

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one through whom everything was created, Our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

We embark today on a journey through some of the most epic stories of the Old Testament. We begin our journey, where else, at the beginning, well almost... The story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is probably one of the most familiar stories of the Bible. It's also one of the most misunderstood... We're not starting with that familiar creation story, but rather with the other creation story, the one many people either gloss over or don't even remember exists. In this version of creation, the Lord God artistically, beautifully, and divinely forms the man from the dust of the earth. In the verses we skipped over this morning, God created all living things from the dust of the ground after creating Man. As God was creating all the wonderful animals and birds, God enlisted the man to help in the creative process by naming all the creatures. After that was finished, God realized the man still did not have a suitable partner, so God created the woman. We continue with the story after the work of creating and naming all the animals had been completed. That's when the serpent entered the picture and deceived our first couple. They disobeyed God's one and only command, which was to leave that one tree in the middle of the garden alone.

Just on the face of it, this story appears to be a myth or fantasy. You don't have to be a Bible scholar to figure that out. I mean, when was the last time you

encountered a talking snake? So, call it a fantasy, a myth, or a fable, it's obviously not to be taken literally. However, just because a story in the Bible isn't meant to be literal, that doesn't mean there isn't great truth in the story. Many myths and fables contain great wisdom. In fables, the animals and even the people in the story are character types that represent traits we can easily recognize in ourselves and other people. In this case, the serpent represents temptation personified and the man and the woman both together represent sin personified. It's easy to see why the writer of this story picked a serpent to represent temptation. Snakes are unusually thought to be cunning, but they are also slimy and treacherous to boot. So, in this scene of our story the tempter simply serves to externalize what is already going on in the hearts of humankind.

The fall of humankind into sin has plagued humans almost since the beginning. In our confession we admit before God and one another that we've done many things God has commanded us not to do, and we've also *not done* what we know God *has* commanded us to do. To make matters even worse, we're born with this sin built right into our DNA. We have the natural tendencies toward sin and there's nothing we can do about it. In this masterpiece of a story, sin is portrayed for what it truly is. Sin is, first and foremost, disobedience of God. It's doing what we know he wants us not to do, and it is not doing what we know he wants us to do. I believe disobedience to God's commands is actually the outward

manifestation of a deeper trouble. When we do wrong or fail to do what's right, we're showing symptoms of a much deeper and more sinister disease.

Underneath it all we have at least 3, probably many more, ailments that come to the surface and show themselves as what we call sin. First off, we're people who are discontent. We're dissatisfied with what God has given us and we want more. Many times, what's behind the outward sin is that we're not satisfied with what we have. We're a greedy people and no matter how much we have we seem to always want more. Another underlying ailment that shows itself as sin is our self-deceit. We're looking for freedom from being restrained. We don't like restrictions that keep us tied down. We believe freedom means we can do what we want, when we want it. The problem is that's only an illusion of real freedom. Real freedom only comes from God, through Jesus Christ. Remember the verse, "If the Son set you free, you will be free indeed"? Our outward sin has a third underlying ailment. It's pride. It's thinking we can run our affairs better than God can. All these underlying ailments erupt into outright rebellion against God. We continuously try to usurp God's role and thereby chase God out of our lives. In the span of these few verses, our fable goes from the cute idea of a talking snake to the horror of our real human predicament. The truth is, on our own, not only should each and every one of us be banished from the Garden, none of us should be allowed within a thousand miles of it!

Most popular Bible scholars and commentators will tell you this story is about the origin of evil, death, sin or the fall of humankind from the grace of God. Again, I say, if you only look at this fable to see how sin entered the world, you're only looking at the surface problem and assuming that's all there is. I think this story goes much deeper. It's really about the call of God on each of our lives. It's about God's purpose for making creation in the first place. The categories this story is usually confined to are far too small. A story that provides information about the origin of sin, evil, death, or even the power of the fall is nice, but not very helpful or even relevant to our lives today. I mean, a talking snake who deceives Adam and Eve into disobedience might be a good story, but how does that relate to our present day reality? This story is, rather, about the calling God for you to be God's creature and to live in his world on God's terms. This story is much more concerned with the reality of God and that makes it so much more than a hopeless description of the human condition. The story of the creation and fall of humankind requires us to ask about the reality of God and God's resolve for life in a world on its way to death.

So, how do we find hope and grace and mercy in this story? Is there any gospel, Good News for us to get excited about? I think there is! First of all, the punishment for disobeying God was supposed to be death. Everyone knows the wages of sin is death... Even so, as far as I can tell, and I've read this story over

several times looking, but no matter how many times I read and re-read it nobody dies in this story. Sure, their eyes are opened, and they discover they really need to put on some clothes, but nobody is dead at the end of this story. That's because of only one thing, God's mercy. Even at this point in the history of humankind God had a bigger plan. The truth is, if you read just a little bit further, you'll find out that God actually sews clothing from animal skins for both the man and his wife. Does that sound like the actions of an angry God bent on punishment? No, right from the beginning God has mercy and wants to woo humans into relationship. The Lord God is a God of forgiveness and mercy and that's what we're meant to get from this story. That's something that is relevant to you and your life today.

The Bible is chalk full of examples of how our greed, pride, and self-deceit continue to rear their ugly heads and God's forgiveness and mercy redeeming our ancestors in the faith. As awful as our record is when it comes to obeying God's commands, God's record is even better when it comes to showing God's love and mercy. For a long time, God simply put aside our sinful behavior, but the plan all along was for a final cure. Unlike our current search for a vaccine and therapeutic treatment for the corona virus, God had his secret weapon all along. I can't speak to the timing of God's gift of Jesus Christ to the world, what I can say is, God had Jesus in mind from the get-go. The Lord God has always been three in one, the Trinity. God knew Jesus would be the one to finally overcome our rebellion.

Jesus lived that perfect sinless life we are not capable of living. Because Jesus was that perfect unblemished human, only Jesus could be the perfect scapegoat and take our sins upon himself. Even though Jesus isn't mentioned by name in this story of the creation and fall, God's will for all creation to be forever just, forever pure, and forever Holy is revealed by God's mercy for our sin, which is personified in this first couple we call Adam and Eve.

As you re-read some of the greatest stories ever written over the upcoming weeks, may you find God's call on your life to live as a Child of the Lord God, a creature God formed from the dust of the earth and breathed God's own breath of life into. May the sin of Adam and Eve be wiped away from you along with all your greed, pride, and self-deceit, through the precious blood of our savior, Jesus Christ. May the promise of God's forgiveness and mercy give you hope and peace, knowing you are already surrounded by God's love and included in God's Kingdom now and forever. Amen.