

Metaphysics And Me

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight I want us to turn to Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, where we have the famous and! amazing opening words of the Bible. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the! earth. For the next four Sunday evenings or so, we are going to do a short series with a bit of a weird title. It's called Metaphysics and Me. And you might be thinking, well, what does that mean? I'm just going to turn my slides off because I'm not quite doing what I want them to do. I'll just reopen it. It's not following my... So just bear with me for one moment and we'll get it to come together.

Is that doing it now? Are you okay just to switch it off and switch it on again? And hopefully it'll work. So our title is Metaphysics and Me. And you might be thinking, well, what on earth is that? The me part seems straightforward enough. But metaphysics, what on earth is all that about? Well, metaphysics is basically just a fancy... Is that working now? There we go. It's working. Excellent. Metaphysics is a fancy word for just the biggest questions of life. So it's exploring questions of being, of first principles, of ultimate reality. So we're asking, what is the universe? Where did it come from? What is time? What's space? What's data? What's information? What is ultimate reality? So as we go through a normal week in our normal lives, all around us, there's a world, all around us, there's reality, there's existence, there's time.

What's it all about? What are we part of? What's going on? Where did it come from? Where's it going? Metaphysics is thinking about all these massive questions. And these are questions that matter to every single one of us, because we're all part of that. And ultimately, we need to know and understand something about it. And that title, Metaphysics and Me, I hope is helpful because it's actually talking about two topics that we find very hard to understand. It's hard to understand metaphysics. It's stretching us to some of the biggest questions of life and death and time and eternity and truth and reality. But it's also sometimes very hard to understand ourselves.

Why do we keep doing things that we don't want to do? Why do things happen to us? Why has my life turned out this way and not another way? And so Metaphysics and Me captures two massively important topics that we need to think about. And they're both topics that the Bible speaks powerfully into. And so we'll be looking at this for the next four weeks or so. And really underneath that title is two big theological topics, the topics of creation and providence. And we'll spend, I think, a couple of weeks looking at creation and then a couple of weeks looking at providence. And so that's why I wanted to start with Genesis 1.1. It's getting us to think about creation. And the first step thinking about this whole theological topic of creation is to remember that creation is within that philosophical topic of metaphysics. And this is where categories are very, very important because metaphysics is different to physics. So one is philosophy, the other is science. And so metaphysics is taking us beyond where physics will take us. And so it's taking us beyond the observable, the demonstrable, the empirical.

It's stretching us outside those boundaries. And so there's a massive amount we can learn from physics and from every scientific discipline. Metaphysics takes us outside that. It's stretching us even further.

[4 : 20] And there's crucial implications for that. And that's why our categories are so important, because the epistemology of metaphysics is different to the epistemology of physics. And what on earth does that mean? Well, epistemology is just the fancy word for how we know stuff. So how we know stuff in terms of metaphysics is different from how we know stuff in terms of physics or any other category. So to put it like this, I can watch a light bulb turn on. So I can go down to the switches there, I can flick the switches off, the lights will go off, and the lights will come on again. We can repeat that process, we can observe it, we can learn things from it. And behind all that lies electricity, voltage, light energy, tons of physics stuff. Ask Kershyn about that, she's a physics teacher. So we can watch a light bulb go on and off, we can observe that. But we cannot watch the let there be light moment when the heavens and the earth were created. Whatever your view of that may be, whether it's the let there be light of Genesis 1, the Big Bang, or whatever, however you want to look at it, we can't go back and look at that.

And even if we can observe its effects, which we can in many ways, none of us can go back and observe who flicked the switch and where all that came from in the first place. And so that means that the questions of metaphysics are not answered by the discoveries of physics, or of biology, or of any other science or technology, because they're different categories. They're different categories.

Now that doesn't mean that physics and all these other things aren't helpful, they are. There's loads that we learn, but they only contribute something to our understanding of these biggest questions. They only contribute something. They cannot give us complete metaphysical answers.

So in order to answer questions in metaphysics, what do you need? Well, the interesting thing is that no matter where you come from in terms of your perspective on the Bible or anything else, in order to have answers, potential answers in metaphysics, you need one thing.

You need faith. And that's true. Whatever your conclusions are, metaphysics is subject to an inescapable reliance on faith. In other words, we can only know stuff by believing stuff. And that's actually true of any area of knowledge. We're constantly relying on faith. So if we go back to the light switch illustration, if we're flicking the lights on and off, we are trusting that what we're seeing is what's actually happening. We're relying on our sensory perception. If we're taking measurements and readings from the voltage or whatever in the lights, we're trusting that the instruments that we're using are accurate. All our endeavors to gain knowledge rely on faith. A brilliant example is your name. How do you know what your name is?

[7 : 28] How do you know what your name is? You didn't give yourself your name. Your parents gave you your name. They told you your name. The only way you know your name is by believing them.

Maybe your name is Trevor. You just don't know it. No. And so anything, when you think about it, you realize, actually, this is true. This is true. And metaphysics, it applies particularly in metaphysics because it's talking about the biggest stuff, the biggest questions. And metaphysics is the activity whereby non-absolute thinkers, finite thinkers, are trying to find absolute conclusions.

In other words, tiny people like us are trying to answer the biggest questions of life. And we can only hold those answers by faith because the absolutes of metaphysics are way, way bigger than us.

We're always relying on a step of faith. And that's true, whatever your worldview, that's true in every area of knowledge. And the key point we want to highlight as we start is that what we know and understand about creation is always going to rely on faith. And the fascinating thing is that the Bible's been saying this all along. In Hebrews 11, it says, by faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God. Now, however you answer that question, whether you answer that question, the universe was created by whatever, random explosion or by something else or by or by or by whatever, the first part of the sentence still applies to you. It's only by faith that you can hold whatever your conclusion is. The Bible recognizes this and it also points us to its explanation, which I'm going to argue is the explanation for metaphysical reality. By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God. I should have warned you all of this. I should have said this at the start that all of this is very complicated. So if you thought that you were on holiday, holidays are over. This is a lot to think about. But this is good to get the opportunity to think about these things. A biblical understanding of creation, therefore, comes through trusting what

God is revealing to us in his word. And that makes total intellectual sense. Because we weren't there when he made it. And it's only by what he's revealed to us that we can understand it. We cannot observe it.

[10:17] We cannot reenact it. And that's why we read from Job 38. Job's got all these questions about why is this happening to me? What's going on? What's happened to my life? What are you doing? And the starting point for God's response to Job is to say, where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determines its measurements? Surely you know.

But who stretched the line upon it? And what that's basically saying is Job is, you know, looking at God saying, look, what is going on? Give me answers. And in many ways, in the depths of his sorrow, Job is doing what many of us do when things are not going well, is we make ourselves and our circumstances the center of the universe? And we think that it's really all about us. And God confronts Job and reminds him that actually he is part of something much, much bigger. And of course, when you read on in Job, you see that the explanation comes. But the starting point is for Job to recognize actually, God is my creator. He's the one who knows it all. And I need to listen to him. And so this is reminding us that when we approach a topic like creation or any of these big metaphysical questions, really, it's like a bucket trying to hold an ocean. So our understanding is like a bucket and we're trying to put an ocean into it, which obviously doesn't fit, but we can get a little bit there. You're the bucket. And the amazing thing is that the ocean is actually just a teeny speck on God's hand.

So there's some things that we can learn, even though there's many things that we won't know for sure. And one of the most important truths that we are being taught in the Bible at the very beginning is that God is our creator. And that's a fundamental aspect of the biblical worldview, a fundamental aspect of what we call the biblical metaphysic. And I want us to think about that a little bit more under two headings. We're going to think about the creator-creation distinction and the creator-creation relationship. So thinking about this first and foremost, creator-creation distinction is a very, very important theological concept that we need to make sure that we're very clear about. And it's been illustrated by a diagram that I'm going to draw. And it's a diagram that's made up of two circles. Please pretend that that circle is not oval. And that circle represents the creator. And this circle, I'll never fit this in, represents the creation. And this diagram was made famous by a theologian called Cornelius van Til. He lived in the last century, lectured in America.

And he used this diagram to say that in terms of the Bible's understanding of metaphysics, of creation, of ultimate questions of reality, there are two levels. There's the level of the creator and there's the level of the creation. And I've got a quote here from van Til that explains that a little bit more. He said, the Bible does contain a theory of reality. And this theory of reality reality is of two levels of being. First, of God as infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. And second, of the universe as derivative, finite, temporal, and changeable. The meaning of all words in the Christian theory of being, or the Christian metaphysic, depend upon the difference between the self-contained God and the created universe. So just to explain that a little bit more, there's two levels of being. You've got God, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. That's this circle.

And then you have the universe as derivative, finite, temporal, and changeable. That's this circle. And so that's all there is. There's nothing else in existence except the creator and the creation.

[14 : 31] And only God is in the creator circle. Only God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Everything else, all of time, all of matter, all of energy, all of everything, is in the creation circle. And that includes both visible and invisible realities. So the heavens and the earth, all created by God.

And nothing else exists outside of these two circles. Now this is the way the Bible understands reality. Now it's very important that we recognize that and hold on to that, because there's lots of alternative theories out there. I'm going to draw them. This is going to be a night for pictures.

So there's a few different ways in which people have approached reality. The Greeks had what they would call, what you'd maybe call a dualistic view of reality, where you had good and evil as these big realities up there. And then there's kind of us here and the world. And so we're in the world, you've got good and evil. And there's this kind of eternal dualism between the two. And what the Greeks tended to think was that physical stuff came from here and abstract stuff like thoughts came from here. And so the Greeks often had this idea that the body was bad, the mind was good, which is why they loved what? They loved philosophy, because they thought thinking was where it was at.

And material, physical stuff, not so much. So that was a dualistic worldview. Still very common. People have this idea of this kind of ultimate good and evil out there.

Another worldview that's common, so this is the creation here, is what we would call a polytheistic worldview, where instead of one creator, you have many, many gods. Again, that has its roots in Greek mythology and the Greek-Greco-Roman religion. But again, it's seen in lots and lots of places today, the idea that there's lots of gods out there. That's another view. There's also a view where you have God of some sort, you have us, the creation here, and then in between, you kind of have like demigods. Again, that's a common view if you go back a few thousand years. And there's like intermediaries between the god that's like unknowable, then demigods in the middle, and then us. That's another worldview. Other people have the worldview of what's called pantheism.

[17 : 11] That's still very common today. And the idea of pantheism is that creator and creation is actually the same thing. It's all one circle that the world around us, the universe is divine, and new age thinking and things like that all taps in to this worldview. And then the last one that people have is that we have like, I don't really know how to draw this very well. You've got the creation here, God is sort of viewed as like deriving from us, but just a bit bigger, stronger, better.

So you'll often see that, you know, God portrayed in these terms. So you think of a strong person, God's portrayed as even stronger. Or you think of a beautiful person, God's portrayed as even more beautiful. All of that's to derive our understanding of God from us. And that's, of course, the wrong way of doing it. The big emphasis in the Bible is that none of those are correct.

And instead, we must, must always hold to the creator-creation distinction. Now, why is that important? Well, one of the things that makes that so important is that it's teaching us that God is transcendent. I need to make sure I spell this right. S first.

Transcendent. What does that mean? Well, that's telling us that God is over and beyond everything.

So remember, we're saying that absolutely everything else that exists is in this creation circle. And God is bigger than it. He's bigger than it.

[19 : 00] And outside it. And beyond it. And he transcends absolutely everything. In other words, what that means is that your view of God has got to be huge.

And if your view of God is huge, it's still nowhere near big enough. He's in a category of his own.

There's a difference in essence between the creator and the creation. He is uncreated divinity, uncreated godness.

We are creatures made by him, made for him. And there's two enormous consequences of that. Nothing matters more than what you think of him.

And nothing matters more than what he thinks of you. Which takes us to this point. The creator-creation relationship.

[20 : 13] Because alongside recognizing this distinction between God the creator and the rest of the creation, we also need to recognize that there's a relationship between the creator and his creation.

And one of the reasons why that's a key part of the biblical metaphysic is because the God revealed in the Bible is a personal God. Not an impersonal force, not like a fate or an energy or a blob or a something from which everything else came.

No, God is personal. And therefore, he exists in a context of relationship. And that, of course, first and foremost applies to God himself.

God the Trinity. God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever and forever existing in the beautiful context of relationship. And from that, there's a relationship between the creator and the creation.

But the point that we have to recognize, and again, I keep having to write difficult-to-spell words, that relationship is asymmetrical. So we're not equals.

[21 : 24] And that's why it's really important to recognize that the creator circle is bigger than the creation circle. It's an asymmetrical relationship. In other words, how God relates to his creation is different from how the creation relates to God.

Let me highlight a couple of differences. So God's relationship with us is one of independence. So God does not need us and does not need the universe and does not need the creation.

He doesn't even need the heavens that he made. He does not need any of it. He's totally independent, utterly complete, in and of himself.

And that's captured very powerfully in Acts 17, 24, when Paul is speaking to the smartest philosophers in Athens. And he speaks about the God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

He's independent. The creation is therefore unnecessary. Secondly, God's relationship towards us is one of authority. So over all the creation, God is Lord and he has total sovereignty over it.

[22 : 52] And we'll think a little bit more about that when we come to think about providence in a couple of weeks' time. But God has authority. That's the big point I want to highlight. He is the absolute owner of creation.

And that's captured in a fascinating version, Genesis 14, where it says, Blessed be Abraham by God, most high, possessor of heaven and earth.

And that's quite an unusual word. It's the Hebrew word *koneh*, which is a cool sounding word. And it's just a word that means owner.

It's the language of ownership. So the whole universe, everything that exists, visible, invisible, it's God's. He has total authority over everything.

So God's relationship towards us is one of independence, one of authority, but thirdly, it's also one of grace. Because the amazing thing about God is that he's benevolent towards his creation.

[23 : 54] He blesses us with an abundance of gifts that we have no claim to. I forgot to read Psalm 89, verse 11, but it just backs up the authority point. Psalm 147 captures this.

He covers the heavens with clouds. He prepares the rain for the earth. He makes grass grow in the hills. He gives to beasts their food and to the young ravens that cry. This is just an example of something you see again and again in Scripture, that to the smallest detail, God provides for his creation every resource, everything that's beautiful and wonderful and useful and beneficial in the creation around us come from him.

He graciously blesses us with an abundance of good things. So God's relationship to us, independence, authority, grace, our relationship with him is asymmetrical. It's not the same.

So instead of being independent, our relationship towards God is one of total and utter dependence. We rely on him for everything.

It's in him that we live and move and have our being, as Paul goes on to say in Acts 17. Our relationship with God is not one of authority towards God.

[25 : 06] Our relationship is one of accountability. And despite how people may live out their lives, God is not answerable to us. We are answerable to him.

Romans 1 captures that very powerfully. Let me read these verses. For what can be known about God is plain to them. That's to those who've rejected God. What can be known about God is plain to them because God's shown it to them.

For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened, claiming to be wise. They became fools. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

This is really capturing the essence of the human condition whereby we're created by God, made for him, made to worship him, and yet we spend all our time worshipping aspects of the creation.

[26 : 10] People and things and feelings instead of God. And so we are accountable to him. But we also exist in a relationship of extraordinary privilege because the blessings that God showers us with leave us in an immensely privileged position.

and that particularly applies to us as humans. We enjoy amazing privileges as we exist in God's creation. All of this is teaching us that alongside the great truth of God's transcendence, at the same time, God is also what we call immanent.

So transcendent means that God is above and beyond everything. He's further away than you can possibly imagine.

Imminent means that he's closer than you ever realized. He's involved. He's sustaining us, providing for us, watching us, blessing us, helping us, leading us.

And these two words capture two massively important truths about the biblical metaphysic, the fact that God is transcendent, he's above everything, he's imminent, which means he's right here tonight.

[27 : 47] and he's listening every time you pray. And he's with you every time you step out your front door.

And he's holding you every time you put your head on your pillow at night. God is transcendent, he is supreme and sovereign over it all, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, but he's also imminent, invested and involved in his creation, kind and generous towards his creatures, utterly determined to love his people.

Now one of the big consequences of this, create a creation distinction, I can't fit creation in there, but you know by now that that's what it's meant to say.

One of the big consequences of this, of the creator-creation distinction, the creator-creation relationship, the transcendence of God, the imminence of God, one of the massive consequences of this that every one of us has to recognize is that this patch here that's yellow doesn't exist.

In other words, there is no neutral ground. we stand! We stand before our creator at every moment that we exist.

[29 : 24] And that is why this matters more than anything. Is there a relationship with him, one of alienation, where we're saying to the creator, that I'm swapping you for something else and I'm walking away?

Or is it a relationship of adoration where we fall before him on our knees and we say, Lord, you are my Lord. And I know that I need you more than anything else.

Another way to say all this is that the transcendence and the imminence of God reminds us of the beyondness and nearness of God. utterly beyond the furthest that your mind can stretch.

Closer to you, nearer to you, than you ever realized. Now, as we conclude, we need to recognize that the creation is doing two things.

What it's doing is pointing in two directions. So, it's pointing as a sign towards God and the creation also points a finger at us.

[30 : 52] So, it points as a sign towards God. The creation is a constant, powerful, and persuasive testimony to the reality of God. The heavens declare the glory of God.

The sky above proclaims his handiwork. And the Bible helps us to see and understand that more clearly. We see the world around us. We see that it's amazing.

We see the fingerprints of God. And the Bible helps explain that more. It helps us to see the purpose that God had in creating the world. I'm running out of time. As usual, I wanted to give you a quote from John Calvin.

I won't read it all. I'll just summarize it. Basically, it's saying that the Bible is like a pair of glasses. And as you read the Bible, you are putting on a pair of glasses that you can then look at the world around you through and you will understand it and see it more clearly.

And that's so crucial that what we see in the world around us, that's pointing us towards God, what we then read in Scripture helps us to see and understand more. So there's lots to be excited about as you go into a new week.

[31 : 56] Look out for stuff that's going to point you to God. Look out for stuff that's going to point you towards God. And you'll see it, whether you're studying physics, microbiology, whether you're working with people, whether you are trying to learn something new, whether you want to go and visit somewhere you've never been before, whatever you're doing, it's going to point you towards God and Scripture will help you to see and understand that more and more clearly.

What that means is that the Bible gives us a deeper explanation that makes sense of what we see. And the way we can summarize it is this, that one of the amazing things about the worldview that the Bible gives us is that it means that our metaphysics and a beautiful Hebridean summer evening match.

and only the Bible gives you that. Because on a beautiful Hebridean summer's evening, you're sitting on a beach and you're watching the sun go down and you're thinking, wow, this is so beautiful.

This is just amazing. I'm so privileged and blessed to enjoy this. This is taking my breath away. And then without the Bible, you'll drive off and put your metaphysical head back, hat back on and you'll be like, yeah, it's all going to get burnt up and I'm going to get burnt up with it.

But the Bible's worldview says this beautiful Hebridean evening is a glimpse of heaven. It's a glimpse of eternity and it's pointing you to the wise, and powerful and good God who made it all and who wants to share it all with you.

[33 : 53] And it's all reminding us that God is so worthy of our worship. And we sang Psalms that spoke of that and there's more here. The Psalms are constantly speaking about God as creator.

He's the one who made us, we're worthy of his worship. In fact, the Psalms even sing of the creation itself, praising God and we read about that in Isaiah 55, even the hills and the trees praising God, God's creation, honouring him.

And so creation points as a sign towards God, but creation also points a finger at us and that takes us back to the big point that's been made in Romans 1, that the reality of God is seen in the world around us.

his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made and that leaves us without excuse.

And that testimony of creation is so clear, we cannot claim ignorance or innocence before our creator, but at the same time, creation speaks powerful enough to tell us that there is a God and it tells us that we need a God, but it doesn't tell us how to get to him.

[35 : 25] And that's why we need more of God's revelation, his special revelation, the word of God revealed in the Bible and brought to us through the gospel.

And the amazing thing about that gospel is that it teaches us that God is our creator and he's more than our creator. He's also our saviour.

And we sang a little bit about that, or we picked up some of that in Psalm 145, the Lord's good to all, his mercy is over all that he's made, the Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth, he fulfills the desire of those who fear him, he also hears their cry and saves them.

Now, as always, I've run out of time, there's so much more I could and should say about this, but that emphasis on God as saviour, our creator coming to save us, our creator coming to save us, that's the gospel.

And it's so important that we recognise that. And you have to recognise that because if you don't have the gospel, if you don't trust in Jesus, if we don't have it, and if the gospel is not true, if the gospel is not true, then metaphysics will swallow you up.

[36 : 54] Because the world, the universe, we're just a tiny speck in something that's just going to disappear. Metaphysics will swallow you up completely and leave you totally insignificant.

In the gospel, metaphysics, the biggest questions of life and reality, are structured to make you, to save you, and to bless you in the presence of God forever.

In other words, without Jesus, the me just doesn't matter at all. God will be with Jesus.

All the metaphysics of the universe are all geared towards God making you his child. Without Jesus, metaphysics will leave us feeling totally insignificant.

but with Jesus. It's not the importance of metaphysics that will blow your mind. It's the importance of me.

[38 : 35] It's the importance of you. The architect of all metaphysics sent his son to die for you so that you could be his child forever.

the Bible's metaphysics are so cool. Amen. That's it.