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Contents

Timeline of Contents *vi*

Introduction *ix*

MOVEMENT I | CREATION • 1

1 Creation Begins 3

2 Creation Is Not God 11

3 Creation Is Good 21

MOVEMENT II | FALL • 31

4 Humanity in God's Image 33

5 Humanity Gone Wild 41

MOVEMENT III | NATION • 49

6 Abraham Finds Faith 51

7 Moses Meets I Am 65

8 Goodness Is Commanded 73

9 Beauty in the Promised Land 87

10 King David and His Boy 99

11 Justice Exiles the Nation 107

MOVEMENT IV | REDEMPTION • 115

12 Jesus Is Born 117

13 Jesus Is Walking Around Saying Stuff 125

14 Jesus Is Dying to Meet You 149

MOVEMENT V | CHURCH • 163

| | | |
|----|---------------------------|-----|
| 15 | The Spirit Arrives | 165 |
| 16 | The Church Begins | 177 |
| 17 | The Apostle Paul Converts | 193 |
| 18 | The Church Expands | 205 |
| 19 | The Church Today | 215 |

MOVEMENT VI | END • 217

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 20 | The End of the World as We Know It | 219 |
| 21 | Highway to Hell or Stairway to Heaven? | 229 |
| | Conclusion | 237 |
| | Endnotes | 251 |
| | Scripture Index | 259 |

MOVEMENT I

Creation



AS A LITTLE BOY, I would sometimes sneak past the foot of my parents' bed (this was before their divorce, when there were seemingly no snakes in our garden) and creep out onto their balcony and up to the roof, where I'd fall asleep under the stars. I did this so often that we eventually set up a tent out there. Sometimes, I'd awake in the morning staring directly up at a sky of blue filled bright with sun, and there would be a brief moment where I didn't know where I was, experiencing the sights and sounds of creation as if for the first time. Morning rising, moon receding, trees twitching with the wind, birds joining the chorus, everything good and glorious and unspoiled. It was like being born and surprised by everything. But then I'd shake awake, brush my teeth, catch the bus, and move on with my day, forgetting that first moment when I didn't take the universe and existence itself for granted.

What is this world into which we are thrown? What is nature, and how did it and the universe and all of us get here? Why is there something rather than nothing? These questions are so basic we sometimes forget to ask them at all. It's with these questions that we start our story in the first movement: creation. When God supposedly *created* everything. It's the first moment, the first set piece, the first act in the cosmic drama, when everything is newborn, surprising, unfamiliar, and unassumed. And so fittingly, the very first line of the Bible goes, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).



CREATION



Creation Begins ●

Creation Is Not God ●

Creation Is Good ●

FALL



Humanity in God's Image ●

Humanity Gone Wild ●

NATION



Abraham Finds Faith ● 2000 BC

Moses Meets I AM ● 1400-1200ish BC

Goodness Is Commanded ●

Beauty in the Promised Land ●

King David and His Boy ● 1000ish BC

Justice Exiles the Nation ● 586 BC

REDEMPTION



Jesus Is Born ● AD 0

Jesus Is Walking Around Saying Stuff ● AD 30

Jesus Is Dying to Meet You ● AD 33

CHURCH



The Spirit Arrives ● AD 33

The Church Begins ● AD 33

The Apostle Paul Converts ● AD 35ish

The Church Expands ● AD 300ish

The Church Today ● The Present

END



The End of the World as We Know It ●

Highway to Hell or Stairway to Heaven? ●



ONE

Creation Begins

“In the beginning . . .”

(GENESIS 1:1)

WITH THESE FIRST THREE WORDS, the Bible already puts its foot in it.¹ For the Greek philosopher Aristotle had argued that the universe never began to exist but stretched back and back into infinity, without any first moment or beginning. And since Aristotle was a big deal, it seemed for a while like all the smart folks thought the Bible was wrong from the get-go. There was no *in the beginning*—the universe had always existed. And if the universe has always existed, then why, you might wonder, would we need a God to bring it into existence? If there is no first moment of creation, what need have we of a Creator?²

Fast-forward to 1929. American Astronomer Edwin Hubble has made some fascinating observations about the universe. Hubble expected all the galaxies to be unmoving and fixed in space. He anticipated that one galaxy would be a set distance from another galaxy and that the distance between them wouldn't change over time, any more than the distance between Paris and Berlin changes over time. Yet when Hubble actually looked through his telescope, it was as if every galaxy was moving away from every other galaxy. No matter what angle Hubble looked at it from, everything seemed to be shooting away from everything else. The universe was like a polka-dot balloon being blown up, with every dot expanding away from every other dot.

But then something even more radical happened. Astronomer and Catholic priest George Lemaître (you don't need to remember all these names) asked: What would happen if we reversed the expansion? What if we played the tape backward and watched the cosmic balloon shrink instead of expand? The universe would shrink and shrink until it was nothing but a one-dimensional dot, which could shrink no further. If going forward in time blows the cosmos up, going back in time shrivels it back to barely anything at all. (When I give this talk, I usually blow up an actual balloon, and at this point I'd slowly let the air flatulate out to illustrate the reversal.)

Lemaître realized that if we imagined going back in time—if we played the expansion of the universe in reverse—eventually there would have been a first moment of creation, when the entire universe ballooned into being. And so the universe *must* have a beginning. Picture a grenade exploding in a war movie, all the fragments blowing up in every direction, expanding outward in a great circle. But then play it in reverse and see all the fragments coming back together until they meet again in the middle, at the first instant of the explosion. At the first instant of the Big Bang.

Usually when we speak of something beginning to exist, we mean the beginning of a particular thing within time and space: The beginning of spring. The beginning of puberty. The beginning of a weeklong vacation. *The beginning of some event within time.* But the Big Bang is not the expansion of matter outward into space and time. Rather, the Big Bang is the expansion of space and time *itself*. The Big Bang is not just the beginning of our universe within time; no, it is the beginning of time itself. It is the beginning of spacetime, the beginning of there being beginnings, the very first beginning. Ours is a tale *older* than time. The universe may end with a whimper but it began—like all of us—with a bang.

Now, a young-earth creationist might be tempted to put the book down at this point (though there are creationists who believe in the Big Bang; they just think it happened more recently than mainstream science does). However, I'm not talking about the Big Bang to try to get you to believe in it. Rather, I'm trying to help you enter a conversation—one that has been

going on for thousands of years. Since at least Aristotle in the fourth century BC, many of the brightest minds assumed that the universe was not created but had always existed from infinity past. But in the early twentieth century, mainstream science began embracing the Big Bang, and suddenly everyone was saying what Jews and Christians had said all along: that the universe had a beginning. It has not always existed but was created at some point in the past. And if it was created, then what created it? Who is the cosmic balloon artist?*



“In the beginning *God created . . .*” (Genesis 1:1).

So after the Big Bang, mainstream science says the universe burst outward, like a grenade exploding. Yet if everything is flying away from everything else, how did enough pieces come together to form stars and galaxies? How can you stop the force of the grenade and bring some of the fragments back together again? What force brought together enough exploding chunks of the universe so that there was sufficient matter clumped together to create stars, galaxies, planets, humans, and Mark Zuckerberg?

Gravity, that’s what. The pull of gravity was just enough that some of the exploding chunks of the universe began to draw close to one another again, like gravity drawing our feet back down to earth. Gravity means that mass draws mass to it; that’s why we stand on the earth’s surface instead of bouncing about like moonwalking Teletubbies. The Big Bang explodes the fragments of the universe away from each other, but then gravity draws some of them near again. These clumps of matter are gravitationally drawn to one another, snowballing until they become big enough to form stars, galaxies, and planets, which eventually allow for intelligent life.

But for this to happen, the force of gravity had to be just right. If it were even slightly *weaker*, the outward push from the Big Bang would have been

*Considering that two of the earliest atomic building blocks of the universe are hydrogen and helium—both of which have been used to fill balloons (google “Hindenburg”)—I think a real case can be made that referring to God as a balloon artist is more accurate than calling him Father, Jehovah, or G-d. This started as a joke, but I think I’ve almost convinced myself.

Now, I don't think that this magically *proves* God exists. In fact, it's probably better that you don't suddenly change your whole belief system just because I threw some random statistics at you. Especially because there are many different ways to try and make sense of those statistics. For example, Rees, the guy who came up with those six numbers above, is actually an atheist. Rees admits that the scientific evidence makes it look like the universe is perfectly designed; he just disagrees on how to interpret that evidence. Rees takes a multiverse approach, according to which there are potentially an infinite numbers of universes, and so one (or more) would eventually get it right by chance, no matter how insane the odds. We just so happen to be that lucky one. If you have an infinite number of lottery tickets, you will strike it rich eventually.

Perhaps Rees's thesis is right. Probability is an odd and wonderful thing—you're only here because you were the one blessed spermatozoa out of one hundred million who won the lottery. Crazy stuff happens; maybe our universe just got lucky. Or maybe, just maybe, it wasn't sheer dumb luck. Perhaps the initial conditions of the universe seem perfectly crafted precisely because there was a perfect craftsman. Perhaps, even if the odds of there being a God are only one in twenty, that's still preferable to the one in a trillion million billion Brazilian reptilian odds that we just got lucky. Perhaps, "In the beginning, God created . . ."

(P.S. You might have wanted a stronger start to the book and to the universe than just "perhaps." But I think that uncertainty and open-mindedness are actually the perfect place for faith to begin. God cannot enter a closed mind.)



"In the beginning God created *the heavens and the earth*" (Genesis 1:1).

The Bible rounds out its opening statement by specifying that what God created was *the heavens and the earth*. The heavens up there and the earth down here, the skies and the ground, space and matter. So, you know, pretty much *everything*—the entire universe that stretches from down here out unto the heavens in every direction.

And isn't it staggeringly insane that any of it exists at all? It didn't have to. It might not have been this way; there just as easily could have been no universe. Indeed, a famous philosopher once said that the greatest mystery of all is, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"⁴ Yet we take mere existence for granted, as if this were just obviously how things had to be. We've become so used to our daily lives, so accustomed to sleeping, waking up, driving to and from work, that we've forgotten how bizarre it all is, how strange that anything exists at all! How strange that we reside on a bluish-green marble, hanging midair, suspended by nothing, frolicking around a great big ball of fire.

None of this is normal. The gift of life is not a given. Even the most assumed aspects of our existence might have been radically different. As Martin Heidegger wrote, "To philosophize means to be constantly perplexed by what common sense considers self-evident and unquestionable."⁵ But Heidegger was a Nazi, so let's appeal to a different source: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). For Jesus, heaven is beheld by wee eyes—little children who haven't had their senses sanded down by the dull repetitions of adulthood, glimpsing each wonder and thingamabob as if for the very first time. As children, we used to hungrily squeal, "Why?! Why?! Why?!" about every little thing, until we learned to be quiet and just pass the dang salt. We've grown up and come to take for granted that which is most mysterious. We're like fish who've forgotten water. Like rich people who don't remember how privileged they are. Like readers who take for granted how much time authors spend searching for the perfect analogy.

We've grown up and forgotten how shocking it all once seemed, forgotten how different it all might have been. There could just as easily have been *no heavens and no earth*. The laws of the universe might never have been or might have been totally different. Gravity might not have existed, and so matter would never have pulled itself together to form galaxies, stars, or planets. Perhaps we could have been created in a universe where light and sound waves didn't exist or where our five senses were different. Perhaps we'd get around by following our noses, or evolve to use telepathy,

or communicate through farts like herrings do (this is true).⁶ Perhaps, instead of three or four dimensions, we could have been created in just two dimensions, like stick people. Or seventeen dimensions, or 525,600 dimensions. Perhaps, instead of a logical, mathematical universe, we just as easily could have been born into a crazy, illogical, *Alice in Wonderland* universe.

The fabric of space and time itself might not have been. According to mainstream science, spacetime only comes into existence at the Big Bang, and so might not have been. We can't even take space and time for granted! Perhaps, instead of space spreading things out into distinct regions, there might have been no space at all, and so all things would have been stuffed into one tiny, unextended dot. Perhaps, instead of time existing and allowing movement and change and growth, we all might have been frozen in place like unmoving, timeless statues in a cosmic Medusa's garden.

Nothing about the way our world works is obvious or how things had to be or just the way things *are*. Because once, *they weren't*. Once there was no heavens or earth. Once there was no universe. Once upon a time, before the beginning of all things, there was nothing. And then suddenly, mysteriously, wondrously—and with a great Big Bang—there was something.

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