

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 8: THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

Lesson 25

In the Beginning God Created — Creation Ex Nihilo

The Origin of All Things in the Sovereign Will of God

Key Texts: Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11

He Spoke, and It Was

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse
<i>“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”</i>
Romans 11:33–34, NASB 1995

Introduction

Every act of God is glorious, but there is a sense in which the first act of God, the act by which everything that is not God came to be, stands in a category of its own. Creation is the first chapter of the divine biography as it touches the creaturely order, the first disclosure of God's power and wisdom and goodness to any audience other than the eternal Triune Persons themselves. Before creation there was nothing, no matter, no energy, no space, no time, no creature of any kind, only the infinite, self-sufficient, all-sufficient God, dwelling in the inexhaustible fullness of His own Trinitarian life. And then, by the sovereign, free, and loving word of His power, there was something: the heavens and the earth, light and darkness, seas and dry land, living creatures of every kind, and at the crown of it all, a man and a woman made in the image of their Creator, placed in a garden prepared for them by the One who had spoken them into being.

This unit, Unit 8 of our Theology Proper series, turns from the eternal purposes of God (Units 6 and 7) to the first temporal expression of those purposes: the act of creation. In three lessons, we will examine the foundational doctrine of creation ex nihilo (this lesson), the specific form that creation took in the six days of Genesis 1 (Lesson 26), and the relationship between creation and the glory of God (Lesson 27). These three lessons together provide the theological foundation not only for the doctrine of creation but for the entire subsequent drama of redemption, which takes place within the created order that this lesson establishes.

This lesson focuses on what the entire Christian tradition has recognized as the most foundational truth about the act of creation: God created all things out of nothing. The Latin phrase *ex nihilo*, from nothing, is not a theological elaboration beyond what Scripture says; it is the precise summary of what Genesis 1:1 and Hebrews 11:3 and the whole canonical witness to creation affirm. God did not work with pre-existing material; He did not fashion the cosmos from some eternal substance; He did not emanate the world from His own being. He spoke, and there was. He commanded, and it stood fast. This is the foundational truth from which everything else in the doctrine of creation flows.

I. Creation Ex Nihilo: The Foundational Affirmation

A. The Meaning of the Doctrine

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo affirms that God created the universe, all matter, energy, space, time, and every entity within the created order, out of nothing. There was no pre-existent material from which He fashioned the cosmos; there was no eternal substrate upon which He worked; there was nothing except God Himself, and then there was everything else. The act of creation is therefore absolutely unique: it is not the rearrangement of existing materials, not the formation of chaos into order from some eternal raw material, but the absolute bringing into being of what did not exist.

This doctrine stands in sharp contrast to several ancient and modern alternatives. Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the Egyptian creation myths,

universally presuppose the existence of some primordial matter or chaos from which the gods fashioned the world. Greek philosophy, from Plato's *Timaeus* onward, generally assumed the eternity of matter: the Demiurge fashioned the cosmos from pre-existing material. Neoplatonism conceived of creation as emanation, the world flowing from God as light from the sun, as a kind of overflow of the divine being. And in the modern period, pantheism and panentheism identify God and the world in various ways, either making the world the body of God or making God the soul of the world.

The Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* stands against every one of these alternatives. Against ancient cosmogony: there was no eternal matter. Against Greek *eternalism*: matter is not co-eternal with God. Against Neoplatonic emanationism: the world is not a part of God or an overflow of His being. Against pantheism: God is not the world, and the world is not God. Against panentheism: God is not dependent on the world for His completion or His identity. God is the Creator; all else is creature; and the line between Creator and creature is the most fundamental divide in all of reality.

B. The Biblical Foundation: Genesis 1:1

The opening sentence of the Bible is the most foundational statement in all of Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, NASB 1995). Every word of this sentence is theologically loaded, and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the natural reading of its plain sense.

"In the beginning", The Hebrew word *bereshit* (literally "in the beginning" or "when [God] began") places the creation at the absolute starting point of all that is temporal. There was a beginning, which means that time itself, along with everything within it, had an origin. God did not create within time; He created time itself, along with space, matter, and all their contents, in the act of creation.

"God", The subject of creation is Elohim, the God of Israel, the God of the patriarchs, the God who would later reveal His personal name to Moses at the burning bush. Before there was anything created, there was God. He is the precondition of everything; everything else is the product of His creative act.

"Created", The Hebrew verb *bara* is significant. While it can be used of human creative activity in a secondary sense, in its primary usage in the Old Testament it describes an activity that is uniquely divine. Crucially, *bara* is never used with a material object in the sense of the material from which something is made. When God *bara*, He does not form something from an existing substance; He brings into being what was not. The verb itself implies, though it does not explicitly state, creation out of nothing.

"The heavens and the earth", This is the Hebrew idiom for the totality of the created order, the merism that encompasses everything that exists other than God Himself. The phrase does not mean merely the visible sky and the land surface; it means all of created reality in its entirety. God created everything.

C. The Biblical Foundation: Hebrews 11:3

The most explicit New Testament statement of creation *ex nihilo* is Hebrews 11:3: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is

seen was not made out of things which are visible” (NASB 1995). The clause “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” is a statement of creation out of nothing: the visible, material world was not fashioned from some prior visible or material substance. Its origin is not material but verbal, the word of God, which is itself not a material thing but the sovereign creative utterance of the one who is Spirit (John 4:24).

The phrase “by faith we understand” is also theologically significant: the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is not a conclusion that natural reason can reach by empirical investigation alone. It is a truth received by faith on the basis of divine revelation. No scientist, however sophisticated his cosmological models, can observe the absolute beginning of existence from nothing; the claim that the universe began in an absolute act of divine creation is a claim that comes to us from the God who was there, and who has told us, in His Word, what happened.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” | “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:3, NASB 1995

II. The Trinitarian Nature of Creation

The act of creation is not the act of the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Spirit alone. It is the act of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the inseparable operations of the triune God exercised in the first and most fundamental of all His works toward the outside (opera ad extra). And yet, as we noted in Lesson 20, the doctrine of appropriations holds that while all external works belong to the whole Trinity, certain works are fittingly attributed to individual Persons because of the correspondence between their economic role and their eternal personal identity. In the work of creation, all three Persons are present and active, each in a manner consistent with His eternal personal character.

A. The Father as the Eternal Source

The Father is appropriately identified as the ultimate source and originator of the creative act. It is the Father who wills creation into being, who speaks the creative word, and from whom all things ultimately proceed. Paul’s great doxology in Romans 11:36, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (NASB 1995), ascribes the “from” to the Father: all things come from Him as their ultimate source. The 1689 Baptist Confession, following the Westminster Confession and the classical tradition, affirms: “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create or make out of nothing the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good” (1689 LBC 4.1).

B. The Son as the Agent of Creation

The New Testament is equally explicit that the Son of God is the agent through whom creation was accomplished, the one through whom the Father’s creative word was executed. The Johannine prologue establishes this at the outset: “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being”

(John 1:3, NASB 1995). The same truth appears in Colossians 1:15–17: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (NASB 1995). And Hebrews 1:2 affirms that God “made the world through” the Son.

The comprehensiveness of these texts is striking: all things, without exception, were created by and through the eternal Son. This includes the invisible realm, the angelic hosts, the spiritual powers, the heavenly realities. Nothing that exists within the created order came into being apart from the Son’s creative agency. This is one of the clearest expressions of the Son’s full deity in the New Testament: to create all things is the prerogative of God alone, and the Son exercises it as God.

The additional affirmation of Colossians 1:17, “in Him all things hold together”, is equally important. The Son is not merely the Creator but the Sustainer: the coherence and continued existence of the universe depends not on some inherent property of matter but on the continuous upholding activity of the Son (cf. Hebrews 1:3: “upholding all things by the word of His power”, NASB 1995). Creation is not a past event that God has left to run on its own; it is a present reality continuously sustained by the creative and governing power of the eternal Son.

C. The Spirit as the Animator and Sustainer

The Holy Spirit’s presence in creation is introduced in the second verse of Scripture: “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2, NASB 1995). The verb translated “moving” (Hebrew: *mərahepet*) is the same verb used in Deuteronomy 32:11 to describe an eagle hovering protectively over its young, an image of brooding, energizing presence. Before the creative word begins to bring order out of formlessness, the Spirit of God is already present, hovering over the primordial deep, ready to animate and order what the Father’s word will call into being.

Psalms 104:30 affirms the Spirit’s ongoing creative role: “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the ground” (NASB 1995). Job 33:4 declares: “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (NASB 1995). The Spirit is the life-giving agent of God in creation, the one who animates, sustains, and renews the creaturely order. This is consistent with His role in the new creation: just as the Spirit hovered over the primordial waters to bring forth the first creation, so He works in the heart of the believer to bring forth the new creation in regeneration (John 3:5–8; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible... He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

Colossians 1:16–17, NASB 1995

III. Creation as an Act of Divine Freedom

One of the most important truths the doctrine of creation establishes about the character of God is that creation was an act of absolute divine freedom. God was under no external

compulsion to create; He was not driven to create by any internal need or deficiency; He was not constrained by any external standard or any pre-existing reality. Creation flows from the sovereign, free, loving choice of the self-sufficient God to communicate His glory and goodness to a creation that, apart from His free choice to bring it into existence, would never have existed at all.

A. God Did Not Create Out of Need

The self-sufficiency of God, His aseity, which we examined in Lesson 9, is the theological foundation of the freedom of creation. Paul makes this explicit in his Areopagus sermon: “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:24–25, NASB 1995). God did not create because He needed companionship, or because the divine life was incomplete without a creation, or because His love required an object external to Himself to fulfill it.

The self-sufficient God, dwelling in the eternal fullness of Trinitarian communion, Father, Son, and Spirit in the inexhaustible mutual indwelling of perichoresis, lacked nothing before creation and lacks nothing now. The Father loved the Son and the Son loved the Father before any creature existed to be loved (John 17:24). God is not enriched by creation; He is not fulfilled by it; He is not made more glorious by it than He was in His own eternal being. Creation is not the product of divine need but of divine generosity.

B. God Created for His Own Glory

If God did not create out of need, what moved Him to create? The answer the Scriptures give is comprehensive and doxological: God created for the display and communication of His own glory. “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1, NASB 1995). “For by Him all things were created... all things have been created through Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16, NASB 1995), the creation exists not only through Christ but for Christ, as the stage on which the glory of God in the face of Christ is displayed. Revelation 4:11 gives the liturgical expression of this truth: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created” (NASB 1995). Creation exists because God willed it; it exists for His glory.

Jonathan Edwards, whose theological vision of creation was among the most carefully developed in the Reformed tradition, argued in his treatise *The End for Which God Created the World* that the ultimate end of creation is the communication and emanation of God’s own fullness, a spilling over of the divine glory and goodness into a created order that can receive, reflect, and rejoice in it. This is not a selfish end, Edwards argued, because for God to aim at something less than His own glory would be to aim at something less than the highest good, which would itself be a moral deficiency. The creature’s highest good and God’s ultimate glory are not competing ends but converging ones: the creature is most blessed when it most fully knows, enjoys, and reflects the glory of the Creator.

C. Creation as an Act of Trinitarian Love

The freedom of creation does not mean that creation was arbitrary or indifferent. Creation flows from the overflow of the Trinitarian love that has eternally characterized the inner life of God. The Father, Son, and Spirit, who have eternally loved one another in the inexhaustible communion of the divine life, chose to extend the sphere of that love, to create a world that could participate in, benefit from, and be caught up in the worship of the triune God. This is the deepest account of why there is something rather than nothing: the eternal love of the Trinitarian God was so full, so free, so generous, that it overflowed into the creative act by which a world of creatures was brought into being to know and enjoy and glorify their Maker.

IV. The Creator-Creature Distinction

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* establishes what is perhaps the most fundamental metaphysical distinction in all of reality: the Creator-creature distinction. God is the Creator; everything else is creature. God is self-existent, self-sufficient, eternal, and uncaused; the creature is dependent, contingent, temporal, and caused. God is infinite; the creature is finite. God is immutable; the creature changes. God is simple, not composed of parts; the creature is composite. The gap between Creator and creature is not a gap of degree, as if God were simply a very great creature, but a gap of kind, an absolute ontological divide that nothing can bridge from the creaturely side.

A. The Denial of the Creator-Creature Distinction: Pantheism

Pantheism, the identification of God with the universe, is the most direct denial of the Creator-creature distinction. In pantheism, God is the world and the world is God; the divine is not a personal being who stands over against the world but the impersonal ground or totality of all that exists. Hinduism, in many of its forms, is pantheistic; so is the philosophy of Spinoza; so, in a different register, is the New Age spirituality that pervades Western popular culture. “Everything is one,” “nature is sacred,” “you are divine”, these are the slogans of pantheism, and they are, at their root, a denial of the God of Genesis 1:1 who stands over against His creation as its Creator and Lord.

The biblical response to pantheism is the uncompromising affirmation that “God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Psalm 115:3, NASB 1995), the God of Scripture is the one who transcends the creation absolutely, who is not identical with any part of it or the sum of its parts, and who relates to it as its sovereign Creator and Lord, not as its indwelling soul or its immanent ground. The creation is not divine; it is very good (Genesis 1:31), but it is creature, not Creator.

B. The Confusion of Creator and Creature: Panentheism

Panentheism, a position associated in modern theology with process theologians such as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, and adapted in various forms by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, holds that the world is “in” God in some sense: God is not identical with the world (which would be pantheism) but the world is contained within God as a kind of divine body or environment. God and the world exist in a relation of mutual dependence: God influences the world, but the world also influences God; God is in process of becoming as the world develops.

Panentheism is perhaps the most influential contemporary distortion of the Creator-creature distinction, precisely because it sounds more sophisticated than naive pantheism and because it appeals to modern sensibilities about divine immanence and divine compassion. But it is ultimately incompatible with the God of Scripture: the God who creates *ex nihilo* from a position of absolute self-sufficiency, who is not enriched or fulfilled by the world, and whose immutable perfection cannot be increased or diminished by creaturely history. The panentheist god is not the God of Genesis 1.

C. The Practical Significance of the Distinction

The Creator-creature distinction is not merely a metaphysical curiosity; it has immediate and practical implications for every dimension of the Christian life. It means that the creation is not an object of worship. Only the Creator is to be worshipped; to worship the creation, in any form, whether it takes the form of explicit nature worship, or the subtler forms of materialism, hedonism, or the idolization of human achievement, is the great idolatry against which Paul warns in Romans 1:25: those who “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (NASB 1995).

It also means that the creation is genuinely good, not divine, but good, as its Maker declared it (Genesis 1:31). The Creator-creature distinction guards against both the error of worshipping creation and the error of despising it. Created things are not God, but they are the work of God’s hands, and they are good. The material world is not a prison from which the soul must escape; it is the theater of God’s glory, the stage on which the drama of redemption unfolds, and ultimately the subject of the great restoration that God has promised: “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5, NASB 1995).

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

Revelation 4:11, NASB 1995

V. Creation and the Ancient Near Eastern Context

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* emerges even more clearly when Genesis 1:1 is read against the background of the ancient Near Eastern world in which it was first composed. The ancient Near East was saturated with creation myths, and virtually all of them share common features that Genesis 1 deliberately and pointedly contradicts.

The Babylonian creation epic, the *Enuma Elish*, tells the story of the god Marduk slaying the primordial chaos monster Tiamat and fashioning the heavens and earth from her body. The creation of human beings follows as an afterthought to serve the gods in their leisure. The Egyptian Memphite Theology describes the god Ptah creating the world through the word of his heart and the speech of his tongue. Across the ancient Near Eastern world, several themes recur: the pre-existence of primordial matter or chaos; the involvement of multiple deities; the creation of human beings as a burden or servile task; and the intimate interweaving of the divine and the natural order.

Genesis 1 stands in deliberate contrast to all of these. There is one God, not many; He is sovereign, not one power among competing powers; there is no primordial chaos to be conquered but only the formless and void earth over which the Spirit of God hovers in sovereign readiness; creation is not an afterthought but the purposeful, ordered, glorious work of an all-powerful God; and human beings are created not as servants to the gods' leisure but as image-bearers of the sovereign Creator, commissioned to govern the creation as His royal vice-regents. Genesis 1 is not merely a different creation story; it is a polemic against every alternative, a declaration that the God of Israel stands in a category absolutely apart from all the gods of the nations, and that His creation is not the product of divine conflict but the expression of divine sovereignty, freedom, and love.

VI. Creation and Modern Science: The Question of Origins

A. What Science Can and Cannot Tell Us

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo inevitably raises questions about its relationship to modern scientific cosmology, particularly the Big Bang theory. The Big Bang model posits that the observable universe began from an extremely hot, dense state approximately 13.8 billion years ago and has been expanding ever since. Many theologians and scientists have noted that the Big Bang model, insofar as it posits an absolute beginning to the physical universe, is more congenial to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo than the steady-state model it replaced (which posited an eternal universe without a beginning).

However, the relationship between the doctrine of creation ex nihilo and Big Bang cosmology must be handled with care. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is a theological claim grounded in divine revelation; it is not a scientific hypothesis to be confirmed or falsified by cosmological investigation. Science, as an empirical discipline, operates within the natural order and can describe how things developed within that order; it cannot, by its own methods, address the question of why there is something rather than nothing, or whether an absolute divine creation underlies the natural order it investigates. These are questions that lie beyond the scope of empirical science and belong to the domain of theology and philosophy.

What we can say is this: the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is consistent with the scientific evidence for a universe that had a beginning. The beginning posited by Big Bang cosmology is consistent with, though it does not prove, the beginning affirmed in Genesis 1:1. And the fact that the universe appears finely tuned for the existence of life, the so-called anthropic principle, manifest in the precise values of the fundamental constants of physics, is consistent with the biblical claim that the universe was created with purposeful design by an all-wise Creator.

B. The Creator-Creature Distinction and Scientific Inquiry

The Creator-creature distinction has positive implications for the enterprise of scientific inquiry itself. Because creation is not God, it can be investigated objectively without sacrilege; it is a creature, not the Creator, and as such it is subject to rational analysis, empirical investigation, and the application of human reason to the understanding of its structure and behavior. It was precisely the Christian doctrine of creation, a universe

made by a rational God, ordered according to rational principles, and entrusted to rational creatures made in the image of their rational Creator, that provided the theological foundation for the development of natural science in the Western tradition. The great pioneers of the scientific revolution, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Faraday, were motivated in significant part by the conviction that the investigation of nature was an act of reverent worship of the God who had made it.

At the same time, because creation is not God, it is not the ultimate source of truth or the final arbiter of all questions. The natural sciences, for all their extraordinary power within their proper domain, cannot answer the questions that matter most: Who made this? Why? What is it for? What has gone wrong with it? How can it be restored? These are questions for theology, not science, and the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is the beginning of the answer.

VII. The Pastoral and Doxological Significance

A. Creation Grounds Our Humility

The first and most foundational pastoral implication of creation ex nihilo is the humility of the creature before the Creator. If God created us out of nothing, if we owe not merely the quality of our existence but the bare fact of our existence entirely to the sovereign, free, gracious act of God, then we stand before Him in a posture of radical dependence and radical gratitude. We have nothing that we did not receive (1 Corinthians 4:7). We are not self-made; we are not self-sufficient; we are not the measure of all things. We are creatures, the handiwork of a God who could have chosen not to create us and who created us, not out of necessity, but out of the sovereign generosity of His own loving will.

This creatureliness is not a degradation; it is a dignity. To be created by the God of the Bible, in His image, for His glory, as the crown of His creative work, this is the highest possible calling that any finite being could have. The humility of the creature before the Creator is not the humility of the slave before the tyrant; it is the humility of the child before the Father who made him, sustains him, and loves him with a love that preceded his existence and will outlast the present age.

B. Creation Grounds Our Wonder

The doctrine that the universe was created out of nothing by the word of the self-sufficient God is, when genuinely grasped, one of the most wonder-producing truths in all of human knowledge. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, not even the possibility of something, and then, by the sovereign creative word of the triune God, there was everything. The stars, the seas, the mountains, the creatures, the human face, the capacity for love and thought and worship, all of this emerged not from some primordial cosmic process but from the free, loving, purposeful speech of a personal God.

The Psalmist's response to this truth is the model for ours: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1, NASB 1995). Every sunrise is a sermon. Every mountain is a monument. Every child's laugh is a doxology. The creation is not silent; it is singing, singing the praises of the God who

spoke it into being. The believer who understands creation ex nihilo is the one most equipped to hear that song and most moved to join it.

C. Creation Grounds Our Worship

The elders before the throne of God in Revelation 4:11 have their theology of creation exactly right: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created” (NASB 1995). The ground of God’s worthiness to receive all glory and honor and power is not merely His redemptive work, as great as that is, but His creative work: He made all things, and all things exist because of His will. Creation is itself a ground of worship, and the creature who does not worship the Creator is guilty of the deepest ingratitude and the most fundamental disorder of the soul.

This is why the Psalms of creation, Psalms 8, 19, 33, 65, 104, 148, are not peripheral but central to the worship of Israel and the church. The God who saves is the same God who created, and the full glory of His character is displayed in both. A theology of redemption that has forgotten creation will produce a thin and impoverished worship; a theology of creation that drives us to the adoration of the God who spoke all things into being will produce a worship as wide as the universe He made.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The God who saved you is the same God who spoke the universe into being. The one who called you to Himself by name is the one who created the stars by name (Psalm 147:4). You are not a random product of impersonal processes; you are the deliberate, purposeful creation of the God who made all things and who made you for Himself. Let that truth anchor your identity and ground your sense of worth in something infinitely more stable than human opinion or personal achievement.

For the long-tenured saint: Return to the Psalms of creation, Psalm 8, 19, 104, and let them renew your capacity for wonder at the world God has made. One of the spiritual dangers of maturity is the loss of wonder before the ordinary, the capacity to look at a tree, a sunset, a human face, and see in it the fingerprints of the God who spoke it into being. Let the doctrine of creation ex nihilo restore the wonder that familiarity has dulled.

For the one who is doubting: If you are struggling with the basic question of whether God exists, begin with creation. Paul’s argument in Romans 1:19–20 is that the existence of a Creator is evident from the creation itself: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (NASB 1995). The universe you inhabit is not self-explanatory; it points beyond itself to the God who made it.

For the one who is suffering: The God before whom you bring your grief is not a distant force or an impersonal absolute. He is the God who created you, who knows you by name, who formed you in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13–14), and who sustains your very being moment by moment by the word of His power. Your suffering has not removed you from the hands of the Creator; you remain, in the most literal sense, in His hands, the hands that spoke the cosmos into being and that hold all things together by their power.

Key Texts: *Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11; Psalm 19:1*

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Creation Ex Nihilo	Latin: “creation from nothing.” The doctrine that God created the universe, all matter, energy, space, and time, out of nothing, without the use of any pre-existing material or substance. God did not fashion the cosmos from eternal matter; He brought all things into existence by the sovereign creative word of His power. Grounded in Genesis 1:1, Hebrews 11:3, and the broader canonical witness to God as the absolute origin of all things.
Bara	The Hebrew verb used in Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning God created”) and repeatedly throughout Genesis 1 for God’s creative activity. Uniquely associated with divine creative action in the Old Testament; never used with a stated material object from which something is made, implying absolute origination rather than fashioning from prior material. Supports the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.
Creator-Creature Distinction	The fundamental ontological divide between God the Creator and all that He has made. God is self-existent, self-sufficient, eternal, immutable, infinite, and uncaused; the creature is dependent, contingent, temporal, mutable, finite, and caused. This distinction is absolute and unbridgeable from the creaturely side. It guards against both pantheism (which identifies God and the world) and panentheism (which makes God and world mutually dependent).
Pantheism	The philosophical and religious view that God and the universe are identical, that there is only one ultimate reality, and it is both God and the world simultaneously. All things are divine, and the divine is all things. Incompatible with the biblical doctrine of creation, which distinguishes absolutely between the self-existent Creator and the contingent creation. Found in various forms in Hinduism, Stoicism, Spinozism, and New Age spirituality.
Panentheism	The view that the world is “in” God, and God is “in” the world, in a relation of mutual dependence: God influences the world, but the world also influences God. Associated with process theology (Whitehead, Hartshorne) and adapted by some modern theologians (Moltmann). Rejects the divine aseity and immutability affirmed by classical theism; incompatible with the biblical portrayal of God as the self-sufficient Creator who is not enriched or affected by the created order.
Emanationism	The Neoplatonic view that the world proceeds from God by necessity, as light emanates from the sun, a kind of overflow or radiation of the divine being into a lower order of existence. The world is not created by a free divine choice but flows from God’s nature. Incompatible with creation ex nihilo, which requires a free, personal, sovereign creative act rather than a necessary

	metaphysical process. Emanationism tends to blur the Creator-creature distinction.
Anthropic Principle	The observation in modern cosmology that the physical constants of the universe appear finely tuned for the existence of intelligent life, that even slight variations in the values of the fundamental constants (gravitational constant, electromagnetic force, etc.) would render life impossible. The strong anthropic principle holds that this fine-tuning reflects intentional design; the weak form holds that we observe a life-permitting universe simply because we are here to observe it. Consistent with, though not a proof of, the biblical doctrine of creation by an all-wise God.
Aseity	From the Latin a se (“from Himself”). The doctrine that God exists in and of Himself, underived and uncaused, dependent on nothing outside Himself for His existence, His perfection, or His blessedness. Aseity is the theological foundation for the doctrine that creation was an act of absolute freedom: a self-sufficient God has no need to create and therefore creates freely, out of the overflow of His goodness and love, not out of any internal deficiency.
Opera Ad Extra	Latin: “works toward the outside.” The external works of the triune God in relation to creation, including creation, providence, and redemption. Distinguished from the opera ad intra (works “toward the inside”), the eternal immanent relations of the divine Persons within the Godhead. The opera ad extra are the undivided works of the whole Trinity, though certain works are appropriated to individual Persons.
Imago Dei	Latin: “image of God.” The doctrine that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27), distinguishing them from all other creatures and constituting the basis of human dignity, rationality, moral capacity, and dominion over the created order. The imago Dei is the foundation of the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28) and is the basis on which redemption aims at conforming the elect to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29; Colossians 3:10).
Creatio Continua	Latin: “continuous creation.” The theological affirmation that God’s creative activity did not cease at the moment of the initial creation but continues in His ongoing preservation and sustaining of the created order. Distinguished from deism, which holds that God created the world and then left it to run on its own. Grounded in Colossians 1:17 (“in Him all things hold together”), Hebrews 1:3, and Acts 17:28 (“in Him we live and move and exist”).

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God created all things out of nothing by the sovereign word of His power, that the universe is not self-existent, not the product of an eternal matter, not an emanation of the divine being, but the free, purposeful, loving act of the triune God who had no need to create and who created for His own glory and the communication of His goodness. This is not a belief we can hold casually; it is a belief that transforms the way we understand everything else, ourselves, the material world, the meaning of human existence, the nature of the crisis created by sin, and the scope of the redemption that Christ has accomplished.

We must also believe the Creator-creature distinction with the firmness it requires. In a culture saturated with various forms of naturalism, pantheism, and spiritual self-inflation, with the message that the divine is within you, that nature is sacred, that the human spirit is a spark of the cosmic divine, the Christian must hold with clarity that God is the Creator and we are the creature, that the world is not God and God is not the world, and that the only appropriate posture of the creature before the Creator is worship, not self-divinization.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* rekindle your sense of wonder. We live in a universe that did not have to exist, a universe that exists because the God who needs nothing chose, out of the generosity of His sovereign love, to call it into being. Every star in the sky, every leaf on every tree, every human face you will encounter today, exists because God spoke it into being and continues to hold it in being by the word of His power. That is not a fact to be filed away and forgotten; it is a reason for perpetual astonishment, perpetual gratitude, and perpetual worship.

Desire the doxological response that the Psalmists model. When you step outside and see the sky, pray with the Psalmist: “The heavens are telling of the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1, NASB 1995). When you encounter the complexity and beauty of the living world, pray with the Psalmist: “How many are Your works, O Lord! In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your possessions” (Psalm 104:24, NASB 1995). Let the creation be a constant school of theology, teaching you, in ten thousand ways every day, the power and wisdom and goodness of the God who made it.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Worship the Creator, not the creation. The temptation to worship the creature rather than the Creator takes many forms in contemporary culture: the elevation of nature, the idolization of human achievement, the pursuit of physical pleasure, beauty, or power as ultimate goods. Against every form of this temptation, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the corrective: nothing in the creation deserves the worship that belongs to the Creator alone.
- Steward the creation with reverent gratitude. Because the creation is the work of God’s hands and is declared very good (Genesis 1:31), the Christian has every

reason to care for it responsibly. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, to fill, subdue, and govern the earth, is a commission to stewardship, not exploitation. We are not the owners of creation but its stewards, accountable to the Creator for how we govern what He has made.

- Use the doctrine of creation in your apologetic witness. The cosmological argument, that the existence of the universe requires an uncaused cause, and that the uncaused cause is the God of Scripture, remains one of the most powerful tools in the Christian apologist's arsenal. Know how to articulate it. Know how to explain why the Big Bang, far from threatening the doctrine of creation, is consistent with it. And know how to point your secular neighbor from the existence of the universe to the existence of its Creator.
- Let the doctrine of creation ground your care for the body and the material world. Against every form of Gnostic or neo-Platonic dualism that despises the body and the material order, creation ex nihilo affirms that matter is good, made by God, declared good by God, and destined for resurrection and restoration by God. The Christian does not despise the body; he honors it as the creation of God. The Christian does not despise the material world; he cares for it as the theater of God's glory.
- Meditate on creation as a witness to divine power in times of anxiety. Isaiah 40:25–31 is the great creation passage for the anxious soul: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable” (Isaiah 40:28, NASB 1995). The God who created all things out of nothing is the God who “gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power” (Isaiah 40:29, NASB 1995). The Creator of the universe is your Father, your Shepherd, and your strength. There is no crisis He cannot handle; there is no need He cannot meet; there is no darkness He cannot illuminate.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. What do you find most awe-inspiring about the universe God has made, its vastness, its intricacy, its beauty, its order? How has your sense of wonder at creation shaped your worship of the Creator? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Genesis 1:1–2. What does “in the beginning” indicate about the nature of creation and the relationship of time to God? What is the significance of the Hebrew verb *bara*? What is the Spirit of God doing in verse 2, and what does this contribute to our understanding of the Trinitarian nature of creation?

3. Read Hebrews 11:3. What does the phrase “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” affirm about the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*? What is the epistemological significance of the phrase “by faith we understand”? What does this tell us about the limits of empirical science in answering questions about ultimate origins?

4. Read Colossians 1:15–17. What is affirmed about the Son’s role in creation in verse 16? What does the phrase “all things have been created through Him and for Him” add to the picture? What does “in Him all things hold together” (v. 17) tell us about the ongoing relationship between the Son and the creation?

5. Read Revelation 4:9–11. On what basis do the elders ascribe worthiness for “glory and honor and power” to God? What does this passage teach us about the relationship between creation and worship? How does the phrase “because of Your will they existed, and were created” address the question of why God created?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

6. Explain the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and contrast it with three alternative accounts of creation’s origin: (a) creation from eternal pre-existing matter; (b) emanationism; and (c) pantheism. What specifically does the biblical doctrine deny in each of these alternatives?

7. The lesson argues that God created for His own glory and that this is the most morally appropriate ultimate end for an infinitely perfect Being. How would you explain and defend this claim? How does Jonathan Edwards’ insight, that God’s glory and the creature’s highest good are converging rather than competing ends, help resolve the concern that this makes God self-serving?

8. Explain the Creator-creature distinction and its significance. What specific errors in theology, spirituality, and ethics does this distinction guard against? How does Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–25 illuminate what happens when the Creator-creature distinction is denied?

9. How does the Trinitarian nature of creation, Father as source, Son as agent, Spirit as animator, enrich your understanding of both God and the created world? How does the

affirmation that all things were created “for” Christ (Colossians 1:16) reshape the way you think about the purpose of the universe?

10. What is the appropriate relationship between the doctrine of creation ex nihilo and modern scientific cosmology (particularly Big Bang cosmology)? What can science tell us about origins, and what lies beyond its competence? How would you respond to someone who claims that modern science has made the doctrine of creation unnecessary?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

11. The lesson argues that creation ex nihilo should ground our humility as creatures, our wonder at the world, and our worship of the Creator. Which of these three responses is most underdeveloped in your own spiritual life? What concrete step could you take this week to cultivate it more intentionally?

12. Romans 1:25 warns against worshipping “the creature rather than the Creator.” In what forms does this idolatry show up in contemporary culture? In what more subtle forms might it show up in your own life, the elevation of created goods to the status of ultimate goods? How does the doctrine of creation ex nihilo serve as a corrective?

13. The lesson calls for the use of creation doctrine in apologetic witness. If a secular friend or colleague said to you, “Science explains the universe; we don’t need God,” how would you respond? What would you want them to understand about the limits of scientific explanation and the doctrine of creation?

14. Isaiah 40:25–31 connects the doctrine of creation with the promise of strength for the weary. Read it together now. In what specific areas of your life do you need to apply the truth that the Creator of the ends of the earth “does not become weary or tired” (v. 28)? How does the sovereignty and power revealed in creation ex nihilo speak into those areas?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer time by reading Psalm 104:1–5 together: “Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering Yourself with light as with a cloak, stretching out heaven like a tent curtain. He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters; He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind; He makes the winds His messengers, flaming fire His ministers. He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter forever and ever” (NASB 1995). Let the grandeur of creation, as the Psalmist sees it, set the tone for your worship.

Spend time in adoration of the God who created all things out of nothing, who needed nothing, who lacked nothing, and who freely, lovingly, and purposefully spoke the universe into being for His own glory and our good. Confess the ways in which you have been more attentive to the creation than to the Creator, more moved by the gift than by the Giver. Ask for eyes to see, in every dimension of the created order, the fingerprints of the God who made it and who holds it together by the word of His power.

Close with the doxology of Revelation 4:11 spoken together as a confession and a commitment: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” This is the worship of the new creation, and it begins now, in the hearts of those who have been born again by the same God who spoke the first creation into being.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com