

The Story of a Seed

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[0 : 00] Almighty God and loving Father, may the words that I speak now be faithful to your word. May you graft your word into our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Well, I want to start this Bible talk today by telling you a story. It was about 25 years ago and it was in the time when management people were into playing games as a way of helping you understand yourself.

They still do that a bit, but it was fairly new in those days. And we had a friend who was really into these sorts of things. And I can't remember the exact occasion, but I can remember the exercise.

There were two of us and one was blindfolded. The other in the party was not. And we were told that the role of the person who was blindfolded was to get across a particular area.

We were told that the area was littered with obstacles of various sorts and of sizes. And we could ask our partner questions. They could tell us answers. And with their assistance, we were blindfolded to find our way across the area in question.

[1 : 07] Well, I was the first to be blindfolded. I could hear others nearby who were also blindfolded. And they were asking their partners if they could take one step forward without bumping into an obstacle.

And then they would ask their partner and say, could I take another step, you know, perhaps to the right or the left or in front? And would I make progress this way? And so step by step, they would make their way across the whole area.

But not me. I wanted the big picture. I wanted to know what items were there in the field in front of me, how many there were, what size they were, what they were made up of.

And I wanted to know all of this before I would even take a step. Afterward, these management folk told me that I was somewhat unusual. I also found out a lot about myself.

You see, I am a big picture person. I'm not a details person. I drive this way. I navigate this way. I think this way. I manage this way. I do nearly everything I do this way.

[2 : 14] I am a big picture person. And most of you know that I even preach this way. I'm not generally a person who gives you all the detail. I would rather give you, say, what I think is going on in the passage and give you the big picture of it so that you can then go and do a bit of the detail yourself.

I do the detail, but I don't do it with you, as it were. Well, today I am not going to be any different from usual. In fact, today I want to start this two-week series on Advent.

And Advent is the time when we remember the coming of Jesus into the world. And I want to give you, as it were, a big picture of Advent. And the way I'm going to do it is to spend this first week giving you an overview of the book of Genesis.

Now, before you start worrying that you'll be here until three o'clock this afternoon, I want to do it in my normal time. And I guess some of you might even think that I'm off my rocker preaching on Advent from Genesis.

You think, well, how does that work? After all, Advent is all about Jesus. It's not about the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their families, is it?

[3 : 20] But I want to tell you that it is. You see, I want to tell you that Advent can only really be understood from the perspective of the book of Genesis and the issues that arise from it.

If you don't understand Genesis, in my view, you may not fully understand Advent. So this week, what I'm going to do is give you a lightning tour of Genesis. Then next week, I'm going to follow what we learnt about Genesis through to the end of the Old Testament.

So if you think I'm adventurous this week, wait till next week. So, but I want to warn you, hold on to your hats. We're in for a roller coaster ride. And I hope you details people can keep up.

We're going to have a ball. And my hope is at the end, you'll understand Christmas in a way that perhaps you never have before. So let's get started. Now, the good thing is, it's very easy for you to stick with me today.

Genesis is, after all, the first book of the Bible. And we're simply going to go from the front of Genesis to the back. So I want you to have your Bibles open and to look at it with me. Open on the first page of Genesis.

[4 : 21] Genesis. Now, to understand Genesis, in my view, you really need to get to grips with one little phrase. It occurs for the first time in chapter 2, verse 4.

Have a look at it with me. Chapter 2, verse 4. Genesis 2, verse 4 says this. This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

Now, that little phrase, this is the account of, could be more literally translated, these are the generations of. Or if you like, these are the begettings of.

Or if you like my loose translation, these are the things that came from. And then you add all the other endings to it. Or this is what became of. The Hebrew word is a word that goes like this, toledot.

And there are 10 toledots in the book of Genesis. Although you can't see it in our translations, some have the word and at the beginning of them and some don't. And when you take that into account, in my view, you've got five sections to the book of Genesis.

[5 : 27] Five sections which have a toledot heading and some sub toledot headings under them. And you can see that in my diagram. If you've got the sermon outline there, you'll see on the back page of it that there is my summary of Genesis by looking at toledots.

Do you have that? You don't have it? That's a bit of a disaster, isn't it? You'll be okay. I'll show you what I need to.

Anyway, I think that Genesis can be grouped into five sections. But the first section begins at chapter 2, verse 4, which means that the previous parts of Genesis to that are, in one sense, a preface, a heading to the whole of the book.

Genesis 1, verse 1 to chapter 2, verse 3 functions as a sort of preface or introduction to the whole book. It sets the context for everything else. And Mark's helpfully found those outlines now.

And they'll be distributed. Just take one in your line, in your pew, then you'll get a feel for it. Now, I want you to, rather than wait on those things, they'll come to you eventually and you'll be able to have a look.

[6 : 37] Let's start and just work through the passage together. I want you to have a look at Genesis 1, 1 to 2, 3. As you know, these introductory chapters are about God's creation of the world.

And you'll know how this functions, don't you? In the first five days, God creates the environment of the world. In the sixth day, he creates the pinnacle of his creation, human beings.

On the seventh day, he rests. So you can see, can't you, from this that the focus of God's creation is, in fact, humanity. His purpose for humanity is that they eventually find blessing and even rest in his presence.

However, he has a purpose for them as they live in his world. And that purpose is that they fill the earth and subdue it. So there's the preface to the rest of the book of Genesis.

Now, if we ask the question, what became of the heavens and the earth? Because that's how chapter 2, verse 4 starts. What became of the heavens and the earth? Then our next section explains it.

[7 : 39] So have a look at it with me. It's the story, isn't it, of humans failing to live under God's rule. Failing to fulfill the mandate that God gives them. They don't listen to his advice. You see, there is, we find, a crafty serpent in the garden.

And instead of listening to God, they listen to the serpent. They act independently. And the result is that instead of receiving blessing from God and from the hand of God, they and the serpent receive curse.

And it is a curse that affects all the world. The great news is, though, that even in the curse, God gives a promise. Take a look at it with me. And it's very critical to notice this because it frames the rest of the book of Genesis.

Look at chapter 3, verse 15. Here are the words that God utters to the serpent. He says to him this. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers.

He will crush your head. You will strike his heel. Now, I want you to notice what is being said. God is saying that in the world, there are going to be two lines of descent.

[8 : 47] The literal word here is seed. In the Hebrew Bible, the word seed is like our word for sheep. That is, it can be used both as singular and plural.

Anyway, what God is in effect saying is that the world will be a place where you can find two sorts of seed. There will be the seed or the offspring of the serpent. And there will be the seed or the offspring of the woman.

And they will be at war with each other. The impression is two lines of descent from that woman. Those who identify with the serpent and his ways, his evil ways.

Those who oppose God and put him to the side. Those who have themselves at the center instead of God. And on the other, there will be those who pursue God. Who want his ways.

Who line up with him. And do what he wants them to do. They live under God's rule. They live as God created them to live. But I want you to notice one more thing about this verse.

[9 : 46] The impression given in this verse is that God has one particular seed or offspring in mind. Can you see that? One representative individual. God promises the serpent.

He. That looks like one person to me. He will crush your head. You will strike his heel. So though the word seed can have multiple reference.

This indicates there's one. He. He will crush your head. You will strike his heel. God promises the serpent that there is going to be one male human serpent head crusher.

Or the serpent might strike at his heel. However, he will deal a mortal blow to the serpent. He will crush his head. So as readers of the story, we must now have our eyes open from this point on.

Eyes open to see what is going on. We will need to look for this seed. This descendant. He is the hope of the world. And the book of Genesis is going to give us hints as to where and how we might find him.

[10 : 49] And we can see this almost immediately in Genesis. Let me give you the follow up story. Look at verse 20. Adam names his wife. And he calls her Eve.

The mother of all the living. Even if she's going to have pain in childbirth. He hopes that her pain might result in a line of offspring that will bring life. In other words, he hopes for a line of offspring that will bring life.

A line of offspring that will produce the seed. Now look at chapter four. Adam makes love to his wife. And she gives birth to the first offspring, Cain. And she acknowledges that it's God that's enabled this to happen.

God has helped her in bringing forth a man. To bring forth a man. And then we hear that she gives birth to a second son, Abel. And in these two sons, the two possibilities are fleshed out for humanity.

Cain proves himself to be the seed of the serpent rather than the wished for head crusher. He not only fails to crush the serpent's head. He kills the other seed of the woman who could have possibly been the seed, as it were.

[11 : 55] He kills his brother Abel. But God's purposes aren't easily thwarted. Look at chapter four, verse 25. Adam makes love to his wife again. She gives birth to another son.

And the verse literally says that she says, God has granted to me another seed in place of Abel.

And he's called Seth. And we get the impression that our hopes are now on him and in him. And that's confirmed in verse 26. For Seth has a son. He names him Enosh.

And the people begin to call on the name of the Lord. So the tide has turned in some sense. Now look at chapter five, verse one. We have the next toledot.

It's got a little addition to it. It talks about a written account. And it could be translated like this. This is the written account of the things that came from Adam. Take a look at it. What sort of things come from Adam?

[12 : 49] Well, it's a genealogy. And I want you to notice the end of each person's account. Over and over again, we hear this. Then he died. Then he died.

Then he died. Then he died. We are reminded, you see, with everyone that there's a curse of sin. The curse of sin is death. Look at verse 28, though.

It shines a bright light into the darkness of death and curse. For Lamech gives birth, or Lamech's wife gives birth to a son. And he names him Noah.

And he remembers the curse of Genesis 3. And you can see, as Noah is born, he hopes that perhaps Noah might be an agent of comfort or respite from the curse. And now, our hopes are quickly dashed, though, in the next chapter.

Look at verse 5 of chapter 6. It appears as though the line of sin has dominated in the world. Hope has dissipated. For the Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil.

[14 : 04] How much of the time? Well, all of the time. Friends, that picture is very dark. The offspring of Adam is almost totally now the spawn of Satan, or of the serpent, if you like.

Every inclination of their hearts is only evil all the time. And the heart of God is deeply troubled at this. But there's one bright light. One hope of an alternate progeny.

Look at verse 8. There is Noah. And Noah, unlike the rest of humanity, found favor in the eyes of the Lord. And with that, we move into our next Toledot.

We're told that this is what became of Noah and his family. Now, I don't need to tell you the story. You all know it well. And my guess is it's one of the very first stories we read to our kids.

I do want to show you one verse, though. Flip over to chapter 8. And look at verse 20. By this stage, the flood has gone. Noah has built an altar.

[15:09] And he's sacrificing burnt offerings on it. And the Lord smells the sweet aroma of it. And we hear words of hope. Even though the inclination of the human heart is evil all the time, God will not totally destroy.

Anyway, the account of Noah continues in chapter 10. We get another genealogy. This time, it fleshes out the descendants of Noah. And we hear this.

This is what became of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons. We get a catalogue of the nations that arose from these sons.

But remember, we're looking for someone in particular, aren't we? We're looking for the seed. We're looking for a male head crusher. And our author lets us to know where to find him by giving us another toledot.

Now, keep your eyes open for it. Just scan down the page in the chapters. And pass the table of nations. All these nations listed that come from the three sons. Pass the tower builders in chapter 11, who are trying to make a name for themselves.

[16:13] And on to chapter 11, verse 10. And we read, Now, friends, let me tell you something.

There are a number of other toledots to come in the succeeding chapters. There's one about Terah in chapter 11. There's one about Ishmael in chapter 25. There's one about Isaac in chapter 25. There's one about Esau in chapters 36 and 37.

But these are, in my view, all subsets of this one. All subsets of this one. For in chapter 12 to 25, we'll hear about Abraham. From the line of Shem.

In chapter 26, we'll hear about Isaac from the line of Shem. In chapter 27 to 36, we'll hear about Jacob and Esau. But the final toledot doesn't come until we hear about Jacob's family in chapter 37 to 50.

That means, you see, we've got one long, large, major toledot that runs through the lives of the major patriarchs until we come to Jacob's family and the story of Joseph in chapter 37.

[17:13] Now, let me show you some of the key verses in this one large slab of scripture. Now, you may be getting worried at this point because we've only got to, you know, chapter 11, 12. And you think, well, how long is it going to take us for the rest of this sermon?

I just want to show you the highlights. So in our search for a male, head crushing, seed or offspring, we have some major developments that occur here.

Check them out with me. We learn what God has in mind for the seed. Look at chapter 11, verse 27. We hear about Terah. Let me tell you about Terah.

Terah is the father of Abraham or Abram. God later renames Abram, Abraham. So that's what we're going to use. The name we'll use of him. Now, look at verse 29. Abram or Abraham has a wife whose name is Sarai.

God later renames her Sarah. And so we're going to use that name for her. But now look at verse 30. We find out that Sarah is unable to have children. Now, you've got to understand what's going on here.

[18 : 15] You've had all the way from Adam, all the way through Noah and so on. You finally got down to Shem. You finally got down to Abraham. You finally got to Sarah. And you find, well, there's a dead end. Where's the seed going to come from? I know it's going to come through this couple, but she's barren.

She's unable to have children. Now look at chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. God speaks three things to Abram. First, he tells him about a land. Second, he promises him that he'll make him a great nation.

It's hard if your wife's barren, but nevertheless, that's what God says. But the third and critical thing is in the second half of verse 2. You see, you need to hear verse 2 in the context of Genesis 3, verse 15.

A curse rests upon humanity. They all die because they all sin. But now there is a definite hope. For God tells us that his goal for all humanity is not curse, but blessing.

We already know that blessing is tied up with this sort of head-crushing seed. But now God promises the means by which the blessing will flow to all the descendants of Adam and Eve. It will flow through Abraham and Sarah.

[19 : 26] And through them, all the peoples of the earth will not be cursed, but blessed. Now let's just skim through the story and show you some of the highlights. Flip over to chapter 15.

Chapter 15. Abraham is worried. You see, he and his wife, Sarah, are getting on. They still have no children. In verse 5, God uses the word seed or offspring.

And he says to him, look at the sky and try and count the stars. By the way, I wonder if any of you have ever been out into the outback on a moonless night.

And you've looked up into the... It is spectacular, isn't it? It's something to do with only for this sight. There's not many places in the world you can see it, as Abraham would have seen it in Palestine, where there were no city lights.

It is just overwhelming, the number of stars. And that's what Abraham would have seen. And as he sees it, God says to him, so shall your seed be. So shall your offspring be.

[20 : 30] And Abraham trusts God's word. And God credits it to him as righteousness. But let's keep moving. Let me see what else. Let's see what else God says about Abraham's offspring or his seed.

Look at chapter 17, verse 6. Can you see it there? Chapter 17, verse 6. God promises that kings will come from him. Look at verse 7.

In our version, we find the word descendants. But there, in verse 8 as well, it is literally the word seed or offspring. It's not descendants.

It's seed or offspring. God is promising him the seed, as promised back in chapter 3, verse 15, will come from you. Our writer is hinting at where he's going with Abraham.

His seed will be connected with kings. His seed will cause the salvation of the world. The head crusher will come from a king, from your line.

[21 : 27] But look at verse 16. Sarah's going to be blessed as well. She'll have a son. She'll become the mother of nations. Kings will come from her as well. But there's even more. Turn to chapter 22.

Flip over in your Bibles. Chapter 22. Abraham fears the Lord and willingly obeys him as he tells him to go and sacrifice his one and only son.

Now, remember, one and only. The one from whom kings will flow. The one who's the seed that we're waiting for in chapter 3, verse 15. And God says, go and sacrifice him.

You think, what's going on? And that must have crossed Abraham's mind as well. But we remember God spares the son. And then he makes some incredible promises to him. Look at chapter 7, verse 17 of chapter 22.

And listen for the words of blessing and offspring. God says, I will surely bless you and make your seed as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.

- [22 : 32] Your seed will take possession of the cities of their enemies. And through your seed, all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me. Friends, hear this word from God.

It is a composite picture. Abraham's seed will be the source of blessing for all the world, not the source of curse. That seed will be kingly. Somehow, somewhere, he will be the means by which the serpent's head will be crushed.

I think that's what's going on here. Let's move, though, to the final Toledot. Chapter 37, verse 2. So chapter 37, verse 2.

Literally, it reads, this is what became of Jacob. As we read on, we get a bit of a surprise because the focus is actually not so much on Jacob, but on his son, Joseph.

However, there's another son who's a secondary focus. And that son is Judah. You see, by this stage in Jacob's family, Judah is the one who has the rights of the firstborn son.

- [23 : 35] Everyone who's preceded him, the sons that were ahead of him in the race, as it were, have given away their right for one reason or another. And so the right falls to Judah.

The promised seed of Abraham will therefore flow through Judah. And Judah makes some mistakes and nearly stops the line flowing through him. You can read about it in chapter 38.

But his shrewd daughter-in-law, not to be commended for the way she goes about the task, but nevertheless, she takes some action that enables the seed to continue. And later, as Jacob gives his blessing to his sons, he says this of Judah.

He says, Judah's hand will be upon the neck of his enemies. He says that the scepter, that's the scepter of rule, will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs and the nations will obey him.

In other words, through Judah will come someone that the nations will obey and will have the rule of God as it were. And with that, we end the story of the seed in Genesis.

- [24 : 45] How can we summarize this, friends? What have we learned from Genesis? Well, we've learned this, haven't we? We've learned that all humans are sinful. As a result of their sin, they've come under the grip of sin.

It cruelly dominates them. It's said in chapter 4 that it's like someone crouching, ready to devour. Their only hope is a descendant, a seed, a head-crushing male kingly descendant of Abraham and Sarah.

This one will live as humans were designed to live. He will overthrow the grip of the serpent, the devil, and he will crush his head.

Oh, he may be wounded, but he will crush his head and he will bring blessing to the nations. Friends, that's part one of the story. Next week we'll pick up part two, but I want to just quickly reflect on some of the things we've learned so far.

We'll need next week in order to pick up the rest. But what I hope you've picked up today is that our God is a careful, planning God.

- [25 : 55] He's not overwhelmed by humans. He carefully, securely, openly works at his purpose for his world. And we think they're hiccups.

We think they're massive, you know, disasters along the way. He doesn't think they're a problem. These purposes are good and they're for his glory. His purposes are good and for his glory.

Second, we learn that God's plans are not finished at the end of Genesis. There is still much work to be done. Third, although there's much work to be done, God appears to be in no great hurry to get on about it.

If you understand what I mean, he's working out his purposes generation after generation, solidly, dependably, according to plan. Fourth, our God is a God who is in control and his actions and his plans are structured, planned, purposeful.

They are overseen by him. They are dependent upon him. They are not subject to or dependent upon humans. Fifth, even here in Genesis, we gain a glimpse of a great New Testament truth.

[27 : 12] See, already in this story, we can see, can't we, how Jesus fulfills what we've glimpsed here. You can hear the echoes, can't you?

Did you listen to the Galatians 3 reading? Did you hear them there? Already, as we hear this story, we can see how Jesus fulfills what is glimpsed here. We will see it fleshed out next week and the week after.

But already here, he is God's yes to all these promises glimpsed here. And that's what we're remembering at Advent, isn't it? There's no surprises. There are simply assured results.

For they are assured by God's gracious promise and active provision. He has a plan for his world and he is pursuing it and he will accomplish it despite us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are the God who controls all things in your world. Thank you that even though our world does seem out of control, as it must have seemed out of control to Abraham and others, the events of this world are dependent upon you.

[28 : 24] That is, they're not subject to or dependent upon humans. That you work out your purposes in your world. Thank you, Father, that you work them out in your Son. Thank you that he is your yes to all the promises glimpsed here today.

Thank you that as we come to Advent, we can remember this, that there are no surprises but assured results. For they are assured by your gracious promise and active provision. And Father, we thank you for this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.