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In the Beginning



Opening lines can be hard to write. But some have captured our imaginations:

Now is the winter of our discontent... — *Richard III*.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.
— *A Tale of Two Cities*

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away... — *Star Wars*

High, high above the North Pole, on the first day of 1969, two professors of English Literature approached each other at a combined velocity of 1200 miles per hour. — *Changing Places*, by David Lodge

With a good opening line, the author grabs us and draws us into their world. This is what the Bible does in its very first verse:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1)

We're being told: here is an epic tale. Here is a sweeping drama that encompasses all time—right back to 'the beginning'. It also takes in all space—the heavens and the earth. And as for its central character—well, nothing less than God himself! The Bible's 'beginning' could not be bigger.

We've heard the Bible's verdict, but what do *you* believe about 'the beginning'? It's a vital issue, but one we rarely consider. So let's try a little thought experiment: what do *you* say was there 'in the beginning'? I realise it's odd to think like this, but give it a go. In your mind see if you can wind back the cosmic clock into the depths of forever.

When I've asked people to do this they commonly respond with: 'cave men, dinosaurs, planets, the sun, galaxies'. I have to say, 'No, keep going. *Before* those. What was there... before people or planets or protons?' At that point we're dealing with *ultimate* reality. 'In the beginning' we figure out what we really believe. Are you there? What's it like? What is ultimate reality for you?

I think there are four main ways of conceiving of 'the beginning'. These four approaches are not mutually exclusive—there's much overlap between them—but our thinking in this area will shape everything we believe about ourselves, our world and our destiny.

Let's start with the first: What was there in the beginning?

NOTHING

'In the beginning' there was... nothing. A big, dark, endless expanse of empty space (of course, that's not nothing, that's a whole lot of black *something*, but let's not get picky).

I don't know about you, but this is my first thought:

Before the universe? But the universe is everything!

What could possibly come before it?!

That's probably my first thought because this is the story I've grown up with in the West. In this story our origins lie in some absolute zero point. Bring it all back to basics and what do you get? Nothing. Shakespeare's King Lear said 'Nothing will come of nothing.' But this story says that everything comes from nothing. We have sprung from nothing, are suspended over nothing and are headed for nothing. Right now we enjoy a brief moment in the sun but as Lawrence Krauss, the author of the book *A Universe From Nothing*, is always reminding us:

The two lessons I want to give people is that you're more insignificant than you ever thought, and the future is miserable.¹

1. *Why a Universe From Nothing Should Mean Everything*, from The Huffington Post, 20 July, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-searles/universe-origins_b_1687559.html

Well, at least he's honest. If we've come from nothing there are implications! What does life *mean* in the 'nothing' story? It means trying to work a something out of a nothing. Make your own reason for being, construct your own image, be a self-creator. There's just one problem: in the end, we go back to basics. Less than basics. We finish how we began—with nothing.

The artist Damien Hirst is brilliant at portraying life from within this mind-set. His artwork includes dead animals preserved in formaldehyde, neon coffins and diamond encrusted skulls. The glitz on the surface might dazzle, but beneath there is only death—only annihilation.

When asked about the motivation behind his art, Hirst at one point responded, 'it's like everything you do in life is pointless if you just take a step back and look at it'.² That sounds horribly bleak. But Hirst is just giving us a little perspective. If there was Nothing in the beginning, he's absolutely right.

Life in its brevity can be beautiful. In close-up there are diamonds to behold, but push beneath and there's nothing. We find we're suspended over a void and soon we will fall into it.

Beliefs about 'the beginning' matter. If there was nothing, then life is *ultimately* absurd.

2. Damien Hirst: 'We're here for a good time, not a long time', The Telegraph, 8 January, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/8245906/Damien-Hirst-Were-here-for-a-good-time-not-a-long-time.html>

So what are the alternatives? Let's think about the second option. What was there in the beginning?

CHAOS

The Genesis account of creation is remarkable when you compare it with the religious texts of its time and place. In Genesis 1 we read of a good world spoken into existence by a good God. Seas, lands and sky are formed at God's word—everything in its right place and filled with light and life (see verses 3-31).

By way of immense contrast the prominent creation myths of antiquity tell of wars in heaven. Battling gods jostle for pre-eminence and the losers are cast out. Perhaps creation is the place of exile for naughty deities or the body of a dead god. Or maybe the universe is just the rubble of some cosmic storm. However these spiritual battles are imagined, life springs from the collision of raging forces.

Of course it's not just religious stories that speak of the force of chaos. Science too tells us we have come from a big *bang*, the collision of stars and the struggle for survival. So much of life *is* about conflict, killing and chaos. That cannot be denied. But there are some who say that this is *ultimately* what shapes reality. Trace it all back to basics and you'll find no guiding hand, no rhyme nor reason, no law higher than 'the law of the jungle'. If this were true, then, essentially, life would be a struggle with no 'Geneva Convention' to appeal to.

Few people can stomach the chaos story. Surely there must be some governing principles that rule

over the turmoil? That brings many people to a third option. What was there in the beginning?

POWER

Again, there's a religious and a non-religious version of this one. The non-religious version says this: 'In the beginning there were colossal forces.' Reality is ruled by iron laws of physics that grind along. The universe dances to this relentless beat.

On 2 September 2010 the front page of *The Times* declared: 'God did not create the universe'. What a scoop! Their source was a book co-authored by Stephen Hawking. He said:

Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.

There are a number of puzzles we won't try to solve here. Puzzles like:

- *Is this really 'nothing'?* Laws of nature seem like some pretty significant somethings.
- *How does anything 'create itself'?* Doesn't it have to exist already if it's going to do any creating?
- *How do laws 'create'?* The rules of chess don't create the pieces, how do the laws of nature create nature?

We will jump over those objections and try to follow Hawking. Imagine that 'a law such as gravity' does indeed lie behind everything. Let's inhabit the story

in which there is nothing higher, older or deeper than laws of nature. These cosmic powers are the unmoulded moulders of everything else and we dance to their relentless beat. Power reigns.

Many people find this to be a particularly barren account of reality. In a world of love, laughter and lemon drizzle cake, gravity and the laws of thermodynamics seem an unsatisfying explanation. No-one denies that natural forces play their part. But are such impersonal powers supreme? Is there nothing beneath or beyond them?

Maybe we should abandon that kind of atheism and run, shrieking, into the arms of religion. Is that a solution to this bleak view of the world? No. I don't think so. Religion is no kind of answer to this problem. All too often, religion is just another version of the 'power' story.

When you ask a generally religious person to describe 'the beginning', they might well mention God. But ask them 'Which God?' and you get some worrying answers. Often the description of God 'in the beginning' sounds like this: 'He was bored.' 'He was lonely.' 'He was contemplating himself.' 'He was planning creation.' Almost everyone thinks of God as a solitary individual. Even Christians, who should know better. But actually, such a thought is chilling.

Can you imagine this solitary god existing from all eternity? He has no-one and nothing beside him, just his own thoughts for company. This god knows nothing of relationship, nothing of back-and-forth or

give-and-take. This god is not *essentially* loving. This god is simply 'power' by another name.

If this god were really God, how must his creatures relate to him? We must submit to his absolute will. We cannot trust the love of this god; we can only fear his power.

If this god was 'in the beginning', then we'd be saved from nothingness, we'd be saved from chaos... but we'd be delivered into slavery.

Is this what the Bible means when it starts 'In the beginning God'? Wonderfully, no. That's not the God of the Bible at all.

Here is the Bible's answer to our question. What was there in the beginning?

LOVE

This is an answer that changes everything. If it is true, it is the greatest of all truths—the Bible insists that we've come from love, we're shaped by love. Love rules our lives, our world and our future.

Could that be true? The Bible says, Think back to 'the beginning'. There you'll see that ultimate reality is not a lonely individual but a lively interplay. Let me explain.

The phrase 'in the beginning' appears three times in the Bible. Once at the start of Genesis and then twice at the start of John in the New Testament.

Genesis says that, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. It goes on to describe God's creation in *plural* terms. The Spirit of God moves upon the waters (Gen. 1:2). The Word of God

brings everything into being (v.3). God has a Word and a Spirit and does all things through his Word and by his Spirit.

In the New Testament, John begins his Gospel by writing: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning’ (John 1:1-2).

Here John is refreshing our memory of Genesis. In the beginning there was not a lonely god. In the beginning there was one Person called ‘God’, later called ‘the Father’ (v. 14). Then there was a second Person called ‘the Word’. He can also take the name ‘God’ (v. 1), ‘the Son of God’ (v. 14, NIV 2011) and ‘Jesus Christ’ (v. 17). Finally, John introduces us to a third Person—the ‘Holy Spirit’ or ‘Comforter’.³ He too is ‘God’. He too was there ‘in the beginning’.

According to the Bible, this is what was there ‘in the beginning’—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Ultimate reality is a loving union of Three. Christians call this ‘the Trinity’, which is just a way of squashing two words together: *tri* and *unity*. The Triunity (or Trinity) is the unbreakable and eternal unity of these Three. *That’s* who God is, and who he has always been.

And here’s what it means. For all eternity there *was* give-and-take, back-and-forth. There was friendliness. Therefore God is not defined by supremacy but by sharing.

3. e.g. John 16:5-16 (KJV).

In short, as a famous verse says, ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). Essentially—right down to his bootstraps you might say—the Father has been loving his Son in the joy of the Spirit. This love is not just what the Three do, it’s who they are. Their love is too good to keep to themselves. The Father, Son and Spirit want to share.

This is the reason for creation. The God of love overflows like a fountain brimming with life. He reaches out, to draw billions more into this love.

WELCOMED BY THE GOD OF LOVE

I was the youngest child in my family by some distance. My parents called me a ‘surprise’; my sisters ‘a mistake’. Strangely, I didn’t like being called ‘a mistake’. I liked to think of myself as carefully planned, eagerly anticipated and utterly wanted. We all do.

The Bible tells us that we’re not a mistake or even just a pleasant surprise. We are wanted. We are the planned offspring of the God of love and he longs to share his life with us.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We have begun with some mind-expanding concepts. Really that’s inescapable. The Bible’s ‘beginning’ forces us to think big. I wonder how you react?

Whatever beliefs we hold, all of us should admit that there is much that is true about the nothing, chaos and power stories. This world *is* full of impersonal powers, chaotic forces and the threat of nothingness. Even if we believe that ‘God is love’ we must all confess

that not everything is lovely. Far from it. In the next chapter we will consider how those darker realities have come to mar God's good world. But here's the question for this chapter: Are those forces *ultimate*? Is life *fundamentally* about Nothingness? Chaos? Power? Or is there a reality that runs even deeper?

Maybe you think we've come from *nothing*? If so our lives are, ultimately, absurd.

Perhaps we have emerged from *chaos*? Then it's all just a struggle.

Is everything simply about *power*? In which case we're determined by forces that enslave us.

The Bible says that these things are not *ultimate*. There was something else 'in the beginning'. If you put your finger on the pulse of reality, you'll find the God of **love**. And through Jesus, we're invited in.