

1 GENESIS NOTES BY SHARON DURANT

In the beginning, God... Genesis 1-5

It's lovely to be able to speak to you and study God's Word together this evening. Thank you so much for being part of the church family, for all your love and care and support over the past few months.

We're going to study Genesis throughout this year – I am pretty nervous and excited about that all at once. We're being ambitious and looking to read the whole thing through... but of course there's only so much time on a Monday night so we will be zooming in on some key moments that keep the thread and focus on God.

Why Genesis. I wanted to go right back to the beginning – back to the beginning when there was just God – and see how his plan for us reaches down through the ages, through human history, right to me in this very moment, and then beyond into eternity at home with God.

I was planning that we would study Genesis even before Coronavirus hit the world. And as the year has worn on, I have felt even more strongly that – for me – this is an essential foundation for my faith and for who I am as a person, as someone who trusts Jesus and follows him, and as a church, as a group of people who are spurring each other on to love and doing good things for each other and the world around us, to the glory of God, amen.

WHEN THE MUSIC FADES

All is stripped away

And I simply come

This last 7 months I feel like I have been living this song.

In March, all the meetings and gatherings and get togethers disappeared, and the way we expressed our worship and love for God changed overnight. Without these systems and ways of doing things, suddenly 'being a Christian' felt like a different thing. I felt pretty naked before God. I couldn't hide behind a song, a worship band, behind a kettle and a cup of tea, I couldn't sit in a crowd in church.

When the music faded, what was left?

Suddenly it was just me and God. And hours and hours and hours and hours and hours of time.

You are probably expecting me to burst into smiles at this point and talk about how wondrous my quiet times have been.

Not true.

For me this was an epic falling apart.

When the music faded, I found myself left asking the properly big questions: Who is this God anyway? Is he relevant? Who am I? What is the point of life at all? Why am I doing any of this?

This year's journey has a happy ending (so far!) in that, as I have slowly begun to piece my faith back together, I have found God to be exactly the same God he always has been and always will be. I am more loved than I ever imagined and certainly more loved than I

deserve. And that I something I realise painfully every day in a way that I used to just arrogantly breeze through.

As we study through Genesis, time and time again we will find God revealing himself to humans that don't deserve his time and attention, who often ignore him and just do their own thing regardless, but he continually pours out his love, his mercy, his kindness, his grace, his very very undeserved kindness.

As I have personally studied Genesis, I have found over and over again that... God is different to me – as in, I am not God, God is not me. God -the divine- is something different to me, someone greater, someone capable, someone who is reliable, always caring, someone worth trusting....

God is all the things I am not.

Oh and he does things differently. In a way I wouldn't. In a way that makes me go – that is crazy.

I am reading Genesis (and also looking at my life) and going, "Wow, this story of how you and humans first got on, God, this book of Genesis.. it's more dramatic than 'Normal People' or anything else I have been watching on the telly... God, why you choose that person for special treatment?? Why would you use that person to accomplish your plan to save us?? In fact, why would you save us at all, we constantly let you down!"

But then... I am not God. He sees a much much bigger picture. And he's in control, even when everything looks pretty wild to me. So he is worth trusting.

First, in answer to "What is the point of all this?" (which has been something I have been asking a lot) it turns out, I am not the first person to ask this. I have been asking myself "What is the point, why are we doing all this" and been on a full-on search for meaning.

When coronavirus hit, suddenly the purpose of my life was no longer to get my students through exams – exams didn't exist.

It wasn't to make sure my family was in the right place at the right time wearing the right uniform. There was nowhere to go.

It wasn't even to invite my neighbours to church. The churches were shut; what would I be inviting them to?

Everything stopped.

WHAT IS THE POINT – Westminster Catechism

So I was left asking, "What are we doing here on the planet??" WHAT IS THE POINT

In fact, turns out, I'm not the first person to ask that question!!

Four centuries ago, the church in the UK asked this question very seriously and the priests and vicars and pastors got their heads together and wrestled with the question and came up with this answer:

"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." (Westminster Catechism, Answer #1)

As in, the ultimate aim of being human is to honour God and give him our admiration, our praise, our "WOW isn't God great"... and enjoy God for all time.

WHO IS GOD

OK.. That's all very well and good. But who is this God? Is he really that admirable? Is he worth glorifying? Can we actually enjoy him forever?

So! Let's dive into the Bible and see what Genesis has to say about the Big Questions that I have been grappling with these past 7 months. And whether there is any basis for getting to know this God, and glorifying him, and enjoying him forever. What is the point. Let's find out.

Genesis 1:1-3

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Let me just cover some fundamentals here... in Genesis 1 and 2, we consistently see that God is good. He makes good things. He gives the trees and the animals and the plants and the humans everything needed to survive. More than that, he sets everything up to thrive. He gives humans his own life breath and he gives them good rules to keep them safe... He even notices that the man is lonely and makes a woman.

God is good, loving and generous.

Also worth pointing out, God is three-in-one. There it is at the opening of the Bible:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light

Jesus as the word. See John 1. Or listen to a Christmas service!

Now, I am passing over these things quickly because these are things we have probably all heard before and are willing to agree about pretty easily. If there's a God, he's good, and oh look! Right at the very beginning, he shows us that he is good by what he makes and how he cares for it.

Great. Safe start.

In my day job, I teach Latin Greek and classical civilisation. I really enjoy stories about the Greek Gods. And the Greek creation story is so fun compared to Genesis. To make the world, one Greek god castrates his father, they eat their babies, they cheat on each other and steal things... Compared to them, the Christian God is pretty dull. In fact, compared to all other creation stories, our triune God stands out as being something quite different. In addition to being good, loving and generous:

He is calm. Ordered. in Control. He's got a plan and he carries it out. There are three persons, but one God. God is unified in purpose and in relationship.

God has huge authority – He says "Let there be light" and BOOM there was light.

I can't even even say "Let there be dinner" and BOOM there was dinner. "Let there be tidy children's bedrooms" (I did try that once. It didn't work either)

God has astonishing and otherwise-unknown power.

He is not just a superhuman in charge of the thunder like Zeus or Thor. His power is greater.

He is truly worth admiring!

Here in Genesis is that God is the creator. He is the source of life on our earth.

He designed it, he planned it, he made it, he finished it.

Genesis 1 was a massive challenge to ancient readers – with one all-powerful God calmly and authoritatively making the world.

And It is still a huge challenge to how most of us, today, think about the world.

Now, I am not scientist. And the original human who held the pen and wrote Genesis wasn't a molecular biologist either. I'm not going to get drawn into the ins and outs of how God made the world. But there are loads of great scientists out there who are discovering amazing truths about how today's scientific community and the Bible actually aren't completely opposed to each other.

If you're interested in finding out more about creation and science, I recommend "Seven Days That Shook the World" by John Lennox, or "God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God" also by John Lennox

While it's comforting to see in Genesis that God is good, loving and generous, Genesis is also straightaway a challenge to some of my assumptions about God. It's tempting to believe that He made the world, set all the biological processes in motion, then sat back and 'rested'.

But actually, God stays involved and invested in the world he has made. He provides a companion to combat Adam's loneliness in Genesis 2. He continues to walk in the garden and meet with Adam (Genesis 3:8). He acts to put clothes on the humans (Genesis 3:21), he guards and protects Adam and Eve by sending them out of Eden (Genesis 3:23-4) and preventing them from making an even bigger mess that they are already in.

God made the world, he cared for it, and now he stays involved. It belongs to him and he takes ownership of it and is interested in it. He is not far away.

–Eddie's lego temple. He made it. He cares very much if other kids come round and play, this is the one thing that gets protected. He didn't just sit back and go "That is Very Good" and rest. He gets it out, enjoys it, protects it, cares deeply for his lego. And when it's broken, he makes a plan to fix it, and gets on with it.

God is the same God he has always been and always will be – that's the name he uses for himself (EXODUS). And he is not far away from the things he has made. He is not far off in the past. He is present, our ever present help in time of need.

How does this truth about God, that he is involved, challenge some of the worldviews of yourself or people around you?

ENJOY HIM FOREVER

Ladies, that is how God cares about our world on a cosmic scale.... and as we read in Genesis 3, it's also how God cares about us on a personal 1:1 basis, too.

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

We've seen a tiny bit of how much God deserves 'glorifying' – our admiration, our praise, our "WOW isn't God great"... But can we enjoy him forever?

I'm seeing, daily, that God is greater than me. Just.. better in every way.

So the next question I am asking myself is, why would God be interested in me being with him forever?

You know that childhood playground feeling, when there is the really beautiful popular girl (or guy, who knows) who comes and talks to you, and you are like, What are you doing with a dork like me?? I am the nerdy one who is "average" and is hiding in the library all the time. It's a bit of a Cinderella story or Charlie and Chocolate factory. The undeserving dirty poor kid gets a magic ticket to the ball with Prince Charming.

Now, my reaction to that, when someone better than me turns up in the playground and shows an interest in me, is instantly to try and prove myself worthy of their interest.

What could I do so that they keep liking me?

I could change somehow – I could start listening to the same music as them... I could make them something thoughtful... I could do their homework for them... Basically – I would be looking to offer them something so I could keep their love. To make sure they knew I was worth their time and trouble.

But when it comes to God, he is SO MUCH greater than me, I'm realising I have nothing to offer to keep his interest.

What could I do, to make sure that he picks me for his eternal home? So that I can enjoy him forever?

I would like to enjoy God forever, but what if he doesn't want me? It drives me crazy that God is so great, I can't do anything worthy of him. I can't be deserving of it. I can't pull my weight in our relationship. I am pretty useless. .. and I fear that eventually this Good, Loving, Generous God... I fear he will one day just get bored of me and cut me off. Unfriend me. /ignore.

Where's the guarantee that I can enjoy God forever? What hope do these opening chapters give me?

THE CURSE

Well. Let's look at his first interaction with humans. Because that will give a lot of clues and the first seeds of how he will make us worthy to bring us back home to enjoy him, forever.

READ GENESIS 3:1-9

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.'"

"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."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

First off.

Adam and Eve disobey God – they ignore his rules and decide they know better than God. Even though God had made them in his own image, they were tricked by the Serpent into

thinking that God had not given them everything they needed.. and so they did the opposite of what God said.

Regardless of your opinion on whether this is a historical reality or a useful morality tale, when I look at my own life, it is easy to see that, far from being cut from a different cloth to Adam and Eve, I rather admire them. In fact I daily recreate their attitude in assuming that I know better than God... I know better than God what is best for me... what will make me fulfilled... I'm gonna go my own path and ignore God's rules. Because.. well they seem pretty arbitrary.

Do not murder? OK but I really hate that colleague and they deserve what they get for stealing my spot at the photocopier.

Not committing adultery? Fine until Brad Pitt finally realises that I am what he is missing.

Honouring parents? Fine until they make demands of me.

Love God and Love neighbours? Absolutely on Sunday, but the rest of the week is Me-Time.

So – Adam and Eve are not alone in turning their backs on God. It creates a massive rift between God and humanity. The possibility of Enjoying God forever is gone. Even being with God in the cool of the day is gone. Being made in God's image is shattered. Being close to each other is gone – from this point on men and women live in conflict with each other, the ground produces thorns for us, work is hard and -ultimately- humans die.

You can read it over and over and over again chapter 4. ... and he died... and he died... and he died... All humans are going to die. It's a tragic truth.

BUT. I was looking for hope in genesis 3. I was looking for "what is the point". It seems I have defeated my own argument. There seems to be no point: the pattern seems to be, humans are given a good gift, humans screw it up, therefore humans die. The end.

Sin leads to death. This is the end.

But it's not the end. There is hope. There is a way we can enjoy God forever. Along with the curse, that we all die, there is also a promise.

We should notice here in Genesis 3 that God ... in the beginning GOD... God is the same good, loving, generous God he has always been. God is not far away. It is us humans who run off. In the cosmic game of hide and seek, God is not hiding, WE are.

In the story Jesus told of the shepherd who had 99 sheep, it was the Shepherd who did the seeking. The shepherd was not hiding, it was the sheep.

God proves over and over again that he is the same good, loving, generous God. The person who is running off, and hiding, is me.

If I'm going to enjoy God forever, I need to first of all confront the fact that I am hiding from God. I am running away from him. And that I am really really really experienced at it. I need to turn back to God in humility and rely on his good, loving generous nature – on his promise – that I can be accepted even though I offer nothing.

THE PROMISE

So what promise is there

Genesis 3:15

*God said to the serpent... "And 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."*

God promises that there will be strife between the serpent and the child of Eve ... the child would crush the serpent's head. i.e. This Child is gonna beat you.

This child is Jesus Christ. Right at the beginning, when everything is looking bad for humans, God is the same God he has always been. he is good, loving and generous. Also He is calm. He is ordered. He is capable. He has a plan.

We see Jesus triumphing over the serpent – he crushes Satan, sin and death. We see it on the cross, where he takes all my failings, all my running away, all my "I know better than God"... and he suffers the curse for it. But then more amazingly, we see it in the resurrection.

This is the the Good News at the end of Genesis 3. The way we can enjoy God forever. We find it beautifully expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 and 20-22.

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas,[b] and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

The chief end of man is to glorify God – check!

And to enjoy him forever – check!

I don't need to worry that he will think I'm the lazy one in the relationship. He already did it. He already made me alive. Jesus proved, when he rose from the dead, that I can be made new. That there is a way to enjoy eternity with God. That the curse not the end; it's not about the curse, it's all about God's promise.

And I can trust that, because God is the same God he always has been and always will be. He has always been reliable, and interested, and involved, and capable — right from the beginning of Genesis 1. And he still is now.

BACK TO THE BIG QUESTION

So to come back to my Big Question. What is the point? Why am I doing any of this?

I'm here to enjoy God. To point out to everyone that he is amazing. To live my life in such a way this it is obvious what a good, generous and loving God he is.

And to rest – to rest and not work to be worthy – knowing that I can enjoy him forever.

I'm beginning to find hope, even through Genesis 3 and my prayer is that you will also.