

**Isn't the World Better Off Without Christianity?
Ever Wondered? Series
Genesis 1:1-27 & Assorted Verses
Mercy Hill Church | April 7, 2024**

Big idea: While acknowledging the wrongs done in the name of Christianity throughout history, we cannot deny the ways our world has been positively shaped by the Christian faith.

Introduction

- While it may seem that the world would be a better place without Christianity – given all the negative news and deeds committed in the name of Christianity, this morning I want to suggest – in fact show -- that in reality, the world would be significantly worse off without Christianity. In fact, much of the good we see in this world is significantly due to the Christian faith, its convictions, values and beliefs.
- With a topic and question this broad, what will be shared will not be comprehensive, and only two topics/responses (out of potentially many) will be touched upon.
 - Please see the list of “Christian resources” at the end of this document (or in the worship guide) for more answers to this big question!

1. The Dignity & Worth of All Peoples: Women, Children, Slaves, etc.

- Would the world be better off without the belief of equality? Where do we have this value of equality? This notion that everyone, all people, are inherently worthy of respect, have dignity and value? This belief -- contrary to our current worldview and values -- has never been the majority opinion or belief throughout most civilizations.
 - Women have historically always been treated as second-class; children like-wise. And slaves? How about the diseased and the disabled? And those who have nothing to contribute to society?
- One cannot deny that this value of equality, of valuing women, children, slaves, the disabled, the diseased, people of different ethnicities, cultures, etc. – all people – is in large part fueled and attributed to the Christian faith
 - Writing about women and babies, Rodney Stark, long time professor of sociology and comparative religion mostly at the University of Washington, in his book, ***The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*** writes in Chapter 5: Role of Women in Christian Growth:
 - “Christianity was unusually appealing [at the time] because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman at large...Men greatly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world...Exposure of unwanted female infants and deformed male infants was legal, morally accepted and widely practiced by all social classes in the Greco-Roman world...reported that even in large families, ‘more than one daughter was practically never reared.’
 - “A major aspect of women’s improved status in the Christian subculture is that Christians did not condone female infanticide. Granted this was the result of the prohibition of *all* infanticide. But the more favorable Christian view of women is also demonstrated in their condemnation of divorce, incest, marital infidelity and polygamy...like pagans, early Christianity prized female chastity but unlike pagans, they rejected the double standard that gave pagan men so much sexual license...Should they be widowed, Christian women also enjoyed very substantial

advantage. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry: Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected...Thus not only were well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband's estate, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry...But there was another major marital aspect to the benefits women gained from being Christian. They were married at a substantial older age and had more choice about whom they married...pagan women frequently were forced into prepubertal, consummated marriages.

- “In addition to infanticide, fertility was greatly reduced in the Greco-Roman world by the very frequency recourse to abortion. The literature details an amazingly large number of abortion techniques – the more effective of which were exceedingly dangerous. Thus abortions not only prevented many births, it killed many women...”
- Stark writes in his other book, ***Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion***:
 - “A study of Christian burials in the catacombs under Rome, based on 3,733 cases, found that Christian women were nearly as likely as Christian men to be commemorated with lengthy inscriptions...this was true not only of adults, but also of children, as Christians lamented the loss of a daughter as much as that of a son, which was especially unusual compared with other religious groups in Rome.”
- What about slaves? In Rebecca McLaughlin's ***Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion***, she chronicles how when one traces those who opposed slavery, Christians were not only a part of those movements but often the lone voices!
 - Many are familiar with, “William Wilberforce, [1787] whose evangelical convictions propelled him to lead the abolitionist campaign...believed he had been called by God to shipwreck the slave trade. He led a squadron of Christian abolitionists, whose refusal to give up campaigning for the lives of their fellow humans finally carried the day.”
 - But as Andrew Wilson writes in ***Remaking the World: How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West***:
 - “The man who did more than anybody to pull the antislavery movement together in Britain was the biblical scholar and campaigner Granville Sharp. In a career spanning fifty years, Sharp was involved in virtually every significant development in British abolitionism: defending slaves who had been abused by their master (1765), publishing the first tract in England opposing slavery (1769), bringing the case that clarified that slavery was unsupported by English common law (1772), prosecuting the perpetrators of the *Zong* slave ship massacre (1781), and cofounding the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787)”
 - It was then in 1787 when William Wilberforce came into contact with Thomas Clarkson and a group of activists – including Granville Sharp
 - McLaughlin: “Influential British preacher Charles Spurgeon denounced slavery as, “the foulest blot that ever stained a national escutcheon...[it would be far better] that north and south should be rent asunder and the states of the union shivered into a thousand fragments, than that slavery should be permitted to continue.”
 - “Methodist leader John Wesley denounced slavery as “that excusable villainy which is the scandal of religion...and of human nature.”

- Of course we cannot forget Harriet Tubman, the black abolitionist woman who said it was because of her Christian faith that she believed and was empowered to escape slavery, rescue slaves and speak out and fight against slavery and for better treatment and rights of women.
 - Not just the past couple of centuries, but throughout history, as McLaughlin writes:
 - “The volcano did not lay dormant between the 1st and 19th century abolitionist movement. In the 4th century...theologian Gregory of Nyssa launched an attack on the notion of slavery that was unprecedented in the ancient world, where slavery was taken for granted as a way of life...”
 - “Likewise, Gregory’s contemporary theologians Augustine and John Chrysostom saw slavery as not ordained by God but a result of sin...Large scale Christian abolitionism started to take hold in the 7th century and over time the Christianization of Europe effectively eliminated slavery. In the 9th century, Saint Askar campaigned against the Viking slave trade. 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas argued slavery was a sin...nonetheless, the practice crept back. Between 1562 and 1807, European colonial expansion included a horrific explosion of slavery. During that period, British traders alone transported over three million slaves...”
 - Esau McCaulley, an African-American New Testament professor, writes in **Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope**, on slavery in the United States:
 - “One does not have to dig very far into history to see that fundamentalist Christians in the South (and the North) have indeed inflicted untold harm on Black people. They have used the Bible as justification for their sins, personal and corporate. But there is a second testimony possibly more important than the first. That is the testimony of Black Christians who saw in *that same Bible* the basis for their dignity and hope in a culture that denied them both...She [my mother] had always told me that the racists were the poor interpreters and that we were reading the Bible correctly when we saw in biblical texts describing the worth of all people an affirmation of Black dignity.”
 - The Slave Bible (from the 1800s, was on display at the Museum of the Bible in D.C.) was used by British missionaries to convert and educate slaves – about 90% of the OT was missing and 50% of the NT was missing.
 - While the Bible was manipulated and twisted to discriminate against black people and used to support and perpetuate the oppression of black people...it was also the Bible, the Christian faith, which proved to be ultimate source of dignity and hope for black people!
- Why? Where, how did this idea of equality, dignity of all people, from unborn to old, regardless of gender, ethnicity, culture, affluence, social-economic status, capable or incapable, diseased or healthy come from?
 - Throughout the world -- until modern times, this idea, this belief, this value – was unheard of and not the norm. We see it most clearly from the Christian faith, from the Bible.
- The idea of *imago dei* - that all people bear the image of God.
 - **Genesis 1:26-27** Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

- **Genesis 5:1** This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.
- **Genesis 5:3** When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.
- [Post-Fall] **Genesis 9:6** "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.
- **Colossians 3:10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.
- **2 Corinthians 3:18** And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
- **James 3:9** With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
- **Colossians 1:15** He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
- **Romans 8:29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
- **Wayne Grudem's Image of God ("Imago Dei")**
 - Image = "tselem"; likeness = "demut"
 - Similar, but not identical, image
 - Genesis 5:3 – Adam fathered a son, Seth, in his own likeness (demut), after his image (tselem).
 - Definition: "The fact that man is in the image of God means that man is like God and represents God."
 - 1. Substantial view: Particular qualities of man (such as reason or spirituality)
 - 2. Relational view: Interpersonal relationships, created as male and female
 - 3. Functional view: The function we carry out, usually our exercise of dominion over the creation
 - Grudem's 5 Aspects of Imago Dei:
 - Physical Aspect: Like God in seeing, hearing, acting, creating, etc.
 - Spiritual Aspect: Not just physical bodies, but spiritual life
 - Mental Aspect: Reason, communicate, awareness of time/future, creativity, emotions
 - Moral Aspect: Right and wrong, behavior
 - Relational Aspect: Interpersonal, marriage, family
- **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence:**
 - "There is nothing specifically religious about altruistic evil. Some of the great instances in modern history – Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Mao Zedong's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia – were avowedly secular...First stage is dehumanization. This is the prelude to genocide. The paradox in the phrase 'crimes against humanity' is that the great crimes are committed against those you do not see as sharing your humanity. To the Hutus, the Tutsis were *inyenzi*, cockroaches. For the Nazis, the Jews were vermin, live, parasites, a cancer that had to be removed, a diseased limb that had to be amputated...a Nazi doctor in an extermination camp, when asked how he could have done what he did in the light of his Hippocratic oath as a doctor, replied that 'out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind.'"
- **Examples in the Life of Jesus (New Testament):**
 - Not just declared in Scripture but demonstrated by Jesus, the Living Word, Himself

- Jesus & Women
 - Parable of the Persistent Widow: Jesus using a widow as a powerful example of faith (cf. Luke 18:1-8)
 - Poor Widow's Offering: Jesus highlighting another actual widow as a paragon of faith and generosity (cf. Luke 21:1-4)
 - Widow's Son: Jesus having compassion on and healing a widow's son (cf. Luke 7:11-17)
- Jesus & Children:
 - **Mark 10:13-16**¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.
 - **Matthew 18:1-6** At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,^[a] it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.
- Jesus & The "Lowly"
 - Who were one of the first people to have the privilege and honor of seeing the birth of the Savior Jesus? Shepherds (cf. Luke 2:8-18)
 - Jesus touching and healing the leper (cf. Luke 5:12-16)
 - Prostitutes, physically disabled (blind, paralyzed, lame, etc.), different ethnicities/cultures (Roman centurion, Samaritan, etc.)
- As Darrin McMahan, professor of history at Dartmouth College writes in **Equality: The History of An Elusive Idea** (recently published in 2023)
 - "Whereas other ancient Near Eastern religions such as those of Mesopotamia, Ugarit, or Egypt, imagined the cosmic order as a model of hierarchical relations on earth, the covenant Yahweh establishes with the people of Israel provides for a different kind of regime. Downplaying the prerogatives of class, caste, and birth, it mitigates clan and tribal hierarchies and takes steps to circumscribe monarchy by rejecting tyranny and dividing political and judicial authority...Yet the very fact that equality was on the horizon at all owed much to these varied Christian efforts. Over the course of centuries, Christians had made of equality a moral good...equal was how God had made us; equal was how God intended his beloved to be. Singular and unique in our persons, we were somehow, all of us, the same."
 - Slave Bible: Why was 90% of the OT & 50% of the NT removed? The belief of *imago dei*, equality, freedom, justice, loving others, etc. throughout Scripture! The declaration of God, and the demonstration of Jesus!
 - Glen Scrivener writes in **The Air We Breathe**:
 - "Science tells us nothing about our equal status in relation to one another. In fact, the more testing you do on a population, the more you find differences between people. Some are taller, some less so; some are smarter, some less so; some are stronger, some less so; What we *see* are differences. What we *seek* is equality. But

we won't find it – not anything morally significant – by mapping genomes or running tests or charting bell curves.”

- In other words, our equality, isn't rooted just rooted in something physical, our common biology or chemistry. So much more! In fact, the author notes, that we as homo sapiens share 40% -- more accurately ~20-25% -- of our DNA as people with...bananas!?!
- **Reflection:** Do you see and believe the *imago dei* is in everyone? From the unborn to the elderly, every ethnicity and culture, capable to incapable? What undergirds your belief that everyone is equal is worthy of respect, honor, compassion and love? Why?

2. **The Development & Advancement of Science**

- Isn't the world better off without Christianity? Would the world be better off without science – and all the discoveries and advancements we've made?
 - Science defined: “the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation, experimentation, and the testing of theories against the evidence obtained”
 - Without Christianity, there would not be much of the development and advancements made in science throughout history.
- **Charles Murray's Human Accomplishments: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts & Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950** writes:
 - “The Greeks laid the foundation, but it was the transmutation of that foundation by Christianity that gave modern Europe its impetus and differentiated European accomplishment from that of all other cultures around the world...It was Christian theology itself that was potentially revolutionary , teaching that all human beings are invited into a personal relationship with God, and that all individuals are equal in God's sight regardless of earthly station. Furthermore, eternal salvation is not reserved for those who renounce the world but is available to all who believe and act accordingly. It was a theology that empowered the individual acting as an individual as no other philosophy or religion had ever done before...”
 - “Aquinas made the case, eventually adopted by the Church, that human intelligence is a gift from God, and that to apply human intelligence to understanding the world is not an affront to God but is pleasing to hm...that faith and reason are not in opposition, but complementary.”
 - “Westen individualism had another step to take, initiated when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door in Wittenberg in 1517...Historian Robert Merton, in his study of the growth of science in 17C England, says, yes, arguing for a direct link between Protestant characteristics of methodical, persistent action, empirical utilitarianism, and anti-traditionalism and the development of the scientific method in England...Protestants were more on their own than Catholics were, and it is plausible to see this as an extension of individualism and of a sense of autonomy.”
 - “Finally my position is not at odds with that obvious fact that great human accomplishment has been produced outside Christian cultures, and for that matter, in cultures where the creative elites are secular...I am arguing that Christianity is an important variable, one of the most important in the story of modern accomplishment.”
- **A very small random list of Christian scientists:**
 - Robert Boyle 1627 – 1691.
Said that a deeper understanding of science was a higher glorification of God. Defined elements, compounds, and mixtures. Discovered the first gas law – Boyle's Law.

- Isaac Newton 1643 to 1727.
Passionate dissenting Protestant who spent more time on Bible study than math and physics. Profoundly changed our understanding of nature with his law of universal gravitation and his laws of motion; invented calculus; built the first ever reflecting telescope; showed sunlight is made of all the colors of the rainbow.
- Carl Friedrich Gauss 1777 – 1855.
A Lutheran Protestant who believed science revealed the immortal human soul and that there is complete unity between science and God. Gauss revolutionized number theory and invented the method of least squares and the fast Fourier transform. His profound contributions to the physical sciences include Gauss's Law & Gauss's Law for Magnetism.
- George Washington Carver 1864 – 1943.
A Protestant Evangelist and Bible class leader whose faith in Jesus was the mechanism through which he carried out his scientific work. Improved the agricultural economy of the USA by promoting nitrogen providing peanuts as an alternative crop to cotton to prevent soil depletion.
- Arthur Compton 1892 – 1962.
A deacon in the Baptist Church. Discovered that light can behave as a particle as well as a wave, and coined the word photon to describe a particle of light.
- Francis Collins (born 1950): director of the National Institutes of Health and former director of the US National Human Genome Research Institute.
- **For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery, Rodney Stark**
 - “There is no inherent conflict between religion and science, but that Christian theology was essential for the rise of science...scientific discovery during the late 16th and 17th centuries...conclude it was Christianity...that sustained the rise of science...the leading scientific figures in the 16th and 17th centuries overwhelmingly were devout Christians who believed in their duty to comprehend God's handiwork.”
 - “Whitehead ended with the remark that the images of gods found in other religions, especially in Asia, are too impersonal or too irrational to have sustained science...indeed most non-Christian religions do not posit a creation at all: the universe is eternal and, while it may pursue cycles, it is without beginning or purpose, and most important of all, having never been created, it has no Creator. Consequently, the universe is thought to be a supreme mystery, inconsistent, unpredictable, and arbitrary. For those holding these religious premises, the path to wisdom is through meditation and mystical insights, and there is no occasion to celebrate reason.”
 - Makes a convincing case in further detail why even China, Greece or Islam – not due to ability or capability but rather worldview and belief about the world – did not have such development and advancement in science like the west – not because the west was best, but rather due to the influence of the Christian faith!
 - **Why the Arabic World Turned Away From Science by Hillel Ofek**
(<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-the-arabic-world-turned-away-from-science>)
- **Why Christianity & Science?**
 - Stark explains: “Christianity depicted God as a rational, responsive, dependable, and omnipotent being and the universe as his personal creation, thus having a rational, lawful, stable structure, awaiting human comprehension...in contrast with the dominant religious and philosophical doctrines in the non-Christian world, Christians developed science because they *believed it could* be done and *should* be done.”

- **Bible Passages**

- **Genesis 1:1-25**
- **Job 12:7-10** ⁷ “But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; ⁸ or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. ⁹ Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? ¹⁰ In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.
- **Psalms 19:1** The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- **Psalms 96:11-12** ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- **Romans 1:20** ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

- **Reflection:** In what ways do you see science and Christianity in opposition? In what ways do you see science & Christianity as complementary? How does knowing the history of science help you to have a deeper appreciation of its Christian roots?

Reflection Questions

- What undergirds your beliefs about the dignity and worth of people? How might the Christian understanding of *imago dei* (and the example of Jesus) strengthen your beliefs?
- How does looking at history (and Scripture) help you to better reconcile science and faith?
- How might this morning's sermon help you to better see (or defend) how Christianity has been a force for good in our world?
- Parent Corner: As you teach and raise your child(ren), what are the foundations you are raising your child(ren) on? What beliefs/values undergird those building blocks for your child(ren)?

Academic Resources

- The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries by Rodney Stark
- Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World by Tom Holland
- Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion by Rodney Stark
- For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery by Rodney Stark
- Equality: The History of An Elusive Idea by Darrin M. McMahon
- Human Accomplishments: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts & Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950 by Charles Murray
- Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Christian Resources

- Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion by Rebecca McLaughlin

- The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress and Equality by Glen Scrivener
- Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope by Esau McCaulley
- Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture by Christopher Watkin