

Genesis 3:1-7

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[0 : 00] Genesis 3, page 2. When I was about 20, I was invited to preach at a special youth guest Sunday service.

And at the end of the service, the senior minister stood up and he said this, and I quote, Well, we've heard a young man speak about the Sermon on the Mount tonight, but what he really meant to say was...

And then he launched into what he thought I should have said, correcting almost everything that I had said, and spoke for exactly twice the length of time that I had.

And I made myself a promise that night never to do that. Never to throw the former preacher under the bus and to say, well, this is what they meant to say, unless they're teaching a distorted truth, a false gospel, changing the word of God, or preaching heresy, which has happened once since I've been the rector of St. John's, but Jim Packer wouldn't allow me to get up and stop it.

The problem is that we are in the early chapters of Genesis, where there is so much surplus of meaning and implication that it's impossible to cover the ground adequately.

[1 : 35] So just have a look at that last couple of paragraphs in chapter 2 from last week, for example. It does teach about marriage, but it is not primarily about marriage.

When God says it's not good that man should be alone, he's not talking about Adam feeling lonely, as though woman is created to make man feel better.

That's a different sermon. God has just put him in the garden, verse 15, and given him this joyful task of keeping and working it.

And God has not made him to do this task on his own any more than he's made Adam to be his image on his own. And the task of being the image of God and the task of keeping creation requires community, connectedness, mutuality.

Representing God in creation is far bigger than Adam, and it's far bigger than marriage. Marriage is just one way God has given his people to bring him glory and serve the needs of others.

[2 : 47] The other way is serving God in your singleness, just as Jesus did. So when God creates Eve, quote, a helper fit for him, she's not a helper to help him overcome his feelings of loneliness, as though marriage is the antidote to loneliness.

And you will know, some of the most lonely people in the world are married. No, no, Eve is created to help Adam in the task of caring for the world, of representing God to the world, to each other, in community and in harmony for the glory of God.

So the second half of Genesis 2 is really about the creation of the church. And we need the connection and community of God's people to reflect his image to the world.

It doesn't matter if you're single or you're married. We're in this together. We need one another. If you want to get married at St. John's, you will receive our wedding package.

So it's got about 100 pages in it. But the very first paragraph is headed this, God's view of marriage. Let me read it to you.

[4 : 00] The Bible teaches us to hold marriage in very high regard. First, marriage is God's good and gracious gift to us. It is not only for our private benefit, but for the benefit of all.

The goal of marriage is fundamentally the glory and service of God. It is not primarily self-fulfillment, intimacy or the meeting of each other's needs, as important as those things are.

So one of the most beautiful things that we see and that pleases God is when you see couples using their marriages and singles using their singleness to serve others in the body of Christ.

This is how we reflect the image of Christ to each other more and more. But Satan wants us to believe the lie that you've got nothing to offer and therefore you should not try and be involved.

And that's been made much worse in the last two years by COVID. And brothers and sisters, we ought to pray as we come out of COVID that the Lord would give us the humility to seek the best way, not just to take our masks off and be happy, but to serve one another for the glory of God. [5 : 13] Brings us to chapter 3, verse 1. And chapter 3, verse 1 is a screeching interruption to the flow of the story. Verse 1, Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

Jesus and the New Testament writers tell us that Satan is real, but there's a lot here that is in symbol and figure and impenetrable to us. But the verse warns us right at the start not to trust this character, the snake.

Crafty means super smart and slimy, shrewd and sneaky. And he's going to try and bend the truth to break man and woman away from God and to introduce chaos back into creation.

And it is a seduction. And the prime weapon that Satan uses, which is the same weapon he wields today so effectively all around the world, are spiritual lies.

So in John chapter 8, Jesus says this about the devil. He was a murderer from the beginning. He doesn't stand in the truth. There's no truth in him.

[6 : 30] When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. In other words, lying is Satan's native language.

He's fluent and brilliant in it. And he wants to bring us to believe his lies. And we only have a few minutes this morning, but there are so many subtle half-truths in Satan's words here.

It's hard to track with them all. But at the centre of Satan's lies, there's one central lie. It is the cosmic blasphemy.

And it's this. This is where Satan wants to get people, that you can't trust God and you can't trust his word, that God is not good, and that you should do all you can to change places with him.

And it's a decision which we see here, and we'll see next week, is tragic and fateful, and it's a decision we live out and live with, and live with the consequences every day.

[7 : 32] Genesis 3 is the largest change in what it means to be human since creation. It's a tragic, it's a stunning transformation for man and woman and for all their children, both outwardly, but more profoundly, inwardly.

And the way the snake works this transformation is by cutting lies, and then by the open rejection of God's truth, of God's word.

Now, it's very important that we think about this in the context. At every point in the story so far, the connection between God and his world, and God and his creatures, has been through his word.

So in chapter one, chapter one is the account of God speaking. And God said, and God said, and God said it 14 times. And God moves the world from formlessness to fullness by his living, personal, and creative word.

So that what happens at the end of chapter one is that the world bristles with purpose. His words have flawlessly achieved his purposes. We come to chapter two, and when it comes to man and woman, the creator relates to them differently than every other creature.

[8 : 43] He speaks to them. He breathes his breath of life into them. So before sin enters the world, God's connection at every point with humanity is by his word, which is why, incidentally, we spend so much time at St. John's attending to his word, and praying through his word, seeking his word.

And this is exactly where Satan wants to attack. It's at the very connection between God and his creature. He attacks the word of God. So these verses, verses one to six, are a tragedy in two steps, two steps.

And the first step is undermining the word of God. And then the second step is completely overthrowing and denying God's word. So let's look at undermining God's word in verse one again.

So the snake slithers up to the woman, doesn't show all his cards. He hides what he's trying to do. And he says this, his first words, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

Hear the changes? It's a very good translation. In the original, the word actually, really is at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. So Satan starts, really?

[10 : 04] Did God say you shall not eat any tree in the garden? Such a slimy question. I mean, it has the suggestion that God is stingy and mean. Every syllable that we've been through so far has shown God's generosity and goodness.

And this already, he's suggesting the great cosmic lie that God cannot fully be trusted. And he's misquoting what God said.

God put one tree out of bounds, but he says, you shall not eat of any tree of the garden. So he distorts the word of God in Eve's mind.

And he wants Eve to begin thinking that God's word is restricting her freedom, stopping her fulfillment. That she would be better off if she grew a little bit more sophisticated and didn't just take God's word as read as the unquestioned good that she has so far.

You understand? Are you with me? Are you with me so far? See, the implication, God doesn't want the best for you. He's holding back something from you.

[11:15] What right does he have to do that? It's ridiculous that anything should be forbidden to you. I mean, when you really think about it, God's word is not as good as you've been led to believe.

It's not the source of blessing. He's holding out on you. If you cross the line, that's where God's blessing is. If you go outside of what God says, that's where blessing and life and fun and fullness is.

It's exactly the same lies Satan whispers in our hearts every day. And if you listen to, if you look carefully at Eve's answer, she does try to correct the snake, but she makes God's word stricter than it is.

She adds that she can't even touch the tree lest we die, as though God is full of threats. And come to think of it, she says, it is a bit harsh.

It is a bit restrictive and authoritarian. You see how Satan is working to undermine the word of God. He's seducing. He's not forcing them to eat. He's not forcing them to act.

[12:20] He doesn't begin by challenging them. He begins by working on what they believe about God. Because if Satan can get us to believe that God is not thoroughly good, that God has hidden and shady motivations, the very next step is that his word is no longer the source of blessing, but an obstruction to my blessing.

So you see step one, undermining the goodness of God and his word. Step two, overturning and denying his word, verses four and five. And it's only now that he's cast doubt on the thorough goodness and grace of God that the snake is able to get them over the line.

So he comes out in verse four and he just flatly contradicts the word of God.

You will not surely die. You will not really die. The words, God has lied to you. God is a liar.

He is an insecure, selfish deity. He's just doing it to keep you in place. He wants all the good stuff for himself. And the only way to get you there is to give you threats, but his threats are empty.

[13:41] He's not going to judge you. You can't seriously believe in judgment. That's primitive and naive. Verse five, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

Here it is. Now it's out in the open. God is a bad actor. He is stopping you because you're a threat to him. He doesn't want you to eat of the tree because you'll get his power and you'll make a better God than he will in your life.

The whole idea of knowing good and evil is not an intellectual knowing, nor is it an experiential knowing. The knowledge of good and evil is the power to decide what is good and evil.

That's the power that belongs to God alone. So the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a symbol for who is going to decide what is right and wrong.

And it's a great mercy from God that there is that tree in the garden because it shows man and woman that God remains sovereign to care for his whole world while they seek to obey within it.

[14:51] Later in the Old Testament, the kings of Israel were described as the ones who know good and evil. They were the ones who determined what was right and wrong. They had prerogative to make decisions in the kingdom.

And this here is what the Bible calls sin. Sin is not doing naughty things. It's placing myself in the place of God.

It's saying God is not going to determine what's good and evil. I'm going to determine it. And it's a great exchange where I try and trade places with God. And when I do it, I do a very bad job of it. But I think it makes sense, doesn't it, of the new religious impulse in North America, which we talked about a couple of weeks ago, this new paganism, where I make God either part of nature or part of myself.

I don't need God to tell me what to do. I can become my own God. I'm accountable to nobody. Nobody is going to put any limits on me. And I tried to write a new pagan creed this week.

[15 : 58] It goes like this. I believe in myself, the creator of heaven and earth. Sorry, the curator of heaven and earth. I believe in my autonomy, my authenticity, my right to be affirmed in everything I think and do.

Amen. All together now. And as Eve fantasises about taking the place of God, where's Adam? He's right there, passively silent. I know. Verse six, we read some of the saddest words in the Bible. She took the fruit and ate it and gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. And in doing so, they overturned creation. They condemn creation to groaning and decay. And the entire created order is turned on its head.

Instead of hearing and believing and following God's word and loving one another and ruling creation, Adam and Eve listen to the voice of the creature and they try to rule God.

[16 : 57] And every time we do wrong and act in defiance of God, we do the same thing. We act with the same arrogance and become false gods. And next week, we're going to look at some of the results and fallout of this decision.

But I just want to finish by talking about two things. One is the power of sin and the second is the greater power of grace. So, the rest of chapter three and the story of the whole Bible is about how deep and profound this rupture and ruin is between humanity and God, humanity and humanity and humanity and creation.

Death enters the paradise of God. Adam and Eve are ejected from the paradise of God.

Relationships are turned over and become exploitative. God's good creation is spoiled.

The image of God is now cracked and we need the work of God to be restored. And in two chapters, when Adam and Eve have children outside the garden, they are born in Adam and Eve's image, which means we pass on our corrupt nature to our children, which is why you don't have to teach your children to tell lies.

We're born with this infection that touches every part of us. It doesn't mean we're all as bad as we can be, but no part of our lives or our personalities or our character is untouched by this rebellion.

[18 : 26] And that means that we as humans are not perfectible on our own, you know, with our own resources. You know, no amount of moral effort or education or ethical management will enable us to deal with the depth of this issue.

It can help. It can help manage our behaviours and attitudes, but it can't change our hearts and it can't bring us back to God. Which is why Jesus says that what ruins us and pollutes us is not what's outside of us, but what's inside of us.

And I think that's why the immediate and spontaneous, the first reaction in verse 7 of Adam and Eve is shame. Their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

There's an instantaneous loss of relationship with God and with each other. And now their nakedness becomes the source of shame because they immediately know they can no longer trust each other.

Vulnerability and harmony is replaced with fear and hiding. And it makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, if I'm trying to play God and you're trying to play God, the one thing I cannot afford to show you is any vulnerability that I have.

[19 : 41] And shame indicates that this has gone right down deep into their identity of who they are. It's not just guilt that they've done something wrong. It's shame that they are wrong. But fig leaves will never deal with the underlying lies that they have believed.

We should deal with the symptoms of our shame as God does next week as he makes them aprons. But we need God to deal with our underlying alienation.

So that's the power of sin. But I cannot leave this without talking about the greater power of God's grace. Because since the rupture between us and God has been initiated on our side, there's nothing that we can do to mend ourselves or mend creation or mend the relationship with God.

We cannot take ourselves back to the garden. We can't restore things with God. I'll say one more thing on that in just a moment.

When the New Testament comes, it tells us that Jesus is the new Adam. He's a better Adam. He's a stronger Adam. He's a more wonderful Adam. He comes and faces exactly these temptations, but he never sins.

[20 : 58] And he comes from heaven at the initiative of the Father, and he brings the grace of God and the restoration that we require so much by the power of the Holy Spirit, the restoration to God.

And he cleanses, he's able to cleanse us from both guilt and shame. And to begin to transform us again into the image of his own likeness. And that is why Christianity has the most realistic view of what it means to be human.

We're not naively optimistic and romantic. We don't have rose-coloured glasses. We believe we're all trying to play God. We're all capable of self-deception and evil.

And that means that every human project and every human cause may produce limited good, but it won't fix things. And that's why, of course, Christians have always been on the forefront of good causes, because we do try and limit the damage of sin.

But we're neither naively optimistic nor cynically pessimistic, because God's grace is at work to restore people into the image of his son.

[22 : 10] That's why we look around the world, we look around the room, and we see some of the amazing things that God is doing in us and through us. And since Satan's weapon, key weapon, is lying about the grace of God, Jesus comes full of grace and truth.

And the truth of God is greater than the lie. And the grace of God is greater than sin. In the garden, there was this exchange, which we've ratified every day of our lives, where we exchange the truth of God for the lie.

But Jesus comes, and in his death, he works a greater exchange, one that's more powerful, more effective, more long-lasting, more far-reaching than the garden.

On the cross, Jesus exchanges place with us, and he becomes sin for us so that we become his righteousness. And in dying, Jesus conquers death.

He gives his life to us, a life that's eternal, glorious, the life of heaven. And he will come again, says the scriptures, and he will judge every lie and every evil deed and every evil thought, bringing justice and equity and punishment for the guilty.

[23 : 29] But for those who hide in him, as we've sung in every single one of our hymns this morning, the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ will reverse the curse, will bring life in death, will give sinful men and women a new heart and a new nature from the outside, directly from God himself.

The problem with stopping this sermon is I feel like we could almost go through any New Testament book and have a look at it. But I just, I point out this from 1 John 3 that Sarah read to us a moment ago.

Listen to these words. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. Or how about this? He appeared to take away sin and in him there is no sin. Beloved, we are God's children now.

What we will be has not yet appeared. But we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies themselves as he is pure.

Amen.