

Series: "Genesis...The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "The Purpose of It All"

Text: Genesis 11:27-32; Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 10:37; Mark 10:29; John 12:23

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- Why am I here? Why are you here? Why are WE here?
- A foundational truth *Genesis* teaches concerns the purpose of human beings—all human beings—black/white, rich/poor, powerful/oppressed, ancient near-eastern nomads/middle class Americans (and even former Canadians).
- If you see Scripture as Truth, it is not oppressive, in any way, to declare this truth of a Created-purpose being common to all human beings even though we might ponder this truth in different ways depending on our circumstances.
- *Genesis* says God created ALL humans, male and female, so that humans could serve as his "IMAGE," his *representative* creatures, his *agents* of his righteous, LIFE-giving ways in all the Earth.
- To fulfill this purpose, humans would need to rely upon God—that is trust God—for LIFE and for all the provisions to fulfill this purpose.
- The first humans didn't. We often don't.
- This muddies the clarity of the very reason for being as humans. Then, our head-issues of meaningful purpose in life, at the most foundational level, arise. On top of all this, the messiness of living in a world—an environment that is now built so often without trust in God, further complicates having a lasting, settled understanding of human purpose.
- The question, "Why are we here?" does not always seem to have distinct, easy answer.
- Different human circumstances shape the expression of this question and the angst over this foundational matter of human purpose but in our culture, we often ask them most desperately when we are young and becoming adults.

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- That is when we sense we are somehow shaping our own lives and if we have any self-awareness at all we worry that we are making big mistakes in that shaping.
- After a certain age—after we have followed a path that has its own power—I guess its own momentum—to keep moving us forward, we may not ask the same questions of purpose as often. However, they usually still come up when we encounter great change especially losses as we experience in sickness, death or relational upheaval.
- For us, the questions are worded like this: *Who am I? Why am I like this? What is my real purpose for being alive in these circumstances? Why do I even exist?*
- We ask the questions with lots of “my’s” and “I’s” because our culture has trained us most often to think *individualistically*.
- An Ancient Near Eastern, more tribal culture—say a group from the lineage of Noah’s son Shem—a group that had recently, miraculously become desert wanderers after being freed from slavery in Egypt, might word the same questions more *communally*.
- They would ask: *Who are we? Why are we like this now? What is our real purpose for even being alive in these strange circumstances? Why do we even exist as a group of people—as a massive family?*
- Those of us who think God gave us Scripture—gave us the book of *Genesis*—would then find the shared, ultimate answer to these questions of the Israelites and ourselves concerning human purpose in the words of that book.
- *Genesis* was written long ago in a land and culture far away and very different than ours. Therefore, we must do some hard work, empowered by God the Holy Spirit as its Author, to make sure we are hearing it say what God intended. Still, *Genesis*, is indeed the foundation to that answer even if it is not in vogue to say that today.

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- So, talk about cultural differences! **"The old pond...A frog leaps in....Sound of the water"** How many of us know what those words translated from Japanese into English are? Yes, a famous *Haiku* poem. I'm not sure I get it! As a human used to calling mostly only "iambic pentameter," *poetry*, I certainly don't easily see the poetic nature and beauty I am told is evident in this other human's poetry. So, I must consider it. I must think about it. But I must do that allowing the author to say what he wanted to say first not what I want it to say.
- *Genesis*, with its answers to the question of purpose, both for ANE desert wanderers and middle class Americans in COS, must, likewise be carefully considered across cultures to hear first what the author meant to say.
- As we come upon a change to a major new section in *Genesis*, at the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, we must take the valuable time to think about this or I believe we will miss the point—certainly much of the point of the book and of all the very human stories we are about to consider.
- Genesis 1:1-11:26 has established a created purpose for humans—i.e., imaging God—a perfectly "good" place or environment in which humans can carry out that purpose—a pattern that reveals God will always provide the needs of the humans carrying out that purpose—how humans very often desire to carry out that purpose *autonomously*—and how this independence from God has made fulfilling that created purpose difficult in quite a messy world.
- *Genesis* 11:27 through *Genesis* 50:26 will now reveal how God works with sinful humans in a messed up world still to fulfill their created purpose.

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- We might not immediately see that overall purpose very clearly in every story because we are used to telling stories with big morals in a linear way. Our stories start with "Once upon a time" and end with "they all lived happily ever after" following a cause and effect sequence governed by the linear passing of time.
- One means the author used in these chapters to teach his readers his point, is as different from our normal storytelling as Haiku is to iambic pentameter. When it came to answering the question of why the Israelites were there and eventually why we are here, Moses employs a cultural way of making that emphasis.
- He has employed this writing arrangement before and we have pointed it out in sections like the description of the Flood. There, using an arrangement we call "*chiasm*," he emphasized the central point, that in the midst of a world-destroying flood—God remembered Noah—God did not desert Noah! He made that emphasis, not by putting it as the conclusion of the story as we would in our linear way. He made it by pointing forward and backward to that main point in the middle of the story.
- Here the Chiastic arrangement, Moses uses is broader. We won't look at all the corresponding points, forward and backward, but we do need to ask what the central focus—the ***emphasis*** is.
- Guess what. It is about who Israel is—why they are there. It is about their purpose as humans and how they will fulfill that purpose.
- Here is the broad scheme sketched out: At the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 we meet a specific human in very specific human circumstances—those circumstances are pretty messed up in some ways. His name is, Abram.
- In these verses, God calls Abram to trust him in some specific ways and to live differently based on that faith in God so that Abram will

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be able to grow into a great people that will image God and fulfill the reason for humans existing in the first place.

- Then, at the other end of *Genesis*, in chapter 50, (which, barring any new diseases, we will get to sometime in 2025, Lord willing), we have the end of the story of a descendant of Abram named Joseph.
- In *Genesis* 50:24 and following we read...**READ Genesis 50:24-25.**
- The point to the brothers is, once again, trust God and he will fulfill his purpose for you as humans. He will put you in a land—an environment where you will be able to fulfill this purpose by *his* strength and not your own.
- That is the beginning and the ending of a long chiasmic arrangement. Now let's recall that a *chiasmic* arrangement most often doesn't work in the linear way we prefer our stories to work. It usually points forward and backward to emphasize something in the middle framed by the beginning and the end of the narrative.
- So, what do we find in the middle? We find the stories of another relative of Abram and Joseph—named Jacob. And for this morning, let me just point out the central lesson of Jacob's life. It is found in *Genesis* 32. We can start at verse 22 for our purposes... **READ Genesis 32:22-32**
- *Who are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose as a people? Why do we even exist in circumstances like these?...*asked the wandering freed ANE slaves.
- You are **Israel!** You didn't get that name because it was a popular name for peoples in that day. You got it because you learned a lesson as a people. That lesson was, "As the people of Israel, we cannot fulfill our created purpose as human beings by our **own** strength no matter how long and how hard we fight to do it!"

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- In fact, we learned that, "When we try to fulfill our created purpose as human beings in our own strength and by our own wily plans and devices we are actually fighting against God and his purpose for us being here."
- Who are we? We are **Israel!** Why are we here in this time and place—what is our purpose? We are **Israel!** What does that mean? It means we are here to be a people who demonstrate to the world—a people that images to the world—what God is like by living our lives trusting him rather than trusting our own powers to provide purpose and success.
- We are **Israel!** That means we are those who fought God tooth and nail to live life *our* own way by *our* own power and we won the fight! We won not by defeating God but by having our autonomous self-sufficiency defeated in us as painful as that was. The rest of our life we walked with a broken-hip limp as a reminder. And, oh, by the way—that is why we still have that seemingly silly tradition not to eat that part of the hip.
- Our broken limp and that tradition are reminders that **by losing to God, we win the fight!** By losing to God, we are able to be who we are meant to be. We are able to know our reason for existence—our purpose—our significance and to fulfill it.
- As long as we wrestle against that, still believing we can win life in our own power, we will not know the answers to these deep questions in every human being—black or white—rich or poor—man or woman—and all those differences.
- Abram in chapter 11 and 12 and for the rest of his life is asked to trust God instead of his own ways and powers and he struggles to do that in a messy, broken world. This is what the stories are about.

- Joseph, in chapter 50, highlights that ongoing need to trust God to his brothers to fulfill their promised destiny—their purpose—and all his preceding stories are about the struggles to do that in the tough, messy circumstances of a broken world filled with mostly unbelievers.
- We are not the ancient Jewish patriarch, Jacob, who became *Israel* with all that meant for the purpose of human living. However, I think you can see we are pretty much in the same boat as created human beings seeking to fulfill our purpose in a world that has been messed up by sin so that it isn't natural to fulfill that purpose.
- Think about what Jesus meant when he said:
- **Matthew 10:37** *"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***
- **Mark 10:29** *"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹ **But many who are first will be last, and the last first.**"*
- **John 12:23** *Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ **The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.** ²⁶ *Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.**

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- When you lose your life you find it. When you leave the things of life you receive the things of true living. When you come in last you come in first. When you die God honors—God blesses you with the reward of the experience of his kind of LIFE—eternal LIFE.
- You can see that in the same way, Jacob *won* by *losing* to God. You can see that somehow, the created purpose for humans is fulfilled by the near opposite of what we humans tend to think. It is not by our successful doing on our own even of good things--in this mixed up messed up world. It is not by what most often gets lauded as human success!
- When we do life autonomously we always lose. When we trust God for living our life, we always we win. When we live by our own strength even trying to accomplish things that seem so spiritual and biblical—when we do that, we miss fulfilling our purpose for being her. We still eventually wonder why we exist in these messy circumstances.
- When we do good things trusting God we fulfill our created purpose. We know why we are here—why we exist even in these messed up circumstances.
- Satan's *2%-off-the-mark-twisting* deception is to "just work hard and do it!" But our purpose is never about **doing** anything. We don't exist just to **do** good things. We exist to image God and that will only happen when we do good things by trusting God. The difference is as big as winning and loosing at life.
- I keep saying we know and do this purpose of imaging God by trusting him for living life in a "**messed up world.**" I keep saying that because this is where *Genesis* now goes. How will humans fulfill that purpose now that the world created to be the perfect environment

to fulfill it is so deformed and upside down because of sin and its outcome—death?

- The quick answer is that Abram (and Raleigh) will only ever fulfill their purpose of imaging God by trusting God and calling on the NAME of the LORD for his glory rather than just trying to get good stuff done no matter how we do it.
- Look at the circumstances in which Abram begins in this story of trusting God in Genesis 11:27-32. **READ Genesis 11:27-32**
- Abram's brother dies. That's tough. He dies having lived his whole life in the "land of his birth"—**Ur of the Chaldeans**.
- Every time I teach this passage, I go back to the experts in biblical archaeology to see if they have finally produced definitive proof for the identity of Ur of the Chaldees. In my humble opinion, they still are not certain.
- I would love to say with certainty it is Babylon, and it may well be—certainly it may be in that geographical area. That makes sense. The theology would be so much more dramatic from the contrast and what has just been said about the plain of Shinar and the Tower of Babel, in the preceding part of chapter 11, if I could be certain.
- However, I **am** certain that wherever Ur of the Chaldeans was, it was not the perfect environment for continuing God's plan through the lineage of Shem and Terah and then Abram. There was another place—a "**promised land**" that will be the perfect place from God to fulfill the purpose of imaging Him.
- Ur of the Chaldees is a **human** civilization place. Unbelieving humans have made it autonomously by their own power. It is a place where humans, in their own plan, have decided to gather rather than spread the NAME of the Lord throughout the earth. It is part of the

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messed up world of people living without God. Here, we are told, Abram still lives there with his family.

- Brother Haran's death leaves a son named Lot fatherless and Abram, his uncle, becomes his *de facto* father. This relationship will be shown to be part of the messed up world in which Abram is called to image God.
- Well, at least Abram finds a wife! This means he can multiply as part of the means of fulfilling the purpose to fill the earth with God's glory. Oh, but wait!
- Do you know those new stop lights they put on the entrance ramps of I-25? I've experienced those before in other places but the first time I hit one here leaving FBC, I about wrecked my car. That red light hit me hard!
- Here, in *Genesis*, that red light is... "Now Sarai was barren—that means, in her and Abram's case, if we need explanation—*she had no children.*" But wait! That "red light" pulls me up short, hard on the brakes, unexpectedly. How can they do what they are supposed to do to fulfill God's purpose by multiplying and filling the earth with God's image if they can't even produce a single child?! This is another, very important *messed-up-world-for-imagining-God* circumstance Abram will face and we will read about in his stories.
- Then we find out Abram leaves all that he knows—all that he is used to as being life in Ur of the Chaldeans to go to some unknown place called Canaan. The first readers would have known better all this leaving implied. Abram was leaving his name—his heritage—his inheritance—protection—security of family—all of the things that being in Ur of the Chaldeans meant back then. He was leaving it for an unknown future. That unknown future is another messed up circumstance of the world in which he will fulfill, or not, his purpose.

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- Abram started the trip to the unknown of Canaan with family—including Dad—Terah—their patriarch—but for some unknown reason they only got as far as Haran and stopped there.
- Moses tells us that Terah died in Haran and it is often assumed that it was not until Terah's death that Abram had the courage to leave daddy and all of the old life behind. That is an assumption and I'm not sure the numbers of ages add up to support it. I think Abram left while Terah was still alive. Moses is simply closing the *toledote*—the account of what came of Terah--by telling us that he died. He does this same thing elsewhere circling back for completion.
- However, one thing we do know about the influence of Abram's daddy Terah is that he he was a worshipper of the false gods of the day—the sort of gods the people building the Tower of Babel envisioned. *Joshua* 24:2 tells us Terah "worshipped other gods."
- These were gods that humans could build a tower on their own tall enough to reach to the heavens where those gods lived. Humans already had a very messed up understanding of what a god, let alone the One true God, was really like. This confusion about the nature of God and gods was another part of the very messed up world in which Abram was to fulfill his purpose of imaging the Creator God.
- So, unlike the Creation at the beginning of which God could say "this is GOOD," and the Garden that was made to be the perfect environment to begin the imaging project, unlike these—Abram embarks on fulfilling the purpose for every human being but doing that in a now very messed up world in which to do it—a world filled with very messed up people especially when it came to their thinking about the nature of God.
- How will this ever work? Well, once again, the short answer is not by Abram figuring out how to do it and working hard enough to do it.

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- It will work by Abram trusting God instead of his own autonomous plans and abilities to do something good. It will work by Abram remembering to **call upon the NAME of the LORD**. It will work by Abram **acknowledging God alone** as the source of all he has and all he does for fulfilling his CREATED human purpose.
- God will certainly intervene along the way to reveal what he is truly like and to redeem Abram from his autonomous messes but, ultimately, the point of Abram's stories and the point of the rest of the book of *Genesis* is: **"We must trust God and lose the battle for autonomy in order to win the battle for a LIFE with real purpose."**
- Put even more simply, the lesson for us is the question *Genesis* asks and answers over and over again. ***Is God into our trusting Him for all of life or into our doing even good things without Him?***
- *Genesis* answers that question in a way that is so backwards to how our culture answers it and tells us to answer it. *Genesis* answers it consistently with the rest of foundational truth in Scripture.
- That consistent, biblical truth makes losing a wrestling match winning—makes giving up gaining—and makes dying real LIVING!