

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Where to begin?

What happens in the beginning?

In the beginning of a novel the characters are introduced, the setting described and the plot initiated.

In the beginning of a relationship people meet, exchange information and ideas and evaluate how much they will invest in going deeper.

In the beginning of a game fans gather, players stretch and opponents size one another up.

And what happens at the beginning of a year?

Beyond turning the calendar to a new page and marking the passage of time it takes for the earth to make one full trip around the sun, what else does a new year mean?

As 2010 becomes 2011 we are marking time from one very specific event in human history. It is time measured in reference to the advent of Jesus Christ. We are passing from one *anno domini* to another. How then was 2010 a year of the Lord for you? How will you make 2011 a more significant year of the Lord?

Even before the Romans started counting years in relationship to Jesus Christ, every day, every season and every year belonged to God.

Genesis 1:14 teaches us that God is the one who set the planets in orbit that they might serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years. Indeed, in the very beginning there was a perfectly

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clean canvas for God to work with. In fact, there wasn't even a canvas until God imagined, envisioned and created it. God alone existed. There was no other reality.

Imagine being the only reality, literally the center of the universe. Nothing and no one exists or thrives or has a future without your desire and command. That is awesome power. And with awesome power comes ultimate responsibility. You and I could not handle it, but God can.

From before the beginning and to the end, God has a plan. God also has a plan for a new beginning in the end. The plan is the Lord's and He is working it out in the context of human history even now.

The Bible teaches us that ours is a history that had a beginning and it is a history that will have an end. But even that end will mark a new beginning!

Jesus is the central figure in the beginning (John 1 and Colossians 1), Jesus is the central figure in making us new now (II Corinthians 5:17-20) and Jesus promises to be the central figure when time reaches its fullness and God makes everything new again (Revelation 21).

This month's study is an inquiry into beginnings. Let us then begin.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

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Week I: When it all began

Read Genesis 1:1-2:3.

The Bible begins with the revelation that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering ...” (Gen. 1:1-2, NIV).

Before God the Father created all things with and for the Son,¹ God the Spirit hovered. “Over what?” we might ask. The Spirit of God hovered over that which was formless, dark and void. In a word: Chaos.

God still hovers over the chaos today, desiring to bring real life, divine order, beauty, truth, grace and peace to all who will allow Him. Even now God is hovering over the things that we consider dark pits, desperate realities and hopeless cases. Even now God is the God of new creations.²

God is clearly the subject of the opening verses of Genesis. In the beginning there was nothing and no one but God. He is the prime mover, the origin of all that is, the source of all good and the One with the power to make all things new. The text says that in the beginning God created, spoke into the darkness and created light, saw and declared that it was good. Then God separated the light from the dark, separated the earth from the heavens, gathered the water and separated it from the land. From the earliest of time God has been delineating, separating, sorting, sifting, choosing. Then God produced life, life that would sustain other life. God multiplied and blessed what He had made. But God was not finished yet.

“God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (1:27). Extraordinary! *Imago dei*, in the image of God, we were created and by the voice of God we have been blessed and by the commission of God we have been called to serve as stewards of all that He has made. This is the way it was meant to be. This is the way God designed it to work. This is what it was like “in the beginning.”

Then comes the deceiver, the liar, the enemy and the children of God choose the darkness over the light; exchanging the truth of God for lies, they idolize themselves. With that, all humanity forevermore falls into sin. The eternal game of hide-and-seek begins and by the very next generation we witness jealousy, anger, violence, murder, deceit, defensiveness and a tragically broken reality.

Chapter 5 of Genesis opens with an echo of Genesis 1:27 saying, “When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, He called them ‘Man.’ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth” (NIV).

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God; Seth is described here as being born in the image of Adam. The text does not say that Adam and Eve did not have any children between Cain and Abel and Seth. God is establishing here the line of Adam that leads to Noah, not all the myriad streams that issue from Adam and Eve. I lift this up because in this case image is everything.

By the 10th generation, the Bible reveals that “the Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that

every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain” (Gen. 6:5-6, NIV). In all the world only Noah was found to have a heart for God. If you’ve ever felt like you were alone in your witness to the grace and truth of God, you are never as alone as Noah.

We all know the story of redemption from death that God orchestrates in the days of Noah. We all remember the ark and the animals, the flood and the global death toll. We know about the dove and the olive branch and the rainbow and the new beginning that God offers: Life after death, order after chaos, calm after the storm, a foreshadowing of the One who is to come.

Questions for conversation:

1. Do you receive the Biblical account of creation as God’s revelation of the truth? If not, what do you believe about God and the origins of life? What is the source that information?
2. If the Genesis account of creation is not true, what do you do with the New Testament references to the presence and participation of Christ in creation?
3. If the Genesis account of creation is not true then we are not made in the image of God. What then is redeemed in Christ? What is the point of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and promised second coming of Jesus if there is no original righteousness to be restored?

*Prayer: “O Lord, I want to believe.
Help Thou my unbelief!”*

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Week II: In whom it all began

Read John 1:1-14 and Colossians 1:15-20.

At the outset of a new year many of us make resolutions, promises and pledges. Many of us can hear a faint echo of ourselves saying, “In 2010 I resolve to ...” but we cannot honestly remember exactly what we resolved to do. God, on the other hand, has both a perfect memory of the promises He has made and a steadfast resolve to keep His promises.

Throughout the Old Testament, God promises to send a Messiah. In the person of Jesus more than 300 of those prophecies are fulfilled. God has also made promises in the New Testament and in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that are being fulfilled in us and through us for the glory of God, according to God’s perfect timing and unquestionable will. Ultimately those promises will culminate in a day like no other. A day in which “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11, NIV). The glorification of Jesus is where history ends, but Jesus is also the One in whom it all begins.

From the beginning it has been about Jesus. The gospel of John opens with a reference to Genesis 1:1 in declaring that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (John 1:1-5, NIV).

Begging the question asked in the first week of this study, if Genesis 1 is not true then John 1 is not true. And if John 1 is not true then there was no incarnation of the Word of God in human flesh. If there was no incarnation then there can be no sufficient atonement. If there is not sufficient atonement then there is no redemption and the cross is voided of its power. If the cross is devoid of power then we are indeed fools most to be pitied and our faith is in vain.³

The God who reveals Himself in the Bible and comes in the person of Jesus Christ is a God who keeps His promises. God’s pledge to those who believe is declared in Ephesians 1:3-10. According to this text, we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be adopted into God’s family through Christ, for the praise of His glory: Not just children born of flesh, but children born of the Spirit. Not only people born of the will of our parents, but children of God reborn into a living hope by the will of our Father in heaven. This too is about Jesus.

Re-read John 1:10-14 and Colossians 1:15-20. Now consider the truth that it all begins and ends and begins again in Christ Jesus, the Lord.

Questions for conversation:

1. What do the passages we studied this week teach about the purpose and plan of God for all of history?
2. What do the passages from this week teach about the presence and participation of Christ in creation?
3. Colossians 1:17 says that Jesus “is before all things and in Him all things hold together.” What does that mean to you? How is Jesus holding you together in relationship with God? How is He making it possible for you to hold it together as a believer in the midst of a world that is hostile to the Biblical Christian faith? How does Jesus hold you together with other believers?

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Week III: In whom it begins again

Read II Corinthians 5:17-20, John 3 and 15.

Dec. 21 is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. It is therefore also the longest night.

One need not look far to see fields lying fallow for the winter. Beneath frozen layers of snow, ice and soil, a renewal is underway. Even now the death of decay of last year's crops is being transformed into nourishing good soil for next spring. Dormant perennials are even now cultivating the stuff of new life.

There may be evidence of death all around you, but with the eyes of faith that is but fodder for the resurrection power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The renewal of our families, the renewal of our neighborhoods, the renewal of the church, and the renewal of the nation all begin with the genuine renewal of the self. Second Corinthians 5:17 makes a conditional promise, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." That's a big "if."

In John 3 we read about Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a well-educated Old Testament scholar, a teacher of the law and a sitting member of what would be for us a combination of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission and the General Assembly Mission Council.

He came to Jesus under the cover of darkness and before he could ask Jesus a question, Jesus proceeded to tell Nicodemus that in order to see the Kingdom of God a person must be born again. What does that mean? Considering that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, it means that each and every one of us must die to ourselves and take on a new life in Christ.

To be "in" Christ is to put our faith "in" the power of Christ's death and resurrection unto salvation and also to abide "in" Christ moment by moment throughout this life.

Jesus amplifies what it means to live "in" Him in John 15 where He says that "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NIV). Obviously, Jesus does not mean that we are utterly paralyzed apart from Him. But we are spiritually dead and unable to do anything that brings God real glory (bear fruit). It is by bearing spiritual fruit⁴ that Jesus says we "show ourselves" to be His disciples. It is the evidence of a life lived "in" Christ.

As we approach the new year, now is a good time to set out a plan for cultivating good fruit for the Lord in 2011. Do a soil inspection.⁵ Ask God to plant the Word within your heart and embark on a Bible reading plan.⁶ Cooperate with the renewing work of the Holy Spirit that is working within you to bring you into greater conformity to God's will. Cultivate a life that is marked by prayer, worship, generosity and genuine, accountable Christian fellowship. Finally, take note of your own fruit production, it is the evidence that you are "in" Christ.

Questions for conversation:

1. Taking Jesus' teaching of Nicodemus in John 3 seriously, can you say with confidence that you are you "in" Christ? If not, you have some business to transact with the Lord and there is no better day than today. It's as easy as ABC: Admit your sinful state (Romans 3:23), Believe in Jesus (Acts 16:31a) and Confess your faith (Romans 10:9-10).
2. If you answered "yes" to the first question, what is the evidence for your answer?
3. What commitments for personal renewal will you make to cultivate your life in Christ in 2011?

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Week IV: When it all begins again

Read Revelation 21-22.

One day, in the fullness of time, God will bring forth a new heaven and a new earth. Creation 2.0. We can only imagine what it will be like but we have some clues from Jesus who spends a great deal of His teaching time revealing what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like.⁷

Questions for conversation:

1. Read and discuss Revelation 21-22.
2. How is the new heaven and the new earth described?
3. How are the inhabitants of the new heaven and the new earth described?
4. How is Jesus described?
5. Does this passage describe what heaven is like “now” or is this a earthly/heavenly reality yet to come?
6. What does it mean for Christians to be a provisional demonstration of the Kingdom of Heaven in the midst of and as yet unredeemed world?

Footnotes

1. Colossians 1:15-20.
2. II Corinthians 5:17-20.
3. I Corinthians 15.
4. Galatians 5:22-25.
5. Matthew 13.
6. www.Biblein90days.org was developed by a lay person at First Presbyterian Church in Houston. I highly recommend it. *The Journey*, available at www.layman.org is a great companion for your Bible reading program in the new year no matter what pace you choose. (For information on ordering *The Journey*, visit www.layman.org.)
7. Matthew 12, 21; Mark 1, 4, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15; Luke 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21. Another great resource on this subject is Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*.

Pray “Maranatha!” come, Lord Jesus.