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THE SELF-EXISTENT GOD

In the beginning was the Word . . .

JOHN 1:1

Any man or woman really sensitive to divine Truth discovers there is truly a kind of spiritual suffocation often felt in the attempt to wrestle with the opening verses of the gospel of John, or with the opening verses of Genesis, for that matter.

No man is really big enough and adequate in his own faith and experience to try to expound for others these key Bible passages. No man really ought to preach on the phrase “In the beginning . . .,” but the phrase is here and in our teaching as well.

We do our best to study and learn, and there is surely a deep and helpful message for us here, but we will still sense the feeling, expressed years ago by the poet, that “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

We must meditate on the eternal nature of God in order to worship as we should. You know, I often refer to Frederick

William Faber, whose great adoring heart pressed into these mysteries during his lifetime in the nineteenth century, and he celebrated the vision of God's eternal self-existence in these warm and wondrous words:

Father! the sweetest, dearest Name
That men or angels know!
Fountain of life, that had no fount
From which itself could flow!
When heaven and earth were yet unmade,
When time was yet unknown,
Thou in Thy bliss and majesty
Did'st live and love alone.
Thy vastness is not young or old;
Thy life hath never grown;
No time can measure out Thy days,
No space can make Thy throne.

Brethren, surely this must be one of the greatest and grandest thoughts we can ever know: that it is the living and eternal God with whom we are concerned, and we acknowledge that only in God can there be causeless existence!

In this context, I confess a sadness about the shallowness of Christian thinking in our day. Many are interested in religion as a kind of toy. If we could make a judgment, it would appear that numbers of men and women go to church without any genuine desire to gear into deity. They do not come to meet God and delight in His presence. They do not come to hear from that everlasting world above!

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Certainly we should be aware that everything around us has a cause behind it. You have a cause and I have a cause. Everything that we know is the effect of some cause.

If we could put ourselves into some special kind of machine that would take us back and back in time, back beyond the centuries of history, beyond the beginning of the creation, we might arrive at that point where there was nothing and no one except God Himself!

Imagining that we could erase history and everything in the universe, we would see in God causeless existence; God—self-sufficient, uncreated, unborn, unmade—God alone, the living and eternal and self-existent God.

Compared to Him, everything around us in this world shrinks in stature and significance. It is all a little business compared to Him—little churches with little preachers; little authors and little editors; little singers and little musicians; little deacons and little officials; little educators and little statesmen; little cities and little men and little things!

Brethren, humankind is so smothered under the little grains of dust that make up the world and time and space and matter that we are prone to forget that at one point God lived and dwelt and existed and loved without support, without help, and without creation.

Such is the causeless and self-existent God!

This God with whom we deal has never had to receive anything from anybody. There is no one and nothing to whom God has ever been in debt.

Some people have the brass to think they are bailing out the

living God when they drop a ten dollar bill in the church offering plate on Sunday.

I do not think I exaggerate when I say that some of us put our offering in the plate with a kind of triumphant bounce as much as to say: "There—now God will feel better!"

GOD DOES NOT NEED ANYTHING

This may hurt some of you, but I am obliged to tell you that God does not need anything you have. He does not need a dime of your money. It is your own spiritual welfare at stake in such matters as these. There is a beautiful and enriching principle involved in our offering to God what we are and what we have, but none of us are giving because there is a depression in heaven.

The Bible teaching is plain: you have the right to keep what you have all to yourself—but it will rust and decay, and ultimately ruin you.

Long ago God said, "If I had need of anything, would I tell you?" If the living God had need of anything, He would no longer be God.

So, that was before the beginning. We are concerned here with that which the Bible calls before the foundation of the world.

We are told that in the beginning God created. We are made to realize that God does not lean upon His own creation.

If God needed help or strength, He would not be omnipotent and He would not then be God.

If God needed advice and counsel, He would not be sovereign. If He needed wisdom, He would no longer be omni-

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scient. If He needed support and sustenance, He could not be self-existent.

So, as far as man is concerned, there was a beginning and there was a Creation. That phrase “In the beginning” does not mark a birth date for God Almighty. It means the point in time as we think of it when God ceased to be alone and began to make time and space and creatures and beings.

But we are not quite ready to leave that pre-creation situation, before the foundations of the earth were laid, when God dwelt alone, the uncreated Being; the Father in love with the Son, and the Son with the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost with the Father and the Son.

God is the eternal God, dwelling in a tranquility that had no beginning and that can have no ending.

Now, you may note that I have not used the expression “the pre-creation void.” *Void* is a good and useful word. When we do not know what else to say, we call it a void.

But before the Creation, God was there and God is not a void. He is the triune God and He is all there is. In His existence before the Creation, God was already busy; busy with eternal mercies, His mind stirring with merciful thoughts and redemptive plans for a mankind not yet created.

This is a very good place to read Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” I am well aware that sometimes when I preach I really worry the Calvinists. I know, too, that sometimes when I preach I worry the Arminians, and probably this is their time to sweat.

BEFORE CREATION

Paul told the Ephesian Christians that we were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world. Someone will run me around a lilac bush and say, “How can it be that you were chosen in Him before the creation of the world?”

I reply with a question: “How can you explain a time when there was no matter, no law, no motion, no relation, and no space, no time, and no beings—only God?”

If you can explain that to me then I can explain to you how God chose me in Him before the creation of the world. I can only say that we must take into account the foreknowledge of God, for Peter wrote to his Christian brethren and called them “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2).

The acts of Creation in the beginning were not God’s first activity. God had been busy before that, for He must have been engaged in choosing and foreordaining before the foundation of the world.

I wrote a little editorial squib some time ago under the title “We Travel an Appointed Way.” I pointed out that we are not orphans in the world and that we do not live and breathe by accident and that we are God’s children by faith. I said that it is true that our heavenly Father goes before us and that the Shepherd goes before and leads the way.

Some dear man who was among the readers wrote to me and said, “I was brought up a Methodist. In your comments, do you

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mean this to be foreordination? That is what the Presbyterians believe. Just what do you mean?"

I wrote him a letter, saying, "Dear Brother: When I said we travel an appointed way, I was not thinking about foreordination, predestination, eternal security, or the eternal decrees.

"I was just thinking," I told him, "about how nice it is for the steps of a good man to be ordered by the Lord; and that if a consecrated Christian will put himself in the hands of God, even the accidents will be turned into blessings. Not only that, but our God will make the devil himself work for the glorification of His saints."

It has always been the experience of the children of God that when we walk daily in the will of God, even that which looks like tragedy and loss in the end will turn out to be blessing and gain.

I did not mean to go down that deep. I was just saying that our heavenly Father leads our way and that the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord. I am sure the Methodist brother can go to sleep tonight knowing that he does not have to turn Presbyterian to be certain that God is looking after him.

By the way, I do not know how this illustration got in there, for it was not in my notes!

Now, once again to the record of the Creation, "In the beginning."

It is plain that God created matter—and that is not bad! Matter is that of which any physical object is composed and from matter we have obtained our words *material* and *materialism*.

I think a lot of people in our congregations get confused when some learned brother advises us that we must all join in a fervent fight against materialism.

Everyone looks around for the enemy but there seems to be no enemy in sight. If a man does not know what materialism is how can he be expected to join the battle?

The word *materialism* has become part of modern jargon. The created things that we accept as matter are all around us: things we can touch, smell, taste, handle, see, and hear. Things that yield to the senses—they are material things and they are not bad.

Materialism in its crisis form occurs when men and women created in the image of God accept and look upon matter as the ultimate. Of material and physical things they say: “These are the only reality. Matter is the ultimate—there is nothing else!”

“We must fight materialism” does not mean that everyone should get a sword and run after a fellow named Material and cut him down.

What it does mean is that we should start believing in the fact of God’s Creation and that matter is only a creature of the all-wise and ever-loving God and that the physical things that we know and enjoy are not the ultimate; they are not an end in themselves.

In the Creation account, God had to have some place to put matter so He created space. He had to make room for motion so He created time.

We think of time as something wound on a great spool in heaven and that it rolls off for men faster than it does for women. Time is not like that: time is the medium in which things change. It is not time that makes a baby grow—it is change that does it. In order for change to occur, there must be a sequence of change. We call that sequence time.

And then God made the laws that govern time and space and matter. It may be an oversimplification here but in the law He

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established, God was just saying to matter: “Now, stretch out and let things move around.”

Then, in the record, we see that God created life. He created life so there could be a consciousness of time and space and motion and matter. Then God created spirit, in order that there might be creatures who were conscious of God Himself. Then He organized the entire universe and we call it the cosmos, and thus we have the world.

Now, I suppose Creation is a great deal more complex than I have described here, and that it took longer than it is taking me to tell about it. But it was the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth. That was the beginning of human thought. That was where matter began, with time and space. That was where created life began.

Oh, how glad I am for the plain record concerning the living, loving, and creating God!

GOD'S ETERNAL LOVE

I do not think I could ever worship a God who was suddenly caught unaware of circumstances in His world around me. I do not think that I could bow my knees before a God that I had to apologize for.

I could never offer myself to a God that needed me, brethren. If He needed me, I could not respect Him, and if I could not respect Him, I could not worship Him.

I could never get down and say, “Father, I know that things are going tough for You these days. I know that modernism is making it tough for the saints and I know that communism is a

serious threat to the kingdom. God, I know You really need my help, so I offer myself to You.”

Some of our missionary appeals are getting close to that same error: that we should engage in missionary work because God needs us so badly.

The fact is that God is riding above this world and the clouds are the dust of His feet and if you do not follow Him, you will lose all and God will lose nothing. He will still be glorified in His saints and admired by all those who fear Him. To bring ourselves into a place where God will be eternally pleased with us should be the first responsible act of every man!

All of these considerations are based upon the character and worthiness of God. Not a man or woman anywhere should ever try to come to God as a gesture of pity because poor God needs you. Oh no, no, my brother!

God has made it plain that there is a hell, a place for people who do not want to love God and do not want to serve Him. The sadness and the tragedy of this fact is that these are human beings all dear to God because He created them in His own image. Of nothing else in the Creation is it said that it was created in the likeness of God.

Because fallen and perishing man is still nearer to God's likeness than any other creature on earth, God offers him conversion, regeneration, and forgiveness. It was surely because of this great potential in the human personality that the Word could become flesh and dwell among us. The only begotten Son could not take upon Himself the nature of angels, but He could and did take on Himself the seed of Abraham, as we are told in Hebrews 2:16.

We are assured in many ways in the Scriptures that God the

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Creator does not waste human personality, but it is surely one of the stark tragedies of life that human personality can waste itself. A man by his own sin may waste himself, which is to waste that which on earth is most like God.

Sin is a disease. It is lawlessness. It is rebellion. It is transgression—but it is also a wasting of the most precious of all treasures on earth. The man who dies out of Christ is said to be lost, and hardly a word in the English tongue expresses his condition with greater accuracy. He has squandered a rare fortune and at the last he stands for a fleeting moment and looks around, a moral fool, a wastrel who has lost in one overwhelming and irrecoverable loss, his soul, his life, his peace, his total mysterious personality, his dear and everlasting all!

Oh, how can we get men and women around us to realize that God Almighty, before the beginning of the world, loved them, and thought about them, planning redemption and salvation and forgiveness?

Christian brethren, why are we not more faithful and serious in proclaiming God's great eternal concerns?

How is this world all around us ever to learn that God is all in all unless we are faithful in our witness?

In a time when everything in the world seems to be vanity, God is depending on us to proclaim that He is the great Reality, and that only He can give meaning to all other realities.

How are the great unsatisfied throngs ever to discover and know that we are made by God and for Him?

The answer to the question, "Where did I come from?" can never be better answered than by the Christian mother who says, "God made you!" The great store of knowledge throughout

today's world cannot improve on this simple answer.

The leading scientists can tell you of their extensive research into the secrets of how matter operates, but the origin of matter lies in deep silence and refuses to give an answer to man's many questions.

God, the self-existent God, all-knowing and all-powerful, made the heaven and the earth and man upon the earth, and He made man for Himself, and there is no other answer to the inquiry, "Why did God make me?"

It is so important for us in these troubled days to be able to stand firmly and positively in this declaration: "Thus saith the Lord!"

Our chief business is not to argue with our generation, nor is it largely to persuade or prove. With our declaration, "Thus saith the Lord," we make God responsible for the outcome. No one knows enough and no one can know enough to go beyond this. God made us for Himself: that is the first and last thing that can be said about human existence and whatever more we add is but commentary.

REFLECT

1. How would intentionally recognizing God's eternal and self-existent nature impact the way you live your day-to-day life?
2. If God doesn't need anything, then why did He create us?
3. If God is eternal and unchanging, then what does that mean about His love for us?