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FROM THE GARDEN TO A COFFIN

Genesis Recap

By

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Genesis Lesson 87

FROM THE GARDEN TO A COFFIN Genesis Recap

Our family does a lot of hiking when we're on vacation. Sometimes you take a hike that meanders through the forest and you begin to wonder where you're going. Then, you finally come out on a high point, where you can look back and see the way you came. Suddenly the whole thing fits together in a way it hadn't before as you see the relationship between the parts and the whole.

We've spent the better part of two years hiking through Genesis, enjoying the details as we've gone from chapter to chapter. Many of you have started attending this church since that time, so you didn't have the benefit of the first message, when I gave an overview of the book and some of its themes. The rest of you have probably long since forgotten that overview. So I thought it would be profitable, now that we've walked through the book, to give a final recap of this first book of the Bible, to look back from the summit and see where we've come.

In broad outline, Genesis answers the question, "How did it all begin?" It starts with the creation and the first man and woman, without sin, in the Garden of Eden. It ends with Joseph in a coffin in Egypt. Of course the pivotal event, which led from that glorious beginning to that disturbing conclusion, was the fall of the human race into sin. Genesis graphically portrays the effects of sin on the human race. But it also shows God's great mercy in redeeming fallen man and calling out a people for His purpose, a channel for His blessing to all nations. Moses, the author, is supplying the historical basis for God's covenant with His people, Israel. He wanted them to know where they had come from and where they were going. God had promised Canaan to them; thus there was no future for them in Egypt or in the wilderness. Moses wrote Genesis to show Israel that they must, by faith and obedience, go forward to conquer the land God had promised to give them.

Genesis hinges at the call of Abraham in chapter 12 into two major sections, each with four subsections:

1. Human history from Adam to Abraham: The beginnings of the human race (chap. 1-11).
 - A. Creation (1-2)
 - B. Fall (3)
 - C. Flood: Increase of sin culminating in judgment at the flood (4-9)
 - D. Dispersion: Sin after the flood, culminating in the judgment at Babel (10-11)
2. Human history from Abraham to Joseph: The beginnings of the chosen race (12-50).
 - A. Abraham (12-24)
 - B. Isaac (25-26)
 - C. Jacob (27-36)
 - D. Joseph (37-50)

The sovereign hand of God over human history is a major emphasis in all of these events. By reading Genesis, God's people can see that He is behind all their history. He is the one who has brought them to where they are, and He has promised many blessings regarding their future. And yet God's sovereignty doesn't negate human responsibility, as is demonstrated in the lives of the characters of Genesis. God confronted Cain with his anger, but Cain disregarded God's warning and went on to murder his brother. Noah, on the other hand, refused to go along with his godless contemporaries and was delivered from God's judgment through his obedient faith in building the ark. Throughout the book there are marked contrasts between those who obeyed God and were blessed and those who disobeyed and suffered the consequences: Abraham and Lot; Ishmael and Isaac; Esau and Jacob; Joseph and his brothers.

Genesis is rich in theology. As I mentioned in my first message, someone has said, "The roots of all subsequent revelation are planted deep in Genesis, and whoever would truly comprehend that revelation must begin here." I am not going to attempt to go through the many doctrines and topics treated in Genesis nor to mention all the beginnings that are covered. But I'd like to point

out some of the fundamental teachings about God and man as we look at the central theme of Genesis.

God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin so that we may be His channel for blessing all people.

1. Genesis tells us who God is.

The book begins by bringing the reader face to face with the awesome reality of God as the creator of all that is: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." There is no introduction to lead up to the point, no argument to prove His existence, no room for speculation or curiosity. By revelation, not speculation, we are brought face to face with the eternal God who spoke the universe into existence. There's not even time to duck. You must either accept God as the source of all or reject Him. The Bible begins with an authoritative declaration that demands a response to the Creator of the universe.

The revelation of God's awesome power in creation might tend to put us off, to make us feel like we can't approach such an omnipotent God. Yet the early chapters of Genesis show that the omnipotent God is also a personal God who communicates with the people He has created. He talks with Adam and gives him meaningful work to do in the garden. He knows Adam's need for a helper and creates Eve for his wife. The first couple communes with God each day in the garden.

But just when we're starting to relax and feel like we might be able to approach this awesome, but personal God, sin enters the picture and we see God pronouncing curses on the serpent, the woman, the man, and the ground. We learn that God does not take sin lightly as He expels the fallen couple from the garden. Then, as sin spreads through the fallen human race, we recoil at God's terrible judgments in the flood and again at the tower of Babel. We see that God is a holy God who must judge all sin.

But in all of this, there is hope. Rather than striking the fallen couple in the garden dead on the spot, God graciously offered them hope in the promise of the seed of the woman. He would bruise the serpent's head, although the serpent would bruise him on the heel (3:15). This is the earliest promise in the Bible of the coming of Christ the Savior, born of a woman (not a man, through

the virgin birth). In His death, He was bruised on the heel, and it seemed as if Satan had triumphed. But Christ's resurrection turned what seemed like Satan's victory into his defeat, as the seed of the woman bruised the serpent's head.

Then God graciously provided animal skins to clothe the fallen couple (3:21). This provided for their physical nakedness, but obviously it went far beyond that. Just as man's nakedness goes beyond the physical and points to the exposure of the soul resulting from sin (3:7), so God's provision of clothing went beyond the physical need for garments. It is a beautiful illustration of what God would do through the Lord Jesus Christ to provide salvation for all who stand shamefully exposed before Him in their sin. God's provision of the animal skins shows us four things:

First, *we need a covering for our sin*. The thought of standing with my sin exposed in the light of God's holy presence is more intolerable than the thought of showing up for a job interview at the White House stark naked. I need some sort of covering.

Second, *our attempts at covering ourselves are inadequate*. Adam and Eve made fig leaves, but that wouldn't do. Modern man tries the fig leaves of good works to cover his sin and to make himself presentable to God, but God cannot accept that.

Third, *only God can provide the covering we need for our sin*. He takes the initiative in properly covering our sin and guilt. Adam and Eve were passive; God did it all. We cannot receive God's salvation as long as we offer Him our fig leaves. We must let Him provide everything, as He has in fact done in Christ.

Fourth, *the covering God provided required the death of an innocent substitute*. An animal had to be slaughtered to provide this covering for Adam and Eve. If, as we can probably assume, Adam and Eve witnessed this slaughter, it must have shocked them. This was the first time they had witnessed death. As they saw the animals (lambs?) having their throats slit and writhing in the throes of death, they must have gained a new awareness both of the seriousness of their sin and of the greatness of God's grace in not requiring their own immediate death for their sin. They learned that without the shedding of blood, there is no adequate covering for sin, but that God would accept the death of an acceptable substi-

tute. In light of subsequent revelation, we know that that substitute is Jesus Christ, to whom these animals pointed as a type.

So Genesis shows God as the Almighty Creator who yet can be known personally. It shows Him as the Holy Judge of all sin, yet the Savior who Himself provided the payment of the penalty for our sin.

Genesis also shows God as the Sovereign Covenant God, who works all human history according to His purposes. He calls Abraham, a pagan man, and promises to bless him by making him into a mighty nation and by blessing all the families of the earth in him (12:1-3). In spite of the foul-ups of Abraham in taking Hagar and fathering Ishmael; of Isaac in favoring Esau; of Jacob in scheming to secure the birthright; and, of Jacob's sons in selling their brother into slavery; God's purpose for His people moves forward. As Joseph told his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (50:20).

We see God's sovereign grace in choosing men. He chose Abraham over his older brother Nahor, Isaac over the older Ishmael, Jacob the schemer over his older twin Esau, and the younger Ephraim over Manasseh. But Messiah would not come through Joseph's descendants at all, but through the tribe of Judah, again demonstrating that it is God's grace, not human merit, that matters. In all this we learn that our salvation depends upon our sovereign, gracious God, not upon our merit and good works.

If I had time, I could develop much more fully this theme of who God is as revealed in Genesis. We could study the names of God as revealed throughout the book: Elohim; Yahweh; the angel of the Lord; El Roi, the God who sees; El Shaddai, God Almighty; El Elyon, God Most High; the fear of Isaac; the God of Jacob; etc.

But before I move on, let me apply this by saying that we need to submit personally to God as He has revealed Himself rather than create a God of our own liking. The God who reveals Himself in the book of Genesis isn't necessarily to our liking. Modern science tells us that everything has evolved through random chance. Genesis says that God created the heavens and the earth. Either you create your own god out of science, which is ul-

timately to make fallible man your god; or, you submit to God the Almighty Creator revealed in Genesis.

Genesis reveals God as a holy God who judges sin. That's not popular in our day. We'd rather have a nice god who is tolerant of sin. But either you create a false god of your own liking, or you submit to the God revealed in Genesis. The God of Genesis is one who provides salvation from His judgment apart from man's efforts. You may not like that, since human nature wants to earn salvation. But you must either submit to the God of Genesis or create your own false god.

Genesis reveals a sovereign God who works all things after the counsel of His will, who chooses His servants according to grace, not human merit. Again, you may not like that, since human nature likes to think in terms of man's freedom to determine his own destiny. But you must either submit to the sovereign God of Genesis or make a god who fits your fancy, who is not God at all. Genesis tells us who God is, which confronts us with our need to submit to Him.

2. Genesis tells us who we are.

The British skeptic, George Bernard Shaw, in response to the German concentration camps, reluctantly concluded, "There is only one empirically verifiable doctrine of theology--original sin." While that doctrine looms large in Genesis, it is not the first picture of man. The first statement about man is God saying, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). While the image of God in man was marred by the fall, it was not obliterated. We know this because after the flood, God establishes the death penalty for murder, basing it on the fact that man was created in God's image, a truth that still applied (Gen. 9:6).

That great truth lies behind the proper Christian view that every human being should be treated with respect. It lies behind Christian opposition to the slaughter of unwanted children through abortion and infanticide. It is the basis for respect and care for the elderly and dying. It is the motivation behind Christian hospitals and health care. It lies behind Christian charity toward the poor and underprivileged. It lies behind a proper Christian respect of men for women and of women for men, since Genesis 1:27 dis-

tinctly states that God created man in His image as male and female. It hints at what the second chapter confirms, the basis for Christian marriage and family relationships. It forms the basis for the proper understanding of one's self, showing that we each have a unique role in God's purpose.

But Genesis also shows us as fallen in sin, alienated from God. The devastating effects of sin are displayed in full view throughout the book. The beauty of the first couple, innocent in the garden, is destroyed as they are expelled because of their sin. Their oldest son, the first man born into the first family on the earth, jealously murders his younger brother. In Noah's time, the sinful condition of the human race is summed up: "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5).

So our view of self has to be molded not only by the encouraging truth that we have been created in God's image, but also by the sober reality that our hearts are inclined against God and toward sin. While it may not be a pleasant thing to look into the mirror that Genesis holds before us, it bears witness with reality. You read the book of Genesis and come away saying, "Yes, that is what human nature is like. Even more, that is what *I'm* like!" It's an accurate picture of the human condition. But Genesis doesn't leave us there. That would be hopeless.

3. Genesis tells us what we must do.

Genesis shows us, as we've already seen, that God offers us redemption and how we must respond. I could illustrate this from the great passage in Genesis 15:6, where Moses writes that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. The apostle Paul uses that text to demonstrate that salvation is by grace through faith apart from human works (Galatians 3; Romans 4). But instead, I'd like to illustrate it from the first instance of faith, when Adam believed God's promise of redemption.

After God pronounced the curse for man's sin (3:14-19), there is a verse that at first seems to be out of context. Genesis 3:20 reads, "Now the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living." Then the text goes on to tell of God's provision of animal skins and of His expelling the couple from the garden. But after the grim words of verse 19, which inflict toil and

death upon the human race, you would not expect verse 20. At best, you would think that it would read, "Now Adam called his wife 'the Grim Reaper,' because she was the mother of all the dying." It was ultimately because of her sin that death came to the human race. Yet Adam calls her "Eve," which means life-giver or mother. And, remember, this was before she had any children.

What does Genesis 3:20 mean? It is Adam's response of faith to God's promise to send a Savior through the seed of the woman (3:15). Adam heard and submitted to God's penalty of death (3:19), but he also grabbed on to God's promise that there would come forth from the woman a descendent who would bruise the serpent's head. And so by faith, before his wife had conceived, Adam named her Eve, the mother of all living.

Salvation is now and always has been by faith in God's promise. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, a person's faith had to look forward to the promised Savior. Since Christ, faith looks back to the Savior who has come. Salvation has never been based on keeping the commandments or on a person's good works balancing out his sins. We are made right with God by trusting what He has said concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, the only Savior, who took our penalty on Himself on the cross.

Saving faith always results in obedience. Noah didn't just say, "I believe You, God, that You're going to send a flood to destroy the earth." His faith resulted in 100 years of hard work and ridicule as he built the ark and got on board when God told him to. Saving faith always affects our behavior in this evil world. If we believe God concerning His promise of salvation from judgment through Christ, we will turn from our sin and seek to live in accordance with God's purposes.

That means that we will commit ourselves and all the resources God has graciously entrusted to us to His great purpose of blessing all the families on earth through the seed of Abraham, who is Jesus Christ. If we really believe what Genesis teaches about God's judgment on sin and about His provision in Christ, we cannot be complacent as billions go into eternity without Christ. Rather, we will do all we can to be channels of God's blessing to those who are lost and perishing.

Conclusion

An old man, walking along the beach at dawn, noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked what he was doing. The young man answered that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun.

"But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish," countered the old man. "How can your effort make any difference?" The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one," he said.

Paul tells us that the Lord is "abounding in riches for all who will call upon Him; for 'whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!'" (Rom. 10:12-15). God wants those beautiful feet to be your feet!

Genesis tells us who God is, who we are, and what we must do. God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin so that we may be His channel for blessing all people. Let's obey the message of Genesis!

Discussion Questions

1. Which is emphasized more in our day: God as loving Redeemer or God as righteous judge? How can we restore the biblical balance?
2. Which view of man is most emphasized today: Man as created in God's image or man as fallen hopelessly in sin? How do we find the biblical balance?
3. Some emphasize God's sovereignty to the neglect of human responsibility. Others focus on "free will" to the detriment of God's sovereignty. Where is the biblical balance?
4. Why is proper theology about God and man the necessary basis for world missions?