

THE BIG PICTURE
GOOD WORLD, BAD WORLD – Genesis

What do you love about the world in which we live? We live in a world full of good things: look around at the universe – it is a fascinating place, a beautiful place; the month of May in Edinburgh is just a glorious time and place because the cherry trees are in flower; the trees are turning green and how many shades of green are there? Look at the stars and try to count them – there are too many but it is glorious to look at them; even the snow is beautiful and the rain is necessary. There are so many good stories of human achievement and compassion: did you listen to the London Marathon coverage and the stories of people running the race? That's an achievement in itself, but so many were doing it in memory of someone who has died and were raising money for charity out of love and compassion for people in need; there are free hugs, random acts of kindness, and people looking out for their neighbours. What a good place world is!

What is there about the world that makes you sad? Disasters strike people, natural disasters over which we have no control and they seem to have no rhyme or reason: earthquakes and tsunami in Japan, volcanoes in Iceland, drought in Africa. People do such dreadful things to one another: war in Libya, people are shot in the streets in Syria, women and children are abused in their own homes; people go hungry because of the greed of others; the weak and poor are exploited by rich and powerful. People will do anything to have power and then to hold on to it. It is a bad world, the world in which we live.

How do we understand this world? If you visit Holyrood, the palace not the parliament, you will see walls covered with huge tapestries. They are very old and very well-made; they took years to make. There are two ways of looking at these tapestries: you can examine them in great detail, close-up and you will see the intricate stitches and you can admire the handiwork that went into creating such splendid works of art and come away marvelling at these tapestries. Or you can stand back and take in the sweep of the whole picture and there are some that, when you look at them, they play tricks on your eyes with their artistic perspective and then you go away marvelling at the pictures they show of medieval life in Edinburgh. Of course, there is nothing to stop you doing both! We can read the Bible intricately, examining each little piece for the detail of its meaning and we will learn a huge amount about God and the world and ourselves from doing that; we can stand back and take in the whole sweep of the story and see the big picture and marvel at all that God has done in the world and for us.

The whole bible in 8 weeks? That's the plan; the outline is suggested to go alongside the E-100 challenge of reading 100 key Bible passages; you don't have to read the passages to understand the sermons, but it's always good to read these passages! The whole idea is that we step back from the detail of bible teaching to look at the big picture and see the grand sweep of the Bible's story so that we can understand the whole thing from beginning to end; it should help us see where the bits fit in; if you want to hear a sermon on an individual passage, come to the evening service!

"In the beginning, God..." (Gen 1:1) What a magnificent way to begin the story; who is this story all about? It is about God; God is the centre of the story; it is His story. We want story to be about us; we want to be centre-stage, but no! We have our part to play in the story, but the centre stage belongs to God. The Bible is about the great deeds God has done in the world, is a celebration of God's power and grace in so many different ways. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says in Colossians 1: *"He is..." (Col 1:15f)* This is the story of what God has done and why He's done it; it is the story of

the ways in which God has blessed the world in which we live, the ways in which God has done us good.

The first of these great works of God comes in rest of that first sentence: *"In the beginning..." (Gen 1:1) "And God..." (1:3)* The Bible is not a scientific textbook to tell us how the world was made, or even when the world began; instead the man of faith looks at the world and understands that God made this, that God is the creator of the universe. It doesn't set out to answer the questions of modern science, but it does set out to celebrate the glorious world in which we live and declare his faith that "God made this" and all the way through the verdict is *"it was good"* Finally, we are described: *"Let us..." (1:26)* and people are made in the image of God, we are made to love and be loved, we are made to worship, we are made with the capacity to make moral choices, good from bad; we are made with a conscience to tell us when we've made bad choices. So we are left with a picture of people in harmony with one another, at peace with themselves, in harmony with God and in harmony with the world in which they live. What could be better! We're left thinking, this is how it should be! This is Eden.

But then it all went wrong. Genesis 3 brilliantly tells the story of sin entering the world. Eve chose to listen to the temptations of the devil and give in to them. Adam and Eve's sin was not eating an apple; their sin was disobedience to God. God had said *"you must..." (2:17)* but the devil's tempting words were attractive; 'you will know everything and you won't die!' So the capacity to choose good things that please God was also open to choosing bad things, things that God didn't like, and that's exactly what happened. Sin came into the world that day and the world has never been the same since: the peace and harmony of Eden was shattered; the people were ashamed to be in one another's company; they hid from God because they were afraid; they were at odds with the world in which they lived; on that day death entered the world – they began to die that day and their relationship with God died.

So, at once we have this "good world, bad world" side by side. Murder, yet people walk with God. Abraham demonstrates great faith and a willingness to obey God in the most extraordinary ways, yet he lies about his wife to protect himself. Jacob cheats his brother and has to run away from home in fear of his life, yet later wrestles with God and perseveres in faith. Joseph is a bit of a brat; family favouritism runs out of hand; his brothers hate him and want him dead, yet he becomes a powerful and important man whose testimony is to God with him all through his life. This is just the story of Genesis; we can add to that; we can bring it bang up to date because our world is still the same; human nature is still the same: we are still capable of the highest acts of kindness and good behaviour and faith and obedience to God and we are still capable of the most extraordinary bad things. This is the world in which we live and the Bible story shows us why it is the way it is.

In this "good world, bad world" God is the centre of the story; it is the story of His dealings with the world and there are 3 banner headlines for us to read:

1. God is the giver of life God made the world and gave us life. That is a controversial statement in some quarters; so many people want to challenge that; Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, others would tell us that science has removed the need for God in the origins of the world. But for all that science tells us about the origins of universe, there is still room for me to say *"By faith..." (Heb 11:3)* Not only is God the giver of life, but human beings are made bearing the image of God – this is not a physical thing, but is about who we are as human beings: we are made to love and be loved; we have a unique set of qualities and characteristics; we have the capacity to make moral and reasoned choices; there is part of us that reaches out for God, with the desire to worship and to believe. This is who we are and this is true of

every human being; for every one of us there is this meaning, purpose and dignity in life, life is to be valued and treasured and at its ideal is to be lived in harmony with God, in community with others, at peace with ourselves and in harmony with the world.

2. God blesses us – what does God do with a world gone bad? Does He write off the good world that He's made because it has gone bad? Does He destroy it forever? Well, no! Instead God loves His world in spite of the bad things and makes some of the greatest promises. To Abram, for example, in Genesis 12: *"I will..." (Gen 12:2ff)* The whole world will be blessed by God, through Abraham and then others later; the climax of that promise is in Jesus and the gospel is for the whole world. Not only does God make promises, but He makes covenants with Noah and Abraham and others later and a new covenant in Jesus when He died and rose again. A covenant is a promise with commitment, promises that He is committed to keep. So we see God continuing to love the world even when the world is not all that He wants it to be; so we see God who loves us even when we're not all that He wants us to be, committed to bless us, committed to love us.

3. God is with us always and everywhere – there is a little sentence in the story of Joseph: *"The Lord..." (Gen 39:2,21)* He's a slave, well-treated by his master, but under pressure from his master's wife; he's in prison though he's done nothing wrong and is about to be forgotten in prison for a long time. *"The Lord was with him"*. God was with Joseph, not because Joseph was a wonderful person, but because God loved Joseph and wanted to help him. Because God was with him, Joseph was able to cope with all that the bad world threw at him; Joseph was able to live his life by faith. This is a promise that comes back time and time again in all the big picture story of the Bible, God's promise to be with us wherever we go; God is with us in all the circumstances of our lives, in the good things and in the difficult things, with us to strengthen and help us, with us to love us, with us to bless us; this is His grace, to love and bless us when we don't deserve it; this is what God is like, this is what God has always been like. Jesus is God with us in another sense, God become human for us; the Spirit is God inside us.

We are made to love God. It is part of who we are as human beings; we are made to love and worship God, God who made the world and has given us life; God who has committed Himself to bless us; God who has promised to be with us always and everywhere – God is worthy of our love and worship. We are made to love Him; we fulfil our whole being as people when we learn to love God and live life by faith. It's who we are and how we're made. Of course, we make mistakes; we get things wrong; we are capable of the most horrendous things as human beings and our world can be a terrible place at times and death is part of our world. But it is also the most wonderful place; we see people capable of the most extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice and kindness, people who live out their faith in most trying circumstances. "Good world, bad world" – this is our world; this is God's world; and God is with us.