

Student Guide



Genesis: The Creation of Relationships

Mike Mitchell

Bible Study Sessions
for Christians involved with
God's redemptive efforts
in the world

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Today's acacia tree is known for its ...



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Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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Preface

The word “worldview” has emerged as a leading rally cry in America’s cultural clash. At the heart of this conflict is the Book of Genesis.

“A debilitating weakness in modern evangelicalism is that we’ve been fighting cultural skirmishes on all sides without knowing what the war itself is about. We have not identified the worldviews that lie at the root of cultural conflict,” wrote a popular conservative leader. “The real war is a cosmic struggle between worldviews—between the Christian worldview and the various secular and spiritual worldviews arrayed against it.”

Within the religious right, one organization is sponsoring a series of “worldview weekends” across the nation. A secular newspaper columnist told journalism students they needed to bring the Christian worldview to the media.

“The first chapters of the Book of Genesis lay the foundation for the biblical worldview,” wrote a fundamentalist seminary professor. “Obviously that we get these chapters right is important.”

He wrote, “A worldview is like a pair of sunglasses; it affects the way we look at everything.”

His analogy presents a significant problem. Eyeglasses help us see the world more clearly; sunglasses shade the way the world really is.

If a worldview is like a pair of sunglasses, it distorts our perspective, shading the real nature of the world and coloring the way we read the Bible.

This problem is compounded when only part of the Bible is used to fashion “the biblical worldview.”

Of course, Genesis has been a source of deep disagreement within Christianity. Some Christians read Genesis literally, pitting creationism against the theory of evolution. Others claim Genesis teaches male domination and female subjugation. Still others cite Genesis to justify unfettered economic development rather than environmental stewardship. Genesis is used to defend pre-existing agendas ranging from meat eating to the death penalty.

Why Genesis is “the foundation” for a biblical worldview is unclear. What is clear from Scripture is that Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb 12:2 KJV). Jesus’ words, witness and work should be at the heart of how Christians see the world.

Such a biblical, theological and ethical affirmation does not under-

mine the vitality of Genesis. How we read Genesis no doubt affects the way we look at the world.

Through six sessions, this study guide explores the theme of relationships in Genesis 1–12.

We hope these sessions enrich Christian discernment of Genesis. We also hope they broaden the discussion about worldviews, especially as worldviews concern relationships. ☹

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Relationship with God

Genesis 1:1–2:3

**“In the beginning
when God created
the heavens and
the earth ...”
—Genesis 1:1**

Creation or evolution? Ask this question in almost any Baptist church today and the sparks will fly! Which is correct? Do we violate the Bible if we find credibility in some of the scientific theories? Do we fly in the face of science if we accept the Bible? How do people of faith reconcile these seemingly competing worldviews?

Some religious groups have declared a “culture war” on any persons who do not embrace a literal interpretation of the Genesis creation stories. Yet, ever-mounting physical evidence points to an “old earth” creation—that the earth is billions of years old and has evolved over time.

Where do you stand in this conflict over worldviews?

The opening passage of Genesis is the grand introduction to the entire Bible. It describes God’s relationship with the created order, including the human race. God is Creator and human beings are the created. All else is commentary on that relationship of love, love lost, and God’s attempt to restore the relationship as first created.

Genesis connects the God of creation to the nation Israel. Israel traces its roots to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who received God’s covenants of promise and blessing.

The book also differentiated Israel from the other nations of the ancient Near East. Israel was different in moral background and, more importantly, the God they served is superior to the other gods. There is the One True God among a pantheon of false gods. Thus, the ethic they receive from God surpasses that of the other nations.

Explore the Biblical Witness

Genesis 1:1–2:3. The first rule in interpreting the Bible is to pay attention to the context—the material that surrounds the focal text. However, the context of Genesis 1–12 includes the larger historical setting.

Why were these chapters written and to whom? They were not written in a

vacuum. Instead, they were written in the world of the ancient Near East in which numerous other writings existed.

Scholar Gerhard von Rad has stated: “To comprehend the significance of [the Genesis accounts] one must remember that they were formulated in a cultural and religious atmosphere that was saturated with all kinds of astrological false belief.”¹

We must also understand the mindset of that ancient culture. It remains a deep mystery to most Westerners today.

The ancients did not see life as fragmentary but holistically. Mind, soul and body were not thought of separately but as a unit. When the body hurt, they believed it might be because the spirit or mind was injured.

They thought differently than Westerners today. So their writing is altogether foreign to our own prejudices. They saw a different order in the natural world and believed they were an integral part of creation, not far above it.

The language, the word usage and the culture must be understood before we can glean the writer’s genius in describing God.

The stories in Genesis 1–12 were

written from a particular viewpoint—one that differed significantly from those circulating at the time. When these views are compared to Genesis, the Genesis material stands out clearly as presenting a radical departure in its understanding of the Creative Being, creation and early world history.

Other cultures in the ancient Near East thought that the gods had all the characteristics of humans. The gods acted capriciously, jealously. Thus, the elevated view of God that Genesis presents was extreme.

Creation stories in greater Mesopotamia existed prior to Genesis. In the past, scholars have compared Genesis with the Babylonian creation stories. Recently, they have suggested that Egyptian creation literature has even closer parallels to Genesis.² This is not surprising given the Hebrew people’s sojourn in the African country.

At the center of the Genesis creation story is a Supreme Being called *Elohim*, literally “gods,” although the context reveals here that the One True God is meant. This application of a common word is what makes this text so different.

The other ancient Near Eastern creation stories cite the work of pantheons—multiple gods—who

with all their posturing, violence and revenge act more like spoiled humans than intelligent gods. The Hebrew God stands above creation as a perfect, powerful, moral agent instead of one more capricious character among a host of imperfect and immoral gods.

Genesis 1–12 likely was written to counter the other creation stories. The chaos of the Egyptian and Babylonian stories was replaced with order and progress.

Genesis makes a strong statement about an all-powerful God with a plan of creation. God was not a localized tribal deity. God was the One True God who is sovereign over the whole universe.

One scholar wrote, “Genesis 1 is more than a repudiation of contemporary oriental creation myths; it is a triumphant invocation of the God who has created [everything] and an invitation to all humanity to adore [the God] who made them in [his] own image.”³

God’s plan. God had a plan for creative activity. Genesis 1:1 contains the Hebrew verb *bara’*, “to create.” Throughout the account, only God created. No other being was able to bring into being what formerly was not. Too, God brought into being not by violent conflict, but by simple, divine fiat.

Each successive act of creation brought into being various parts of the heavens and the earth. It is interesting that the heavenly bodies that give and reflect light—the sun and the moon—are not created until day four (v. 16), although light was created on day one (v. 3). Obviously, the intent of the writer was something other than scientific.

Light is the first element created and is necessary for the creation of the other elements. One must understand the ancient mind to avoid missing this point. Light and darkness were not thought of “exclusively in connection with the heavenly bodies.”⁴

The words for “sun” and “moon” were not used (instead “greater” and “lesser” lights) to avoid parallels with the Egyptian practice of worshipping the sun and moon.

The word that God pronounced on each segment of creation is *tob* “good” (vv. 4, 10, 12, 21, 25). This is not “an aesthetic judgment ... but the designation of purpose and correspondence.”⁵ God created according to a plan, and everything created has a divine purpose.

On the last day of creation, God brought into being land animals of every kind (vv. 24–31). The last and highest of creation, by special decision, is humankind. The Hebrew

word is *adam*, “humankind.” By transliterating the Hebrew (replacing the Hebrew characters with their English equivalents), we derive the word “adam.” Obviously, the writer here was not speaking of a particular human. Later, in Genesis, it is used as the name for a particular man.

When translated, the Hebrew word means “humankind.” God created a *species* called humans. God created them in corresponding sexes, male and female. The Hebrew again gives insight. The words *tsakar*, “male,” and *nekabah*, “female,” are used to differentiate the sexes, but together they comprise the species.

Both were created in God’s image. In God’s plan, no difference exists between the two. Both are necessary to accomplish the task God assigned: filling the earth. They complement each other in this task.⁶

By placing the divine image in the species (v. 26), God indicated a moral condition approaching holiness. Since God is spirit, the image is not physical but in humankind’s mental and spiritual capacities.

Humans have moral and emotional capacities the other creatures do not have. The purpose of these capacities is for relationship with God. Only with humans does God communicate on a personal level.

God rested. After the work of creation, God rested. Was God tired? If so, God is not omnipotent—all-powerful.

The Hebrew word *sabbach*, has three translations: “to cease to be,” “to desist from work” and “to observe the Sabbath.” Here the second clearly is indicated.⁷

God’s “resting” was not for recuperation or regeneration. Rather it was a cessation of creating. God *finished* the work of creation.

Scientists believe that all the matter in the universe has existed from the beginning, that no more matter is being created but merely reshaped by the forces of nature. This fits with the declaration that creation was finished.

God made the seventh day holy. Usually, only animate objects are made holy, such as humans or their sacrifices offered to God in worship. By “hallowing” a day God provided for humans an example of needed cessation from work.

Later, the priests in Israel enlarged on the idea of ceasing from creating to institute Sabbath rest for all people. Admittedly, they went a little too far. For example, they made tying a knot on the Sabbath a sin. Sabbath observance appears to be of Babylonian origin.⁸ However, Israel

gave to it a far superior emphasis. Rather than the gods resting from their exploits (Babylon), here humans are to rest from theirs.

Further, the reason for the rest is to enjoy divine blessing. One created in the image of holy God is to reflect God's example.

One final thought: God's will also maintains creation; the universe stands permanently in need of God's support.⁹ God did not create the world and leave it to evolve without order and genius. God remains at the center of creation to keep it from regressing into formlessness.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Above all else, Genesis 1 deals with God's character. It's all about God—theology. In a profound sense, that is the theme of the whole Bible.

God is contrasted repeatedly with sinful human beings as God calls people to holiness and offers redemption when we fail. The creation story is the beginning of humanity's long history with God and our attempt to describe God's character. This description of God was not complete until Jesus came, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15).

Who vs. how of creation. Many want

to pit Genesis 1 against modern scientific theories of creation. This reflects an extremely shallow understanding of the Genesis record, and, perhaps, even a phobia of things scientific.

Obviously, Genesis does not tell how God created the earth and the heavens. Genesis and scientific theories of creation address entirely different sets of questions. Genesis deals with who created all that exists. Science attempts to discover how our universe came into being.

Theology was uppermost in the mind of the writer of Genesis, not science. Very little that we would term "scientific" even existed in that day. The writer was not trying to explain the processes at work in creation; rather, he sought to describe the nature of the One responsible for creation.

Here again, we must deal with the cultural context. The writer wanted to validate Israel's existence by connecting the nation to the supreme Deity who created all matter.

Amid the popular ancient Near Eastern stories of human-like gods creating the universe came the startling account of Israel's God. God created all that exists simply by will and word! Instead of a god created in man's image, Genesis presents the species as created in

God's image.

Ownership by creation. The writer declared that all of creation belongs to God. One who creates owns what is created. Thus, it all exists in relation to the Creator, and as John 1:3 states, nothing exists apart from God.

Further, there is no creative force except God. There is no struggle of two or more primordial beings. Nor does chaos have any power of its own; it exists only in reference to God's creative will.¹⁰

In addition to creating, God gave definition, dividing and naming light and darkness, land and sea.¹¹ God set the boundaries for creation to inhabit. In its natural state, nothing in creation acts outside those boundaries (until humans attempt to usurp God's prerogatives; see session four).

Gender differences/similarities. God created both man and woman in the divine image. As far as God is concerned, there is no substantive difference between sexes. The physical difference simply is for the purpose of procreation, the survival of the species. However, God created no hierarchy. Class distinctions between the sexes are the creation of human beings; they are culturally influenced (see session three).

Cultural/racial differences. God created a species of creatures called humans. God did not establish a hierarchy based on physical differences such as skin color or stature.

Anthropologists and physiologists have seen an evolution in these and other traits due to locale, nutrition and circumstances regarding survival. God created one "kind." Any differences made between the races are the doing of human beings. Again, these differences are culturally influenced.

Sabbath observance. The traditional reasoning regarding the Sabbath rest is because God "rested" from creating (Ex 20:11). We now know that the best translation of the word is "cease from creating."

Since God did not need physical rest, but rather ceased creating, this observance really is not tied to humankind's need for rest. Although rest periodically is good, Sabbath is about our need for relationship with God through reflection and worship.

The Israelite religious establishment set aside times for rituals of sacrifice and adoration. These were based on a desire to emulate God's moral dignity in all relationships.

One's relationship with God overshadows all other unions. Thus, a day was set aside for religious

observance in which worshipers could renew their relationship with the divine.

Reason for creation. Some of the ancient Near Eastern creation stories said humans were created to meet the gods' needs, to serve the gods. Humans would provide food, shelter and clothing so the gods could plot and play.

Genesis includes no such foolishness. God created humans as the caretakers of the earth, not for them to provide things for God's benefit. God has no need of relationship with humans, but humans are not complete without a close relationship with their Creator. From that relationship comes a desire to imitate God's moral and ethical character. Thus, order and dignity come to characterize creation—God's intention all along.


Conclusion

God created all that exists according to his divine character. How God accomplished it was not important to the writer, except to say it happened by God's word and will.

Did it take six, literal 24-hour days or four billion years?

What difference does it make for us today? Order, law, morality and

ethicality are at the heart of God's creation. Being the crown of creation, we human beings are to reflect those qualities.

Without them, we are closer to the animal world than to God. Every relationship we have and every situation we face daily must be influenced by a close, personal relationship with God. Thus, every facet of our being will reflect God's order, morality and ethicality. 

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary. The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 55.

² Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1–15," in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 1:8–9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ von Rad, 51.

⁵ von Rad, 52.

⁶ Ronald E. Clements, "rkz zakhar; rwkz zekhur; hbqn neqebhah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 4:84.

⁷ Wenham, 35.

⁸ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Meuthen & Sons, 1913), 34.

⁹ von Rad, 51.

¹⁰ von Rad, 65–66; Wenham, 37–38.

¹¹ Wenham, 38.

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Relationship with Creation

**Genesis 1:28-31; 2:15;
9:8-12, 15, 17**

**“God saw everything
that he had made, and
indeed, it was very good.”
—Genesis 1:31a**

Scenario 1. You are a storeowner. You place your best employee in charge of the business before taking a well-deserved vacation.

Despite calling regularly and being assured that all was well, when you return, you find the place in shambles. The stock has been plundered, the floors are strewn with debris and the windows are dirty. Looking at the books, you realize money is missing, too.

When questioned, the employee in charge says that it was too tempting not to take as long as there was anything left to take. Any thoughts of accountability and responsibility left when the boss walked out the door. The employee had no qualms about lying during the calls.

You must now make a decision. Will you reward the employee for this kind of behavior or will you dismiss the employee? For most of us, it doesn't take long to make this decision!

Scenario 2. God placed human beings in charge of creation. Yet, we have “plundered the stock” and repeatedly lied to God and ourselves about the planet's real condition.

Because our lives and those of our descendants depend on how we use the Earth, every person should be constantly aware of waste and ways to prevent destruction of the environment.

The theme of relationships is especially prevalent in this section. Humans are tied to the created order, and we fail to recognize this relationship to our harm. When we do, we disobey God's command to care for creation. We also deny ourselves the privileges God has promised when we take care of what he has created.

Explore the Biblical Witness

Genesis 1:28-31. God charges humans with two jobs in the Genesis account: procreation and dominion. The two are linked. Procreation contributes to dominion.

Being created in the image and likeness of God is unique to human beings (vv. 26-28). No other creatures are so endowed. Each individual has part of God's character built in and has the capacity to interact with God.

The privilege of bearing God's character brings the responsibility of looking after creation. God placed creation in humankind's care. Thus, every human being has a responsibility to care for the environment.

Dominion is not domination. Quite the contrary! Dominion carries the responsibility of a caretaker and the accountability of an employee so charged.

Genesis 2:15. Surprise! Contrary to popular misconception, work is not the result of sin. God ordained work for humans as part of creation.

First, they were to “till” the garden. A garden of any kind requires much labor for it to produce. The Hebrew word for “till” is the root for “to serve.” God placed humans in the garden to serve, not to be served.¹

Second, God told humans to “keep” the garden. The word “keep” is a translation of a word meaning “to exercise great care over.” It was the charge given to the heavenly beings to guard the garden after the first couple's expulsion.

Thus, humans were to guard creation rather than possess it.²

Of vital importance here is the concept of obedience. Rather than pleasure and freedom from suffering, true paradise comes in obeying God.³

But the humans did not do this. They corrupted Earth. As a result God promised to destroy them (Gen 6:13).⁴

Genesis 9:8-12, 15, 17. Noah's great task was to preserve a remnant of life on the earth.⁵ Genesis identifies Noah as one who obeyed God and was rewarded with the opportunity to keep alive the land species.

The Babylonian flood story, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, has many similarities to Genesis. Yet many substantive differences exist between the two. Genesis paints a picture of a single God who knows all and is all-powerful. The Babylonian story depicts a committee of gods who cower in the face of the deluge they unleash on the earth. The God of Genesis is far more powerful than the gods of Babylonia and is superior in every way.

The Genesis account sought to counter the other stories by portraying God as a moral agent who holds humans to a high standard. Where other stories give the reasons for the

human destruction as noisiness and excessive fertility, Genesis says it was because of human depravity.

God destroyed creation because of human disobedience. Genesis 6:7 records, “So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’”

Yet, one man was righteous and sought God (6:8).

God made a covenant with Noah whereby God promised never to destroy the earth again by flood. The covenant was not like those with Abram or Moses, where humans responded in agreement.

The Noachian covenant is high above humankind, calling for no earthly response. It is because of God’s grace that the covenant was enacted.⁶ This covenant is a one-way covenant; it is from heaven to earth, from God to humans. It is not dependent on what humans do—as are some of the other covenants in the Bible.

Apply the Biblical Witness

What do these verses from Genesis say about our relationship with the created order?

Caretaking responsibility. God created humankind as the apex of the created order and commissioned us with caretaking responsibilities for the planet. This responsibility extends to individuals as well as to nations.

Our species was unable to harm the earth irreparably until the Industrial Revolution. Since then we have begun to wreck God’s creation. Now, destroying our Earth is possible.

We are quickly depleting the resources that have been forming for millions of years. Many species that once flourished are now extinct due to our expansion into their habitats.

Certainly, some species die from natural reasons, but far more have disappeared because we have failed our responsibility to work at our relationships with the created order. We have ignored many parts of God’s instructions.

In the United States, landfills are closing faster than new ones can open. Our throwaway attitude has not changed significantly. Other governments are pressing for the United States to support the environmental movement since we use more resources than any other country. Yet we seem to ignore these pleas.

Of all people, Christians ought to be

the most conscious of the environment. We know God created the world and told us to take care of it.

If your community does not have a recycling center, start one.

A class of elementary school children, whose teacher impressed on them the need to recycle, started ours in Fort Payne, Ala. They campaigned before civic groups and the local government until the center became a reality. Now tons of glass, paper and metals that went to the landfill are recycled.

Work is a fulfilment. Work is not the result of sin. It is part of God’s gift of fulfilment. The purpose of a job is much more than simply to provide for the physical necessities of life. The emotional and psychological aspects of work contribute to a wholeness of one’s life. Work is essential to our well-being.

However, we are not to become so obsessed with work that it is all we do. Remember, God gave us an example to follow when God ceased creating and established a day for humans to rest and worship.

What we think of paradise—idyllic leisure—quickly becomes boring and unfulfilling, although most of us would like to try it for a while. Many who have looked forward to retirement and being rid of work responsi-

bilities soon learn how void life is without some meaningful endeavor, whether paid or unpaid.

Overpopulation must be considered. One of the biggest problems facing our species is overpopulation.

Some scientists say food production can keep up with the population growth, but distributing what is grown continues to be a problem. How much longer the planet can produce enough food for its human population is questionable.

Another catastrophe can happen. God’s covenant with Noah promised no worldwide destruction by flood. However, that does not rule out destruction by other means.

Now that humankind has the capability to ruin the earth with nuclear contamination or through global warming, our call to responsibility is more urgent than ever.

How sad that secular groups often lead the way in obeying God’s command, while religious bodies that should know better stand on the sidelines and criticize, or even downplay the danger.

No room for human conceit. The Bible places humankind at the top of the creation ladder. However, like the rungs in a ladder, the top ones are of no use without the lower ones.

Without the lower rungs of creation, humans cannot survive.

We depend on plants and animals for food. But plants absorb our carbon dioxide and emit oxygen in return. God built an interdependency into creation that we ignore to our peril.

God promised humans “every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit” (1:29). For us to destroy any one genus of these plants means we are wiping out something God created that can never again be re-created.

In the process, we are destroying something God meant for us to have for our good. Who knows what cure for a disease or a miracle food may be lost in some plant that we do not even know of at this point?

God’s gift of creation is good. But he has given us the responsibility of taking care of the world he has given us.

Much like other sins, our disobedience carries with it its own punishment. During the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, farmers learned that poor conservation brought devastating results. We have learned that run-off from fields covered with chemicals kills streams.

When used correctly, chemicals can

be extremely beneficial. When used improperly, they can cause devastation.

Conclusion

God created a delicate balance—relationship—within creation. When we relate properly, we are all blessed. When we violate these relationships, we all bear the brunt of our failures.

In 2500 B.C., Moen-Jo-Daro was a thriving city in the Indus Valley. The buildings were made primarily of baked bricks and mortar. A drainage system that many cities today would envy kept the city clean and free of infestation and disease.

The city boasted a large granary complete with loading platforms. Stores of grain meant a secure food supply for its population. A standardized system of weights and measures was in place.

What happened to this advanced culture? For miles in every direction, the trees were cut to use for fuel in baking bricks. The soil eroded to the point that crops would not grow. Floods became common.

Eventually Moen-Jo-Daro was abandoned because none of the support systems needed for life could be sustained. An advanced society fell due to environmental short-

sightedness.

Dominion is not domination. It is stewardship of resources commanded by God. We must follow God’s plan for creation and live within our relationships. Otherwise, we will taste consequences like Moen-Jo-Daro and perish. 🌳

¹ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 171.

² Ibid.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary. The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 81.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1–15,” in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 1:205.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ von Rad, 134.

Relationship between Male and Female

Genesis 2:18-24

**“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”
—Genesis 2:24**

In an ideal world . . . These words usually start the description of a fantasy. Many people picture a South Sea island with gentle breezes and waves, and abundant leisure.

However, there is no perfect world. Most of us live somewhere between chaos and bliss, depending on our choices and circumstances.

What if your world were ideal? What if all your relationships were what God intended? What if you began today to work toward making the ideal real? How close could you come?

God’s ideal in creation was the

human species in which men and women were created equally.

How, then, did we get the uneven playing field we have today? One word: sin.

Explore the Biblical Witness

What’s your name? In the biblical accounts of creation, the first story focuses on the entire species (Gen 1). In Genesis 2 and 3, a second account gives a completely different order of creation. The focus narrows to an unnamed individual. In Genesis 4, the individual is named “Adam,” although his name comes from the same Hebrew word used earlier and translated “humankind.”

In part, the writer intended to debunk the creation stories circulating in other nations at the time. Genesis gives the account of one all-powerful and all-knowing God dealing with the human race. These accounts in Genesis are far different from those with capricious, even malicious, gods with all the frailties of humans.

According to the second Genesis story, all was not right (good). The man had no counterpart, no mate. Genesis 2:20 notes, “for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.”

A major teaching of the Bible is that

God meets our needs. So, God gave the man a mate. (You will notice immediately the difference from Genesis 1:27 where God created male and female together.)

Rather than merely speaking a person into existence, God “performed surgery” on the man to make a helper fit for him. God formed a woman (Hebrew *’ishshah*) from the man (*’ish*) and presented her to him as his mate.

Can you help me? Some take the term “helper” (v. 18) to mean that woman was created as man’s servant. However, the Hebrew term used here (*’ezer*) is used in other texts to apply to God (Deut 33:7, 26; Pss 33:20; 121:2; 146:5). This word does not connote inferiority or subordination.¹

And since women actually bear children and propagate the race, they are certainly equal as the crown of creation. Her “help” is of the utmost necessity and not something that mankind can do without.

Ideal versus real. God created a world designed to supply all that each species needs to survive and thrive. God blessed humans in a special way by placing in them God’s image and likeness. This permits humans to commune with God—a kinship no animal shares.

Ideally, the relationships among humans should be equal. God created each human with the capacity for divine fellowship, and God did not set up a master-servant hierarchy. Each person answers only and directly to God.

However, in the real world, relationships are far from equal. Not even a constitution that says, “all men [read “humans”] are created equal” can rectify the discrepancies.

We are created equal. We come into this world naked and dependent. After that, everything becomes unbalanced and is subject to immediate change.

Leave and cleave. As a postscript, the writer added verse 24, which, if the account is taken literally, presents a big problem as to where Cain got his wife. From where did these *parents* come that the first man was to leave? However, the account is not a literal record, but a pattern (or model) for the species.

Interestingly, it is the man who leaves father and mother rather than the woman. In reality, it must be both!

The basis for the story may have been a matriarchal society.² Texts exist throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that point to the possibility of a female hierarchy.³

Surely the writer of Genesis knew that the man had no parents to leave, but this concept was so important that it was applied to the very first couple. It was good advice then, and it still is good advice. As in all other areas, male and female are equal. Leaving parents and cleaving to each other is good advice for both. A proper relationship between husband and wife demands that both execute these two steps.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Ideal versus real. In God's perfect world, men and women would act as equals (1:27). God did not create one to rule over the other.

However, sin works against the ideal. Sinful humanity creates hierarchies where the stronger rule over the weaker, whether physically, politically or militarily.

In the latter half of the 20th century, western countries began to level the playing field in many gender matters. However, it still slants toward males. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1999 female earnings were between 72.2 percent and 83.8 percent of that of males performing the same tasks.⁴

In most countries, females continue to be second-class citizens. In some parts of the Middle East, the situation is far worse. Women must cover

their heads and faces in public. They are denied educational opportunities.

In the United States, the glass ceiling in the worlds of business and academia has been cracked. In July 2001, Brown University became the first Ivy League school to have a woman as president when they elected Ruth J. Simmons.⁵

Women make up almost half the U.S. workforce, but only two of the Fortune 500 companies have women in their highest places. Carly Fiorina heads Hewlett Packard and Andrea Jung leads Avon Products. Ninety of the top 500 companies have no women executives.⁶

Churches not any better. In Christian circles, the field has tilted more favorably for women only in main-line Protestant bodies. Catholic and evangelical denominations retain their male-dominant beliefs.

Some of the Pentecostal and more moderate evangelical bodies have acknowledged women's equality, but it will be years before the ideal is realized in leadership and ministry.

Is God a male? To many, the answer is yes. What do we do, then, with females also made in God's image (1:27)? If God has no gender, we have no rationale for discrimination based on sexuality. Thus, men and women are equal and should have

equal status and opportunity.

Lately, some conservative evangelicals have tipped their hats to women by saying that women are equal in being but different in function. While this certainly is true in matters of procreation and jobs requiring great upper-body strength, it presents problems for mind, spirit and ministry.

At its core, the sexual bias of "equal but different" reveals a fear of women out performing men if given the chance. Thus, a turf war ensues where men try to accommodate women (after all, they want and need wives, and they have daughters!), but keep them away from jobs of policy and ecclesiology.

Gender hierarchy based on biblical proof-texts is inherently contradictory. To say that women have a different ecclesiological function is to place the sexual nature on a par with the spiritual nature.⁷ Thus, those who believe this want males to dominate. They make Genesis 1:27 patently false.

The proof-texting method also endangers New Testament verses. Galatians 3:26-28, James 2 and Acts 10:34 reveal God's impartiality between the sexes. These verses must be false as well if we follow the equal-but-different doctrine.

"I take thee . . ." The story shows that male and female were created for each other. They come together for mutual friendship and partnership.

Indeed, it takes both males and females to propagate the race. Neither can survive without the other. As they bring children into the world, they truly become "one flesh" in the new generation.

But there is more. Man and woman need each other to be whole emotionally and psychologically. The complementary nature of their relationship goes to the deepest level of human involvement. That is the way God planned it from the beginning.

Conclusion

Where should Christians stand on gender equality? Obviously, where God stands. God is not capricious and does not play childish games with humans.

God created male and female for mutual benefit. The propagation of the species requires sexual differences.

Maritally, the roles are complementary, as in procreation. There are obvious differences, but a healthy household requires both male and female involvement. Children need


role models from both sexes. One gender is not more important than the other.

Spiritually, male and female are equal. Their relationship to God is equal. God does not favor one over the other.

What now? How do we achieve equality?

Each gender possesses unique attributes. Many a male pastor has needed the services of a woman deacon and many a church could have benefited from the ministry of a woman pastor. Still, only a small percentage of churches have women in these roles.

Statistics reveal that in the last quarter century, the female enrollment in divinity and theological schools climbed to between one third and one half of the total enrollment. Yet, many of these women never find clerical opportunities for service in churches due to gender bias.

Informed and sensitive Christians must press for gender equality. This clearly is God's ideal and the standard for all who follow Christ. 

¹ Wilda W. Morris, "Women in the Old Testament," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Watson E. Mills, General Editor (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 968.

² G. Henton Davies, "Genesis," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 1:138.

³ Proverbs 31.

⁴ www.dol.gov/dol/wb/public/wb_pubs/wagegap2000.html.

⁵ www.brown.edu/webmaster/inauguration/index.html.

⁶ www.infoplease.com/spot/womenceo1.html.

⁷ Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Equal in Being—Unequal in Function: The Gender Hierarchy Argument," in *Christian Ethics Today*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 2001), 11-13.

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Relationship of Distortion between God and Humanity

Genesis 3:1-24

**“He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’”
—Genesis 3:11**

During his military retreat from Greece, Persian King Xerxes boarded a ship with a number of his troops. A terrible storm arose, and the captain told Xerxes they had to lighten the ship’s load to survive. The king turned to his fellow Persians on deck and said, “It is on you that my safety depends. Now let some of you show your regard for your king.” A number of the men bowed to Xerxes and threw themselves overboard!

The ship made it safely to harbor and Xerxes immediately ordered that a golden crown be given to the captain for preserving the king’s life. He then executed the captain for causing the loss of so many Persian lives!

Was the captain responsible for the loss of life? If you say he was, you probably believe Adam and Eve are responsible for your sinful nature.

If you believe the king, with his inflated sense of importance, is responsible, you might believe we are responsible for our own sinful nature.

Disobedience distorts our relationship with God.

Explore the Biblical Witness

Fact or fable? Is this story of Adam and Eve fact or fable? It reads as a fable, complete with a talking snake and God walking in the garden.

But this story is not a fable as we think of fables. Rather, it is a paradigm of every person’s struggle with temptation and sin. Every person is Adam and/or Eve at some point.

Keep in mind the biblical writer’s intent as you read. This story is told against the backdrop of its culture in which existed many accounts about the search for knowledge and/or

immortality. The Genesis story is more about the search for knowledge.¹ The tree of life is not mentioned until after the sin.

This story’s moral and spiritual insight makes it different.² The story taught that humans sin. They failed to obey God. Weakness, fate, genetics or the jealousy of the gods was not the reason for the human condition. These were the reasons given in the other stories.

Yet, Genesis contains some striking similarities to the ancient myths of other religions. Among these similarities are the following:

- ◆ After humans gained divine knowledge, the gods devised a plan to prevent immortality.
- ◆ The gods had human attributes and conducted human activities such as walking and talking.
- ◆ Talking animals were common.
- ◆ “Eve” was the name of a Semitic serpent goddess.
- ◆ Mythical gods dwelled in gardens.
- ◆ Gardens with magical trees granted eternal life or supernatural knowledge.

- ◆ A “tree of life” was common in several other stories.
- ◆ The gods reserved immortality for themselves.
- ◆ In one story (*The Gilgamesh Epic*), a serpent stole a life-giving plant.³

What makes the Genesis account different from these myths? The Genesis writer included many of these concepts, but departed in some very important ways. Most important was the moral of the story: disobedience leads to broken relationships.

Another significant difference is in what this story answered: namely, the origin of sin and death, the pain incurred in childbirth and why obtaining food from the ground is so difficult.

Snakes alive! Genesis 3 makes much of the serpent. The serpent was a major symbol of Canaanite fertility religions.⁴ By using the serpent, the writer was presenting a clear decision for the reader—Yahweh or Ba’al.

When the writer says the snake was shrewder than other animals (v. 1), he may have been drawing on an ancient Near Eastern belief. In that myth, the serpent was symbolic of life, wisdom and chaos.⁵ The Egyptians (where the Hebrews lived for

almost 400 years) raised the serpent (and many other animals) to the status of gods.

Genesis does not identify the snake with Satan. Nowhere in Genesis 1 or 2 is the serpent called Satan. The concept of Satan is not found in Old Testament literature before Judah's exile in Babylon. Outside of the Book of Job, the name *Satan* appears only in 1 Chronicles and Zechariah in the rest of the Old Testament.

In Genesis 3, the serpent placed doubt in the woman's mind about God's prohibitions on the couple. The serpent did not lie per se, but did question the truth of the prohibitions: "Did God really say . . ."

When the woman looked at the fruit, she saw good food, a good decoration and wisdom. How did she know all this just by looking? The writer was not bothered with these practical concerns. The writer wanted to communicate the nature of temptation.

The fruit promised to add much to her life, so the woman ate and gave some of it to her husband. The husband did not question their violating God's prohibition. The man's will power was no stronger than hers. Perhaps it was even weaker since he had not confronted the tempter directly.

Immediately, their eyes were opened (v. 7). But they could not see what they thought they would see. They had hoped to see as God saw. Instead, they saw their own faults, depicted as nakedness.

"Naked" does not imply that sexuality is sin or that the fruit was an aphrodisiac. Instead, they had a new range of knowledge, a maturity that comes when the innocence of childhood gives way to the age of adulthood.⁶

Some question whether the pair had sexual relations before this sin. Again, that is not the writer's intent. The woman was created as a counterpart to man, and God commanded them to fill the earth.

Realizing their nakedness, the pair made clothes. In many ancient religions, participants and priests "worshipped" nude. The writer of Genesis sought to reinforce Israel's prohibition of such practices.

What's going on here? God came looking for the pair. They attempted to hide (vv. 8-9). Redemptive history records God's "search" for people—not the geographic location, but the spiritual estate.

The search is not because God does not know where we are. God's all-knowing provided the knowledge of their location. The account portrayed God looking for them so that people

may discover their distance from God and come back to God.

This concept is similar to prayer. People do not inform God through praying. Rather God informs and strengthens people through the practice of prayer.

The punishment. Some biblical interpreters identify this passage as *protevangelium*—the first hint of the gospel.

God issued a punishment for both the woman and the man.

The woman's punishment was pain in childbearing. Again, the writer explained the origin of this pain. Despite the pain, women would suffer it in order to propagate the race. The rewards of children far outweigh the pain.

The man's curse was difficulty in providing a living for his family. Where the soil once had been generous, now it would grudgingly yield its increase. But as the woman persevered in her pain, the man persevered in his struggle.

Out you go. Cherubim were composite beings (v. 24). Ezekiel 10:21 describes cherubim as having four faces, four wings, and something like human hands under the wings. The Assyrians posted statues of them to guard the entrances of important

buildings. Their cherubim had the body of a bull, feet and tail of a lion, a human head, and eagle's wings. They certainly were not the chubby babies that our culture depicts.

God placed cherubim to guard the garden. These correspond to the Levites who guarded the tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem.

Worshippers experienced true life when they went to the sanctuary. God, the giver of life, was present; to enter God's presence meant life.⁷

Expulsion from the camp, as in the case of lepers (Num 5:2), meant death. For the couple to be expelled from the garden was a death warrant. They no longer had a close relationship with God.⁸ They experienced something worse than physical death.

What about original sin? Original sin is a concept foreign to the Old Testament.⁹ It developed in Jewish lore during the intertestamental period.¹⁰ New Testament writers adopted and expanded it more fully.

Sin originated in freedom of choice.¹¹ Freedom is indispensable to moral values and personal life. It means humankind must have the potential both for good and evil or else there is no freedom.

The essence of sin, then, is our

choice to depart from God and seek to be gods unto ourselves.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Human pride. We think we are the masters of our own souls. With our intellect and sense of self-determination, we feel we know how to live our lives without anyone's help.

Such an attitude usurps God's prerogatives. When we go our own way, we deny ourselves a close relationship with God and God's rule.

We attempt to replace God with self. We try to become a god unto ourselves. The story of the Fall depicts this type of disobedience.

We tend to create gods we can manipulate for our own ends. This explains why we attempt to replace God with so many other things. These things are easy to mold to our own desires, and they yield to our commands.

Too, we rationalize God's prohibitions. We say, God wants us to be happy above all else, and this (whatever sin we seek to justify) makes me happy. Or, God created this desire in me, so I'm merely doing what God ordained.

These attitudes fly in the face of

God's sovereignty. They challenge God's place as Creator of our lives. Our pride gets too much in the way for us to submit to God's will and word.

Original sin. This story teaches that we are responsible for our own fall. Despite comedic assertions to the contrary, the devil did not make us do it.

At some point in our lives, we reenact the role of Adam and/or Eve. We partake of a "tree" bearing "forbidden fruit." Whether at that moment or later, we realize something has changed and that we are "naked." No longer do we have the protection of innocence we once had. It is then that we realize that innocence has died, and we no longer have a close relationship with God.

Sin leads to sin. Too often, one sin leads to another. We lie to ourselves, others and God in a vain attempt to cover our sin.

Some people have developed the ability to blame others for any breach. These people may have sinned. Yet they firmly believe someone or something else is the real culprit. This is a denial of responsibility. But the bottom line is that we alone are responsible for our sin.

Know who is the boss. In his autobiography, John Kenneth Galbraith illustrated the devotion of Emily Gloria Wilson, his family's housekeeper. It had been a wearying day, and Galbraith asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while he had a nap.

Shortly thereafter the phone rang. Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House.

"Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson."

"He is sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him."

"Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him."

"No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you." When Galbraith called the president back, Johnson could scarcely control his pleasure. "Tell that woman I want her here in the White House."¹²

From whom do we take orders? Determining that will go a long way in deciding whether we yield to temptation.

Conclusion

Does reading this story as something other than a literal account mean we do not believe the Bible or that our faith

is false? No! Nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible is filled with stories that teach eternal truths.

Old Testament writers used stories to communicate divine enlightenment. Jesus told parables to teach eternal truths.

God does not ask us to surrender our intellect or rational thought in order to have faith and believe the Bible. Rather, God expects us to use these faculties to better interpret divine interaction with human beings.

Adam and Eve represent every person who has lived. Early in our lives, we lived in a paradise in which we did not succumb to evil or sin. But that changed when we succumbed to temptation. Nothing has been the same since, and we cannot restore our innocence.

Sin distorts our relationship with God. Only through Jesus Christ is that relationship restored, in part, with the promise of complete restoration in eternity. ☉

¹ Simon J. DeVries, "The Fall," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:235.

² *Ibid.*, 236.

³ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1–15," in *Word Biblical Commentary*

(Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987),
1:72.

⁵ Karen R Joines, *Serpent Symbolism
in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield,
NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), 1.

⁶ John Skinner, *International Critical
Commentary:Genesis* (Edinburgh:
T&T Clark, 1937), 76.

⁷ Wenham, 74.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stephen Z. Hearne, “Fall,” in
Mercer Dictionary of the Bible,
Watson E. Mills, General Editor
(Macon, GA: Mercer University
Press, 1990), 293.

¹⁰ Simon J. DeVries, “Sin, Sinner,” in
Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible
(Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:368.

¹¹ Frank Stagg, *New Testament
Theology* (Nashville: Broadman
Press, 1962), 18.

¹² John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in
Our Times* (Boston: Houghton
Mifflin Co., 1981), 121.

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Relationship of Conflict within the Human Race

Genesis 4:1-17; 6:5-8; 11:1-9

**“And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”
—Genesis 4:11**

The headlines screamed the news on September 11, 2001: AMERICA ATTACKED!

No one will forget the horrible scene in New York City as two airliners slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

The crashes evoked horror that a small group of human beings could be so heartless or so misled as to visit such tragedy on thousands of innocent people.

The same occurred at the Pentagon just a few minutes after the New York City travesty, and a possible fourth attack was averted by passengers who caused their plane to crash in a field in Pennsylvania, killing all aboard. Some believe this plane was aimed at a target in Washington, possibly the White House.

These events are the latest in a long line of unconscionable acts human beings have done to each other. Since civilization appears to make no progress on the sin front, such violence, and possibly worse, will continue for the foreseeable future.

Explore the Biblical Witness

The story of humankind’s dealings with God and sin continues. It is the eternal tug of war between good and evil, God versus self.

Genesis 4:1-17. For some interpreters, this is the first usage of the proper name, Adam, for the man, indicating an individual. Others continue to see him as the male representative of the species or every man.

Hebrew uses the verb *yada*, “to know,” to indicate sexual intercourse here. This relationship between the man and the woman resulted in the birth of Cain, *qayin* in Hebrew. The name drew attention to another word

qaniti, which in Hebrew meant, “I have gained.”¹ So often in translation, we lose a lot of the beauty of the language and some of the meaning.

Cain’s name, however, does not come from the verb, “to get.” Instead it means “spear” or “lance.” It apparently refers to metalworking, Tubal-Cain being the “father of metalworkers” (v. 22).²

Eve’s sentence in verse one is difficult to translate. Interpretations vary among “with the help of Yahweh,” “by Yahweh” or “as Yahweh.” She probably was giving credit to God for Cain’s safe delivery rather than boasting that she could create a human as God had done.

Abel was born next, but was not a twin to Cain. The writer was not concerned with the passage of time. Rather, the writer wanted to get to the action quickly—the conflict between the two brothers because of different viewpoints.

Abel’s name more closely fit what would soon happen to him—“vapor” or “breath,” indicating the brevity of his life.

Abel earned his living by animal husbandry. Cain earned his by agriculture. The stage was set for conflict—shepherd versus farmer.

In this story, the nature of sin began to take shape in another sphere. In the previous story between the man and woman, we saw the conflict within self that drives one from God. Here, the conflict is between humans.

God accepted Abel’s animal sacrifice, but not Cain’s grain offering. No reason was given. We are left to speculate. At least five explanations are offered:

- ◆ God preferred shepherds to farmers.
- ◆ God preferred animal sacrifice to grain offering.
- ◆ The mystery of divine election; God’s motives are unknown.
- ◆ The motives of the two men were different.
- ◆ Abel gave the choicest animal; Cain offered just “some produce.”³

If the writer drew from Israel’s worship tradition as in the previous story, this story elevated blood sacrifice as preferable. Israelite law made this distinction, providing for grain offerings by the poor in some cases (Lev 5:11). However, Israelites were required to sacrifice their first fruits (Ex 23:16).

Cain was jealous of his brother. Literally, “his face fell.” He was dejected and hurt (vv. 5-6). However, his anger became so hot that he saw fault more in Abel and God than he saw in himself.

God gave Cain a remedy: if he behaved properly, Cain (not his offering) would be “lifted.” Cain could once again attain the honor that God reserved for the first-born, especially in worship.⁴

If he rejected God’s offer, he could expect sin to ambush him at any moment. The writer reminded the reader of the snake’s subtlety by picturing sin as a creature lying in wait for its prey (v. 7).

Cain allowed sin to overcome him as he plotted to eliminate his competition for God’s favor. Sin progressed in Cain’s mind to a contemplation of murder. After luring the unsuspecting Abel to an isolated spot, Cain carried out his plan (v. 8).

The text does not say how, but the Hebrew verb is a strong one for ruthless murder (*harag*).

No sooner had Cain done the deed than God asked Cain, “Where is your brother?” (v. 9). Cain pleaded ignorance—a lie—and answered with another question, in effect, “Am I the shepherd’s shepherd?” (In his teachings, Jesus answered that

question once-and-for-all with an emphatic yes!)

God immediately confronted Cain with his sin, as Abel’s blood cried out to God for justice (v. 10).

Because of the Hebrew belief that life was in the blood (Lev 17:11), the writer depicted Abel’s spilled blood calling out to God from the ground.

The first ethical consequence of Cain’s sin was punishment from the same ground that had swallowed Abel’s blood. Cain would suffer even more severe crop-yield restrictions than his father’s sin had garnered (3:17-18).

Second, Cain feared he would be murdered in turn (4:13-14). God assured him of protection from revenge-minded people. Cain’s statement presumed an eye-for-an-eye society (Ex 21:12-14).

Finally, Cain’s guilt drove him from the presence of those who knew of his sin, in particular, from the presence of God (v. 16). In the Hebrew mind, God dwelled on Mount Zion, not in the East where Cain was going. Wherever Cain went, it was far from God.

Genesis 6:5-8. Sin grew to the point that the species was totally corrupt. This passage is a stark contrast to the earlier pronouncement of good on all

creation (1:31).

The writer portrayed God anthropomorphically (as seeing the evil) and anthropopathically (as having emotions that humans have). God was grieved by what the species had become in its exercise of freedom.

God’s grief grew in direct proportion to human sin. However, no matter how grieved God was, there never was a hint of anger—only sadness. Destruction of the species was the only solution.

The writer saw God’s response in direct relation to the species’ moral direction.⁵

It is interesting that God included the land animals in the judgement of destruction. However, because a flood was the chosen method, there was no recourse.

There is no hint here that the animal world was under the curse of sin. However, their destruction indicates that our human sin affects other parts of God’s creation. We do not sin unto ourselves.

Genesis 11:1-9. Sin continued to spread, as humankind perpetually desired to be like God.

In its immediate state, the story answered the question of why humans speak so many different

languages. The context of the account is the story that leads to the beginnings of the nation Israel.⁶ Building a tower that reached to heaven was the goal. Becoming like God was the intent. The people believed that “making a name” for themselves would guarantee their unity and continued prosperity.

On top of the ziggurats of the ancient Near East (especially Babylon) were temples in which the people thought their gods dwelled. With the top of this tower in heaven, God would have a dwelling with the people.

The building was not the problem—it was the attitude of arrogance that accompanied the endeavor. In stopping the building and confusing their language, God created numerous “states” or nations, none of which could accomplish the original feat by itself.

Apply the Biblical Witness

Sin is pervasive. Once it starts, it spreads into every facet of life.

Us versus them. In the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent, we see the beginnings of rebellion against God. In Cain versus Abel, we see the beginnings of human conflict.

God’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice made Cain jealous of Abel. Abel did

nothing wrong, according to the text. Abel did not provoke Cain.

Instead of dealing with his anger in a constructive fashion, Cain nursed his anger until he committed murder.

Jesus cautioned that the sin of murder begins with anger in the heart (Mt 5:21-22).

Unchecked, hatred can grow to deadly proportions.

The terrible tragedy on September 11, 2001, is the result of sin's progression. At the root of this heinous crime is sin.

Different viewpoints bring conflict. Each view sees itself as superior in some sense. The result is deadly, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually.

The blame game. It is easier to blame another person, thing or situation than ourselves when we falter. Every parent has heard the lame excuse, "I dunno."

Cain pleaded ignorance when God inquired about Abel. Pleading ignorance to sin is to attempt to cover another transgression. It may work for a while, but ultimately the original sin and the ensuing cover-up can bring down even an American president.

Sin run amok. Genesis 6:5-8 records that sin became so entrenched in the earth that God's only alternative was to destroy the entire human species and begin again.

Sin can infiltrate every area of life. Even supposed guardians of morality and ethics fall prey to sin's pervasive nature. When a religious leader succumbs to sin and is discovered, the whole religious world reaps the consequences.

Jim Bakker, Robert Tilton and many others have fallen prey to sin while preaching against the evils of the very acts they were committing. Their fall only appeared greater because of the elevated status they attained in religious society.

In reality, each of us has fallen. Sin separates us from God. Once we reach a stage in life that we can discern good from evil, we eventually choose the evil and are cast from the "garden" of innocence.

Sin encapsulated. At its root, sin is a desire to be something we cannot: God. Although it takes myriad forms, sin basically is rebellion against God. We decide that we know better how to conduct our lives than does our Creator.

Thus begins a headlong fall into self-righteousness and self-centeredness. We want what is best for us at the

expense of God and other people.

Those who built the Tower of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves and to exalt themselves to god-like status. There can be only one God, and we test that at our peril.

Because God is holy, sin is not permitted where God is. Thus, we must choose God or choose sin. Sadly, most people choose to remain with sin.

We cannot dwell with God while sin dominates our lives. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters. Only one King can sit on the throne of our lives.

Conclusion

A famous Dutch legend recounts the story of a young boy who was walking by the dike in his village when he saw a trickle of water coming through a small hole. He plugged the hole with his finger until repairmen arrived.


Had he not acted quickly, the water pressure would have made the tiny hole larger until the entire dike would have failed, destroying the village.

Sin begins in the mind with thoughts about possibilities. If the thought is

nurtured, it becomes a plan, which, when carried out, is sin committed. No matter how "small" the sin, destruction of some kind occurs.

If the small thought is dismissed or given no room to grow, the sin never is committed. Small thoughts are dismissed with the help of the Holy Spirit and occupying the mind with wholesome thoughts.

"But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (Jas 1:14-15).

We must be on guard constantly to avoid unhealthy conflict with others. Avoiding this destructive behavior can only be accomplished by the presence of Christ in our lives. 

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1–15," in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 1:101.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 104.

⁴ G. Henton Davies, "Genesis," in *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 145; see Wenham, 105.

⁵ Wenham, 144.

⁶ Davies, 165.

Relationship between God's People and the World

Genesis 11:30; 12:1-3

**“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”
—Genesis 12:2**

In his inaugural speech on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy uttered his now-famous words: “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”

When religious people think of blessing, it usually is in terms of what God can/should do for them. Some feel they deserve a blessing from God because of their goodness, while others think God should give them a break because they have had bad luck.

God does not owe us anything. Rather, we owe God—big time!

Although the most common sense of blessing is material, blessing comes in many forms, the least of which is material.

Explore the Biblical Witness

God commissions, equips and compensates those called for divine service. Abram was the first in a long line of persons called to accomplish God's task of establishing a people through whom God could relate to the world.

The purpose of the account of the patriarchs was to tie together the stories of prehistory with the establishment of Israel in the land. God intended these clan leaders to bring together a people of faith who would proclaim the purposes of God to others.

God called Abram to leave country, kindred and his father's house to journey to an unknown land (12:1). Abram's faith for this mission set him apart from others.

Abram's people came from southern Arabia, Ur of the Chaldees (11:28). He settled in Haran, which was located at the northern apex of the Fertile Crescent. It apparently was there that Abram received God's call to journey onward to Canaan (v. 31).

The cost of obedience. Leaving his clan was a dramatic event for Abram. Semi-nomadic peoples of that era struggled to sustain life. They were not welcome in many lands because their flocks and herds ate valuable resources, and the nomads contributed little to the economy.

God called Abram to give up all that was dear to him¹ and to go to a land where he never had been. This was the first of many tests of his faith in God.

Promised land. The promise of land is one of the major themes in the biblical stories of the patriarchs. Israel used that promise to lay claim to the land of Canaan despite its occupation by various other Semitic tribes.

For an ancient nomadic herdsman, possessing land was an unlikely dream. Did Abram have grave doubts about this promise? Perhaps. Nevertheless, his decision to go was remarkable.

Another element that highlighted Abram's faith was the possible delay factor built into the promise. Abram probably knew he would not live long enough to see the land become his, for possessing it would take generations.

The Bible records that none of the

patriarchs fully possessed the Promised Land. Still, Abram possessed a promise of blessing through the inheritance of a land that his children would inhabit.

Promise of a nation. What makes a nation? For the United States, a constitution and articles of incorporation define the nation.

But in the ancient Near East, a nation was carved out through struggle and conflict. There were no unclaimed areas to homestead.

An insight into religious beliefs here helps us understand more completely Abram's faith in God relative to this promise. People of that day believed life continued through their progeny. A man gained “eternal life” through a line of sons bearing his name in perpetuity. This is what Abram believed God promised him.

God's promise to make of Abram a nation meant numerous offspring. Yet, Sarai was barren (11:30). Her infertility made the promise seem hollow. Both Abram and Sarai had great difficulty accepting the promise (Gen 15:2-3; 16:2; 17:17-18; 18:12).

Abram and Sarai decided to take matters in their own hands and to provide a solution. Sarai followed an ancient Near Eastern custom of giving her female servant to Abram

as a concubine (16:1-4). Any children born to the union would be considered Sarai's.² Sarai and Abram evidently thought following this custom was the way God intended to fulfill the promise of progeny.

Believing the promise that God would make of him a great nation required great faith. Abram was seventy-five years old and Sarai was barren.³ This test became even more severe later when Abram felt God leading him to sacrifice Isaac (22:2).

The promise of a *nation* rather than just a *people* was also significant. A nation was comprised of three main elements: people, land and an administration.

Thus, in promising to Abram a nation, God signalled a grand scheme whereby Abram's descendants would coalesce into the apex of human community—a nation.

Promise of a name. Session five examined God's judgement on a group of people who wanted to "make a name" for themselves (11:1-9). They discovered that making a name for oneself is something best left to God.

What did a great name entail in the ancient world? A great name included character and reputation.⁴ When God exalted a person, that person became righteous (15:6).

People who esteemed character would follow someone whose name God made great.

Abram's name would not have become great without God's intervention (12:2). Abram did little early on to establish moral character. He was not above lying when he sensed danger, twice passing Sarai off as his sister rather than his wife (12:10-15; 20:1-3).

Promise of blessing. God's covenant with Abram was neatly tied up in the concept of blessing (12:2-3). What we often call luck or fortune the ancients called blessing.⁵

Caught up in blessing was the restoration of God's intention in creation. Through Abram, God would begin to redeem humankind and reestablish the close relationship God desired at creation.

O be thou a blessing. All the earth was to be blessed through Abram (v. 3). Abram's faith in God brought extended blessing to all humankind. God used Abram and his descendants to bestow grace.⁶

The life of one blessed by God would have far-reaching beneficent effects on others. Each person who had agreeable contact with Abram was blessed, and those who had such relations with his descendants were to be blessed, too.

Apply the Biblical Witness

This passage has numerous applications to our lives.

Faith. How may we express faith in God? Faith implies dependency and trust. Yet, there is more. Faith involves yielding life.

Like Abram, God asks us to have faith, to make sacrifices that testify to God's providence. These sacrifices involve cost and present a person as a disciple of God.

Faith in God is expressed only in discipleship. Jesus likened the cost of discipleship to exalting him above family and things (Lk 14:26). He included cross bearing as the primary witness of one who follows him (Lk 9:23-26).

Cross bearing is not dragging a literal cross wherever we go. It is about displaying the character, demeanor and conduct of Christ each day. It means self-denial and deferring to others as a way of blessing them.

A committee once inquired about the remuneration of top-level denominational executives. Such inquiries were allowed under the organization's constitution. But some of those contacted declined to disclose their salary packages.

Others justified their pay by stating that if they were administering a similar budget in the secular market they would be making much more. The concept of "service" was lost amid the perks and advantages of "position."

Does filling a "ministerial" job that pays hundreds of thousands of dollars involve no ministry or blessing? Ministry involves sacrifice and faith. Blessing involves sacrificing for the benefit of others.

Jesus warned that one cannot serve God and money (Lk 16:13). When Paul advocated that a servant was worthy of his hire, he never imagined today's remuneration packages. His idea was that persons should be paid enough to meet the necessities of life.

Fame. Who decides when a person is famous? Celebrity status is laid on entertainers, athletes and politicians by adoring fans/followers. In the world's eyes, these people have a "great name."

Making a great name by God's standards involves much more, however. God still is the only one who can make a great name for a person.

If we try to make ourselves great, how have we benefited God's kingdom or other people? The New

Testament has numerous warnings about exalting ourselves (Rom 12:3; Mk 10:37; Mt 20:21; Lk 13:30).

Pride is a deadly beast that makes us easy prey to our achievements. Luck or success breeds the belief that we are responsible for our upward gain instead of God. Staying humble before God becomes harder as success becomes greater. Becoming proud because of God's blessing is even more inappropriate and tragic.

One's name becomes great by allowing God to fulfill the divine intent for each life. This does not preclude one's working hard and exploring every option. It does rule out any dishonest or devious tactic to get ahead.

My title's better than yours. Our culture loves titles. Companies have chief executive officers (CEO), chief operating officers (COO), chief financial officers (CFO), and the standard presidents and chairpersons.

Parish ministers have gotten on the title bandwagon lately, and they have done so in a great way. Titles such as administrative pastor, senior pastor and even executive pastor have become popular.

Everyone also wants to attach Dr. to the name, so now a person can buy doctorates for only a few hundred

dollars and practically no academic work. Look soon for: "The Most Rt. Rev. Dr. John Doe, Senior Executive Pastor" on a church marquee near you.

Blessing others. God blesses and intends for us to bless. Oddly, being a blessing to others blesses us in return.

Volunteer missions work has gained wide popularity among church people. Some mission agencies have trouble filling all the requests they receive from people or groups who want to work.

Why? Part of the answer is that our society has more leisure time and disposable funds than any previous generation. However, much of the gain is because of the gratification people receive from helping others.

Millard Fuller's Habitat for Humanity International has grown exponentially since its founding in 1976. It has built over 100,000 houses in more than 79 countries.⁷

People enjoy seeing the rewards of their labor as honest, hard-working people who could not previously afford a home become owners.

Fuller attributes Habitat's success to God's formula for blessing. As an example, he cites Jimmy Carter's emphasis that we in the United

States have a responsibility to be a blessing to others less fortunate.⁸

We are blessed more fully when we become a blessing to others than when we seek self-gratification. Anyone who ever has visited a shut-in has learned this lesson.

God shall overcome. Selfish pride and keeping up with the Joneses are two of the many obstacles that lay before us in becoming what God intends. Yet, it is in these obstacles that we must see God at work. Each obstacle is a possibility for us to allow God to receive glory through us as we try to leap the hurdle.

We may not be successful every time, but our struggles and even our failures can be a powerful witness to God's love if we endure them with grace and the resolve to continue.

We must accept of life what God can make it rather than settle for what we can make.

Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals in track in the 1960 Olympics. To get there she had to overcome scarlet fever at age four. She lost use of her left leg and had to learn to walk again when she was seven.

Lou Gehrig was such a clumsy ball player that the neighborhood boys would not let him play. But he

persevered and eventually became a member of baseball's Hall of Fame.

Woodrow Wilson could not read until he was ten years old. But he was committed to overcome the handicap and became our 28th president.

Conclusion


God seeks relationships with individuals. Even though sin separates people from God, God continually seeks to reestablish that relationship.

Through Jesus Christ, God revealed the divine nature completely. Jesus modeled God's love to us. He also embodied the kind of faith we should have in God.

Jesus established the church as the instrument through which God's love would flow to all the peoples of the world. Although the church is composed of human beings who often fail, we still have the mandate to carry the message of God's love to the entire world (Mt 28:19-20).

Carrying the message takes many forms and involves many examples. As Abram was charged with being a blessing, so we as God's people are to bless others with our ministries and our lives.

"Is your life a channel of blessing?"

the hymn asks. Strive to be a blessing in whatever you do and wherever you go. That is God's commission with a promise. 

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1–15" in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 1:274.

² Pamela J. Scalise, "Sarah," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, Watson E. Mills, Gen. Ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 796.

³ Melvin Eugene Henderson, "The Significance of Blessing in Genesis 12-50," (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977).

⁴ John Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 245.

⁵ Wenham, 275.

⁶ Henderson, 108.

⁷ www.habitat.org/how/tour/1.html.

⁸ Millard Fuller, *The Theology of the Hammer* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1994), 123.

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