

SERMON TITLE- "The Beginning and the End"

TEXT- Genesis

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BY- James Toews

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We have spent a good long season in the Book of Genesis. In this series we have looked at the foundational stories of the Bible.

These are stories that should be part of our consciousness because they lay the foundation for what follows. We need to know them. They are the essentials of Biblical knowledge- the 3 "Rs" of the people of God. There was a time when every child knew the stories of Genesis like the back of their hands. That is no longer the case. We need to make sure we get those stories into our minds.

These stories also need to be known accurately. This of course makes a lot of sense but to know things accurately means that they need to be studied carefully. The Biblical stories are highly compressed accounts. People easily add pieces to the stories that aren't there. A trivial example is the idea that Eve picked an apple from the Tree of Life. There is no apple in Genesis. In such highly compressed stories, however, what is missing needs to stay missing.

The point of all this- we need to read and study the Book of Genesis. I hope that in the season of this study that has also been going on.

As I have already mentioned, Genesis covers a vast expanse of time- from the very beginning right up to modern times.

The people that we meet at the end of Genesis are the same people that we live and work with today.

Today we as close off this study I want to do a sweeping review of Genesis and use that to point us to the next series.

#1. Genesis Is The Story Of God's Original Plan

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . .

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. Genesis

1:1-31

The Bible begins with a Good Creation. This is radical in 2 senses-

-Creation is not evil

In ancient times the idea that creation is good was very radical. Even on today's surviving primitive communities the idea that nature needs to be appeased. Elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices were performed to make sure that these people and communities appeased the gods of nature.

Most of us don't immediately think of nature as evil and dangerous the way pre-modern people do but we are very easily drawn in by a variation on this theme.

-Creation is good but not magical

We are told that creation is good and needs protection. This is a very good thing within our culture but this makes us open to an ancient view of nature that sees it as magical.

You don't have to go very far to find people who think that crystals and potions have magical powers to be tapped.

Genesis however has a very scientific view of creation. There is nothing divine or magical in it. Nature is created by God and having been so created by the laws God set in motion at the beginning. These are the laws of the natural world. These may be infinitely complex but they are not random or magical.

What does this mean for us?

1. We must not worship created things. They are amazing and beautiful but to worship them is a serious disrespect for the true Creator. The God of Creation has the power to intervene in His creation- should He choose to- but creation does not respond to human beings on its own. It is why the study of magic is forbidden to God's people. Such a study shows a terrible misunderstanding of who the Creator is.

2. As God's people we don't have to fear the study of the natural world. The fact that it is materialistic- is not a threat to Biblical faith. In fact it is Biblical faith that lays the foundation for science.

Of course, as people with a faith that has Biblical foundations, we believe that human beings are not merely materialistic.

It is that "not merely materialistic" belief that Genesis establishes and from which we are to operate in our world. This is a very big idea and that alone will shape how we do things. When we

understand that all human beings are created in God's image it has to affect how we treat each other- and even ourselves.

#2. Genesis Is The Story Of How Evil Works

The big questions that haunts humans is- "Where does evil come from?"

The answer that Genesis gives to that question is not simplistic. It is not- that evil was always present in the cosmos and that we have to find ways to battle it. There is nothing like that in Genesis. Instead the opposite is the case. In the beginning was God and God was God and this good God created a good creation.

Where does evil originate? Not from the above.

The Genesis answer to the problem of evil always winds its way back to our choices. We always find ourselves choosing. The story of evil entering the world does not hinge on the serpent talking to Eve. The story is about Adam and Eve choosing to follow a different course that God had directed them to. That's it. Everything else is just excuses. God had said, "Don't eat from that tree." And Adam and Eve ate. That's it.

Why did they do it? We are supposed to think about the things that we did that we knew we weren't supposed to do. As we look back we will have a list of excuses a mile long but if we are honest with ourselves- the boil down to Adam and Eve's answer-

. . . the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" . . . The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Genesis 3:9-13

Evil is present in our world. We all know that. Where it actually originated is specifically beyond the boundary that our minds are designed to go.

Evil being present, however, we are instructed to choose to do right and in doing right we stand up to evil. In failing to do right we are part of the destructive path that evil runs across the cosmos.

So much of the story of Genesis is the story of men and women choosing evil.

That is absolutely not the only side of the story. There are many heroes of the "right" in Genesis. There are Enoch, Noah,

Abraham, Joseph and others who stand up- against the flow of their times and do right.

They are the heroes of God's story and examples we are to watch carefully.

But evil that rises out of the choices we make is the fabric of Genesis. It is in many ways a very tragic story.

This dark background, however highlights a very powerful message-

#3. Genesis Is The Story Of The God Of Second Chances

Over and over and over again- the Bible is the story of God giving His people the chance to start over again. It is a story that is established in Genesis and carries on throughout history. At the very end of OT history Nehemiah sums it up-

But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs . . . So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you . . . and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers . . . But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight . . . and in your compassion you delivered them time after time. Nehemiah 9:26-28

That has been the story of Genesis and it is a story that continues.

It is the story of a loving parent raising a child- not an unusually difficult child but any child. In the course of growing up children test the patience and composure of their parents.

"Don't do that . . ."

"Don't play with that . . ."

"Don't go there . . ."

"Listen to what I am saying!"

And what do parents do? They find ways to start all over again. Sometimes this goes too far and parents fail to put down boundaries that need to be there.

Out of their own broken nature, parents also go to places of anger and frustration that adds to the problem.

But instinctive within any parent is the craving to see their child "get it." The hope that their child "gets it" is what makes parents let their children start over again and again.

And God, through Genesis and indeed the rest of Scriptures tells His people of the 2nd chances He offers.

Genesis is so specific.

Yes, Adam and Eve are sent out of the Garden but they are still living in a rich and beautiful world.

Yes, the first 2 children of Adam and Eve die in a family feud but God given them more children.

Yes, humanity becomes so depraved that God sends a flood to wash the earth clean- but God first sends Noah as the preacher of righteousness and then after hundreds of years finally starts over. But the fact is that He does begin again with this good man and his family.

Yes, when Noah's offspring follow the way of people before them, God again intervenes- confuses language and then selects a new beginning in Abraham.

And that starting over and over again is the theme of Genesis and it is no mistake. From Genesis on God keeps starting over with His people.

He does it just the way a parent who loves their children does. Parents and children get older but I have seen the oldest parents longing to see their children take the opportunities to start over again.

And what does that message mean to you and me? It means that it is in the very character of God to give His people 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th chances. No matter where we find ourselves God want us to stop and begin again.

But Genesis is the 1st book of the Bible- the first chapter and because of that sets the background for what follows. What follows next, by itself could be a dark shadow-

#4. Genesis Is A Story That Ends In Captivity

The Book of Genesis ends as God's people travel from the land that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- to take up residence in Egypt.

In some ways we do need to read the rest of the Book to understand why this is a dark shadow because on the surface of it, it doesn't appear that way.

As we found from the story of Joseph, last week, a massive famine had swept the land of the Promise and Jacob, renamed Israel, and his whole clan had loaded up their stuff and moved to Egypt.

It was a rescue mission. At first everything looked good. Here God's people lived in a land of plenty safely and in peace but soon things went terribly wrong.

The very next thing after Genesis we read-

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died . . . Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt . . . So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. Exodus 1:6-11

And this begins the rest of the Bible story- God's people in captivity needing rescue.

That is what Egypt symbolizes in the Bible. Genesis only takes us to the place where God's people get to Egypt and it stops there.

They have been rescued. Genesis ends with Joseph's famous words to his brothers. Words that Ryan talked about last week.

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Genesis 50:19-20

As the years unfolded, however, this "good" also changed its character and became the ultimate symbol of oppression.

In that another aspect of the human condition comes to light- another facet of Genesis.

When we fail to really take God's offers of 2nd chances the walls start to close in. When we are offered a new start we need to rebuilt trust and when that is not done properly- what should be a new beginning merely becomes a pause in a slide down into disaster.

That is the pattern that the rest of the Bible describes- a pattern set out in Genesis.

The book end in Egypt and at that moment it looks pretty good but not for long.

In Joseph's final words to his brothers he recognizes that as good as Egypt looks- this is not their home- this is not the land that God had intended for His people.

Joseph's final words are-

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and

Jacob." And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place." Genesis 50:24-25

The story of the captivity in Egypt is also a powerful metaphor for the trouble we find ourselves in. Captivities seldom look sinister and dangerous when we enter them.

You don't build a trap that looks like a trap. Sebastian and I are reading the story of Rascal the Raccoon at bedtime. It is the story of a boy who raises a pet raccoon but finds that his pet becomes the neighbourhood pest. The solution that the neighbours impose is- Sterling must cage his beloved pet. With great sadness he builds a cage. He is wise however. In the process of building he makes the cage a place of fun and the door is never closed. The day comes however when that place becomes a prison. When the door finally locks the prison is complete.

The story of Genesis ending in Egypt is much like the story of Rascal and it is the story of how our sins trap us in a box that God never intended us to live in.

And Genesis ends in a captivity that looks pretty good but already foreshadows the fact that we are not designed to live in captivity. Egypt is where we live but it is not the home of God's people.

And that leads to the ending of Genesis and the beginning of everything else-

#5. Genesis Sets The Stage For Salvation

As God's people, we are living in Egypt. Sometimes it's a pretty nice place with all the provisions that we could possibly want. Sometimes the "king" thinks highly of us and even gives us honour and privileges. Egypt is a pretty amazing place.

But there are other times when the walls of the prison are only too real. We live in a world filled with every kind of suffering and injustice. At those moments we know that something is seriously wrong.

The ultimate sign of the oppression in Egypt was when Pharaoh ordered the death of the new born children. When adults suffer and are attacked there can possibly be some reason for it- but when children- before they have done anything good or bad are targeted- there is not doubt that something is terribly wrong.

And in our world- it is when children are born into tragedy that we feel the sense of oppression most vividly. Everyone one does. It is why fundraisers focus on the eyes of children when they ask for help. The eyes of a suffering child evoke a universal human compassionate response. Something must be done.

And having taken the story of humanity from creation to living in Egypt- Genesis sets the stage for the rest of the Biblical story.

#6. We're Not Designed For Captivity- There Is A Way Out Of Egypt

That is the story of the rest of the Bible- beginning in Exodus [which means- exit].

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. Deuteronomy 30:4

Obviously if it takes the rest of the Bible to describe- the journey is not simplistic. But it is important to remember that it is also a story that is designed to be understood and lived, here and now.

The challenge- of course- is the constant tension between the reality of life in Egypt contrasted with the hope. As God's people we are never given permission to focus only on one side or the other. There was a theologian in the 70s who described it as "the already and not yet." It is a good description. Life in the "already and not yet" is the life of God's Kingdom people.

It is the life that Genesis sets the backdrop for.

And with that we look forward to the next stage and in that we are going to do a series whose intention is to specifically answer the question- "So how do we live as God's people in Egypt?"