

Blessing and Responsibility ~ Genesis 1:28-30

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 5, 2007

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

Many of you know the names John and Charles Wesley, well-known for writing many of the hymns in our hymnal, whose ministry God used greatly at the same time as their friend George Whitefield, who is more my theological hero – I would disagree with the Wesley’s somewhat, I’m not a Methodist or Arminian in theology, but I’m thankful God used these men greatly for His kingdom and conversions and spiritual awakening in England and America, and they were some of the most influential Christians of the 18th century. I’ve read that the mother of the Wesley boys, Susanna Wesley had 17 children (that’s taking Genesis 1:28 seriously). It’s been said that she spent an hour daily praying for her children, and spiritual time with each individually each week.

[As a young boy] John was rescued from a blazing house, a “brand plucked from the fire.” Charles, born prematurely, was tightly bound for days in swaddling clothes. And Samuel?

Samuel, born February 10, 1690, worried his parents from the beginning by refusing to utter sounds. As he grew, no amount of coaxing would draw from him even one word. Friends feared he was dumb. But one day when five, Samuel hid under a table. His mother, Susanna, became alarmed when she couldn’t find him, and that prompted Samuel to speak his first sentence : “Here I am, Mother!”

After that, there was no stopping him. Susanna soon realized Samuel was a precocious child. She taught him the alphabet in a snap, then she proceeded to teach him to read. What textbook did she choose? Genesis.

In short order, Samuel read all of Genesis 1:1 by himself. Then the first ten verses. Then he memorized the whole chapter, ending with the last verse : “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

It was a firm foundation. Samuel became a clergyman, poet, and educator who exerted a lasting impact on many—including his younger brothers Charles and John (though he objected to their Methodism).

But Samuel’s life was cut short. He went to bed in apparent health on November 5, 1739, age 49, only to awaken at three in the morning, ill. By seven, he was dead. His influence, however, outlived him and on his tombstone are the words:

*Here lye interred the remains of Rev. Mr. Samuel Wesley, A. M.
A man, for his uncommon wit and learning, esteemed by all
An excellent preacher: But whose best sermon
was the constant example of an edifying life.¹*

As we study Genesis 1, my prayer is that these would not be mere sermons, but would have effect on lives – that we would all be more known as godly men and women, whose greatest message besides the truth of scripture is “the constant example of an edifying life.” I hope that these times will not be merely academic or interesting, but would in fact edify your life and motivate you to live more for the glory of your awesome and Holy Creator God.

OUTLINE:

1. **Blessing (v. 28a)**
2. **Responsibility (v. 28b)**
3. **Provision (v. 29-30)**

First, the Blessing

1:28 God blessed them and God said to them “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”

Remember that in Genesis 1 this comes on the heels of the statement that mankind is created in God’s image, so when God says the purpose of this fruitfulness and multiplying is to fill the earth, we see that mankind is to fill the earth with God’s glory by multiplying his image and increasing His image-bearers abroad.

The KJV has “replenish” instead of “fill” but in 1611 English usage, it has the same meaning of “fill, to make full, to occupy the whole of.” The word “replenish” is a little misleading with how the word is used today (to refill, fill again), but Oxford English dictionary shows it only later developed this meaning.²

The idea of divine blessing on reproduction is not what all the other ancient cultures believed. For example, ‘ancient tales, hailing from urban Mesopotamia ... tell of the gods taking steps to curb human fertility by sending plagues, famine, flood and miscarriage. The God of Genesis repeatedly urged the first people to be fruitful (1:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7) and promised the patriarchs that they would be successful in fathering innumerable children. Sex is thus seen as an important part of God’s very good creation (31).’³

The blessing and gift of life is something we don’t think of enough.

In English, this phrase “be fruitful and multiply” sounds like a command, but the Hebrew is really more of a blessing. As we saw earlier in chapter 1 (v. 22), this not just an imperative or just giving permission, what God says here grants the power to reproduce.⁴ The blessing precedes the fruitfulness and multiplying, and in fact God’s blessing is actually what causes or endows the fruitfulness and enables the multiplying. Life is dependent on Him and a gift from Him. The word of blessing guarantees success, and the most visible evidence of that enrichment is productivity or fruitfulness.⁵ God not only made all living creatures, He blessed them with the ability to procreate, propagate, proliferate, and populate the planet.

If you read Genesis 9:1, and 7 you see this repeated to Noah’s family after the flood

Genesis uses this word “bless” similarly in 17:16, where God’s blessing of Sarai imparts to her the capacity to bear a child

“I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

The idea of blessing through offspring is a theme in Genesis:

- Abram (12:2-3, 22:17-18)
- Ishmael (17:20)
- Isaac (26:3-4)
- Jacob (28:3, 48:3-4)

This idea of fruitfulness-multiplying-filling continues in the Torah

Exodus 1:7 (NASB95)

7 But the sons of Israel were **fruitful** and increased greatly, and **multiplied**, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was **filled** with them.

Deuteronomy 30:16 (NASB95)

16 in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and **multiply**, and that the Lord your **God may bless you** in the land where you are entering to possess it.

Deuteronomy 7:13 (NASB95)

13 “He will love you **and bless you and multiply you**; He will also **bless the fruit of your womb** and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your forefathers to give you.

CHILDREN ARE A BLESSING FROM GOD, NOT A BURDEN

READ PSALM 127:3-5 AND 128:3

You cannot read through even the first book of the Old Testament without noticing that the Bible is very pro-child in stark contrast to much of American society. This idea also prominent in Hebrew poetry

There is no question that the biblical view of children sees them as a great blessing and not as a burden, and having a “full quiver” of children was both a joy and sign of divine favor to Jewish families.

Before we moved here, the nursery at our former church had a system where they would give you safety pins for each kid you checked in that you can wear and then would give to the workers for security purposes to match up with your kid upon pickup. I put our girl’s safety pins on my belt loop and sometimes when I saw another dad with multiple pins on their belt lip, the little joke I liked to say is “blessed is he whose belt buckle is full of them”

Still I wonder if many of us fully view children the way they did in the Bible, or if we think more in unbiblical worldly terms

In 1800, American women bore an average of 8 children, in 1860 it was 5.2, and in 1964, the average woman still bore 3.5 children, but by 1988, the average was 1.93 (presumably still between 1 & 2).⁶ There's a number of factors, but certainly one is the attitude that children are an inconvenience getting in the way of adult pursuits.

Daniel Doriani writes in a helpful article on family planning:

'The American family is shrinking like a cheap cotton shirt. In a day of small families, people-watchers can enjoy the reaction when a couple announces, "We are pregnant again." If they herald a second child, faces beam approval and arms extend affection. The display shows that we no longer take the multiple-child family for granted. A second child is an event. It creates another ideal family: mother, father and two children. But the body language changes for subsequent pregnancies. In my circles, body language suggests that three children are a sign of faith; four, a sign of bravura; five, extravagance; and six, lunacy.'⁷

The Bible presents a very different picture. The high view of children and the family presented in this psalm should also be the mindset of believers today, no matter what our culture thinks.

Does "BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY" mean you have to try to give birth to 17 children like Susannah Wesley to obey this verse? I don't think so, and as some have pointed out, a "quiver-full" is also a handful, and not every mom is of the caliber of a Susannah Wesley.

I don't believe the Bible mandates huge families or no spacing and limit of children, with all due respect to some friends and godly people who reject family planning. I think there is a biblical and balanced way to affirm Ps 127 / Gen 1:28 along with other biblical principles as well in family planning (wisdom, provision aspect, sensitive to wife, convictions, etc.).⁸

I know we have younger ears at church, and don't want to go into too much more detail on this subject that is probably not a controversy for most, but we do need to make sure we think biblically about such things [see footnote 8 for more]. And there's an excellent article that balances this issue well that I can provide to any who might be interested further on this.⁹

The fact that the presence of children is a great "heritage" and "reward" from God does not require the reverse: that couples unable to get pregnant are under the curse of God (as some in O.T. times believed). The same Lord who blesses families also "exhibits his love and concern for 'the barren woman' by promising her joy and a family, that is, a home whether literal or not."¹⁰ God does care for his children and will sustain and bless them, even if they're unable to physically have children of their own.

Unfortunately, a number of examples of child-less women in the OT were not patient or trusting in God's will and made sinful responses. Rachel is not a good example when she pleads "Give me children or I will die!"

In modern times, the pendulum appears to have swung towards the other end of the spectrum with unwanted children, abortions even among married, or at least the thinking of the fewer the better. (If Abraham lived today, would he see God's promise of him having many children as a good thing?) We need to make sure we view children biblically as a blessing from God, and as Jesus taught, the children were to come to him and were really an object lesson to sinful adults like the disciples.

Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck puts it this way:

Children check selfishness in parents.... They uphold to their parents, as if in a mirror, their own virtues and defects, force them to reconsider their lives, soften their criticisms, and teach them how difficult it is to rule a human being. Out of the family life there proceeds a reforming power toward the parents.... Family life turns the selfish into servants, misers into heroes, coarse men into considerate fathers, and tender maidens into courageous mothers.¹¹

How are children a blessing from the Lord? Not just when they're born, of course. If we really believe what the Lord says that "it's more blessed to give than to receive," we understand the blessing is not what they give us but the process of giving ourselves *for them*.

Doriani writes that as he reflected on his own parenting:

[T]he chief blessings of parenthood seem to lie in giving. If we first forfeit the hope of gain and give without hope of return, then we can enjoy the blessings of parenthood. So parents give; they give the Lord the godly children He desires (Malachi 2:15). They give their children the gift of life. They give society the salt and light it so desperately needs. Once we are committed to giving first, the blessings can flow.

Martin Luther, recalling that he never awoke with pigtailed in his face and his blanket gone in the monastery, observed that family life is a school of character. That is, parenting blesses us by teaching us to love sacrificially, to bend our will to another's. Parents learn to subordinate their plans, their goals, their happiness and fulfillment, to spend themselves for little ones who can give very little in return ... [infants who] cannot be counted on to contribute. Babies cry more than they smile. Little children are a bundle of need, and teenagers bring more worries than celebrations. They teach us to expand the circle of passionate concern beyond ourselves to our children, our community, and even the good of distant generations.¹²

Application: How should this verse apply to me if I'm not married or unable to have children? God also has a wonderful place in His church for single people, as both Paul and Jesus taught. You can still be fruitful in your service to the church, in your own thoughts of children as a blessing rather than a burden. Most of all, you can multiply *spiritual* children of God by being an

evangelist and disciple-maker. Applying fruitfulness and multiplying to salvation is not a stretch.

Acts continually uses the same Greek words for “fruitful / increase” (from LXX of Ex. 1:7) and “multiply” in relation to the growth of the early church, which was also by God’s blessing.

Acts 6:7 (NKJV) 7 Then the word of God spread [was **fruitful**], and the number of the disciples **multiplied** greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Acts 9:31 (NKJV)

31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were **multiplied**.

Acts 12:24 (NKJV)

24 But the word of God grew [**was fruitful**] and **multiplied**.

So when Genesis 1 says “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” there’s a lot behind that. And we of course should recognize and rejoice every time a child is born, but more than that, our longing is to see more born again – that more physical children would become spiritual children of Abraham – as the book of Galatians says, the gospel is that all families of the world would be blessed through Abraham’s offspring, for any who trust in the Messiah.

May God bless the going forth of His Word here in El Dorado County, my prayer is that this pulpit would be fruitful and that the influence would multiply, and that more would become children of God by faith in Christ, till the earth is filled with God’s glory.

*So we’ve seen the blessing in this text, I want you also to notice with me **THE RESPONSIBILITY***

1:28 “... and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

A wise man once said “With great power comes great responsibility.” With great blessing comes great responsibility. God is not only a God of blessing and love and kindness. He’s also a Holy Creator whom we are responsible before and accountable to. Mankind is here given the high responsibility of subduing the earth and ruling over its creatures.

There’s a lot of speculation and statements written about what this means, but perhaps we should look at the context to see if Genesis 2 gives us information (ex: v. 5, 15, 19, etc.). The word for “subdue” often means domination if not domineering, but the expanded descriptions in chapter 2 seem to emphasize a positive yet high responsibility in tilling and tending and keeping and using the land for himself. One commentator says these strong words for “subdue” and “have dominion” are used “because this dominion requires the energy of strength and the art of wisdom.”¹³

Also, Genesis 1:29-30 seem to clarify what is meant by the strong words “subdue” and “rule”

that this does not include killing animals for food, as man's original food was plants, fruits, veggies. *This is the third point in our outline, God's provision for His creatures.*

"The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's; but the earth He has given to the children of men" (Ps. 115:16, NKJV).

We are stewards responsible to use God's creation, not abuse it.

God gives human beings the unique responsibility of ruling the earth and its creatures. Everything is given for discovery, enjoyment and satisfaction ¹⁴

This verse is seen as the basis for the creation mandate or cultural mandate or dominion mandate. Others have seen it as the basis and approval of study, sciences, art, technology, even industrialization, harnessing our earth's energy resources, doing useful work. But we are not to worship the world – there is a brand of environmentalism that seems to do that and to elevate the earth above man, whereas God's point seems to be that man is above the earth and its creatures as a responsible steward to use it for man's good and God's glory. When we live in a world that protects trees but kills unborn babies, something is out of balance.

Five years ago, the Evangelical Environmental Network rolled out an ad campaign some of you might remember WWJDrive (What Would Jesus Drive?) which was about SUVs and gas-guzzlers and pollution and global warming concerns.

There is a global warming we should be much more worried about, and that's in 2 Peter 3 where it says God will dissolve the whole universe in a fervent heat, not a gradual process but an instant rolling back the skies as a scroll, melting the material universe on the final day. For environmentalists worried about what man is doing to our world, just wait to see what it's like when Jesus get's done with it. It may be getting warmer here on earth (that's debated in scientific and political circles) but a concern I wish our world thought more about was how to avoid the eternal heat and torment of the lake of fire for all who reject Jesus.

That's a judgment and more clear and present danger that all humanity should seek to avoid, and the solution is not political and has nothing to do with what kind of fuel we use, it has to do with Jesus Christ who saves all those trust in Him and Him alone, who are banking on the works of Christ not their own works. Today is the day to make sure you are ready to meet your Maker. God has given great blessing to you and this world, but there is also a great responsibility.

¹Morgan, R. J. (2000, c1998). *From this verse : 365 scriptures that changed the world* (electronic ed.) (January 2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

²Bridges, R. F., & Weigle, L. A. (1997, c1994). *King James Bible word book*. A contemporary dictionary of curious and archaic words found in the King James Version of the Bible. (electronic ed.) (288). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Ge 1:24). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

⁴*Gesenius Grammar* 110b; Barrick, 3

⁵*NET Bible Notes*.

⁶*Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S Bureau of the Census, 1991), page 65.

⁷Daniel Doriani, "Birth Dearth or 'Bring on the Babies': Biblical Perspectives on Family Planning," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12/1 (Fall 1993), p. 24.

⁸There are some Christians who teach that any form of birth control, even for health reasons, is sinful, and some argue that procreation is the only purpose of the marital bed. One Christian book someone gave me here I read and it encouraged mothers not to listen to the world when secular doctors say things like it's not safe to have children into your 40s and 50s – they would say basically go for it and that it's never ok to have operations or do anything to prevent pregnancy, even if there is medical safety issues. I'm concerned when statements are made by those who are not doctors, who have no professional medical training, and apparently very little formal biblical training. One of the questions in the book that also concerned me is "what to do if doctors tell you that if you get pregnant again, there's a real potential of something serious happening and you and/or the baby will die." The book said those usually aren't true, but if it is, then the couple should just abstain from intimacy to practice self-denial. That to me, seems to clearly contradict 1 Corinthians 7, which tells spouses to not deprive each other in this area except temporarily by agreement for prayer, but this book was willing to sidestep other scriptural principles because of their presupposition that intercourse must only be for procreation. But Genesis 2:24, right in our context, says that beyond procreation, marital intimacy is fundamentally about being one flesh, which is not just a physical thing, but it includes a deep relational oneness on multiple levels. And Proverbs 5 clearly teaches that satisfaction and enjoyment is another purpose and gift from God, as Song of Solomon also portrays. Better to marry than to burn in passion, the N.T. says; there is also the idea of fulfilling one's God-given desires in the God-intended way, there is a closeness and deep relational aspect of the one flesh union, which is why we use the word intimacy for it.

⁹See above article by Daniel Doriani.

¹⁰Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 461.

¹¹As cited by Doriani, 27.

¹²Doriani, 27.

¹³Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:101.

¹⁴Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide*. Includes index. (1st Augsburg books ed.) (23). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.