

Genesis 3:8-15

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, *"Where are you?"* ¹⁰He said, *"I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* ¹¹He said, *"Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* ¹²The man said, *"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."* ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, *"What is this that you have done?"* The woman said, *"The serpent tricked me, and I ate."*

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life."

¹⁵*I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."*

Hebrews 10:19-23

¹⁹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since **we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,** ²⁰**by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain** (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

Mark 15:37-39

³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And **the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.** ³⁹Now when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, *"Truly **this man was God's Son!**"*

SERMON: God's First Promise: Not Even Sin Can Separate Us From God

You may be wondering how our Gospel reading pertains to the promises of God and the way they fit into God's plan for creation. It makes no mention of promises. But on the cross, at the moment of Christ's death, God's plan for salvation of creation came to completion, as did his promises of a Messiah to bring salvation. God's plan from the beginning was to remain close to us, but sin has gotten in the way of that. The curtain in the temple being torn in two, mentioned in both New Testament passages, is important. That curtain separated the Holy Place in the Temple from the "Holy of Holies" – the Most Holy Place – the place in the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and so was considered the dwelling place of God's presence. It was a space entered only once per year, and then only by the High Priest. But God's plan from the beginning was to be present with his people. He even walked in the Garden of Eden and spoke with Adam and Eve even before the first sin took place. And in Jesus Christ, God came down once again to walk in creation amongst his people. Tearing the curtain to the Holy of Holies was symbolic of God opening up the way to personal relationship with him for all his children.

I know that most of the Jewish folks in Christ's time thought his death proved he WAS NOT the Messiah, nor the Son of God as he had claimed, since they assumed Jesus couldn't save himself. The truth is: he chose not to. These doubters could not believe that the Father would choose to

send his Son to die, which remains a stumbling block for some people, even today. And yet, Jesus professed in John 3:16 that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* And he also taught, in John chapter 10, that *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,"* and stated a few verses later that *"I lay down my life for the sheep."* Additionally, multiple times in the Gospels Jesus told his followers that he was going to die in Jerusalem. Scripture has made clear that God's Messiah was nothing like they expected, nor was the freedom all have gained through the sacrifice of the Son of God – the willing sacrifice.

Why do believers across the ages have difficulty accepting this as God's plan from the beginning? Perhaps it is because mere humans cannot understand God's *eternal perspective*. Plus, the people of Christ's day didn't understand that he was truly God incarnate. After all, how could the Son be spoken to by the Father, and have the Holy Spirit alight on him after his baptism, if they were all one and the same God? Most believers have difficulty grasping the concept of the Trinity, God who is three-yet-one, that was at the root of their problem. This is one of those times when I think our materiality – our physical substance and its limitations – gets in our way, as does our belief that we are the pinnacle of creation: the highest thinkers. It is hard to accept that something goes beyond our ability to comprehend it. But where our physical and mental limitations prevent our understanding, **this is where we allow our faith to take over.**

Genesis tells of creation's beginning, much as the book of Revelation reveals something of God's preparations for the new creation that is yet to come. Looking back at our first beginning, there was careful planning that took place, with God building space and time, matter in all of its many forms, and organizing all that was needed to sustain life before creating living things. Being all-knowing and able to see across all of time, do you believe that sin entering the world could have been a surprise to him? Does that seem credible to you?

I find that incredible to believe. God wasn't surprised by the sinning of Adam and Eve any more than parents are when their children do something they've been told not to do. Disappointed, sure...but God was not surprised. God created us in his image and seeks relationship with us. So, knowing that sin was inevitable for us, do you not think he made a plan at the dawn of creation to reestablish relationships, to make known his forgiveness in some way? Some today may not approve of the way to reconciliation that God created...Christ's sacrifice...but that does not mean the Father did not send his Son into the world to win victory over death and sin through the cross. Such disapproval is not so much hubris as it is an inability to see things from God's eternal perspective. Our Trinitarian God knows that this life we live, which we cannot see beyond, is a *trifle* compared to our eternal life. Talk about a perspective that is impossible for us to relate to!

In the beginning, as he created light and water and air and land, God set his plans into motion to allow us to prosper, but also to allow us to find forgiveness and hope for our future. Creating us as children who need to learn and grow, he not only set up our environment but also guiderails – rules that help us to learn and grow in safety. That is how I see the garden of Eden – a place without all of the perils our world has today...a place for us to take our first steps, trying to be as much like our Father as we could be, within the confines he had set for us.

Those confines included rules set for our protection. We hear in *Genesis 2:16-17* that God said *"You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and*

evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." God gave Adam, and in time Eve, as long as they needed for safe growth within the confines of Eden, walking alongside the Creator and talking in the garden. Some consider this statement in Genesis to be God's first promise to humanity – a promise that disobeying our Creator would have dire consequences: Our infancy period, our protected time of growth, would be over once humanity chose to disobey the one rule God had set for us. We would no longer have forever to enjoy the good in creation *uncomplicated* by the bad. Death would become a part of life for us. But I don't see this as a promise, rather more as a hard truth, one of our first and greatest lessons – with sin comes death and destruction, which rob us of paradise.

Indeed, we have experienced no part of life in Eden, although most of us have known a time of protection by our elders. While we were young, they set guidelines and tried to keep us safe from harm until we developed enough to make decisions for ourselves...and were able to face the consequences of those decisions. God, THE Elder, continues to provide guidance for proper living together, desiring that we learn to care for and enjoy this world. His time of protection continues, just in a less sheltered environment. No longer are we surrounded by paradise. Life and death exist, side-by-side. In the time since God planned and set Creation into motion, the cumulative effects upon all life and the earth itself of humanity's poor choices are readily apparent – never more so than in our inability to get along, to enjoy good relationships with all peoples. And for many friends and neighbors, a relationship with God is nonexistent. I cannot begin to imagine the sorrow God feels when looking at the sum total of the harm we have done by going against his commandments, by not putting God first and neighbor second in our priorities.

And yet, God IS still known in the world, although not personally known to everyone, not in the way he made possible by Christ's death on the cross. Humanity has not reached its peak, as so many believe, but continues to learn and grow today. Those of us who do seek to follow God, to understand his will for us, would do well to consider his promises to humanity, and his commitment to making good relationships possible for everyone. His commitment should never be questioned. The One God, in all three persons, is steadfast. The persons of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – work together as only they can, for they are all God, the One God. They act only in ways that support and complement one another, to bring God's will to fruition in our lives. But this fruit is only plentiful when we open ourselves to God's promises and possibilities.

Romans 8:1-4 tells us *"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God [the Father] has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* In other words, because of the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is no need for us to stand in condemnation for our sins or those of others. The law – the guardrails or guidelines, if you will – that God has set up to direct our actions remain, even after Christ. But we need not stand ashamed of past mistakes or poor choices. In Christ, our relationship with the Father stands repaired, and we can approach our Father without fear, knowing he loves us and accepts us as his own. Christ is our Savior – the Messiah, the one promised to God's people since sin first entered creation while Adam and Eve yet lived in the garden. And yes, God's Savior was promised to us that early, while paradise still existed.

Our reading from Genesis 3 today is believed to include the first Scripture passage indicating God's plan for saving humanity from sin's hold. Hear again the words of verse 15, spoken to the snake, the tempter (or our Adversary): *"¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."* Note that God turns from speaking about Eve to speaking of her offspring and speaks of a male offspring to come – *"he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."* God's plan for his Messiah, for entering the world in Jesus Christ, was fully formed, ready to reveal and commence as soon as humanity first chose to go against the instructions of God. **Our Father was ready for the first sin.** That sin signaled the end of humanity's time in infancy and the beginning of harsher environments for our learning and growing, now that we had learned to go against the will of God.

God's response to the entry of Sin, and the corresponding death and separation resulting from it, is also witnessed to by *Romans 6:23*, a familiar verse that tells us *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Death may have come because of Sin, but God's love remains, hence this gift. Our Father loves us enough that he sent his Son for our salvation. John 3:16 says all that is required of us is that we believe in Jesus Christ, and we will be saved from sin and death. The choice to accept salvation is ours, meaning the choice to continue sinning or return to God rests with us. And this promise from God is for all people, as this passage clearly says "everyone," or in some translations *"whosoever believeth in him should not perish..."*

I make this distinction today not to emphasize the universal offer of salvation so much as to point out that not all of God's promises are made to us. As I mentioned last week, some of God's promises are to specific people. God promised Abraham a multitude of descendants, which is not a promise made to everyone. God promised David in 2 Samuel 7 that he would raise up his offspring and be a father to him, that even when this offspring sinned God's promise of steadfast love would remain, and David's kingdom and throne would be made sure before God forever. This, too, is a specific promise that was not directed at all people, but to David, although it impacts all of us.

It is important to note, as we begin to explore the promises of God, that not all promises are general, applicable to every believer across time in all situations. Many promises have limitations associated with them or are conditional even when they are universal. It is important to consider the conditions under which God's promises are made so we don't try to apply them out of context. Too many people try to get God's Word to say what they want to hear, instead of hearing what God has truly said. This is how the *prosperity Gospel* has taken hold in society, by taking the promises of God out of context or applying them in ways that they were never intended to be applied. We must never strip God's meaning from his promises, as this is blasphemous and we would be guilty of leading others astray. I promise to take care in explaining God's promises to you, for Jesus has said *"Occasions for sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come! ² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin."* A millstone sounds a little too heavy for me to carry, even under water... So, believe me when I say: I will take great care to speak openly, clearly and truthfully about God's promises.

In my humble opinion, God's first promise is reflected in his plan to make sure sin does not keep us from relationship with him. So, remember – **not even sin can separate us from God!**