

West Van Baptist, June 28
Family Foundations – Offspring, Promises, and Signposts
Genesis 3:1-15 and some other texts...

I. Favorite passages?

Today we're finishing our series on the family in Genesis. With that in mind I've been asking people: do you have a favorite passage or story in this book? A section that touches your heart, that you find especially helpful?

The responses were interesting. Some people love the glory of the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2. A number mentioned Abraham's life: God's promises to him, his generosity with cousin Lot, his growing faith. Several immediately spoke about the Joseph story, with its reminders that God is present with us in trouble, that forgiveness brings healing, and that the Lord can turn difficulties into good. Someone even expressed a fondness for Cain and Abel. I don't completely understand the appeal of a narrative where one brother kills the other; but perhaps it's a reminder that things could be worse than they are for us?

Several sections of Genesis were nobody's favorite. No one mentioned the verses we read this morning, where Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sin entered our world. That's not a surprise. It's the saddest passage in the whole Bible, not one we like to read very often.

I also wasn't surprised that no one pointed to the genealogies scattered through Genesis. You know—those lists of descendants:

Shem became the father of Arphaxad. [Then] Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Arphaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah. [Then] Arphaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived 30 years, he became the father of Eber....

And so on. I've never met anyone who is excited about the genealogies. We acknowledge that they're part of God's Word, inspired by His Spirit. But the names are hard to pronounce. Most of the characters play no role in the Bible's story. So, even though 10% of the verses in Genesis are given to these "family tree" lists, it's very easy to skip right by them.

Well, guess what! In this series we're not going to skip them. Today we're going to look at the "Fall" in Genesis 3 and the genealogies that come after.

Please don't leave! I know, sometimes I preach unusual sermons on difficult passages, and it takes some work to wade through them. Thank you for your patience when we do. These texts really are in God's Word for a reason, and we shouldn't just skip them. This will stretch us a little; but please be patient and I promise we'll see the value of the study as we go.

II. Some perspective on Genesis

First, we're going to need a little historical perspective.

What does Genesis look like? In my hard-copy, leather-bound Bible, Genesis looks like this [picture]. Most of the time these days, I read my Bible electronically, either on my phone or my computer. In them, Genesis looks like this [picture]. In both cases I see columns of text, chapter and verse divisions, and some helpful notes.

This is *not* what Genesis looked like in Jesus' day—and definitely not in the years before. The Old Testament books were written on scrolls (and you'll still find them on scrolls in Jewish synagogues today). In the centuries after Christ, the Greeks and Romans started to use books with pages instead. But even then, Genesis and other Bible books looked very different. There were no verse or chapter divisions for another 1000 years. In fact, for a long time people left no space between words. And Old Testament Hebrew only wrote the consonants, not the vowels. So for ages, Genesis would have looked more like this [picture].

This had practical implications. If you wanted to read about Abraham in the Genesis scroll, there was no section title to help you find him. You had to scan the scroll until you saw his name, then search for exactly the right part.

It also meant that people normally read the Bible in large chunks. Today we often read a chapter, or maybe a few verses, as we did this morning in Genesis 3:1-15. In Bible times you'd almost never do that. The Jews and early Christians would read the story of Adam and Eve from start to finish. On a festival day, we'd likely read the whole Genesis scroll from one end to the other.

This is one of the reasons it's so important to read the Bible in context. Most of the Old and New Testament books were specifically designed to be read in large sections, and the overall message is at least as important as the verse-by-verse details. (By the way, if you want help with this, trying making an outline when you study a Bible book. It's a really useful practice.)

The genealogies in Genesis are a great example of this. Most of the names in these lists aren't super-important for us to know. I'll never preach a sermon on Elam and Asshur and Arpachshad, the sons of Shem. But that doesn't mean the genealogies are unimportant in the overall design of Genesis. If you fly over the book at 30,000 feet and make an outline, here's what you will see.

- **The story of creation, Adam and Eve (ch 1-5)**
We get the story—creation, the fall, Cain and Abel. *Then we have the “generations” or descendants of Cain and Seth (ch 4-5).*
- **Noah and the flood (ch 6-11)**
We get the story: sin multiplies, God sends a flood, Noah builds an ark and is saved, his family starts over again. *Then we have the descendants of Noah, Japheth, Ham, and Shem (ch 10).*
There is a brief account of the tower of Babel, *then a longer genealogy of Shem's family (11:10-26).*
- **The life of Abraham (ch 12-25)**
We get the story: Abraham moves to Canaan, has sons Ishmael and Isaac, interacts with nephew Lot and several kings, and dies. *Then we have the descendants of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac (25:12-28).*

- **The lives of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau (ch 25-36)**

We read the story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, of Jacob's travels, marriages, children, and return home. *Then we have the descendants of Jacob and Esau* (ch 35-36).

- **The life of Joseph (and a bit about Judah; ch 37-46)**

We read the story of Joseph as a slave and then a ruler in Egypt. We watch Judah grow, and see Joseph reconciled with his brothers. *Then we have the descendants of Jacob through his 12 sons* (46:8-27).

- **Final days in Egypt (ch 47-50)**

Finally we hear how Jacob's family moved to Egypt. As Jacob prepares to die we hear his *final words to each of his 12 sons and their descendants* (ch 49).

(Afterwards there is a brief chapter when Joseph encourages his brothers and asks that he be buried in Canaan.)

III. The pattern ... and the point

Do you see the pattern that runs through Genesis? The book has 6 main sections. Each section is built around key characters: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. Each section tells stories about those characters. Then each section finishes with genealogies tracing their family lines.

The genealogies interrupt the story each time a major section ends and a new one begins. In fact, they are the original chapter divisions in Genesis. Genealogies tell us: "something new is about to start." They do this topically—and visually, since they were the easiest things to spot on a scroll that had no spaces between words [picture]. If you were reading a Genesis scroll and you wanted to start or stop at one of the main sections, you'd use the genealogies to help you navigate.

But why use these long, complicated family trees? Wouldn't it be easier just to write "new topic here"? Easier, yes. But these dividers were designed to communicate an important message. To understand this, we need to go back to this morning's reading in Genesis 3.

The first chapters of the Bible tell us 3 main things.

- God created a good world, including human beings made in His image.
- Humans have a choice to make. We can listen to the Enemy of God, or we can listen to and obey our Creator. Adam and Eve chose badly, allowing sin to enter and ruin the world.
- God will not allow the Enemy to win in the end. There will be temptation and consequences for sin. But in God's plan, there will come a day when the Enemy will be defeated and sin overturned. This will be accomplished by someone who comes from the human family: a "seed" or "offspring" or "descendant" of the woman.

We read the first hint of this plan at Genesis 3:15: *"I will cause hostility between you [the serpent, the Enemy] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."*

Every great story centers around a problem that needs to be solved. The Bible teaches us that human history is a kind of story, and the whole thing revolves around the problems of a deceiving

Enemy and damage caused by sin. We humans can't solve these problems. God must. He promises that He will—through a member of the human family. ***This is the single most important thing in all human history.*** Whatever else happens—and many other things will—from God's perspective this is the central plot of the story, and it outweighs everything else.

That's the reason Genesis uses genealogies for its chapter divisions. If we read this book the way it was designed to be read when it was a scroll and the story was told in large chunks, we find that every new stage in the story is marked off by a reminder of what we learned back in Genesis 3.

- The genealogies remind us that sin brings death. They count off the lives—and deaths—of each generation.
- They remind us that human beings must choose whether we will listen to the Enemy or to our Lord. In each genealogy there are at least 2 branches of the family tree: a branch that learns to obey God (like Seth, Abraham, Jacob, and Judah), and other branches that mostly wander away (like Cain, Ham, Lot, and Esau).
- Most important: the genealogies remind us of God's promise to raise up a family member who will defeat the Enemy and undo the problem of sin. Someone from Eve's family, from Seth's, from Noah's and Abraham's and Judah's.

The genealogies aren't the only reminders of God's promise in Genesis 3. Along the way God tells Abraham, *"I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.... All the families on earth will be blessed through you"* (12:2-3). Judah's father makes this prediction about his family line: *"You will grasp your enemies by the neck.... Judah is a young lion that has finished eating its prey.... The scepter will not depart from Judah ... until the coming of the One to whom it belongs, the One whom all nations will honor"* (49:8-10).

Still, just in case we're not paying attention, every section of Genesis ends with a long, in-your-face object lesson. The genealogies constantly remind us of God's promise to raise up an "offspring," a child who will defeat the Enemy and overturn the problem of sin. That truth is present in every story, and ultimately it's more important than the details of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph.

This summer you might make a trip down the highway to some special destination. Maybe to your favorite vacation spot, or to visit family or a special friend. That destination is the whole reason for the trip, so you watch the kilometers go by, eager to reach the end. Along the way you might enjoy some beautiful scenery: a lake, a mountain pass. An ice cream shop where you can stop and be refreshed. All those things are good parts of the trip. But in the end, the most important thing is the destination, so you keep watching for signs that say: "destination this way," "destination 300 km," "200 km," and so on.

Those plain green signs on the highway aren't the most exciting parts of the trip. The lake and the ice cream shop are more interesting. But the signs are important. They remind you of the destination and keep you on track.

That's what the genealogies in Genesis are. They are signposts that remind us of God's promise and point to the destination.

IV. So what?

We need to make this practical for our lives today. Let me suggest 3 ways this information speaks to you and me as we walk with God in the here and now.

(1) This is the context for the Bible's story

We're all called to be students of God's Word. If we want to understand the Bible well—especially the Old Testament—we need to be aware of these themes from Genesis. God is a good Creator. His good world has been harmed by sin, and it is under the influence of an evil Enemy. We must choose to listen to God and not the lies of that Enemy. Most important, there is good news: God has a plan to defeat the Enemy, to overturn sin and make things right again. Amazingly, He will work through the human family to fulfill that promise.

These themes color everything else we read in the Bible. They are the reason God delivered Israel out of Egypt. They are the reason God's people needed to stay separate from the pagan Canaanites. They help us understand the importance of King David and the subsequent kings of Judah. They explain, in part, why having children was so very important to the people of Israel. They help us to understand why other genealogies are scattered across the Old Testament and included at the beginning of Matthew and Luke.

The themes build and grow as history unfolds. We begin with a “seed of the woman,” a “lion of Judah,” “one to whom the scepter belongs.” Along the way we will learn that this person is a “Son of David,” a “Son of Man,” an Anointed One whose ministry has prophetic, priestly, and kingly dimensions. We hear that He will call God His Father. All these things will prepare us to recognize Him when He finally arrives, and we discover that His name is Jesus—and that He is both son of Adam and the unique Son of God.

We'll read many other wonderful things in the Old Testament that stir our hearts and help us to grow. We need to study those stories and lessons. But we will not fully understand the message of the Old Testament until we see it in light of these themes from Genesis, and learn to recognize the signposts that keep pointing us toward the Savior who is still to come.

People sometimes say, “I enjoy the Old Testament stories, but I don't see where the Messiah fits in. Does the Old Testament really predict him, or is this something the New Testament just imposes on the Hebrew Bible?” This is like the person who is so preoccupied by the mountains and lakes and ice cream shops that they overlook the signposts along the highway. The signposts are there. Once you start noticing them in Genesis, it's easier to recognize the ones that follow.

(2) This offers encouragement for the frustrated

I hope this spring's sermon series on families in Genesis has been helpful for you. It has for me. Our families are important, and it's good to get guidance from Scripture.

At the same time, I'm conscious that some people find the subject of “family” frustrating and discouraging, or at least not-super-interesting. Singles can get tired of lessons about marriage. Those of us who have no kids, or whose parents are gone, may find parent-child lessons difficult.

Lots of people have at least someone in their family who is a source of pain, turning these lessons into an awkward reminder.

When we're really honest, people sometimes share that this makes them want to avoid the Old Testament, where book after book speaks of family as a key sign of God's favor and blessing. I think about verses like these from Ps 127:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame. (127:3-5)

These words were a huge source of hope and joy to Hebrew people with happy families. They're less popular for people who want children but can't have them, and for others who struggle with difficult relations.

We need the perspective of Genesis on this. Yes, family is an important part of life for most of us. So of course the Bible speaks about our families and celebrates them. But Genesis adds another dimension. It tells us that in God's plan for history, the single most important thing is the coming of a Savior from within the human family who can defeat the Enemy, overturn sin, and bring healing to our world. In the Old Testament, that truth brought an importance to the family that went far beyond the joys of having children and being part of a household. For every descendant of Abraham, and especially for those from the tribe of Judah, that truth was a key reason for emphasizing family so much.

Then the promise was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus. After Jesus, everything changed. Family is still a good thing and always will be; but it is no longer the single most important thing.

That's why there are no more genealogies after the story of Jesus' birth. It's why Jesus tells us that it's OK for some people to stay single for the sake of God's kingdom (Mat 19:12); why Paul suggests that in some circumstances it's better to avoid marriage and children, knowing that *"each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that"* (1 Cor 7:7). We no longer live in the Old Testament situation. From a New Testament perspective a person's family is no longer the main focus of God's blessing. Now that Jesus has come, it's all about our relationship with Him—and through Him, with God and one another.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be married, to have children and grandchildren, to enjoy the blessings that come with a healthy, happy family. These are good things. But if you're one of the people who is frustrated by family (or lack of family), and especially if you feel like the Bible adds to the weight of frustration on your shoulders, then pay attention to Genesis, and let the frustration go. That special emphasis on family in the Old Testament was all tied to the promise of a Savior who would come. He *has* come. Now we experience God's blessing and the joy of fellowship in a new and better way, and we don't need to live up to an Old Testament expectation that's simply not relevant anymore.

For the rest of us who *are* happy in our family situations, let's make sure we're sensitive to those who find this difficult. Let's be careful not to misuse Old Testament promises that were for people who lived *before* Messiah, in a way that frustrates our brothers and sisters. Let's encourage them

with the message of Scripture. Let's affirm and appreciate them and find ways to be family to them in Christ.

(3) This helps us to see the greatness of Jesus

For many centuries, Christians have divided history into "BC and AD"—the time before Christ and the time "in the year of our Lord." Secular society has replaced those letters with BCE and CE, "The Common Era" and the time "Before the Common Era." But the point remains. We understand from Scripture that Jesus is the center of history. Everything changed because He came to live among us, taught us, gave His life for us, and returned to life to bring us life.

This isn't just a New Testament idea. It begins in Genesis and runs through the whole Bible. Of course it gets special emphasis in the New Testament! Now it's happened, and we know details! And when you've waited for help for many generations, and then it finally comes, there's much to celebrate. Paul says this well:

The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.
(Rom 8:22)

Then, when the set time had finally come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as His children. (Gal 4:4-5)

The Bible presents Jesus to us as the fulfillment of an ancient promise and the very center-point of human history. He is the one who defeats the Enemy, who pays the price for sin, who has the power to forgive and heal and restore. He gives new life right now to those who trust Him, who are willing to place themselves in His hands and welcome Him into their lives. And at a right time still to come, He is the one who will make everything whole again.

The whole Bible speaks of the greatness of God's Savior. The message comes to full flower in the New Testament. But the seeds are planted, promises given, and signposts set up at the very beginning, in Genesis. The more clearly we see the message here, the brighter it shines everywhere else.

Genesis helps us see the greatness of Jesus. May we see it and respond in worship.

V. Road signs...

God sent His Son, born of a woman ... to redeem ... so that we might receive adoption as God's children. What a great message! I can't think of a better way to close our series on the family in Genesis, can you?

As we drive to various places this summer—to Grandma's, to the cabin or the campsite, to the lake, wherever—I hope we all notice the road signs along the way, and remember how important they are as pointers to our destination.

And may they be a reminder that God has filled His Word with signposts, including those genealogies that we usually skip. May we become more aware of all the signposts God has put in His Word, pointing us to Jesus: the Son of Man, the Seed of the Woman, the Anointed Son of David who fulfills God's promises.