

Confronting Reality

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[0 : 0 0] That's got a lot of questions raised by that passage, as you heard it read and then read so well. Thanks for that, Joel. We'll try and deal with some of those questions on our way through. As always, any questions that we don't cover, do sort them away and come find me afterwards.

We can chat about those things a bit more. But our aim, as always, is to keep our focus on the big idea, on the main point of these verses that we're looking at this morning.

I would imagine that many of you are like me, in that we're prone to what we might call wishful thinking, or what we might also call just a bit of denial here and there.

The idea that if we just ignore a problem, maybe it will just go away. So perhaps it's kind of bills that come through, or awkward emails that remain unopened.

Maybe it's trips to the doctors that remain undone. Maybe it's hard conversations that remain unspoken, in the hope that if we just don't see it, or if we don't think about it, problems will just go away, or sort themselves out by themselves, without the time to deal with it.

[1 : 1 0] I remember for a while that the HMRC, the tax and revenue people, seemed to be the only people that had my official title as Reverend. So any post that came in from where Alice the Sewell just got put into a special pile to be dealt with, and I felt I had the resources to be able to do that.

But we know that actually ignoring things like that, it doesn't help, does it? It doesn't actually solve the issue. We need to face up to those things. We need to face up to those difficulties, those challenges, if we're going to have any chance of being able to deal with them.

Well, that's what this passage is all about. This passage here brings us face to face with the two biggest problems that humanity faces, which biblically speaking are death and sin, our mortality and our rebellion against God.

Those are probably not things that you love to think about. That probably wasn't top of your list this morning. You know, kind of fingers crossed there will be death and sin at church today.

Perhaps even as I say to them, as we say here's our topic, that sounds a little bit kind of old-fashioned or a little bit cliché for a church. You know, shouldn't we have kind of moved past that?

[2 : 2 9] Is that not something we've left behind? But actually, it's the very fact that we would rarely, if ever, choose to think about these things, that makes passages like this, that bring them right into our faces, so important.

And it's what makes the Bible such a revolutionary book. Because as we said, avoiding our problems doesn't make them go away, but the Bible here makes its face up to them, so that we can also see the Bible's solution to them.

Okay? So that's our goal this morning in this passage, to be realistic. Again, we've said plenty of times, these opening chapters of Genesis describe the world that we live in. They make sense of what we see around us, and that's not always a pretty picture.

But also to be hopeful, because again, Genesis, even at the very beginning of the Bible, it lays out its promise, it points us forward, to remind us that what we see here, what we see around us, is not the end.

And so we're going to look at these two universal problems, in turn, and each time, that the hope that this passage is pointing us towards. So the first thing we will look at here, the universal problem of death.

[3 : 45] And really this is the whole of chapter 5, that chapter begins with a bit of a recap. This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God, male and female, he created them, and he blessed them, and named them man when they were created.

There's a reminder there for us, of really what we've already seen, so far in Genesis, and especially that original creation of humanity, in God's image.

And that's important, that reminder here, because you read on in verse 3, when Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.

So we have Adam in God's image, Seth in Adam's image, he said, a copy of a copy, this image being passed down. So straight away, this passage wants to remind us that the image of God, that humanity created in his likeness, continues through the generations.

Even though sin has come into the world, humanity still is made in the image of God. The dignity, the value that means all people have, that we've spoken about in previous weeks, that has not been erased, or undone by the fall, that continues in humanity.

[5 : 07] That is so important. But we see here, that while that remains, something else has been added. Because, verse 5, after Adam's wrong life, we read, and he died.

Verse 8, we read of Seth's children, Seth's life, and that same ending, and he died. And that is, he repeated, we're afraid, for almost everyone, in this list.

And he died, and he died, and he died. We heard it just kind of piling up, as Jill read those verses for us. Eight times in chapter 5, and he died.

We perhaps look at those incredibly long lifespans, don't we? I'm sure those kind of caught your eye. Hundreds and hundreds of years, we're surprised by that. Again, we could chat afterwards about why those might be so long, if you'd like to do that.

But we're not going to dig into that detail here, because actually the point isn't supposed to be, wow, that guy lived a long time. The shock is actually that they didn't live forever. And this is the first time what we would call death by natural causes it is shown in the Bible.

[6 : 20] And again, we saw it, it's just stacked up one after the other after the other. And he died, and he died, and he died. The universal problem of death has entered the world.

Humanity as a whole, it is reaping the effects of Adam and Eve's first sin. And where God warned them not to eat in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for he said, in that day you eat of it, you shall surely die.

And having refused that warning, we see here the truth of it. As in addition to the image of God who passed down through the generations, so is our mortality.

And the consequence of that rebellion, of that distance from God, and he died. And the universal problem of death. And actually, we're so used to that, aren't we?

We are so used to the concept of death that really, we're not surprised as we read chapter 5. And he died, doesn't stick out to us, well of course he did, everybody does, we think.

[7 : 28] And yet this passage reminds us that it wasn't supposed to be like that. This passage is pointing out to us that actually death is an imposter in God's good creation.

And again, that makes sense of the world that we live in. That's why even though in some ways we are used to death, and even though we expect it, in some ways we never get used to death.

And in some ways it continues to be something that hurts us more than anything else. And that we never get to be okay with. I imagine most of the people in this room have in one way or another been affected by death, whether that has been people very close to us, or perhaps people further removed, or perhaps the pain is very real at the moment of having lost loved ones recently, or those like that, that day seems to be growing ever closer, where that kind of tragic moment and the sorrow it brings is looming large on the horizon and in our minds.

Death is such a horrible thing. In some ways we get used to it, but it always hurts. We heard just last week about kind of a family friend, a young granny in her 60s who suddenly died last Sunday afternoon, completely unexpected.

This wonderful Christian woman, but to hear that out of the blue, it kind of takes the wind up here. To have messages from various other people kind of describing their sadness at what happened.

[9 : 05] It's that reminder that death is tragic. And why does it hurt? Well it hurts because it is not supposed to be. And really it is the ultimate evidence that we're no longer in the affection that God created and that God created us for.

That those made in his image will die. And actually that's not just thinking about other people, but actually this is the destination for all of us.

So it's stark to think isn't it that one day that same refrain will be spoken over our lives and he died. And she died. Our world tries to kind of blank that out to work against that.

We pretend that we'll be able to delay or avoid that. Again, the idea really if we just kind of ignore something maybe it will just go away because our culture has no answer and no hope in the face of death.

A famous novelist, Leo Tolstoy, put the question like this. He said, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? It's a fairly bleak way of looking at the world, isn't it?

[10 : 17] It's a fairly bleak question. It's no wonder when we consider life itself in that way over the shadow of an inevitable death that will wash away anything we've done.

People want to put that idea of death just to one side and forget about it. As we said, the Bible says we need to be realistic. Instead of ignoring these things, instead of wishful thinking, we need to live in light of that.

I suppose that leads us really to the question of why can the Bible face up to this most difficult topic when everything else runs away and hides. And the reason is because the Bible says even in this most serious of problems there is hope.

We mentioned earlier that this repeated refrain, and he died, and he died, is the ending for almost everyone on this list. But we can't help as we read through, as we listen to these words, to wonder at Enoch.

In verse 21 it follows that same formula, he lived this long life, he had these children, he lived this much longer, we almost automatically fill in the blank, don't we, and he died.

[11 : 31] But that is not what it says. It says, Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him. Now we see in this simply laid out, this incredible verse, that God breaks into this repetition of death to take Enoch directly to himself without seeing the grave.

Enoch who walked with God in life is taken to be with God for eternity. Now I don't think the point here is that Enoch was particularly better than everyone else.

I think the point that's being made here is that although death is this universal problem, that actually God isn't bound by that. and that God is able to do something.

So often in these early chapters of Genesis there is just, we've seen this kind of glimmer of hope. And yet something that is undeniably there and supposed to grab our attention.

You don't just drop that into a family tree, this one guy was taken directly by God and not think people might want to know a little bit more about that, that people are going to notice that. These verses, they don't give us the whole story, they leave us with a whole lot of questions, don't they?

[12 : 53] But they show us that there is more, the potential for God to do something about this universal problem. And again, the rest of the Bible opens up and unfolds up for us that yes, God will do something about the problem of death.

As we said last week when we were introduced briefly to Seth at the end of chapter 4, if we were to turn to the New Testament and Luke Gospel chapter 3, we see that actually this is the family tree, these are the names that lead us to Jesus.

The point is what we see in embryo here, just a hint of here, is brought to fulfilment through Christ, where God deals decisively with death.

So where the questions and the wonderings raised here are answered definitively and conclusively as Jesus shows God's power over death, not by avoiding it, not by being spared from it, but by going through it at the cross and coming out the other side in his glorious resurrection.

The Bible says that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, so that everyone who trusts in him can follow in his footsteps. So that those who walk with God now, that means those who trust in him, who find forgiveness in him, who live for him, we'll see more of that in just a minute, those who walk with God now can look to Jesus and know that we will be with God forever to what he has done.

[14 : 32] I wonder if it sometimes feels like we begin our Christian journey with a very childlike faith or a childlike understanding of what Christianity is, which really says if we trust in Jesus, then we'll have light after death or we'll go to heaven to be with God.

And we perhaps think as we grow in our faith that we almost progress beyond that. We see that actually Christianity makes a huge difference in this life. It affects all of the decisions we make.

It shapes how we live in every different area of life. It describes our world that we live in. That's something we've been saying a lot over the last few weeks. But at times, perhaps especially as we grow older or especially as we're confronted afresh by the reality of death, our own, or those that we know and love, it's inevitability, it's universality, pain.

Perhaps at times these are brought back to what almost seemed childish or basic, that through Jesus there is life after death with God forever.

And we see actually far from being something that is just a nice thing to tell little children, far from it being something that is a kind of first step that we move beyond, we see that actually that is foundational.

[16 : 02] If that doesn't stand then nothing else really matters. It's not something to move beyond, it's something that nothing else can offer, and it is our biggest need.

The universal problem of death, the problem God has answered in Christ. So there's the first half of this passage, or really that's the whole of Genesis chapter 5, the problem, but also that glimmer of hope that the Bible opens up to us.

Okay, well the second problem then that is shown here, and really the two of these go hand in hand, the second problem we're confronted again with here is in chapter 6 down to verse 8, the universal problem of sin.

The universal problem of sin. Again, a tough topic to speak about, but a great thing to face up to in light of what the Bible says. Now verses 1 to 4 of chapter 6 in particular, there's some quite complicated bits in there, I think it's fair to say, I'm not going to claim to be infallible and give the definitive answers to every detail.

We read in verse 2, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive, and they took as their wives any they chose. What's happening here, this isn't simply men and women getting married, as God has spoken about in Genesis chapter 2, really this is describing a perversion of that.

[17 : 37] Where it speaks of the sons of God, that probably refers to some sort of powerful, semi-demonic, self-appointed rulers.

first, we can talk more about who scholars think that might be referring to afterwards, if you'd like. But we see how they take as their wives any they choose. This isn't a man leaving his parents and holding fast to his wives, as the Bible's picture has described, this is the powerful, kind of snatching away any who take their fancy.

Even their language used, they saw, it was attractive, they took. It echoes that first sin of taking the fruit in Genesis chapter 3.

So this is definitely a negative picture here. We're told the offspring of that was the Nephilim, a giant race of people that was a wicked offspring of these unholy unions.

So this whole kind of picture here is not good. This is not things going according to God's design. These are the boundaries that God has set out, being ignored, being crossed over.

[18 : 48] Again, any more questions on those verses we can chat about them later. But it's set out for us in some ways much more clearly, the same kind of scenario in verses 5 down to 8, especially verse 5 which is so stark.

It says this, the Lord saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

And we see in this situation that God looks at the hearts of man and his assessment of humanity is wickedness wherever he looks.

You see those words there, every intention, they're only evil, continually. And this is describing to us the universal problem of sin.

we might not like to read that, because we're probably happy to say I don't get everything right, we all make mistakes, but surely that is good in us as well.

[19 : 49] Michael Palin in a recent interview said this, I know I must sin a bit, but generally I try to live a fairly decent moral life. We'd much rather have that viewpoint, wouldn't we?

We're generally good people on the whole, and we just occasionally go outside the lines a little bit here or there, but here we read a really different view, God's view on humanity.

And it's stark and it's harsh and it's difficult to hear. And I know it's not saying here that nobody ever does anything good. Which is true, isn't it? Because we can all think of good actions, we can think of worthy causes, and certainly Christians don't have a monopoly on doing good things.

But the key here is that God, it says, is looking at human intentions, is looking at our hearts. And we see that even in our very best actions, actually our motives are mixed.

I'm sure you have, if we're honest, experienced this yourself. You know, we do something incredibly generous, and yet we feel a part of our heart longing for people to recognize that, so that we'll get some praise and respect that we do.

[21 : 02] Or we show kindness. But again, a part of us uses that to feed our pride at how much kinder we are than the other people around us.

The point really here is that left to our own devices, our natural tendency, our inclination, our intentions, our heart, are not towards God and his glory, but our love are away from God and seeking our own glory.

And that is true for all of us, this passage is saying, and that is what the Bible calls sin. Not so much the individual things that we do wrong, they are more the symptoms of that underlying attitude where we look to put ourselves in God's place.

And that is really the heart of wickedness as the Bible season. And we reject God, rebel against him, and install ourselves where only he should be. As God looks out on humanity in Genesis chapter 6, that's what he sees.

And what is his reaction? Verse 6, this incredible verse, says that the Lord regretted that he had made man on earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

[22 : 18] Now this isn't meaning that God has made some kind of mistake, or the things that are out of control for God, they're not quite going on what he thought was going to happen. No, the Bible's created God is perfect, God is something, that means he's in control.

And the language here of this verse is to express just how deeply God cares about sin, about humanity's rejection of his perfect and loving and gracious rule over them.

One Hebrew scholar writes that the word used here for grieved is one which expresses the most intense form of human emotion. There couldn't be a stronger word that could use here.

God is pained by the mess he sees humanity creating and descending into. God is not just kind of watching on, uninterested from a distance. God is affected by that.

And so it's good for us, I think, to stop and to ponder that. The anguish that our sin causes to God. We often think of sin as purely horizontal.

[23 : 25] We only think of the consequences it causes to other people, and it does. But if that's our only viewpoint, that means if we can convince ourselves of a victimless crime or things that people have coming to them or something that we can do and no one else will know and it will never really affect anyone else, and well, why not just indulge ourselves in it?

And we don't see who is hurt when we dodge payments or fill in tax forms inaccurately. We don't see how it affects other people if we consume sexually explicit material alone at home.

And we don't see how it affects other people when we allow our minds to covet at other people's homes or possessions or way of life or the gifts that they have.

Now I think actually all of those things do affect us and do affect other people. And yet because we perhaps don't see that or we choose not to, we find it hard to change. We think, what's the harm?

But as Tim Keller writes, if you recognise and feel poignantly what your sin is doing to God, you will have a deeper and more permanent motivation to turn away from the sin itself.

[24 : 41] We get that great insight here. into God's emotion towards sin. As we see that vertical aspect of sin, when our sin affects God, it grieves God as it sins.

And in our people who love God, that is the motivation for us, to turn away from sin. But then this sorrow there is only one part of God's response, isn't it?

We get this along if we think somehow we have to pity God and therefore just do what he wants. God's declaration of judgment against sin.

Verse 7, so the Lord said, I will block out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things on both of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.

God basically says he's going to undo everything that he's done in creation, everything that we've got to at this point so far in Genesis. And actually the brokenness which has come into the world, which we all share, God will not let that stay.

[25 : 49] God can't and shouldn't turn a blind eye to wickedness, just as we wouldn't want our human rulers to turn a blind eye to wickedness, to ignore evil, to pretend it doesn't matter.

And so there will be this judgment that God promises. And yet again this section ends alongside that with the message of hope. Verse 8, that Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Now this doesn't mean, as we'll see in a couple of weeks as we look at Noah and the flood that God decided not to judge wickedness and sin, and it shows that even in that promised judgment that still there is the chance to find favor with God.

That there is a way through that judgment. And the word used there for favor, it means grace, it means kindness, it's an undeserved love. One commentator puts it like this, together the two verses show God's characteristic way with evil, to meet it not with half measures, but with the simultaneous extremes of judgment and salvation.

And that is where again this passage is leading us to Jesus. That is how this story whispers his name as we've got used to saying in the earlier parts of our service.

[27 : 14] Because we ask, well how, how can God judge wickedness fairly, when that is something we're all culpable on, when it's this universal problem of sin that encompasses all of us, how can God bring judgment on that, and yet it also be possible that we, part of the problem, can find grace, favor, salvation.

And the answer to that question is that we look to the cross, where justice and mercy meet. And God doesn't decide against judgment, he doesn't say actually sin doesn't matter that much.

God remains rightly dead against sin. That is good news for us. We should want a God who hates sin because it means he's committed to doing something about the sin that poisons that perfect world he created.

The causes, the suffering, the pain, ultimately the death, we've seen unfolding in these chapters of the world around us. God has to deal with that for there to be the hope of a better future.

And he does that through Jesus Christ, God the Son, coming to earth and taking that judgment on the cross. And that the fullness of God's anger at sin is poured out, just as he said it will be.

[28 : 35] And it is poured out on Christ in our place. And that means we can find mercy, favour, salvation if we trust in him, that we can be forgiven as that penalty is fully paid.

And our greatest problem, our wickedness, our rebellion against God, the punishment that rightly deserves, has been taken and dealt with by God himself, so that we can find failure, so that we can be brought back to him, so that we can know him as our loving heavenly father forever.

And that's the message of the Christian gospel, that is the good news, and that is the motivation of the Christian life. As we said, we turn from sin because how could we bring ourselves to sin against the God who has done that for us?

How could we ever think, oh, sin is not that big a deal, or justice won't matter, or it's not really important? Because we have sinned against the God who has shown us that incredible life.

We live even in anticipation of our death that will one day come, and knowing that because of Jesus we have a hope that stretches beyond that death into perfection, walking in forgiveness with God because he's made that possible in Christ.

[29 : 56] It means we live eager to share that with the world around us. There is that solution to the problem of death and sin that everyone faces. And it's not to do with what we've done.

It's not going to list the rules that we need to add to people that they need to live up to. It's what God has done. And we long for people to hear that good news as they struggle through the difficulties of life in light of their inevitable death.

And we need to be honest about the problems of life. Life is tough. And there are no bigger problems than death and sin, and that is for all of us, and that is for every single person we meet.

And that Christianity is good news. That God, through Christ, has dealt with our biggest need. And so day by day we can live with our hope in Him.

Let's pray together.