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Chapter 1

A Creative Word

*Nature is the one song
of praise that never stops singing.*

RICHARD ROHR

We hope it never comes to this.

But if, during the course of your life, you find yourself held hostage, crisis negotiators say there is one thing you can do that may very well save your life. And it isn't necessarily to disarm your captor.

Your best bet is to talk about the weather.

Or your child. Or your job. Or your favorite band.

This may seem like an odd or even silly piece of advice, but time and again, professionals have seen people survive hostage situations through the simple act of small talk.

This is because conversation personalizes and dignifies us. People are far more likely to kill or harm what they perceive as an *object* rather than a *person*. Objects don't make small talk or chit-chat. Objects do not talk. Objects, such as rocks and paper clips and orange peels, just sit there quietly and have no feelings, no breath, no story. But *people* talk.

Our ability to speak with power and intention is one of God's

richest gifts. Without words, how else would we resolve our conflicts? God gave us words so that we would not have to turn to violence. The richness of language is God's way of giving us tools to resolve our human relationships and also to be vulnerable and honest with Him. Words are an essential part of our humanity and what it means to be made in the likeness of God. They enable us to not only avoid or resolve conflict but also to bless God, bless our neighbor, communicate our feelings, sing our praises, and shout our joy.

If we are to study the biblical importance of words, we must look at the first words—God's. His speech is the beginning and end of a theology of words.

God Talks

The first thing God does in the entire Bible is *speak*:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. . . .
And God said, "Let there be light." (Gen. 1:1, 3)

So begins Scripture's story of God and creation. Within the very first verse of the Holy Scriptures are three critical components of the nature of words.

First, and most importantly, God's words are fundamentally creative in nature. What is God's first act in the Bible? God *said*. He talked. Words were spoken. And what was the result of God speaking these first words? Light. The result of a word from God was all the light the world has ever needed.

But God does not stop there—God continues speaking. As a result of His continued speaking, the vault is created to separate

the waters. Then the dry ground and the water in the air. Then vegetables and trees. Then the moon and the sun. Then the stars. Then the fish and the birds. Then the beasts of the land. Then *humanity*.

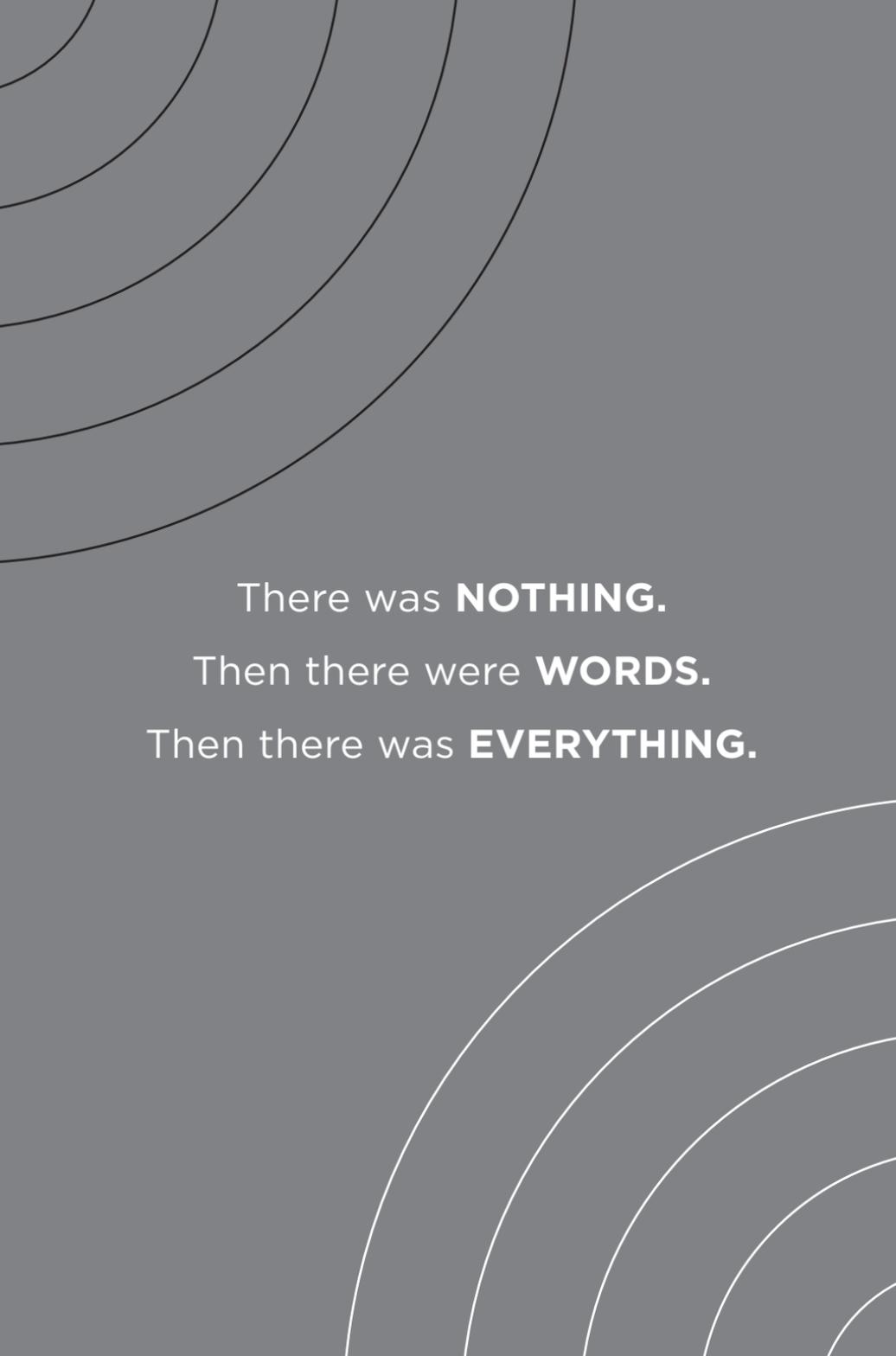
Each movement of creation begins demonstrably with a simple “And God said . . .” The lingering message conveyed by this rhythm is that God does not create the world with slaves, angels, subcontractors, or even His hands.¹ God creates the whole wide world with nothing more than His words. We live in a *spoken* world. All the created universe that one can see, taste, touch, and smell is created in one single chapter by a few words from God.

Words are in and of themselves *creative*. God does not ramble some magic formula or make a massive inspirational speech to a creation that already existed and just needed a little direction. There was nothing. Then there were words. Then there was everything.

The simplicity of this action demonstrates the power of God and the nature of words: they are paramount to existence. There is no such thing as an empty or harmless word. Speech is always powerful—whether it builds up, distorts, or tears down. Everything in the world is the result of words. It began with a series of words.

But the opposite is also true. Words can undermine all the good things that God has begun. This is precisely why the Hebrew tradition tells us, “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Prov. 18:21). Words can create and, as we will see, destroy.

Molecular physicists have theorized that every atom—if we could see it at its most basic level—is a vibration. In his book *The Elegant Universe*, Brian Greene suggests that, simply yet scientifically speaking, matter is music.² Biblically speaking, all matter is actually embodied sound—what Christians might describe as the



There was **NOTHING**.
Then there were **WORDS**.
Then there was **EVERYTHING**.

words of God. God *spoke* the world into existence. In one sense the universe is God's voice in physical form.

The second thing we notice about the nature of words is that all of this is done *with just a few* words.

In our own culture the assumption is often that we need *more* words to get things done. Edward Everett was the keynote speaker at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery. He talked for over two hours. Immediately afterward, and so quickly that photographers didn't even get a good picture, Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address. It was a simple 272 words, and it took no more than two minutes.

God created everything with a few words. Likewise, Lincoln summarized the struggle of the whole Civil War. This speaks to the value of intentionality, not the number, of our words. We need intentional words, not more words themselves. Words are creative, even when they are few.

"Let your words be few," the author of Ecclesiastes writes (Eccl. 5:2), and later, "Of making many books there is no end" (12:12). That has not been the habit of human beings. Jesus even tells us that we will "give account" for every word we speak (Matt. 12:36). James counsels us that "everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). Even Jesus chastised the Pharisees for thinking their prayers would be answered because of their many, rather than humble, words. Where we tend to multiply words, God opts for a few creative ones.

The third and final thing we'd like to point out is how words themselves have the power to liberate and set others free. God's creative words not only made and animated us as humans, but they created freedom and space for us to live into our full humanity.

God's plan is, in the phrase of our friend Wynand de Kock, "to make space for life."³ In the narrative of God speaking in Genesis, we hear a phrase repeated over and over: "Let there be . . ."

God's creative process has been a point of great discussion among biblical and theological scholars.⁴ The famed Karl Barth argued that "Let there be . . ." speaks to God's great patience. While God created with His words and spoke the "Let there be," He still creates capacity for species and creation to change, grow, and reproduce. No other creation account depicts a God who extends this kind of freedom and generativity to what has been made. God creates the birds and the trees and the people to have freedom and be able to create—to have offspring, flourish, and, in Adam's case, even name creation. The present world is the result of God "letting" things flourish and develop in their own creative ways. "Let there be . . ." is not only a mandate; it's an invitation. God is no micromanager; His words extend creative freedom to His creation.

The Devil Talks

God creates the world with just a few words. Likewise, Satan mars the whole world with just a few words.

Somewhere along the way—Scripture doesn't specify when—one of God's greatest angels, Lucifer, rebelled against Him. Also known as Satan, Lucifer is a created being. He is not an eternal being. There was a time when Satan was not. As with the rest of creation, God made Lucifer.

Because Satan is a created being, his finitude limits his powers. He does not have the power and authority that God does. For instance, Satan is not omnipresent as God is—he is not everywhere all

the time. Satan is not omniscient—he has no foreknowledge of all events that are to come. He is not all-powerful. In fact, he is bound to submit to God’s final word, as evidenced by his conversation with God in the first chapter of Job. Yet while Satan lacks God’s eternal qualities, he has rational power to subvert God’s works.

Still, how does the devil get his work done? More than anything, he uses words. In fact, it is through words that the devil does his “finest” work. He is so good at using words that he is called *Satan*, meaning “accuser.” Not only does the devil use to destroy what God uses to create—words—but he is literally named for what he does with them.

So just as God created the world with words, the devil manipulates the world with words. Some of God’s first words of instruction to Adam and Eve have to do with food: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:16–17). Adam and Eve were free to eat from any tree *except* one.

Enter Satan, pouncing on Eve. The very first words out of the snake’s mouth in Genesis are framed as a deconstructive question: “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). The devil’s work in the world—his destructive activity of stealing, robbing, and confusing—begins with words, specifically with a cynical question. In a tricky and maligning way, the very good word of God that made the world is being questioned. God begins a creative kingdom with words, whereas the devil begins a destructive kingdom with words.

“Did God really say . . . ?” the devil asks. The big problem in the garden is that God’s word is quickly forgotten and replaced with Satan’s question. This is immediately reflected in Eve’s attempt to explain God’s command to Satan during her temptation:

“But God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not *touch* it, or you will die” (Gen. 3:3). Eve, in that critical moment, reveals humanity’s vexing and perennial problem: an inability to remember what God actually said. Of course, God never once commanded Adam or Eve not to *touch* the tree. Rather, God commanded them not to *eat* from the tree. Eve added to God’s word, indicating that she had forgotten it.

The problem is not just that she forgot a line verbatim or did not commit it to memory. The passage reveals that she perhaps never understood the heart of it, or didn’t understand why it was important to fully obey God’s command. It’s when we don’t understand or trust God’s heart, beautiful design, and goodness that we begin to question His commands and then subsequently disobey.

The devil is a wordsmith and a master of spin. Making things more challenging, the devil actually speaks truth at times. Later in Scripture, when Satan tempts Jesus in the desert, we find that he has a working knowledge of the Bible. He quotes Scripture to Jesus. Satan knows the truth, but he misuses it with evil motives—to manipulate and control rather than to set people free. Satan knows how to take God’s good and creative word and then use it for his own purposes.

Once Satan’s word is obeyed in the garden, the relationships there begin to fall apart. Adam and Eve blame each other for what has happened. The breakdown in human relationships becomes more and more pronounced as the Genesis narrative continues. Within even a few chapters, we see the first instance of murder and the subjugation of women in the practice of polygamy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer framed Satan’s use of the truth like this:

There is a truth which is of Satan. Its essence is that under the semblance of truth it denies everything that is real. It lives upon hatred of the real and of the world which is created and loved by God. . . . God's truth judges created things out of love, and Satan's truth judges them out of envy and hatred. God's truth has become flesh in the world and is alive in the real, but Satan's truth is the death of all reality.⁵

The fall of humankind didn't begin by eating the wrong fruit, but by an uncritical dialogue with the devil.

To show the evolving picture of a humanity spiraling farther and farther away from Eden, the biblical text employs the image of "going east." After they are cast out from the garden, Adam and Eve go to the "east side of the Garden of Eden" (Gen. 3:24). Cain, the child of Adam and Eve, is sent farther east to the land of Nod after murdering his brother Abel (Gen. 4:16). Then humanity travels even farther east to the land of Shinar, where they build the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–4). East, east, and farther east. Humanity wanders away from the land God had established. It is not until God invites Abram to go the Promised Land that the return west begins.

The lesson? Listening to the words of Satan displaces humanity from the will of God.

As those in the world listen to the word of Satan—a habit begun with Adam and Eve—human relationships fall apart. Conversation becomes increasingly difficult. This is seen in the story of Babel. As humanity gives in to full-fledged idolatry and attempts to build a tower to heaven, God curses them with a divided tongue. Listening to Satan leads to idolatry and the breakdown of relationships, further leading to the breakdown of civil, human discourse. It's a tragic cycle.

We Become What We Hear

We can see from examining how God uses words that their main purposes—at least in the creation account—are to create, free, and establish. However, when we look at the way Satan uses words, we see he has the opposite intent—to divide, hurt, marginalize, and deconstruct. Whatever God does with words, Satan tries to undo with words. This is why Satan is called the Father of Lies.

This contrast frames one of Jesus' more famous indictments of the Pharisees in Scripture when He likened Himself to a Good Shepherd and implicated them as false shepherds or thieves who come to kill and destroy.

In John 10, Jesus said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*
(vv. 7–10 NASB)

If God's will is for an abundantly good creation, and evil works to bend and destroy it, the obvious question is: upon whose words will we build our lives?

In Matthew 7:24–27, Jesus tells a parable of two ways to build a house. You can either build your house on the words of Jesus—pictured as building on the stable rock—or you can hear the words of Jesus but choose to not build on them—described as building on sand. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and

puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock,” Jesus said.

Do we build our lives and identities around what Jesus speaks over us? Do we sit in that reality and let it shape us? We can encourage one another to choose the stability of Christ over the shakiness of culture. We can choose to influence our family and friends and to find voices who will similarly speak wise words into our lives. We can do so much better than letting the devil’s words of spin and destruction set the framework for how we live our lives.

We all build our lives on words. We either build our lives around words that are trustworthy, true, and resonant, or we build our lives on words that are deceptive, lacking, or hollow. Our lives are built or broken by the words we believe.

This is why theology is drastically important. Theology, the study of God, becomes paramount to living faithfully in relationship with God. Karl Barth once remarked, “In the church of Jesus Christ there can and should be no non-theologians.”⁶ While in its worst case, theology can be just bickering about words, Barth was pointing out the reality that thinking through the words we use to talk about God is central to the task of following Jesus. This is true for everyone, not just academics, since it so profoundly shapes how we understand God, and thus how we live. This is why we have had creeds—statements (words)—that articulate something of the nature of God. The Christian church spends so much time thinking about its words because they greatly shape who we become.

The preacher Will Willimon tells the story of a student who got into an argument with an Orthodox priest. When the student said he did not believe the creed, the priest responded, “Well, you just say it. It’s not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can quickly learn it by heart.” The student then retorted, not confident

his dilemma was understood. His issue was that he didn't *believe* certain elements of the creed, such as the virgin birth. Recitation wasn't the issue.

Or so he thought. The priest reiterated, "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually."⁷ This references a deep formational reality: we eventually become our words.

We not only become the words we believe about God, but we also become the words spoken over us by ourselves, others, and society.

A young man we know tells a story. He has dreams and desires—many of which are in his reach—to become an artist. Yet, every time he gets close to living these dreams, he makes some decision that ultimately undermines what he wants to do. He keeps pulling the rug out from under his own feet.

He remembers as a child telling his father his dream, only to be shut down. "Get realistic," his dad told him. "Do you really think you can do that with your life? How will you make money?" Even though he has long been out of his parents' home, every time he gets close to his dream, he is subtly compelled to sabotage it. Because of the doubt and objection instilled by one person who spoke words of futility over him, he has given up his pursuit of the vocation to which God has called him.

The power that words have to shape our identity at an early age is well attested. It's common to hear testimonies of people whose growth was stilted by critical words. Conversely, we know stories of boys and girls who dared to become who they are because of encouraging words spoken by a teacher, celebrity, or sports figure at just the right moment.

When we realize the potential of words for good, we can find the motivation we need to improve our relationships, families, and communities simply by rethinking *how* we talk. The right words can free us to define our circumstances, and we can set others free by the words we speak over them. Even our small talk has the power to save the lives of hostages. This is why we must attend relentlessly to the words we speak over others.

God made the world with words, and He made words powerful. The devil seeks to destroy the world with words, and his words are powerful too. The first great lesson in redeeming how we talk is deciding whose words we will listen to. They are the words we will build our lives on and the words we will echo to others.