

GENESIS: THE METHOD OF FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

This Bible is given to us to read. It is a great book, a tremendous book. Let us begin at the first of the Bible and go through it all, book by book -- from Genesis to Revelation -- and look at the setting, the message, and the relationship of each to the whole. This will be a zoom-lens view, book by book. Such a panorama is one of the most helpful ways to understand and see the divine pattern of revelation. One of the most powerful and unanswerable pieces of evidence for the truth of inspiration is to see the divine pattern that runs through the Bible. How can this be explained apart from God, that a book as diverse in its authorship, written under equally diverse conditions should have such a remarkable pattern of truth unless it comes from one divine author?

We are so familiar with the Bible that we scarcely consider what an ancient book it is. There is a Greek philosopher named Herodotus, a teacher and scholar who lived some three hundred years before Christ, who is called the father of history; he is the first historian whose writings have been preserved to us. Anyone who has studied something of ancient history knows about Herodotus. But the outstanding thing about the Bible is that Moses, who wrote the first five books of our Bible, had finished his books and was in his grave a thousand years before Herodotus saw the light of day.

That's how ancient Genesis is. It is the book of beginnings. It takes us back into the very dawn of human history and yet as we read it, it is as up-to-date as tomorrow morning's newspaper. That, again, is a mark of the divine afflatus behind this book, the in-breathing of God. The Bible has so much color and life about it in these revelations of early human life. Those who are familiar with archaeology know that these cylinders and slabs and potsherds from the past give us but the faintest glimpse into the bare facts of life in these ancient lands. There is little of human interest about them. There is no color, no life, no flesh. But when you open the pages of Genesis you discover here that these men come alive. Abraham is better known than some of our more distant relatives. Isaac and Joseph, with others, are familiar household names to us. We feel that they're people we use to know back where we came from. They are as close to us as that, because this book has so marvelously preserved for us the color, the depth, the flesh and the tone of life in those days.

Genesis is not only a history. Obviously it would have little significance to us if it were only that. But the book of Genesis is one with a tremendous message which can be declared in one statement. It reveals to us the inadequacy of man without God. That is the whole purpose of the book, and, as such, it strikes the keynote of all subsequent revelation of God. It reveals that man can never be complete without God, that he can never discover or fulfill the true meaning of his life without a genuine personal relationship with an indwelling God.

Now this inadequacy is revealed to us in three realms, realms in which each of us live. First it is revealed in the realm of natural relationships, through what we call the natural sciences: cosmology, the study of the universe, its origin and make-up; then geology, about the earth, all the manifold aspects of it that we think we know so much of today; and biology, the study of life itself in all its manifestations. These natural relationships circumscribe our contact with the physical world around us. The second area is the realm of human relationships. This takes in what we call sociology, psychology, psychiatry, along with all the other "psychs" that are made so much of today. And then finally, the realm of spiritual relationships -- theology, soteriology and philosophy. In all three of these vital areas, including many of the particulars with which we are concerned, the book of Genesis reveals that man apart from God is totally inadequate. This one message echoes throughout the book like the sound of a bell.

Let me show you what I mean. The first two chapters are largely concerned with the world of nature. This book opens with the greatest material fact in our life today -- the fact that we live in a universe. We become aware of this when we step out under the stars at night and look up. Even the most ignorant of us ponders what is out there -- the unending stars, these brilliant lights in the heavens. We wonder at the movement of the heavenly bodies. Man has stood and gazed in awe and wonderment at this sight for centuries.

At last we have begun to probe out into the universe around us and have discovered that we live in a great galaxy, a diffuse body of stars and planets -- millions of them. Our own galaxy is three hundred thousand light years across and it's just the home base of us in the universe. First base is out yonder and center field is WAY out. In this great ball park, we know of over a million bases out there, galaxies like ours. Our minds begin to blow a fuse when we start thinking like that, yet Scripture opens with this -- right on that very note. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" -- and man. That is the story of the beginning -- of Genesis.

We are in a universe which is mainly mystery to us. We know very little about it and in any direction we choose to go we soon come to a place where we can go no farther. I was talking with a nuclear physicist one time and he was telling me something of the complexity of the nucleus of the atom. He says that it has become so "astronomically" complex that we simply cannot begin to grasp all that we are discovering about the fundamental elements of matter. It is right on this point that the Bible begins with the answers to questions that scientists cannot answer. What is it that keeps the universe going? Where did we come from? Who made us? Why are we here? Yet in spite of the fact that the study of the universe is the theme of science today, science hasn't found an answer to any of these questions.

Now to these questions, Genesis supplies answers, the only answers that fit. It reveals to us that the key to human life, including the material universe and the mystery of our own nature -- plus that invisible realm of spirit life we know little about -- is spiritual, not physical or material. That is why we can never know ourselves or the universe or God by studying nature. We'll never understand it that way. Ultimately we run up against a closed door. It becomes so complex we cannot grasp it. Why? Because the Bible tells us the key is in the spiritual realm. When we take this book and open it up, we discover that we are moving past all the discoveries of science today into a realm to which science has not yet come where we have answers to these questions.

It was no less a person than Albert Einstein who put his finger squarely upon the inadequacies of science when he said, "Science is like reading a mystery novel." You go down to the drug store and buy a dime novel (of course they cost more now) and take it home and you go to bed at night. Everybody else has left the house and it is dark. You get into bed, snap on the light, prop yourself up with pillows and start reading. In the first chapter there are two or three murders, with several bodies lying around. The whole of the story begins to focus on "who done it." Clues appear as you read on. In about the third chapter you've decided that the butler did it. Continuing on, the finger of guilt points more and more to the butler. But then you reach the last chapter in which suddenly all the previous evidence is upset and it wasn't the butler after all. It was the little old lady in tennis shoes who lives on the third floor. She did it. Now Einstein says science is like that. It is always struggling from hypothesis to synthesis from a few clues here and there, but it never gets the answer. And then suddenly some new light comes along that throws the first estimate all off, and all the previous answers seem of little value.

The interesting thing about Genesis is that it starts right where science leaves off. It gives answers addressed to faith, admittedly, but never faith that is a violation of human reason. Science is always facing the past. Genesis begins where science is seeking. If we look at it this way we see that there is no essential conflict. Here is a book that is simply dealing with matters science has not wrestled with, and, indeed, cannot wrestle with -- the key to the mystery of human life.

Now in chapters three to six the realm of human relationships is seen; here you have the entrance of man into the picture. This book reveals that the basic unit of society is the family. For ten to twenty thousand years of human history there has been absolutely no variation in that pattern. The family is still the basic element of human life today. When a society forgets that fact and begins to destroy family life, the foundations of the nation crumble because a nation is an extension of the family. The nations of the world are simply great family groups. Consider for a moment the uniform reaction of Americans on the day in 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated! There never was a time when the whole American nation felt so like a family as when John Kennedy lay in death. We were all one people. A crisis disclosed that our nation is nothing more than a gigantic family. Inside the nation, inside the family revealed in the Scriptures is the single individual. But when the family crumbles, the nation begins to fall.

These chapters also reveal the failure of man in this basic relationship, because man tried to be man without

God, and the result of course was the introduction of the principle of sin. Sin is the monkey wrench which has been thrown into the human machinery that makes us behave the way we do. As you read the account here you'll see how Cain rejected God and became a murderer. He went out and founded a civilization that ended in apostasy and the flood. When Lot tried to move away from God, to get away from the influence of God in his life, he wrecked his family as a result.

This life pattern in Scripture is given again and again, and though we live some thousands of years after these events, it is the same story today isn't it? Every generation has been repeating the same cycle. We see it all around us in our nation of lovely homes, new cars and gimmicks -- yet riddled with strife, violence and almost unmentionable immorality. Increasing crime rates and broken homes on every side all result from, and testify vividly to, man's failure to live successfully on the level of human relationships apart from God.

Finally then in the last part of the book, which is one large section beginning with the middle of chapter six through chapter fifty, you have the realm of spiritual relationships. It is the largest part of this book because it is the most important to man -- his spirit and its relationship with God. This is the story of five men. If you remember the lives of these five men and what they mean, you will have most of Genesis right in the palm of your hand. They are Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Genesis reveals in the story of these men what man is always seeking. Do you know what it is? We think that we are seeking after things. But we know that things aren't what we really want.

All the restlessness and rush of the age in which we live can be understood as an attempt to focus upon three goals. First, righteousness, the sense of being right. This is why we are always attempting to justify ourselves. When anyone accuses you of something, what happens? You start justifying yourself. You want to be right. Man is forever seeking righteousness. The second is peace. We want a sense of well-being inside. A chrome-plated economy based on "education" leading to "high standards of living" is surely a cheap substitute. How often the word peace is flung at us in these days, leaving only a hunger for the real thing. Man is ever seeking peace. And the third thing is joy. He wants a sense of gladness, of happiness out of life. Those three are the unseen, almost unconscious, goals of life -- righteousness, peace and joy. Where are they found? Romans fourteen says "The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 14:17) Only God imparts these things to men, and this is the story of this book.

Now it reveals how men who did not believe or obey God sought these things in vain. Jacob for a time, as you know, refuses to obey God and insists on doing things on his own. Out he goes and becomes a wanderer and a hired servant of his uncle. He ends up being not only a deceiver but deceived, and life falls apart at the seams for him. Even Abraham falters occasionally -- he goes down to Egypt and falls into lying and adultery, and again, life falls apart.

But if this book, Genesis, reveals the inadequacies of man without God, it also reveals the adequacy of man with God. That is the great message. In natural relationships you see that man with God is sovereign. If I had only known Adam back in the days before the fall! What a rich character he must have been. What tremendous power and knowledge he must have had of the secrets of nature. When we look at the New Testament and read of the miracles of the Lord Jesus walking upon the water, changing the water into wine, stilling the storm with a word, we say to ourselves, "That is God at work." But the Old Testament says, "No; that isn't God, that is man. That is what man was intended to be -- the sovereign, the king of the world."

You find it reflected in the eighth Psalm. David says as he is looking into the heavens, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" And then he answers his question, "Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." (Ps. 8:4,6) You only see that in Jesus. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, "We do not yet see every thing in subjection to him. But we see Jesus..." (Heb. 2:8,9) who as a man is the fulfillment of God's intention for man to be sovereign of the earth. In the garden before Adam fell, you see him as the lord of creation. He knew its mysteries, he controlled its activities. Man cannot do that any longer today. We have the urge to do so, but we can do it no longer.

In the realm of human relationships, the book of Genesis reveals that man with God is seen as living at peace and in harmony with other men. One of the most beautiful stories in this book is of Abraham dwelling under

the oaks of Mamre with the Canaanites all around him, the men who had for many years been his enemies. But God so worked in the life of that man Abraham that even his enemies were made to be at peace with him. The story of Abraham closes with the Canaanite tribes coming to him and saying, "Thou art a prince among us" {cf, Gen 23:6 KJV}. So it is fulfilled what God says elsewhere that when a man's ways please the Lord he makes even his enemies be at peace with him {cf, Prov 16:}. This is the key. This is the secret of life in all our relationships.

Then in the spiritual relationship, Genesis declares that man in fellowship with God begins to know supreme happiness -- the righteousness, peace, and joy that men always crave. Realization comes only as he discovers that the indwelling God is the answer to all his needs.

This is revealed in the lives of five men. Let us quickly review these. Noah is a picture to us of regeneration. Noah is a man who went through death in a figure. He was on both sides of the flood. He was preserved in the ark through the waters of judgment, through the waters of death, to come out into a new world and a new life. The imaginative writers of our day are always trying to write a book to depict what would happen after an atomic holocaust had completely wiped life off the face of the earth and what it would be like for a new couple to start out in such a world. Yet none of them seem to realize that is exactly what happened in the story of Noah and the flood. None of them seem ever to have caught the romance of Noah and his family starting afresh in a new earth. Nevertheless, they are a picture of regeneration. The beginning of life as a Christian is the passing from death into life (in Christ) just as Noah did in the flood.

Then comes Abraham. And what does Abraham teach us? Justification by faith. Here was a man who lived by faith. Everything that he did was given to him -- not by any merit of his own, not by any effort of his own. But as God led him along and Abraham stepped out on the promises, he found that God's promise was true. Eight times that man's faith was dramatically tried. If you are ever in a trial of faith, read the life of Abraham. You will find in his life similar circumstances to the ones you are going through. Abraham teaches us what it means to be justified, to be the friend of God by faith.

Then comes Isaac. Isaac is a beautiful picture of sonship, what it means to be a son of God. If there ever was a boy that was spoiled, pampered and petted by his father, it was Isaac. He was the son, pre-eminently so. In the glimpse this book gives of him you see what it means to be the darling of a father's heart. And I think there is no message more needed in this day than that which is so beautifully exemplified in Isaac, how God looks at us and calls us the darling of his heart. "Beloved, we are God's children now," says John; "it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him." (1 John 3:2) -- We shall be like Christ.

The story of Jacob follows. Jacob was the rascal, the schemer, the man who thought he could live on his own, by his wits and by his own efforts. He went out trying to deceive everybody and ended up being deceived. Jacob is a beautiful picture of sanctification, that marvelous work of God in which we in our folly, attempting to live life in the energy of the flesh, are led into the very situations that drive us into a corner where at last, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we discover God speaking to us and we give up. And when we give up our trying, we begin to live. That is what Jacob did when he gave up at the Brook of Peniel {Gen 32:22-32}, knowing Esau was waiting with a band of armed men ready to take his life. He wrestled with the angel of God at the brook; it was there that God broke Jacob. And as a broken man, limping the rest of his life, he became Israel, prince of God. What a lesson that is. Some of us are going through this very experience right now. What an encouragement to us!

Now the last picture is Joseph -- glorification. The man loved of his father and mistreated by his brethren. While living through this earthly relationship he is suddenly lifted from the darkness of a prison house into the glory of Pharaoh's throne to reign and rule as the second person in the kingdom. Now this is the picture for us of truth for the believer: What do we look forward to as death comes upon us? Isn't it that we are translated out of the darkness of this earthly existence, from the prison house in which we have lived our years, suddenly to the very throne and presence of God himself.

It is all there, isn't it? The pattern fits so beautifully. We discover what God intended for the believer and the method by which man reaches God and appropriates all this. It is revealed in this book as the method of faith.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God," Hebrews reminds us (11:6). As you believe, it all becomes true. Not as you intellectually give credence to it, but as you step out on it and act upon it, it all becomes true in experience.

The final message of Genesis is that God is absolutely necessary for the completeness of life. Without God you cannot understand the world around you. You can't understand yourself or your neighbor or God himself. You will never have any answers without God, but if you have fallen away or excluded God and found misery and heartache and darkness and futility and emptiness and boredom -- all the things that are a result of man attempting to live without him, Genesis declares that if you return on the principle of faith in God you will find help, spiritual health, and happiness, in every realm of life. God is the secret of human life. This is the first note in the Bible and it is also the last.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will give us the urge and the motive to give ourselves to the writings before us. How many difficulties and troubles we could avoid, how many heartaches we could pass by if we only knew what you intended us to know in this book. May our hearts be open with a readiness to seek and to search and to find and know that we are in a universe -- not silent, not mechanical, not empty in which there is no echo to our cry -- but a universe uniquely disposed by a Father, with a father's heart. As we believe this and learn to walk by faith, you fill life for us to the full. We ask that this may be our experience in Jesus' name. Amen.

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