

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Notes by Todd Bolen

The book of Genesis fills 50 chapters and spans thousands of years, and though its stories are familiar to many, summarizing its essential message is more difficult. Genesis is often explained by a series of events (creation, fall, flood, Babel) and people (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph), but how do these fit together? What are the primary themes and how do they contribute to the author's main idea? What is God doing in Genesis and what does he want the readers to understand?

GOD: God is. God exists before and apart from his creation. He alone has no beginning. He creates, and all that he creates is good. When man rebels, God provides the hope of restoration. God judges and God saves. God chooses Noah and God chooses Abraham. God's grace triumphs over sin, and God's purpose stands despite man's failure.

CREATION: God created the sun, the moon, and the stars, but the centerpiece of his creation is earth. God created waters, but his primary interest is in the land. God created animals, but only humans are made in God's image. God completes his creation in six days, and God is satisfied with his creation. God's creation is corrupted by man and God places it under a curse for a time. God intends to redeem his creation.

HUMANS: God created a man and a woman in his image in order that they might represent him on earth and rule over all creation. He blesses them and commands them to fill the earth and subdue it. When they refuse to submit to their Creator, they are separated from him and their mission to fill the earth and subdue it are made more difficult by God's judgment. Most people follow in the way of the serpent rather than the way of God. God chooses a series of individuals to carry out his purposes.

SIN: What begins as one act in the garden soon fills the earth as mankind repeatedly rebels *en masse* against their creator. Every person is guilty of sin and faces judgment, but the hope that one can be restored to God is clear from individuals such as Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. As a result of man's sin, every person dies, the world is destroyed by waters, and languages are confused. God's judgments are intended to end worldwide rebellion and bring hope to a preserved remnant.

SEED: Each creation produces after its own kind. Mankind gives birth to people who are distinct from all other created beings. But with the introduction of sin, man may choose to honor his Creator, thereby acting in the image of God, or man may choose to follow the serpent, thus becoming the serpent's spiritual seed. God provides hope to Adam and Eve by revealing that one

of their seed will crush the serpent. In longing for the fulfillment of this hope, the book of Genesis traces the seed of the righteous line through a series of *toledot* (family lines). The promised seed will come from Adam, from Seth (not Cain), from Noah, from Shem (not Ham or Japheth), from Abraham, from Isaac (not Ishmael), from Jacob (not Esau), from Judah (not Joseph or his brothers). While the blessing of God promises numerous descendants, only a single individual is expected to crush the head of the serpent (3:15), conquer the land of his enemies (22:17), bless all nations on earth (22:18), and rule over an earth restored to its original blessed state (49:10-12).

LAND: God made man from the dust, to live on the land, to work the soil, and to subdue the earth. Man is a physical being whose existence is tied to the land. When man rebels against God, the ground is cursed. When man dies physically, his body returns to the dust. Man was made for the earth and his future hope is on this earth. God did not reject the earth, but plans to redeem the earth through the seed of the woman. Man will one day rule over the earth in complete submission to the Creator. God judged and re-created the land through the flood, thus showing his intention to redeem it so that man may rule over it as his representative. God promised to give one portion of this land (Canaan) to one man and his seed. This land was located in the center of the world so that the seed living in the land would bless all of the families of the world.

BLESSING: God loves to bless his creatures. His blessing is particularly given along with a command to multiply and fill the earth (1:22). He blessed Adam when he commanded him to fill the earth, as he did Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob (1:28; 9:1; 12:2; 17:16, 20; 22:17; 26:3-4; 35:9-12). God's blessing is intended not for one family only, but for all nations of the world. These peoples would be blessed as they came into contact with God's chosen family and as they blessed them (12:3; 22:18; 27:29; e.g., Abimelech, Potiphar, Pharaoh). Those who cursed God's chosen family were effectively cursing God and would themselves be cursed (e.g., Cain, Ham/Canaan, Pharaoh, Abimelech, Laban). God gave the chosen family the ability to pass on the blessing to their seed. Ultimately the greatest blessing would come through a single seed who would crush the serpent, defeat God's enemies, and bring peace and prosperity to all peoples submitted to God and the seed (3:15; 22:17-18; 49:10-12).

KINGS: God made man to rule over the earth. God's intention was to fill the earth with his image-bearers so that his glory would be on display to all of creation. His plans to establish his kingdom on earth were initially thwarted when the human king rebelled against him. God intended to raise up from this rebel a family and a nation that would produce kings (17:6, 16; 35:11). Abraham demonstrated kingly character and success during his life, as did his son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Abraham defeated the coalition of Mesopotamian kings (14:15), Isaac was feared by the Philistine king (26:29), and Jacob blessed Pharaoh (47:7). By the close of Genesis, it is revealed that the kingly line would come through the tribe of Judah, a seed of the one willing to give his life for his brothers. That God's purpose would be fulfilled by a single king is clear

from Jacob's blessing that the scepter would come to one to whom it belongs (49:10). One day Adam's seed will reverse the curse and rule over the world for the glory of God.

BEGINNINGS: The book of Genesis is appropriately named, for it tells the beginnings of all things under God. This book accounts for the glory of man (made in the image of God), the depravity of man (born to a fallen couple), the hope of man (the defeat of the serpent), and the destiny of man (judgment or life with God on a blessed earth). This book prepares for the nation of Israel with the promises of countless descendants, a land of inheritance, and victory over enemies. The book emphasizes the triumph of God's grace to repentant sinners and the judgment to those who cross divinely established boundaries, attack his people, and reject his blessing. Those in God's chosen family are in no less need of his grace, and each elect person demonstrates profound failure that proves that God's choice is not based on merit. But each one who carries on the promise is ultimately characterized by faith in God and his word. This faith is demonstrated in worship and obedience. The patriarchs thus provide hope for their sinful Israelite descendants who too may enjoy reconciliation with God through faith that keeps the covenant. The book of Genesis prepares the Israelites and the world for the necessity of a substitutionary sacrifice through the death of animals to provide a covering for Adam and Eve, the salvation of Noah's family who offer animal sacrifices, and the provision of a ram in place of Abraham's only beloved son. Judah provides the model of a man willing to lay down his life to save his brothers. The Israelites hearing the book of Genesis in Moses' day know who God is, who they are, and what God's purposes are for the world. These answers to the ultimate questions of life are still satisfying to the humble, repentant individual today.

IN BRIEF: When God's creation is marred by man's rebellion, he chooses a family whose seed will rule over the land and bring great blessing to the world.