

WINNING, LOSING, LOVING

The Gospel in the Old Testament

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INTRODUCTION

As one reads the Old Testament in its entirety, it becomes clear that two things can be counted upon: the first is human sin, and the second is God's love for sinners. We discover in the story that human sin is too deeply entwined in the human condition to ever make even followers of God free of it.

On the other hand, God's faithfulness is dependable—it endures in spite of the unfaithfulness and failure of humans. From Genesis to Malachi, God's love for sinners continues unabated. Even in the pronouncements of judgment, God demonstrates His mercy by driving His people back to Himself through loss and suffering.

If we look closely at the Old Testament story, we quickly see that the theme of this narrative is no different than the Gospel story in the New Testament. This theme is echoed in the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John centuries later. The common notion—that the Old Testament is concerned with law and judgment, and the New Testament concerned with God's grace and love—is

quickly dispersed. The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, contains both law and Gospel, judgment and grace.

The story begins on such a positive note. God creates a wonderful universe by means of His Word. In the beginning we find the establishment of life and peace, order and harmony. The Old Testament, however, ends on a sour, depressing note with the people of Israel failing once again by forgetting God and seeking to live their life apart from their creator. With the words of the prophet Malachi closing the Old Testament story, we find the people of Israel in a destitute position. Israel returns from Babylonian captivity weak and insignificant, and once again fails to follow her Maker. Malachi exposes the people's hard-heartedness and spiritual weakness. Consequently, the Old Testament ends in complete human failure. Yet, by then the reader discerns that God's love will be the final word. There are too many precedents of undeserving grace at that point to think God's disposition to sinners will change. He seems bound and determined to pursue His beloved, no matter what they do.

WINNING

In between this glorious beginning and dismal ending, there are five cycles marking the major movements of the Old Testament story. Each cycle consists of three components: **winning**, **losing** and **loving**. Each period begins with God initiating interaction with the world through His Word in such a way that brings life, peace, order and/or beauty. This is the **winning** part of each cycle. God is a winner, and He continually creates the potential for a good and wonderful life.

At the beginning of each of these five cycles, God gives a gift to His people. He wins this gift out of chaotic elements working against what He seeks to procure. In the first cycle, God gives the gift of life through His perfect creation, which humans are called to enjoy. In the second cycle, God gives the gift of freedom out of the chaos of Egyptian bondage. In the third cycle, God gives the gift of a new vision for the Hebrew people of Israel to take the Promised Land while they lived amid the chaos of an unforgiving and desolate wilderness. In the fourth cycle, God wins for Israel the Promised Land, in spite of the chaotic presence of hostile nations. In the fifth cycle, God wins for Israel a kingdom out of the chaotic conditions of a leaderless and weak people.

The amazing truth we glean from God winning these five significant gifts from chaotic elements is that we catch a glimpse of a God who is committed to the world and to humanity, no matter what. God did not create the world and then step back to let it run on its own, for if He had done so, the world would have collapsed instantly and humanity's sin would have dragged them beneath an ocean of death and destruction. The Biblical witness is of a God who chooses to enter the world time and time again through His Word in order to win life and hope, which is continually lost because of human sin. Another amazing truth we learn from this story is that God loves sinners and will not abandon them. We learn God is unceasingly gracious, full of compassion and merciful. We discover God will not give up on His world or His people, regardless of human response.

LOSING

The great negative constantly running through the Old Testament story is human failure. In the five cycles of **winning**, **losing** and **loving**, human failure to obey a good and sovereign Creator will be signified in this book with the word **losing**. After God gives a gift to humanity in the five major cycles of the Old Testament story, human failure and sin ultimately destroy each gift, and the people drift back toward a chaotic existence apart from their Creator. This constant of human failure is deplorable, and we become certain early on in the story that humans cannot be trusted with God's gifts. Humans perpetually fail God. We quickly conclude humans cannot hold on to these gifts because of a deep-seated moral problem. The Old Testament witnesses to the reality that all people are sinners and always will be in this world.

In the first cycle after God wins life from the chaotic elements of the darkness and floodwaters, humans lose it all by their rebellion. Adam and Eve turn the gift of life into the curse of death. They turn inner peace—the result of relationship with the Creator—into inner turmoil because of separation from Him. They turn order and harmony—part of God's created order—into a world of disharmony and disorder.

In the second cycle after God wins freedom for the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt, humans lose this gift of freedom by choosing to imprison themselves in the bondage of service to other gods. When Israel made the golden calf, the freedom God had provided was cast aside in the blink of an eye.

In the third cycle, after God wins a vision for the people to take the Promised Land, the Israelites listen

instead to the 12 spies who convince them that the warriors and walls of Canaan are too big to be conquered. They decide not to trust God, not to catch His vision. Their lack of trust in God when He was ready to move is the **losing** of the third cycle, the losing of God's vision by Israel. They forfeited the glory of having their own land, and instead were doomed to a generation of wilderness wandering.

In the fourth cycle—after God wins for His people the land promised to Abraham and Sarah hundreds of years earlier—human sin and failure again achieve only the losing of that land. The book of Joshua records the winning of the Promised Land by God. The next book, Judges, records the failure of Israel to hold the land. As soon as God fulfilled His promise in giving them Canaan, the people rebelled and forgot Him. As a result, they lost control of the land time and again to various foreign powers.

In the final cycle, after God wins a kingdom for Israel so she might find stability in godly leadership, Israel again sins and loses this gift of a sovereign nation. In the end, Israel's sin was so great that the United Kingdom not only split in two, but finally both kingdoms—Israel and Judah—were utterly destroyed.

LOVING

The most astounding feature of the **winning, losing, loving** cycle of the Old Testament story is no doubt the third part, **loving**. God is a giver of good gifts by nature. Humans are losers of these good gifts from God because of their fallen nature. In other words—God initiates relationship and gives gifts, while humans respond with disobedience. The good news, however, is that each

cycle concludes with God **loving** sinful people. God does not commit Himself in this intimate way when humans are at their best or most worthy. God enters covenants when people are at their worst, after great failure and disobedience. When reading the contexts of the making of covenants between God and Israel, it is important to note they follow examples of human failure.

In the first cycle—after God gives life, order and peace to the world—Adam and Eve quickly lose those gifts by their disobedience. In chapter 12 of Genesis, after four examples of human sin, God enters into a covenant of love with Abram and Sarai for the purpose of bringing a sinful world back into relationship with Himself.

In the second cycle—after God wins freedom from Egyptian bondage for Israel, and after Israel loses the gift of freedom by bowing before the golden calf—God enters into a covenant at Sinai with His renegades. God chooses to commit Himself in love to a people who had just forsaken Him.

In cycle three—after God wins a vision for the taking of the Promised Land, and after Israel loses the vision by failing to trust God to take it—God chooses to renew the covenant with the new generation of Israelites. The covenant of love is renewed in Moab after Israel fails God and after 40 years of a rebellious attitude toward God.

In the fourth cycle—after God wins the land for Israel, only to have them lose control of it to neighboring nations countless times because of their sin—God makes known His plans to raise up a king (David), and finally a Savior. As the book of Joshua describes God’s winning the land for His people and the book of Judges describes Israel losing the land, the last verses of Ruth catalogue God’s gracious love with a genealogy from Boaz and Ruth going

to King David. In the book of Ruth, we find God working for the future of Israel and planning for the coming of a Savior at one of the most wicked times in Israel's history.

In the fifth cycle—after God gives the gift of a kingdom and a king to Israel, and after Israel loses the kingdom because of sin—God enters a new covenant with Israel. In exile, God promises He will restore Israel's fortunes. It must be clear that God enters these covenants when Israel is least deserving. When we begin to notice these contexts of God's generous love, we cannot help but hear an echo coming from the future words of Paul in the fifth chapter of Romans: "*God shows his love for us in while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" This God loves sinners. This God commits Himself to intimate relationships with those who cannot and do not respond in love themselves.

The kind of love we witness as we read through the Old Testament story is the kind of love similar to the encounter between a man and a woman. It is the kind of love we behold in those whom we say are "in love." It is a love that overshadows everything else, including reason. It is a love that makes a person act contrary to what seems appropriate. This is the kind of love the Creator shows His creatures in the Old Testament. It is a passionate and unrelenting love, even when there is little hope of having that love reciprocated. It is the kind of love that seems blind. It is the kind of love we discover God has for us. The Bible is indeed a love story. It is critical for us to keep this in mind at all times.

What makes this love story especially interesting—but equally tragic—is the fact that a superior, more noble personage gives everything to an unworthy other, and that love is not reciprocated. The harder God tries to win

Israel's affection, the more difficult it seems for them to engage in any positive response. It seems to be a marriage made in heaven, yet one party refuses to comprehend the great gift offered, or is unable to comprehend it. The one-sided love story—this tension, this courtship we witness as we hear this story—is one that should annoy the serious reader to no end. These questions jump into the mind of the spectator: “What kind of foolish love is this? Why does God continue to throw pearls before the swine? Why doesn't God simply give up on humans?”

Finally, it is essential for those of us separated from this love story by thousands of years to understand it is a story relevant to the present. This story of God's struggle for the love of His people Israel is indeed our story. Israel is us. Their sin and failure is ours. Their inability to comprehend the great gifts offered them and their inability to respond in love to the Great Lover is ours also. The tragedy of it all becomes a little more personal when we understand this fact. We are the objects of the eternal Lord's favor and love. We are the ones He so passionately pursues and relentlessly courts. We are the fortunate ones who receive His unending favor. This story **is** our story. If we fail to see ourselves in the Old Testament, we fail to comprehend the story.

Cycle 1

Genesis

WINNING

THE BEGINNING

God Wins Creation

In the beginning was God. He created the universe, formed all things necessary to sustain life, and filled His world with living creatures. By the time the sixth day of creation was over, we were created and everything needed for life was in place. When humans came on the scene, they did not have to struggle to gain life and peace. Everything was complete. All they could do was sit back in awe and marvel at the great gift God had bestowed on them in creation.

The first chapter of Genesis is about God, and in this love story's opening chapter the main character, God Himself, is introduced to the reader. We learn what God did long ago, and we get a picture of our God today. Genesis, along with the entire Old Testament, speaks about present reality through the experiences of the past.

What then does the first chapter of Genesis say about God?

The creation story shows us who God is. There is only one God, uncreated and independent of creation. As such, He is Lord and Sovereign. All creation is called upon to give Him their allegiance and serve Him with their whole being. The sun, the moon, the stars, the hills and the valleys, the flowers and the trees, the animals, and all living things—including humans—are called to worship their creator and live in total submission to Him. God is Lord. Consequently, all created things belong to Him.

In the context of the ancient world, chapter one speaks the truth about this God. He is not a false god, such as the ones worshiped by Israel's neighbors. This God is the only God. He alone is worthy of our allegiance. No created being or thing merits our worship. All of creation is dependent upon this one true God. Problems arise when humans begin to worship and honor as God the very things He created. This idolatry is exposed as false through the structure of the first six days of creation.

In the first three days, God formed the things essential for life. He formed the sea and the earth. He formed light, oxygen and vegetation for food.

The second three days of creation—days four, five and six—God filled the world He had formed with the objects He calls into fellowship and service to Himself. In Genesis 1:1 we read, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void.”*

Formless and void. But—after the first three days of creation—it could no longer be said the earth was without form, because He formed the things necessary to support life. After the second three days of creation, it could no longer be said the earth was void—He illuminated it with

light from the sun, moon and stars, and filled it with living things.

The objects of creation worshipped as gods by the ancient world are all objects created during the second three days of creation. The Babylonians and Egyptians worshipped the sun, moon and stars. These luminaries were put in place only on day four. This is an important point, for it declares that the sun, moon and stars are limited and dependent upon the creator who made them. They are stripped of any divine qualities.

On day five, God filled the oceans with sea creatures and filled the air with flying creatures. Some religions of the ancient world worshipped animals of the air and sea.

On day six, God created the land animals, some of which were worshiped as idols by people of the ancient world. Certain animals—including human rulers—were often looked to as the source of life itself. The problem: they weren't created until days five and six. Their life was only possible after the forming of light, air and plants by God in days one, two and three. This clearly demonstrates that these living creatures, human or otherwise, are unworthy of ultimate trust by other creatures. They are dependent upon the same elemental needs as every other creature.

Who is this God? This is the only God, and He is a jealous God. He states unequivocally in Genesis chapter one that to worship any created thing is not only foolish, but an offense to the true God. God alone is independent of creation. He is Creator and Master. All creation is to serve Him—and Him alone.

As Genesis 1 introduces the main character of this great love story, it not only shows us who God is, but it also tells us what God does. What He does here is not

something He did just once in the beginning—this is a glimpse of how God has continued to act ever since creation and how He acts today. What did this God do? How did He engage with His world?

In Genesis 1, we do not start at the very beginning when there was nothing. Instead, the author begins when there were a couple of chaotic elements making life impossible. There was unending darkness, and deep waters covered everything. These elements dominated the scene. Life was impossible while these elements ruled. God entered this chaotic world by means of His Word and spoke, “*Let there be light.*” In six days, God completed creation. The earth was no longer dark or without form, but instead was filled with living creatures and abundance. God did not leave the world in its mess and death. God’s creation was designed to obey Him and to be faithful in their service to Him.

When God finished these created acts, there was no longer disorder and disarray. Instead, there was an ordered world where harmony and beauty reigned. After God dealt with this initial chaos, life became possible.

So, then, what is our God like? He is exactly as He was in the beginning. He does not and will not change. First—our God is a Creator who, after bearing the universe, continues to nurse it and provide for it as a mother with her newborn. Second—our God’s chosen means of entering His world is through His Word. Third—God always seeks to establish peace, harmony and life. This then is our God. Genesis 1 is our introduction to that God, who remains the main character in all of life. It is also our introduction to this great love story we call the Bible.

Genesis 1 also tells us who this God is in relationship to us. He is our Creator and King, our Lord and Sovereign. We, like all created things, are to worship and serve Him in order to be in our rightful place. As Lord, He is to receive our full obedience and service. We recognize God as the one who is the source of our life. We acknowledge our dependence upon Him. We look to Him for all of our needs. We were created—not to be conscious in the least of ourselves—but to be wholly God-conscious and anxious to serve Him in the created order.

God's strategy for His engagement in today's world has not changed. We continue to be surrounded by darkness and floodwaters, pain and trouble, storms and chaos. Genesis 1 not only portrayed the condition of the world in the beginning, but also portrays our condition in the midst of a hostile world. The intention of Genesis 1 is to make us aware that God can—and will—do what He did in the beginning in order to work peace and life in His creation. As we suffer or feel overwhelmed by floods of problems, we should instinctively think of Genesis 1. This chapter is not primarily a history lesson, but a sermon of hope for those who sit alone in the darkness. This creation account was especially important to the people of Israel in exile after they had lost everything—the Promised Land, friends and family, the temple, and their freedom. The cause of its popularity at this time is apparent. Israel needed to know God and remember His faithfulness.

Besides Genesis 1, the latter part of the book of Isaiah also spoke a message of hope to those exiles. It is interesting to note that Isaiah imparted this hope through the same images as the writer of Genesis. Creation is often referred to by this prophet, as well as the images of darkness and floodwaters. He returned to the creation

story to find a word of hope for the destitute Israelites. Isaiah 42:5-6 returns his listeners to the beginning:

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it. I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you.

Isaiah often refers to the God of these hopeless people as Creator in order to remind them of His power and commitment to creation. In Isaiah 43:1-2 we find these words:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...”

Isaiah assumes that recalling creation adds strength to his argument—God will not abandon Israel to the powerful waters of present chaos and destruction. It is as if Israel was to remember those first waters that kept life and peace from God’s world, and to remember what God did there. In this way, they would understand what God would do in their flood of misery. If creation tells us anything, it is that we can depend on God’s consistent behavior in His care for the wayward creation through all eternity. We witness His great power and understand He is able to help us in our time of need. We also witness in

creation His great concern for His world. We understand He not only is able to rescue us, but willing as well.

After the temple was destroyed and the people of Israel were hurled into bondage in Babylonia, the question, “Has God abandoned us?” haunted their every heartbeat. To answer that question, they only had to go to Genesis 1. There they were reminded that God would never abandon His world to the powers of death and darkness. Today, we have these same words to give us hope in the darkness and enable us to hang on in the deep waters.

Our introduction to God in the first chapter of Genesis portrays this Supreme Sovereign as a winner. Through His power and love, we see He is a God who constantly seeks to win life and a bright future for what He has created. Genesis 1 shows us the first great gifts given by God to humanity: life, peace with Him and an ordered existence. Herein begins the first of the Winning, Losing, Loving cycles of the Old Testament. God graciously wins life for His people.



Coupled with life and an ordered world, Genesis 2 shows another gift God gives to people: relationships. God did not simply create a bunch of objects, then place them here and there in creation. He put them all into relationship with one another in such a way as to promote harmony, peace and interdependence.

There are four relationships God gives to humans. The first relationship God forms is between Adam and Adam. He formed Adam from the dust of the ground. Adam was only a lump of clay at this point—just a lump of lifeless

clay. Then God filled Adam's nostrils with the breath of life. In coming alive as a conscious being, Adam received relationship with his own person.

The second relationship God gave as a gift to Adam was with Himself. God forms a unique relationship among all creatures through communication. Humans are the only part of creation to whom God speaks directly. They are also the only part of creation able to respond to Him. In God's communication to Adam, relationship was formed. However, this relationship was not one of equal partnership. This was one of Creator with creature. God filled this relationship with limits: "*Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you will die*" (Genesis 2:17). Humans, as creatures, were made with limitations. The commands and limits imposed by God upon them defines humans as such, and subordinates them to the Almighty.

This relationship between God and humans was also unique, because He had created humans in His own image. Humans alone were given free will. Humans alone could choose to be submissive to God—or to rebel. This power of free choice created the potential for a created being to respond on its own to the divine initiative. Here was the only relationship that was two-sided for the Creator.

The third relationship given to Adam as a gift was relationship with an equal, another human being. Adam had a need that God could not meet as God. Adam was lonely for someone like himself. God met Adam's need and brought another into his life by creating Eve. God formed Eve from one of Adam's ribs, and filled Adam's life with her. They were to be helpers one to another.

The fourth relationship God gave as a gift was Adam and Eve’s relationship to the earth. God formed a garden and filled it with this new couple. They were given the responsibility of tending it, as well as caring for the animals. As God was Lord over them, they were to rule the earth in order to care for it.

Today, these four relationships are still God’s gifts to us. We have a relationship to life and to ourselves as a result—with God, with other people, and with the rest of creation. In the beginning, God willed that humans would serve Him. He desired humans to remain within the established limits so the gifts won for them would continue to provide life and peace. Adam received these gifts, not with a self-consciousness that sought to consume these gifts selfishly, but with a clear understanding of his place within all creation. In response to the gift of relationship with self, Adam’s appropriate response was not self-consciousness—but God-conscious and other-conscious. Adam’s appropriate response to his relationship with his Creator was one of worship. Adam and Eve’s appropriate response to the gift of each other was to always be “helper” one to another. Their response to the earth and other created things was to be overseers and caregivers.

When Genesis 1 and 2 are complete, we as readers should spontaneously erupt in praise and gratitude to God. Behold all the fights God won for His world and for us: life, peace, provisions, relationships, and a commitment from God of His never-ending presence. God is indeed a winner!

When we complete these two chapters, we also understand we have just witnessed a perfect parent caring for His children. God created Adam and Eve, and then

provided them with everything necessary to meet every human need. He granted them all the things that give life, provided them with a sense of security, gave them responsibilities and tasks, showed them respect by letting them make their own decisions, and set clear limits and consequences for disobeying those limits. This is a perfect parent—providing everything we know earthly parents should provide, but are unable to do so completely. This love story begins with a deep love of parent for child.

Other than in the Bible's last two chapters, Genesis 1 and 2 are the only places in the Old Testament that present a picture of complete peace and harmony. It is the picture of what God, by His very nature, accomplishes and begets. Knowing the tragedy and mess that begins in chapter 3 and continues unabated throughout the rest of the Scriptures, we should seek to remain in the garden and in perfect relationship with God, others, and the rest of creation. But that would be to linger in the past, a past that no longer represents our present.

LOSING

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Humans Lose Their Place

We got a clear picture of God in Genesis 1-2, and we receive a clear picture of humanity in chapters 3-11. Within these chapters, we find four crimes committed by humans that undermine and destroy the great gifts God has so lovingly bestowed. The agony of these chapters is that we see such wonderful gifts of God thoughtlessly being cast aside. These are ugly events. It is here that we understand humans to be, above all, losers. We lose God's gifts of life, harmony and relationship because of disobedience and sin. These chapters introduce humans into the love story as sinners. The love story becomes complicated, because the object of the Creator's special favor spite His love.

Genesis could be called a book of new worlds. More than one world is forged. Its pages begin with God forging

a new world through His Word. This world is one where He is Lord over all and all creation serves Him. But, in Genesis 3-11 we watch as humanity forges a new world of their own—quite different from the one God forged. Humans create a world where they themselves are lord, and all creation serves them and their needs. In other words, God first puts humans in their place (as servants), then humans put themselves in God’s place (as lords). The title song from the movie Aladdin says it so well:

*I can show you the world, shining,
shimmering, splendid. Tell me, princess, now
when did you last let your heart decide?*

*I can open your eyes. Take you wonder by
wonder over, sideways and under on a magic
carpet ride.*

*A whole new world, a new fantastic point of
view*

*No one to tell us no or where to go or say
we’re only dreaming.*

*A whole new world, a dazzling place I never
knew. But when I’m way up here it’s crystal
clear that now I’m in a whole new world with
you.*

*Unbelievable sights, indescribable feeling,
soaring, tumbling, freewheeling through an
endless diamond sky.*

*A whole new world, don’t you dare close your
eyes. A hundred thousand things to see hold
your breath—it gets better.*

I'm like a shooting star

*I've come so far I can't go back to where I
used to be.*

*A whole new world, every turn a surprise,
with new horizons to pursue, every moment
red-letter*

*I'll chase them anywhere there's time to
spare,*

let me share this whole new world with you.

*A whole new world, that's where we'll be
a thrilling chase, a wondrous place, for you
and me.*

These words could have been spoken by the serpent to Adam and Eve. They were deceived by the serpent's voice into believing they could break through the limits God had set and be more than creature and servant. They choose to serve themselves instead of God, and His ordered, peaceful creation begins to crumble.

When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit (see chapter 3), they commit the first crime. By this act they lose the gifts of life and harmony, as well as perfect relationship with God. They choose to live in a world of death and brokenness—all for a drink from the cup of self-rule. They gain a false sense of independence and strength, and forfeit everything good in the process. Adam and Eve lose everything. God's gifts are squandered and abandoned.

After the crimes create a different world from the one God intended, punishment is meted out to the serpent, to Eve, and then to Adam. The worst happens in Genesis

3:22-24: Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, and their perfect relationship with God comes to an end. Broken relationships, death, curses and misery become the order of the day.

If the reader engages in this story only as an unaffected bystander, he fails to understand what is happening in this story. These stories in Scripture are meant for the purpose of describing present reality, as much or more than they are for simply relating past events. The point: we need to see ourselves in the story of Genesis 3. These pages are not meant to be a window to a past time only, but primarily a mirror to show us ourselves with all too much clarity. The story of Adam and Eve's sin and fall is our story through and through. Their experience is ours. Their failure and sin is ours. Their fate, likewise, is ours.

When we realize our personal involvement in the story of the Old Testament, we quickly become more interested in the outcome. We see Adam and Eve in the garden and witness their sin, and as we squint to see their faces more closely, we discover our own faces—almost as if we were looking into a mirror. This story becomes a biography of ourselves. As it does, everything changes. We become tense and anxious as we see sin show its ugly head and do such horrible damage.

Our question changes from, “What is God going to do with Adam and Eve now?” to “What is God going to do with me now?” We frantically skim past the account of the crime and punishment. All that seems to matter now in the wake of human sin is what God's attitude will be toward the sinner. Will He abandon humanity? Will He abandon us? A little sweat begins to appear on our forehead. We unconsciously move slowly to the edge of

our seats. We are concerned at this point, because we know what our tendency would be in the face of another who absolutely and totally rejects us. We would most certainly abandon that relationship and move elsewhere. What will God do? Our lives, our futures depend on the outcome of this ancient story. Our own destiny will be determined by God's response to this sin of the first couple. Here we will get a glimpse of how God responds to our own sin.

We read and re-read Genesis 3, looking for some hope that God would act differently than we would, and for some reason not leave Adam and Eve (or us) on their own to rot and die. We know instinctively that if God abandons Adam and Eve, then there is little hope for us...and then we see it. After the crime, after the trial, and after the punishment is declared, we find in 3:21: "*And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them.*" Alleluia! Hope!

Of course, the world is not set straight again. Indeed, it is still fallen and broken. The good news is that God has not walked away from the fallen world. In simply clothing the first couple before expelling them from paradise, we see His concern for sinners. We can almost see Him bending down to fit a piece of clothing on Adam and Eve. He is there, in the picture. Consequently, we can trust He is in our picture also.

The appropriate response for all of us who read this good news and understand its implications for ourselves is to mop our wet brows with the backs of our hands in relief as we mutter, "Whew!" That was a close call. We still have to deal with the consequences of sin and suffer its slings and arrows, but we know God still cares. We know He has not abandoned us. We see He remained committed

to the welfare of Adam and Eve after they forsook Him, and we realize He is committed to us as well. We slump back into our chairs with a sigh of relief.

The problem is that the story does not end there. Genesis 4 begins innocently enough with the birth of children to these first parents. But, by verse 8 the story gets interesting ... too interesting. We sense sin crouching at the door and ready to erupt again as we feel Cain's anger and jealousy. Then Cain kills his brother. By this time, our brow is beaded with sweat again and we are poised on the edge of our seats. God hung in there with Adam and Eve. We wonder if this next sin isn't pushing it a little bit. How patient can God be? How much will He tolerate from humans? We look for the answer in Genesis 4. We look for God's caring presence in Cain's life even, after his heinous crime. Yet, we are doubtful we will succeed. We know all too well what we would do if we were God.

We hurry through the description of Cain's hate, the murder, and the pronouncement of punishment—Cain is severed from human community and cursed in work—looking for some sign of hope. In verse 15 of chapter 4, we find it: God's grace! *“The Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him.”* Could it be that God does not turn His back on those who turn their backs on Him? How could this be? The holy, mighty Lord—stooping to care for sinners? Instinctively, our hands rise again to wipe the sweat from our brows as we utter, “Whew!” We fall back into our chairs again in relief. “Who is this God?” we ask. “Why does He continue to care for rebellious creatures?” The love we behold is incomprehensible. It is a love we can no longer fathom. We realize this is a greater love story than we had imagined at first. God's

love seems misguided. His love is so blind to the object of his affection. What could be the hope of loving those creatures who cannot reciprocate? Why would He bother pouring so much time and energy into a seemingly lost cause? What kind of love is this?

We have little time to relax in our chairs before we are confronted by a new sin that looms larger than the previous two. By chapter 6, we find the entire world corrupt and violent—except for Noah. We discover all humanity completely separated from any acknowledgment of their creator. All but Noah have utterly abandoned the One to whom they owe everything. No one has a thought for the Almighty. No one serves God. People have lost their call to be “helpers” to one another, and are consumed with an intense self-centeredness.

*Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight,
and the earth was filled with violence.
And God saw the earth, and behold it was
corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way
upon the earth. — Genesis 6:11-12*

We creep to the edge of our seats with a new sense of urgency. The outcome deeply and profoundly affects **our** lives, **our** futures. This crime seems a bit too serious. How could God tolerate such blatant neglect?

We read with a heavy heart:

*And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined
to make an end of all flesh ... behold I will
destroy them with the earth.’ — Genesis 6:13*

Judgment, as with the two earlier crimes, comes as no surprise. However, this punishment seems to betray God’s desire finally to give up on humanity. Is this it? Is

the hope for continued relationship with God, no matter how imperfect, gone for good? It seems like it. As sweat gathers on our brows again, we look hesitantly for some sign that God will continue to show undeserved grace to humankind. We know only too well that we, too, are sinners. If God abandons these sinners in Genesis, we cannot believe He will not reject us. So we search for grace, no matter how doubtful we are of finding it.

Once again, it is with joy and relief we find it. God's grace is first revealed in His saving of seven people from the destruction of the flood, even though they were unworthy of it. In Genesis 7:1, God tells Noah: "*...you alone are righteous.*" "You" here is singular in the Hebrew. One man was worthy to escape the flood of God's wrath. Yet, we find eight people in the ark. Thus, seven unrighteous people were saved by the grace of God. Noah's wife, his three sons and their wives were undeserving of God's rescue. They were part of all the people who were considered unrighteous. How then were they saved? For one thing, they knew Noah. They were his family. Also, they trusted Noah when he told them about the coming disaster, and heeded his call to enter the refuge of his floating fortress. They entered into salvation by grace through faith. Seven undeserving souls escaped what they deserved and were given the gift of life.

Salvation by grace through faith is not a new concept in the New Testament. It is as old as sin. In this story, sinners who acknowledge their need and their wrongs are invited by God to escape the wrath and death that should follow their sin.

A second sign of God's commitment to sinners is the rainbow. In the beginning of the story, we read twice that God saw the horrible sin of humanity (Genesis 6:5, 12).

At the end of the story, we find God seeing something else twice (9:14, 16)—the rainbow. God promises in this way that never again will He destroy the earth. Even though God knows the sinful nature and acts of all people, He here chooses instead to see something besides their sin. There is no condition here that God will only preserve humanity from this event again if He sees they are good. Instead, God promises to not see their sin, but to look at His promise as He is reminded by the bow in the sky.

We reflect: the beginning of our story is that God clearly sees our sin, too. But now, after faith and repentance, He looks not at our sin but to what He has raised over the earth; for us it is not the rainbow, but the cross. We remember that as the seven unrighteous people were saved by means of a wooden ark, so we are saved by means of two wooden beams. God has stayed with His unworthy people. Again we mop our brows with a “Whew!” Even in spite of such absolute rejection of God by the community of believers on earth, God is committed to staying with them and seeking their welfare and salvation.

As Walter Bruggeman notes, the very center of this carefully structured story is the phrase “*But God remembered Noah...*” (Genesis 8:1). In this remembering, seven others are included. This is a reminder to us that God also remembers us. He does not forget us because we are insignificant or unimportant to Him. He does not forget us, even though we are sinners and unworthy of His affection. No, He remembers us. In that we find hope and life.

No sooner do we settle comfortably back into our chairs again, when we are confronted with the account of the tower of Babel. Before the rainbow fades, the

community at Shinar offends the Almighty again. These people unashamedly continue the human struggle of constructing life with a new world order: humans on top as lord and king. With every stone placed on the great tower, God is mocked. Here, God is not so much ignored as He is replaced. Humans climb the earthworks of their puny tower in order to seize the throne of God and place it in their own hands.

This is the fourth and last crime of Genesis 3-11. This bold affront to God's sovereignty seems like the worst sin so far. We are appalled at the forgetfulness of humans and their constant sin. This causes us to creep to the edge of our seats once again. Sweat covers our brow as before. Even though God so far has stayed with His disobedient, sinful creatures when they sinned, the very repetition of it all—and the deepening intensity—brings fear to the reader. Our relationship with God is at stake here. These imbeciles of millennia ago are playing Russian roulette with our relationship with the Almighty.

Then we remember we carry the same sin, have inherited the same rebelliousness. They will not destroy our relationship with God for us—we are able to do that for ourselves. The story of these people and their sin is where we carefully watch and learn how God will respond to our sin. We are these sinful people in the ancient story. Consequently, we want to know what God does with them. In that we will understand what He does with us.

On the edge of our chairs again, we notice we are not as terrified as before. We are accustomed to finding God's gracious love and presence, no matter what the sin. We are confident we will find it here, also. In the first crime, we found God's grace in the Creator's making of clothes for the sinners. After the second crime, we find God

protecting a murderer with a mark. In the third crime, we uncover God's grace in the ark and the rainbow. Here, we are confident, we will find the same.

We scan the story. We witness the crime. We behold the judgment and the punishment. We see the tower destroyed and the peoples of the earth confused, divided and scattered throughout the planet. We look for a sign that God has not abandoned His people. We look further... and further ... but see no sign of God's unmerited favor. We see no sign of God's presence in spite of the sin. We become nervous. Our anxiety increases. Where is God?

Then comes chapter 12. We find God in Ur, calling a man and a woman to "*Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*" Later, God states: "*...through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" Here is the sign of God's grace. After all the world abandoned God at Shinar and humanity was divided and scattered, He called an elderly couple—who would one day be a nation for the express purpose of bringing those scattered people back together. His plan was to use this family to draw all people back to Himself through their faithfulness and witness. They were to be a light to the Gentiles, exposing the darkness of living apart from God and luring them back to life. "Whew!" we sigh again.

We should be emotionally exhausted at this point in the story. By this time we are experts on the human condition. We clearly can see humans are losers in their quest to be faithful to their Creator. We should, however, also be confident of God's love and faithfulness. These two elements are consistent throughout the story. We know that remains the case today. We are stuck with our sin, but assured of His love. We are losers when it comes to

anything spiritual. All of us are losers. Our sin loses God's good gifts time and time again. The only thing humans cannot lose is God's love.

By chapter 11, we have had a thorough introduction to the main characters of the love story and we can foresee the problems on the horizon. We can tell at one glance that a winner and these losers are going to struggle in frustration and pain. The one thing we understand is this: God and humans are set in their ways. God is a winner and a champion of His beloved, no matter how ill they treat Him. We understand He will not waver. This is His nature. We also understand humans are losers of God's wonderful gifts and cannot change. They are— since the fall—in bondage to sin and death, and are unable to respond positively for any length of time to their lover.

LOVING

THE PROPOSAL

God's Engagement with a Family

We now get to the third part of the first cycle of winning, losing, loving: the loving part. After humans throw away God's gift of life and relationship and give Him a good reason to abandon them, it is then that God decides to enter into an intimate covenant with them.

The 12th chapter of Genesis tells of God approaching sinful humanity by speaking to a representative of this lot, Abram. He calls this man and his wife to obedience while promising great things. God enters a covenant, and commits Himself to a never-ending relationship of fidelity and love. The reader has to keep in mind that these promises come after the horrible crimes of Genesis 3-11. God begins to work for the salvation of the world that

so carelessly and quickly rejects Him. “*Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed,*” is a revelation of God’s intent to reconcile the world to Himself through this family. God again commits Himself to sinners.

The call of Abram and Sarai is like the engagement between a man and woman. God is asking for a commitment of marriage, finally to be consummated with this couple’s descendant at Mt. Sinai centuries into the future. As for now, the relationship becomes one where Abram and Sarai are betrothed, in proxy for future Israel, to this God who is asking for a pledge. God promises His faithfulness, and tells Abram what great things will be his if Abram says yes. These benefits are similar to what one getting married is promised: children, a home, and a name.

The great relationship instigated here is one of God/people, just as a human marriage covenant is one of husband/wife. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God reminds Israel often of His hope that the covenant will remain intact and He will be their God and they will be His people. This covenant requires a great commitment on both sides, and a faithfulness that can only have its analogy in the marriage contract.

When I first decided I wanted to marry my girlfriend, Kay, I was living in Minnesota. She was teaching in rural Montana. I bought an engagement ring and took an all-night train ride to see her. She picked me up at the station, and after driving a few miles toward her home I asked her to stop at a wayside rest. I proposed to Kay at the picnic table, and was relieved when she answered in the affirmative. Before that moment, I was not sure exactly where our relationship stood and she did not know for sure how committed I was to her.

My effort to come to see her convinced Kay I was interested in her. My proposal convinced her I was serious. Likewise, God's appearance to Abram after the great sins of Genesis 3-11 convinces us God is still interested in sinners. His invitation into an intimate relationship convinces Abram and the reader that God is serious about humanity and wants them as His own.

When I proposed to Kay, she knew saying yes would take her away from her job in Montana to an unknown destination (I was planning to enter seminary after we were married). I had no steady employment. I had no assurances for her that I would succeed as a pastor, or would even want to be one. She said yes to my proposal because she knew whatever came and wherever we ended up, I would be there with her. I felt the same. In a similar way, knowing God would go with him was enough to give Abram the courage to accept God's proposal; "*So Abram left, as the Lord had told him*" (Genesis 12:4).

The period of engagement is such an uncertain time, when major promises are made that can change life forever—without knowing fully whether or not it will work out. After Kay and I were engaged and I had committed myself to marriage a year down the road, I often wondered if I had made the right call. I asked myself questions: "What will Kay be like after we are married? Would we make each other happy? Would I lose too much freedom and regret it?" Abram and Sarai must have wondered the same.

What gave me incentive to marry were the benefits involved. The greatest benefit—I would be with someone I loved without worrying about her leaving me. I also longed for a family, as well as a home where I would find meaningful relationships and stability. Abram must have

longed for the same and God promised it.

After Abram and Sarai left Ur and had finally arrived in Canaan, God continued to remind them of His promise and their engagement. In the 15th chapter of Genesis, the covenant is “cut” when Abram is instructed by God to cut in half a heifer, a goat, and a ram, and to lay the parts opposite each other. The sense here was when one of the parties entering into the covenant passed between the halves, it was as if to say, “may this happen to me if I do not uphold my end of the agreement.” God committed Himself to faithfulness when through this ritual a smoking firepot passed between the animal halves.

Then, in chapter 17, God reminds Abram again of the covenant they had made:

*I am the God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my **covenant between me and you** and will greatly increase your numbers. Abram fell face down, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my **covenant** with you; You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram, your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations ... I will establish my **covenant** as an everlasting **covenant** between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come **to be your God** and the God of your descendants after you ... The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and **I will be their God.** (Emphasis added.)*

— Genesis 17:1b-4, 7-8

After God recites His promise to be faithful to Abram and his descendants, God reminds Abram of his part of the covenant: “...as for you, you must keep my **covenant**, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come” Genesis 17:9. (Emphasis added.)

In the year preceding our wedding, Kay and I kept reminding each other of the upcoming event and all it entailed, as well as what would happen after we were married. We would finally live in the same house, have children, and settle down in a community. When we were separated by so many miles, I worried Kay might become interested in someone else when she was so far from me.

In the same way, God understood that humans, even the most righteous, were far from being able to commit to Him wholeheartedly and needed help in remaining faithful. He knew humans were vulnerable to turning their affections elsewhere.

Throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, God keeps in touch with each generation in order to call them to a fresh commitment to Himself, and to remind them of the covenant. He appears to Isaac and then to Jacob to renew the everlasting promise He made to Abraham and Sarah. He also reminds each generation of His desire for them to remain faithful to Him—as a result, in Isaiah’s words, be a “*light to the Gentiles*” (Isaiah 42:6).

The difference between this engagement and any human one is that God courted imperfect, rebellious, ungrateful humans, whom He knew would ultimately fail Him. In other words, while Abraham, Sarah and all the human family were sinners, God decided to commit Himself intimately and completely to them.

As we consider that the story of the Old Testament reflects our own story, we recall with relief and gratitude

the words of Paul: “*While we were sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8).

This would be like a person deciding to marry another who is an active alcoholic. As a pastor, I would adamantly discourage the marriage. It is doomed from the beginning—no matter how well-intentioned the alcoholic is, the alcohol will compete with the marriage relationship, and unless dealt with, will win. It is foolish to marry somebody with an addiction. It also seems foolish for God to risk a commitment to anyone He knows is incapable of shedding his sinful orientation. In this covenant, God is settling for second best.

We should be shocked at this bold, unexpected move by God. It is unexpected because it seems God was contemplating abandoning His failed creation, or maybe destroying them. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the rebellious people at the time of Noah, and the Shinar fiasco—all deserve only God’s wrath, not His favor secured through a covenant. Does God just have a poor memory, or is He a glutton for punishment?

When we discern our own part in this story, we cannot help but rejoice. We each can say, it is **me** this story is talking about! It is me who is loved by God, in spite of my unworthiness and failure. It is me whom God wants. It is me with whom God seeks to have an intimate relationship, sealed with a covenant. And as the reality of this incredible news sweeps over our hearts, we cannot help but fall to our knees in praise and wonder. We do not know how to express this deep gratitude and joy. Tears will have to suffice. We are His.