

Understanding the Bible #3 – Origins 2

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

Bible Reading

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:8-9

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “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, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Genesis 2:15-17

Introduction

In the previous session we looked at the Genesis account of how the universe began, about how it shows that it was created and continues to be sustained by an all powerful, relational God.

We saw that while the account does not *contradict* science, Genesis is not *primarily* a scientific book. The authors are explaining that the universe was created by one God, not a squabbling gang of gods. And that humans have been made in God’s image, to be God’s representatives on earth.

The Problem of Evil & Suffering

Throughout history humans have been intrigued and confounded by the existence of evil and suffering. Modern secular people increasingly put it down to the universe being a random system. Earthquakes,

volcanoes, viruses are all a part of the evolutionary whole. And they believe that because evolution's 'survival of the fittest' principle encourages competition, humans tend to think of themselves and their family/tribe first, with inevitable consequences.

And yet, humans seem to have a desire for things to be different. There is a constant nagging hunch that things are not the way they're supposed to be. And one of the functions of religion is to give answers to the question, 'What went wrong?'.

The Bible's answer begins in Genesis 2.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:8-9

and then, a little later on...

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "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, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

Genesis 2:15-17

Eve is then introduced into the narrative as a partner for Adam and the chapter ends with them together in the garden.

If the book of Genesis was a pantomime, what happens next would be where the audience is prompted to boo and (appropriately) hiss!

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 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.’”

Genesis 3:1-3

As Christians we are used to identifying the serpent with ‘the Devil’, or ‘Satan’. And I think that is what the serpent represents. Whether the serpent is actually Satan, or a creature possessed by Satan, we are not told.

Satan is intent on making the first humans distrust their creator. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” is exactly how Satan works, by putting thoughts into our head that make us wonder if God is as good as he seems to be.

Either Adam has told Eve about God’s commands to her, or maybe God told her personally, as she adds an extra detail not mentioned in God’s instructions to Adam about not touching the tree. And she tells the serpent so.

Here’s the thing, Eve is living the dream. She has the perfect man, with absolutely zero female competition. Life in the garden is wonderful. And she has no worries about what to wear.

But as Genesis says, the serpent is crafty.

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Genesis 3:4-5

Thousands of years before it became a common acronym, the serpent uses FOMO on Eve. What if God is holding stuff back from you? What if obeying him means you're missing out on something? Maybe he's secretly a killjoy!

Sound familiar? Some things haven't changed for millennia!

And the rest is history.

Eve eats from the tree. And Adam, despite knowing it was wrong, does so as well. And their eyes are opened. And for the first time in their lives they know what it is like to be afraid of their creator and companion.

So they 'hide' themselves from God, first with makeshift coverings, and then by running into the dense forests of Eden.

Now, word to the wise, hiding from God is a pointless exercise (ask Jonah!). What is amazing is that God doesn't simply zap them into oblivion and start again. Instead, God calls out, "Where are you?". For the first time, but not for the last time, God takes the first step in reaching out to disobedient, ungrateful humans.

When God asks a question, it's not because he doesn't know what is going on. It's because he wants us to think about something. Jesus was fond of asking questions for the same reason.

Adam's answer is evasive, but reveals that his relationship with God has changed.

"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

God plays along with the charade asking Adam how he knew he was naked, and whether he had eaten from the tree.

And things go downhill from there. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and (one of my favourite Bible jokes) the serpent doesn't have a leg to stand on.

God's relationship with humans has been damaged. And Adam's relationship with Eve is also fractured. Half-truths, shame, blame and the fear of rejection have all entered what was once a perfect place.

It's what Christians call 'The Fall'. Adam and Eve were created to extend the beauty of Eden throughout planet Earth. Instead they chose to believe the lies of the serpent, questioned the goodness of their creator, and did the one thing he had told them not to do.

Satan's reasons for Eve to eat the fruit is that if she does so, her eyes will be opened, and that she will 'be like God, knowing good and evil'. Which is ironic, because she was already more like God than any other created thing, and she did know all she needed to know about good and not-good.

Genesis 3 is the story of humans being tempted to be independent from God, while still having all the benefits of being like God. Of course, nothing is independent from God, even the serpent is one of his creatures, as is made clear from the way God is able to punish him. Without God's continual intervention, every created thing ceases to exist.

And rather than destroy Eve and Adam, God honours their decision to be independent from him, as much as is possible without them ceasing to exist. This independence includes losing many of the benefits that came from being in a perfect relationship with God. He casts them out of the place that he had created for them, and sets up an armed angel and cherubim security system to prevent them from ever returning to it.

One of the most significant and mysterious verses in the Bible is when after Eve reveals that the serpent is the one who deceived her, God says to the serpent:

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

Genesis 3:15

God is saying that the male child of a woman will one day crush the serpent. The serpent will hurt him, but will ultimately be defeated.

The rest of the Bible is a gradual unpacking of this prophecy.

Adam and Eve soon realise that being independent from God is not all that the serpent promised them it would be. Being independent from God means things don't work perfectly the way they used to. Life becomes a lot more difficult

Adam and Eve have two sons. And when they have grown, we see the first murder occur. Humanity's broken relationship with God leads to the perfection of Eden breaking down, including broken relationships between humans.

And so it continues, with humanity spiralling into a cycle of violence, revenge and death. Lamech, a descendant of Cain is quoted as boasting to his wives...

*“Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.
If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times.”*

Genesis 4:23b-24

(This might remind you of the time Jesus explicitly reverses this revenge policy when he is asked by Peter how many times he was expected to forgive his fellow disciples in Matthew 18.)

Genesis 5 traces the family line of Adam up to Noah. Significantly, it begins with a reminder that humans are made in the likeness of God, even though the relationship is now fractured.

Chapter 6 describes how humans increase wickedness as quickly as they grow in numbers. And God is not happy about it.

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground – for I regret that I have made them." But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD.

Genesis 6:5-8

The Bible isn't the only place which tells the story of a great flood. Other cultures and civilisations in ancient Mesopotamia told their own versions of the story.

(Mesopotamia means 'between rivers', think of the areas between modern Iran and Iraq). And there is archaeological evidence of a great flood occurring in this area around the time of Noah.

Scholars argue over whether the Ark was big enough to contain all the animals described, and food to feed them (it could) and whether the flood covered the world as we know it, a roughly spherical planet floating in space, or the world as the Bible's authors knew it, extending over a relatively small area including modern Iran, Iraq and Israel.

What we do know for sure is the Bible tells us that God decided to destroy a huge number of people in a catastrophic flood, everyone that is except for Noah and his immediate family.

The Bible's words show us just how seriously God takes this. His 'heart' is 'deeply troubled' and that he 'regrets' having created humans

is mentioned twice. When the Bible talks about God ‘regretting’ things, it is not the same type of regretting as when a human being does something that in retrospect they wish they hadn’t.

God is God. He knows the end from the beginning. He is outside of time. He does not make mistakes. The flood is all part of his plan to redeem the world, not the result of him having a temper-tantrum.

That does not mean I don’t find the flood story difficult. I find a lot of the Bible difficult. That doesn’t mean it isn’t true. In fact, it may even point to it being true. If God is anything like the God he is revealed in the Bible to be, we should expect that we won’t always like or agree with what he says. If God only does stuff that we agree with, it suggests we’ve created him in *our* image.

Humans have a difficult relationship with truth, especially when it disturbs our comfort zones. And if you are going to scribble out every part of the Bible where God punishes rebellion against himself, you are going to need plenty of ink!

And, as with the Bible’s account of creation, the Bible’s account of the flood is very different from the surrounding nations’ versions where the gods get angry with humans for making too much noise, or failing to provide them with enough food.

The reason for the flood is that God sees that humans are moving further and further away from him. The people he intended to be his representatives on earth, to live in relationship with their creator, are doing the opposite. He’s not bothered about their noise, he doesn’t need feeding, but he does demand their obedience to his good and merciful laws. He is utter moral perfection. He is pure love.

The Bible’s account of the flood is a story not primarily about humans, or animals, but about God and the way he resolutely works towards restoring his fallen creation. It is a part of the bigger picture that this series is attempting to address.

Noah's task is to preserve the human race, as well as the land animals. The flood is restarting creation, bringing the world back to a new beginning. When the flood recedes, and Noah and his family step on dry land for the first time in over a year, the Bible's words echo creation language...

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

Genesis 9:1

And God promises that he will never cause a flood of this magnitude again. Even providing a visual aid in the form of a rainbow. Where there was judgement, there is now mercy.

However the flood did not change Noah and his family's fallen human nature. After the flood humans continue to live just the way they did before.

So, why the Flood?

The reasons are many, including demonstrating the tension that we experience between God's hatred of sin and his incredible mercy.

One of the lessons of the flood is that a fresh start can only be effective with a fresh heart.

When humans are faced with massive problems, they are often tempted to throw out everything they have done so far to make a completely fresh start. Societies can do the same, revolutions happen when an entire community decides to make a fresh political/social start, often by wiping out all the people who disagree with them.

The problem is, wherever you go, there you are. You can change your location, your hair, your friends, your politics... but the basic problem remains. You. Us. Sinful, selfish you. Sinful, selfish us.

The Flood is a lesson to us that new starts without new hearts don't work. Meanwhile God continues his work of redeeming this world

without having to destroy humanity in the process. God is the God of the long haul, redemption is a lengthy and costly process!

As humans spread across the earth, they continue to try to be 'like God' while still being independent from God. The Tower of Babel is a symbol of humans trying 'to make a name for themselves' (Genesis 11:4), they are still trying to be God-like independently, building a way back to heaven without God being in charge.

Again, what upsets God is not people building a huge tower, it is people doing stuff without reference to him, and often in direct opposition to him.

The Babel project is a failure. God frustrates the builders' efforts, confuses their language and scatters them.

And yet despite all this, the God of the Bible is the God of second chance after second chance after second chance.

And in July we will be looking at the next stage in that plan, which includes a man called Abraham.