

THE GOD WHO DOES NOT WIPE OUT REBELS:
A SERMON ON HOW GENESIS 1–3 GIVES HOPE TO SINNERS
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Introduction

This sermon today is spoken from the mouth of a sinner to sinners, all of us desperately in need of grace. For most, the morning has already been wrought with sin: unfaithfulness in our devotions, a thoughtless remark to a spouse, an undisciplined perusal of the Internet. We are sinners who sin every day through pride or discontentment or ungodly anger or worry or lust or apathy or an entire host of other signs of unbelief.

You may find yourself where Eve was in Genesis 3, finding yourself questioning whether God's ways are best. Sin is so deceitful, alluring us with promises of a better tomorrow, or at least a better tonight. 3:6 says, "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (desires of the flesh), and that it was a delight to the eyes (desires of the eyes), and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (pride in possessions), she took of its fruit and ate" (1 John 2:16). John declared, "The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (2:17).

Or you may find yourself where Adam was. Look at the end of Gen. 3:6: "And she also gave some to her husband who was with her." Back in 2:15 Adam had been commissioned "to work" and "to keep" the Garden, which would consist of plants, animals, ultimately his family. He was to be a servant and guardian, a provider and a protector. But now, rather than fighting for the supremacy of God in the Garden, he passively lets his wife and himself be deceived. Far too many men are passive in this world, not thinking about the destructive nature of what they watch or how long they watch it, how they spend their time, or how they use their money. They are not stewardly guardians of their lives, and so they waste them.

Or your problem may be that which is evidenced later in our story when we see Adam move from passive to aggressive in relation to his wife. God enters the Garden and calls to the man in 3:9: "'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.'" How quickly when confronted with sin do we attempt self-justification rather than divine justification? Adam, the one called to be a servant leader and to love his wife as his own body, now turns on his wife and declares death

to her. God had said in 2:17, “in the day that you of [the tree] you shall surely die.” “It’s not my problem, God; it’s Eve’s. Kill her!”

The deceived woman; the passive husband; the aggressive husband—all are signs of the fall. So too is pain—pain in childbearing, pain in toil, pain in sickness. In God’s judgment against the man and the woman, the Lord describes so well the cursed world in which we live. To the woman in 3:16 we read that the pain in bringing forth children is part of the curse. So too is marital strife. “Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.” Like sin in 4:7, which was crouching at the door of Cain’s life, ready to trample and subdue him, so also in this cursed world wives will seek to overpower their men, thwarting the beautiful roles of mutual service and respect set forth in Genesis 2, where there is a servant-minded head and a support-minded helper. Not only this, to the man we are told that life will be filled with burden, as God subjects the creation to futility, decay, and destruction. Work will be laborious and bodies will break down.

Are you there today? Do you see sings of the curse in your own life? How great the mercy of the cross! How amazing to have a God who does not wipe out rebels like you and me.

This semester our chapel hours are devoted to capturing the message of the biblical storyline. What is important to recognize today is that the grand narrative called redemptive history that is conveyed from Genesis to Revelation was written to sinners. When Genesis 1:1 declares, “In the beginning,” it introduces a message targeted to sinners. It is to those living this side of the fall—to those in need of the cross—that the Bible was given. While the true story told in the earliest chapters of Genesis is pre-fall, the story itself was written and given to those post-fall, to those who have already been anti-God, living our own way and failing to honor God as God. The Bible is given to sinners, and this should give us great hope. Instead of wiping out rebels, God discloses himself and his will, so that those who have ears to hear may be reconciled into relationship with their Creator.

This morning my sermon title is this: “The God who does not wipe out rebels: a meditation on how Genesis 1–3 gives hope to sinners.” What word does God have for rebels like us when we read these chapters?

I. We are called to a radical display of God’s greatness.

“In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). From these very first words in the Bible, readers learn that there is a God and that we are not it. He is the Creator; we, the creation, who are by nature to be servants, not the King. The text continues with a radical God-centeredness: *God* called forth the light, *God* separated it from the darkness, and *God* named it “Day” (Day 1). *God* made the sky, and *God* called it “Heaven” (Day 2). *God* gathered the waters, *God* called the dry land

“Earth,” and *God* made the vegetation (Day 3). *God* put the luminaries in the heavens (Day 4). *God* filled the sea with fish and the sky with birds (Day 5). *God* formed the animals, and *God* created humans (Day 6). God, God, God, God—this title is the explicit subject of almost every sentence! Although the author could have used the third masculine singular pronoun (“he”), *he used instead the explicit “God” to highlight that all things past and present are about the Creator!* Every glimpse of a sunset, every bite of watermelon, every cool breeze across one’s face is designed to direct us back to *God*, the One *from whom* but also *to whom* everything exists (Rom. 11:36).

This fact is reinforced in Genesis 1:26–28 when we learn that, whereas all other living creatures were created “according to their kinds” (1:21, 24–25), humanity alone was created *in God’s image*, after his likeness (1:26–27; cf. 5:1–3). The significance of an image is not found in itself but in that to which the image points. Like a telescope, which takes something large and shows its glories in a clearer way, so too humans are called to display God’s greatness and worth for all the world to see. This is the purpose of the commission in Genesis 1:28. The call to fill and subdue the earth is a call to spread God’s image over the globe—to be pointers in word and deed to the greatness of God and to spread a passion for his renown. In this do we find our life’s purpose, our mission.

If you find yourself this morning not displaying in speech and behavior that God is the treasure and leader of your life, take heart, for the Bible that contains this call is a book for rebels that have ears to hear and who through humility and brokenness begin to display the greatness of God. Humble yourself, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you (1 Pet. 5:6).

II. We must recognize that God alone can help us display him rightly.

Next, look at 1:28. I already noted how the commission to fill and subdue is properly understood only in light of humanity’s role as imagers of God. But note also that this commission is framed with these words: “And God blessed them. And God said to them.” In all likelihood, the commission to fill and subdue provides the content for the blessing. That is, in this verse God doesn’t do two things (bless and say); he does one (say a blessing). This fact is significant because, like prayers (which are addressed to God), blessings (which are usually addressed to people) are equally dependent on God to fulfill. You are likely familiar with the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23–26: “Yahweh bless you and keep you; Yahweh make his face to shine up you and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” Here the priest declares life into his audience, while looking to God to bring it. In Genesis 1:28, God framed his command to fill and subdue within a blessing, suggesting that the fulfillment of his commission will only be accomplished through dependence on him.

There is great hope here for sinners. Rather than wiping out rebels, God calls rebels to dependence. Here me. While Genesis 1 is a record of what was, in its role as Scripture it becomes a pointer to what should be. It relays the ideal for a people well aware of their insufficiency and calls us to look to God. Imaging God and spreading a passion for his renown will only be accomplished by people whose very obedience draws attention to God's sufficiency and not our own. He gives the blessing and by this makes the fulfillment of imaging him and exalting him through the world fully dependent on him to accomplish. "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

III. Be convinced that there is only one God who can save.

The narrative that begins in Genesis 2:4 and carries on through the rebellion of the first couple and their exile from Eden also points to this move of mercy, and I want us to meditate on this narrative and the nature and sequence of the words of the main character as the plot unravels.

In a world where two or more equally supreme powers exist, there is no basis for asserting that one power or its associations are "right" and others "wrong," some "good" and others "evil." If there is no standard for judgment, then all is relative and true hope in deliverance is superseded by wishful thinking at best, for no promise ultimately exists that one power will triumph over another.

In contrast, just as in Genesis 1 God could assert that his creation is "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), so too Genesis 2 shows this God establishing what is right and what is wrong, what is beautiful and what is not (2:16–17): "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." A number of observations are clear from this text.

First, God is the arbiter of what is right and what is wrong. There is a difference between "good and evil," which means there is a standard in the universe upon which to weigh value, and the Creator God is it. As creatures, our definitions of right and wrong need to conform to God's, and to turn from God's ways, deciding for ourselves what is "good and evil," is to assert a right not given to humans. We are creatures, and to act as if we are the Creator is to rebel, choosing death over life.

Second, what could easily be missed is that the mention of "good and evil" and the very promise of death gives great hope to sinners reading Genesis 2–3, for the text is unmistakably clear that there is indeed One God over all things—One God who is able to distinguish "good and evil" and ultimately One God who can save from death. If everything comes from him and is dependent on him, then salvation itself is something only he can bring.

For there to be a right and wrong means that we live not in a relative world but one with a Standard, with One supreme God. Satan and his forces are not God's equal but are created, like everything else that is not God. As 3:1 explicitly notes, *God* made the serpent. Did you get that? Satan is not eternal. The very one in this text who personifies all that is anti-God was made by God. In the words of Paul, the very spiritual rulers and authorities that we wrestle against (Eph. 6:12) and that Jesus disarmed at the cross (Col. 2:15) were created by, through, and for Jesus, that he might ultimately show his supremacy over them: "For by [the Son] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:16). Hope does exist for sinners because there is a God is over all things, determining what is right and what is wrong and calling sinners back to himself. Somehow the instructions originally given to Adam must have lasting value to those living this side of the curse, and one way they have value is in showing us both that rebellion is bad and that the God who distinguishes "good and evil" has moved to establish a relationship with sinners. The very presence of "good" in contrast to "evil" gives hope to a people in desperate need of salvation, for there is One who governs all things, and amazingly this God does not immediately wipe out rebels.

IV. Know that judgment is deserved but the promise of salvation is real.

The last point I want to make is just an amazing one, and I wish I had more time to develop it. We began this morning considering how all of us find ourselves this side of Genesis 3. What I want us to see now is that before God ever pronounced judgment on the woman and man, he declared a promise of salvation. Look with me at what has often been termed "the first gospel" in 3:14–15. "Yahweh God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.'"

We must not view this as a judgment on snakes, for the snake itself here and in all the rest of Scripture is portrayed as an image of the devil, the spiritual leader of the anti-God movement. With images of defeat, we are told that he will forever be on his belly and lick dust from the ground. Not only this, we are also told that he would bear offspring alongside the woman. Flowing out of Genesis 3 are two family trees—one associated with the anti-God rebellion of Cain and the other associated with the promise-trusting reconciled life of the woman and her son Seth. From Seth we move ten generations to Noah, and from Noah's son Shem we move ten generations to Abraham. Genesis makes every effort to distinguish the line of promise from the line of rebellion, for in the line of promise alone lied the hope of the world.

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Offspring is a special sort of noun called a collective singular. It's always singular in form, but context alone determines whether it is singular or plural in meaning. Sometimes clues in the context come from grammar, as is the case here. The 3ms pronoun "his" on "his heel" signals that the serpent will one day be crushed not by numerous descendants of the woman, but by a singular male descendant.

Eve herself in 4:1 appears to have thought Cain was this promised son, when she declared, "I have gotten a man with the help of Yahweh." Cain's killing of his brother Abel, however, proved that Cain was an offspring of the devil and not the promised "seed," but then Eve revived her hope in the promise when Seth was born (4:25): "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him."

By the time we get to Abraham, it is absolutely clear how desperately in need of blessing the cursed world is. But the original promise given to Eve has been maintained generation by generation through the line of promise, and we have been told in Gen. 12:3 that through Abraham the blessing would finally reach the nations. But how, seeing as Abraham did not have a son. Eliezer of Damascus was his heir but not his "seed" (15:3–4). Into this context, Abraham believed God in light of his promise to give him not only a son but offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5–6). Every star would be a pointer to the single star that Balaam foretold would rise from Jacob (Num. 24), and when that royal star would rise, the light of all other stars would be dimmed by its glory.

The promise given to Abraham regarding the seed finds climax when God calls him to sacrifice Isaac.

Gen. 22:17b–18

Ps. 72

Gal. 3:8, 14 – "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall the nations be blessed.' ... In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [has] come to the Gentiles."

Conclusion

1. We are called to a radical display of God' greatness.
2. We must recognize that God alone can help us display him rightly.
3. Be convinced that there is only One God who can save.
4. Know that judgment is deserved but the promise of salvation is real.