



A word on the Word

Journey through the Bible, book by book — by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

In the beginning God...

Beginnings are telling. Beginnings illuminate and captivate. If you are like me, when you are considering reading a book and want to know its essence, you read the opening chapter. The opening chapter initiates topics and issues on which the following pages elaborate. Similarly, when we grapple with questions of “How?” “Why?” and “What?” we often stretch back to our past to understand our present and shape our future. Historic inquiry is dynamic because it tells just as much about the present as it does about the past.

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, opens with “*bereshit*,” the Hebrew word for “in the beginning.” The Septuagint (Greek) translation gives it the title “Genesis,” which means “origin, beginning,” because it records the origin of the world, the human race, and the Hebrew people. The first eleven chapters of Genesis unfold a riveting, majestic picture of God creating the heavens and the earth. The God who powerfully shapes the universe and all that is in it is simultaneously the God who tenderly and personally creates man and woman in His image and lovingly guides them into life. The God who breathes creation into being also holds humans in the palm of His hand and talks to them. This God of love is all-powerful, transcendent, and exquisitely personal.

Abraham Lincoln said, as he gazed upon the stars, “I can see how it might be possible for a man to look upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he can look up into the heavens and say there is no God.” St. Paul acknowledged the splendor of creation another way, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom. 1:20). It is evident to many that the world reveals something beyond them. Christians advocate that creation reveals a Creator. However, some argue that the world is one of total happenstance.

In recent years, a renewed wave of atheistic and materialistic thought has emerged. The well-known atheist from Oxford University, Dr. Richard Dawkins, said “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference” (*River Out of Eden: A Darwinian view of Life*, 1995). How we view the creation of the world has profound ramifications for our lives. If there is a God, we must seek to know Him, see ourselves in relation to Him, and conform our lives to Him. If there is no God, we fashion our lives accordingly.

Atheists often use science as a vehicle to disprove God. However, science and religion do not negate one another. Science is exceptional in telling us about the

single phenomenon but less equipped to relate to wider dimensions. Science can illuminate when and how the universe arose physically and when man appeared. Yet it does not answer questions about the meaning of those origins. The catechism of the Catholic Church notes that scientific discoveries “invite us to even greater admiration for the greatness of the Creator, prompting us to give him thanks for all his works and the for the understanding and wisdom he gives to scholars and researchers” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 83).

With this said, in every day dialogue with someone who does not believe in God, where do we begin? As Christians, we begin with the truths the book of Genesis reveals. These first chapters of the Bible frame our world view.

Although we cannot “prove” the existence of God in a perfect mathematical equation, we can affirm His existence based on significant pointers. We can prove very few things in this world with absolute certainty, and we can do so based only on things we already know or presuppose — *anterior* knowledge. So for example, in order to prove that $2 + 2 = 4$, we have to have some concept of number. I cannot prove that my Mom loves me, but more than anything, I know this to be true.

So how do we know anything? How do we come to any conclusions about this world? We apply the scientific method, which uses inductive reasoning. We have a strong notion that something is true; so, we state a hypothesis, test it, and observe whether it stands the test. We observe the evidence and form a conclusion. Of course, we have to change our conclusion if opposite evidence arises. For example, before any English people had gone to New Zealand, they believed that all swans were white because the only swans they had ever observed were white. However, when explorers went to New Zealand, they found black swans. As a result, they had to alter their understanding of swans. We base our conclusions on observation of accumulated evidence. I know my mom loves me because she tells me, she shows me by doing nice things for me, and she is faithful and loyal day in and day out. I cannot prove her love but I can know her love to be true.

Likewise, although we cannot prove God, we can look at the accumulated evidence that points to His existence and accept or reject it.

The evidence that points to the existence of God — and more specifically the existence of a personal God — is quite compelling:

The fact of the world — As Martin Heidegger questioned, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” How is it that anything exists at all? Atheists argue that the world derives from blind chance and random happenstance. But how do you get an entire world based on cause and effect from a random beginning? It is highly unlikely. Doesn’t this point to the fact that there must have been a Cause to begin the universe? An ultimate Cause in the universe points us to God.

The design in the world — It is difficult to observe the intricate design of the world and attribute it all to random chance. Consider the complex focusing equipment of the human eye or the uniqueness of each human thumbprint. Explore the beauty of nature found in a sunset or the intricacies of a leaf. It is unconvincing to posit nature has no designer. John Polkinghorne, former professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge University who writes much on the anthropic principle, observes that, in order for the earth to come into being, numerous constants had to be finely tuned. If any had been off a fraction or the physics had changed even slightly, we would not exist. The intricate design in the world points to a Supreme Designer.

Personhood — A materialist view is that chance + time + the impersonal gives us the personal. Human beings are not robots or tailor-made dummies. Our ability to reason, imagine, love, and create points to the existence of an ultimate intelligence rather than random impersonal chance. Our human minds and hearts point to the Mind of a personal God.

Values — From what source do cherished human values come, such as truth, beauty, goodness, creativity, and love? If a Creator God exists, then our values make sense. God, the Supreme Value, has stamped them within us.

Conscience — Although some peoples’ notions of right and wrong have gotten twisted, all humans seem to have an instinctive sense of how we “ought” to behave. How do we get within us this sense of “ought”? Some people argue that morality is a product of social conditioning. However, most great moral advances (*e.g.*, liberation of slaves; women’s right to vote) have gone against the grain of society. If survival of the fittest governs morality, how do we account for individuals who voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the survival of another? Isn’t it likely that the moral law within our hearts points to the Moral Law Giver?

Religion — Every culture has an innate belief in the divine. Why do humans have this instinct to worship something beyond themselves? It has taken many shapes and forms in our society. We can pervert it when we worship movie stars or sports. One thing is certain, however, quenching our instinct to worship is difficult.

Jesus Christ — The most profound evidence for the existence of God is the person of Jesus who claimed to be God. The Gospels proclaim that God has come to earth. “No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart; he has told us about him” (John 1:18). God revealed himself in a way we could understand. The God who was there at the creation of the world, became flesh and walked among us.

We can’t prove God’s existence with a watertight argument, but abundant pointers reveal that He does exist. As the writer of Genesis wrote, “In the beginning God...” May His beginnings shape our today.