

Sermon Series Guide



- Who am I?
- What is truth?
- What does my life mean?

These are called the existential questions. You might think only philosophers and students with too much time on their hands worry about such things. But it turns out that COVID, and an unstable world, have made a lot of us ordinary people ask these questions too.

And there are plenty of answers on offer – scientific, psychological, social and spiritual.

The Bible also offers clear and satisfying answers to these questions. Many of those answers come in the Genesis creation account (Genesis 1-3). So, we're going to spend this term examining the Bible's answers to the existential questions.

I pray that what we learn will help us to make sense of life ourselves, and give us the confidence to offer clear answers when we meet others who are searching for truth or meaning.

The book of Genesis

The best information we have suggests that Genesis was written by Moses – along with the other 4 starting books of the Jewish scriptures called the Torah. This view is based on references from elsewhere in the Bible – nearest in time to when these books were written.

Moses himself wasn't present for the events he records in Genesis. He records his own birth in the second book of the Torah (Exodus, chapter 2). Therefore, he must be recording verbal traditions handed down, and – very likely – things God has revealed to him directly. Moses spent long periods of time alone with God (Exodus 19, 24 and especially 33: 7-11 where it's clear that Moses spoke with God 'face-to-face' on a regular basis in the Tent of Meeting).

The book of Genesis is long and contains several different kinds of literature.

- Some is written as narrative (e.g. the lives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).
- Other parts have a clear poetic structure (e.g. the first creation account in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3).
- And some has a 'mythical' tone (e.g. the second creation account focussing on mankind, the tower of Babel, the flood etc.).

Most of Genesis 1-3 is poetry and mythical literature. But that doesn't make it any less important or meaningful. Like the best poetry and literary prose today, it has profound and life-shaping meaning, but to get to that meaning you have to interpret the pictures and stories. It's not like a newspaper report or a scientific paper.

To put this more briefly, Genesis is 100% reliable – but it's not cosmology or geology or biology; it's theology and anthropology.

What we might learn

These three chapters give us God's account of:

- how he has ordered the universe
- why he made mankind
- our role in his world
- why he made both male and female
- what has gone wrong in the world
- his promise to put things right again

I'm praying that, by digging into Genesis 1-3, we will better understand our part in God's creation, our relationship with him, the brokenness around us and within us, and God's redemptive plans & promises.

I'd love this to shape our understanding of who we are and why we're here. In turn, I'd love that understanding to change the way we live and the way we respond when others are seeking answers to life's big questions.

Structure of the chapters

PASSAGE	CONTENT
Genesis 1:1-2:3	The first creation account
• 1:1-2	In the beginning
• 1:3-5	Separating light and dark – the 1 st day
• 1:6-8	Separating waters above and below – the 2 nd day
• 1:9-13	Separating land and sea – the 3 rd day
○ 1:11-13	Seed-bearing plants
• 1:14-19	Heavens filled with lights – the 4 th day
• 1:20-23	Sea and sky filled with life – the 5 th day
• 1:24-31	Land filled with creatures – the 6 th day
○ 1:26-31	Mankind
▪ 1:26	'In our image' to rule
▪ 1:27	'In our image' male and female
▪ 1:28	Being fruitful and multiplying

▪ 1:29	Eating the seed-bearing plants
• 2:1-3	Completion and rest – the 7 th day
2:4-25	The second creation account
• 2:4	This is the account of...
• 2:5-7	A man of dust & 'breath of life' in a barren world
• 2:8-14	A garden of life and wisdom watering the world
• 2:15-17	Man in the garden: a job, freedom & limits
• 2:18-24	A woman to complete man
○ 2:18	Not good alone
○ 2:19-20	No animal suitable
○ 2:21-23	The creation of woman: flesh of man's flesh
○ 2:24	The one-ness of marriage
• 2:25	Shamelessness
3:1-24	The fall
• 3:1-5	The serpent's deception: suspicion of God
• 3:6	Humanity's fall: pleasing and desirable
• 3:7-13	Shame and fig leaves
○ 3:8-10	Hiding from God
○ 3:11-13	Hiding from truth
• 3:14-19	Curses and promises
○ 3:14-15	The serpent: dust and enmity
▪ 3:15	The serpent-crushing offspring
○ 3:16	Woman: labour pain and gender warfare
○ 3:17-19	Man: toil and death
• 3:20	Eve: the mother of all the living
• 3:21-24	East of Eden
○ 3:21	Garments of skin
○ 3:22-24	Separation from the tree of life

The sermons

We're going to slow down and concentrate on various passages as follows:

7th Sept. Genesis 1:1-25 Ordered (All Age)

These verses chart the creation of the cosmos. It starts dark, formless and empty, and ends full of light, shaped into domains, and each domain filled with life. And the repeated refrain is 'God saw *that it was good*'.

I did a session with the Year 6 children at a primary school comparing Genesis 1 with the big bang theory, and I asked the children about poetry and what we can learn from its repetition and structure. Here is what they said.

God's telling of creation tells us that:

- He has made everything out of nothing,
- he likes order,
- he likes light,
- he likes life and fullness,
- and he loves what he has made.

I don't think I can provide a better interpretation than those Y6 children.

When we examine these verses, I hope we will learn to 'read' creation as God intended it - seeing that our universe tells us a lot about our God, and that he loves it. As Psalm 19 says,

*'The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.'*

14th Sept. Genesis 1:11-13 Seed-bearing (Holy Communion)

Looking at the structure above, you can see that Genesis 1 draws special attention to 'seed-bearing plants' (1:11-13) and 'seed-bearing people' – who are permitted to eat seed-bearing plants (1:26-31). In each case, the rhythm of the poem breaks to give these parts of creation extra emphasis. Why?

Seeds are a big deal in Genesis and the rest of the Bible.

In nature, they are how one generation passes its life and likeness to the next. That's called heredity.

Heredity is one of the great wonders of God's biological design – and generations of thinkers and scientists have delighted to study it.

But the heredity of a seed is also a biblical image for some of the great theological truths:

- that God has made 'life' so that it inherently grows, multiplies and spreads (Genesis 1:12, 28)
- that the Kingdom of Heaven announced by Jesus, multiplies in the same way – like a seed (Matthew 13:31)
- that man is the image-bearer (seed) of God (Genesis 1:26-27)
- that the son of God will one day appear as the seed of man (Genesis 3:15)
- that (in Jesus' words) a seed must die in order to produce life (John 12:24).

Thus, the way Genesis clearly singles out seed-bearing plants and people pre-figures God's design for the Kingdom of Heaven, the lineage of his son, and the means of his salvation.

21st Sept. Genesis 1:26-28 Image-bearing (All Age)

Both creation accounts tell us that God has a special connection with mankind. In the first account God says, *'let us make mankind in our image...'*. In the second account God, *'breathed into [man's] nostrils the breath of life'*.

The text suggests at least two ways in which mankind 'images' God.

- We are social beings who 'complete' one-another in our relationships (more of that in a later week).
- We are also stewards or 'under-rulers' intended to care for God's creation (more of that later too).

But each of these is an aspect of a deeper reality. We are God's earthly family. Little wonder that he most frequently reveals himself to us in the scriptures as Father and Husband. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he begins with the words, *'Our Father, who art in heaven...'*

Here is the great cause and cure of humanity's identity crisis. We routinely think far too much of ourselves – worshipping other people or seeking the worship and adoration of others. And we routinely think far too little of ourselves – counting other human lives cheap or imagining ourselves meaningless or worthless. If we're God's family then we find our right dignity and humility in relation to him. As Psalm 8 says,

*'What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

*You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet...*

*...Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!'*

The second creation account emphasises man's physical earthiness – saying, God *'formed the man from the dust of the ground'*.

Scientific progress has made it clear just how true this is! Our bodies can be boiled down into so many grammes of Oxygen, Carbon, Nitrogen, Hydrogen, Calcium, Phosphorus and trace earth elements. There is no human 'magic ingredient'. We have the same ingredients as the earth's crust or a tree. One author calls humanity 'living dirtbags' to emphasise our physical ordinariness.

Every funeral service acknowledges this when we say, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' – quoting Job who said, *'I am reduced to dust and ashes'* (Job 30:19).

So how come we look so alive? Genesis 2:7 continues, *'[God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being'*. It is only the breath (or spirit) of God that gives us life. Without God's ongoing sustaining breath, we return to dust (Genesis 3:19). Or, as Colossians 1:17 puts it, *'God the Son is before all things, and in him all things hold together'*.

We tend to live as if life is 'automatic' and death is an imposter. But actually, it's exactly the other way around. We would fly apart into so much dust and ashes if the breath of God wasn't holding us together moment by moment. We should not be surprised that, if we spend our lives turning away from God, the day comes when he says 'your will be done' and we do return to dust.

But the spirit of God can change that fate by breathing into us a second time – this time with the inextinguishable life of Christ. As Philippians 2 says,

'You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world ... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.'

5th Oct. Genesis 2:8-17 Stewards (All Age)

Both creation accounts underline man's responsibility for the earth. This is one way we 'image' God; we're his stewards of his world. The first account emphasises mankind's authority over creation, '*let them rule over ... all the earth*' (Genesis 1:26). The second account emphasises man's responsibility for creation, '*God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*' Healthy authority and responsibility are always connected.

So, how are we doing? Ask Greta Thunberg. She says, 'Since our leaders are behaving like children, we [children] will have to take the responsibility....' She is highlighting humanity's catastrophic failure to care for our planet. And, because of the intimate relationship between the world and its inhabitants, this isn't just a climate problem; it's a humanitarian problem.

Most Christians acknowledge that the world is broken, and have placed their hope in a renewed creation. This makes some of us relatively apathetic about the care of this creation. We don't believe we can 'save the planet' as Greta Thunberg hopes to do.

But even if this creation can't be saved, we actually have even deeper reasons to care than Greta Thunberg. It is part of mankind's most fundamental job description. We should love and care for this planet, and the human beings who depend on it, because God does and we're his stewards.

Read Job 38-41 and ask yourself how God feels about his creation.

12th Oct. Genesis 2:18-24 Relational (Holy Communion)

One of the biggest surprises of Genesis 1 is the word, 'us'. God said, *'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ... So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'*

Seemingly God is an us and a him. He is plural and singular. And something about mankind's relationships (and especially between the genders) is designed to reflect the plurality and singularity of God.

The second account develops the same theme. God announces, *'it is not good for the man to be alone'*. And when no animal is found to be a suitable partner for man, God takes part of his side (literally, his 'other half') to create a new being. Man is delighted with this partner – *'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh'*. And the institution of marriage is born, *'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.'* These are the scriptures Jesus quoted when asked about marriage – adding *'Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate'* (Mark 10:5-9)

Though there are many hints in the Jewish scriptures, it wasn't until Jesus came that Judeo-Christians finally realised our God is Father, Son & Spirit – a three in one God. He doesn't just invent love and community; he is love and community.

We humans cannot fully 'image' God alone – only in our relationships with others. Therefore, our relationships with one-another in the church matter more than we might think.

- Friendships don't exist to suit us, but to give us opportunities to love and bless one-another.
- Differences like gender shouldn't divide us but should bring us out of ourselves, and give us opportunities to complete one-another.
- And marriages, though not for everyone, can be a powerful picture of intimacy and faithfulness where two *'become one flesh'*.

In all these ways our relationships are pictures of our three-in-one God.

So far, we have an orderly, light-filled, life-filled creation that God calls 'good'. We have mankind – God's image-bearers and stewards working the garden of Eden and taking care of it. It is idyllic, but it's not the world we know. So, what happened? That is where the powerful story of Genesis 3 comes in.

I remember starting to read the Bible looking for answers in my 20s. What is wrong with the world? What is wrong with me? And Genesis 3 is one of the reasons I started to take the Bible's account seriously. I had never heard such an accurate diagnosis of the problem. I wonder what you think.

A new character enters the scene – the snake. He is described as 'crafty'. And this snake uses his powers of deception to shed doubt on the character of God. First, he suggests that God is mean and restrictive (3:1). Then he suggests that God is not truthful. He's out for his own advantage and doesn't want the best for mankind (3:2). Of course, the serpent is describing his own character. But think about how you feel about God. Isn't this exactly what most of us humans are tempted to think God is like?

The woman and the man then take matters into their own hands. They decide for themselves what is 'pleasing' and 'desirable' – and they reach out and take it. One author has described this as the law of 'see, want, take'. Isn't this exactly our problem? From arguments to marriage breakdowns to world wars the same basic human behaviour explains it all.

Here is God's diagnosis on what is wrong with the world: We have been tricked into suspecting that God is not good and taking matters into our own hands – deciding what we think is good and trying to get it. Of course that doesn't always look ugly. When we want the approval of other people, we might do nice things to get it. But the same law is driving us. As Jeremiah 2:13 says,

'My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.'

What fools we are – and how we have been (and continue to be) deceived!

26th Oct. Genesis 3:7-13 Ashamed (Holy Communion)

Shame is defined as 'a complex emotion characterized by feelings of humiliation, disgrace, or unworthiness, often stemming from the perception of having done something wrong or falling short of expectations.' To be 'ashamed' is to be overwhelmed with shame. It's not quite the same as guilt (defined as 'the fact of having committed a specified or implied offence'). It's possible to be guilty and unashamed. It's also possible to experience false shame where there is no actual guilt.

In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve have been deceived. They have been suspicious of God and have 'played God' – taking it upon themselves to decide what's good and bad. The consequences are immediate. They look at themselves and one-another in a new way, '*they realised that they were naked*' and they think what they see is not good. We know that because '*they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves*'. We can probably all imagine being naked in public; it's a powerful experience of shame – the feelings of humiliation, disgrace and unworthiness.

Next, we see the destructive power of shame.

First, the man and his wife hide from God in **fear**. Shame always brings fear. What are we afraid of? We are afraid of the verdict of others – and especially of God – that we are indeed as unworthy as we feel. In fact, their fear is what gives away their guilt. '*Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?*' asks God. Have you ever been told that your face gives the game away?

Second, they each seek to pass on the **blame** to others. The man blames the woman (and God) (3:12). The woman blames the snake (3:13).

Shame is a horrible experience in itself – but it also produces further relational damage through fear and blame. Isn't that a familiar pattern – from household dynamics to international politics? In fact, are we humans ever free of shame, fear and blame?

Early in his ministry Jesus announces his mission by quoting Isaiah 61. Isaiah 61:7 says, '*Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice*'.

Shame, fear and blame are the order of the day in a broken world full of broken people – but Jesus came to replace shame with blessing and rejoicing. And he chose to do that by carrying our shame for us!

2nd Nov. Genesis 3:14-19 Frustrated (All Age)

Shame is a subjective experience. It's how we feel. But sin also has concrete consequences – for the snake, for women and for men.

The New Testament reveals that the snake is *'that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray'*, and that he is a heavenly being with 'angels' of his own (Revelation 12:9). But he is now bound to earth to *'eat dust all his days'* (3:14). In Luke 10:18 Jesus rejoices that he saw *'Satan fall like lightning from heaven'*.

Woman is the child-bearer commissioned, alongside man, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth – but now *'with pain you will give birth to children'* (3:16).

Man is the groundsman commissioned, alongside woman, to work the ground and take care of it – but now *'through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life'* (3:17).

Together, through their relationships – and in a unique way in marriage, men and women were to 'image' God. Now, the dynamics will be poisoned. God says to the woman *'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'*.

And together men and women were to enjoy access to life in God's Garden, but now they are destined to *'return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return'* (3:19).

Everything men and women were made to be, to do, and to enjoy is disrupted in one way or another by sin. So, when we taste the brokenness of the world – as we do every day – let's remember that it wasn't made to be this way. And let's also recognise that, ultimately, it is our choices that are responsible for our condition.

16th Nov. Genesis 3:21-24 Alienated (All Age)

I remember the first time I read Nicky Gumble's description of the human condition. 'We all have a God-shaped hole in our lives' he wrote – and I knew he was right. Saint Augustine said the same thing centuries earlier, 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'

I wonder if you can relate to that idea – that we're somehow searching for something, lacking peace, not quite at home. Perhaps that is why we spend so much time trying to achieve or experience something new or better – a meal, another piece of chocolate, a holiday, a new house, a new job, a new hobby, a new partner.

Genesis 3 says that's because we're not at home. We've been banished from the place we were made for and banished from the company of God. *'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever. So the Lord God banished him from the Garden ... [and] he placed on the east side ... a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.'*

We are indeed away from home – and no wonder we feel it. The life we live wandering this earth is not the one we were made for.

But God is not happy with this tragedy any more than we are. He has a plan to leave the garden and break open a way back to the tree of life from our side – facing the flaming sword himself as our champion.

23rd Nov. Genesis 3:15-18 Not alone (Holy Communion)

Things have taken a terrible turn. God's beautiful creation and mankind's privileged position as his family have all been ruined. We have been deceived, and are now ashamed, frustrated & alienated. Our failures are hurting the world we were made to care for. What a mess!

But also, what an accurate picture of the world we know. I'm so glad God's word is realistic about the state of the world – because if it wasn't I wouldn't be so ready to believe and trust God's promises to make it all right again. I used to be a doctor, and I know that an accurate diagnosis (however serious) is the first step to the right cure.

And even here in Genesis 3, as things go from bad to worse, in the middle of curses and banishments, God is already planning that cure. We humans are God's heirs – his offspring. And God promises that a human offspring will, one day, crush the snake who has caused all this damage. He says to the snake, *'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring (seed) and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'*

From here on, the promise of a Satan-crushing offspring of Eve threads all the way through the Bible.

- Psalm 72 speaks of God's king who will *'defend the afflicted among the people ... [and] crush the oppressor'*.
- Psalm 74 speaks of 'God the king' who *'crushes the heads of Leviathan'* (another picture of the Satan-serpent).
- Matthew 21:44 and Luke 20:18 say of Jesus the cornerstone, *'Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'*
- And, in Romans 16:20, Paul says to the church of Jesus Christ, *'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.'*

There can be little doubt that the New Testament writers recognised Jesus as the Satan-crushing seed of Eve – and that his people, the church, are called to continue his Satan-crushing work.

But it came at a cost. Jesus chose to crush Satan's power by taking his poisonous snake-bite. When Satan bruised Jesus' heel, Jesus' sin-bearing death *'cancelled our guilt, which stood against*

us and condemned us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.'
(Colossians 2:14).

As Isaiah 53 puts it, *'by his wounds we are healed'*.

How does this cure our problem? In every possible way!

At the very root of our problem is a suspicion that God is out for his own advantage and doesn't want the best for mankind. How could you look at Jesus and still believe that?

The worst consequence of our shame is alienation from God – hiding and then banishment. But then God the Son comes to earth and takes on our humanity to find us.

And the worst part of our banishment is that we're cut off from life. From dust we came and to dust we must return. But Jesus has defeated death! Beside Jesus – 'in Jesus' – we can walk back into God's garden and experience life again – now in part, but when our mortal existence is over, then in full.