

Grace Outrunning the Avalanche of Sin

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[0 : 0 0] Living God, we believe that you inspired this text. And we pray now in your mercy and grace that you would help us enter into the purpose for which you inspired the text.

And this we pray in Jesus' name. What we just read has to be one of the saddest stories ever told.

And a number of you have said to me during the week that as you've read Genesis 3, verses 8 to 24, you have felt profoundly sad, and rightfully so. Because in this story, we are reading the collapsing of God's good world.

The living God had, out of love and much joy, brought humanity into being in paradise. The living God had, with deep affection and much delight, formed us to live in a fourfold relational harmony.

The Creator, bless His name, had made us for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with the living God.

[1 : 1 4] And in this story, in Genesis 3, the fourfold relational harmony is falling apart. It is quickly unraveling. Unraveling is a euphemism for dying.

I think what makes the story so sad is that we are seeing it played out before our very eyes in our time in terribly sad ways.

The headlines of this week alone confirming that what Genesis 3 is teaching is true. Sadly true. But as sad as this sad story is, the fact that the story is told is a grace.

The fact that the God who sings the joyful song of Genesis 1 and then who tells the happy story of Genesis 2, who also bothers to tell us this sad story of Genesis 3, is in and of itself grace.

It is? Yes. For the story is telling us what every person alive today implicitly feels.

[2 : 2 9] The story is telling us that things are not now as they are supposed to be. The story is telling us that the breakdown of our fourfold relational harmony is not the way things are supposed to be.

The text is describing death and the text is telling us that death is not supposed to be. And just knowing that fact in and of itself is a grace.

G.K. Chesterton, the witty philosopher-theologian of the 20th century, puts it best. He's wrestling with the phrase the best of all possible worlds. The best of all possible worlds.

It's a phrase coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz and others argued that since the Creator is good and since the Creator is all-powerful, He must have chosen this world for us as the best of all possible worlds.

Chesterton is wrestling with this because he feels, as many human beings have felt and feel, that this cannot be the best of all possible worlds. In his book, *Orthodoxy*, which I highly commend to you, he writes, The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place and I had still felt depressed, even in acquiescence.

[3 : 48] But I had heard that I was in the wrong place and my soul sang for joy like a bird in spring. He continues, I heard that good was not merely a tool to be used, but a relic to be guarded, like the goods from Robinson Crusoe's ship.

I heard the wild whisper of something originally wise, for according to Christianity, we were indeed survivors of a wreck, the crew of a golden ship that has gone down before the beginning of the world.

Then Chesterton says this, but the important matter was this, that it entirely reversed the reason for optimism. And the instant the reversal was made, I felt like an abrupt ease when a bone is put back in a socket.

I'd often call myself an optimist to avoid the too evident blasphemy of pessimism. But all the optimism of the age had been false and disheartening for this reason, that it had always been trying to prove that we fit in the world.

The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do not fit in the world. This is not the world for which we were made. It is a fallen world.

[5 : 04] And as sad as that realization is, knowing it in and of itself is grace, for it justifies the longing of the human spirit for another world.

For one, the Bible says once was. For one, the Bible says will one day be. The way things are is not the way they are supposed to be.

That is the good news of Genesis 3. This, by the way, is why we cannot build our ethics on the way things are.

Ethical choice and behavior cannot be based on the way things are. That's just the way I am proves nothing.

Because the way things are and the way I am is not the way things are supposed to be. As sad as the story told in Genesis 3 is, the fact that it is told is a grace.

[6 : 06] And, as sad as the story is, it is full of grace. It is full of grace for the survivors of the shipwreck.

Full of grace? This text is full of grace? Yes, it is. You see, as the text describes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the avalanche of sin, the quickly moving disintegration of the four-fold relationship for which we were made, as the text painfully describes the avalanche of sin, the text also describes the quickly moving grace of God.

Indeed, the text is telling that grace is outrunning the avalanche of sin. Although all four relationships break down, there is grace, God's unmerited blessing in all four.

Yes, paradise is lost. It's gone. The garden has become a cemetery, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, a fact with which we are all too painfully aware in our world.

But, in the cemetery, there are all kinds of amazing signs of life, because in the cemetery, God is extending all kinds of amazing grace.

[7 : 24] So, go back with me and work through the story two more times. the first time, let us take seriously the way the text describes the avalanche of sin.

The second time, let us also take seriously the way the text describes grace outrunning the avalanche of sin. T'was grace that taught my heart to fear.

First reading of Genesis 3. And grace, my fears relieved. Second reading of Genesis 3. Let's review.

In the original paradise, the living God gave humanity only one command. One command. How many commands? One.

One good command. From any tree of the garden, you may eat freely. But, from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat because in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die.

[8 : 28] We learned that that commandment is so good because we do not need the knowledge of good and evil. We need all kinds of other knowledge, but we do not need the knowledge of good and evil.

We learned with the help of Daniel Fuller that to the first readers of Genesis, the knowledge of good and evil referred to the kind of knowledge that makes us think we can live independently independently of anyone else.

To aspire to the knowledge of good and evil is to aspire to be one's own master, one's own lord, one's own god. It is to aspire to be the captain of the ship.

God warned the first humans and all their subsequent children that as glorious as humans are, we are not able to be our own gods.

In the day that you aspire to be the captain of the ship, you will die, the ship will wreck. The enemy of God, the serpent, the embodiment of evil, comes into the picture and begins to mess with the first servant's minds as he does with all their subsequent offspring.

[9 : 36] He twists God's good command in ways that raise suspicion about God's goodness and generosity. The first humans sadly buy into the servant's twisting and they conclude that they must have this knowledge of good and evil.

They strike out on their own to make life on the earth work by themselves. They decide that they need to not remain in a dependent relationship with the creator.

And the result is what Genesis 3 is describing. All four relationships unravel. Death enters God's world.

Thus, the avalanche. Our relationship with God unravels. What was a relationship of trust, delight, love, and intimacy is now marked by suspicion, doubt, fear, and guilt.

Genesis 3, verse 8. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. They hid themselves.

[10 : 44] A sad, sad text. Notice, God has not even spoken to Adam and Eve. They simply hear, as the text says, the sound of the Lord God walking in the cool of the day.

This is a sound that they had heard many times before. This is a sound that had given them joy in their heart before. When they heard this sound in the past, they said, oh, how wonderful, the Lord is drawing near.

But now, having disobeyed the one command and having moved out of their proper place as the creature before the creator, the sound of the living God walking in the garden made them afraid and made them feel ashamed and they try to hide.

as do all of their other offspring. We all try to hide. Oh, there's a sense in which we all seek God for the deepest recesses of our being longs for the creator and redeemer of our lives.

But sadly, the characteristic posture of humanity now is actually one of hiding. We sense the gentle stirrings of God moving in our lives and we hide.

[12 : 01] Am I right? We try to hide under noise. We keep the television and radio on or we keep the iPod plugged in.

Sometimes for good reasons, but most often as an unconscious attempt to silence the sound of God walking in the places where we live and work.

We try to hide under our busyness. Yes, often we are super busy because we have responsibilities for other people or because we're caught up in some kind of creative activity of God, but often we stay busy so we don't have to deal with the sound of the creator moving around us.

We hide through chemicals big time in our time. We use alcohol or drugs to drown out the sound of the holy other. We hide behind skepticism.

There certainly are real intellectual challenges to believing in God in our time and I don't want to minimize them, but often we use the challenges as an excuse for not believing, not because of a lack of evidence, but because our hearts know that if we believe, we are going to have to change and we don't want to change.

[13 : 21] We hide by not accepting responsibility for our choices. When God does speak and confront the first humans about their disobedience, they shift the blame. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and Adam even blames God, the woman you gave me.

The most sophisticated hiding place of all, though, is religion. Religion is the biggest place where people hide from God.

Religion? Yes? We tend to think that humans design religions as part of the search for the one true God, and sometimes that's true, but most of the time it is not true.

The apostle Paul, I think, commenting on Genesis 3, writes in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, for even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculation and their foolish heart was darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image. because the one true living God is now experienced as a threat, we invent a God with whom we can more comfortably live.

[14 : 46] We shape God in our own image who does not upset our lives. We create a God we can handle, a God who will baptize our understanding of reality.

One church historian has even said that many congregations pay their pastors to protect them from the true God. What was originally a relationship of trust, delight, love, and intimacy is now marked by suspicion, doubt, fear, guilt, and hiding.

And then this affects the relationship with the self. The self also starts to unravel. The separation from God is now carried into the personality as a separation from the self.

Originally, we were created naked and not ashamed, says the text. That means that we were originally integrated and at peace with ourselves, but now it is, I heard the sound of you walking in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked.

Who told you you were naked? God asks sadly. When the living God is moved out of the center, center and we move ourselves into the center, the break in relationship with God is now experienced as a break in the relationship with self.

[16 : 12] When we no longer know the creator as he is, we can no longer know ourselves as we are. The psychologist is going to be able to help me a little bit in coming to understand myself, but my healing will finally come when I move out of the place where I was not intended to live and back into the place as creature before the creator.

This alienation from God resulting in alienation from self has radical effects then for the relationship with others. Adam blames Eve and God's good gift of a life partner unravels.

Instead of accepting responsibility for his own actions and confessing his own guilt, Adam projects it all onto Eve and all of their subsequent offsprings follow suit.

We blame parents, our genes, our culture, our environment, people are even coming up with now the so-called sin gene. Now all of that has a role to play, but we choose to do the things we do and say the things we say.

the avalanche of sin, alienation from God resulting in alienation from self resulting in a breakdown of human community.

[17 : 37] The relationship between the man and the woman was originally to be one of trust and care and attentiveness and servanthood and mutuality and it's now marked by competition and the desire to dominate.

Genesis 3 verse 16 God says to Eve, your desire shall be for your husband and he will rule over you. Desire and rule. The verbs desire and rule will be used later in Genesis 4 where God says to Cain, the first offspring of Adam and Eve, sin is crouching at the door, its desire is for you and you must rule it.

The relationship between the man and the woman, I will make a helper suitable for you, I will give you a partner, becomes one in which each seeks to dominate the other.

Genesis 3 verse 16, your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you is not the way it was supposed to be. God is not proscribing, God is describing, God is not proscribing any human relationship involving dominance.

God is describing the natural consequence when we disobey his good command. man. And Genesis 3 then tells us that all this spiritual, psychological, relational alienation actually affects the relationship with the earth.

[19 : 01] That relationship also unravels. The avalanche is now gathering up the created order in its sweep. The ground is cursed and there is pain in childbirth. Adam now struggles with thorns and thistles to till the ground and Eve now endures agony and pain as she gives birth to a child.

God has said in Genesis 1, be fruitful and multiply and now creation groans in order to multiply and creatures groan, to be fruitful and creatures groan in order to multiply.

First reading. But God, but God keeps pace with the avalanche. So walk through the story a second time.

God, although the earth no longer works the way it was intended to work, it still yields food, an abundance of food.

Every garden that grows in the cemetery is a sign of grace. Every farm that yields produce in a fallen world is a sign of grace, which is why it is so appropriate that every time we eat food we say grace.

[20 : 16] God did not have to keep the creative properties of creation going. God could have left the earth to completely die. The earth still yields food, grace.

Although the relationship between the man and the woman has been damaged, they still care for each other. They still want each other. Every time any relationship works in this world, it's a sign of grace.

Any sign, two people actually get along, it's a sign of grace. Any time a man and woman choose the way of servanthood, it's a sign of grace.

I mean, why does the world around us, and even the unbelieving world, why does it honor people like Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela? They're signs of grace. They've rejected the way of dominance and lordship.

They've chosen the way of submission and servanthood. notice what the text says when Adam calls his wife Eve. Genesis 3 verse 20.

[21 : 23] Now the man called his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living. Eve means living. Although this relationship is unraveling, Adam still delights in Eve, and he recognizes that although death has come into the world, God is still bringing forth life.

A doctor once told me, Daryl, always remember that the birth of every child is a sign that God has not given up on the world. Grace keeps pace with the avalanche of sin.

Although the relationship with the self is now problematic, God meets the humans in shame and he covers their nakedness. What a tender scene.

Genesis 3 verse 21. And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and he clothed them. Earlier in Genesis 3, the first humans tried to cover their shame by making clothes out of fig leaves.

God had a better idea. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, God does for the couple what they cannot do for themselves. They cannot deal with their shame, but God can and will and does and he covers them.

[22 : 36] And then the relationship with God. Oh my, how this is full of grace. God asks the question, Adam, where are you? Genesis 3 verse 9.

Where are you? The point? God really wants this relationship and is not going to give up on it. God's question is pure grace.

Obviously God knows where they are. And he knows where we are. Where are you? I think God asks the question as a way to draw us back into fellowship, to draw us.

He knows that we're afraid and we feel shame and so he draws us out of hiding instead of forcing us out of hiding. God could have said, Adam and Eve, I see you under the bush.

Now come out and let us talk. But those words would have driven them further under the bush. And Adam would have said to Eve, shh, be real quiet, maybe you'll go away. Or God could have said, Adam and Eve, come out.

[23 : 39] I still want you. I love you. But they wouldn't have believed the words because guilt drowns out the grace note in God's voice. So God asks a question because questions have a way of getting behind the defenses.

It's harder to be still before a question. Where are you? Where are you? A huge grace, a sign that God still wants this relationship of trust and intimacy.

And as we have already noted, God then clothes the fearful, ashamed humans. God does not pull them out from the bush and make them stand naked before him.

God does not yank the fig leaves off them and make them stand before his all-searching gaze. No, Genesis 3, 21, the Lord God made garments of skin and clothed them.

God knows our need to hide and so provides a hiding place in his very presence.

[24 : 46] Where are you? The question calls us out of darkness into light and in the light he covers us. He covers our shame. The prophet Isaiah would later say, I will greatly rejoice in Yahweh.

My soul will exalt in my God for he has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me with a robe of salvation. God's act in the garden that became a cemetery prefigures the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For where did God get the animal skin with which to clothe them? From a dead animal. A death took place to enable God to cover the shame of the first humans.

blood was shed to make God the hiding place for ashamed sinners. Looking at the cross and quoting from the Psalms, the apostle Paul then declares, Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, whose sins have been covered by the blood of the Lamb.

There is more grace. God guards the way to the tree of life. God is massively merciful grace. It is?

[26 : 05] Yes, it is. God is protecting us from a horrible judgment. God does not want us to go on living in independence as fallen creatures.

This is not the best of all possible worlds. And God does not want us to grab hold of life and continue in the world that is not the best of all possible worlds. God does not want us to go on living in eternity alienated from him and from ourselves and from others and from the earth.

And so he guards the way to this tree. That is grace outrunning the avalanche of sin. And then in the garden that had become a cemetery, the creator makes a great promise.

It is what the church has throughout the centuries called the proto-gospel. Genesis 3, verse 15. Speaking to the serpent who is rightly cursed, God says, I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed.

He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel. He, the seed of the woman, shall bruise you, the serpent, on the head and you, the serpent, shall bruise him, the seed of the woman, on the heel.

[27 : 22] It is in that promise that we most see grace outrunning the avalanche of sin. God is promising that one day a seed of the woman, a child of the woman, would come into the world and would take on the serpent.

This child would end up representing the whole of humanity and he would come and he would deal a death blow to the serpent. The serpent would try to hurt him, bruise him on his heel, but in hurting the seed of the woman, he would be overcome, bruised on the head.

This promise and its fulfillment is what holds the rest of the Bible together. It's this promise and its fulfillment that threads its way through the rest of the story to make sure it's a story of grace.

From that day on, from the day that God made this promise in the garden, the question became, so who is this seed of the woman? Who is the seed of the woman who is going to come and crush the serpent?

The implication being that when this seed of the woman comes, he will restore this fourfold relationship. This seed, this child, this boy, this Adam will free us from the power of death and he will bring us back into relational wholeness.

[28 : 42] The longing for this seed is, in my mind, most passionately expressed by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah. In words that I'm sure many of you know very well and in words we're going to hear a lot in the coming weeks, Isaiah says, the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.

For you will break the yoke of their burden. A child will be born to you. A son will be given to you. The government will rest on his shoulders and his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And there will be no end to his government or of his peace. Then he comes. The seed of the woman finally comes. Galatians 4, 4.

In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son, born of a woman. And right from the beginning of his life, in this fallen earth, he faces the rage of the serpent.

The serpent tries to crush him when he's just a little boy through Herod. And the serpent tries to crush him when he's an adult through the powers of religion and the powers of politics. And on the cross, the serpent thinks he has crushed the seed.

[29 : 54] Only to discover, to his horror, that the seed of the woman crushed him. This is what Mel Gibson was trying to show in his film, The Passion.

If you saw the movie, you saw that in many scenes there is this snaky, serpent-y creature who comes in and out of the scene. And you'll remember then, that at the moment that Jesus dies, there's this loud scream, and the serpent begins to coil downward into the abyss, screeching all the way.

Because there, in that moment, the serpent bruised the seed of the woman on the heel, but the seed of the woman bruised the serpent on the head. And remember what else happened when Jesus dies?

Oh, the writers of the Gospels love to tell it. In the moment Jesus died, the curtain in the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. The curtain that guards the way into the holy of holies, where the holy one chooses to dwell.

The curtain that guards the way. Now, on that curtain are embroidered seraphim, reminding us of the seraphim, teraphim, that keep humanity from the tree of life in the garden.

[31 : 10] And at the moment that the seed of the woman dies, the curtain with the cherubim is torn in two from top to bottom, signaling that the way in is now open. For Jesus Christ, you see, is humanity as we are supposed to be.

He's humanity living in utter, complete dependence on his father. And in him, it is safe to now approach the tree of life. Indeed, he is the tree of life.

And then remember what happened on Easter morning. The seed of the woman is in the garden that has become a cemetery. Mary Magdalene does not immediately recognize him.

Mary thinks he's the gardener. And she's right. She's right. Not the gardener on duty that day in the cemetery, but the gardener.

God the gardener in the garden again, calling Mary and ourselves out of our hiding back into relationship. Grace is out running sin big time.

[32 : 16] God the gardener. God the gardener. So, E. Stanley Jones, missionary to India, observed that the early Christians did not say in dismay, look what the world has come to, which is what we say the first time we read Genesis 3.

But they said in delight, look what has come to the world, which is what we say when we read Genesis 3 the second time. They saw not merely the ruin, but the resources for the construction of the ruin.

They saw not merely that sin did abound, but that grace did much more abound. Jones could say that because the Apostle Paul trumpeted that word through the collapsing Roman Empire.

Romans 5 verse 21. But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. Literally, it is where sin increased, grace super abounded.

And then the next verse, that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[33 : 23] Amazing grace. How sweet the sound. That found, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, now I'm found. I was blind.

But now I see. Grace will always outrun sin. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.