

A Guide from Genesis to Revelation



The **BIG IDEA**
COMPANION *for*
PREACHING
and
TEACHING

Edited by

Matthew D. Kim & Scott M. Gibson

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Introduction

MATTHEW D. KIM

Preparing a sermon or a Bible-study lesson can be daunting. Have you ever wished that you had a trusted conversation partner for determining the main idea or big idea of each book of the Bible? Have you wondered what the big idea is for the passages in Scripture on which you're preaching and teaching each week? It's not always easy or even convenient to ask someone for assistance. Studying the Bible can be a lonely and challenging venture for all believers in Christ, including preachers and teachers.

Well, you need not look any further. That elusive help is in your hands. Welcome to *The Big Idea Companion for Preaching and Teaching*. Written by leading evangelical homiletics, teachers of preaching, and experienced pastors, this book provides a concise resource for you—whether you are a pastor, teacher, or layperson—to check your understanding and interpretation of a particular Bible book or passage. But more than just handing you a catalog of big ideas, we want you to study the passages on your own and become confident that you can determine the main ideas of biblical texts in the privacy of your study or as you work together in groups.

This book is based on the late Haddon W. Robinson's big idea philosophy from his textbook *Biblical Preaching*. In it you will get an insider's view of the process of determining the main idea of a passage in its context (i.e., subject, complement, exegetical idea, and homiletical idea). In addition, for each book of the Bible you will have quick access to several features: (1) a brief introduction to the big idea of the entire book, (2) tips on how to divide the book into preaching and teaching pericopes, (3) guidance on difficult passages and

verses, (4) cultural perspectives to facilitate faithful application, and (5) recommended resources for interpreting, preaching, and teaching each book.

The Big Idea Companion for Preaching and Teaching will guide you in your hermeneutics, homiletics, and teaching of biblical texts. While we do not claim to have the sole voice on correctly interpreting any of these passages, our hope is simply to walk alongside you in this journey and act as that coveted conversation partner for you. As you'll soon find out, the overall framework for each book of the Bible, as mentioned above, will be the same. However, each author has a distinctive process for determining and wording the main ideas. We didn't want cookie-cutter chapters that taste exactly the same. Rather, we wanted each contributor's preaching and teaching voice to be read and received in a natural way. In addition, due to space limitations, the contributors may not cover every verse or pericope in their respective Bible books. As you engage in intentional and faithful study of Scripture, we ask you to pray that the Holy Spirit will lead you to *his* interpretation. The contributors to this handbook are fallible, imperfect people. Every time we read the Bible we are also submitting ourselves to the authority of God and to the authority of Scripture.

Our Christian culture is in a time of crisis—some might say apathy, dependency, or even upheaval. The very act of preaching is on a precarious slope. Too often, preachers and teachers are concerned more about their own image and popularity than they are about their integrity and faithfulness. Our hope and prayer in putting together this volume is to play a small role in assisting your daily and weekly preparation. Open up this volume whenever you feel stuck on the meaning of a given text or simply want to check your understanding with others. Depending on your needs, it can also be used as a mini-commentary to provide additional historical, grammatical, literary, and cultural context.

We believe in the faithful interpretation, proclamation, and teaching of God's Word as do you. This is our desire because we believe in the church. We believe that God is faithful to use us in this salient work of building his kingdom. May you preach and teach the Word with excellence, passion, and excitement—to the glory of God and the edification of God's people. Now, let's get to some big ideas.

THE OLD TESTAMENT



Genesis

CASEY C. BARTON

The Big Idea of Genesis

Genesis narrates our origins as God's people. The book traces humanity's story with God from its origin in God's spoken word that initiates and completes creation. The story moves through our first ancestors' disobedience to God and their consequent exile from God's presence. Once outside God's garden, humanity immediately finds itself mired in sin. Murder, shame, and immorality begin to abound in the story of God's once perfect world. From the first moments after Adam and Eve's entanglement with the serpent who led them astray, however, Genesis records God's work to bring about a reconciliation with his creation and to give his blessing to the world. The story follows the flow of God's covenant promise and blessing through his chosen servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob's family is preserved through God's gracious salvation of Jacob's son Joseph, and they will become the people of God's promise, Israel. Genesis is a book of beginnings, tracing the origin of God's people back to God's word.¹

SUBJECT: What story does the book of Genesis tell God's people about their origins?

COMPLEMENT: That from the beginning, with creation broken by sin, they are a people created by God's word of promise and blessing to bring God's word of promise and blessing to all people, which will heal and reconcile creation with God in the end.

1. For a more complete and quite accessible introduction to Genesis, see Tremper Longman III, *Genesis, The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 1–25.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The book of Genesis tells God’s people the story of their origins, that from the beginning, with creation broken by sin, they are a people created by God’s word of promise and blessing to bring God’s word of promise and blessing to all people, which will heal and reconcile creation with God in the end.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God’s story begins with promises of his presence with his people for the world.

Selecting Preaching and Teaching Passages in Genesis

Genesis is the first portion of the larger literary unit that includes Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the Pentateuch. The book is composed of four broad narrative arcs that focus on God’s presence and promise with the central characters of the story. The narratives that make up these larger sections detail God’s particular history with his people as he forms them through covenant, promise, and blessing, and as he judges sin and wickedness both in his own people and in the world. Selection of preaching passages should take into account the pericope’s place in these larger narratives.

The first of these arcs is the prehistory of God’s people, from creation through the flood and on to the introduction of Abram (chaps. 1–11). Here the story is told of God’s good creation spoiled by the sin of the first people that he made to steward it. From the fall, God’s gracious presence travels alongside the spread of sin in the world. Even with God’s cleansing of the earth with a flood, sin remains in the generation of Noah’s sons (9:18–28). Sin stubbornly will not go away. Two paths begin to emerge—the path overgrown with sin and choking most of creation, and a path of promise graciously given to Abram and his descendants (though even this path has its fair share of sin along the way).

God’s promises are formalized as we are introduced to Abram (soon to be Abraham) and the all-important covenant that God makes with him (chaps. 12–25). The arc of Abraham is a story of God making promises to one man for the blessing of all people, and that one man struggling in faith and obedience to believe and live the promises of God when they are nearly impossible for him to believe. The son born out of God’s covenant promise, Isaac, inherits that promise from Abraham and in turn passes it to his son.

The next generation of God’s covenant promises working their way into the world comes through the narrative arc of Jacob (chaps. 25–36), the deceptive younger brother who both steals the blessing and is given it by God. Jacob’s story, like Abraham’s (Jacob will also get a new name), is one of

emerging faith in the fulfillment of promises that Jacob may not be able to fully see or understand but that he will grab and hold on to for dear life (32:22–32).

A final set of stories focus on Jacob's son, Joseph, and are told for the sake of Jacob's entire family (chaps. 37–50). Joseph's story recalls how God preserved the people that he had created and blessed to be the bearers of his covenant blessing to the world. It is given to show God's providential work in bringing the people of Israel to Egypt, saving them from famine and building them into a nation. This sets the stage for the central redemptive act of God in the Old Testament when he brings his people out of Egypt in Exodus, keeping yet another promise (46:2–5).

Selecting specific texts for preaching within these larger sections will be a matter of tracing narrative beginnings and endings, seeking the central idea in each as it functions within the whole.²

Getting the Subject, Complement, Exegetical Idea, and Homiletical Idea

Genesis 1:1-2:3

SUBJECT: What does the author of Genesis say is the origin of the cosmos and everything in it?

COMPLEMENT: God speaking all things into existence, forming and filling it all out of nothing.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author of Genesis says that the origin of the cosmos and everything in it was God speaking all things into existence, forming and filling it all out of nothing.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God spoke, forming and filling all of creation out of nothing.

Genesis 2:4-25

SUBJECT: What does the author say is the origin and original state of humanity?

COMPLEMENT: God created man and woman as innocent and perfect complements, stewards of his good creation.

2. Commentators outline Genesis in varying ways for both exposition and preaching. For alternative structural outlines, see Longman, *Genesis*; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1982); or R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that the origin and original state of humanity is that God created man and woman as innocent and perfect complements, stewards of his good creation.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God created us to be the perfect caretakers of his creation.

Genesis 3

SUBJECT: How does the author say humanity lost the innocence with which it was created?

COMPLEMENT: Through disobedience to God, which brought a curse on creation and separation from God.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that humanity lost the innocence with which it was created through disobedience to God, bringing about a curse on creation and separation from God.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Sin leaves its scars when we allow it into God's world.

Genesis 4:1-16

SUBJECT: What does the author say happened in the generation after the fall?

COMPLEMENT: Sin began to dominate as Cain murdered his brother Abel.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that, in the first generation after the fall, sin began to dominate as Cain murdered his brother Abel.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Sin overwhelms with violent force.

Genesis 4:17-5:32

SUBJECT: What does the author's juxtaposition of Cain's and Seth's lines reveal about humanity after the fall?

COMPLEMENT: Humanity's path was split as Cain's family pursued sin and vengeance while Seth's family pursued God's relief from the curse.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author's juxtaposition of Cain's and Seth's lines reveals that, after the fall, humanity's path split as Cain's family pursued sin and vengeance while Seth's family pursued God's relief from the curse.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: After the fall our paths diverge, leading us either toward God or farther away.

Genesis 6:1-9:17

SUBJECT: How does the author say God responded to wickedness overtaking humanity and the whole creation?

COMPLEMENT: By bringing a flood to cleanse creation, saving for himself a small remnant for a new creation.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God responded to wickedness overtaking humanity and the whole creation by bringing a flood to cleanse creation, saving for himself a small remnant for a new creation.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's way is to make all things new.

Genesis 9:18-28

SUBJECT: How does the author say sin persisted in the first generation after the flood?

COMPLEMENT: Noah's son Ham dishonored his father, bringing a curse on his son Canaan's line and a blessing on the families of his brothers Shem and Japheth.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says sin persisted in the first generation after the flood when Noah's son Ham dishonored his father, bringing a curse on his son Canaan's line and a blessing on the families of his brothers Shem and Japheth.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God makes all things new, and sin still pushes back.

Genesis 10-11

SUBJECT: How does the author present the development of nations and languages from the time of Noah to Abram?

COMPLEMENT: By recounting that humanity's problem with sin was magnified rather than overcome through coordinated human effort, and in God's judgment and grace God divided the people into nations and languages, tracing his plan to and through Abram.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author presents the development of nations and languages from the time of Noah to Abram by recounting that humanity's problem with sin was magnified rather than overcome through coordinated human effort, and in God's judgment and grace God divided the people into nations and languages, tracing his plan to and through Abram.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: The path to God must follow his story, not ours.

Genesis 12:1-9

SUBJECT: What does the author say about the covenant God made with Abram?

COMPLEMENT: That Abram would leave all he had and God would make him a great nation, give him a great name, and bless him and the world through him.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that in the covenant God made with Abram, Abram would leave all he had and God would make him a great nation, give him a great name, and bless him and the world through him.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's people are created with a promise, and its blessing remains today.

Genesis 12:10-13:18

SUBJECT: What does the author reveal about God's treatment of Abram in these stories of his wandering?

COMPLEMENT: That God rescued him from harm and promised to bless him in the land.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: In these stories of Abram's journeying, the author reveals about God's treatment of Abram that God rescued him from harm and promised to bless him in the land.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God cares for the bearers of his promise.

Genesis 14

SUBJECT: How does the author say God reinforced his covenant with Abram at the end of the battle in which he rescued Lot?

COMPLEMENT: Through the blessing of Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God reinforced his covenant with Abram at the end of the battle in which he rescued Lot through the blessing of Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's blessing appears in surprising places.

Genesis 15

SUBJECT: How does the author say God answered Abram's fear over the covenant's delayed fulfillment?

COMPLEMENT: By guaranteeing the covenant promises with God's own self in a self-curse ritual.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God answered Abram's fear over the covenant's delayed fulfillment by guaranteeing the covenant promises with God's own self in a self-curse ritual.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises rest on God's shoulders.

Genesis 16

SUBJECT: How does the author say God treated Hagar when she was used by Sarai and Abram to seek the fulfillment of the covenant promises on their own, apart from God?

COMPLEMENT: God found, heard, and saw her in her abuse and blessed her with a son who would become a great nation who would stand in hostile relationship with other nations.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that when Hagar was used by Sarai and Abram to seek the fulfillment of the covenant promises on their own, apart from God, God found, heard, and saw her in her abuse and blessed her with a son who would become a great nation who would stand in hostile relationship with other nations.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's love comes to those abandoned by God's people.

Genesis 17

SUBJECT: What does the author say about God establishing the line and sign of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants?

COMPLEMENT: That God's covenant would flow through Isaac's line with circumcision as the covenant's sign.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says about God establishing the line and sign of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants that God's covenant would flow through Isaac's line with circumcision as the covenant's sign.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God has set his people apart, then and now.

Genesis 18:1-15

SUBJECT: How does the author say God confirmed the covenant to Sarah?

COMPLEMENT: With a personal visit by God and his emissaries, in which he read Sarah's heart and affirmed the imminent fulfillment of the promise of a son.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God confirmed the covenant to Sarah with a personal visit by God and his emissaries, in which he read Sarah's heart and affirmed the imminent fulfillment of the promise of a son.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: The impossible won't prevent God's promises from prevailing.

Genesis 18:16-19:38

SUBJECT: How does the author say sin persisted through the age of God's covenant with Abraham?

COMPLEMENT: The citizens of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah practiced egregious sin, such as asserting power through forcible rape, bringing God's destructive judgment on them even while, for Abraham's sake, God saved Lot's family, whose descendants would be the result of further sexual sin and become enemies of Abraham's descendants throughout their story.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says sin persisted in the age of God's covenant with Abraham as the citizens of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah practiced egregious sin, such as asserting power through forcible rape, bringing God's destructive judgment on them even while, for Abraham's sake, God saved Lot's family, whose descendants would be the result of further sexual sin and become enemies of Abraham's descendants throughout their story.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's mercy emerges even as his judgment ensues.

Genesis 20

SUBJECT: How does the author say God responded to Abraham's habitual sin of lying about his marriage to Sarah, putting her and the covenant in danger?

COMPLEMENT: In preserving the covenant promise by preventing Abimelech from taking Sarah for himself.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God responded to Abraham's habitual sin of lying about his marriage to Sarah, putting her and the covenant in danger, in preserving the covenant promise by preventing Abimelech from taking Sarah for himself.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promise won't be derailed by our sin.

Genesis 21:1-21

SUBJECT: What does the author say about the status of Abraham's two sons in relation to God's covenant?

COMPLEMENT: That Isaac was the long-awaited and impossibly conceived child of God's covenant promise, while Ishmael would not inherit God's promise and was driven away, though cared for by God.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says about the status of Abraham's two sons in relation to God's covenant that Isaac was the long-awaited and impossibly conceived child of God's covenant promise, while Ishmael would not inherit God's promise and was driven away, though cared for by God.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promise follows God's story.

Genesis 21:22-34

SUBJECT: What does the author say Abraham's oath with Abimelech revealed about God's covenant with Abraham?

COMPLEMENT: That while God's blessing would remain on Abraham despite his previous dishonesty, he must deal honestly with his neighbors in the land, becoming a blessing to them.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that Abraham's oath with Abimelech revealed about God's covenant with Abraham that while God's blessing would remain on Abraham despite his previous dishonesty, he must deal honestly with his neighbors in the land, becoming a blessing to them.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promise must change who and how we are in the world.

Genesis 22

SUBJECT: What does the author say was Abraham's response to God's test of his faithfulness by asking him to sacrifice Isaac?

COMPLEMENT: Abraham displayed the maturity of his faith in God's promises by obeying without question, to which God reaffirmed the covenant promise through Isaac.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Abraham's response to God's test of his faithfulness by asking him to sacrifice Isaac was to display the maturity of his faith in God's promises by obeying without question, to which God reaffirmed the covenant promise through Isaac.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Only Jesus provides the sacrifice that brings us life.

Genesis 23:1-25:18

SUBJECT: How does the author say Abraham's part in God's story was concluded?

COMPLEMENT: After Sarah's death and burial, Abraham ensured the continuation of the covenant line by finding Isaac a wife and passing on all he had to Isaac before he died.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Abraham's part in God's story was concluded when, after Sarah's death and burial, Abraham ensured the continuation of the covenant line by finding Isaac a wife and passing on all he had to Isaac before he died.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promise lives past our part in his story.

Genesis 25:19-34

SUBJECT: How does the author trace the path of God's covenant promises at the beginning of the story of Isaac and his sons?

COMPLEMENT: By revealing that God chose the younger Jacob to inherit the covenant rather than the older Esau, who sold and despised his birthright.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author traces the path of God's covenant promises at the beginning of the story of Isaac and his sons by revealing that God chose the younger Jacob to inherit the covenant rather than the older Esau, who sold and despised his birthright.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises flow in his own ways.

Genesis 26

SUBJECT: How does the author describe the beginning of God's fulfillment of covenant promises to Isaac?

COMPLEMENT: By showing that, for the sake of Abraham's obedience, God blessed Isaac with wealth and prosperity and elevated his status among the peoples.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author describes the beginning of God's fulfillment of covenant promises to Isaac by showing that, for the sake of Abraham's obedience, God blessed Isaac with wealth and prosperity and elevated his status among the peoples.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God fulfills his promises from generation to generation.

Genesis 27:1-28:9

SUBJECT: Who does the author say is the recipient of Isaac's blessing and God's covenant promises?

COMPLEMENT: Jacob, who deceived his father and yet was chosen by God from his birth.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says the recipient of Isaac's blessing and God's covenant promises was Jacob, who deceived his father and yet was chosen by God from his birth.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God sees his way through our deception to fulfill his promises.

Genesis 28:10-22

SUBJECT: How does the author say God confirmed the passing of covenant promises to Jacob?

COMPLEMENT: By coming to him in a dream in which he showed himself to Jacob and made to him the promises he made to Abraham, to which Jacob responded with a vow of faithfulness.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God confirmed the passing of covenant promises to Jacob by coming to him in a dream in which he showed himself to Jacob and made to him the promises he made to Abraham, to which Jacob responded with a vow of faithfulness.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises span heaven and earth to bring his children home.

Genesis 29-31

SUBJECT: How does the author say God preserved and progressed the story of his covenant through Jacob's raucous time in exile?

COMPLEMENT: By providing him children who would carry the story on.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God preserved and progressed the story of his covenant through Jacob's raucous time in exile by providing him children who would carry the story on.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises endure through the craziest times.

Genesis 32:1-33:17

SUBJECT: How does the author say Jacob was both changed and remained the same in his two meetings as he returned to the promised land fearing Esau's wrath?

COMPLEMENT: In his meeting with and defeat by God, Jacob was changed as he was reborn, newly named Israel and blessed though crippled, after which he found reconciliation with Esau as the new Israel and remained a deceiver when he lied again to his brother.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Jacob was both changed and remained the same in his two meetings as he returned to the promised land fearing Esau's wrath when, in his meeting with and defeat by God, Jacob was changed as he was reborn, newly named Israel and blessed though crippled, after which he found reconciliation with Esau as the new Israel and remained a deceiver when he lied again to his brother.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Magnificently defeated, we are being made new.³

Genesis 33:18-34:31

SUBJECT: What does the author say Israel's sons did to Shechem and his people when he raped their sister Dinah?

COMPLEMENT: They used the sacred symbol of God's covenant, circumcision, to exact a violent and brutal revenge for personal satisfaction and economic gain.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that when Shechem raped their sister Dinah, Jacob's sons used the sacred symbol of God's covenant, circumcision, to exact a violent and brutal revenge on Shechem and his people for personal satisfaction and economic gain.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: In humanity's sin we turn God's blessings into inhumane weapons of violence.

Genesis 35:1-36:43

SUBJECT: How does the author affirm the lineage along which God's covenant would travel?

COMPLEMENT: By recounting Jacob's and Esau's lines, highlighting Jacob's blessing by God at Bethel.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author affirms the lineage along which God's covenant would travel by recounting Jacob's and Esau's lines, highlighting Jacob's blessing by God at Bethel.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises follow God's story.

3. The phrase "magnificent defeat" for the story of Jacob wrestling with God comes from Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985).

Genesis 37:1-11

SUBJECT: What does the author indicate about Joseph as he introduces the story of Jacob's sons?

COMPLEMENT: Joseph was Jacob's favored son, whose dreams reveal that he would rule over his older brothers.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: As he introduces the story of Jacob's sons, the author indicates that Joseph was Jacob's favored son, whose dreams revealed that he would rule over his older brothers.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises fulfilled are our grandest dreams come true.

Genesis 37:12-36

SUBJECT: How does the author say Joseph's life was spared when his brothers determined to kill him because of their father's favoritism and the implications of his dreams?

COMPLEMENT: Instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery, which brought him to Egypt.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Joseph's life was spared when his brothers determined to kill him because of their father's favoritism and the implications of his dreams when, instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery, which brought him to Egypt.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promise rolls right over whatever barriers we put in its way.

Genesis 38

SUBJECT: Why does the author say Judah regarded Tamar as more righteous than himself?

COMPLEMENT: Because his self-serving preservation revealed his denial of her justice.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Judah regarded Tamar as more righteous than himself because his self-serving preservation revealed his denial of her justice.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Denying justice to those it is owed distances us from God's righteousness.

Genesis 39

SUBJECT: Why does the author say Joseph was able to prosper in Egypt despite being a slave who was falsely accused of rape and imprisoned?

COMPLEMENT: Because the Lord was with him and brought him success.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says Joseph was able to prosper in Egypt despite being a slave who was falsely accused of rape and imprisoned because the Lord was with him and brought him success.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Even when the deck is stacked against God's people, God's presence preserves them.

Genesis 40-41

SUBJECT: How does the author say God prospered Joseph in Egypt?

COMPLEMENT: By giving him the gift of interpreting dreams, which put him into favor with Pharaoh, who made him second in command over all Egypt in the time leading up to and during a great famine.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says God prospered Joseph in Egypt by giving him the gift of interpreting dreams, which put him into favor with Pharaoh, who made him second in command over all Egypt in the time leading up to and during a great famine.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God gifts us to play our part in his big story.

Genesis 42-45

SUBJECT: In this extended story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, what does the author say had been God's ultimate purpose in bringing Joseph to Egypt?

COMPLEMENT: To preserve the lives of the family of Israel, and by extension the promises of God's covenant with them.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: In this extended story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, the author says God's ultimate purpose in bringing Joseph to Egypt had been to preserve the lives of the family of Israel, and by extension the promises of God's covenant with them.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Through good and bad, God tells his story to preserve his promises.

Genesis 46-47

SUBJECT: What assurance does the author say Jacob had from God as Joseph settled his family in Egypt?

COMPLEMENT: That God would go with him, prosper his family, and bring him back.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that as Joseph settled his family in Egypt, Jacob had the assurance that God would go with him, prosper his family, and bring him back.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God joins us as we play our role in the story he's telling.

Genesis 48:1-50:14

SUBJECT: What does the author say Jacob did for his family at the end of his life?

COMPLEMENT: He bestowed on the whole of his family blessings appropriate for each one individually, passing God's covenant blessing on to his descendants.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says that at the end of Jacob's life he bestowed on the whole of his family blessings appropriate for each one individually, passing God's covenant blessing on to his descendants.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: God's promises live past our part in his story.

Genesis 50:15-26

SUBJECT: What messages does the author say Joseph gave to his brothers before he dies?

COMPLEMENT: All that had happened had been from God, who would fulfill his promise to bring them out of Egypt and into the land promised to their fathers.

EXEGETICAL IDEA: The author says the messages Joseph gave to his brothers before he dies are that all that had happened had been from God, who would fulfill his promise to bring them out of Egypt and into the land promised to their fathers.

HOMILETICAL IDEA: Looking back at God's faithfulness encourages us for the road stretched out ahead.

Difficult Passages/Verses

A number of difficulties await the preacher approaching the book of Genesis. First, some of the book's stories have a fantastical quality, and the preacher will benefit from understanding the literary nature of Genesis when shaping his or her interpretation and proclamation of these stories. Second, the story unfolds into scenes that are seemingly incongruous with our vision of God,

of God's people, and of the interaction between the two, and the preacher can be left not quite knowing what to say.

We don't have to wait around long in the pages of Genesis before we recognize the fantastical nature of the story of our beginnings. From the outset we are faced with realities that seem apart from our own experiences of the world. Herein lies a world where God breathes into lumps of dirt (2:7), snakes speak (3:1), God walks in the garden (3:8) and wrestles with men (32:24), and God speaks creation into existence (1:3) and speaks to those he's chosen to hear him (46:3–4). The world revealed in these pages makes its claim to be the very same world in which we live. When proclaiming Genesis as God's story, the preacher must be able to bring the creative world of Genesis into focus for the congregation that lives in that same world today.

Recognizing that the literary genre of Genesis is *theological* or *sacred history* is helpful.⁴ The book is centrally a historical narrative, making real claims about a real past. However, it is not history that seeks only to recount facts, figures, dates, people, and locations. Genesis narrates events, and those events all have their origin and significance in the relationship of God's real and actual interaction with humanity. The author is centrally concerned about the work and action of God in the world. In this sense, the author often uses figurative or nonliteral language to recount and present events and realities that literally happened. The point here is that Genesis was not intended to function as history in the same way a twenty-first-century history book recounts history. Sidney Greidanus notes about Hebrew historical narratives that they “are like stained-glass windows which artistically reveal the significance of certain facts from a specific faith perspective.”⁵ Genesis recounts the events of God with God's people through a theological lens. God himself is fantastical and creative. That his story is also fantastical and creative shouldn't give us much pause.

A second set of difficulties arises when the text presents stories that strike modern ears as particularly unethical or violent, that reveal God's people as immoral and yet heroes of the faith, or that present actions of God that are simply difficult to understand.

When God gives Abraham circumcision as a sign of the covenant, he commands that all males be circumcised, including those “born in your house or bought with your money” (17:12 ESV). Does God here condone slavery? Or does God merely acknowledge its reality? Why doesn't God condemn it

4. Longman discusses the genre and style of Genesis as theological history. See Longman, *Genesis*, 7–10.

5. Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 196. Greidanus's discussion of Hebrew narrative on the whole is helpful; see 188–227.

outright? The preacher should be ready to address questions such as these inside and outside the church.

Some stories are simply violent and shocking. What are we to make of Shechem's rape of Dinah in chapter 34?⁶ The story is at once disorienting and infuriating. Shechem rapes Dinah, and yet we are told that he loves her and wants to marry her. Her father and brothers negotiate her marriage to her rapist with his father, and in the story she is given no voice in the matter. In the end, Jacob's sons weaponize the sign of the covenant blessing of God, circumcision, to gain a tactical advantage in their plan to slaughter not just Shechem but also all the men of the city and to plunder what was left. How should the preacher address such a violent scene? Telling this story in the pulpit will take wisdom to not say too little and distill the power of the offense, and to not say too much, exploiting Dinah once again for homiletical spectacle, still not able to speak her own story. In any case, the story is God's and we cannot ignore it.

Other times the story's heroes act very unheroically. In chapter 16 Abram and Sarai use their servant Hagar as a surrogate for Sarai in an attempt to force the fulfillment of God's promise rather than having patient faith that God will be faithful. Too often preachers skip or gloss over these stories of unvarnished abuse. Here, the patriarch is guilty of using Hagar as a sexual servant and then allowing his wife to abuse her. It is important to acknowledge that God's people are flawed, even if God and his covenant are not. It is notable here that God cares for those whom God's people have abandoned. That is a powerful story to tell today, calling God's people to repentance and preaching hope to those who have found themselves unwelcome among them.

Among these stories that are difficult to hear, there are also the stories in which we cannot fathom the action of God on the stage. These may have to do with the utter scope and destruction of God's judgment, such as in the flood (chaps. 6–9) or the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah (chaps. 18–19). God's people today are not accustomed to interacting with God as judge. Central among these stories, however, must be God's test of Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac, the son of the promise, as a burnt offering to God (chap. 22), a story that can cause logical dissonance in the reader. While this story is incredibly important to the whole of Genesis, and for understanding the sacrifice of Christ later in God's story, it can be equally difficult to interpret, understand, and preach. On the one hand, it is hard to think of God as asking for a human sacrifice, when we know that elsewhere in Scripture he abhors the practice (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10). On the other

6. With the NIV, Longman translates Shechem's offense in 34:2 as rape. See Longman, *Genesis*, 426–35.

hand, it is nearly as horrible to think of Abraham's willingness to comply. The preacher must keep the focus on the overarching themes of Genesis—the faithfulness of God to his covenant promises, the creation of a covenant people for himself—to lead the congregation in hearing God's Word here. It is helpful to remember that we preach these stories in the context of the gospel of Christ.

Cultural Perspectives and Application

In this space I will focus on just two observations of application: Genesis gives us a story about origins, and that story shows us that God will not abandon his people.

In recent years at-home DNA tests have become increasingly popular for consumers looking to connect with others and connect to their roots. At the end of 2018 more than twenty-six million people had added their DNA samples to databases through companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe. Researchers extrapolate that number to be more than one hundred million by the beginning of 2021.⁷ One way to interpret this phenomenon is to say that people are longing to connect to their history, to discover their origins, and new technology is making it easier and more accessible to do so. At the center of the human experience there is a sense in which we long to be connected to something larger than ourselves.

Genesis tells this story of our origins. It gives us the history that we are longing for. We have our origins in the very word of God spoken into nothing to bring about something good, beautiful, lovely, and loved. Genesis tells us that we are something good. We are the ones whom God loves. We are the inheritors of the story of God pursuing his creation, despite our sin, through Sodoms and Shechems, deceptions and famines, promises and blessings down through the generations of God's people. In the death and resurrection and reign of Christ, we are connected to this story of the beginning of God's people because in Christ we are God's people. Genesis begins the story of how God loved us so much that he wouldn't let us go. Proclaiming this story can help people connect to that bigger story that all of those DNA tests promise but cannot deliver in remotely the same way.

Another pervasive experience of contemporary living is abandonment. Children experience abandonment when they don't receive the love or care

7. Antonio Regalado, "More Than 26 Million People Have Taken an At-Home Ancestry Test," *MIT Technology Review*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612880/more-than-26-million-people-have-taken-an-at-home-ancestry-test>.

from a parent that should be given to them. These fears and feelings can follow individuals through the entirety of their lives, possibly casting a shadow over every relationship they will ever have. Marriages that end in divorce often carry feelings of abandonment by one or both partners. It is striking that so many relationships in our world that are supposed to be marked with love, care, and stability end in infidelity, apathy, and abandonment of the other.

Genesis tells us another story, though. Throughout the narrative we are confronted with a God who simply will not abandon those he loves. At times in the story it seems as if humanity is trying to get God to abandon us as we persist in taking God's good creation and using it for selfish or violent ends. And yet through it all God is relentless in his faithfulness to his covenant promises, unyielding in his pursuit of the redemption of humanity. God has been faithful to his creation throughout history, working to remove the sin that separates us from him. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and he created us good in the midst of it all. In Christ, he is recreating the world the way it was meant to be from the beginning, restoring the garden, and he will not leave us or let us get away from him until the story is finished (Rev. 22:1–5).

This is good news to preach.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Arnold, Bill T. *Encountering the Book of Genesis*. Encountering Biblical Studies. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox, 1982.

Longman, Tremper, III. *Genesis*. The Story of God Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.