

## Genesis Series 2011 – Sermon 1

Genesis 2:4 – 3:24; Romans 1:18-25; Matthew 12:33-37

In the film *Grand Canyon*, a well to do lawyer breaks out of a traffic jam and attempts to bypass it. His route takes him along streets that seem progressively darker and more deserted. Then the predictable *Bonfire of the Vanities* nightmare: his expensive car stalls on one of those alarming streets whose teenage guardians favour expensive guns and sneakers. The attorney does manage to phone for a tow truck, but before it arrives five young street toughs surround his disabled car and threaten him with considerable bodily harm. Then, just in time, the tow truck shows up and its driver — an earnest, genial kind of guy — begins to hook up the disabled car. The toughs protest: the truck driver is interrupting their meal. So the driver takes the leader of the group aside and attempts a five-sentence introduction to what the Genesis story is trying to tell us:

“Man,” he says, “the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.”

...

Today I want to focus on just two areas of our reading from the book of Genesis:

- the nature of the text addressing us,
- and what it has to say about the creation and our human condition

## The Nature of the Text

Firstly, I want to say that we should not read Genesis as either a *scientific* text book or as *history* in the contemporary sense of these terms. This is not to say that the creation narrative has nothing to say to these disciplines (and all other areas of our lives for that matter); it is just to say that to ask scientific or historical questions of this text is to ask questions the text was not written to answer.

The Genesis story, especially the first three chapters, function quite differently: Firstly, and crucially, they set up the rest of the ‘Big Story’ of the bible – and I want to come back to this shortly. Secondly, as Genesis scholar Gordon Wenham persuasively argues, they function as a polemic against the prevailing ideologies of the day and, by extension, our day too. That is, they place a distinctive Judaic understanding of all that is, firmly at the centre of our thinking when we ask: what is God like? how do we understand the human condition – why are things as they are? how do we relate to the world around us and to ourselves? how should we live – what is the ‘good life’? where do we begin when we start thinking about things as followers of the one true God?

Notice here, I am *not* arguing that while Genesis addresses religious or “why” questions, science addresses “how” questions. To do so would be to assert, as modern secularists do, that science is to do with neutral “facts” while religion is to do with personal values. The end result of this is to say that while science is a public enterprise, religion – the area of values – is a private one. This compartmentalising of knowledge is unbiblical and ultimately doesn’t just marginalise religion, it is destructive.

Again, I’ll come back to this... I just want to emphasise here that whilst

we are dealing with a highly symbolic narrative expressed in mytho-poetic language, it is a text that still has impact in real world, concrete terms but that we shouldn't force these terms onto the text. Rather, as far as we can, we must allow the text to speak for itself.

What then is the text – these first three chapters of Genesis – saying that is important for us now? Well lots of things actually, but I want to focus on just a couple of them...

### *A Good Creation*

Today we have heard, in abridged form, the second and third chapters of the Genesis story. We will all recall, however, that great poetic first chapter of the bible with its refrain: “and God saw that it was good... and God saw that it was good... and it was good”. This, then, is a key concept regarding the creation of which we are a part. It is “good”.

Clearly something special is meant by “good”. After all, a tree or a fish (‘Jaws’ notwithstanding), are not morally good or bad. Rather, what is meant here is that everything related to everything else as it should; it was rightly ordered, it was structured and had an interdependent coherence, it was not random and chaotic, nor a just a collection of parts. All this was what God intended and so the creation was “good”, and as such it was to be revered by humans as a *gift*, freely given for their benefit, not to be feared on the one hand or divinised on the other.

It was also fecund. That is, it was prolific and productive, lush and fruitful, bountiful and rich in possibility. Into this “garden”, humans were placed to unfold these potentials and enjoy themselves in communion with God, each other and the world about them. As gardeners and guardians, then, anything humanity creates in this process comes from something already given and created for them.

This is not to say that everything hung in a kind of “just so” state of perfection, in the sense that life was without pain or that trees didn’t fall and decay in the forest and other biological processes didn’t occur. Some forms of pain serve a good function: if you put your hand too near the fire you want it to hurt so you pull your hand out and avoid burning yourself; similarly, a tree needs to fall and rot to refresh the soil.

Again, these are not the issues being addressed. This is not a book on safety in the home or ecology. The text is simply asserting that Human “dominion” was about service, about *developing* this “right order” into something even more wonderful. Humans were briefed to extend God’s creativity and so enhance life and offer true worship to God.

Paul takes this idea up in Romans chapter twelve when he says:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [all that you do and are] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual worship*.<sup>1</sup>

So this is why humans are placed in the garden. And this is why, Genesis tells us, men and women “cling” to each other<sup>2</sup> – so they can fulfil their calling as God’s stewards of the earth.

Note, though, that there were boundaries around this. The garden itself was bounded by rivers; there were some things humans could do and some things they were not to do. In particular, they were not to eat of the “tree of life” nor the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Human existence was not about unbridled exploitation, either of other humans or the rest of creation, it was to carry out their oversight in obedience to,

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:24.

and dependence upon, their creator.

### Our Human Condition

And so the narrative moves onto the portion we heard earlier. And here, again, we find the goodness of creation affirmed but something quite different also introduced along side it. Genesis 2:5 to 3:22 asserts that all is not as it was intended to be and this is why we as human beings often *don't* experience life as enriching and meaningful – or at least only in part and then often in a skewed way which seems to always fall short of its promise.

In direct contradiction to God's ordinance, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. The scripture doesn't say the fruit was bad, nor that it didn't live up to the serpent's recommendations. Quite the contrary. Humanity's sin was to listen to the *animal* instead of God. The serpent was a creature, just like Adam and Eve, albeit the craftiest of creatures after humans. In listening to the serpent, the humans became animalistic in their thinking and behaving.

As we heard, Paul later put it like this:

... for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 1:21-23, 25.

In other words, humanity gave into the temptation of thinking they could live without dependence upon God as the source of all wisdom; they could “know” without God. In short, they could be “as God”.<sup>4</sup> Just as grasping the fruit of the tree of life offered, so they believed, immortality, so eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil offered absolute knowledge appropriate for the divine. To paraphrase Laplace,<sup>5</sup> “God was not an hypothesis they needed”.

This is where modern science and the Genesis story *do* intersect. For modern science, “purpose” or “intention” is irrelevant at best or confusing at worst. Unlike a movie, where the wide-shot makes sense of the close-up. In science its all about the close up, about the bits of data for this where we start. All we need, as Bacon argued, is to gather the facts.<sup>6</sup> In these we discern patterns and from these we form ideas or theories. These ideas we employ to relate to the world around us and each other. As with the Babylonians and ancient Egyptians, we build cities and towers to the sky, and immense armies whose chariots are many. Science, then, is as autonomous as human thought and experience. God is unnecessary since, in this sense rational humans have become God creating their own garden.

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The rest of the book of Genesis documents the “avalanche of sin”, as von Rad called it, that resulted from this – toil, conflict, deceit, alienation, oppression, suffering, chaos, despair and perhaps above all, violence and enslavement, characterise human existence, even while we glimpse something more and feel deep in our bones life is not meant to be like this.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:23.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness To The Greeks*, Eerdmans 1986, p.65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79 & f.f.

Moreover, again as Paul teaches in chapter 5 of Romans, Adam becomes not just the *paradigm* of sin, but the *cause* of it. In our *solidarity* with the first humans, though banished from the garden, we go on trying to fight our way back into it by our own efforts.<sup>7</sup> The result is more and more of the same – paradise lost, as Milton called it.<sup>8</sup>

Yet deep down, because of who we are created to be, still we know that truck driver is right: the world isn't supposed to work like this... this isn't the way it's supposed to be. Everything's supposed to be different than how we experience it.

The drama we find in scripture, is that of God showing us how it can be different.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 5:12.

<sup>8</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise\\_Lost](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_Lost) for an expansion on this theme.

***Our first reading is taken from chapters 2 and 3  
of the Book of Genesis....***

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up ... the LORD God formed adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now, a river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches... and so ... the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ... but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man... Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.



Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

***Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!***

### ***Our story continues...***

Now they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."<sup>14</sup> The LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,  
cursed are you among all animals  
and among all wild creatures;  
upon your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will strike your head,  
and you will strike his heel."

To the woman he said,  
"I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,

and he shall rule over you.”

And to the man he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.”

...

[Now], the man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living... Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” – therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

***Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church!***

***Our third reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans,  
chapter 1, verses 18 to 25...***

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

***Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!***