

Bible stories rediscovered: creation and fall

Just as the roots of a mighty oak tree plunge deep through the soil, securing it into the bedrock itself, so Genesis anchors, supports and nourishes all that unfurls in the rest of scripture. Our first impression is of a disparate collection of material. There are various genres and sources; different perspectives on the same event sit side by side; poetry, genealogies and various kinds of narratives are woven together into a multicoloured tapestry. On closer inspection, though, recurring patterns appear, joined by threads that continue throughout the Bible.

Genesis represents the beginning of a covenant that binds together God, his people and the wider creation. The establishment of this promise-based relationship is a presupposition for all that follows in the Bible. The opening chapters mark a radical break with an ancient view that saw the gods as open to human control and manipulation. The tendency of flawed humans to fabricate gods in their own image continues to the present day. Genesis both explains the root of this temptation and challenges any diminished or distorted view of the Creator.

As we allow Genesis to shape our worldview, the idea of God as a benevolent but disinterested clockmaker—setting his creation in motion and leaving it to its own devices—will be challenged. Equally, any concept of God as a puppeteer and us as helpless puppets will be confronted. Rather, we find him to be intimately involved in his world and yet he gives us freedom to accept his loving guidance or to reject it.

The nature of our humanity, paradoxical and complex, is also explored. Created in the image of God, we should never doubt our dignity and value. Equally, flawed and prone to disobedience, we should never be surprised at the depths to which we can sink. Within a few short chapters we see how harmony between environment, each other and God descends into jealousy and conflict between siblings. The continuous circle of love binding Creator and creation is shattered. Pain, deceit and murder enter the world as a consequence.

There is hope, however! The golden threads of covenant and blessing remain and, as full-blown rebellion against God emerges, so does a counter-culture—a remnant of faithful worshippers, eager to align their ways with his and hopeful of redemption.

Steve Aisthorpe

On the origin of everything

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 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. And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

A four-year-old boy asked his mother, somewhat hesitantly, 'Where did I come from?' His mother, thinking it was a little early for explanations but wanting to respond with appropriate gravity, described as simply as possible the biology involved. The boy looked amazed and replied with a frown, 'Oh... my friend James says he came from Manchester'!

When it comes to interpreting the God-breathed, poetic narrative that opens the Bible, there is a danger of wrestling with issues that are not being addressed. The primary concern of the writer of Genesis was not the *how* or the *when* of creation but, rather, the *who*. These opening verses lay a foundation for all that follows. The psalmist later summarised it thus: 'Know this: GOD is God, and God, GOD. He made us; we didn't make him' (Psalm 100:3, *THE MESSAGE*).

Making gods in our own image is not just a modern phenomenon. Ancient myths were full of gods of limited power and temperamental character, prone to tantrums and unpredictable reprisals. Genesis mounts a radical challenge to any belief system, scientific or mythological, that attempts to address questions of life without reference to God.

'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' So read the controversial slogan on UK buses and the London Underground in 2009. Yet the book that points the way to 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10, GNB) and a joy-filled life free from anxiety (Philippians 4:4–7) begins with the phrase, 'In the beginning... God' (v. 1).

Reflection

'The God of Creation is the guarantee of Order, the repudiation of Accident or Chance' (H.C. Brichto, The Names of God, OUP, p. 397). Thank the Lord for an ordered and purposeful world and for his loving presence.

Good? Suffering in context

And God said, ‘Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry ground ‘land’, and the gathered waters he called ‘seas’. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

‘Life is difficult.’ So begins M. Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Travelled* (Rider, 2008). Most of us have enough proof of that in our own lives: tragic accidents occur, illness robs us of well-being, the processes of decay inherent in ageing take their toll. If our own experience provides insufficient evidence, we only need to hear the news broadcasts: poverty, environmental disasters and so-called ‘acts of God’ wreak havoc and the foundations of our own society appear to be crumbling.

What, then, do we make of God’s sevenfold affirmation of every aspect of creation, ‘It was good’? The truth is that all suffering in this world takes place during the phase of life that occurs between the absolute perfection of original creation and the complete restoration of that flawless creation still to come (Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 21:4). The apostle Paul was able to see his own suffering from this perspective. The same Paul who was flogged, stoned and shipwrecked was able to say, ‘I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us’ (Romans 8:18).

Yes, life is difficult, but it will not always be so. In the meantime, Christ promises comfort to those who mourn (Matthew 5:4), rest for the weary (Matthew 11:28) and peace for all who trust in him: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid’ (John 14:27).

Prayer

Creator God, thank you for your promise of restoration. Please strengthen and comfort all who suffer. May I be a channel of your compassion. Amen

SA

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Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

I was at a remote, unstaffed Highland station, hoping to take my bicycle on a northbound train. A southbound train arrived and I asked the guard about this. I’ll never forget his answer: ‘You’ll need to ask the guard on the northbound train.’ Then, as he hopped on to the departing train, ‘It’ll be myself!’ Later, the northbound train arrived. Sure enough, the guard was ‘himself’, one and the same but in a different role. My bike and I were welcomed aboard!

Today’s passage gives us astounding insights into both humanity and the nature of God. Just as I stood bewildered on that station, so a first reading of verse 26 leaves us wondering: ‘us... our... our’? Is there some plurality in the character of God? This first hint is reinforced by mysterious references later in Genesis (3:22; 11:7). The prophets have tantalising glimpses of God’s ‘three-in-oneness’. Isaiah talks of the Holy Spirit (63:10–14) and John says that Isaiah ‘saw Jesus’ glory’ (12:41). The New Testament writers unpack much more of the mysterious truth that we call the Trinity: God’s distinguishable persons, yet perfect unity.

If the notion of plurality in the Godhead were not enough, the writer of Genesis tells us that this awesome God created us ‘in his own image’. It is impossible to plumb the depths of all that this implies and it is a theme to which we shall return. One implication is that the unity, harmony and love that characterise relationships within the Godhead are his desire and purpose for us.

Reflection

God’s aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

Dallas Willard, quoted in Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 162

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From exploitation to stewardship

God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.’

The headlines scream it, governments recognise it—there is a growing consensus that we face an unprecedented environmental crisis. We are waking up to issues of climate change, depletion of the ozone layer, extinction of species and the degradation of air and water.

Amid the debates, misunderstanding of today’s passage is sometimes cited as being responsible for engendering an unhealthy attitude towards this amazing planet that we call home. The thinking on words such as ‘subdue’ and ‘rule over’ has sometimes led to the view that all creation is for our benefit and revolves around us. David saw it differently: ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’ (Psalm 24:1).

A misunderstanding that this earth is destined for destruction, coupled with the biblical promises that the Lord will create a new earth (‘so why bother about this world?’) has undermined the view of God’s people as its stewards. There will be a new earth, but that means ‘new’ in terms of quality; the new creation will be part of God’s transformation (Revelation 21—22).

Ancient kings set up images of themselves throughout their territory as a symbol of their rule. Being made in the image of God, we have a delegated authority over creation. *THE MESSAGE* renders Genesis 1:26 as, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself...’. We are to be stewards, exercising responsibility with care and compassion.

Reflection

The Bible doesn’t begin with sin and end at the cross. Rather, it begins with a perfect creation and ends, by way of the resurrection, with a perfect new creation. Ask the Lord what it might mean for you to be a better steward.

Stop!

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

A small aircraft was flying from the Midwest in the USA to the East Coast. During the flight it became apparent to the ground controllers that the pilot was not flying according to the filed flight plan. All efforts to communicate with him failed: unbeknown to them, both pilot and passenger were unconscious because of an oxygen supply failure. Because the plane was on autopilot, however, it flew on. Eventually it headed out to sea—flying on and on until it ran out of fuel and fell from the air. To the uninformed observer everything looked fine... until it eventually plunged into the sea.

In our 24/7 culture, this tragic flight might be a poignant analogy for the lives some of us lead. Many jobs do not give the satisfaction of having truly finished a task. We can feel as if we are on a treadmill, with none of the ebb and flow that characterised the life of Christ (Mark 6:31; Luke 5:16), no pause for thanksgiving and well-earned rest—just relentless grind until we make it to the next holiday or burn out.

God initiated the sabbath as part of the divine order for creation. It was to be a model for all time and all people, a principle of such foundational importance that God put it in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8–11). The Bible tells us little about what we are to do on the sabbath, but, when we respect it and find ways to express our gratitude and love to our Creator, we will find our souls are nourished and our joy replenished.

Prayer

Almighty Creator, loving Father, thank you for your wise and gracious exhortations. Please help me to be faithful in my expression of the sabbath principle—both for myself and in the expectations I have of others. Amen

The perennial question

When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth... for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

The average body contains about 6.7×10^{27} atoms; 99 per cent of our body is made up of just six elements; there's enough carbon to make 900 pencils, ample fat to make several bars of soap and sufficient phosphorus to make 2200 match heads. At a purely physical level, we have never known more about what it means to be human, yet the psalmist's question, 'What is man...?' (Psalm 8:4) continues to confront us with a pressing urgency.

The opening paragraphs of Genesis provide a foundation for understanding the paradox of humanness. Like the animals, we are living creatures made from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7, 19). At the same time, we are formed uniquely in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God (1:26–27). In the passage above, we see life bestowed in a personal, face-to-face encounter between Creator and creation that is paralleled by the action of Jesus as he brought new life to his disciples: 'he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"' (John 20:22).

We exist because God made us, as a race and as individuals (Jeremiah 1:5), and, while we are flawed by sin, we are still bearers of God's image. It is this that distinguishes us as those with the capacity to love and be loved. Sense the note of awe and reverence in the ponderings of David: 'What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour' (Psalm 8:4–5).

Prayer

Lord, in quietness, humility and with deep reverence, I thank you for making me. Please grow your character in me and give me the wisdom and love to enjoy you and serve you with my whole being. Amen

Drudgery or devotion?

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Gardening requires lots of water—most of it in the form of sweat! In placing that first man in the garden, God inaugurated his first calling: work. There is no hint of any negative connotation here, though. The name ‘Eden’ comes from the Hebrew word meaning ‘delight’. Work was an integral part of man’s enjoyment of that delight. Later, following human disobedience, work took on a frustrating character, but even then work remained his calling (3:17–19).

It is fashionable to denigrate work: we often express a commonly held view of work as a necessary evil. The Bible, while leaving us in no doubt that God abhors exploitation, also maintains that work has dignity and should be carried out as an offering to the Lord: ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters’ (Colossians 3:23).

Brother Lawrence (1614–1691), a Carmelite monk, spent much of his life working in kitchens and repairing sandals. These apparently mundane tasks were transformed by a realisation that they were to be the medium of his worship. His insights were later recorded in *The Practice of the Presence of God*—a book that has influenced Christians of every generation since and speaks powerfully to our contemporary culture. Most of us will spend about half of our lives working or in work-related activities. Whether that time is worship or drudgery is largely our choice.

Prayer

*Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

Frances R. Havergal (1836–1879)

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The same... but different

The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'... So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep... took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman", for she was taken out of man.'

Once upon a time, Martians and Venusians fell in love and had happy relationships together. They respected and accepted their differences. Then they came to earth and forgot they were from different planets!

Don't worry, I haven't gone totally off the rails—this is the metaphor that John Gray uses in his bestselling book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Harper, 1993). Our need to understand gender is crucial to harmonious living, a point highlighted by the fact that few books have sold more copies during the last decade than those of Dr Gray. While his books do not attempt to be biblical, they do contain important kernels of truth regarding the different but complementary natures of men and women.

The New Testament writers looked on Genesis 2 as a foundation for understanding the sexes. Man is revealed as having social needs; he is made for fellowship (v. 18). The creation of one who is 'the same, but different' is God's response. Adam is overjoyed at the degree of similarity: 'At last!... This is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh!' (v. 23, NLT). The similarity is balanced by complementarity, however. The term 'suitable helper' (vv. 18, 20) literally means 'a help opposite him' or 'corresponding to him'. There is no hint of any difference in status, only of compatibility, interdependence and companionship.

Reflection

She was not created from his head to be above him; nor was she created from his foot to be trampled by him. She was taken from his side to be his equal, from beneath his arm to be protected by him, from near his heart to be loved by him.

Author unknown

SA

Standing firm? Be careful

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die."' 'You will not surely die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Into a situation of shameless innocence (2:25) comes the tempter. He comes not with abrasive arguments or lavish claims, but with a gentle suggestion: 'Did God really say...?' Tactic two is exaggeration: 'You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden?' (3:1). Eve is hooked and she adds her own subtle exaggeration: 'and you must not touch it, or you will die' (v. 3). Finally, after sowing seeds of doubt about God's character, the full-blown contradiction comes: 'You will not surely die' (v. 4).

It is a strategy that has worked throughout history. Our heavenly Father, 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6), is portrayed as a megalomaniac, prone to petty jealousy. Humanity's privileged and dignified role as servants of the almighty Creator is portrayed as sycophancy or misguided self-enslavement. The path to broken fellowship with God, guilt and shame, is disguised as the route to a richer, fuller life.

Jesus faced the same kinds of tests as Adam and Eve, but overcame them. Now he helps us to overcome: 'when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it' (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Prayer

Father, I want to live for you today. Please give me the courage and wisdom to overcome every temptation to doubt your holy, gracious character. Amen

SA

Hide and seek

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'

So begins the ultimate tale of hide and seek. The Bible is full of people on the run: Hagar, Jacob, Jonah, and even the first disciples, who deserted Jesus and fled (Mark 14:50). Hiding from God is part of the human condition, as Francis Thompson wrote in 'The hound of heaven':

*I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

The 'hound of heaven' pursues us not with the relentless chase and forceful overcoming of a hunter, however, but with the persistent seeking and costly rescuing of the good shepherd: 'I will search for the lost and bring back the strays' (Ezekiel 34:16).

When Jesus was accused of 'welcoming sinners', he answered with three parables, all found in Luke 15. The parable of the lost sheep tells of his deep concern for the individual (vv. 3–7). The lost coin speaks of a diligent, patient search (vv. 8–10). The lost son (some would say, 'sons', as both sons in the story were lost in their own ways) explains the extravagant and gracious welcome that awaits the one who 'was lost, but now is found' (vv. 11–31). Jesus' attitude is clear: not only does he welcome sinners, he seeks them out. It started in Eden and goes on to this day. Our invitation is to 'Seek the Lord while he may be found' (Isaiah 55:6); our commission is to ensure that this invitation is widely known (Matthew 28:18–20).

Reflection

'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

The sting of death

To the woman [God] said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.' To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'

Endurance athletes become 'habituated' to pain: they develop a tolerance of pain as they experience it daily. Living in a world where pain, physical and emotional, is a present reality, we all, to some degree, become habituated to its presence and impact. Similarly, we become used to the muted daylight of a cloudy day, but when a cloud crosses the sun, we immediately shiver at the sudden change. We can sense an abrupt change in today's passage, too.

Naked and ashamed, the man and woman reluctantly emerge from hiding. Everything has changed: the previous harmony is gone. The loving fellowship between Adam and Eve and their Maker has been replaced by a cold, awkward estrangement. It is the low point in human history, one to which all other tragedies and horrors since can trace their roots. The joy of motherhood is tainted with pain and anxiety (vv. 15–16). Satisfying labour becomes frustrating toil (vv. 18–19). 'To love and cherish' becomes 'to desire and dominate' (v. 16). Life will now be lived in the shadow of death (v. 19).

Fortunately, while we still live in an era when all beauty is tainted, we also glimpse the hope of a new era. Our pain is like that of childbirth: it points us forward to the time when creation will be liberated from decay (Romans 8:21–22), when death, mourning and pain will be no more.

Reflection

*While we live in the shadow, we are a post-Easter people—
death has lost its sting. Hallelujah!*

Compassion leads to action

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to... take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.' So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword... to guard the way to the tree of life.

Gutted, devastated, distraught—Adam and Eve must have missed and yearned for the warmth and depth of intimacy with God that had characterised Eden. Yet that tender act of clothing them must have also spoken profoundly of the unconditional, if pained, love of their Father.

The impact of Adam and Eve's banishment has rolled down the ages. The fact that we are 'children of Adam' gives us a feeling of homesickness. We have a taste of the exclusion that Adam and Eve first experienced as they went east of Eden. We know, however, that we are also 'dearly loved children' of God who have been commanded to 'be imitators' of him (Ephesians 5:1). One aspect of that is learning and developing some of God's practical compassion: 'The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them' (Genesis 3:21).

Despite the chasm that has opened between God and his creation, he remains, eternally, 'the compassionate... God' (Exodus 34:6). Compassion is a noun that longs to be a verb: wherever we find it applied to God or Jesus, it results in action. Our merciful acts are commended by scripture: 'I needed clothes and you clothed me' (Matthew 25:36). Neglect of mercy suggests that our faith is defective: 'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead' (James 2:15–17).

Prayer

Lord, please open my eyes to opportunities to demonstrate your practical love today. Amen

True worship

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she... gave birth to Cain... Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry?... If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door... you must master it.' Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Like ripples radiating out from a pebble dropped into a pond, the infectious consequences of Eve and Adam's disobedience pursue the generations that follow. Callous sibling rivalries are a feature of Genesis—Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. The helter-skelter spiral of sin takes its course: 'after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death' (James 1:15).

Genesis gives us few clues as to why Abel's offering was acceptable and Cain's was not. We need to look to the New Testament for those. It appears to have had everything to do with the attitudes of the worshippers. Abel is celebrated as a man of faith, his offering reflecting a genuine and whole-hearted gratitude to the Lord (Hebrews 11:4), whereas Cain is condemned for his self-seeking motives (Jude 11).

Worship is not synonymous with singing hymns and songs, although doing so may be a valuable part of it. As Paul writes, believers are called to 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship' (Romans 12:1). We are not to be consumers of worship experiences. Rather, we are to bring to God our whole being as an unreserved, unconditional, heartfelt thanks offering to him.

Prayer

Father, here I am. May all I do and think and say be pleasing to you. Amen

SA

Choices beget consequences

Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch... Lamech said to his wives, 'Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.' Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, 'God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.' Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.

The 1998 film *Sliding Doors* explores the potentially huge impacts of apparently small life choices. Two parallel stories run in tandem. In one, the central character manages to catch the train home on time and in the other she misses it. The two lives go in very different directions.

Genesis 4 contrasts the choices and consequences of two family lines in a similar way. The course of Cain's line was set when he 'went out from the Lord's presence' (v. 16). Whereas the Lord had ascribed to him the life of a nomad (v. 12), we find him establishing a city (v. 17)! By the seventh generation of Cain's line, we find Lamech introducing polygamy, boasting of murder and a blasphemous immunity to its consequences.

In contrast, Seth is portrayed as a substitute for Abel, a new shoot developing into the line that produces Jesus (Luke 3:23–38). The seventh son of his line was Enoch, who 'did not experience death' and 'was commended as one who pleased God' (Hebrews 11:5). It is in Seth's day that 'men began to call on the name of the Lord' (v. 26 above).

The contrasting lineages of Cain and Seth highlight a fundamental truth: humans have free will and can make genuine choices. That is why Solomon's advice is crucial: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight' (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Prayer

Lord, in all my conscious decisions, please guide me. In all my unwitting choices, may your will be done. Amen