

Scripture Reading

Genesis 3:8–15 (NASB 2020)

⁸ Now they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." ¹¹ And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman whom You gave *to be* with me, she gave me some of *the fruit of* the tree, and I ate." ¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this *that* you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." ¹⁴ Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all the livestock, And more than any animal of the field; On your belly you shall go, And dust you shall eat All the days of your life; ¹⁵ And I will make enemies Of you and the woman, And of your offspring and her Descendant; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise Him on the heel."

Sermon Text

Revelation 21:5–8

⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." ⁶ Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give *water* to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life, without cost. ⁷ The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. ⁸ But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

The Big True Story of the Bible Daniel Cote 2nd Congregational Church—Winsted 6/9/24

A young mother relaxed by reading her Bible each day. After observing this habit for several years, her 5-year-old daughter asked, "Aren't you ever going to get finished reading that book?" Unlike a novel where the content can be exhausted in hours, we will never in this life exhaust the content of the Bible.

Today's sermon is a different kind of sermon where I will try to lay out in a straightforward manner what the Bible reveals about what God is doing and accomplishing in human history. As I noted another time, the Bible contains 31,124 verses. Sermons are typically preached on 5-10 verse passages of the Bible. At that rate, the average church attender will have a very hard time gaining an understanding of the grand and glorious true story that the Bible conveys to its readers. Every now and then, it is important to step back from the details to gain an understanding of the big picture and the big true story the Bible conveys to the faithful of all generations. If you attend my studies, or read my books, you might remember some of this, but nevertheless, I think there will be useful insights for everyone.

Did you know that a Bible in the hand is worth ten on the shelf? I say that up front since this sermon will highlight the need for each of you to read the Bible from cover to cover on a periodic basis to gain a better understanding of how God is working in human history. In doing so, you will learn details and facts that you will not get from a lifetime of sermons. So, my goal here today is to add context that will be helpful in understanding the many sermons that you will hear on particular passages of the Bible in the coming months.

The Initial Conditions

Genesis begins with a majestic first chapter, and in the first verse, God has already created the heavens and the Earth. The Earth is formless and desolate and then begins the sequence of the creation days, days one through six. Note that the universe has already been created when we commence the creation days. The Hebrew word *yom* is the word that is translated into English as day, and it can mean a 24-hour day or a period of time. Some theologians argue that the days of creation in Genesis are 24-hour periods, but many conservative theologians believe that the days of creation are long periods of time, which is a legitimate interpretation of the original Hebrew. The age of the Earth is not an essential

doctrine of the Christian faith, so you are welcome to investigate the matter and the arguments supporting each view, and come to your own conclusion after due diligence. The sequence of creation continues, culminating in the events of the sixth day, where God creates mankind, male and female, in His image.

Disobedience Brings Sin into the World

As we come to our Scripture reading, we read about the day that everything went wrong, bad choices were made, and paradise was lost. Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden, and they hid themselves in the trees of the garden. They knew what they had done, and their conscience convicted them of their sin and disobedience. God had commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from one tree in the garden, and at the tempting of Satan, Adam and Eve did the very thing God told them not to do. Sin is disobedience to God, and because of their sin, Adam and Eve were now alienated from God. Where before their sin, they were in communion with God; now, because of their sin, they were enemies of God because they had sided with Satan, who fell into sin before he tempted Adam and Eve. All human souls and all human DNA traces back to Adam and Eve, and thus their sin nature has been passed down and inherited by us through the human reproductive process. So, we are sinners in need of a Savior, and apart from Jesus, we remain alienated from God.

Exactly when Satan fell, we do not know, but putting the pieces together, we know from 1 Timothy 3:6 that Satan's sin was pride. Most Bible students see Isaiah 14:14 as describing Satan's desire to place himself on par with God. It reads, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." Through his pride and disobedience, Satan had fallen from his high perch serving God, and now he had successfully tempted Adam and Eve to join forces with him. When we disobey God, like Adam and Eve, we don't usually think we are joining forces with Satan against God, but that is what we are doing, and thus we should hate sin and avoid it at all costs. In short, sin places a barrier between us and God, just as there is a great chasm or gulf between heaven and hell, as we learn in Luke 16:26.

Who Caused Adam and Eve to Sin?

So, who caused Adam and Eve to sin? There are only three choices in answering this question: Satan, Adam and Eve, or God. Satan was certainly complicit in the sin of Adam and Eve, but while he could tempt them to disobey, he could not force them to disobey. God had given Adam and Eve freedom, and He told them that they could eat freely from any tree in the garden. So, Adam and Eve are responsible for their free choice to disobey God. It certainly cannot be God who caused Adam and Eve to sin because God hates sin, according to Habakkuk 1:13. The face of the Lord is against evildoers, according to Psalm 11. In Psalm 5, we learn that God takes no pleasure in wickedness and that no evil can dwell with Him. The obvious conclusion is that Adam and Eve freely chose to disobey God.

In contrast to the plain teaching of Scripture, John Calvin taught in his *Institutes of Christian Religion* that God instigates everything that humans do, including sin. However, James 1:13 clearly teaches that God does not tempt or entice anyone to sin. So you can choose Calvin's unbiblical theological meanderings concerning the nature of God, or you can choose to agree with the inspired Word of God I cited from Habakkuk, Psalms, and James. Last fall, we chose to affirm the Word of God over the words of John Calvin. Moreover, if God instigates sin, as John Calvin claims, how can it be said that He is different from the devil. The notion that God instigates evil leads to a very distorted, unbiblical view of God, which all Christians should reject.

Why Did God Allow Adam and Eve to Disobey?

The question then becomes, why did God allow Adam and Eve to disobey? That is one of the questions I get most often from students and in Bible studies. Why didn't God preclude the possibility that Adam and Eve could sin? Why didn't He just create these perfect beings who could not disobey? The Bible doesn't tell us directly, but I think C.S. Lewis is correct when he writes:

God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata -of creatures

that worked like machines- would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this Earth is mere milk and water. And for that they've got to be free.ⁱ

I laid out the biblical case that God gave humans free will last fall, so I won't do it again today. God does not want robots in heaven to worship and serve Him. So too, God will not subvert the will of people and force them to believe. God wants people who freely say no to the world and its evils and say yes to Him, Jesus and to righteous living. As Paul writes this in Titus 2:11–14 (NIV)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

As Paul says, God wants us to say yes to Christ and righteous living and no to ungodliness. He sent Jesus to redeem his people from wickedness and to save them for the purpose of purifying a people for Himself. In the midst of the chaos and evil we find in the world, God is purifying a people, that is, the church, for Himself, who are eager to do what is good. These are the people who trust in Christ and love God's moral code, and moreover, these people compose the true church that will forever live in blissful eternal union with Him. That is your destiny if you are a child of God.

God's Choices

God was not caught off guard when Adam and Eve disobeyed. God is omniscient, and thus He knows all things. It seems that God had three obvious choices when sin entered the world. First, God could have obliterated all humanity and started over. Second, God could have preserved Adam and Eve in their fallen sinful state for eternity. As a third option, God could implement a solution to the human sin problem.

Let's briefly consider each of those options. With regard to the first option, destroying or annihilating creatures created in His image capable of love, creativity, empathy, good, and concern for justice would seem to be an act of God against God. As Jesus says in Matthew 12:23, every kingdom divided against itself will be laid to waste. It would seem to be contrary to the character of God as an all-loving being to annihilate creatures created in His image.

With regard to the second option, if God preserved Adam and Eve in their fallen state, He could not have remained in eternal union with them and their descendants. God's goal, stated in the passage I just read from Titus 2, is purifying a people for Himself who are zealous for good works. Leaving people to languish in their sins would have led to their eternal separation from God because, as we learned in Psalm 5, God is perfectly pure, and He hates sin, and nothing evil can dwell with Him. God chose the third option, and He sent His Son to bring salvation into the world.

Our sermon text from Revelation 21 puts a finer point on the matter as we read in verses 7 and 8 of that text. God says through the Apostle John,

The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Those who overcome are those who believe in Jesus, and God says of the believer in this text, "I will be his God, and he will be my Son." That same sentiment is repeated over and over in the OT and the NT. God desires a people to be in relationship with Him for all eternity. It is hard to put into words the joy that that desire and plan of God should bring into your heart! Hear God speaking through John again: "The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be My son." I want you to contemplate that, and I want you to remember that. Write it on a sticky note and paste it to your bathroom mirror so you can start each day with it. There is no higher hope, no greater prospect, no greater love, and no greater joy that is available to all who trust and believe in Jesus. Praise God that

amidst this earthly toil that is often mired with pain, suffering, and heartache, He gives us hope, He gives us joy, and He offers His love, and there is no higher love than the love of God.

But in verse 8 of our sermon text, the ecstatic union with God that I just described will not be available to those who do not believe in the Son and do not live according to God's moral code. The unbelieving, the murderers, the sexually immoral, liars, those who worship false gods, and those who traffic in the occult, their place is the eternal fire. I suspect you can guess where that is. God will not allow sin to infect His heaven, where He is sovereign. So too, He will not annihilate people who He created in His image who chose to rebel against Him and reject Him.

God will not destroy people who reject Him and so He constrains them for eternity in a place with others who reject Him. The people who are in hell lived their lives rejecting or ignoring God and His moral code, and they certainly would not want to spend eternity praising God and serving Him in heaven. God will not force people to love Him. Thus, if there is an eternal heaven, there must be an eternal hell. As C.S. Lewis says, the gates of hell are locked from the inside. Those who reject Jesus and despise God's moral code will not want to spend eternity in eternal union with God praising and worshipping Him. Thus, hell is where they must go. I think part of what is so hellish about hell is that it is devoid of the light of God. There, it is very dark indeed.

God's Program to Save the World

We know that God's plan of salvation was to send Jesus, His Messiah, to save all who believe in Him. We read this in verse 15 of our Scripture reading, "And I will make enemies of you and the woman, And of your offspring and her Descendant; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise Him on the heel." Here, God says to Satan that he and the woman will be enemies and that the offspring or children of Satan and the descendant of the woman will be enemies. The children of Satan are all who reject Jesus and God's moral law. The descendant of the woman is Jesus in our text.

Our Scripture reading prophesies a battle between Satan and the descendant of the woman who is, of course, Jesus the Messiah. According to this prophecy, Satan will bruise the Messiah's heel, which is not a deadly wound, but Jesus the Messiah would bruise Satan on the head, which is a fatal wound. That is exactly what happened in AD 33 when Jesus was crucified. Satan incited the crucifixion of Jesus, and thus, as it turns out, he bruised Jesus on the heel. Satan at the crucifixion inflicted a minor wound upon Jesus, which became obvious on Easter Sunday that the Son of God, an eternal being, can never die, as evidenced by the resurrection.

So, Satan inflicted a minor wound on Jesus that resulted in a temporary death, but in raising Jesus from the dead, God turned the tables on Satan. As John writes in 1 John 3:8, "...The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." By His resurrection from the dead, Jesus destroyed the work of Satan and ensured his eternity in hell. But Satan is not yet committed to eternal hell, and some challenge the existence of God on this basis. They say, how could a good God allow evil to continue in the world, and they ask if God is all-powerful, why has He not destroyed evil in the world?

Common Criticism of God's Methods

Why does God commit genocide?

From the instant that Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, God promised that a descendant of the woman would destroy the work of Satan. Through the woman, God brought about mankind. When the world turned wicked and rejected God, God saved humanity through Noah. Many years later, God called Abraham, who was faithful to God. Through Abraham, God brought about the Nation of Israel. Through the Nation of Israel, God provided the OT, which contains His moral code, and the writings of the prophets, which describe the coming Messiah who would bring salvation into the world. So from Israel came the OT and the Messiah, who is, of course, Jesus, who fulfilled the dozens of Messianic prophecies, giving us the certainty that He is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. And from the Messiah, God brought about the church, which consists of all who trusted God and placed their faith in Jesus through the ages.

So, from Adam and Eve came humanity. Through Noah, God saved a faithful remnant, the eight people who were Noah and his family. From the descendants of Noah, God chose Abraham. From Abraham came Israel. From Israel came the Messiah. And from the Messiah came the church, which is the purified people of God zealous for what is good, which is God's purpose, as stated by Paul in Titus 2:11-14, which I read a few minutes ago.

Unbelievers and skeptics accuse God of genocide and criticize Him for destroying almost all humanity with the flood and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone and for ordering the destruction of the Canaanites when Israel entered the promised land. However, in each of these cases, the flood of Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the destruction of the Canaanites, the people had rejected God, and if God had allowed their evil to continue unchecked, all would have rejected God, and there would have been no Israel, the chosen people of God. And if there had been no Israel, the Messiah would not have been born. And if the Messiah, Jesus Christ, had not been born, there would be no church who are the people of God. And if there had been no church, you and I would not be here and thus God's plan would have been thwarted and stopped. But God is not going to allow sinful humans to upend His plan! He says through the Prophet Isaiah (Chapter 46:9-10),

⁹...I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My plan will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';

God's plan to purify a people for Himself, zealous for good works, through Jesus Christ will not be stopped, for He is all-knowing and all-powerful.

Why does God allow evil in the world?

Skeptics also criticize God for allowing evil to continue in the world. They say if God is good and if God is all-powerful, He should not allow the evil that we see all around us to continue in the world. I did a whole sermon on the problem of evil a few years ago, but here is a brief review of what Jesus tells us in the parable of the wheat and the tares found in Matthew 13.

According to Jesus (Matthew 13:37–43), God allows evil in the world for the purpose of revealing the children of God who will freely choose to follow Him. But one day, at the end of the age, all evil will be destroyed, and all who work evil will be separated for all eternity from the children of God who will inhabit His kingdom. Furthermore, God is building a people to coexist with Him in heaven. The failures of integration and peace among the races and nations on Earth will be fully corrected in heaven in the presence of God and Jesus (the Lamb), as we read in Revelation 7:9.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; (Revelation 7:9)

The Qualified Savior

Unlike other world religions, which prescribe the actions that humans should take to attain heaven, inner peace, or whatever else it is that they are selling, the Bible and Christianity tell us that we will never save ourselves by our actions. The Bible tells us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Hebrews 7 tells us that our Savior and High Priest did not need to atone for his own sins before He atoned for ours. He was perfect and unblemished from conception, the incarnate Son of God who created us. That is why He was able to save us. That is why Jesus' death was the only acceptable sacrifice to God. In human history, there has never been another person like Jesus.

Many see Christianity as exclusive, and for this reason, they say it cannot be true. They argue that billions follow other religious leaders, and surely, they cannot all be lost. Yet Jesus says unequivocally and without exception in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

Jesus is the only way to God because He is the only one who ever lived that is qualified to save anyone. This is a very important observation. Jesus was sinless, and Jesus is God. Jesus is qualified to save. None of this can be said about Muhammad, the Buddha, the Dalai Lama, or any other religious leader who ever lived. They are in the grave. They were not qualified to save themselves, let alone anyone else. A sinful, finite human who will face death cannot promise to provide eternal life for other humans. On the other hand, our sinless Savior was the perfect fragrant offering before God, who possessed eternal life in Himself, was fully qualified, and was able to confer eternal life to those who believed in Him. By His sacrifice, He has justified us before the Father. By faith in Jesus, the righteousness of Jesus is credited to all believers. And, where once we were alienated from God, now we are reconciled to God by the blood of Christ.

Your Place in the Grand Story

Rejoice, brothers and sisters! Through faith in Jesus, you have gained entrance to the kingdom of God and will forevermore be with Him. That is your place in the grand and glorious true story of the Bible. And so, we say, come, Lord Jesus, come! Hallelujah. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/437424-god-created-things-which-had-free-will-that-means-creatures>