Genesis

Let us begin with prayer, and then we will talk about Genesis. Let us pray together.

Dear heavenly Father, we are humbled at the incredible gift of Your Word to us that You have spoken to Your people as a Father to His own children. You have come near to us to speak to us, as Calvin says, “with a lisp, in baby talk,” that we can know something of the wonder of who You are and something of the wonder of the world that You made and Your tenacious commitment to it. You are so committed to what You have done, what You have made, and who You have made us to be that You would send Your own Son that we might be restored to Your image. Help us, Lord, to put on the new man. We ask it in Jesus’ name and for His glory. Amen.

We come now to the book of Genesis. I want to draw your attention particularly to the first two verses. These are very familiar verses, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” That is a headline, and it is on the marquee. Verse 2 is very important, “Now the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Earth was without form and void. It is very interesting in the highly artistic way that Moses begins to outline God giving form to the chaos. On the one hand the Earth was formless, and the Earth was empty. The creation story is God giving form and filling up that form and bringing order to His world. Out of chaos and the chaos of the waters the Spirit and presence of God brings light, the expanse, land, and vegetation. Then we see that God fills up the heavens with light and birds, the expanse above and below with birds and fish, and then the beasts and humans over the land. We then see at the beginning of chapter 2 that He finishes the story. “The seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing so he rested from all his work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” What is interesting here is we have a very different kind of Genesis and a different kind of story.

The book of Genesis was written to the Exodus community. Imagine walking in their shoes, if you can. They have been liberated from a life of oppression under Pharaoh. The Exodus has already happened, and they journey from Egypt up toward Canaan. They are in the wilderness, and they meet all kinds of people groups. We see from the very beginning a polemic against the kinds of stories of origin that they would have heard in Egypt and the ancient Near East. In Acts 7 we learn that Moses was educated in all the literature of Egypt. He was aware of these stories. These stories do not just intend to tell us as God’s covenant community, the Exodus community, about how God made the world, but they also have in mind a counterpoint to other kinds of stories.

Let us mention the other kind of stories we have. From Mesopotamia we have the Enuma Elish. This story of origin, or cosmogony, is a story of all of these junior gods fighting against each other. We have the young, daring Marduk, who takes on the sea goddess Tiamut. The sea, in all of the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, represents threat. It represents chaos and life out of order. The daring Marduk attacks Tiamut and then tears the carcass of Tiamut, and from the blood and the carcass of Tiamut the Earth is made. All of the humans are made for one purpose. They are made to do all the work so that the gods can be at leisure. These are pervasive themes in these cosmogonies of the ancient Near East.

Yet Moses tells a very different story. Instead of a violent beginning, instead of tearing a carcass apart, we see something different. God just speaks to begin the world. Each day we have the same order in chapter 1. “And God said, ‘Let there be […] and it was so.’” And then we have something very, very important to the worldview of the Old Testament. “It was good.” It was good. In other words, this
Creator and what He makes has a moral quality to it. Instead of this violent competition between the gods that explains everything from the beginnings to how languages began to the violence of floods in various places in the ancient Near East, we have some correspondence, but we also have very clear differences. The worldview that Moses conveys to shape the identity of the Exodus community is a worldview of creational monotheism. From the very beginning, reality has a covenental shape. God speaks, and His world responds; God speaks, and His people respond. It is not a violent competition between the gods. This creational monotheism is a very different worldview. It is a covenental shape of reality. God speaks, and the waters respond. God speaks, and the land separates from the water and vegetation grows.

We have a very different anthropology. The Exodus community was made up of escaped slaves. Their anthropology was, “We are Pharaoh’s production eunuuchs. We are cogs in Pharaoh’s wheel.” But notice what Genesis says: “God created man in His own image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them. He blessed them and He said, ‘Be fruitful. Increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living creature that moves on the ground.’” He gives them everything. He places them in a garden, and He tells them to tend to it. They are to have meaningful work as His vice-regents, not as slaves. They are to subdue the Earth and to rule over it. That is not something you tells slaves. This is a very different anthropology.

The other thing is that God speaks with them. The dialogue indicates intimacy. On the seventh day God rests, and they are to commune with Him. He walks in the garden with them. What you have in the garden is a picture of royalty and of a palace. There were royal gardens in the ancient Near East. God tells those whom He makes that there was not a violent beginning. Their job is not the job of slaves but to rule over the creation with Him. They are to show the rest of the world and extend the borders of the garden to show the world the goodness of this God. “And it was good.” This is evident in the way that they care for His world. We have similarities to other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, but we have a very different worldview.

There are key aspects of what it means to be created in God’s image, and that is very connected to how ancient Near Eastern kings would convey their rule over a territory or place. Notice that God puts them in a specific place. God gives them a specific program in the way in which they are to care for these things. It should be done after His own character. Notice that we have two aspects that are really important: be fruitful and multiply. Ancient Near Eastern kings let people know who was in charge by making statues. They would put them everywhere. In their territory, one of the first things you would see is a statue, especially in the first major city. There would be a temple, and there would be a code of laws. One of the things that would also happen to let people know who was in charge in this economy is that the king would get a portion of the people’s money. He was in charge. There was a certain economy. We see that Adam and Eve are to reproduce the image of God to show who is in charge of the place God made. They are to take care of this place in a way that conforms to God’s character in this creational monotheism. The way in which God made everything is good. Notice that the command is not to subdue Eden. The command is to extend Eden and keep making the garden bigger. Subdue the Earth and extend the borders of Eden.

We know what happens in chapter 3. God gives man a helpmate, or partner, who corresponds to him. He gives him and her the job of multiplying His image and of subduing the Earth together. They reflect God’s image together. Now this does not mean that everyone has to be married. It does mean that everyone needs to be in covenental relationship with females if you are male. There is something about who God is that I as a man really cannot understand unless I am in a relationship with a woman. We are a covenental people, and not just by marriage. There are things about who God is that a woman needs to
understand by being in relationship to men. This includes what it means for God to be good, just, holy, and loving. There is beauty in what He made. Unfortunately we see that that relationship that should reflect that image easily becomes perverted and broken.

It is really extraordinary to see the curses in chapter 3. The curses correspond directly to the aspects of image bearing. Notice that in terms of “be fruitful and multiply,” the curse on Eve is “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing.” That is a direct frustration of this upset of the image bearing. To Adam God says, “Subdue the earth. I give you every seed-bearing plant. Through painful toil you will eat.” Adam and Eve do these both together. This is a direct frustration of the cultivation of the Earth. We have the placement of the cherubim so that they will not take out their hands and eat of the tree of life and therefore live in this condition of brokenness and alienation. We have this incredible promise that corresponds to image bearing. The original image bearing is “I will put enmity between your seed and her seed. And though you will strike his heal, he will crush your head.” God says this to the serpent in Genesis 3:15.

What we see in Genesis 4 through 6 is a spiraling down of this brokenness. What should be a fraternal relationship results in murder. Cain kills his brother Abel. Then we see Cain’s descendent Lamech and his taunting poem, which essentially says, “Cain killed, but I will kill in revenge all the more.” There is intensification and a spiraling down of violence that is the result of rebellion against this good God. It is the result of trying to live in a way that does not correspond with the covenantal shape of reality. Man tries to make a world on his own terms, and that is exactly what Babel would later represent: “Let us make, let us make.” It is a violation and a rebellion against the covenantal shape of reality.

In Genesis 6 we see a difficult story that has been much debated. I want to draw our attention to this language, “When men began to increase in number on the earth.” That is a good thing. That is the way it was supposed to be. It says, “Daughters were born to them. The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose.” A better way to understand that is “they took any of them they chose.” It is a very violent word. Again, what is supposed to be an intimate relationship has become a violent one. There is only one place that sin can go: violence. It is a rebellion against the created order. We see this extraordinary statement, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

If you read the New International Version (NIV) or the English Standard Version (ESV), you see the capital letters for Lord. That is the covenantal name that was not revealed historically until Exodus 3. But Moses wrote Genesis. If you turn back to Genesis 2:4, we see one of the key aspects of the way Moses tells the creation story: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens…” On the one hand he says “El.” El is the high God of the Canaanite area, the creator God. But then he says “Yahweh,” or Yahweh Elohim. Yahweh is God’s covenantal name. Moses says to the Exodus community, “The Lord who delivered you from Egypt, the redeeming God, is the creator God. He is the One who made all of this and made all of these nations that you will encounter.”

What we see with the flood is interesting language. It says, “Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out, men, animals, and birds of the air.” We see creation in reverse here. Judgment often is depicted that way in Scripture. It is the undoing of what God has done. We see it with the exile later. The exile is the undoing of the Exodus, the conquest of the land. The judgment of the flood is the undoing of the creation. Of course God preserves His image with Noah. Noah’s very name is very striking in that it means “relief” or “comfort.” In Genesis 5:29 we have that “When Lamech lived 182
years, he had a son. He named him Noah and said, ‘He will comfort us…’” It is a word play on Noah’s name. “He will bring relief in the labor and painful toil of our hands.” That reminds us of the language of the curse. We see with Noah and the repetition of the commands in the garden to “be fruitful and subdue the earth.” In the garden God says, “I give you not only every seed-bearing plant, but I give you all the animals.” God repeats the fact that the covenantal shape of reality holds. He is tenaciously committed to that, and He does not give up on that storyline despite the rebellion and competing storylines and attempts to create alternative virtual realities.

What we see with the covenant is really incredible. With the covenant we see relief from the curse. The covenant is about restoration of the created order. Notice the language of the abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 and 17, among others: “I will make you into a great nation. I will greatly increase your numbers.” Those who traveled in the Exodus community could not carry a Bible with them. They heard the stories, and what we have are oral cues. The cadences are exactly the same. We are supposed to get it. This sounds like Eden. This sounds like the original commandment. This sounds like what image bearing was supposed to be in the beginning. It is supposed to sound that way. Covenant is about restoration. “I will make your name great, and I will give you the whole land of Eden. Subdue the Earth.” What we see with Canaan is very much intended to be a return to Eden, even in the way that the markers are given. In Genesis 2 and 17 the boundaries of the land correspond in terms of Eden. This is very intentional, and God does not give up on the original story. He is committed to that.

What we see in Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12, is very intentionally a new beginning, a second Adam. I love the way that Gordon Wenham has put it in Story As Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically. He says, “The promises to Abraham renew the vision set out for humanity set out in Genesis 1 and 2. He, like Noah, is a second Adam figure. Adam was given the garden, Abraham is promised Canaan. God told Adam, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ Abram is promised descendents as numerous as the stars of heaven. God walked with Adam in Eden. Abraham is told to walk before God. In this way the advent of Abraham is seen as the answer to the problems set out in Genesis 1 to 11. Through him all the families of the Earth will be blessed.” The abrahamic covenant corresponds to the noahic covenant. The noahic covenant corresponds to the aspects of image bearing. Despite man’s rebellion, God is tenaciously committed to His world. God continues to work despite man’s attempts to violate the covenantal shape of reality and to make reality on one’s own terms, “Let us make our name great in the plains of Shinar and build this tower of Babel.” It is not by accident that is says, “Let us make our name great.” In the very next chapter God says to Abraham, “I will make your name great.”

With Abraham the Exodus community gets something extraordinary. They learn about who has liberated them from Pharaoh. “I am the God of your father Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will make good on my promise to make you numerous.” They had already become too numerous. That is why they had the whole problem of being enslaved in Egypt. “I will give you land and will bring you into that land.” These folks ran into all kinds of problems in the wilderness. They could not plant crops in the wilderness or while they were traveling. There was not enough to drink. There were a lot of hostile people groups they came into contact with. Moses told them these stories to encourage them to keep going and keep moving. “Do not go back to the chaos of Pharaoh’s virtual reality. Go into the new Eden. You are God’s vice-regents. Keep moving through the wilderness. Move on and lay hold of the promise that God has given you.”

Genesis 12, the first story we come to after the abrahamic covenant, is really extraordinary. It resonates with the Exodus community. Abraham goes down into Egypt because of a famine. Pharaoh is going to touch Sarah, but he does not know that she really is not Abraham’s sister. He gets plagued for it, which is the same word for what caused the Exodus. Plagues come against Pharaoh. At the end, Abraham and
Sarah come out with all this incredible stuff. The Exodus community could hear that and think, “Just like our father Abraham went through the same thing, God will bless us just like He blessed him.” God has a plan, and He is committed to the plan. Over and over again this plan gets threatened, but God keeps bringing us back to the original storyline.

This whole section on Abraham in Genesis is a very large section, and we have not yet spoken about how Genesis is structured. We will come to that in just a moment. What we get in this large section is the corresponding language in chapter 12, “Go; I will show you; I will tell you.” “Go; I will show; I will tell you where to take Isaac.” We have this correspondence, and you can see the influence of literary design and shaping that attends to an oral culture. There are these clear markers that correspond as the stories are told of what is to be emphasized. As they are told over and over again, the structure becomes more engrained. In the beginning we can see Abraham, Sarah, and Pharaoh, and there is a corresponding story in chapter 20 with Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech. Then we see Lot and Abraham. Lot is rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah. Then we see the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We have framing and clues as to what is central, which is the covenant. In the middle of that covenant we have circumcision. The covenant is reaffirmed, and this is really important. Genesis 12, 15, and 17 are all a part of the same covenant, even though you can view them as different covenant events. Again, Moses took up some of the literary forms of cosmogony to tell these stories in a way that would be a polemic against some of the ancient Near Eastern stories. What we see in the way he talks about covenant events is that God accommodates Himself to them. He takes the literary forms of treaties. You see that very clearly in chapter 15, and the notion of the fire and the smoke would have been very familiar to the Exodus community. This is especially true for those reading after Sinai in terms of the presence of God and how He talks about His presence. The cutting of the pieces of the animals in chapter 15 and the presence of God going through those pieces is very much like treaty-making in terms of taking curses upon oneself, declaring, “This is what will happen if I do not fulfill what I have told you.”

The great kings of the ancient Near East made many different kinds of treaties. Some of them were very focused on what they would do for the other person, such as in land grant treaties. That is the nature of Genesis 12 and 15. Then there were also the suzerain-vassal treaties between a greater king and a lesser king. Most of those treaties were very focused on what the lesser kings would have to pay, the obligations they had to the greater king. Throughout the Pentateuch we see all these different types of treaty forms working together as God accommodated Himself to the cultural forms in which He communicates to His covenant people. The Genesis and Abraham stories re designed in such a way that as the story is retold the oral clues come out. You can see the centrality of the covenant.

The same is true of the Pentateuch as a whole. If you look at all five books and the way that they are structured, Genesis to Deuteronomy, it is very clear that what is central is Sinai and the Mosaic covenant as they are about to come into the land. We will come back to that a little later.

Let us talk about how Genesis is structured. One of the oral clues that comes over and over again is this phrase in Hebrew, “These are the generations” or “This is the family history.” We see the generations of the heavens and the Earth. We have Adam and Noah and Noah’s sons. Then there is a focus on Shem as the line of the seed of promise. Then the focus on Abraham’s story that we have already seen takes up a great deal of space in Genesis. How do you emphasize something when you do not have boldface and underlining? You emphasize by repeating and repeating and giving more space to what is important.
What is interesting is we have Ishmael and Esau in here. Why do we have these other toledotes? We have major and minor toledote panels. You can see in terms of the space given to Abraham’s, Jacob’s, and Joseph’s stories that they are major toledotes. But we also have Ishmael and Esau as examples in here. The abrahamic covenant does not say, “I will bless you so that you can consume it all for yourself.” It says, “You will be a blessing to all the families of the earth, and I will make your sons great.” He does not mean just Isaac will be great. The blessing is for even Abimelech and Pharaoh when they are in good relationship with the covenant community and when the covenant community is in right relationship with God, and with them families of the Earth are blessed. One of the great stories in which we see this most powerfully is at the end of Genesis. There is famine, but not just the Hebrews are saved from the famine. All of these nations around Egypt are saved because of Joseph’s wisdom. Joseph embodies the covenant working well. He is a blessing to all of these families.

Turn to Genesis 26 for a moment. We have talked about Abram and how important his story is for Genesis. I just mentioned the correspondence between Genesis 12 and 20 regarding Abimelech. In chapter 20 we get a bit of a sense of why this story is repeated. In Genesis 20:13 it seems like this was kind of the policy and the agreement that Abram and Sarah had. Verse 13 says, “When God had me wander from my father’s household I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me, everywhere we go say of me, ‘He is my brother.’” The beginning of this echoes chapter 12. You have a sense of this small family, and you have the correspondence to the small Exodus community in relation to all these kingdoms and people groups. There is a sense of vulnerability and exposure to their power, and yet you see God’s commitment to them and His vindication. The seed promise is threatened in that Sarah is potentially violated by Pharaoh or Abimelech, but God protects Sarah and Abram.

Notice what we have with Abram’s son Isaac in Genesis 26 as part of the encounter with Abimelech. Abimelech is an interesting name, and it is a common Hebrew Semitic name that means “My father is king.” It can refer from a grandfather to a son and down. We may well have a different Abimelech in the same line in Genesis 26 here, and that is how I take it. Notice there is famine in the land. Verse 2 says, “The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while. I will be with you and bless you, for to you and your descendants I will give these lands. Confirm the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky and give them all these lands through your offspring. All the nations on earth will be blessed because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees, and my laws.” We have the repetition to Isaac of the covenant with his father Abraham and the promise. Notice that we have Isaac planting crops in the land in verse 12, and God blesses his planting. He becomes wealthy and numerous and, as verse 16 says, “too powerful for us.” That probably means “too numerous for us.” That echoes the command to multiply, and planting crops reflects subduing the Earth. Isaac reflects and embodies the covenant in that he brings wealth and produce from the Earth.

Then we see that the wells that his father’s servant had dug had been stopped up. This whole story in Genesis 26 of another encounter with Abimelech is in many ways the same as chapters 12 and 20, but there is also a key difference. The result of this story is that all of those wells that had been stopped up get unstopped. We begin to see at least a foretaste of the land promise being viable. Abraham buys a cave, and he and Sarah are buried there. Isaac is blessed in the land. His crops are blessed in the land. Though largely unrealized, there is a sense of foretaste and hope. That sense of hope will be really important as we come to the story of Jacob and his sons, particularly the story of Joseph.

Turn to Genesis 35. You know the story of Jacob and his relationship with Laban. Laban deceives Jacob, the deceiver himself. Of course he wants so much to marry Rachel. We have the 12 sons of Jacob who
are listed for us in chapter 35. Among them we have Levi and Joseph, and we know that Levi will not have land. These 12 sons are the exact patriarchy of these tribes. The people understand themselves as tribes journeying as the Exodus community. Genesis talks about the Exodus community’s direct patriarchs. They bear the name of Jacob’s sons. As we come to the book of Numbers later, we will see that they travel in those same groups. The way they are arranged around the tabernacle reflects the tribes as well. We learn in Leviticus that those tribes have a land inheritance, and a land grant will be given to each tribe. It is really important to understand in Genesis that they get a strong sense of who they are. The Joseph story is vital to understanding that. We see that Joseph’s two sons will be part of the land grant, and Levi will be a part of the priesthood, so they will not have land. Joseph himself will not have land either, so his two sons replace Joseph and Levi as far as the 12 tribes that have land given to them. This is very important to understanding what is called the inheritance and land legislation later and how the land was given. It does not include all of God’s promises about the land, because we will see special provisions for people like Caleb and others a bit later.

Let us talk about the figure that dominates the Jacob story, who is Joseph. Let us try again to think about the Exodus community traveling from Egypt. They were refugee slaves who had been a part of Pharaoh’s economy. They were cogs in his wheels, and now they are told again and again, “No, you are not production units. You are God’s image bearers. You are vice regents of the One who redeemed you and the One who made everything. You are to be a blessing to all the families of the Earth.” There is a series of dreams and a series of journeys surrounding Joseph. These dreams and journeys are interlaced in his story in how they work together. It all moves toward one strong sense of motivation that the Exodus community would identify with.

First we have the dreams of how his brothers and his father will bow down to him. There are the sheaves, the stars, the sun, and the moon. That part of the story ends when his brothers kneel down before him and plead for their own lives. They are afraid that he is going to kill them because he has power over them. Joseph himself does not get a white hat, and we get that sense from reading Genesis. Many of you read those dreams and think that Joseph is very arrogant. We are supposed to feel that with his brothers. He is like snooty kid. “Who in the heck are you to be saying these things?” We are supposed to feel the brokenness of the favoritism. The motivation is palpable to get this guy out of the brothers’ hair. That does not make it right, but the story is told in a way in which we can understand those feelings. Yet we also see the contrast with the way Judah and Tamar’s story goes. The two stories of Judah and Tamar and Joseph and Pharaoh’s wife are right there together so that they can be contrasted. We see in Joseph, “I will not do this wicked thing.” Something happens with Joseph through his ordeal. He understands that the gift of interpretation of these dreams is just that. It is a gift, and it is God who gives interpretation. Later on we will hear Daniel say that. God reveals these things.

Joseph has the two dreams in prison. The cupbearer has the three branches of the vine, and he will be restored. The baker dreams about the three baskets, and his story ends badly. Then we have Pharaoh’s dreams about the seven fat and sleek cows and the lean cows. These dreams are intertwined with the whole story of the famine, the storage of grain, and Joseph being a blessing. Notice what happens when Joseph’s brothers come down without Benjamin. They come to get grain because of famine. Again we have the sense that the Exodus community wondered how they got to Egypt in the first place. It is very clear over and over again that the famine brought them to Egypt. We are told who was with him when Jacob came back in the second trip. We are given a whole list of all of the families that came down into Egypt. The way in which this plays out is that the dreams are fulfilled.

Notice that Joseph very shrewdly accuses them of being spies. The ancient Near East is not a service economy. You cannot have a banking job or an Internet job. You live by having strong boys to farm the
land. Joseph is shrewd in calling the brothers spies. What father in his right mind would send all of his sons in a subsistence agrarian economy to spy? The brothers respond by saying, “We are all sons of the same father.” The only way to understand that is because of the agrarian economy. How are Jacob and his sons going to live if something happens to the brothers? His insurance is Benjamin. He cannot afford to lose all of his sons. The one proof that they are not spies is that they have to bring Benjamin. Joseph keeps Simeon in order for them to do this. He chooses Simeon even though Ruben speaks up. They do not think Joseph understands Hebrew, so they speak right in front of Joseph. Ruben says, “This is all happening because of what we did to our brother.” Joseph understands that Simeon was the one who was behind the plan to sell him, so Simeon gets to stay.

Jacob learns the truth in this whole thing. The truth comes out. The only way for the truth to come out is they all must be bound together. They are all bound together. The message for the Exodus community in the Joseph story is, “We cannot go into the land fighting each other. The only possible way that we can take this land that God gives to us is if we are in it together.” What we see in the brothers of Joseph is the land and the seed promise intertwined. You cannot take them apart, because they are part of the restoration of the created order. That has to do with intimate, vulnerable, loving, and good relationships. It has to do with caring for God’s creation, subduing it, and revealing Him by the way you use your resources and the way you share in times of famine. It affects the way you buy and sell land in that Joseph is the epitome of that. He buys up the property, and they can then live off the land, but he does not oppress them.

Why does God put all that stuff in the Bible if salvation is just about the forgiveness of sins? It is all in there because it is all important. Our God is not a dualistic God. The fight between good and evil is not going to come to a draw. God will win. Time and time again the seed promise is threatened. The land promise is threatened by inter-fraternal disagreements and fights. Yet they come together, and Joseph forgives them. In these trips we see that they go back and forth from Egypt to Canaan. Look at the end of this story. Turn to Genesis 47, and let me draw your attention to Jacob. He has come and brought all of his family. They settled in Egypt and followed Joseph’s instructions. They were shepherds, settled in Goshen, and they have their own region in Egypt. Notice what Jacob says in verse 28, “Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years. The years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven. When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said, ‘If I have found favor in your eyes put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.’” Jacob was renamed Israel when his hip was touched. Turn to Genesis 48:21 where this statement is repeated, “Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘I am about to die, but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers. And to you, as one who is over your brothers, I give the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.’” Genesis 49:29 repeats again, “I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, in Mamre, in Canaan, where Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite along with the field.” The burial request is repeated three times.

We see in Genesis 50:7-12 the fulfillment of this oath. “Joseph went up to bury his father. All Pharaoh’s officials accompanied him—the dignitaries of Egypt…” Then notice what happens with Joseph in verse 24, Joseph says to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and you must carry my bones up from this place.’ So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten, and after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.”
Let us talk about how the story of Genesis ends and what it has to do with the pastoral purpose for the Exodus community. A promise, a promise, a promise, “You will not be left in Egypt. You will not. Keep moving. Keep going. Do not go back. Do not be buried in Egypt. Do not let your children be buried in Egypt. God will give you a land. Keep moving.” We will stop there.

Let me go over some questions about Genesis. The primeval history is in Genesis 1 through 11. The patriarchal history is in Genesis 11 through 37. Joseph’s story is in Genesis 37 through 50. The purpose of Genesis is to say that God has created an ideal world, and He has created a land. “Do not go back to Egypt. Go to the land that God has created for you.” Some have asked how to keep Christians from getting an “us and them” mentality where they begin to think, “We are God’s people, but you are not.” That mentality is possible, but it is a violation of the plotline of Genesis, especially Genesis 12:3, which is at the heart of it. It says, “Through this family all the families of the earth will be blessed.” We have to go to Deuteronomy to answer that question. You could answer it from the dysfunction of Abraham’s, Jacob’s, and Isaac’s lives and say, “I do not think they were chosen because they were so great.” Jacob’s very name means “deceiver.” Deuteronomy makes that very explicit. “It was not because you were righteous that I chose you. It was because I loved you.” The sense is that God’s people are God’s instrument.

Time and time again in Genesis we see that, because of their disobedience, the promise is threatened. Time and time again, often God uses people who are not of the covenant community to teach them and get them back on track. For example, Abraham not telling Pharaoh that Sarah was his wife. The sense of common grace and being able to learn from others comes through very clearly in Genesis. The way we as God’s people should act toward others is just that way. We do not know everything; we will mess up, and we have a lot to learn from everyone. We depend on the Lord, not on our own strategies, for our forgiveness and restoration.

Though there are 12 tribes of Israel, 14 names are listed in the blessing. Dinah is not given a land inheritance. Levi, from whom the priesthood comes, gets support through the tithes of God’s people. They are not to farm the land. Joseph, whose name is listed, is separated between the two. Joseph, Dinah, and Levi are out, but Ephraim and Manasseh are included. That makes it 12.

Some have asked why Leah was blessed and Rachel was not blessed. In addition, why did Jacob love Rachel more than Leah? It is not clear other than the fact that barrenness is a dominant theme in Genesis. We see it with Sarah and all along the way. There is a sense that all is not right. The world is not the way it is supposed to be. The sense of barrenness and vulnerability to the other nations is a realization that we will not be able to do this on our own. You see it with Abraham and Sarah. It was culturally acceptable to give your concubine to your husband, yet it was not God’s plan. Even the way that story is told in Genesis 16 makes it clear that it was not God’s plan. The fact that Hagar was an Egyptian was not an accident. The whole barrenness thing is the threat to the seed promise and the fact that the fulfillment of that promise really must be God’s doing. It just shows the greatness and goodness of God that barrenness is an important theme in Genesis.

It has been asked whether Joseph always intended to be a blessing to his brothers or if there was a time when he had not decided how to respond to them. I am sure that his motives were mixed up. I do not think Joseph is painted as entirely righteous. What we see with Joseph is definitely character development and growth in his moral excellence. There is an intensity of emotions that we see. He goes through anger, sadness, and wailing. He goes into the other room so they will not see him cry. I would not say that Moses tried to tell the story in a way that made Joseph look entirely and completely right. Joseph was the glue to the family, though. We are supposed to get that. It is Joseph’s story, and he is the
glue that brings the tribes together. He is the means of reconciliation among the brothers. He does not have to forgive them, but it is only because of his own character development that he forgives them. He has power, and he could have his brothers executed if he wanted. We are meant to get from Joseph that he is a really righteous person. We are supposed to get that, I think.

Let us talk about the significance of Joseph wanting to have his older son blessed with the major blessing and his younger son given the lesser blessing, but then Jacob switching his hands. That happens a lot in Genesis. Similar to the barrenness issue, it seems that God consistently works against a sense of entitlement. Even when He sets things up a certain way, He works against a sense of entitlement and toward grace. Whether it is Jacob and Esau or Joseph’s sons, the same thing happens. The storyline is that it is God’s world and God’s grace.

The other thing about Genesis is that our covenant responsibilities are real. When we disobey, bad things happen to us, and we miss out on God’s blessing. We are to get that message. When we obey God, it is an incredible privilege and grace that we get to participate in His mending of the world. It is a great privilege to be part of the second Adam agenda. That is exactly what we are part of. That is what Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 say, along with all the language of Paul about putting on the new man. We are in the second Adam’s agenda, and we are part of that.

Some have asked why Jacob was not reprimanded for having multiple wives. It is hard to know why that happened. We see the same thing with David and Solomon later, much to their downfall. It is clear in the way that the story is told that the story itself has its own consequences. Instead of a direct reprimand we get the outplaying of consequences in Genesis with Abraham. We are to get very clearly that surrogacy is not a good idea in the way the story is told in Genesis 16. Restoration is about restoration to the created order of Adam and Eve. “Man shall cleave to his wife.” That is the way in which the priesthood is ordered, and we see that creation order coming through even though it was culturally acceptable to have more than one wife in a patriarchal situation. That does not make it right or representative of the creation order. In my view, that comes out in the way the stories are told.

Some have suggested that God did not bring His design to His people all at once but as it was unfolded, as it went, and that is how it became acceptable to have multiple wives. Some have said that perhaps they were not as aware as we are at God’s displeasure. I think we have to be careful with that. There is certainly something to progressive revelation, but we have to be clear about Genesis 1. In my view I would agree with Dr. Williams very strongly that we have such an underdeveloped doctrine of creation. As a result, we get the law wrong. The law is all about the restoration of the created order. We are Calvinists, not Lutherans. Calvin understood something precious about the law. Christ’s righteousness is sweet like honey. It is a guide toward—not just a sense of being good outwardly—good in terms of beautiful, full living. We are to have full-fledged life, enjoying good wine and productive land. That is shalom. The law reflects God’s created order, so that is the thing we have to appreciate.

The Exodus community got this story of Genesis, so as the Genesis story unfolded the people in the story did not have the same awareness as the Exodus community. Abraham and the others did not have the same awareness or degree of revelation. But what they did have is important to note, and that was the creation story. It is not about Adam and his wives. Even though we do not have an elaborate code, we have the original storyline. That sets a trajectory and a pattern of the created order that the law would later reflect as well.

When you read about Jacob tricking Esau and Laban, we are supposed to feel that they are unrighteous characters. Jacob’s very name means deceiver, and we are supposed to get that. He is a tricky guy, and
he is not a likeable person. Moses tells the story in a way in which we should not like him very much, even though he is the grandfather of the Exodus community. They were supposed to realize that Granddad had some problems. That is the thing I love about the Bible. The Bible is not always rated G. The Bible is for dysfunctional families, and I am really glad for that. As we minister we can be more transparent about our brokenness. As we build trusting relationships we can exhibit redemptive transparency, as Dr. Eswine says. That is very helpful. There are some passages in the Bible that would be intense if we read them from the pulpit! Someone has to do something about that Ezekiel guy; he is a renegade. Be careful with him.

We are out of time, so we will not be able to start Exodus, which means that we are a little bit behind. We will have to work hard. In the next lesson we will talk about Exodus and Leviticus.