

UNIT 1

THE BEGINNING AND END
OF GOD'S CREATION



- ▶ CHAPTER 1 THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD
- ▶ CHAPTER 2 THE WORLD THAT GOD CREATES
- ▶ CHAPTER 3 HUMAN BEINGS MADE BY GOD

THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD

OBJECTIVES

Your study of this chapter should help you to:

1. Understand the Bible's teaching about God the Creator.
2. Appreciate the importance of books such as the Psalms and Isaiah for helping us understand the Bible's teaching about the Creator.
3. See the importance of thinking about creation and the Creator from the perspective of God's purposes.
4. Understand the meaning of theological terms used in connection with the doctrine of the Creator.
5. Understand the connection between the doctrine of the Creator and the practice of the Christian life.

KEY WORDS TO UNDERSTAND

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|-----------------------|---------------|
| Creation from nothing | Omnipotence |
| Eschatology | Omnipresence |
| Eternity | Omniscience |
| Holiness | Providence |
| Immutability | Theodicy |
| Infinity | Transcendence |
| Monotheism | |

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU READ

1. What does the Bible say about God when it portrays God as the Creator?
2. How is Christian faith in the Creator different from scientific ways of thinking about the origin of the universe?
3. What does the doctrine of the Creator say about our practice of the Christian life?

*Father of all, whose powerful voice
Called forth this universal frame;
Whose mercies over all rejoice,
Through endless ages still the same;
Thou by thy word upholdest all;
Thy bounteous love to all is showed;
Thou hearest thy every creature's call,
And fillest every mouth with good.*

*In heaven thou reign'st enthroned in light,
Nature's expanse beneath thee spread;
Earth, air, and sea, before thy sight,
And hell's deep gloom, are open laid.
Wisdom, and might, and love are thine;
Prostrate before thy face we fall,
Confess thine attributes divine,
And hail the sovereign Lord of all.*

*Thee, sovereign Lord, let all confess
That moves in earth, or air, or sky,
Revere thy power, thy goodness bless,
Tremble before thy piercing eye;
All ye who owe to him your birth,
In praise your every hour employ;
Jehovah reigns! Be glad, O earth,
And shout, ye morning stars, for joy.*

This Wesleyan hymn expresses the Christian faith in the Creator, who “called forth this universal frame” and whose “word upholdest all.” It affirms that the Creator is exalted and transcendent (“In heaven thou reign’st”) and calls on creatures to worship the Creator. But the transcendent Creator is also the one “whose mercies over all rejoice” and whose “bounteous love to all is showed.” In short, this hymn invites us to consider the Creator who is holy and exalted but who also comes to us in love and grace.

▶ INTRODUCTION

The opening words of the Bible are simple and majestic. They speak of God, in the beginning, creating the heavens and the earth. These words have the power to grip our minds and hearts with wonder and awe. They speak of a divine reality incomprehensibly greater than our world and our conceptions. They point us to the mystery of the universe's existence and to the inconceivable divine reality that lies outside our world of space and time. In short, they point us toward the Christian doctrine of creation and of the Creator.

But we will miss important aspects of the Bible's teaching about creation if we focus too narrowly on the opening chapters of Genesis and find the doctrine of creation only there; we should not identify the act of creation with a single, originating event in the past. We see other aspects of creation when we study other biblical books, especially the Psalms and Isaiah.

▶ THE CONTEXT OF THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ABOUT CREATION

In the context of exile in Babylon, biblical writers affirmed the power and supremacy of the God who was about to liberate Israel from exile and re-create it. They proclaimed that the God who was about to redeem Israel was the God who had created the world. In this proclamation, they portrayed redemption as a new act of God's creation.

One way to get beyond a narrow conception of creation is to study chapters 40—55 of Isaiah. The context of these chapters was Israel's exile in Babylon, in the 6th century B.C. As a result of the war with Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed, the national life of Israel was brought to a close,

GOD, MAKER AND PRESERVER OF ALL THINGS

The creeds in our tradition affirm the doctrine of creation by calling God the "Maker" or "Creator" and "Preserver of all things both visible and invisible."

and several thousand Israelites endured a forced evacuation to Babylon. There they lived a difficult life throughout the greater part of the 500s B.C. In this situation a prophet arose with the hopeful message to the exiled people that Israel's God, the Creator of all, was about to redeem Israel by an act of re-creation. God's creation, in other words, flows seamlessly into re-creation and redemption.

Consider, for example, Isa. 42:5-9. Here the God who does "new things" is the God who in the beginning "created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it" (v. 5). Creation, therefore, is not a once and for all event, lying solely in the past. On the contrary, it is the continuing act of God's creative power. In the context of Isa. 40—55, this divine movement of creation-redemption meant the end of exile in Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem.

The lesson to draw from Isa. 40—55 is that, in order to think rightly about creation, we must see it not only as an original event but also as the paradigm of all divine activity and as continuous with redemption and new creation. Original creation, considered abstractly, is meaningless apart from its relation to the sum total of God's creative acts, acts that all have an end in God's purposes.

▶ THE ESCHATOLOGICAL END OF CREATION

The Bible's teaching about creation goes beyond Israel's destiny. It embraces as well the destiny of the entire created world, so that God's creative power and presence extend from the beginning of the world to its end. This means that God's creation has a goal—an end. This end is fellowship between Creator and the created world.

Thinking about redemption and new creation introduces another aspect of the Bible's teaching about creation. This aspect is suggested by Rev. 1:8, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," that is, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. This important verse reminds us that God is not only the beginning of all things but is also the end of all things. But the word *end* may confuse us because in English this term means cessation or termination. For example, the end of someone's life means the conclusion of that person's life. When we say that God is the end of all

things, we are not speaking about the termination of the world. We are instead speaking about the goal of creation.

The theological term that denotes the end of creation is *eschatology*. Discussions of eschatology customarily focus on Christ's return, the final judgment, and other events mentioned in books such as Revelation. These are important matters that bear on human sin; however, apart from sin, creation would still have an end—an eschatological fulfillment. Eschatology, then, is above all a doctrine about God's desire for the created world, a desire that remains unchanged in spite of sin. Christian thinking about creation, therefore, moves in an ellipse whose foci are (1) God's originating creative act and (2) the end of creation. The ellipse itself is the universe's history, a history that revolves around God's creative activity.

What is the eschatological end toward which God's creative activity points? Genesis 3 helps us here. It pictures God walking in the garden and calling out to Adam and Eve (vv. 8-9). This brief episode is important for it indicates God's desire for fellowship. God does not remain in heaven, distant from us. On the contrary, God comes into the world for the purpose of fellowship. That is what makes verse 8 so poignant: "The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God." Whereas God came into the world seeking fellowship, humankind withdrew from God's presence.

God's quest for fellowship is a pervasive theme in the Bible and the Book of Revelation concludes with this theme. In portraying humankind's destiny, it does not think of us as journeying to heaven to be with God. It instead portrays God as coming from heaven to dwell with us: "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals'" (21:3). In the end, God overcomes alienation, the history of which goes back to the events narrated in Genesis 3, establishes unhindered fellowship with us, and thus restores the world to its status as God's creation. We can understand the doctrine of creation only in the context of eschatology and God's quest for fellowship.

At this point it is important to ask whether God's creative power, in all of its manifestations, is aimed only or principally at communion with humankind. The answer is no. God comes into the world seeking fellow-

ship with the entire world. But in order to think about the significance of the nonhuman world, we need to attend once again to biblical passages besides Genesis. Most instructive in this regard is the Psalms' affirmation that God provides for animals as well as for humans as in Ps. 147: God "covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry" (vv. 8-9). Other examples include Pss. 36:5-6 and 145:15-16.

In response, nonhuman beings offer praise to God. Psalm 19, for instance, affirms that "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (v. 1) and Ps. 148 exhorts every creature to praise God (v. 10). It may be difficult for us to think of the nonhuman portion of creation praising God, perhaps because we think of praise as something verbal arising from thinking. But Pss. 19 and 148 show us that praise is not always verbal. On the contrary, these psalms envision each kind of being in the cosmos as playing a role in a great symphony of silent praise. But in what does their praise consist? It consists in the act of declaring God's glory, which each thing does by acting according to its created nature. The sun, moon and every created thing declare God's glory by their nature and existence. Just by being what they are, they show forth the glory of God and thus praise God.

Consequently, the beginning and end of God's creative activity extend beyond the human world. Of course, being human, we can speak much more fully about our destiny and end than we can speak about the destiny and end of the nonhuman world. It is impossible for us to imagine what it is like for other beings in the universe to enjoy communion with God and what it is like for God to enjoy communion with them. We are likewise puzzled at some of the harsh facts of the world such as the death and suffering associated with predation. It is difficult to reconcile these facts with our image of a loving God and of God's providential care for the world. Nonetheless, our lack of imaginative power and our intellectual perplexities should not prevent our affirming the significance of the nonhuman world to God and of God to the nonhuman world. Doing so is required not only by the Bible's express teaching but also by the need to remind ourselves that we are not the only creatures of importance in God's universe.

We have noted that the Bible defines God in terms of creative power, so that the doctrine of creation spans the totality of God's activity. It is now time to inquire more carefully into what the Bible says about God's creative power.

► THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD: FAITHFULNESS

The act of creation not only is the world's beginning but also is God's act of sustaining the world and its rhythms. God's faithfulness to the created world assumes concrete form as God's blessing. Because of this blessing the world is characterized by natural and predictable processes.

One of the dominant themes of Isa. 40—55 is the Creator's promise to be with Israel in spite of all of Israel's troubles and sins. For the prophet, God's creative power was much more than the cause of Israel's beginning. It was also God's faithful promise to be with Israel and to bless and provide for Israel: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (40:11).

Other biblical writers expressed this belief in God's faithfulness in their conviction that God's creative power faithfully sustains the universe in its continued existence. A classical expression of God's faithfulness toward the universe is found in Gen. 8:22: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." This confidence in God's sustenance is stated picturesquely in those passages, such as Ps. 104:5, that portray God as constructing the world so well that its continued existence and well-being are secure: "You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken."

The characteristic of God that inspires this confidence is faithfulness. God's faithfulness is the promise of God's continued creative power and, therefore, the promise of God's perpetual will to achieve fellowship. It is God's promise to conquer everything that hinders this fellowship. The term *immutability* designates God's unwavering faithfulness and the steadfast character of God's intent. It points to the meaning of *hesed*, a Hebrew word that denotes God's pledge to remain true to a covenant. So, when Genesis portrays God's relation to the world as a covenant, it is stating that the promises that God makes are backed up by God's *hesed*—

God's utterly dependable faithfulness and promise to remain creatively present with us.

Psalm 136 is an especially powerful testimony to God's covenantal faithfulness toward the world. "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, . . . Who by understanding made the heavens, . . . who spread out the earth on the waters, . . . who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever (vv. 1, 5-7). Psalm 33:5 similarly affirms that the earth is full of God's *hesed*, finding God's faithfulness in every part of the created world. These psalms express the conviction that the world and its continued existence rest on God's faithfulness and covenant with the world.

The New Testament affirms God's faithfulness by associating God's creative power with Jesus Christ. Colossians states that "In [Jesus Christ] all things hold together" (1:17) and Hebrews asserts that Christ "sustains all things by his powerful word" (1:3). Describing God's sustaining faithfulness in terms of Jesus Christ signifies the eschatological character of that faithfulness. It reminds us that God's creative activity is oriented toward an end, which is fully understood only from the revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is accordingly the meaning and fulfillment of God's creative activity. The God who is faithful toward the created world is the God who in Jesus Christ comes to the world in redemption.

However, to speak of God's sustaining the universe does not convey the full extent of God's faithfulness. The Bible also presents God as faithfully blessing the world. Psalm 65:9-11 is instructive in this regard: "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; You provide the people with grain . . . You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty."

For the biblical writers, the regular, predictable processes of nature were in fact God's blessings upon the world and resulted from God's covenantal faithfulness. The theological term for God's faithfulness in the processes of nature is *providence*. As God's creative activity has a universal scope, so God's providence and blessing are given to the entire world. This means that it is not only the people of God who receive God's blessing. As Matthew's Gospel states it, God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

teous” (5:45). The point is that God’s blessing on the world is seen in the regular rhythms of the natural order, which benefit everything in the created world. The world thus sustains life of all sorts through the kinds of processes that the natural sciences study. Without nullifying the validity of scientific inquiry, Christians believe that these processes reflect God’s universal faithfulness and blessing.

At the same time, recognizing that God’s blessing takes the form of natural processes enables us to understand that these processes are subject to variation. In some years we receive more rain, in other years less rain. In some years there is so much rain that crops are destroyed. In other years there is so little rain that crops wither. We understand that the rhythms of nature do not guarantee that things will always work out for our immediate benefit. It is no sign of God’s displeasure when we suffer at the hands of nature just as it is no sign of God’s favor when the unrighteous benefit from nature. As a result, the praise that we give to the Creator for blessings is based not so much on the fact that we have benefited as on our recognition that the world as a whole and all of its processes are generally life-sustaining, even if sometimes they are not directly good for us.

▶ THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD: WISDOM

The creative power and presence of God, which is God’s faithful blessing, is also God’s wisdom.

The predictable processes of the natural world lead us to consider God’s wisdom. God’s wisdom is God’s creative power establishing the conditions for fellowship with humankind by fashioning an ordered world that makes creatures’ well-being possible. To call the created world ordered is to say with Proverbs that “the LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens” (3:19).

Sometimes God’s wisdom is seen in the sheer variety of beings within God’s world: “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps. 104:24). At other times (as in Prov. 8:22-31) God’s wisdom is seen in the stability of the world. And sometimes it is manifested in the incomprehensible realities of the world, as when God asks Job, “Who has the wisdom to

number the clouds?” (Job 38:37). In every case, the Bible testifies to the conviction that the world is rooted in God’s wisdom and that this wisdom is an expression of God’s creative power.

But to fully understand this conviction about God’s wisdom we must see it in relation to the biblical idea of God’s word, which is a way of speaking about God’s acting with creative power. To say that God is wise is to say that God creates and acts wisely. This emphasis on action underlies the Bible’s concept of God’s word:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, . . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (*Isa. 55:10-11*).

This passage vividly portrays God’s word as an effective and creative power that proceeds from God and performs his purpose. This helps us understand the first chapter of Genesis, in which God creates merely by speaking. God speaks and things come into being in such a way that God’s wisdom is manifested. God’s word is God’s wisdom in action.

The connection between God’s word and wisdom is reinforced by the New Testament’s insistence that Jesus Christ is both the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24) and the word of God (John 1:1). As the divine wisdom and word, Jesus Christ is the world’s Creator (Col. 1:16). Jesus Christ is, therefore, the wise, creative and active word of God—the movement of God into the world that creates fellowship.

God’s wisdom is transcendent. Humans are able, with great effort, to attain to a measure of knowledge and, with experience, can accumulate some wisdom. But God possesses wisdom that is unsurpassable. Sometimes the Bible represents God’s knowledge as amazing in extent, as when Isaiah affirms God’s knowledge of each star: “Lift up your eyes and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name” (40:26). However, the Bible more customarily portrays God as creating and therefore knowing things that are incomprehensible to us: “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Its measure is longer

than the earth, and broader than the sea” (Job 11:7-9). Consequently, to say that God is wise is not merely to acknowledge that God knows so much more than we know. It is not even to affirm that God knows things that are in principle impossible for human beings to know. It is not that God knows things as we know them, except that God knows everything whereas we know only a few things. Such an understanding would violate the Bible’s sense of God’s incomparable nature. It is better to think of God’s knowledge as coinciding with God’s creative activity—with God’s word. To say that God has created the world is to say that God knows the world. This means that God’s knowledge is of a different order from human knowledge. For us it is one thing to know, another to act. For God, however, knowledge is identical with creative action. God’s knowledge is God’s action; God’s action is God’s knowledge. And since the scope of God’s creative activity is universal, the scope of God’s knowing wisdom is likewise universal.

The theological term that designates the universality of God’s wisdom is *omniscience*. The identification of God’s knowledge with God’s creative activity means that God’s knowledge is not composed of isolated facts (as our knowledge tends to be) but is instead God’s wisdom, that is God’s act of creating an ethical order that sustains human well-being. As a result, we are compelled to acknowledge a paradox. On one hand, we can share in God’s wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 2:6-7). Indeed, our well-being depends on doing so. On the other hand, God’s wisdom and knowledge infinitely exceed ours. This helps us grasp the difference between our transitory, fragmented wisdom and God, who is wisdom itself. This is the truth to which the idea of omniscience points.

► THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD: RIGHTEOUSNESS

God’s wisdom passes over into the created world in the form of an ethical order that establishes the conditions for human well-being. This ethical order indicates the righteousness of the Creator God.

Besides emphasizing God’s faithfulness and wisdom, Isaiah 40—55 stresses the Creator’s righteousness. For the prophet, God’s righteousness was evident principally in God’s judgment on Israel (42:8-25) and also in the coming destruction of Babylon (47:1-15). But righteousness is also

God's desire for the entire created world: "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I the LORD have created it" (45:8).

This verse speaks of the connection between God's creative power and righteousness. This connection tells us that the universe exhibits a righteous moral order just as it exhibits a wise natural order. Just as there are reliable, predictable processes in the physical world, so there are reliable, predictable processes in the ethical world. And just as God's faithfulness, expressed in wisdom, sustains the natural order of the world, so that same faithfulness, expressed in righteousness, sustains the moral order.

God's righteousness is God's power that creates justice in human affairs, thus establishing the conditions for fellowship with humankind and for human life well-lived. It is God's act of destroying everything that hinders this fellowship and the good life.

The world's moral order is grounded in God's own righteousness, for "the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice" (Ps. 33:4-5). Although God's ways are at times incomprehensible, biblical writers never depart from the fundamental conviction that, ultimately, God is righteous. In turn, just as the wise Creator wants human beings to be wise, so the righteous God demands righteousness from us. Hence the sadness of the early chapters of Genesis, in which God is persistently disappointed by human actions of unrighteousness. Adam and Eve prove to be disobedient. Cain spills his brother's blood. People strive for divinity by building a tower into the heavens. And, in general, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). The early chapters of Genesis as well as the rest of the Bible show that God responds to unrighteousness as a judge (see for example Gen 6:7; Ps. 14:2). Thus, according to Paul: "[God] will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury" (Rom. 2:6-8).

However, the Bible does not regard the Creator's demand for righteousness as burdensome, for righteousness is simply a matter of doing good, as Paul indicates in Rom. 2:6. Righteousness is doing what is right, just as God does what is right.

In summary, God's faithfulness is the promise of God's continued creative power among us and the promise of his perpetual will to establish fellowship with us. It is God's promise to conquer everything that hinders this fellowship. God's wisdom is God's creative power fashioning an ordered world in which we may live. God's righteousness is God's creative power that brings about a moral world ruled by justice so that human beings can have fellowship with God, with each other and with the rest of the created world. Faithfulness, wisdom and righteousness are ways in which God expresses his love as he relates to the world.

▶ THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD: INFINITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

God the Creator is the powerful Lord of all things, who is not limited by worldly realities such as time, space, and power. God is not a part of the created world but instead is the creative presence that sustains that world.

God's faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness differ from human faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness. Theology uses terms such as omniscience and immutability to indicate this difference. These and similar terms express the conviction that God is not constrained by the limitations that characterize humans and that, in important respects, God is not like beings in the created world.

It is important to emphasize God's difference from created beings for without this difference God would not be the creative power that redeems and re-creates. This is the point made in Isa. 46:1-7, which makes fun of the Babylonian gods by noting that they are unable to save anyone and have to be carried about by animals. Although people cry out to them, they cannot answer, for they are really only a part of the created world: "They hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship!" (46:6).

Israel's God, however, is different. Israel's God is not a being that belongs to the created world. This God is radically different from the cre-

ated world and everything in it. In Isaiah's words, this God is incomparable: "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike?" (46:5).

Two theological terms that express God's incomparability are *transcendence* and *infinity*. God's transcendence means God is neither a part of nor dependent on the created world. God's infinity means God is not limited by anything and, more important, that God's creative power knows no boundaries and that God's will to create fellowship with humankind is unconquerable. The infinity of God and the transcendence of God mean that God alone is the Creator. Since only Israel's God is the power of creative activity, only Israel's God is truly divine, for nothing can be considered divine unless it has the power to create. Other gods are really no gods at all (see Jer. 16:20); they lack creative power and they can do nothing. Israel's God is the living God, the God who is creative power. The belief that Israel's God alone is the living God of creative activity is the basis of *monotheism*, the belief that the word *God* points to a single and unified reality.

THE ONENESS OF GOD

The credal statements in our tradition assert the oneness of God by affirming belief in "one living and true God" who "only is God."

The one God—the infinite God—is not limited by the realities that limit creatures. One of these realities is time. The existence of every created thing is inscribed within the structure of time. Everything has a beginning and an end. But with God it is different. In the picturesque words of Ps. 90, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (v. 2). Here the psalmist considers first the oldest things thinkable—the mountains and the earth—and finally confesses that, as unimaginably old as these are, God is before them. Job goes further, in perplexity observing that "Surely God is great, and we do not know him; the number of his years is unsearchable" (36:26).

The psalmist's confession, "from everlasting to everlasting you are God," makes clear that God's life is not limited by time, and hence it cannot be measured by time. As Creator, he is not confined to or controlled by time. Instead, time is subject to God, and thus he is the Lord of time. The theological term *eternity* points to this idea of God as the Lord of time. Psalm 90 goes on to say, "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past" (v. 4).

This verse does not imply that time is meaningless to God, but it does affirm that, with respect to time, God is free in a way in which we are not, for God is the Lord of time. Because God is the Lord of time, he can truly be the Creator, the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). As the Lord of time, God does not suffer the limitations inherent in beings that are bounded by time. The psalmist laments about the brevity of human life, extending to seventy or eighty years, filled with toil and trouble (see Ps. 90:10).

Human life is thus a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable vicissitudes of time. Because God is the Lord of time, the psalmist finds him as our refuge, "our dwelling place in all generations" (Ps. 90:1). This means that his creative activity can bring about the renewal of our life, which is otherwise transient and filled with trouble. The biblical conviction that God is eternal—God is the Lord of time—thus also means that the creative power of God and God's will to create fellowship with us transcend the boundaries of time.

The same is true concerning space. Creatures are bound by space, even if that space is very large. Every entity occupies some space. But God is not bound by space; Isaiah speaks about God's immensity in this way: "It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretched out the heavens like a curtain; and spreads them like a tent to live in" (40:22). This verse metaphorically affirms God's incomparability with respect to space. Nothing in the created world, regardless of its immensity, can be compared to God's greatness. But this does not mean that God possesses a larger size than any other created thing or that God is located in some region of space. If this were the case, then God would be bound by space and would be limited in the same way in which every created thing is limited. On the contrary, as the

psalmist indicates, God is the Creator of space and is free from spatial limitations: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me” (139:8-10).

In contrast to the pagan gods, who were thought to inhabit a specific territory, Israel’s God knows no spatial limits and consequently is the Lord of space. This is the truth expressed in the theological term *omnipresence*. By this term we mean that the creative activity of God that sustains our being and our well-being is not limited to this or that place. The psalmist believed that God would be found even in *Sheol*, the place of the dead. Elijah encountered God in the silence of the desert (1 Kings 19:4-13). John heard the voice of God on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9-11). The creative power of God and God’s will to create fellowship with us cannot be conquered by the limitations of space, for God is the Lord of space.

God is unlimited with respect to time and space. God is also *omnipotent*, that is, unlimited with respect to creative power. We are familiar with the exercise of power by human beings and political institutions. But in

GOD’S INFINITE POWER AND HUMAN FREEDOM

The idea of God’s infinite power has been a point of contention and the subject of long discussion in Christian history. The main point of debate is whether God’s infinite power excludes human freedom. In medieval theology, theologians generally held that God acts in and through all human deeds but without compromising human freedom. In the 20th century some theologians have proposed that we think of God’s power as inherently limited, so that there are some things (for example, preventing the evil acts of human beings) that God cannot do. Others suggest that God’s power is not inherently limited but that God voluntarily limits the exercise of divine power in order to preserve human freedom. Other theologians have found these proposals flawed and instead have argued for a version of the medieval view.

every case there are limitations to that power and its exercise is not always creative. However, God's power is unlimited: "Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps" (Ps. 135:6).

The infinitude of God's power with respect to creation is expressed in the theological concept of *creation from nothing* (often referred to as *creatio ex nihilo*). This is the idea that nothing constrains God's creative power, especially with respect to the originating act of creating the world. This concept denies that the universe is eternal and that the originating act of creation is merely a transformation from a previously existing state of the universe. To affirm the idea of creation from nothing is to assert that only God is the Lord of time and space and that the created world exists only through God's creative power.

THE ETERNAL GOD

The creeds in our tradition affirm God's Lordship over time by confessing that God is "everlasting" and "eternal." They assert God's Lordship over the limitations of space when they affirm that God is "without body or parts." They proclaim God's limitless power by affirming that God is "of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness" and is the "Sovereign of the universe."

The concept of infinite power and the idea of creation from nothing are puzzling. But we should not become obsessed with the logical and theological puzzles arising from these concepts. Instead, we should see that because God's power is unlimited God is an inexhaustible source of life and blessing for us, who suffer from the limitations and distortions of power: "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (Isa. 40:28-29).

The power of which this passage speaks is the creative power of God's presence among us. In exile in Babylon and with hope nearly exhausted, Israelites heard the declaration that their God was not only powerful but also the everlasting source of strength. To say that God is the

Lord of power is, therefore, to affirm that God's creative power, which establishes fellowship with us, never comes to an end and that this power creates the hope that sustains life and provides us with a future.

To speak of the Creator as the infinite creative presence who acts powerfully raises a difficult issue, expressed in those passages of the Bible that represent God as the power that determines everything. For example, consider Ps. 104: "[living creatures] all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust" (vv. 27-29). This passage gives clear expression to the conviction that the life and death of every living being depend directly on the creative activity of God. But it is not only life and death that the Bible attributes to God's will. Events of all sorts are attributed to God: "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things" (Isa. 45:7). "Does a disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?" (Amos 3:6). Some biblical passages, then, portray God as determining the course of all events, both the great and the small.

Of course, the Bible does not provide a philosophical theory of God's power and as a result does not deal theoretically with the problem of reconciling God's power and humankind's sense of freedom and our notions about the contingency of historical events. The Bible also does not devote much space to the difficult problem of explaining how God can be good yet be responsible for woes and disasters. Philosophers have devoted much thought to this issue, which is called the problem of *theodicy*. None of the various attempts at forming a theodicy has been fully satisfactory.

The Bible's ultimate response to this issue is that of Job. Throughout his discourses, Job has enunciated a persistent complaint against God and God's use of power: "He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:17).

Job regards God as the force behind his problems and argues that he is suffering unjustly. As a result, he repeatedly demands an audience with God: "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God" (13:3). At last Job receives his audience with God. He finally

has his chance to present his case and to press God for justice. But when he encounters God, his quest for justice evaporates as the tables are turned, with God posing questions to Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!” (38:4-5).

Job does not receive an answer to his query about God’s justice and God’s role in his suffering. In the presence of God, Job is reduced to silence as he realizes that God’s mystery cannot be contained by his concept of justice: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:2-3). This is obviously not a philosophical solution to the problems associated with God’s power and our need of an adequate theodicy. But it is one of the Bible’s responses to these issues. It is a response that calls upon us to acknowledge that God’s reality cannot be measured by us and that it is we who must answer to God and not God to us. It is a response that leads us to see that we do not fully determine the course of our lives. We do not act in complete freedom. There are realities that lie outside our control that shape the contours of our existence and establish constraints upon our actions in ways we do not understand.

How are we to deal with the intellectual perplexities that the Bible’s convictions generate? We certainly should not affirm that God is the only causal force and that humans are mere instruments of God’s power. Although the Bible occasionally portrays things in this way, as when Paul discusses Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17-18), it more routinely recognizes that God’s determination of life does not annul the causal efficacy of human behavior. Proverbs expresses this paradox when it notes that “The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps” (16:9).

The paradoxical relation between divine action and human action—the fact that both are somehow operative in the same events—means that we cannot formulate a philosophically precise account of this relation. Nonetheless, we can make several affirmations as matters of Christian faith. First, because we cannot comprehend God, there will always be something enigmatic about divine action. Theology’s task is not to resolve perplexities but instead to point to them and honor them. Second, God’s

will is accomplished through human action in ways that we do not understand. For example, Isaiah proclaimed that God had raised up the Persian king, Cyrus, specifically in order to liberate Israel from exile in Babylon. Isaiah perceived matters from God's perspective. Cyrus was certainly not aware of being an instrument of Israel's God. From Cyrus's human perspective there were factors such as Cyrus's desire for conquest at work. The Bible, then, invites us to perceive that there are various ways of viewing the same event. To be a person of faith is to acknowledge that in every instance of creatures' acting there is also a dimension of divine action, even if we cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of the matter. Third, the Bible's conviction that God determines all things points us to an affirmation of great importance, namely that human life depends radically on God and that our well-being is a matter of acknowledging that dependence and living in response to that dependence. In other words, regardless of how we think about God's power philosophically, its religious significance is clear. Human life is lived in the presence of God and cannot exist outside that presence. But it can be lived well only when God's power works within us and leads us into fellowship with God.

The God who is love—who is faithful, wise, and righteous—is also infinite and transcendent. The Bible's word for designating God's infinity and transcendence is *holiness*. To say that God is holy is to affirm that God is radically unlike us and unlike anything in the created world. It is to affirm that God differs from the world and everything in the world.

The Christian faith affirms that God is both love and holy. God is the transcendent power that infinitely exceeds us and whose faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness cannot be compared to ours. But this transcendent, infinite power creates and comes into the world for the purpose of creating fellowship with creatures. This fellowship-creating power is God's love. In order to think truly about God, we must think about God's love and holiness together. We must see that God's holiness is not lessened by his coming into the world and creating fellowship with creatures. And we must see that God's love is the expression of his holy transcendence and infinity. In love God identifies with the world. In holiness God remains transcendentally different from the world. Christian theology is the work of holding together this identity and difference.

CREATION AND THE TRIUNE GOD

The Early Church stated the doctrine of creation in the creed of Constantinople (381). This creed's doctrine of creation was fashioned in response to a religious movement, Gnosticism, some types of which held that the Creator of the world was not the Father of Jesus Christ but instead a different god. Although its statement is brief, it declares the main points of the Church's convictions: "We believe in one God the Father all-powerful, maker of heaven and of earth, and of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . through whom all things came to be. . . . And in the Spirit, the holy, the lordly and life-giving one." This creed affirms (1) that there is one God; (2) that this God is all-powerful and therefore has no rivals; (3) that God has made everything, so that every being (except for God) is a part of the created world; (4) that Jesus Christ is the Word through whom the Father created the universe; (5) and that the Holy Spirit is the source of creatures' life. We will consider the trinitarian dimension of this doctrine in subsequent chapters.

► A POSTSCRIPT: THE TRIUNE CREATOR

In this chapter we have asked about the Creator's identity. We have seen that the Bible sets forth this identity in terms of creative power. Yet there is more to be said about the Creator who comes into the world to create fellowship, for Creator is the triune God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The triune being of the Creator will be discussed in detail in later chapters. But it is profitable to remind ourselves of this truth at the beginning.

The Bible testifies to the trinitarian Creator in its affirmation that the Father God creates the world through the Son (Heb. 1:3) and when it sees the basis of creatures' life in the divine Spirit (Ps. 104:30). To speak of the Creator, then, is to speak of the Father, from whom all things proceed, and the Son, through whom all things come to be, and the Spirit,

in whom all things subsist. To speak of creation is to speak not only of the beginning but also of the revelation of the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. It is, finally, to speak of the world's redemption accomplished by the triune Creator.

► THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF FAITH

Faith in the Creator is more than a cognitive belief that the universe was caused by a transcendent power. It is also a commitment to conduct our lives in a way that imitates the Creator's faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness.

The Christian doctrine of the Creator is not a scientific or even quasi-scientific theory about the origin of the universe. It is instead a statement of our faith in the Creator. Accordingly, the appropriate response to this doctrine is not merely belief, as though, having believed the truth of this doctrine, we were through with it. On the contrary, our response must involve the totality of our being.

In particular, it is not enough that we acknowledge the Creator's faithfulness, wisdom, righteousness, and justice. The Christian faith demands that we not only believe but also reflect God's nature. This means that we should respond to God's faithfulness with our active faithfulness, that we should receive and embody God's wisdom as best we can, and that we should practice righteousness and pursue justice as does God. By practicing faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness, even in our finite and fallible way, we truly believe in the Creator. We also thereby cooperate with God's eschatological goal of fellowship with humankind. This is because fellowship with God is a matter of living faithfully in the world that God is creating and of conforming our lives to God's life.

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. In the context of exile in Babylon, biblical writers affirmed the power and supremacy of the God who was about to liberate Israel from exile and re-create it. They proclaimed that the God who was about to redeem Israel was the God who had created the world. In this proclamation, they portrayed redemption as a new act of God's creation.

2. The Bible's teaching about creation embraces the destiny of the entire created world, so that God's creative power and presence extend from the beginning of the world to its end. This means that God's creation has a goal, which is fellowship between Creator and the created world.
3. The act of creation not only is the world's beginning but also is God's act of sustaining the world and its rhythms. God's faithfulness to the created world assumes concrete form as God's blessing. Because of this blessing the world is characterized by natural and predictable processes.
4. The creative presence of God, which is God's faithful blessing, is also God's wisdom.
5. God's wisdom passes over into the created world in the form of an ethical order that establishes the conditions for human well-being. As the source of this ethical order, the Creator God is the righteous God.
6. To say that God is the Creator is to say as well that God is the powerful Lord of all things, who is not limited by worldly realities such as time, space, and power. God is not a part of the created world but instead is the creative presence that sustains that world.
7. Faith in the Creator is more than a cognitive belief that the universe was caused by a transcendent power. It is also a commitment to conduct our lives in a way that imitates the Creator's faithfulness, wisdom, and righteousness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do biblical books such as Proverbs, the Psalms, and Isaiah supplement the teaching about creation that we find in Genesis 1?
2. How is our thinking about creation and the Creator affected by considering them from the perspective of eschatology?
3. What, if anything, do scientific theories about the universe have to contribute to our understanding of the Creator?