

Snake on a Plain

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to Genesis chapter 3 on page 2 in your Bible. And as you do, I want to apologise for the title of the sermon, Snake on a Plane.

Sean insisted on it. It's his favourite film. He's seen it 53 times. And he just wanted us to actually... That's not true. The title came from some people sitting in the front row in the chapel and you can speak to them about it later.

Genesis 3 is one of the most important chapters in the whole of scriptures. Can't understand ourselves, our families, our future.

Can't understand the newspapers unless we begin to come to grips with it. And it describes the greatest change that has happened in humanity since creation with one possible exception.

A stunning transformation, tragic, not just outwardly but inwardly, and you know that the chapter is completely disinterested in philosophical questions of where evil comes from.

[1 : 05] Instead it charts this transformation and the corruption of what it means to be human. It is the record of how the image of God is defaced and now remains in ruins.

And I think it's absolutely crucial for us to grasp it. We tend to flatter ourselves. We want to think of ourselves as those who live in Genesis chapter 2.

We look around the world and we see those who look like they live after chapter 3. But this chapter tells us that every single one of us in our present condition lives outside the garden after the fall and there is a huge chasm between who I am and the original innocence and beauty and harmony of creation.

And I must confess preaching this that I struggle with two tensions. The first one goes like this. On one side, I feel very well qualified to preach on this.

You know, being a preacher means you often have to preach things that are beyond your experience. You come to a passage in the Bible, you know it's true because it's God's word, but it's beyond what I've experienced, not this passage.

[2 : 17] I consider myself something of an expert on sin. And if you were to know what was in my heart, you wouldn't be listening to me. On the other hand, we need to know that Satan hates to be exposed as he is in this chapter.

He deals in lies and he deals in deception and he hates the light of God's word shining on him in this way. Because the Bible teaches us that there's more to reality than God, you and me and this creation.

That there is a profoundly malevolent and evil spiritual being who is intelligent, subtle and outside us, who the New Testament calls Satan.

When the New Testament speaks about this passage, he calls him Satan. He is more cunning than all of you and I put together. He is more sophisticated than we are. And he doesn't come to us in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork.

He comes to us dressed in the most attractive option. In this chapter, a little bit like a theologian. And he does not wish to be exposed.

[3 : 27] So while I feel at home talking about sin, I want you to be aware that as we are looking at this passage, there is a spiritual effort underway in your heart and in my heart to tow us away from the truth, to shine the light somewhere else, to distract us and to deviate us from what God wants to say to us.

That's the first tension. The second tension is this. On the one hand, this doctrine, this teaching about sin, is probably the only thing in all Christian doctrine that is absolutely empirically provable day by day, just by a newspaper.

But on the other hand, as we come close to it and begin to face the reality of sin in our own lives and in the lives of others, we find it's not just Satan who's exposed, but we are exposed.

And as God begins to speak to us, our own excuses and our justifications come to the surface. And I don't think we like hearing the truth about ourselves whenever it's not positive.

The passage teaches us two things. I've got two headings, the fall and the fallout, and there are two sections in each of those headings. Let's look at the fall. And as we do, you remember that the rest of the Bible speaks about this as a real historical event, as well as representative of what's happening in the hearts of each of us.

[4 : 48] This devastating shift takes place as sin enters the world. And of course, the only place we see sin these days is on the dessert menu for certain chocolates or in an advertising brochure for some sort of luxury item which we just have to have.

The true nature of sin, the true nature of the fall, has two components to it. The first is unbelief. Unbelief. Chapter 3, verse 1.

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made, more crafty and cunning. And he said to the woman, did God say, did he really say, you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?

Did he really say that? And it sounds like a perfectly reasonable and respectable question, a question of ethics and philosophy and interpretation, a very proper topic for discussion, don't you think?

Except it just breathes the spirit of doubt and it just changes how we understand God's word slightly. It changes the command of God into a question mark.

[5 : 57] And there's a shift of perspective away from God's generosity and his goodness to the suggestion that perhaps, perhaps God doesn't have our best in mind.

Perhaps he can't be fully trusted. You remember God said, you shall eat of all the trees except one. And Satan now says, you shall eat of any tree. And the shift is away from God's kindness.

And now we start to think about what God is not allowing us to do. And the word of God, which has been the boundary for blessing, the truth and reality, suddenly becomes a limitation.

It's a restriction. You see the implication. God does not want the best for us. He wants to restrict my full humanity. I mean, how important could it possibly be to God, what tree I really eat?

And isn't it a bit of an insult that God should come and say, I shouldn't do something? It's ridiculous. Surely there's another way to look at things, even a better way to look at things, than the way God puts it.

[7 : 02] What Satan is trying to do is, he's trying to get Eve to believe a lie. He's trying to transform her understanding of God and his word, to move away from thinking that God and his word is life and truth and loveliness.

To think it's just, you know, it's not quite the best thing for me. Maybe real blessing is not there. Maybe it's over here. And behind this, you see, is unbelief.

God can't be trusted. He looks down and he sees us having fun and he says, stop it. Is that pleasure? Stop it. This is how sin comes to us.

It's as we begin to trust this lie, we distrust God and his goodness. Very important, brothers and sisters. Satan's chief weapon is lying and God's chief response is the truth.

Remember, Jesus says, the devil is a liar and the father of lies. When he lies, he speaks according to his nature. And if he can get you and me to believe what is false about God, he has us under his power.

[8 : 14] So we read verse 2, the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

Now I think we should give good marks to Eve for trying here. She does correct Satan. She goes back to what God says. Or she does make God's word just a little tougher.

You shan't touch the tree. And then right at the end, she introduces this perhaps, lest perhaps you may die. Verse 4, but the serpent said to the woman, you will not die, which is meant to be said with a sneer, you will not die.

For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. You cannot take God's word at face value.

You can't just believe it. You won't die. The only reason God wants you to obey him is to keep you down, to keep you in your place. He wants to keep good things for himself.

[9 : 15] He's a liar. And don't you find it instructive that the first doctrine that Satan denies is the doctrine of judgment. So that whenever you hear the doctrine of judgment being denied, look and the snake will be close at hand.

It's devastating, isn't it? I mean, sin is not immoral things that we do. Sin is this profound shift of unbelief where we make our decisions, we live our lives as though God can't be trusted, that he does not love us absolutely, that his word is not true.

I think one of the favourite Canadian ways of defining sin is to define sin in terms of what harms others. That is not the Bible view of sin.

Sometimes our sin harms others, sometimes it doesn't. That's not really what sin is. Sin is a rupture in my relationship with God. It comes from my unbelief in his goodness.

It may lead to harm, it may not. And so verse 6, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, delight to the eyes, desire to make one wise, she took the fruit and ate and she also gave some to her husband who was standing there mute and he ate.

[10 : 35] Looks good, feels right, practical thing to do, take the fruit. And we choose our experience over God's word because underneath we begin to believe that God's word is not a boundary for blessing and that's what unbelief is all about.

But there's a second element to what the fall and sin is all about and it is pride. Do you notice that the heart of Satan's suggestion is this tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This is what he has wanted Adam and Eve to want from the moment he appeared. Remember in chapter 2 God said, don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the day that you eat it you shall die.

And when Satan comes in verse 1 in chapter 3, his focus is you should eat it. And in verse 5 Satan says, when you eat it God knows your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil.

And in verse 7 it says their eyes were opened. And then at the end of the chapter in verse 22 God says that Adam and Eve has become like one of us knowing good and evil.

[11 : 42] The tree is absolutely pivotal to Satan's plan and I've got to tell you it is not an apple tree. Jesus did not die because Adam and Eve ate apples.

Nor does it have anything to do with sex. Sex was part of the creation of God in chapter 2 in the one flesh relationship. Nor does it have anything to do with experiencing evil because God does not experience evil in that sense.

The knowledge of good and evil is the right to determine what is good and evil. It is the right to decide what is right and what is wrong.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in chapter 3 is a symbol for deciding what is good and what is evil. Sin is not so much law breaking, it's law making.

And later on in the Old Testament when the kings are described and King Solomon comes along and he has to make rulings and judgments on all sorts of things in Israel. He is called the one who has the knowledge of good and evil.

[12 : 50] He is the ruler, he has authority, it's his prerogative. It's very important. You see, sin is not so much our naughty deeds, it's putting ourselves in the place of God.

It's saying, God, you will not determine what is right and wrong. I'm going to determine what is right and wrong. God made us in his image and put us in the garden to rule in his place, gave us incredible dignity.

But he didn't make us gods. God's. And the difference is symbolised in this tree to decide what is right and what is wrong. And as Adam and Eve believe the lie and as we believe the lie, we put ourselves in the place of God.

Do you notice how creation itself is turned on its head? Instead of God being God and man and woman submitting to God's word and ruling creation, it's turned upside down and they listen to the word of the snake and they try and be God.

And every time we decide what is right and wrong in defiance of the word of God, we play the role of the false god. You see, don't you think it is a massive arrogance to think that I am the measure of what is right and what is wrong?

[14:03] That I determine what is beautiful and what is good? That guided by the light of my own reason and my experience, I decide without God and against God what the good life ought to be. It is the disease of sin.

And this is a very Anglican way of speaking about it. Sometime later, you should look at Article 9 in the 39 articles. Cramner speaks about this as an infection that remains in us even after we are regenerated.

Because the Bible distinguishes between the disease and the symptoms, between sin and sins. And sin itself is not the immoral things we do, but it is a deep, anti-God, unbelieving pride.

The thing about it is, you can be one of the most moral people in this room and still have a deep, anti-God, pride, ruling your heart.

You can be a decent person and still living with yourself as God. And I think we need to come to terms with this underlying disease. The problem is, if I start playing God, what are you going to do?

[15:17] If you start playing God, then we've got a problem. There's not room for both of us, you see. I sometimes feel, and I don't know how you do, I sometimes feel when I read magazines and newspapers, if we could just establish peace and civility and niceness, all our problems would be solved.

What this chapter is saying is that it's good to establish peace and civility and niceness, but unless we deal with the underlying disease, all those things are just putting fingers in the dike.

This is the Bible's view of who we are as human beings. We are afflicted with this deadly disease of unbelief and pride. That's the fall. That's what it is. And let me move very quickly from the fall to the fallout.

What are the results? There are two immediate results, and the first is shame. Shame, verse 7. And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

You see, there is an instant loss of relationship with each other. As soon as they take the tree, as soon as they decide what's right and wrong, they can't trust each other. There's no longer vulnerability and harmony.

[16:35] Instead, I am frightened of you, I am fearful of what you think of me and you of me, and all that God has created is now replaced with shame.

And their natural response is not suddenly to turn back to God and say, Lord, what have we done? Please forgive us. Yes, it's to make these fig leaves and to cover their own shame. And the fact that it rises so spontaneously is proof positive of their guilt.

The fig leaves, you know, making fig leaves and covering themselves is not repentance. It's not turning back to God. It is, in fact, a futile attempt to cover the symptoms of their sin.

Let me just point out, verse 21, God himself sows clothing together and covers them, which means that it is right for us to deal with the symptoms of sin and of shame, as long as we remember that all the fig leaves in the world will not deal with our underlying guilt and the disease itself.

Verse 8, 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.

[17:49] And the Lord God called to the man and said to him, where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of thee in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself. And he said, who told you you were naked?

Have you eaten of the tree that I commanded you not to eat? This is very wonderful. This is very exposing. The way shame and guilt works is it makes us want to avoid the presence of God, avoid his presence.

we now naturally have lost our love of hearing God's voice. We and they are afraid of his voice because his voice comes as the reminder to them that they are trying to play God.

And that is why people don't naturally come to church. It has nothing to do with our musical taste or our intellectual objections or our business or our lifestyle issues.

It is because we are very busy playing God and the one thing we cannot afford to do is to hear the true God speak to us. His voice strikes deeply into our hearts because it is the only thing in the end that can deal with our guilt which we are so busily covering.

[19:01] And so instead of the fig leaves Adam and Eve run for the trees. Perhaps the trees will cover us and hide us. And the irony is of course that the trees were the good wonderful beautiful gift of God in the first place and this is exactly our strategy you see.

We take the good gifts that God has given us and we use them to hide from God and to not hear his word. For some of us it might be a cause something bigger than ourselves.

Something very good in itself but it can become something which functions as a way of hiding from God. For some of us it's busyness I'm sure. a whole host of other socially acceptable addictions. But they are death if we use them to hide from God and they only increase our alienation. And God comes to us in great humility and great love and he asks us his questions where are you? Who told you? What have you done? And his questions are very, very important. If the first fallout is shame the second is blame.

[20 : 12] Verse 12 The man said The woman whom thou gavest to be with me she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate.

And the Lord God said to the woman what is this that you have done? And the woman said the serpent beguiled me and I ate. You notice what Adam does.

This is very clear. I am not responsible. I am a victim of my circumstances. I am not to blame. It is someone else that made me do this.

And what Adam does is he lays off blame in two directions onto the woman and then he blames God. He says the woman you gave me. You're the one responsible for this.

You've got to take your blame in this God. So God turns to the woman and she blames the serpent. And in doing that they demonstrate that they have changed their allegiance from God to Satan.

[21 : 15] Because they no longer deal with the truth uprightly but they twist the truth to justify themselves. And so do we.

What the heart desires the will chooses the mind justifies. We distort and twist the truth to our own advantage.

Have you noticed this week this terrible story about Tom Ellison charged with these crimes? The way he defends himself is to play the victim. The perpetrator blames the victims for what happened. That is the way sin works. And the Bible says this permeates our whole being, our heart, our soul, our intellect. and we try and cover ourselves and we try and hide from God and then we distort the truth and avoid accountability and ultimately we blame God himself and when we do that we choose to side with Satan.

And what we really need is a new nature. We need a new humanity. We need a new Adam to come from heaven who will remake our nature washing it and cleansing it and bringing it so that it can be justified before God.

[22 : 34] We need a desperately big act of grace from God bringing life and goodness. And I want to finish for just one moment with you.

If you would turn to Romans chapter 5 on page 146 near the back. Romans chapter 5 You and I begin life not as pre-Genesis 3 human beings but as post-Genesis 3 human beings.

It doesn't matter how nice you are, the decision was taken for us in the garden and we inherit the corruption from our parents which is why unbelief and pride are natural for each of us.

And in verse 12 of Romans 5 we read that the first Adam came and death and sin spread because of him and then in verse 14 there is a second Adam who is coming and the remarkable thing about verse 17 is it tells us that what Christ has done doesn't just reverse what Adam did it does much much more let me read verse 17 if because of one man's trespass speaking of Adam death reigned through that one more death meaning shame and blame as well as physical death much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ our need is immense the provision of God is much much much greater and in Jesus Christ God gives us back far more than was lost in the garden he doesn't just give us back and remove the alienation and guilt and shame and death he brings us to something far greater that's why the Bible moves not from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Eden but from the Garden of Eden to a city a grace filled loved filled life filled city where all the promises and all the good things of the garden are there but perfected and fulfilled and all the effects of our rebellion are much more than reversed they are outdone and now our task is to receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness receive the free gift of grace and the abundance of righteousness let's do that shall we as we begin to pray together