

A New Beginning

Genesis 50:1-26

The End of the Beginning

Tonight we come to the end of the beginning. The word Genesis means “beginning,” and this book is full of beginnings. It tells the story of the beginning of all created things: spiritual and physical. Genesis opens, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” which is the biblical way of saying spiritual and physical, and chapter one proceeds to give some detail about the physical creation. (We learn more about the spiritual creation as scripture unfolds.) Chapter two tells us about the beginning of the human race – it’s sexual nature and family structure. Chapter three recounts the beginning of the great rebellion and God’s promise to defeat the enemy. We learn about the beginning of culture, the beginning of a special race, and the promise of a homeland for God’s people. Genesis introduces the symbol structure that will interpret the rest of scripture and make sense of God’s acts.

The rest of the Bible makes no sense without Genesis. You may learn that God loves you and died for you by reading the New Testament – and many people have trusted in Jesus with this scant information. But the New Testament does not explain how sin became a problem and why Jesus had to die to save us. The New Testament does not provide answers to the fundamental questions of the universe because the writers of the New Testament were self-consciously building upon the Old. It would have been a silly waste of time and papyrus to repeat all that God had already said in the Old Testament. This is why so-called “New Testament Christianity” is foolish and impossible. It is like refusing to read anything but the last chapter of a book. Genesis is the foundation of the New Testament, and it orients us to all of life. Without Genesis you go through life stabbing blindly for meaning.

Tonight we come to the end of the beginning. The foundation has been laid. The plot of God’s great creation-redemption story has been established. But this has been just the beginning. At the end of Genesis the promise of a seed is not fulfilled. The serpent is still in the garden, sin is ravaging the human race, the great rebellion continues to break out here and there across the earth – and God’s chosen people are strangers in a foreign land.

Lessons from Jacob

The last chapter of Genesis is packed with meaning. We see the horror of death and the hope of eternal life. The verse immediately preceding this chapter says Jacob “breathed his last and was gathered to his people.” This does not mean he was dumped into a mass grave. Jacob died in Egypt and the family burial plot was in Canaan. Jacob’s people did not rot in the grave. Their bodies did, but they were somewhere else and Jacob joined them. Eternal life was God’s plan from the beginning, but death was not. Death is the punishment for sin and the sign that we need a Savior to rescue us from sin. Eternal life is not in question for God’s people, but death is nevertheless a horrible reality, and God acknowledges that by devoting half of this chapter to the death and burial of Jacob.

And how much love and care was poured out on Jacob’s dead body! No one expected Jacob to come back to life – certainly not after embalming! The body was dead, and eventually it would rot and return to the ground from which it came. Nevertheless Jacob’s sons treated their father’s body with love and respect. After all, their father had inhabited it all his life. Furthermore, it was a gift from God. We learn from this chapter that our bodies, like all of creation, are a gift of God to be valued and treasured – even when dead.

This chapter sheds more light on the relationship between Joseph and Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the ruler of Egypt and he could issue any command he wished. Joseph was the prime minister. He was the architect of the grain storage program which saved Egypt from starvation during the famine. Joseph could have arrogantly demanded time off to bury his father. “After all I have done for this lazy Pharaoh, the least

he can do for me is to allow me to bury my father, he might have thought.” But Joseph showed great respect for Pharaoh. He did not even approach him directly, but asked the palace servants to intercede on his behalf. We see how much Joseph was respected by the palace in that they conveyed this request to Pharaoh. Pharaoh might have been ashamed that a smelly Hebrew shepherd could govern better than he. Pharaoh might have thought, “This Joseph always acts like he owns the place. It’s time to rein him in.” Joseph, the savior of Egypt, was a humble servant, and Pharaoh, the most glorious man on earth, was generous and thankful. Each of them demonstrate proper behavior among superiors and inferiors.

Good from Evil

But the center of this chapter is contained in verse 20, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Joseph’s brothers meant to kill him, and instead sold him into slavery. Their jealousy and greed drove them to commit this terrible crime. They meant to satisfy their anger and profit from Joseph’s plight, but God meant to save the world. God used Joseph’s enslavement in Egypt to mature him and to position him to come to Pharaoh’s aid. But God has been doing this all through Genesis. Man always seeks to do evil, and God always brings good out of it. Abraham lied to Pharaoh about Sarah, telling him she was not his wife, and God delivered Abraham and Sarah and gave them the wealth of Egypt. The kings of the east stole Lot and all his possessions, but God enabled Abraham to rescue Lot and gain much spoil. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter instead of Rachel, and from those women God raised up twelve sons who became the foundation of the nation of Israel. Laban forced Jacob into disadvantageous contracts, but God gave Jacob tremendous prosperity anyway. We could go on and on. But the supreme example of God’s bringing good out of evil is His promise to save the human race by a child the sinful woman would bear.

Most of us have a natural tendency to expect people to treat us well when we treat them well. We are shocked at the behavior of Joseph’s brothers, are angry at the plundering kings of the east, and are appalled at the raw greed of Laban. It seems so wrong that good should be rewarded by evil. Part of the reason that this is always disturbing is that *we* do not behave this way. We always bless those who care for us – don’t we? And it seems unjust that our good deeds should be rewarded by evil. But it should not shock us. What is truly shocking is that Adam and Eve believed a snake instead of the God who created and provided for them. How dumb can you get? Even worse, how evil can you act? Believe a snake instead of God? How well will the snake provide for you? How well will he love you? Is it even a little bit credible that God was selfishly withholding good things after all He had done? Adam and Eve committed a stupid, evil act – and that choice of rebellion locked sin into human nature. Ever since then all human beings routinely commit stupid, evil acts. What is truly surprising is that they sometimes do good.

And when we say that human beings routinely commit stupid, evil acts – that includes you. Most of you here tonight have not committed sins which you judge to be terribly wicked, and we tend to rank sins such that the things which tempt us are pretty low on that list. But any sin is at root a determination that you know better than God, and a refusal to do what He commands. God commands us to love our enemies. So how are doing with that? God commands sexual purity. Who manages that in our society? Martin Luther could not keep from lusting even in the cell of his monastery. God commands us to keep one day in seven holy. What do you do on Sunday? God commands us to honor our parents. How much do you help at home when you are not at school? Now, the point of this is not to shame you or make you feel guilty. I struggle with all of these sins, too. And I think that most of us would think that some of these things are more serious than others.

No, the point is to highlight the stupidity and evil of sin. Do you really think that it is better to play video games with the guys than to mow the lawn for your dad, or to chat with the girls than to do the laundry with your mom? Why would you not honor your parents by helping with household chores? It can be hard

to worship and refrain from work on Sunday, I get that. And sometimes there are genuine necessities like illness which cause us to deviate from the divine pattern. Let me speak for myself. Most Sundays I want to do things which I do not need to do, but make sense to me. So who knows best, God or I? Is this a hard question? Of course not. God always knows best. So why don't we easily, cheerfully, consistently do what God commands? Because ever since Adam and Eve believed the serpent, sin has been locked into human nature. Sin does not make sense. Rebellion against our omnipotent, all-loving God is really, really stupid. We do not sin because we objectively weigh the options and pick the most sensible one. We sin because we are propelled into it by our own nature. All of us, every human being ever born is just like these sinful characters in Genesis.

But look at you! You are studying in one of the best universities in the world. You have plenty of good food and comfortable lodging. You have good friends and a great campus minister. What did you do to deserve all this? Not much! And even though many of your choices are sinful, God has brought you all these good things. This is who God is, and this is what God does. Joseph knew that he did not become ruler of Egypt because of his intelligence or hard work. Joseph became ruler of Egypt because his brothers sold him into slavery and God used that act to send Joseph into Pharaoh's palace. Joseph knew that his God is a God who turns evil into good. Joseph's brothers did not know this. They thought that God would crush evil, and they thought that Joseph was like Him. They knew that what they did to Joseph was horrible and that they deserved a horrible punishment. They were afraid of God and terrified of Joseph. Joseph's brothers had come a long way from the place where they wanted to get rid of him and make a profit in the process. They saw their sinfulness and they repented of their evil acts. But they fundamentally misunderstood God. They thought that God was a harsh master who would execute swift judgment on the guilty. They had yet to learn the grace and patience of God. Joseph knew this, and his brothers learned it through his gracious response.

Over and over, a million times over God will bring good out of evil. He will use sinful men and their sinful acts to build a holy nation and show the whole world His glory. God will use deeply flawed men such as Moses, Samson, and David – and women such as Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba to care for His people and display His glory. Genesis reveals the ways of God, and God shows Himself faithful for thousands of years. Finally, at the end of the ages, God brought the greatest good out of the greatest evil. Wouldn't any sane person agree that only God could do what Jesus did? Wouldn't any sane person know that it is certifiably crazy to attempt to kill God? What a monumental evil to kill a perfectly innocent man, God in the flesh! Yet through this foul deed God saved the world – including you.

Living in Redemption

God brings good out of evil, and this leads us to several conclusions. **First, do not fret over evil.** We must not *commit* evil acts, and we should *oppose* evil acts – but we must not *fret* over evil. Do what you must, and get on with your life. God will deal with evil according to His wisdom. Work to end human trafficking, speak out against abortion, promote wise use of creation – then go to sleep and let God work. Scripture says, “the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God.” God will end evil in His time, and He will bring some good out of it. Do not act as though you know more than God. This applies on a personal level also. When you are cut off in traffic, when your boyfriend or girlfriend misuses you, when you do not get the grade you deserve or the job you want – and these are without a doubt unjust acts – do not fret! God will bring good out of evil. There was nothing good about kidnapping, enslavement, false accusation, and unjust imprisonment – but God brought good out of all this in Joseph's life, and God will bring good out of the evils that befall you. Be patient. Endure suffering. Wait for God to reveal His glorious plan for you.

Second, do not fret over your own evil. Do not misunderstand me. Sin is wrong and destructive. You must confess your sin to God and repent of it. Perhaps you need to change some of your habits or

circumstances in order to avoid repeat performances. But having done those things, you must not fret over your own sin. God is in control. God paid for your sin on the cross, and God forgives you when you confess your sin to Him. Scripture says God puts your sin away as far as the east is from the west. When you believed in Jesus, your sin was fully paid up forever. Paul says without qualification, “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” None! That means zero. Yes sin is wrong and destructive, but God will not condemn you if you trust Jesus. How in the world could God do nothing in the face of gross sin? Because He already did all that needed to be done. God delivered the full punishment for all sins past, present, and future on Jesus when He died as our substitute. And if God does not condemn you, you must not condemn yourself. Sometimes there are consequences to sin, and they can be worrying. But remember what we have learned tonight. God brings good out of evil.

A good contemporary example of this is Chuck Colson, one of Richard Nixon’s hatchet men in the Watergate scandal. Colson was convicted and sent to prison for his crimes, but before he entered prison he turned to Jesus. Believing in Jesus does not cancel a prison sentence, and Colson served his time. But while he was there God worked on his heart and gave him compassion on prisoners. When he was released, Colson launched what is now an international ministry in prisons. What Colson did for Nixon was wrong, and prison was no picnic, but God brought good out of Colson’s sin.

What is the worst that you can imagine? I doubt that most of you are tempted to commit murder or engage in extortion. But I suspect some of you are tempted to cheat on your exams and papers, and I bet that for many of you the worst thing you can imagine is to get expelled from Brown or RISD. That really would be bad, especially if it were for a misdeed. Real bad, right? It would feel like the end of the world. So avoid doing things that will get you expelled. But if you were to be expelled, God can bring good out of that experience. So you must not waste the time and emotional energy fretting over your own sins. The worst that can happen is redeemable by God. So repent of your sins and move along.

A New World

In spite of the hateful sin of Joseph’s brothers, and through the miserable experiences of Joseph in Egypt – this Hebrew family is doing well at the end of Genesis. They are settled with their families on the best farmland in the richest nation on earth. Their brother rules the land and they are under the protection of the might of Egypt. Genesis ends on a high note. But it is a hollow satisfaction. Egypt is not their home. God provided a home for them in the land of Canaan, but it was currently occupied by Canaanites and was ravaged by a terrible famine. Is this the end of the story? Will Joseph and his brothers settle for the comforts of Egypt, or will they cling to the ephemeral hope of a home in Canaan? Well, Genesis is only the beginning. This book shows us who God is and how He acts. It introduces His long-term plan and sets it in motion. Genesis ends with God’s people prospering, but not home. Home still awaits them, and that is not an ephemeral hope. Nothing about God is ephemeral, least of all His promises. What was more certain than the sunlight that shines through your window each morning is that God would bring His people up from Egypt and plant them in the land of Canaan. That certainty was not rooted in an assessment of geopolitics or demographic projections or military capability. That certainty was based on one thing, and one thing only – God’s word. Folks, when God says something, it is an ironclad certainty.

The story will unfold as God brings His people up from Egypt and plants them in their homeland, as God raises up a magnificent king and secures a small, peaceful empire in the eastern Mediterranean, as God inhabits an astonishingly beautiful temple in a glorious kingdom. Compared to the world of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it is a new world. God’s promises to Abraham came true!

But only partly true. Within the wonders of God’s people of Israel the corrosive power of sin still remained. The story continues as the world David and Solomon built collapsed. But eventually from the

ruins of that kingdom there arose a remarkable son, beloved of his father but hated by his brothers. There was no Midianite band to rescue Jesus from death, and He was killed to satisfy the wrath of his vengeful brothers. As Joseph emerged from prison to rule the world, so Jesus emerged from the grave and now rules heaven and earth. As God fulfilled His promises to Abraham, He has fulfilled His promises to us. Now we live in the comfort and presence of God the Holy Spirit. And just as the fulfillment in Israel was only partial, so it is with us, as we wait for a new world to come – a new heavens and earth. As we come to the end of Genesis we recognize that our own story is but the beginning of an eternal future with God. And that future is a glorious future, so wonderful it cannot be told in words. And it is secure, because God has promised it. Tonight, go forth rejoicing that no matter what comes in the following weeks or years, a glorious home awaits us.

Prayer

Lord God, we know that your word is certain and that your promises are secure, but we forget. Our faith wavers. Every day we return to thinking that we know better than you what will prosper us. We judge your holy word and find it flawed. How treacherous we are, O God! Yet still You love us. In spite of all we do to You, You do not abandon us to our wicked and foolish ways. Thank you for caring for us, for patiently bearing with us, for loving us. We praise you for paying the penalty for our sin Yourself on the cross. We praise You for never condemning us! We praise You for doing even more than this, for bringing good out of the evil that we and others commit.

Help us, Lord, to believe in You, to rest in You, to trust You to bring good out of evil. Drain the anger and frustration out of us. Make us able to confront evil without acting sinfully ourselves. We believe in You, our God. Help our unbelief! We ask in the name of Your precious Son who loves us and died to sanctify us. Amen.

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April 26, 2019