

Parish of Central Saanich – St. Stephen's & St. Mary's  
NOVEMBER 2017 – BIBLE STUDY SERIES  
*"Genesis 1-3: The Story of Beginnings"*

***Beginnings # 1: "The Creation"- Nov. 7/8, 2017***  
**Genesis 1:1-2:4**

***Opening Prayer:***

*Heavenly Father, we are your creatures made in your image; by your Spirit present at the beginning of creation, humble us before you now as we behold the wonder of your grace in creation and draw us to the One through whom you made all worlds, Jesus, that we may love and serve you as our Creator and live in harmony with the world and those around us. Amen.*

**Introduction**

Almost 50 years ago,<sup>1</sup> the first astronauts landed on the moon and all the world was watching and looking back at ourselves through their cameras some 240,000 miles away. It was at that point that, in the midst of the greatest adventure of science and technology ever made, those involved chose to read the very passage we are studying tonight/today. And the wonder of it all was that, gazing at our lovely little planet, shimmering blue and white in space, we knew that these words were the most "marvellously appropriate" that could ever be used. The commentator, John Gibson, says "There in the face of one of science's greatest achievements was an acknowledgement by the scientific community of a mystery at the heart of things which only religious words, not scientific ones, could adequately describe."<sup>2</sup>

In these three studies on the theme, "Beginnings," I hope to show you that not only Genesis 1, but also Genesis 2 and 3, are the most wonderful and comprehensive descriptions of the meaning of life we could possibly find. It is in these chapters that we will find the right basis and perspective from which to begin all our investigations into the nature of God, the world around us, and ourselves. It is here that we can rediscover the majesty of God and His plan for us and the world, how we have strayed, and how we can be restored. We begin with Genesis 1 – the Creation.

Now some of you may be thinking, "But surely, Pastor Brett, chapter one of Genesis was written for a pre-literate and pre-scientific society. We have to take it with a grain of salt!" Others of you may have been trying for years to hold together the Biblical account of Creation and scientific theories of evolution and see in the Bible an echo of these discoveries. I hope to show you that the Biblical account is not just a myth in the common sense of the word and is far more than a symbolic picture of what went on at the dawn of history. Genesis 1 opens-up to us a way of thinking and looking at reality that has a profound meaning and importance for us today.

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<sup>1</sup> July 20, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> John C. L. Gibson, *Daily Study Bible, Genesis, Vol.1* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1981), pg. 10.

## The Background and Nature of the Material

Before we get to that point, though, we need to look at the background and nature of the material we are studying - the sources and influences behind today's passage, then its form and content.

1. **Sources:** Genesis, which means "Beginnings," is the first of five books attributed to Moses and is obviously a bringing together of material from a wide variety of sources. All you have to do is look at chapter one and compare it with chapters 2 and 3 and you can see we have two different styles of writing and perspectives on Creation. Various scholars have tried to isolate what came from where and so on.<sup>3</sup> I don't think that needs our attention, except where it helps us understand deeper meanings of the text. The fact of many sources need not bother us - a glance at the opening verses of the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4), where Luke speaks of accessing many sources to compose his Gospel, is clear evidence that God's servants can write inspired Scripture using different sources. In fact, as I hope you will see, it is the placing of these different accounts side by side and intermingling with one another that is part of the inspiration itself. Just as God's Spirit can inspire people to write, so He can inspire people to edit! Did Jesus know that Gen. 1 and Gen. 2\3 were written from different perspectives? Of course! Any intelligent person can see that. The fact that Jesus saw the whole literature as being inspired is what is important to us.
2. **Influences:** But where did Moses or the compilers of the material get their inspiration? Was it directly from God as in a vision or from stories handed down through their own history or was there an impact from the stories of surrounding cultures? Many peoples around the world have their own creation accounts and some scholars have seen Genesis as being a purer transmission of what actually took place, handed down the generations from the of earliest times<sup>4</sup> - I lean towards this view. Others have seen Genesis as a God-inspired reaction to the quite contradictory pictures given in the stories of surrounding cultures (which doesn't necessarily cancel out the first view). For example, in the stories of Ancient Mesopotamia (e.g. Sumerian and Babylonian), some of them have fantastic tales of wars amongst the gods and the land and sea being created out of the carcasses of the vanquished deities. Some seem to have been written with the express object of demonstrating how their local god, was supreme over all other gods, such as Marduk in Babylon. The chart below<sup>5</sup> shows the contrasting theologies between the Mesopotamian stories and the Biblical account:

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Theories of "J", "E", "P", "D", etc.

<sup>4</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1st ed.); (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Handed out during lecture course, "Genesis 1-11", Gordon Wenham, Trinity College, Bristol, Spring 2015.

<b>Mesopotamian Creation Stories</b>	<b>Genesis</b>
Many gods, including sun and moon	One God: sun, etc. created
Matter eternal	Matter created
Civilization progress	Sin and fall
Man afterthought to feed gods	Man climax - fed by God

We will look at these contrasts in more detail in a moment. The theory goes that, since the Old Testament was compiled during the exile in Babylon the influence on Genesis (albeit a negative one) from these cultures helped shape its form and content. This has led some to say that the Biblical stories have no authenticity of their own but that is extreme. But there is nothing amiss in saying that they were written in this context and that helped sharpen the differences between them

However, there is a whole series of creation stories from Egypt which one scholar, Rikk Watts from Regent College in Vancouver (up until last year), has shown are much closer to the Biblical account.<sup>6</sup> Although there are a variety of Egyptian creation stories, there are some common themes between them and Genesis such as:

- one god, not many, being responsible for creation
- no pre-existent material but what is made comes into being by the word of the god
- creation emerges from the deep, the darkness, the formlessness and emptiness, and the wind
- a similar order to creation where light precedes the sun and the moon
- a firmament which divides the upper and lower waters.
- finally, unlike the Babylonian traditions, the Egyptians grant a special role to humans, who are made of clay but in the image of the god and who is "breathed" into being.

What does this tell us? First, that it shows that writing of Genesis 1 could go back to the time of slavery in Egypt with Moses as author - after all, he "Was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22). Second, that having just witnessed the acts of the true God, Yahweh, in "uncreating" Egypt at the Exodus through the ten plagues and destruction of the armies of Pharaoh, supposed son of the god Amon-Re, in the sea, was indeed the Creator and "not Ptah, Atum, or any other of Egypt's failed deities."<sup>7</sup> Watts asks, was it "the details of the varied Egyptian accounts that have influenced the language of Israel's creation story precisely to make it all the more effective against the gods of Egypt?" Again, we don't have to say that Moses necessarily took these writings as his source, but that they formed the context in which he composed or transmitted his account and thus helped shape it. Whatever the

<sup>6</sup> Rikk E. Watts, "Making Sense of Genesis 1", taken from "Science in Christian Perspective" website: <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Bible-Science/6-02Watts.html>

<sup>7</sup> Watts, *ibid.*.

influences, Genesis 1 is clear that it is Yahweh, the God of Israel, "who alone was responsible for the good and perfect order of creation."

3. **Form and Content:**<sup>8</sup> Moving on from sources and influences, we come to the literary form and content of this passage. We will see that it is a carefully constructed literary work and knowing this will help us avoid imposing upon it things it doesn't say and open up our minds and hearts to understand what it does say. Turning first to the form, even a cursory reading of Genesis 1 reveals a great deal of repetition: "and God said" (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29), "let there be" (or some form thereof; vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26), "and it was so" (vv. 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30), "and God made" (or similar action; vv. 4, 7, 12, 16, 21, 25, 27), "and God saw that it was good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), some form of naming or blessing (vv. 5, 8, 10, 22, 28), "there was evening and there was morning" (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), and then a designation of the day as first, second, etc. (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2.2), with most of these occurring seven times. Usually we associate this kind of repetition with poetry. But we have examples of ancient Hebrew poetry (e.g., Exodus 15; Numbers 23-24; Deuteronomy 33; Judges 5), and Genesis 1 is clearly not the same thing. But neither is this repetition characteristic of straight narrative, such as in Genesis 2. Therefore, we could say that Genesis 1 has a poetic character.

Another indication that this text is highly stylized is in its parallelism. The first three days of creation are paralleled by the last three. The days are correlated concerning the same elements of creation: Day 1 with Day 4, Day 2 with Day 5, and Day 3 with Day 6 as shown in the following diagram:

Day	Structuring	Day	Filling
1	day / night	4	sun / moon and stars
2	waters above (sky) / waters below	5	birds / fish
3	water / land	6	land animals / humans

In the first set of three days, we see the giving form to or structuring what was formless in Genesis 1:2. The second set concerns the filling of the newly created but empty forms. Furthermore, in both sets there is a progression from heaven to earth, with the preparation of the land and the formation of humanity respectively as the climactic moment. These highly stylized literary patterns point us away from taking this account too concretely. This is not to say it is not true, only that its truth claims may not be of the kind we associate with "literal" reading.

Now let us turn from form to content. First, we see that a "day" exists before the sun is created - an indication that a literal day is not in mind. Then, we look at the description of a working period of twelve hours from morning to evening. Why did the various creative acts

<sup>8</sup> Much of the content of this section is taken directly from Rikk Watts, *ibid.*.

of the six days take the same amount of time? Surely creating the sun, moon, and stars would take more time than creating birds and fish. And why exactly twelve hours? And why should it take God any time to do anything? Why should he work only in daylight hours? Plus, the seventh day of rest doesn't have an ending - it goes on. It seems obvious from the content of the text itself that the designation "day" was not meant to be taken as a literal "24-hour" day. Questions and reflections like these point us to the fact that whatever the truth claims of the account might be, it was and is not intended to be what we normally call "literal" history.

So, looking at the form and content of Genesis 1, we are given the strong indication that it is not intended to be read "literally" in the sense of "concretely" or strictly and without the possibility of metaphor, hyperbole, or symbol. This does not mean Genesis 1 is not true. It does, however, mean that its truth claims are of a different nature.

I have found the analogy of a painting and a photograph helpful in describing the differences in approaching truth; which is more "accurate" - a painting or a photograph? In the late nineteenth century, there was a school of painting which emphasized reproducing exact photographic likenesses and there is one such "photographic painting" of Pilate presenting Jesus to the crowd, "Ecce Homo" - "Behold the Man."<sup>9</sup> In the picture, there are two large pillars flanking an opening leading onto a gallery beyond which you can see the crowd. Pilate is on one side of the opening, with his back to us, pointing to Jesus on the other side of the opening who is also standing with his back to us, looking out. The photographic exactness is amazing. You feel you are there. But there is a problem - with the main characters' backs towards us and their looking beyond, they do not arrest our attention and actually lead us to try and see what they are seeing. In this way, all the lines of sight go out of the window, over the heads of the crowd below and beyond them to the blank horizon where the sight lines converge. Although the painting is photographically correct, it tells you nothing; it focuses on no one, just the empty horizon. Thus, it fails as a painting in telling the viewer the truth of what is going on. A true painting, however, is one which may miss out some details or exaggerate others in order to present the whole truth more clearly. It focuses on the key characters, their emotions and intentions, so you see instantly what is going on; regardless of whether the tree and building behind the characters was 8 feet tall or 20, the truth has been told. Genesis 1 is more like a true painting than a photograph.

Having seen the influences of the original context of the material when it took shape and its obvious stylized form and content, we now step back to look at the reality that Genesis 1 reflects and points to.

### **A Way of Looking at Reality**

You see, there are different ways of looking at reality. Our modern world is pre-occupied with the scientific approach to truth. We are interested in the "How" of things. Using our five senses we want to discover how things exist or work the way they do. Unfortunately, this does not tell us the "Why" of things. Science cannot tell us why we are here or the meaning of our existence.

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<sup>9</sup> "Ecce Homo," painted by Swiss-Italian painter Antonio Ciseri in 1871.

This was the pre-occupation of the ancients. They looked to the cosmic forces behind the world as they saw it and sought to explain the “Why” of existence using stories and myths. Unfortunately, these stories of gods rising in rebellion against one another and the heavens and the earth being created by the cutting in two of one god by another had no basis in fact and led to fear and superstition and a twisted view of reality.

Standing in the gap between these two approaches to life, the “How” and the “Why,” stands Genesis 1. It is remarkable that, while this material was compiled in an age when people in the surrounding cultures worshipped the sun and moon as deities, in Genesis 1, these stars and planetary bodies are placed firmly as part of creation, not outside it. The great creatures of the sea are not ferocious opposing deities of chaos but placed there by God as part of his living things of the waters. Humans are distinct from God, not the blood of a slain god mixed with the dust of the earth. Nor are they created to relieve the gods of their hard work and provide them with their food. They are created in the image of God with responsibility to govern the world.

But Genesis 1 is also in distinction to our present view of reality where all it can say is that we are composed of a few dollars worth of chemicals and are a product of chance forces in an impersonal universe. Our very beings cry out that we are more than that and we seek the “Why” and meaning of our existence.

In Genesis 1 we find the two questions of “How” and “Why” marvellously combined. On the one hand, we have the “Why” of our existence clearly stated. We know we are part of God's creation, made with a purpose and destiny. On the other hand we see opened up the “How” of creation. The world around us is clearly set within a framework of order. The physical world is not some mystical existence to be feared but a reality that can be investigated and examined. In Genesis 1, we have opened up for us the possibilities of the scientific method and it is no mistake that cultures loyal to the Bible have been at the forefront of scientific discovery and advance. However, taken alone, the scientific method is barren and harmful, leaving out purpose and responsibility - the “Why” of life so carefully described in this chapter. No wonder the astronauts saw in this piece of ancient writing the inspired Word of God revealing the whole truth about his creation.

In the face of this, all our questions pale into insignificance. “Are the six days of creation literal or not?” becomes a non-question when we realize the writer was not trying to give a purely scientific account that would only be valid for a generation or two anyway, so fast do our scientific knowledge and theories change. What about evolution? This is to be decided by science as we are not told by what precise method God created living things. The “Big Bang?” Perhaps - but, again, Genesis 1 is not tied in to a particular theory current in our own thinking. What it does do is give us the underlying view of reality upon which to base our investigations. What is important is that we do not, in our scientific age, neglect the “Why's” of the passage, but take them seriously because they need to govern the way we go about the “How's.” Genesis 1 unites the “Why” and the “How” and presents a holistic approach to reality. We now look at that reality and see that it reveals three great truths to us - truths about God, the world, and ourselves.

## Three Great Truths

### 1. About God

The first great truth is about God. When the Russian cosmonauts went up into space for the first time, having been in a culture that officially denied the “Why” and focussed exclusively on the “How,” it was reported that God didn’t exist, because they had looked out of the portholes of their space capsules and hadn’t seen him. Unaided, we can not see God. He must reveal himself to us. This is what he does in these magnificent verses, through their simple and evocative portrayal of the process of creation.

First, we see ***God's existence is assumed***. There is no statement of proof, just, “In the beginning, God created...” (verse 1). We start, not with a description of God's being, but of his activity. We can speculate about what God is like and whether he exists, but we only discover him through his actions. This is basic to the whole Biblical story, from here in the beginning, through God's reaching out through Israel to rescue humankind, most especially in his action in becoming a human in Jesus Christ, dying and rising again for us, and now in his continuing activity in us through his Holy Spirit. God is a God who acts and is discovered that way.

Secondly, ***God is sovereign***. There is no duality here, with equal and opposing forces of good and evil as in the Near Eastern Myths of the time or the current “New Age” thinking of our own. Chaos is under God's control. In verse 2, the earth is formless and empty, and, as we have seen, God proceeds to “form” it in days one to three and then “fill” it in days four to six. Nothing is outside God's creation and control - the stars and planetary bodies are his down to the smallest creeping things. But neither is God a part of his creation, submerged and confused with it, mixed in with the good and evil, powerless to effect change. He is outside of creation and he structures it. God is not like “The Force.”

But, thirdly, ***neither is God distant from creation***. God creates by his Word. “And God said” or “God spoke” is repeated 10 times. The whole chapter focuses upon the Word of God. “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made,” says the psalmist, “He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:6-9). God's Word is the personal expression of himself. We and all creation are a response to his personal call to us. Plus, his calling forth into existence carries with it not only the ability to bring it about but also the provision for its continuance and maintenance (“be fruitful and multiply”). This is in contrast to the surrounding religions' view of the word of the gods as some magic formula that had to be repeated annually or else everything would fall apart. Not so the true God – Hebrews tells us that God the Creator “sustains by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Just as God's word here led to its being enacted, God's commands to us personally are never without provision for their fulfilment. God is continually with us to work out his will and purpose. He has not left us alone.

### 2. About the World

The second great truth we learn about is the truth of the world around us. Matter and creation are not evil or second best; they are good. “And God saw that it was good” occurs seven times. Each part of creation, the inanimate and the living has its own place and dignity requiring

respect. There is no hint of superior or inferior forms of existence. Jim Houston comments, “Neither matter, nor plants, nor animals are less good, less removed from their creator...no other religion or philosophy has ever been able to ascribe such significance and power to matter as Christianity has.”<sup>10</sup>

We also note, that while inanimate objects are just “named,” humankind and animals are “blessed.” This blessing is related to the command “to be fruitful and multiply” (verses 22, 28). It carries with it something of the power of God to create new life. So, because the material world is good and the animal world is blessed, we see that we cannot treat it with contempt. We know from elsewhere in Scripture the decaying state of the world is a result of our own sin (e.g. Romans 8:19-22) which is certainly confirmed by our environmental crisis. We will look more into our relationship with creation and our impact upon it in the next two studies. We have a responsibility under God to care for the creation and to protect it.

### **3. About Humanity**

This brings us to the third great truth which is about ourselves, humanity. First, we see that we are creatures, not some demi-gods. We are related to the creation around us. We share with the animal world. In fact, the Bible doesn't elevate us as much as Darwin did when he said that we are descended from apes - it says we are made of dust! We need to remember our creatureliness and not to detach ourselves from the rest of creation.

But also, we see that we are made in the image of God. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over...all the earth’...in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (verses 26-27). This image is reflected in at least two ways. One is that we are given dominion - authority to act. We are to rule the earth as God’s deputies (verse 26). This was in great contrast to the religions of the time where only the king was God’s vice-regent. Here it is all humankind, male and female, which is granted the status of kingship. This involves us in responsibility to act as God acts. We are to ask ourselves “What does God require of me?” We are responsible under him.

The second way we are in the image of God is that we are created as relational beings. We are created male and female (verse 27) - we are not created to be solitary but to be in relationship - horizontally with one another and vertically with God. When we neglect either of these dimensions of God’s image – responsibility and relationship - we deny our humanity. We will explore the dominion and relational aspects of our nature in more detail when we come to look at Genesis 2 in our next study.

### **Light and Rest**

We conclude by looking at our relationship to God as revealed in the first day's activity, light, and that of the seventh, rest. Light and rest unify the creation week. God creates light first so that we can see his grace to us in creation and creates rest last so that we can enjoy it with him. This last day has no morning or evening, it is not defined. It continues to this day. The great question for us is “Are we experiencing God’s rest today?” The writer to the Hebrews, referring

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<sup>10</sup>James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pg. 16.

back to Psalm 95, where it challenges us not to harden our hearts like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, and so not enter into God's rest, says, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). That entrance into God's rest has been provided by Jesus. It is through him that we gain access to the rest of God. Shun disobedience and enter fully into his rest; rejoice in the work of your creator as you live out his commission and grow in his love.

## Appendix:

**Two video clips** from scientists that put the science and the Bible debate in a healthy perspective:

- **The Road:** [theroad-uk.com](http://theroad-uk.com) - 2 min clip "In the Beginning - What is Genesis?"; [http://www.theroad-uk.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=12&Itemid=102](http://www.theroad-uk.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=12&Itemid=102)
- **Francis Collins:** the head of the genome project shares how he came to faith; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obEBR5MbHNU>

### Article by Dr. Francis Collins

Special to CNN found on [http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/03/collins.commentary/index.html?\\_s=PM](http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/03/collins.commentary/index.html?_s=PM)

*Editor's note: Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., is the director of the Human Genome Project. His most recent book is "The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief."*

**ROCKVILLE, Maryland** (CNN) -- I am a scientist and a believer, and I find no conflict between those world views.

As the director of the Human Genome Project, I have led a consortium of scientists to read out the 3.1 billion letters of the human genome, our own DNA instruction book. As a believer, I see DNA, the information molecule of all living things, as God's language, and the elegance and complexity of our own bodies and the rest of nature as a reflection of God's plan.

I did not always embrace these perspectives. As a graduate student in physical chemistry in the 1970s, I was an atheist, finding no reason to postulate the existence of any truths outside of mathematics, physics and chemistry. But then I went to medical school, and encountered life and death issues at the bedsides of my patients. Challenged by one of those patients, who asked "What do you believe, doctor?", I began searching for answers.

I had to admit that the science I loved so much was powerless to answer questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" "Why am I here?" "Why does mathematics work, anyway?" "If the universe had a beginning, who created it?" "Why are the physical constants in the universe so finely tuned to allow the possibility of complex life forms?" "Why do humans have a moral sense?" "What happens after we die?"

I had always assumed that faith was based on purely emotional and irrational arguments, and was astounded to discover, initially in the writings of the Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis and subsequently from many other sources, that one could build a very strong case for the plausibility of the existence of God on purely rational grounds. My earlier atheist's assertion that "I know there is no God" emerged as the least defensible. As the British writer G.K. Chesterton famously remarked, "Atheism is the most daring of all dogmas, for it is the assertion of a universal negative."

But reason alone cannot prove the existence of God. Faith is reason plus revelation, and the revelation part requires one to think with the spirit as well as with the mind. You have to hear the music, not just read the notes on the page. Ultimately, a leap of faith is required.

For me, that leap came in my 27th year, after a search to learn more about God's character led me to the person of Jesus Christ. Here was a person with remarkably strong historical evidence of his life, who made astounding statements about loving your neighbor, and whose claims about being God's son seemed to demand a decision about whether he was deluded or the real thing. After resisting for nearly two years, I found it impossible to go on living in such a state of uncertainty, and I became a follower of Jesus.

So, some have asked, doesn't your brain explode? Can you both pursue an understanding of how life works using the tools of genetics and molecular biology, and worship a creator God? Aren't evolution and faith in God incompatible? Can a scientist believe in miracles like the resurrection?

Actually, I find no conflict here, and neither apparently do the 40 percent of working scientists who claim to be believers. Yes, evolution by descent from a common ancestor is clearly true. If there was any lingering doubt about the evidence from the fossil record, the study of DNA provides the strongest possible proof of our relatedness to all other living things.

But why couldn't this be God's plan for creation? True, this is incompatible with an ultra-literal interpretation of Genesis, but long before Darwin, there were many thoughtful interpreters like St. Augustine, who found it impossible to be exactly sure what the meaning of that amazing creation story was supposed to be. So attaching oneself to such literal interpretations in the face of compelling scientific evidence pointing to the ancient age of Earth and the relatedness of living things by evolution seems neither wise nor necessary for the believer.

I have found there is a wonderful harmony in the complementary truths of science and faith. The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. God can be found in the cathedral or in the laboratory. By investigating God's majestic and awesome creation, science can actually be a means of worship.