



THE KINGDOM

RELEARNING THE KINGDOM

Sunday 14 March 2021

EXTENDED SERMON TRANSCRIPT

The gospel that Jesus constantly talked about is about the kingdom, and the kingdom is anywhere the will and way of God is done in partnership with people for the blessing of all creation. But, as we saw last time, that blessing is replaced by curse, flourishing becomes groaning, joy becomes mourning. And if you waded your way through Genesis 3-11 you encounter a string of tragic examples of that groaning, of that downward spiral of humanity.

Now, what's God to do with us rebels? Given He could do anything, what He does next tells us a lot; and what God *refuses* to do is to 'change the plan'. But God now has a problem:

- The kingdom is God AND people in relationship together, partnering to do His will and way for the blessing of all creation. So, the blessing flows THROUGH this relationship...
- So, you don't really restore the blessing if you don't restore the relationship...
- And you can't restore the relationship if the picture your image-bearers have of 'the God in the relationship' is messed up, and driven by false beliefs and fear: if you don't know this God or, worse still, are terrified that God is some vengeful, fickle, impersonal force that demands you worship it if you want to be blessed, then by the time we reach Genesis 12 God is virtually forgotten, recast or redefined to such an extent that the Genesis 1-2 Creator is unrecognisable to the human soul...

Have you ever found yourself in one of those awkward conversations where one person is complaining to you about someone they don't know, but you know personally? And as they make their case, you are having this conversation in your head thinking, "You really don't know them or their heart. You are filling in the blanks with your own thoughts and you really should

get to know them..." Genesis reveals how lost humanity was in its understanding of God and His kingdom and, equally, it's an invitation to them (and all humanity) to personally re-know God - as He really is.

So how is God to get the kingdom back on track? God has to re-educate humanity to who He really is (and He is going to have to deal with the consequences of sin). I have found a really helpful framework for reading the Old Testament is that it is like a school curriculum for the (re)education of humanity as to who God is, culminating in God's full revelation in the Messiah, Jesus. And today I want to share with you 5 of those lessons.

God starts this re-education with one unlikely, old couple. A 75-year-old childless pagan couple named Abram and his wife Sarai:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

(Genesis 12:1-4)

Abram hears God speak firstly with a command, then a promise. The **command** is "Abraham, I want you to leave the life you know - your country, your people and your family". Now we live in a highly mobile time, it's normal to change the course of your life; we assume life is a script and we write it. But in the Ancient Near East, life was an unchanging cycle; a script you can't change - this is radically new idea. God is saying to Abram, "Start a new life in a new land that I'll show you." That's the command. Then, God makes a **promise**, "I'll bless you, bless those who bless you, and through your family all the families of the earth will again have access to my blessing." Ok, so the re-education is beginning right here. Here are the first 3 lessons:

Lesson one: To know 'this God', you are going to have to exchange the familiar for the new, fear for faith. And that is going to look like departing from the script or repenting of your own worldview (the powerful pull of family, culture, country) and venture forward beyond what you think you know into the unknown where God says He will meet you.

Lesson two: In a world that was afraid of the gods, in a world that thinks the gods despise us and use us for their blessing, 'this God' is personal - He speaks. 'This God' wants to bless, not curse. Again, this is a radical departure from the prevailing view of the local deities of the Ancient Near East.

Lesson three: God's blessing is on the other side of obedience: "So Abraham went as the Lord commanded." You can *believe in* something and then you can *believe* something.

Curse was on the other side of disobedience in the garden and blessing from obedience. Belief is ultimately demonstrated by action not agreement. Abraham believed the Lord and as we will later see, God 'credited it to him as righteousness.'

So, first 3 lessons:

1. God doesn't look to fit into your existing worldview, you'll have to come out of it.
2. God wants to bless you.
3. That blessing comes as you obey what He is asking.

Today all three still apply. You can't stay where you are and be a disciple because Jesus is not standing still - we have to follow.

Now I have two more lessons from Genesis that really require me summarise the next 38 chapters to make the point... **Lesson 4** has to do with the kind of people God chooses to reveal His nature and His kingdom. So, let's summarise the highlights, or more accurately, lowlights:

- Chapter 12: You've met Abraham - faithful, obedient Abraham - in an act of self-preservation, will pass off his wife Sarai as his sister in Egypt.
- Chapter 16: Sarah can't believe that in her old age she will ever fall pregnant so forces her slave, Hagar, to sleep with her husband. Hagar falls pregnant, as requested, giving birth to Ishmael; then Sarah gets all jealous and bitter and mistreats Hagar, so she runs away - but then comes back.
- Chapter 19: Lot tries to protect two angels from being gang raped in Sodom by offering to give his two daughters to the crowd instead. Those same daughters got their old father drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant because there were no other men available.
- Chapter 21: Eventually Sarah gives birth to Isaac and drives poor Hagar and Ishmael away.
- Chapter 25: Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah. They have twins, Esau (who was, by all accounts, one of those really ugly babies covered in red hair) and then Jacob (which means 'deceiver', or in our language: 'conman'). Rebekah liked her second son better than her first - that's going to work out well (not). Jacob swindles Esau out of his birth-right as the firstborn, for a bowl of stew.
- Chapter 27: Later on, Jacob also swindles Esau out of the Abrahamic blessing by covering his arms in goat hair (as his mum instructed) so his blind old father, Isaac, would think he was Esau. Esau is ticked-off and wants to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees to Paddan Aram and the household of his mum's brother, Laban, who is also pretty shifty.
- Chapter 29: Jacob falls in love with Laban's beautiful daughter named Rachael and, in a love-struck moment, makes a deal with Laban to marry her after 7 years of working for him. After the wedding banquet, when they were all merry and it was dark and it was time to consummate the marriage, Laban somehow swaps the beautiful Rachel for

the not so beautiful older sister, Leah. So, in the morning, Jacob leans over to kiss his new bride and there was Leah in the bed. Jacob, the swindler, had been out-swindled. He was not happy, but Laban renegotiated the deal and Jacob also got Rachel for another 7 years of labour - so he now had 2 wives, but he loved Rachel more than Leah.

- Chapter 30: Leah was very fertile and unloved, and Rachael was very loved but infertile. Let's say the sisters didn't get on so well... So Leah then has 6 kids to Jacob in an attempt to spite her pretty sister and win Jacob's love. Plus, if that's not messed up, Jacob has 2 sons to Leah's servant, 2 sons to Rachel's servant and, yes, Rachel had 2 sons (Joseph and Benjamin) for a neat dozen. And that's where you get the 12 tribes of Jacob who, incidentally, gets renamed Israel .
- Chapter 31: 20 years after arriving, Jacob swindles Laban out of much of the wealth tied up in their livestock through some clever animal husbandry, which results in a more permanent split from Laban and tearing the clan into two.
- Chapter 34: One of Leah's daughters, Dinah, is raped by a Hivite named Shechem. So, two of her brothers, Simeon and Levi, massacred everyone in the city and looted it.
- Chapter 37: Now, of those 12 sons of Israel, the 2 who were born to Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) were hated by the other 10 - there is some serious family conflict here; they really needed a few parenting courses! Especially hated was Joseph because we are told Jacob was especially fond of Joseph, and Joseph had a big mouth. He was a dreamer and in most of his dreams he was pretty offensive to his family. So hated was he, in fact, that his brothers had him sold into slavery to some passing Midianite traders, and told their father Jacob that he had been killed by a lion.
- Chapter 38-44: You then get the long saga of Joseph in Egypt...
- Chapter 45-50: The story then comes to a dramatic conclusion in a famine and the big reveal to Jacob that his son, Joseph (the son of God's promise), was alive and the second-in-command in Egypt.

Joseph is perhaps the most redeeming character of the whole book of Genesis because he is beginning to live like a man who is re-learning who God is:

But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Genesis 50:19-20)

Joseph realises he is not in the place of God! That God determines good and evil, not he (in a stark contrast to what happens in Genesis 3).

Now there are admirable moments, but on the whole, what are we generally observing here?

Lesson four: In the Bible, there are virtually no stars, saints or heros, anywhere. God seems

to have picked (at least from our 21st-century perspective) the most dysfunctional set of people to carry out the mission of the recovery and revealing of His kingdom. Genesis reads like a cross between the 'Godfather', 'Keeping up with the Kardashians' and 'Game of Thrones'. OR just the Royal Family! Growing up I remember watching shows like 'I love Lucy', 'Happy Days', 'The Brady Bunch' - idealised families that don't exist. But that all changed in the 80's with 'Kingswood Country', 'Dallas and Dynasty' and 'Days of our Lives' - and since then almost every show about families is about how messed up they are, because they are our stories. This is all of us. All a work in progress. No one can relate to 'Ned Flanders', but we can all in some way relate to 'Homer Simpson'.

In here (the Bible) there are lots very flawed people operating out of world views that are very alien to the Kingdom of God. Unlike other ancient literature, why does the Bible have so few shining examples of virtue or morality? As Tim Keller says, "the moral of the story is that morals won't get you into God story. But God has to keep coming by sheer determination into your story."

As you read through the Old Testament you are going to find a lot that seems archaic, barbaric and offensive - because it often is! In Genesis we've observed slavery, polygamy, bride purchase, preferencing of one child over another, and male domination. You might be thinking, "see that's exactly why I can't believe". But, just because it's in there doesn't mean that it is good or in any way endorsed by God. Did you notice, all these behaviours go badly; they cause conflict, suffering and destruction. If you read the bible and think, "well, it's in there, so it must be ok," you are not reading your Bible properly. It may be in there to show you the opposite lesson.

You might think, "why not skip all the lessons and get to Jesus?" Well, that's like saying, "why not skip school and just go to university". The Bible is a history of humanity back at school, in transition, unlearning, and learning. This is a slow, long process and we are witnessing real people at real times, places and cultural contexts in ancient history, slowly taking baby steps in their re-education as to who God is. It may seem archaic but it's people making progress in their understanding of God. Often it's radically progressive for its time, and we need to appreciate that. So, as you read the Old Testament, be so careful to not rush to overlaying your 21st-century mindset onto the raw history of ancient people and conclude they and God are barbaric. I find this is a really helpful thing as I read, but also as I answer others about answering objections they may have.

Now the final lesson requires I take briefly you to Genesis chapter 15 and chapter 22: Back in chapter 12, God gave promises to Abraham of a family line and a land. Years later nothing has changed, and Abram is asking what's with this. So, in Genesis 15:8-10,

But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it? So the Lord said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a

dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.

I know this sounds weird to us, but it made sense to Abraham. God is saying, "let's make a covenant, a contract." Today we put contracts on paper, but in an oral story-telling culture you made a contract by some action - like building a pile of rocks or acting out the consequences of not adherence to the covenant in a ceremony like this. Both parties would walk through the bloody mess of carcasses and guts signalling they understood what would happen if they failed to keep up their end of the covenant: "If I don't do this I'll be judged, I'll be torn apart, and killed". I know, its barbaric, but that was normal in the time.

Then the strangest thing happens:

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. (Genesis 15:12)

Abraham is asleep at the ceremony! God begins to speak of a future time for His people when they will experience slavery and liberation. Then in Genesis 15:17:

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

The smoking fire pot with a blazing torch is hard to translate, but it's the same word for 'Glory' and used to describe 'God's presence' later on when Moses is receiving the ten commandments, and when Israel is guided by a pillar of smoke and fire. So this is a picture of the presence of God. And God is passing through the pieces saying, "I will keep up my end of the covenant - if I don't do as I have promised Abraham, may I be torn in pieces, may I be killed." But what is most astounding is that Abraham is asleep at the ceremony and God goes through in his behalf too. In other words, "Abraham, if you don't keep up your end of the bargain, if you fail to keep your promises, if you are totally dysfunctional, I will take on the consequences of the covenant for you too. May I be killed if I don't do my part, and may I be killed if you don't do yours."

Now do you see it? Do you see what God does with the incompetent, dysfunctional people He calls His own? He is already foreshadowing the time when the judgement will come down on His own head: He will be declared guilty, not because He failed but because we failed; He will be torn, killed, because of *our* failure to obey, to keep up *our* end. What kind of a God does this? What kind of a God would be so committed to blessing us, even if we don't bless Him?

One last snapshot of this lesson is in chapter 22 - another totally weird passage:

Abraham finally has a son, Isaac, the fulfilment of the promise to become a nation. And God says something outrageous:

"Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. (Genesis 22:2-3)

When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. That place would become the site of Solomon's temple 1000 years later. Abraham goes, no arguments, and while this is again an act of true faith it also indicates that child sacrifice was normal with all the other gods of the time. Of course, you had to keep the gods on your side and sometimes, well, you just had to offer the most valuable thing you had: your children. Barbaric to us, but in that time that's what all the gods demanded.

Young Isaac gets to thinking:

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. (Genesis 22:8)

Abraham is going to do it, but just as he is about to kill his son, God intervenes and says, "No, stop":

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Genesis 22:12-13)

The same God that signs the covenant for both Him and us, is the God who says, "when you fail and justice is required, I'll provide the sacrifice - I'll bring the lamb."

Lesson 5: this God is nothing like the other gods, and His kingdom is not like earthly kingdoms. He gives you what you don't deserve. He doesn't demand you provide for Him - He provides for you. He doesn't demand you meet the terms - He meets them for you; and when you fail - and you will - He will bring the sacrifice. This is God re-educating us to that which most distinguishes the God of the Bible from every other GRACE - He gives you what you cannot earn or pay for, nor deserve.

In that same mountain region that would become the holy city of Jerusalem, God would bring the sacrifice. As John the Baptist would say of Jesus, "behold the lamb of God who

takes away the sin of the world" – Jesus, the King of the kingdom, would come and die a criminal's death, perfect sacrifice.

To know this God, you are going to have to be prepared to accept that God doesn't fit your existing worldview or script; that this God wants to bless you, and that blessing comes as you obey what He is asking.

But never forget that even your best attempts at obedience are woefully inadequate; that your morals or virtues are never enough; that you can never be the hero of the story; that you need a hero. The most important lesson we have to re-learn about God and His kingdom is that you enter His kingdom not because you meet the requirements of the covenant, sacrificial life and say, "not my will but yours be done." You enter it and live in it by grace, because He met all the requirements, He was the perfect sacrifice once for all, He said to His Father, "not my will but yours be done." God not only promises Himself to us in covenant love, but bears the consequences of our failure to meet it: that your best efforts are inadequate, so God takes His beloved, one and only Son up the mountain – only there is no substitute ram, because Jesus, willingly, is the Lamb *for you and on behalf of you. His sacrifice means your preservation.*

So today, may you unlearn some things that distort who God is in your heart, and may you know that this God is like no other – He is the God of Grace. This God wants you to know Him as He is. He wants to restore, bless, and call us into life in His kingdom together.

Read again: Genesis 15 and 22

Questions to reflect on over this fortnight:

- Why do you think God wanted Abram to get out of his prevailing culture and worldview?
- What do you think are the defining characteristics of our culture in Australia in 2021?
- Make a list of where you think that our culture is at odds with the Kingdom of God?
- Have you ever radically altered the 'script' of your life? Made a big change? How did it feel?
- What have you had to unlearn about God? How did that unlearning happen?

Ask God:

- "What do I need to re-learn about you that has gotten lost along the way?"
- "What have you asked me to leave behind that I am resisting to obey?"