



# A WORLD MADE: THE BEGINNING

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Life isn't what it could be. It's a beautiful morning. But life isn't what it could be.

I'm a big fan of movies because they are such great examples of careful storytelling in our culture. I've alluded to this before, but my taste in movies has changed since having small children. I watch a lot more cartoons than I used to. But the interesting thing about cartoons is that they still deal with the big issues of life. One such movie is *Madagascar*.

The scene begins with Marty, a zebra, living in the zoo. He talks about how he is there at the zoo for the viewers enjoyment 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Then his monologue is interrupted by some visitors.

The visitors are some penguins planning an escape. They tell him, "we don't belong here." They talk to him about "the wild." Marty says in disbelief, "you can actually go there?" He feels some deep connection with the wild, even though he was born in captivity.

Life isn't what it could be. We feel the same thing that Marty felt. Some longing for something that we can't quite describe. We all know that our lives could be better, and we can all name dozens of ways that is true. Studies have shown that even animals bred in captivity can be reintroduced to the wild. Something in them remembers how to act in the wild even if they never experienced it themselves. Could there be something similar in us? Could we have a memory of something that we personally didn't experience?

As most of you know, today is the first chapter of our nine month journey through the Scriptures that we are calling EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world. Last week we introduced the series. My goal last week was to show you that all of us live our lives based on some big story and to suggest that the Bible tells the kind of story that we need.

This morning we jump into the beginning of the story.

What does the beginning of this story say about where we came from? Does it help to explain anything about us? This morning we want to find out whether it explains

why we know that life could be better, but don't know exactly why.

We're starting off by looking at Genesis 1-11. These eleven chapters are the introduction to the Biblical story. It's a huge portion of the Bible to look at. Our approach will be to look at three scenes from these chapters: a woman, two brothers, and a family. Each of these scenes will tell us something about how things started.

My hope is that these stories will help us to understand why we feel that life isn't what it could be. Maybe they reveal some distant past to us that helps to understand our present. And perhaps they say something about our future as well.

## Created for life

The first two chapters of Genesis describe the creation of the world, the creation of life, and the creation of humankind. They are rich, poetic verses that are dripping with theology and meaning. The main argument that these chapters make is that God, the God that this book describes, is responsible for the existence of everything. God created.

This is a radical idea in our culture. Unfortunately, scientific theories about the origin of life have overstepped their purpose and made theological claims. Our world does not believe that we were created at all, much less by the God of the Bible. We touched on this last week as well, but the main issue here is not the mechanics of creation. You have to let the Bible answer the questions it wants to answer, not the questions you want it to answer. The first two chapters of Genesis do not attempt to answer the questions that we want them to answer about how old the earth is and the mechanics of what began everything.

One of the questions that these chapters do address is what things were like at the beginning. The first few chapters describe God creating life. The emphasis throughout these chapters is on life. Trees that bear fruit that are capable of life. Animals, fish, and birds. And the pinnacle of his creation, humans who are given the responsibility to continue the job that God started of filling

this new world with life.

But life isn't the only theme in these chapters. Six times God says that what he has created is good. A seventh time he concludes that it is very good. God creates life and it is good.

You've probably seen the T-shirts and hats that say "Life is good." That's actually a fairly good summary of Genesis 1-2. God creates life and it is good.

All that goodness of creation is summed up in these verses.

Genesis 2:8-9:

**<sup>8</sup>Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. <sup>9</sup>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.**

In the middle of the world that God created, he planted a garden. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word for "garden" is translated by the word that we get our modern word "paradise" from. Consider the image of a beautiful garden. Wikipedia defines a garden this way, "a planned space, usually outdoors, set aside for the display, cultivation, and enjoyment of plants and other forms of nature."

That is a pretty good summary of what God created. This garden was about displaying life. It was about cultivating life. And it was about enjoying life. At the center of this garden is the first kind of life that God created in Genesis 1 and the very symbol of life itself: the tree of life.

The tree of life is a powerful image throughout the rest of the Bible. I spent a full week teaching on the tree of life throughout Scripture at a Christian camp in Colorado this summer. And we still didn't exhaust all the imagery of the tree. The tree is a symbol of life.

This is what we were created for. We were created for the good life. Not "the good life" of American consumerism: expensive cars, exotic vacations, or flashy homes. The "good life" of joy, peace, contentedness, and satisfaction. What Jesus in the gospel of John calls "life to the full."

This is what we long for. This is why virtually everyone all over the world can imagine a way in which their life could be better. We have a memory, a distant sense that

there was something else. We are like Marty, a zebra bred in captivity. We have never seen open plains, but something within us longs for them anyway.

This is actually a compelling argument for the existence of God. It dates back to Plato's concept of the ideal. It goes like this. If we know that life could be better, then we have to have some knowledge of that kind of life. I can't point to anyone living or dead that experienced the kind of life that I can feel within me must be possible. That means that I must have some distant memory of something past.

C.S. Lewis explains this argument by saying that he feels thirsty and there is water to quench his thirst. He feels hungry and there is food to satisfy his hunger. He desires sex and there is such a thing as sex that he can experience. So if he feels some kind of innate longing, then something must exist that satisfies that longing. Desires don't exist for things that don't exist.

We have this desire within us for something better because God created us for something better. He wants us to experience something better. He wants us to experience life. The problem is that sometimes we have a hard time believing this. Sometimes we think of God in exactly the opposite terms. Sometimes we think that God wants to limit life. He wants to restrict our access to good things.

I know I am susceptible to thinking this way. For me, growing up in the church meant that there were a lot of things I wasn't supposed to do. Other people could do them, but I couldn't. My family was the good family and we obeyed the rules. It made me think that there was life available out there, but it wasn't meant for me.

If you've ever felt that way, then it might not be surprising to realize that even Adam and Eve felt this way. Even in the midst of such a beautiful life giving garden, they mistrusted God's intentions. That's what leads to the first catastrophic failure of this creation story.

Genesis 3:1-6:

**<sup>1</sup>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?'"**

**<sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, <sup>3</sup>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.'**

**<sup>4</sup>You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. <sup>5</sup>“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**

**<sup>6</sup>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.**

This is the first great tragedy of the story of the Bible. The first, but certainly not the last, failure of the pinnacle of God’s great creation. God created man and woman, put them in the garden with the intention that they would experience life. He warned them that most of the trees would lead to life, but one would lead to death. And they chose that tree. They chose something other than life.

The fact that we were created for something good explains how we know that life could be better. In some way, we remember it being better. But now we see part of the reason why that memory remains only a memory. Why hasn’t anyone anywhere managed to get back to life as it was meant to be?

Because we get confused about what life really is. Through the trickery of the serpent, Eve has become convinced that God doesn’t really want her to experience life. She says that we can eat from any of the trees, except the one in the center, which obviously must be the best one. Except that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil wasn’t in the center. The tree of life was. But in her mind, everything revolved around the one thing that she couldn’t have.

That’s what happens to us too. We think that life is found somewhere other than where God tells us that life is to be found. This is why we are constantly tormented by the idea that “the grass is always greener on the other side.” This is why we look at our neighbors and our friends and our coworkers and can’t shake the feeling that they have it better than us. This is why we buy things we don’t need thinking it might make us feel better only to realize it’s another empty promise.

We were created to experience life, but we constantly choose something other than life.

What about you? Do you really think that God wants you to experience the fullness of life? Or do you think he wants to withhold it from you? Are you confused about where the source of life is? Are you choosing what leads to death?

This big story starts out with a God who created his people to have life. Will you trust God to provide that? **Trust God to provide life.**

You have an incredibly strong desire to experience life. I know you do because I do too. Will you trust God with that desire for life? We are going to see in a few weeks how this issue is at the heart of everything that goes wrong in the world. This is what led Eve to disobey God and it’s what leads us to disobey as well.

Will you trust the life that God wants for you? Will you trust in the midst of financial decisions? Will you trust in the midst of sexual decisions? Will you let go of your desire to control everything and trust God to provide life?

Will you trust God with your desire for life?

God created you to experience life. We don’t experience what we were meant to experience because we inherit the consequences of the past and we make bad choices for ourselves. But that’s not the end of the story. Listen to how God responded to Adam and Eve’s poor decision.

Genesis 3:24:

**<sup>24</sup>After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.**

Because of their choices, God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden. They no longer have access to the tree of life. They no longer have what they once had. They have lost access to the life that God intended for them to experience.

But there is hope in this verse. God places an angel not to block the way to the tree of life, but to guard it. You guard something precious, something that must be protected until it can be enjoyed.

This is the first indication we have that God persists in wanting for us what he meant for us to experience. We had it once. We lost it. But God doesn’t let that be the last word. God persists in his efforts to help us experience the life we were meant to experience.

We’re starting to understand where these longings within us come from. If this really is our beginning, then maybe we remember it even though we personally weren’t there. Maybe there is a distant memory of a garden with a tree of life in the center that is buried deep within us. That explains why we know life could be better. And the fact that we have been sent out of that garden explains why

we can never seem to scratch that itch.

The next two stories we are going to look at play out those same themes with a few twists. If you're familiar with the Bible, you may think of Genesis 3 as describing the introduction of sin into the world. This is what theologians call "the fall." But it's actually Genesis 3-11 that describe the fall. The first two chapters of Genesis describe what God wanted for his creation. Chapters 3-11 describe what happened to that plan.

## Created for Relationship

Immediately after Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, Eve has a son. She is amazed that she has created life in a similar way that God has created life, so she names him Cain which sounds like the Hebrew word for "create." She has a second son and names him Abel. It's an ominous name because it's the word for "breath" or "vapor" in Hebrew. She may have named him Abel remembering how God breathed the breath of life into her, but it is a grim foreshadowing of what will be his untimely death.

Cain and Abel are brothers. This is a new kind of relationship. It has the potential to be an incredible thing. We use the term "brother" today to refer to someone that we are close with. Having a sibling can be one of the most reliable relationships you ever have.

I have an older brother and an older sister and I have great relationships with them. I don't see them as often as I see most of my friends, but there is something special about the relationship of siblings. There is something there that simply isn't a part of other relationships.

God created Adam and Eve and put them in a beautiful garden. Now we have Cain and Abel placed into what has the potential to be a beautiful relationship. But it doesn't turn out that way.

Genesis 4:3-5:

**<sup>3</sup>In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. <sup>4</sup>But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup>but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.**

Cain and Abel are the first brothers. They have the possibility of a great relationship. But what happens? They each offer something to God and God chooses Abel's

offering over Cain's. Abel did well and Cain did not do well. We aren't told what made Abel's offering favorable and what made Cain's offering unfavorable, but later on in the Bible, there are a bunch of reasons given as to why an offering might not be favorable. We have to assume Cain gave a substandard offering to God.

The first sibling relationship in the Bible is invaded by what ends up destroying a lot of relationships: competition. Abel has done better than Cain. So Cain is jealous and angry. In fact, he is so angry that he does the most extreme thing you can do in this situation.

Genesis 4:8:

**<sup>8</sup>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.**

Competition. Jealousy. Anger. And finally murder. Once again, God has created something good: siblings, friends, relationship. And once again a choice was made that destroys it. Instead of a brother, we get a murderer.

It seems like things are getting worse. Eve ate from the wrong tree. Cain lured his brother into an open space and ended his life. Things haven't gotten better, they have gotten worse. In the first scene, Eve chooses death for herself. In the second scene, Cain chooses death for someone else.

First we saw that God created us to experience life and yet we don't quite have it. Now we see that God created us to experience relationship. And we don't quite have that either.

The first question we asked ourselves was whether we can trust God to provide life. Now we must ask whether we can trust God for relationship. **Trust God to provide relationship.**

We understand the story of Cain and Abel on a very personal level. Every single one of us knows about disappointing relationships. Relationships offer so much promise. We all have this idea of what our relationships could really be like.

I'm willing to bet that you could look at every relationship you have and think of a way it can be better. You know the same experience that Cain and Abel have. You know about a relationship that doesn't end up being what it could. Some of us know about the extremes that Cain went to. We know about hateful, angry, abusive, and

even murderous relationships.

Just as God's creation has failed to experience life as it was meant to be, they have failed to experience relationship as it was meant to be. We're starting to see this pattern: God creates something good. People end up messing it up. But once again, as we follow the story, we see that God persists. He sends Cain away and Adam and Eve have other children. The story continues. God doesn't let his creation live without relationship.

God wants relationship for us. He wants us to experience intimate connections with other people. Friendships. Romance. Siblings. Parents. Children. Will you trust that God won't leave you alone? He may not provide the exact kind of relationship you want, but he will provide. Will you trust him?

## Created for Community

First we saw a creation that was marred by sin. Then we saw a sibling relationship that was ended by murder. As we get to Genesis 6, it seems that God has had enough. He has concluded that everything good that he intended has been marred beyond recognition.

Genesis 6:5-8:

**<sup>5</sup>The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. <sup>6</sup>The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth-- men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air-- for I am grieved that I have made them." <sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.**

At this point, things are dire. The world that God had made to be good has become everything but good. Things are so terrible that God is presented as being sorry that he had made man on the earth.

Once again, we have this mixed combination of themes: Things are bad, but God wants them to be better. We aren't the only ones who long for something else. God himself longs for his creation to experience what it was meant to experience. And even what he is about to do here, even wiping out mankind and starting over serves that purpose. God is willing to go to drastic measures so that his creation can experience what it was meant to. At this point in the story, we can't even imagine how far he will actually end

up going. But for now, even wiping out the earth and starting over is for a good purpose. He is trying to restore his creation to what it was meant to be.

God has found one man with favor in his eyes. Noah is a righteous man. In a world of evil, the Bible says that Noah walked with God. Maybe if God starts over with a good man and his family, things could be different. Eve failed, Cain and Abel failed, but maybe Noah and his family will work out. Maybe there is hope.

So God goes about the terrible business of wiping out his creation. He gives Noah detailed instructions to build an ark. There are strong similarities in the account of God telling Noah to build the ark and the creation of the world earlier in Genesis. They follow the same kind of pattern. We are meant to notice that God is at work to make life what it was meant to be.

God starts over to get his people back to creation. To get them back to the garden and the tree of life.

Does it work? Well, after a long and probably smelly time on the ark, Noah, his family, and lots of animals come out again to dry land. Here's what happens.

Genesis 9:20-25:

**<sup>20</sup>Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. <sup>21</sup>When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. <sup>22</sup>Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. <sup>23</sup>But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness. <sup>24</sup>When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, <sup>25</sup>he said,**

**"Cursed be Canaan!  
The lowest of slaves  
will he be to his brothers."**

God saves Noah because he is the one good man that God can find. The first thing that Noah does is to plant a vineyard. Then he drinks the wine and gets drunk. Not the most impressive thing for the only good man on the face of the earth to do. But things get more complicated from there. Not only is he drunk, but he gets naked. In walk his sons. A few of them do the honorable thing. One doesn't. Noah wakes up and he is furious.

Things aren't getting better. They are getting worse. Eve made a single bad choice to eat from the wrong tree. Cain's sin was a bit more involved. He laid in wait and killed his brother. Now the situation with Noah and his family is completely a mess. Noah is drunk and naked, one of his sons handles the situation poorly while his other sons are put in a really tricky place. Noah gets mad and curses his son, but part of his anger was likely due to his own stupid choices.

This is often how I feel as a parent. One of my children will come to me and say that their sibling did something against them. But it's never the case that one person did something wrong to a completely innocent person. It's never simple. There's usually a little blame everywhere. This is what happens in community. Sin infects everything. Nobody has clean hands.

And yet we desperately want to be part of a community that loves each other. We want a place where there is justice and peace and love. First we saw that God created us to experience life. Then we saw that God created us to experience relationship. Now we see that God created us to experience community.

We have been challenged to trust God with our desire for life and our desire for relationship, but now our challenge is on a bigger scale. God created us to experience community. Will you trust Him for that? **Trust God to provide community.**

God starts over with a family, but it falls short. Just as life isn't what it could be and our relationships aren't what they could be, we know about disappointing communities. About places where we want to belong, but never quite feel included. In every group I've ever been a part of, I've heard people talking about an inner circle that they weren't included in.

But even this unmet desire points us to a God who created us for something. And just as God doesn't give up on wanting for us to experience life and relationship, he doesn't give up on our desire for community. In fact, the nature of God's work in the world—the very heart of the gospel itself—is about community. We'll see more of that as we continue in this story.

Even after Noah's family falls apart, God persists. He doesn't give up. God persists in his desire that the people

he created experience what they were meant to experience.

God's intentions for his creation seem to be growing: from life to relationship to community. But the mistakes these people make seem to be growing as well. They get more complicated, more messy and harder to fix. In the midst of that we still see a God that is working to restore his creation to what he intended for it.

## Conclusion

We started off thinking about a zebra in a zoo. Thinking about his desire to go to the wild. And how we know that desire for something else. Something better.

These first chapters of Genesis tell us where that desire comes from. They tell us what we were created for. We were created for vibrant life. We were created for intimate relationship. We were created for deep community.

But we don't experience what we were created for. These stories tell us why. They tell us what went wrong. We make choices for other things. We inherit the choices of the past. The Bible calls this sin. It is the combination of the choices we make and the condition we find ourselves in. Sin is why the memory of the garden remains a memory.

Genesis 1-11 sets up the story that the Bible tells. It describes what we were created for and what went wrong. After Eve ate from the wrong tree, we might have thought there could be a quick fix. But by Genesis 11, we have seen sin invade every area of life. This is a serious problem and it needs a serious solution.

The hopeful part of this story is that God never gives up on us. He isn't OK with his creation missing out on life, relationship, and community. He persists to bring his creation back to what he originally intended it to be.

Zebras don't belong in zoos. They belong in the wild. We don't belong in the world as it looks now. We belong in a beautiful garden with a tree of life in the center. We can trust God to bring us back there. Next week, we'll see him start the solution.