

Today Counts Show Episode 115

Jim: What was the God of the universe doing before he created the universe?

Matt: Unfortunately, it's framed the wrong way.

Jim: It is.

Matt: Because it's framed in the concept of time

Jim: It is, exactly.

Matt: And it's framed in the concept of a beginning and an end. God has neither one of those. And so I can't answer a question of where something started when it didn't start.

Jim: Welcome back everybody to the Today Count Show. This is your fearless leader, Jim Piper, and I'm excited to kind of prep this. We've decided along with all the other podcasts that we do, we've decided to add a pillar, a lane, a story where we want to talk through the biblical book of Genesis. And if you're not familiar with Genesis, there's 50 chapters. And I've got a couple dear friends of mine that I'm going to introduce in just a second. In fact, you're if you are a fan of The Today Counts Show, they are not strangers to you. But we're not going to be preaching. We're not even going to be presenting a clear outline. We're going to have a discussion about the Book of Genesis. And today, we're going to talk around it. We're going to talk about it. And we're actually going to read Genesis 1:1 and talk about that. To relieve some stress on the front end, we won't spend as much time in one verse as we are today. Otherwise, we will never get through the book of Genesis since it has 50 chapters but today will be kind of fun as we set the table for this. So let me introduce to you Winston Harris. Winston is a pastor. He loves the Bible and he is joining us today. And so Pastor Winston, welcome.

Winston: Thanks for having me, Jim.

Jim: Pastor Matt Martin is a dear friend of mine and we've known each other now. We're starting to stack up some years together and he is a lover of reading. He's a lover of studying. He's a lover of God's word as well. Matt, Pastor Matt, welcome to The Today Counts Show.

Matt: Absolutely. Thank you. Looking forward to it.

Jim: Well, guys, let's jump in, right? And so, audience, what we told each other before I hit record is we're just three guys. We study, we're humans, we are believers and lovers of God. To the best of our ability at this stage in our lives, hopefully, we'll get better and better at it. But we're just having coffee and we're just talking about it. So I hope this will be fun for you to listen in with us. Let's talk about the book of Genesis. I heard somebody say not long ago that if you can embrace Genesis 1:1, which we'll read in a little bit, but if you can embrace Genesis 1:1, the statement of the origin of all things, then frankly, you should be able to get through the rest of scripture. And I thought that was a huge, a huge statement. In other words, it's a work, it's a foundation for everything else in our lives. When you guys think of Genesis and Genesis 1:1, what comes to your mind?

Winston: I'm going to take your lead, Pastor Matt.

Matt: Oh, man. I was wanting to see what brilliance would come out of your mouth. I thought if I held my tongue, we're talking about Genesis, but Proverbs says a man sounds wise even when he says nothing. They think he's wise. So I just hope that fool would [crosstalk].

Jim: Is that how you're going to roll? You're going to sit back in silence being the wise man.

Matt: Yes. I love the book of Genesis for so many reasons. I, when, again, it's what you said. And I believe I heard David Guzik say that same statement. If you can embrace Genesis 1:1 that God created, then you can embrace the incredible God of the rest of the scripture. And I think we've overlooked the simplicity because there's so much depth to Genesis 1. But I do believe we've overlooked just some of the simplicity of those first few statements of the Bible. Think about this. When I think of any way, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-things God, he could have started scripture any way he wanted to. There could have been any way to say this, and he chose to start with in the beginning. And I think part of that comes back because we all want to know where we came from. And so I think there's a little bit of, I'm going to give humanity a chance to, no matter what their physical family around them is doing, we can all trace back to

the beginning, to the place. And so there's a lot of things around that. But I think that is, when I think of Genesis 1:1, I could probably talk for an hour here about this because there's so much depth there. But I think one of the things we miss sometimes is just the simplicity of it. Just like, just here, God could have started the Bible any way he wanted to. And he decided to start it with, "In the beginning, God." And he introduces himself because, you as you talked about, Moses wrote this sometime later, but it's-- I read it earlier, Exodus 24:4, it said, "And Moses wrote down everything the Lord said." And so talking about, you know, some of the authorship of this and how this goes, but man, just imagine that magical moment. Moses knows he's in the presence of God and the moment of God. And he says, "Moses, let me tell you a story." And it begins to pin this.

Jim: Yeah, in my imagination, I don't have anything other than what you just quoted, Matt, to refer to. And in a little bit, we'll talk about some of the New Testament references to Moses even being the author. But I kind of, in my mind's eye, I don't know about you guys, but when I read the Bible, I try to go there in my mind. And in my mind, Exodus, when the Israelites are roaming around in the desert for 40 years, trying to get a line with God and one another, there's a lot of teaching going on, I envision. And then I envision this as part of it. Not all of it was necessarily new information because there was oral tradition, which I'm sure we'll talk about here in a minute. But I do kind of imagine, well, what the heck did they do besides try to survive?

Matt: Right.

Jim: So there must've been-- I mean, surviving was, I'm sure a lot of, a lot of work.

Matt: That was a full-time job.

Jim: Yeah. But still there was campfire time, right? And there was small group time and there was tent time and all of that. But I see it as a very exciting book, right? Instead of "once upon a time," it is "in the beginning."

Winston: There is a form and function in which humanity, the narrative of humanity is expressed and there's almost like a peace and a familiarity that comes with just in the beginning. Like, obviously we all watch movies and if you're engaged with any kind of content, There is a chronological beginning, middle, and end. And though the Bible isn't necessarily put together in that specific way, we do, I think, innately understand there is a narrative that is playing out in our own lives. And so as we grapple with the tensions and the situations that we all face, we all see

that we've had a beginning. So we all are very familiar with just that practical, "Oh, something started," and I think when we get into these big abstract concepts of spirituality, if somebody is approaching a God or an idea that man is Jesus God and do I want to put my faith in him and do I want to be a Christian, right? Just that simple to your point, a starting point in the beginning, I think brings an openness, a kind of an invitation, if you will, that people can connect to which obviously God is, you know, that's who God is, right? He's one of invitation. So in the beginning, strategically being the starting point is almost like, "Come on, come on in."

Jim: Yeah, that's good. It really is a warming-- I mean, I know that we don't always tell people to start in Genesis when they start reading the Bible because there's some urgent matters and sometimes you can get right to it in the book of John, but it's difficult for me to do that because I'm kind of a big picture thinker. And with that, I would like to offer that before we dive into 1:1, not only is the attendant audience, the Hebrew people, the Israelites. And of course, we're blessed today to have it in Western society and even before then. But, you know, when I look at if I were to divide Genesis up into two simple sections, chapters one to 11 teach the Hebrew people that humanity is broken. And I don't think it was difficult for them to see that, I don't think. And then chapters 12 to 50 where we are introduced to many, many characters, but the four big ones that probably any casual American has probably heard somewhere in some shape and some form, and that's Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. And it's not kind of, it's that birthing canal that genealogy, that brings forth, of course, the person that we must all decide, we all must make a decision on who he was, and that's Jesus. And so I know that's a huge, you know, oversimplification of Genesis, but I think it kind of helps us set the table for it. We kind of know these first five books that we've talked about as the Pentateuch or the Torah or the Law. All of those represent those first five books, but let's talk a little bit about the authorship. We've touched on it a little bit but how have you come-- It's already been implied. How have you gentlemen come to believe or think. I don't know that this is a core essential of our doctrines, but how have we come to believe that this character, Moses, is the one responsible for these first five books of the Bible?

Matt: The Bible says that Moses, as he wrote the law, taught the law. And so we see that Old Testament, New Testament, obviously in the gospels, we see this quoted by none other than those who knew the law better than anybody else, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And they were always looking for such detail to trip Jesus up that they would not have missed a detail as to who the author was of the first five books of the Bible. Because their religion, if you would, was so steeped in knowing and being confident of every detail of it down to the letter because that's how they were trying to trip Jesus up anyway is that they would not have let this slip by. And so as they even make reference to the law or the first five books as we recognize that and was recognized by Jewish tradition and passed down. So that would be one way that I would look at, just from a little more than casual reader of the Bible, somebody studying the Bible, that

would be one angle I would look at. And then obviously I think there's other things that you can see through the way that was penned, the way the storyline is told. And then how Moses, through Exodus and Numbers, it's very clear that, the scripture I quoted a while ago, that Moses wrote down everything the Lord said.

Jim: Yeah, absolutely. For those who are interested and want to do a little bit of cross-referencing is what we call it. I'll give you a couple New Testament examples. One is John 7:19. I won't make any comments about that, but that's the red letter words, which means that's what we believe Jesus said. Also in Mark 12:26, I will read that. I just turned it in my Bible, guys. Jesus is speaking and he says, "As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses," and he goes on and I believe the reference that he's talking about with the burning bush would be in the book of Exodus. Is that not right?

Matt: Yes.

Jim: The book of Exodus. So he's referring to these first five books. Jesus himself is acknowledging that Moses is the author. So if you believe in Jesus, that's a pretty good reference source. There's this other idea too that I was thinking about the other day is that, you know, other than creation and the fall and the flood, but certainly from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, those four books, Moses would not-- He had been an eyewitness. I mean, he was part of it. He was the leader, a part of that outside of his death, right? Obviously, he probably didn't write about his death but I'm pretty sure Joshua could have handled that and if not he himself, someone in his house could have buttoned that up and because as you remember, it is pretty short. It doesn't it go into a whole--

Matt: The language tightens up quickly on that.

Jim: Yes, it does. And yeah, I'm sure we'll refer to that at other times. Of course, we as believers, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Moses. And I don't think we have to say, do we? I mean, what do you guys think? I don't think we have to say that he necessarily had to be the original author of the whole organic text. He could possibly have been an editor and an author, could there not have been other texts that have already been written? I don't think that is out of bounds. Do you guys think that?

Ad: Everybody, we're going to take a brief break from The Today Counts show just to let you know that our very own Jim Piper has released a brand new book called Story: The Art of

Learning from Your Past and this is going to be for anyone who's looking to make a change in their life. If you feel stuck if you want to grow beyond your current position, man, we just believe there are stories and truths in this book that will help you move into the future with a different perspective. We all have a story and we can learn from that story to propel us into a strong future. Be sure to grab Story where books are sold; Amazon and wherever you find books. All right back to the podcast.

Jim: Yeah, there's a thing called critical examination. And so what some of the critics will say is that when you read through the first five books, it seems like in some places, you have somebody else that takes over. It's a different style of writing, which I don't see as problematic. I just see it as him kind of reaching out and gathering and organizing. But I don't have a problem with him. I mean, I think about my style of writing, right? I'm still learning how to write and my style changes. So, you know, and hopefully gets better. So I'm not sure how strong of an argument, you know, that is anyway. Yeah.

Matt: In I believe in modern society, if you will, especially Western society, we've become very skeptical and cynical of so many things.

Jim: Very skeptical. Yeah.

Matt: But a Jewish tradition, even oral tradition was- I mean, when it was passed down, that was it. Like you knew this was the real deal. If you go to John Chapter 5, Verse 45, 46, maybe even 47, Moses is obviously that pinnacle that the Old Testament is looking back to because Jesus is talking, he says, "Your accuser is Moses on whom your hopes are set." So in order for the Jewish, if we go back to Jewish context, for them to believe these first five books for them to believe this, whether it's passed on by written or oral tradition later on to their families, there is a confidence in Moses writing this that can't be shaken. So it could be that some of the evidence of detail here is left out of our writings that we have today because it was just known as such as we would know that, in our case, Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence. But I mean, yeah, there's history books that tell me that, but like there's just some things you just know in American history that I don't need all this massive evidence around it to tell me all of the exact little details. I just know because of an eyewitness or whatever we have. And I think there's some things in Jewish tradition that our skepticism and our cynicism buries when they knew that, hey, this is-- 'Cause it's not like we believed he did it. It's what Jesus said. He said, your hope is set in what Moses said because you took those first five books and said, "This is how we're going to live our life. This is how we're going to be saved. This is how we're going to be God's children." And so I think--

Jim: Right. Matt, just look at the difference between the cultures, you know. Our technology and the speed in which we do things and the speed in which we say things and the lack of capacity we have to even hold each other accountable for everything that is written and said. And you think about the pace of that day. And if you haven't read the book of Leviticus, you can't tell me that they didn't have an accountability structure that, you know. And so I have a hard time believing that, you know, he comes out of his tent and says, "Okay, here's how it went down."

Matt: Exactly right.

Jim: And everybody goes, "What?"

Matt: Yeah. No, that's not how it works.

Jim: I think a lot of this was, you know, carried around in not just oral tradition, but tribal knowledge in some way, shape or form. Now, obviously, there was new revelations that God brought and you saw that even in the way they traveled. God reintroducing or introducing himself, you know, to the Hebrew people. You guys have heard me tell this story before, but, you know, I don't know that I really understood the power of oral tradition until I was in Bolivia. I was on the top of the Andes outside of the city, Sucre, and a woman brought her little girl to me and dumped her in my arms and threw an interpreter or a translator, whatever the right term is. She told me that her little girl had tuberculosis and asked me to take him down to Sucre to the hospital.

Well, first of all, you may or may not know but you catch tuberculosis in the air so that's that was a little scary holding this little girl. At the same time as a human, what do you do, drop her? Right? I'm holding I'm holding her, but you guys know me. I'm a bit philosophical, analytical, and it confused me that a mother who is, you know, yes, I understand she was a distance away from the city and certainly didn't own a vehicle. I was surprised that she would hand the child to me instead of say, "Can I go with you and take my child down there?"

And so, you know, my inquisitive self, who probably looked like I didn't care was simply trying to figure out the situation. And I asked the translator, "Why would she turn over her child to us?" And the translator, without hesitation, said, "Back in such and such a date," and I don't remember the date, "the Spaniards chased all these Bolivians up here into the Andes." And that was generations ago. "And through oral tradition, the law that the Spaniards, the deal that the Spaniards made to them, to their ancestors was, as long as you stay up in the mountains, we won't chase you, but you come down and we will slay you." And she was assuming that if she put her child in missionary's arms, you know, the child might be able to get through. So even

though that was not really rational, it shows you how powerful oral tradition is and they believed it as much as they were standing on dirt.

I think there's another point too is that Moses unlike his people was raised in Pharaoh's house and highly educated probably the most educated group in society, I believe. I don't know if that's a fully accurate statement, but it's in the neighborhood anyway if it's not. So he learned to read, he learned to write. He also learned various disciplines of business and problem solving and things that, to be honest, farmers probably didn't have that level of understanding.

So just to recap, I think what we've said is that it's a pretty good argument that Moses is the author because A, as Christians we believe that God inspired and directed. And I know that's really intangible, but we certainly believe that. Moses was an eyewitness to most of this and what he didn't know he got either from the Lord or oral tradition. And they did live longer lives in those days. And so oral tradition, you can even more credence to oral tradition. And then finally his education as in Pharaoh's home. One of these minutes here, we're going to actually read the verse that we wanted to talk about. In fact, why don't we do that? I don't know if you guys have your Bible open or not. I had mine to Genesis 1:1. What translations do you guys have in front of you?

Winston: I have ESV.

Jim: ESV?

Matt: I normally have the ESV, I have the NIV today.

Jim: Yeah, let's see if there's any difference just for fun. Winston, why don't you read the ESV, and then Matt can read the NIV.

Winston: Yep. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

Jim: Boom.

Matt: And the NIV decided not to deviate at all from that. And they said, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

Jim: That's cool. All right, so, and for those that are curious, the ESV stands for English Standard Version, and the NIV stands for New International Version. I'm not sure that those titles are important, but-- And then by translations, you know, I would bet that by the time we get through Genesis 50, we'll talk a lot about translations, but if we look at that together, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. You know, to me, that's like a cannon shot. Here, open up the Bible, read Genesis 1:1, boom! And there are so many questions answered in just this verse. In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. I don't think I even asked the question until I was an adult, but you know, you start wanting to figure everything out because not everything makes sense. And in the beginning of what? In the beginning of what? In the beginning, I would assume that this correlates that in the beginning of time. Is that how you guys read it?

Matt: That's how I read it.

Jim: Yeah, in the beginning of time. Someone once asked me this question, what was God doing before he created the universe? What was the God of the universe doing before he created the universe? Assuming there is no other creation and that we're the center of eternity. I don't know if that's such a thing.

Matt: That's a great question because, unfortunately, it's framed the wrong way.

Jim: It is.

Matt: Because it's framed in the concept of time

Jim: It is, exactly.

Matt: And it's framed in the concept of a beginning and an end. God has neither one of those. And so I can't answer a question of where something started when it didn't start.

Jim: The way Hugh Ross would have said it is it's beyond our grasp because we have not been-- We have a lot of common graces, right, that we all have. And we'll get to this, but I think that if we can illuminate the minds of others, including ourselves, and realize that we have been blessed with common graces, and every time we learn something, science, how to fight cancer,

how to mend a bone, how to serve one another, these are all common graces. But then there's this stuff that is unique, you know, grace.

But anyway, back to that question, and Matt, I think you said it right. It's a ridiculous question because God lives outside of time. Well, He transcends time. He's in and outside of time, so he's outside of time. And again, Hugh Ross would say, we don't have the dimensions that God has. And so we can't even fathom what that looks like. But the question leads though to a lot of great stuff. So what does this tell us about God? So in the beginning, that God decides to create. So I mean, to me--

Matt: [crosstalk] for just a second there. I just thought about something out of Second Peter, I believe. He said that this salvation that we have, Peter's writing, he said this salvation that we have, even the angels desire to look into it is one translation. The other translation basically says the angels are jealous of what we have. But the angels desire to look at, so obviously before this Genesis 1:1, before in the beginning, there's God and Angels because Genesis one and one begins the redemption story that God is going-- Here's the other thing we forget. Everything God does is to show his glory, to show his glory. And yeah, we probably could argue around that for a while, but so is it this moment that these angels that are created to worship-- that he created to worship him, he begins to, you know, I'll use very layman terms here and we'll break this down much better. But, you know, he looks into a black blob, if you would, of matter and says, well, watch what happens and watch what is created from here. And so much that he begins the story of mankind and redemption story that whatever was happening before, the angels are in awe and are in desire to look into what God has created in this salvation. Because of what God created, you and I have something that the angels will never have. And so in this context, God starts this story of in the beginning, you know, if you would. So anyway, that went nowhere, but I just kept talking.

[laughter]

Winston: Thank you for joining us for Part 1 of our Genesis project conversation. We are excited to be releasing Part 2 and so many more conversations in this Genesis project in the near future. Be sure to like and subscribe Lead Today Community on our Youtube channel. You can follow us on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn. And be sure to subscribe and follow on the podcast platform you use. Be on the look out for so much more to come.