was incomplete. Here is the full quote. ["There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ."] And now, we hear the full quote of Jesus' prayer from John 17:3 expressing God's solution to God's desire and humanity's predicament. [*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*"]

This prayer expresses the reason Jesus came. He came to make the Father known. He came to solve the problem of human sin by his sacrificial death on the cross. He came as one sent from God for the express purpose of healing the breach, making real the possibility of a return to God so the humanity may say, "Finally, I have found what I am looking for."

I grew up in the dinosaur age of television. . . black and white, television on legs, lousy reception, constant snow and rolling screens, a channel dial with twelve numbers, one through thirteen, and only four channels with signal . . . ABC, CBS, NBC, and WQED in Pittsburgh. I was the remote control. "Doug, go change the channel."

One of my favorite shows growing up was "I've Got a Secret." ---Picture of "I've Got a Secret") A guest would be introduced. The guest's secret would be revealed to the viewing audience. Then, panelists would get to ask questions of the guest, to guess his or her secret. If the guest could stump the panelists, he would win a prize.

The most exciting part of the show was the big reveal, when the secret became known to the panelists. Without revelation the panelists would have never known anything more than the identity of the guest. They could guess, make conjecture, or fabricate something from whole cloth, but they would never have known the truth.

Jesus reveals the truth about God. Hear what the Gospel writer John says of Jesus in John 1:17-18, [*The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*"]

Jesus makes God known. That renders a great truth. We cannot know God unless God reveals Himself to us. We can have philosophical discussions about the idea of God, question the existence or non-existence of God, attempt to describe God from our own experience, and wrestle with the concept of God. Nevertheless, we will never know who God really is unless God reveals Himself.

In Jesus, God has made Himself known.

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory. Amen.

ⁱ <https://crossexamined.org/still-havent-found-youre-looking-c-s-lewis-bono-argument-desire/>

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianit*