

There is no doubt that in recent years the credibility of the Bible has been under attack. Like never before the Christian faith has been subjected to scrutiny. The critics and the sceptics are not hard to find, but there are some among that number who are not so sure. In the new atheist movement that has emerged over the last ten years, with characters like Ricky Gervais among them, Markus Brigstocke the comedian, has recently written an investigation into faith and in his book called, *God Collar*, he makes comment about the book by Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*: ‘Richard Dawkins says at the beginning of his book, “I would like everyone who reads this by the time they put this book down to be an atheist.” Well, I was an atheist when I started reading the *God Delusion*, but the time I finished it I was an agnostic. I was going to read it again but I was worried that I would turn into a fundamentalist Christian.’”

The new atheist alternative is not as attractive to many as it first appears. We believe that Christianity is attractive and is also objectively true. During these next few weeks we’re going to take a journey across the terrain of the entire Bible. We’re going to move from Genesis to Revelation and survey the one big story that holds this book together. Essentially there are two questions: 1) what is the big story that holds it together? 2) Can I believe it? Is it really true, and if it is really true, what difference does it make to me? So today we begin at the beginning.

We begin with a new world created in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Creation accounts are found throughout the ancient world. There are many different creation stories and accounts that you can find as each culture sought to explain where we had come from and these are mythological in nature. There is a world of difference between the language of myth and the language of history. In fact, it can be reasonably, claimed that what we mean by history, emerged from a Jewish worldview. A fairy tale begins, ‘once upon a time’. They’re timeless tales of eternal truth but history is rooted in time and place and so Genesis begins at the beginning, and follows with family trees and historical events that indicate we are in a world of history. Having said that, we could spend the next few hours debating when it happened, or was it six literal twenty-four hour periods about six thousand years ago, or is it compatible in some way with the slow process of time and evolution. The reality is we come with different points of view and that Christians have different points of view on these questions.

Genesis does not necessarily answer all of the questions we might put to it, but it doesn’t mean it’s not history. It describes in simple pictorial language the

profound subject of creation and human origins. And we can be confident Genesis is history because where it can be tested it has proven to be reliable. Take creation itself for a moment, Genesis describes a moment of creation. It describes a moment when space and time began. Interestingly, up until the 1930s science textbooks did not teach that, instead, they taught the 'steady state' nature of the universe - that is, the universe has always been here. But then evidence began to mount in the early 1900s that the universe has not always existed. There was a moment of creation and evidence mounted that there was a 'big bang', a moment of creation in the distant past. We need to remind ourselves that in those days, in the 1930s and 40s, atheists and agnostics were not happy with this because of its implications - it looked like creation. Robert Jastrow, leading NASA scientist said this in an interview with Christianity Today magazine:

"Astronomers now find they have painted themselves into a corner because they have proven, by their own methods, that the world began abruptly in an act of creation to which you can trace the seeds of every star, every planet, every living thing in this cosmos and on the earth. And they have found that all this happened as a product of forces they cannot hope to discover. That there are what I or anyone would call supernatural forces at work is now, I think, a scientifically proven fact."

"For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountain of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

I think the best way to understand Genesis is to compare the light of Genesis with a torchlight. You're camping. It's a dark night so you need a light and you could choose to put on the car headlights, which act like floodlights, illuminating everything. Or you could choose a torchlight that has focused beam that you can shine around. You would choose the torch because the floodlight is too much. It lights up too much, but it also can cast huge shadows, so that you can see what you want to see. The torch has focused beam and doesn't show you everything but it shows you what you need to see. Genesis is like a torch beam being shone back into our past. It doesn't answer every question or resolve every issue, but it shines its light on what we need to know.

So what does it show us? It shows us a lost world. What has gone wrong with the world? In verse thirty-one of chapter 1. God saw all that he had made and it was

good. Creation was declared good. There is goodness in nature, in creatures, in the physical laws that govern our universe and there is goodness in humanity. There is so much about our world that is good. So what has gone wrong? Why is it when we turn on TV news we are confronted by wars and massacres and disasters and misery? The Bible with this torch beam shone back into our origins begins to give the answer.

Adam and Eve were given a garden, a place where they were to tend, and from there they were to multiply, spread out and tend the whole earth. In the garden there are two trees or two kinds of trees, a tree of life which would secure them everlasting life, and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We don't know much about it, except that it probably wasn't an apple tree. A lot of ink has been spilled about the purpose of this tree and there is a clue in its name. God tells Adam and Eve that there is only one rule to keep in the garden and that is to not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. That is the clue to its purpose. By having this tree, God showed that he was not only their partner, but their master. There are three people we see walking in the garden in chapter 3: Adam, Eve and God. But they are not all equal. God made them, and he loves them, he has a purpose for them, but he is not one of them. Adam and Eve were made in God's image, God was not made in their image. So, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil serves a purpose. It demonstrates that Adam and Eve, though, made in the image of God, are not equal to God. Only God makes the laws and to break his rules is like trying to be God, deciding that we will choose reality and we will make the rules.

And then into this garden comes the serpent. Outside of the Bible, the image of the snake or a dragon or a sea serpent is an image of a creature that is full of wisdom, but is deceitful and in conflict with humanity. The earliest piece of literature ever discovered, the epic of Gilgamesh, makes reference to creation, to a flood, to a Noah like character who built a boat, but also to a tempting serpent, deceitful character. This, of course, echoes many of the themes of Genesis.

Who is this deceitful character? From Genesis we don't know any more than it was a serpent who came into the garden to tempt Adam and Eve. Elsewhere in the Bible we build up a bigger picture, and he is named Satan, Beelzebub or the great dragon. Jesus calls him the father of lies. At this point Adam and Eve don't know any of this though and so when he questions what God has actually told them they don't know to be wary. The serpent was the first being in the Bible to use the word really. He comes with a question, "*Can God really be trusted?*" It is God and his

work that's in question. So he asks, "*Has God really said that you shall not eat from ANY tree in the garden?*"

Then we read of this conversation where Eve responds: ² *The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ 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.* The trouble with this conversation is not that God's word is being questioned, but that it is being distorted. Asking the question really is not wrong. Asking questions is not wrong, that's how we learn and grow and understand, but it's motive that matters. It's the spirit in which we ask the question that matters. The spirit of this question is not good. As Eve begins to get involved, God's word begins to be distorted. The serpent tells an outright lie – you will not die - and there is the suggestion that if you simply brushed against the fruit you wouldn't die, so it must be possible to touch it and not die, therefore God is not telling the truth. But the rule is not simply not to touch, it is not to deliberately take and eat the fruit.

Then the serpent explains what this fruit will do. "*For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*" And so they ate. Just in case you're thinking it must all be the woman's fault verse six is quite clear that Adam was with her at the time. Maybe he was watching to see whether or not she would die if she ate the fruit, in which case he wouldn't have eaten it. Actually, he was abrogating any responsibility of leadership. They realised they were naked, made coverings from leaves and hid from God.

This is the event that Christians come to call the Fall and it seems a very minor and insignificant event and yet, it has such huge implications. Throughout our journey in these coming weeks we are going to see the consequences of this decision to choose our way and not God's way. And that leads me to today. We live in this broken world. You see lies we tell get out of control. They start so small but very quickly get out of control. At the heart of a lie is our desire to create our own reality. Not to live in God's reality, but to create our own, and we can't because it's not reality. And the consequence of this human rebellion of chapter 3 of Genesis gets out of control and we read of God's judgement which in many ways is God, confirming the decision of Adam and Eve. Their relationship with creation is broken, and bringing children into the world will now involve pain. Working in the fields will be a battle with the weeds. Creation itself will be broken. Their

relationship with each other will be broken and Adam and Eve will be in a battle of the sexes that will not achieve harmony. Their relationship with God will be broken because they have now chosen to live ignoring God, rather than being under his care and protection. And that is why the Bible says they must leave the garden. The thing they must not be able to do is to reach out and eat from the tree of life and so live forever, because if there is something worse than men and women being able to choose their own rules, it is immortal men and women choosing their own rules. And so they must leave the garden and that's why death came from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Not instant death, but spiritual death and physical death that followed.

So Genesis describes the beginning of a conflict, the War of the worlds that will continue down through history. But I want to finish with a moment of hope because there is a little pointer to that in verse 15: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*" God says here that between the serpent and Adam and Eve there will be a conflict, but in the course of time one of her offspring will come and crush the serpent. His heel will be struck but he will crush the serpent. And who is this person who will come to destroy the work of the serpent? The Bible doesn't really begin in Genesis, although that's where we started. To find out real story really begins we don't start in Genesis, we should start in the New Testament. In the opening of his gospel John writes, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* The word is Jesus says John and as God created this beautiful world Jesus was there with him. And as Adam and Eve rebelled, Jesus was there and as God promised to send a deliverer, a serpent crusher, Jesus was ready for action. History begins with Jesus and as will discover over the next few weeks. This story is actually more about Jesus than is about us.