

“God’s Goal. God’s Risk. God’s Problem.” Part 1

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00:00

Hello New Covenant and friends far and near. This is Ron Simkins. I'm grateful to be sharing the teaching today. This is the first of a two-part teaching. I will finish it next week.

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I've titled the teachings "*God's Goal, God's Risk, God's Problem.*" Two authors that have had a major impact on my thinking recently, my prayers, and on this teaching are Willie James Jennings and N.T. Wright. I just wanted to say I deeply appreciate them both and their influence.

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So, God's Goal.

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I'd like to begin by reading Genesis 12:1-3.

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The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family and your father's household, for the land that I'll show you. I will make you a great nation and bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse. And all of the families or tribes of the earth will be blessed because of you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

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Sounds like a rather simple covenant promise, maybe even pretty straightforward. It proves to be neither.

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Nevertheless, all the Old Testament, all the New Testament, and all of Jesus' self-understanding, faithfulness, teachings and ministry, hang on this little thread: the promise that God will continue to pursue God's goal, until the goal of blessing humans is achieved.

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So why is this statement also not just a goal, but a risk, for God?

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I'd like to just begin with you by thinking how Genesis says, God's involvement in human history came to this place, in the covenant with Abraham. Just as an aside, however, you think of the first eleven

chapters of Genesis, at very minimum, they're meant to be a summary of God's involvement in what we would call the pre-history of the human history that we know and experience.

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So in Genesis 1 and 2, we have God deciding to make a wonderful creation. Very good creation is then crowned with the very wonderful creation of humans, male and female, in the image of God, in likeness of God. Humans who are moved by God in the creation beyond just the chemicals, and even the wonders of the animal life, and now also share in the breath of the Spirit of God.

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Humans who were created to co-labor with God in this incredible creation, and its ongoing history. Humans who are daughters and sons of God, children of God, who will be the family of God, the household of God, the community of God. But, Genesis 3 tells us that as individuals, it is a very small community of two, humans chose not to trust God, and they disobeyed God. And we're told that at once evil and bentness and brokenness were unleashed. And humans became alienated from God, from one another, himself, from the creation that they've been given to steward. And a theme begins to develop that runs through all the Bible, all the way to the final chapters of the book of Revelation. God judges the evil, judges the evil these humans have done. And then God immediately starts finding ways to still care for them, bless them, and move them forward in God's history with humans.

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Like many a brokenhearted parent, we're told that God cries out and says to the children, what have you done, and then immediately begins making adjustments in how to relate to these children. In short, we humans are now seen not just to be God's goal, but also God's problem. And God's great risk. If you continue through Genesis, Genesis 4, this dark shadow that's now been created, becomes even darker. Cain is jealous of his brother, kills him. Lamech sings a song to his two wives bragging about how violently he had killed a young man who just hit him, and then says he could be far more violent than that, and he's very proud of it.

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And by Genesis 6, and by the way, I know there are other interpretations of this, but I understand Genesis 6, the sons of God, to be tribal despots, not angels. Point of stand anyway. In Genesis 6, we're told that a very primitive civilization has grown up. And it's become so violent, that the mighty men, the leaders of it, the sons of God, just take whatever they want. That includes any beautiful woman they see or anything else they want. And we read one of the saddest statements in the Bible: God is brokenhearted about his creation.

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Like many a parent of a teenager, God wonders, "Why did I even have children? What was I thinking?" And like many a parent, God also begins planning for how to move beyond the mess. Notice, in just the six is no longer individuals who are named, evil, and hurting one another has become a systemic problem, a cultural problem, not just an individual one.

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Reading from Genesis 6: 5-8

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The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth, and that every idea in their minds that they thought was always completely evil. The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth. The Lord was heartbroken. So the Lord said, "I'll wipe them off the land, the land that I've created for these humans. I've had the humans and the livestock and all the crawling things. I regret I ever made them." But as for Noah, The Lord approved of him. (Genesis 6:5-8)

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So God's feelings are, What have I done? This just hurts too much. Too heartbreaking. But God's decision is to find a way to move forward with God's history with humans, in spite of that. So again, the pattern of judgement, to the great flood, but God keeps looking for a way to move forward in human history with us. Noah is a person still seeking God in these crazy times. But God's responding to Noah is not some innocent who's fooled that starting over is going to make everything okay. The risk is still there. The problem's still there. And God knows it's not been solved. Genesis 8:21 reads this way:

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"I won't do this again, I won't destroy the earth this way again. Why? Because the ideas of the human mind are just evil from their youth up." (Genesis 8:21)

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Sure enough, we don't even finish Genesis 9 before we find out that Noah and his family become part of God's problem and part of God's broken heart. Genesis 11 tells us, and this is just right before the Abraham passage, a new problem is presented to God by our human history. And this time, and again, we're not just talking about individuals, in fact, no individual is named.

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This time the human systems and cultures respond in a way that shows human fear. And what they do out of that fear is they try to create empire. An empire with a tippie and a tower reaching toward the heaven. An attempt to cover up their fear by building a great and arrogant empire that will dominate the earth, dominate the heavens. God says this is going to really end up in a bad place, confuses their language, and disperses them across the earth. We're told that thus, the first attempt at a great world empire is postponed at least.

08:43

God's next step is the covenant with Abraham and Sarah that we read to begin with in which they are promised, God is promising, that he will bless all the tribes, all families, all nations of the earth, through them. God doesn't give up, even with this terrible attempt at dominating arrogant empire, rather chooses to take the risk and move forward in human history, toward a beloved community, toward blessing all the humans, toward a great family of the children of God.

09:20

This is God's commitment to finish the creation, to be committed to it, despite all of the brokenness. It becomes evident before you even finish Genesis 12 that we read from, where the covenant is first enunciated, that Abraham and Sarah aren't only part of God's answer, they're part of God's problem too. A part of God's great risk is choosing to love and work through people like us -- through humans. Before Genesis 12 is even over, we're told that Abraham has fled to Egypt because of a famine, begins to lie, pawns Sarah off as a sister because he's afraid, and allows Pharaoh to take her into his harem. And that brings a plague on Pharaoh and his whole household.

10:08

And you think, bless all nations? Very first thing he does, brings a curse on another nation. And we see still again, even with these people, these beginners have the next step of covenant, that good and evil isn't just the horrors that really, really evil cultures and people who've chosen evil, Sodom and Gomorrah, evil isn't just there. The line between good and evil runs through Abraham and Sarah, too. They're part of God's solution to human sin but they're also part of God's problem. They're God's great risk.

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This pattern continues throughout Genesis, and I would say, throughout the whole Bible. We'll look at that a bit more next week.

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Next we have the covenant being moved forward through Isaac and Rebekah, people who definitely trust God in some very powerful ways. But Isaac's willing to try to pass the covenant on to the son that God didn't choose, and Rebekah, who wants the right son to be the one chosen, but does so and tries to get it for him by lying, cheating, and making a big mess of their family. And then that son, Jacob, becomes the next bearer of the covenant, moving forward in human history. And he, along with his wives, Leah and Rachel, who also, all of them, trust God in their own ways, live a life that their family becomes a total mess, filled with lies, cheating, hatred, and even violence.

11:48

There's so much more to say. We'll follow up with all of this next week. But I want to just spend some time and conclude by thinking about two New Testament passages, both of which say God is still determined not to give up on us humans. First of all, that God won't give up on us as individuals. This is a reading from Ephesians 2:8-10:

12:18

You're saved by God's grace through trust. This salvation is God's gift. It is not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Jesus the Messiah to do good things. God planned for these good things, to be the way that we live our lives. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

12:49

Just a few notes about that. This is a very individual promise that God is going to keep moving forward with us as individuals. That word we're God's accomplishment, the Greek word is **poiema**, it can be

translated *masterpiece, work of art*. The idea is that it's a work of an artist, or craftsman that they're very proud of. So God, the craftsman, the artist, the father. This is a promise that we are God's work of art. And also, it's that we are, and the 'are' in the Greek is present tense, which means it's in process. We're not finished work. We're being created through our relationship with God and Jesus. And we're being created to do good things, things that God always wanted to be expressed in our lives.

13:41

It means a lot to me, I'm sure it does to you, that, as an individual, God isn't going to give up on you. God isn't going to give up on me. God has a goal. Humans in the image and likeness of God, masterpiece, work of art, and God isn't going to give up. Ephesians also, that same chapter, second chapter says, God also isn't going to give up on our communities, our communities of faith. God isn't going to give up on our church, our alienated tribal systems. God is determined to have a household, a forever given family, a beloved community, one made up of renewed humans. Reading from Ephesians 2:14

14:35

Messiah is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He cancelled the detailed rules of the law so he could create one new person out of the two groups making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. (aEphesians 2:14)

And now, to verse 19:

14:57

You are fellow citizens with God's people. And you belong to God's household. As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus the Messiah himself as the chief cornerstone. The whole building is joined together in Him and it grows up into a temple that's dedicated to the Lord. The Messiah is building you into a place where God can live through the Spirit.

15:35

Knowing that God is not going to give up on you as an individual. God is not going to give up on us, as a community, a church. Let's ask God, despite the fact that we trust and trust God and are blessed by God, to also show us, show me, show you, "How am I a part of your problem, God?" Show us as a church, as a community. Show us God, how are we as New Covenant a part of your problem?

16:18

How are we your risk? Please help us not to be afraid to see this.

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To allow you to continue toward making us a work of art and a beloved household. Beloved work of art in our individual lives and a beloved household in our church life and I give you a moment to pray about that. I hope you'll make it an ongoing prayer as well. [pause for personal reflection]

16:59

Also, let's take a few moments to thank God, that God's willing to risk even to endure heartbreak at times, being involved with you, with me, with us as communities, as churches. Because God values us so much, sees more in us than we'll ever see in ourselves. And to give you a moment to pray and just thank God for his willingness to have his heart broken in order to keep loving you, to keep loving us, to keep loving me. [pause for personal reflection]

17:55

Lord God and Jesus our Lord and Messiah, thank you for hearing our prayers. Amen