



The End of the Beginning

Genesis 50 & Hebrews 11:1–12:2

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With this sermon we conclude our journey through the book of Genesis, a journey that began with the beginning, Genesis 1:1, on Sept 17, 2006. We have made the journey in short segments, most recently during the 2010 Epiphany season in a series on Joseph's story. Tonight we come to the end of the beginning. In order to understand it, we have to remember how it started.

Our Cultural Mandate Under God

"In the beginning," Gen 1:1, "God created the heavens and the earth." From this very first line, two important themes emerge:

1. **God is sovereign.** He is almighty, possessing ultimate and supreme power. By his very word the heavens & the earth (i.e. everything) were made.
2. **God is good.** At the end of every day of creation, God declared what he made to be good. And the pinnacle of creation was mankind, created male & female. These he declared to be *very good*. Why? Because they were made in the image of God, who is himself the essence of goodness.

God gave to Adam & Eve their task in Gen 1:28: "*Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and exercise dominion over it.*" This is the Cultural Mandate: multiplication & dominion under God. They were to remain human, rather than become gods. *Under God*, they were to spread his *very good* image everywhere (multiplication), and serve as his vice-regents (dominion).

God also commanded them not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil. Why not? Shouldn't all of God's creatures be able to distinguish right from wrong? Of course. But this tree was God's tree, bearing a type of fruit that was only for fit for God. Only God knows good and evil absolutely. Consider these words from Proverbs 30:4–6:

*Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and the name of his son? Tell me if you know!
Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.*

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Even prior to our fall into sin, we were finite and not omniscient. We were and continue to be human, not God. “One must know comprehensively in order to speak absolutely about what is good and bad.” Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 46.

Joseph Exemplifies Fulfillment of the Cultural Mandate

In Genesis 3, the serpent tempted our first parents to doubt God’s goodness, to doubt his sovereign power to enforce the commandment, and to doubt the fundamental distinction between us and God. They were tempted *to take God’s place*. But when they gave into temptation, they found it was all a lie. God was indeed good. God was indeed sovereign. And they did not take God’s place. Instead, they fell into the corruption of sin.

Sin brought severe consequences for the tasks of multiplication & dominion, explained in God’s curses (Gen 3:14–19). The rest of Genesis, from the Fall (Genesis 3) all the way to the end, is about the struggle for multiplication and dominion in a broken world.

1. In terms of **multiplication**, the curse of sin means that the spread of life comes with a threat to life. Childbirth is difficult and dangerous, life is hard, and we are dust. But God is good, and in his mercy he gives abundant life to those who abide in him.
2. In terms of **dominion**, the curse of sin means that the stewardship of God’s creation is also difficult and dangerous, and fraught with toil. But God is sovereign, and he empowers those who serve him.

What does all of this have to do with Joseph and the end of the beginning? Everything. Joseph endured hardship after hardship in a broken world, but he refused to curse God. He resisted the temptation to take God’s place. Joseph preferred to be with God in prison than to be alone and free.

Joseph was a faithful steward wherever God placed him, whether as a slave or in prison. He exercised dominion and worked towards multiplication in slavery and in prison. Consequently, God raised Joseph up as his redeemed vice-regent, to lead in multiplication and dominion under God’s command. God gave Joseph dominion over the Egyptian empire. Everything under Joseph’s dominion prospered. When the curse upon the ground led to a seven year global famine, Joseph’s dominion saved the nations, including his own family. In short, God raised up Joseph as a model to us of the Cultural Mandate.

It’s a wonderful story, but we ought not see Joseph as a superhero. We are meant to be wise stewards like Joseph, in order to fulfill our very same destiny in God’s providence. We too are called to serve God as redeemed vice-regents, leading in multiplication and dominion under God’s command.

Are you following Joseph’s model as God’s redeemed vice-regent? Are you a faithful steward in your current station? What do you have? Time? Money? Position? Opportunity? Are you making it count for the Lord? Jesus says, *“The one who is faithful with a few things will be put in charge of many.”*

Sin Leads to Alienation, but God Graciously Offers Reconciliation

There's also another story line getting wrapped up at the end of Genesis, and it's the story of alienation and reconciliation. When our first parents fell into sin, they were alienated from God, symbolized by their expulsion from Eden. Immediately following, fratricide threatens the human race and God's purposes in creation. Before Cain murders his brother, God says to him, "*Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*" Gen 4:6-7.

Do you know this feeling? Whether through your own jealousy and insecurity, or that of someone else, you are *done* with that person. You don't want to interact with him or her ever again. Like Cain, sin crouches at our door, stirring up hatred and driving us toward alienation. As Christians, the shed blood of the innocent Abel still speaks to us—of Christ, who died in innocence so that we might not experience alienation from God.

The story line of alienation, particularly family strife, continues throughout Genesis. Just to name a few:

- Abraham must leave his family & go to Canaan.
- Ishmael vs. Isaac. (cf Gal 4:21ff)
- Jacob vs. bro. Esau, Jacob vs. Uncle Laban.
- Rachel vs. Leah.
- Joseph vs. his brothers, Joseph vs. the world

One of the great miracles of Genesis is that in spite of all this enmity and alienation, God in his miraculous providence preserves for himself a people. When in Gen 49 Jacob blesses his sons on his deathbed, by God's grace there are the 12 tribes of Israel. They haven't been wiped out by any of their enemies, nor have they destroyed one another. Sin leads to alienation, but God in his mercy works to keep the family from tearing itself apart.

Repentance is Essential for Reconciliation

As we have seen, in spite of "death" at the hand of his brothers, Joseph experiences "resurrection" in Egypt. Through him, Jacob and his other sons are rescued from famine. And so, at the end of Genesis, only *some* consequences of sin remain for Jacob and his sons. If God had abandoned them to suffer the full consequences of their sins, they would all be dead. Everyone would have starved to death during the famine. But God had mercy upon them all through Joseph.

Yet some consequences of sin *do* remain, and we see these when Jacob blesses his sons. Jacob's blessings overflow to Joseph and Judah. E.g.:

*The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs,
and the obedience of the nations is his. Gen 49:10.*

But unlike Jacob's blessing for Judah, in several instances his blessings are really more like "antiblessings." He takes away Reuben's rights as firstborn because Reuben put himself in the place of his father and slept with his father's wife. Simeon and Levi also lose their father's blessing because they put themselves in the place of their father and led the family into a dangerous and unnecessary war. These antiblessings make sense, because in punishing wickedness among the brothers, Jacob demotes those whose characters are a threat to the survival of the entire family. They also make sense in light of the beginning of Genesis, because in each case they sinned against their father in the same way that Adam and Eve sinned against God.

The reason for highlighting these things is to point out how, at the end of Genesis, *some* of the consequences of sin still remain. It's the end of the beginning, but not anywhere near the end. Joseph is no longer alienated from his brothers, but he still is an alien in Egypt when he dies.

Why do the brothers in some instances experience just punishment, and in other instances receive mercy? It depends on *repentance*, at least within the Genesis narrative. The brothers eventually confess their sins against Joseph. But we never hear any repentance from Reuben, Simeon or Levi, and eventually they suffer the consequences for it.

It seems counterintuitive, doesn't it? We think that if we can just keep our sins hidden, then they won't cause us harm. Yet the exact opposite is true. When we confess our sins, we open the door for mercy instead of justice. When we hide our sins, we close the door on mercy, making justice all the more inevitable.

Remember that it is *we* who close the door on God's mercy. The Lord never closes it, as we saw in the story of Judah. Judah starts out as a pathetic loner in his disregard for his family, especially Tamar his daughter-in-law, and selling his brother into slavery for a profit. But twenty years later, at the apex of the story, Judah is transformed and takes the lead in repentance. Instead of hating his brothers, he is willing to sacrifice himself for them. Instead of disregarding his father, he is the one who remembers him. Through repentance, Judah is clearly transformed. Thus Jacob's blessing (above), that Judah's descendants will someday bring forth the messianic kingdom.

Through this, at the end of Genesis, Judah redeems the story of Cain. Cain hated his brother and killed him, and for the rest of his life suffered the consequences of his sin, living in alienation from his family. Judah, on the other hand, hated his brother and sold him into slavery. But then he repented, and was willing to lay down his life for his family. At the end of his life, Judah enjoyed redemption and reconciliation with his family.

The heaviest burden in the world is the guilt of our own sinfulness. It weighs us down, to the point that we can hardly move, or think, or feel. Repentance is God's gift to us, to remove this burden so that we might run freely once again as God intended.

Remember how this played out with Joseph's brothers? Back in Gen 42:21, when things began to go badly on their first trip to Egypt, they supposed that it was their just desserts. More than twenty years had passed since they sold Joseph into slavery, and yet *this* was the first thing that came to mind in a time of crisis! They got what they wanted when they rid themselves of Joseph, but it didn't lead to their freedom. Instead, the guilt of their sin against their brother was crushing them.

Then came the climactic moment in the reunion of Joseph and his brothers, when Judah courageously begged Joseph on behalf of his other brother Benjamin (Gen 44). Remember Joseph's gracious response, in which he relinquished the opportunity for revenge, and instead testified to the sovereignty of God? (Gen 45) Remember how Joseph wept on the neck of his brother Benjamin? Remember how Joseph kissed *all* his brothers and talked with them? How could one forget this beautiful triumph of reconciliation through the providence of God

Yet *forget* is exactly what Joseph's brothers did, presumably all except Judah and Benjamin. In Gen 50, after the death of Jacob their father, they once again fear for their lives in anticipation of their brother, Joseph's, revenge. Like their father, who cowardly deceived his brother Esau, they send a lie to Joseph (50:16-17), *saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."*

They hide behind the false pretense of instructions given by Jacob prior to his death. Yet in their message is a genuine confession of "sins & wrongs" committed against Joseph. This is the full repentance from all the brothers that should have accompanied that of Judah.

When Joseph hears this and bursts into tears, then the brothers go to him in person and offer themselves as his slaves. Now more than ever before, Joseph is aware of God's presence with him. Through thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment, Joseph learned that it is better to be with God in prison than usurp him and be alone. Joseph knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that all his blessings come from God, and that the greatest blessing of all is the presence of God. So once again he refuses the opportunity for revenge, and makes the climactic statement of all of Genesis: *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, so that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."* (Gen 50:19-21) Here is the moral of the entire story, at the end of the beginning, framed in terms of the same two themes from the beginning of the beginning: **God is sovereign**, and **God is good**. Both themes are essential:

- **God is sovereign (and we aren't).** "Am I in the place of God?" Sin is crouching at my door, and I really, really want to be in the place of God.

But I have learned that his ways are higher than mine. By God's grace I will take dominion over sin, and let God be master over me.

- **God is good (and we aren't).** "You meant evil against me." And frankly, sin is crouching at my door, and I really, really want to mean evil against you in return. But I have learned that mercy is better than justice. By God's grace I will take dominion over sin, and let God's goodness flow through me to you.

Are you dreaming about getting even with someone? Try Joseph's question instead: "Am I in the place of God?" We may be good some of the time, but we aren't God. Our knowledge is limited, and so our justice is flawed at best. "*Vengeance is mine,*" says the Lord. "*I will repay.*"

Are you thinking that your life isn't what it should have been? Are you angry and bitter because things didn't go your way? Have you been sulking for months or years because of a disappointment in school or work, relationships or church? Try Joseph's question instead: "Am I in the place of God?" My plan isn't really better than God's, is it? *I'll be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let my requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep my heart and mind in Christ Jesus.*

Jesus Christ Offers Reconciliation to Us

We have come to the end of the beginning, and the end of this great book is a miraculous one. In the midst of God's good creation gone mad with sin, God's people have been partially successful in the mandate of multiplication and dominion. From fratricide in the thorns and thistles east of Eden, to 12 tribes more or less reconciled, with plenty of livestock and little ones, getting on reasonably well in Goshen. It's not the Promised Land, but you have to admit they have come a long, long way since Cain murdered Abel.

How should we feel having reached the end of Genesis? Every once in a while in God's word we have the privilege and benefit of another biblical author's response to a particular text. Hebrews 11 is just such a text, as it is a New Testament reflection on the book of Genesis. It recaps and briefly comments on the significance of the Genesis story. When the author comes to Joseph, he says simply this (Heb 11:22): *By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.* The author of Hebrews understood that the end of the beginning was simply that. It left us with another patriarch who died in faithful anticipation of the fulfillment of the promises of God.

Thankfully, Hebrews doesn't leave us there. The end of the beginning points to the grand conclusion, when every loose end will be tied up. At the end of his historical summary, the author's conclusion is instructive for us. How *he* responds to Genesis is a model for how *we* ought to respond. Here's what he says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

At the conclusion of the story is Jesus himself, the only one who perfectly accomplished God's Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:28. Jesus was faithful to God even to the point of death on a cross, and in so doing, he took death captive and now reigns over all creation as God's vice-regent.

It was our sin that put him there on the cross. Despite our best intentions, we chose evil rather than good, and it cost Jesus his life. But now he welcomes us to be reconciled to him, and we do so by the grace of repentance, casting off the burden of sin, casting it onto him, so that we might again follow God unhindered. As we cast off the burden of sin, he empowers us to persevere in the work of multiplication and dominion in his name.

God is good, and God is sovereign. His good plan for us is a way out from the crushing burden of sin. The aim of his good plan, the end of the story, is Jesus his Son. Let's fix our eyes upon him. He welcomes repentant sinners like you and me into his kingdom with open arms, saying, *"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, so that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."*

Thank you, Lord Jesus. Gladly we come. Amen.