

West Van Baptist, April 12
Family Foundations
Genesis 1:26-31, 2:7-8, 18-25

I. Launching a new series

This morning we're launching a new spring sermon series. For the next 12 weeks or so we'll be considering what a healthy family does—and doesn't—look like, based on the book of Genesis.

I'm really excited about this series. It should be very practical, which is good. I always learn from the narratives in Genesis, and I expect to discover new things again this year. And preparing will be fun. Sometimes it's hard to know how to build good Powerpoint slides, but I think it will be easy to find pictures for this series. Lots of funny ones! Did you know that there's a whole website called "awkwardfamilyphotos.com"? (Have a look sometime—but not during church!)

Why do a series on the family?

As I've said already, it's a very practical subject. Every one of us began life in a family. Most of us spend years building our own families. Even those who are on their own still rub shoulders with other families on a regular basis. Beyond our biological connections, we all form significant relationships that serve as a kind of extended family. One of the most important examples happens right here: as a community that follow Jesus, we are called to be the "family of God," brothers and sisters who should live in a beautiful family relationship.

So "family" is relevant for all of us. It's also very important. Not just because we feel a need for relationship. Family matters to God. He designed us to live in relationships when He created us. We'll come back to that theme in a few moments.

It's also good to study what the Bible has to say about family because in today's world the family is under attack. We're surrounded by people who promote lifestyles and philosophies that are directly contrary to what God desires for our families. For the most part these folks aren't trying to undermine healthy family life intentionally. But without a clear, God-centered idea of what the family can and should be, many of our neighbors embrace approaches that harm their own relationships and create a climate that is hostile to the family in general. So we find ourselves in a spiritual battle for our own families and for a family-friendly culture. We need to be aware of this and to equip ourselves to stand for what is true and right, for our own sakes and for the good of our community.

Why focus on family stories in Genesis?

In part because we've spent a number of months in the New Testament letters, and it's time to do some more study in the Old Testament. Nowhere will we find a longer, more detailed, more colorful collection of family stories than in Genesis. Many of these are familiar. They are also powerful, filled with lessons that will speak to us. Genesis doesn't teach everything there is to know about healthy family life, but it lays a strong foundation. That's why, when other biblical books talk about the family, they often refer back to the themes and concepts from this first book of the Bible.

So, over the next couple months we'll explore various family-related stories from Genesis, looking for lessons that will help us to make our own families (and our church family) more and more what God intended them to be.

This morning we're going to begin in Genesis 1-2. If you go on a hike in one of our BC parks, you park your car in the lot, then you walk past a sign that introduces the area and onto a trailhead that sets you in the right direction. The first chapters of Genesis are like that. They set the stage for everything that follows. If we pay good attention here, the rest of the book will make better sense.

We don't have time to examine the whole passage, but we'll consider the most important verses on family relationships, drawing out some truths that we can apply this week and beyond.

II. Key verses in Genesis 1-2

Genesis opens with a simple but essential statement that frames the whole biblical worldview: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (1:1). Chapter 1 goes on to affirm that God made and named the basic parts of our world: light and darkness, sky and sea and land, sun, moon and stars, plants, fish, birds, wild and tame animals. All these things are God's creation, and He called them all "good."

That takes us into the verses we read this morning. *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness"* (1:26).

This statement sounds different depending on which translation you read. I've just read "humankind." In some Bible versions God made "mankind," or "human beings," or just "Man" (capital M). The same variations appear through the rest of chapters 1, 2, and 3. This isn't because the passage is difficult to understand in Hebrew; it's because the passage is poetic. In Hebrew it says that God made "*adam*." This word can mean one man, or humankind as a whole. It can also be a personal name: "Adam." It's poetic because we're *supposed to* see that any and all of these meanings apply. The poetry becomes even more obvious in chapter 2, which says God formed *adam* from the dust of the ground. The Hebrew word for "dust" or "dirt" is *adamah*. So God formed *adam* from the *adamah*. This is a bit like an English-speaker saying that God took some dust and made a guy named "Dustin."

In chapter 1, translators use "humankind" or "human beings" because the verse goes on to say: *God created ... him, male and female He created them* (1:27). Clearly God was making the human race as a whole. But notice that the verse uses both singular and plural, as well as references to "male" and "female." This makes it plain that in creating humanity, God made individual people, and He made us to be a race of women and men.

Three times in these two verses we're told that God made *adam* "*in His own image*." This has several dimensions, and we only understand it fully when we study the rest of the passage. But the implications start to appear right away. "*God blessed them*"—He wanted them to enjoy His good gifts, and offered those gifts freely. He said these humans would "*rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky...*" and the other creatures. They will *be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth, and subdue it*" (26-27). Though their bodies came from the dust, they would have a special

place in this world, enjoying the good things God has made. Finally, after creating human beings in His own image, *God saw all that He had made, and it was very good (1:31)*.

The scene changes a bit in chapter 2. You've probably seen movies that begin with a picture of the earth from outer space. Then they zoom in closer and you see a continent, then a city. Then the camera descends to street level and you see the house where the story starts. Sound familiar? It's actually a very ancient story-telling technique, and we see it in Genesis 1-2. Having given us the "big story" of God creating the whole world, now we get a closer look at God fashioning the human race.

Starting at verses 7-8, we read: *The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there He put the man he had formed.*

Here we get the connection of *adam* and *adamah*—man and dirt, dust and "Dustin." There are other poetic elements, too. In Hebrew the same word means "breath" and "spirit." So when God breathed "the breath of life" into the man, He wasn't just doing first aid, blowing air into the man's lungs. The Spirit of God infused spiritual life into this human being, forming a creature who is miraculously both an earthly physical animal and a spiritual being that reflects the Creator.

Because He loved and desired to bless this new race of humans, God placed *adam* in a garden whose very name—Eden—means "joy" or "delight." It was a wonderful place to live, and the man and his race were to tend it, enjoy it, and expand its borders until the whole world was a paradise.

However, in God's good creation, one thing is "not good." *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (2:18)*. "Helper" here doesn't mean a servant; the word means a partner. And the Hebrew term for "suitable" means "someone who can look him in the eye, face to face." I like the New Living Translation, which says God will make a helper "*who is just right for him.*"

In case we miss the point, in the following verses *adam* was told to take an inventory of all the animals, giving each a name. This was probably a fun and enlightening task—it was Adam's first trip to the zoo! But after examining them all, not a single creature could "look the man in the eye, face to face" (2:20). Only *adam* bore the image of God, making him unique—and alone—among the creatures. The man needed the company and partnership of another human.

So what follows is the creation of woman. Genesis 1 told us that *adam*—humanity—was created in God's image, both male and female. Now in Genesis 2 we get a more intimate picture of human beings—of a man and a woman—as individuals linked together by profound and permanent bonds.

This is where we are introduced to the concept of family.

Don't miss this, because it's the main point. People sometimes get preoccupied with details in the story that really aren't that important. We're told that *God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, He took one of the man's ribs Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib" (21-22)*. Everyone wants to know: why make the woman from a rib? Why not some other body part? Why not dust, like Adam? People have come up with lots of creative theories. But frankly, the Bible doesn't answer this question, and it never does come back to the theme of Adam's rib—not here or anywhere else.

We need to read in context! We've been told about *adam*—this word that means both a man and humankind. We've learned that the image of God applies in the singular and the plural, that God blesses "Adam" the man and the human race, men and women. In the next verses we will read about husbands and wives being joined together, about parents and children, about becoming independent from one's birth family and bonding together to form a new family. After this, the rest of Genesis will tell us about couples, parents and children, and siblings. Genesis is one long story about families—and it all begins right here. The main point in these verses is not about a rib, but about the fact that *adam*—humankind—*lives in relationships*.

God made the woman, not separately from the dust, but out of the man's own being. He looked on her and said: "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' [isha], for she was taken out of man [ish] (2:23)*". Then we're told this is the first example of personhood-in-relationship, which will set the pace for the rest of human history. *That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (2:24)*.

What does it mean to be human—to be *adam*? We are all individuals who, like Eve, begin our existence as part of someone else. We develop independence, because we *are* individuals. But we also form bonds of relationship, because being completely alone isn't what God intended. We are not pebbles on a beach, all created to be fundamentally, permanently separate. Neither are we drops of water in the ocean, all blurred together into a giant unified puddle. Human beings live in the tension between these states: created as individual persons, created to live in connection to other persons.

This takes different forms. But the first, most basic, most essential form is the marriage and family.

That's plenty for us to think about, so we'll stop at the end of chapter 2. If we were to continue into Genesis 3 with its story of the fall into sin, we'd find the same ideas. Sin will harm individuals, and their relationships. It affects Adam, Eve, and all their offspring including you and me. And so God will begin a process to heal and restore individuals—and their relationships. But that's a longer story for another time.

III. Summarizing some key truths

For now, I'd like to highlight 3 key truths that help us to put handles on what we find in the first chapters of Genesis. These truths will be an essential foundation for everything else we learn in this sermon series.

(1) Humanity is created in God's image

This is stated clearly in chapter 1. But what exactly does it mean? I have a good, hour-long lecture on this subject; but lunch is coming, so I'm going to assume that you trust me, and I'll skip to the bottom line. If you read carefully through Genesis 1, 2, and 3, looking at all the things Scripture says about God and about human beings, you'll find at least 3 things that fit this idea of being made "in God's image."

First, there is resemblance. In many ways, human beings are *like God*. God creates; we procreate. God names things; *adam* names things. God thinks and communicates; so do we. We're not exactly like God, but we were created to reflect Him.

Second, there is relationship. Humanity was created to *have fellowship with God*. Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day. They spoke with Him. God blessed them, which is something that happens in relationship.

Third, there is representation. Humanity was to *act on God's behalf*, serving Him and representing Him in this world. We were to rule the world over which He is ultimate King; to care for His garden; to fill the world with human beings that image Him.

Genesis doesn't reduce the image of God to one thing. It paints a multi-colored picture of human beings who are living reflections of God's own multifaceted glory.

(2) God's image applies to persons-in-relationship

This is the most important point this morning, and it's the one people most often overlook. When we think of the image of God, we almost always think about how an *individual* lives "in His image," and how *every* human person is an image-bearer.

These are good things. Every human being does bear God's image. That's why we believe human life is valuable. It's the basic concept behind Christian ethics. It's important!

But it's not enough. Genesis describes *adam*—humanity—as a person and a race, as singular and plural, as man and woman, and as individuals who exist in relationships—most notably in the family relationships of husband and wife, parents and children. The human race God created isn't *either* a bunch of individuals (pebbles on the beach) *or* a vast blob with no individuality (drops of water in the ocean). The human race God created is made of individuals-in-relationship.

This means the image of God applies *both* to us as individuals *and* to the meaningful, God-created relationships in which we live—including our marriage and family connections.

Let me put it another way.

- The image of God involves *resemblance* to Him. You and I were created to be like God as individuals, reflecting Him in our character, our speech, our actions. Also, we were created to be like God in our relationships: reflecting His love, kindness, patience, grace, and goodness in the way that we treat each other.
- The image of God involves *relationship* to Him. You and I are called to know God, to love and walk with Him as individuals. Also, we were created to form and live in families that worship God together, that love and follow and know Him together.
- The image of God involves *representing* Him in this world. Individually, you and I have the privilege and responsibility of caring for His creation, learning and doing His will, helping to extend His Kingdom. But our marriages and families, and our church family have the same privileges and responsibilities, which we need to fulfill together.

Each and every one of us is an image-bearer of God. This gives us dignity, value, and significance like nothing else. It is our glory—and our responsibility. It's how we fulfill God's purpose for us.

Each of us also has significant, bonding relationships that are part of what we are as human beings. These relationships are also part of being God's image-bearers. They, too, give our lives value and

potential. They, too, are our glory—and our responsibility, because through them we fulfill God’s purpose for us.

Of these relationships, the first and most fundamental are the relationships of marriage and family. These are the foundation for all the rest. This is why I said earlier that family is important. It isn’t some incidental thing or social construct. It’s part of being human, and it matters to God who created us.

Our families look different, and they go through different stages. The Bible doesn’t insist that we all have to be exactly the same all the time. But it does teach us that relationships are important, whether we’re talking about our marriages, families, committed friendships, key partnerships, or our fellowship as members of Jesus’ body the church. We are called to image God well in every relationship, just as we should in our personal lives.

(3) God aims to rebuild the image marred by sin

We didn’t read Genesis 3 this morning. But the story is familiar, and it sets up a bridge between this morning’s message and the ones that will follow.

In Genesis 3 we learn that Adam and Eve sin, disobeying and putting themselves in God’s place. If you read the chapter carefully you’ll notice that all the things which describe the image of God from chapters 1 and 2 are now damaged—the image is marred, both in their individual lives and in their relationships. So we all inherit a problem: our own marriages, our families, and our church family regularly fail to be all that God intended.

But Genesis 3 also hints at good news, developed further through the rest of the book and ultimately across the whole Bible. God has a plan to restore: to forgive, and heal, and make things right again. He wants to do this for individual men and women whom He loves, shaping us into the image of Jesus, making us what we were created to be. And He wants to do this with our relationships, transforming our marriages, our families, our church family, and other relationships that shape our lives, so that there, too, our love and faithfulness will be a beautiful reflection of His own nature and His love and faithfulness to us.

That’s God’s goal for us. And it’s the overarching goal for this sermon series. We want to learn lessons from Genesis to help us better image God in our relationships, especially (but not only) in our families.

IV. Imaging with Joe

When I was a freshman in college I lived in a men’s dorm with a whole lot of guys who became good friends. One of those friends lived across the hall from me. His name was Joe. Joe was from Montana. He was a hulking big, football-playing guy. He had a good sense of humor, and got along well with everyone—except on one or two occasions when the other guys on the floor made him a bit angry.

Joe had a girlfriend named Margaret. We heard about Margaret day and night. We heard how wonderful she was, how beautiful, how fun, how gracious and kind, how perfect! To be honest, I

think we were all pretty skeptical. Joe was a nice guy, but he didn't seem like the kind of guy who would attract a girl like the "perfect" Margaret.

Then one day Joe posted a glossy 8x10 photo on a tack-board in his room. The rest of us were astonished! We couldn't tell whether Margaret was "perfect" from the picture, but we had to admit—she was stunning. All the jokes about Joe's girlfriend stopped that day.

Well, almost all the jokes. Along the way someone made a photocopy of Margaret's picture and drew a dartboard target over top. Another day someone added a mustache and bushy eyebrows. The made-up pictures were humorous, and no one meant any harm. But I never saw Joe get so mad as he did when he found them. The picture was an image of the girl he loved. It was precious to him. How dare anyone do anything to deface it and make it less than perfect!

The guys quickly stopped messing with Margaret's photo. We all understood Joe's feelings. No one likes it when the image of their loved ones—or pictures of them—are disrespected and mistreated.

Friends, God created the human race in His image—to be a beautiful, worthy expression of His own glory. To reflect Him, and commune with Him, and represent Him well. That's what He intends for each of us as individuals. It's what He intends for the human race as a whole. And it's what He intends for our marriages, for our parent-child relationships, our sibling relationships, our other family relationships, and for the relationships we share as members of the church, the "Family of God." These relationships are an essential part of what it means for us to be human. They matter to us—they affect our well-being. And they matter to God. He cares about them much more deeply than Joe ever cared about a photo of Margaret.

We need to learn to think about our relationships this way. To see our marriages, our families, our fellowship as a church, as ways we image our Lord. To constantly ask ourselves: how can we reflect His love, and goodness, and faithfulness, and beauty more accurately?

It's a question we'll be asking over and over as we look at families in Genesis in the coming weeks. But it's a question we should ask all the time, starting today. May our relationships, like our individual lives, image our God well this week and always.