

Sin and Salvation

As I mentioned at the start of this series, Genesis is a book that marks the genesis, or beginnings, of many, many of the themes of Scripture. The fact that today's message is the third in a row that is based in the book of Genesis tells us that there are some important themes that get their start in this first book of the Bible.

Today I want to look at another theme that starts in Genesis and takes off from there. The first part of it is failure: human beings' sin, starting with disobedience in the Garden of Eden and escalating rapidly from there. The second part is steps to success: God's plan for saving the human race from the disaster we brought upon ourselves.

Now, this is going to be a bit tricky, because you're so used to hearing words like "sin" and "salvation" that you probably can't really hear them for what they are. They are words that have become cliched; they lack the punch they once had. So, I'm going to have to tell the story as if I was telling it to people who had no idea that there was a problem between them and God. And, as I tell the story, you'll hear the world of today, maybe some of your friends, family and neighbors, interrupting, asking questions, trying to find their way through this key theme from the Bible.

So, when God set this whole thing up, when He created the universe, He made humans to be the leaders, the managers, of the earth.

"Just a minute, we don't buy all that creation stuff. Everyone knows that all life forms have evolved from the simplest ones to the most complex and that there is no magic moment of creation."

We're getting off track a little earlier than I had planned, but let me ask you a couple of questions in response. First off, has anyone ever found a simple life form? According to what I read, the simplest cells are vastly complex and include tiny machines that are responsible for everything from reproducing the various parts of the cell to transporting those parts to the place where they are needed and to getting rid of waste. The simplest cells we know about are so complex that they look like they have been designed by a gifted engineer. And if everybody knows that we have evolved from these not-so-simple cells, then surely they know where these cells came from and how they were able to instantly develop such complexity. No? And, you say that there was no magic moment of creation, but isn't that what scientists refer to as the "Big Bang"? Isn't that the magic moment when your version of creation happened? Anyway, I've got lots on this topic, but that 's really not what I'm talking about today.

The topic is what happened to the people God created, made to be like Him, made to be able to relate to God, to the Creator. Well, God gave them a ton of freedoms. They could go anywhere and do whatever they wanted, with only one restriction. God said that they shouldn't eat the fruit of one tree, a tree that was in the garden where they lived, the tree that would give a person the knowledge of good and evil, and that if they

ate the fruit of that one particular tree, they would die.

“Hey, that’s not fair. Why did God set them up for failure like that, setting this trap right in the middle of the place they lived?”

God didn’t set them up for failure. He gave them only one restriction. It’s like having a severe food allergy -- you eat that certain food, and you’re in serious trouble. Do you have to eat it? No, you learn to avoid that particular food. You stay away from it, make sure it’s not an ingredient in any of the foods you’re eating, and you stay alive.

Maybe God was just testing them to see if they would trust Him enough to do the one thing He asked of them -- and He found out that they couldn’t do it. They just had to try it. They wanted to be as wise as God is, so they disobeyed Him to show that they were pretty smart -- and because they were told that this would make them smarter.

But, guess what, God was telling the truth -- when they chose to defy Him and make a different choice than the one He told them to make, death entered the beautiful world God had made -- and death has been with us ever since.

“Death? Isn’t that an extreme reaction to a minor slip-up?”

Why do call it a minor slip-up? You live in a country where there are at least a thousand slip-ups that can cause you a great deal of pain and here they only had one restriction. So violating that one restriction was a big deal because it meant that they didn’t trust God. If your doctor tells you that you’re going to have a heart attack in the next six months unless you go on a diet and start exercising, will it be the doctor’s fault if you don’t do your part and you do have the heart attack? Is the doctor unjust? Is the warning your doctor gives a sign of meanness or of putting too high a standard on your life?

“Okay, but, if God set everything up in the first place, He didn’t have to make it so that people would die.”

What do you think would be a fair judgment for the person who disobeys His Maker, who decides that he or she wants to do their own thing and live without any obligation to the One who made them? Do you think God should have fined them 100 pomegranates or something? You are trivializing an act of serious rebellion, making it sound like nothing, as if you would be a better judge in cases like this, as if you would know better than God what was an appropriate consequence for outright rebellion against His commands.

You look at the guilt and the shame that came into these first humans’ minds as a result of their rebellion. They became aware of their nakedness and made the first clothes. They hid from God when He came looking for them in the garden. Everything changed about their relationship with their Maker. Their rebellion had made a separation between themselves and their God. Should people have to live forever in a state of pain, of guilt and of separation from God? Maybe there was a little bit of mercy

in their judgment.

“Are you saying, then, that because the first man and woman rebelled that everyone who came after them also deserves this death? If that’s true, then God isn’t just -- He’s punishing people who’ve done nothing wrong.”

Who are you referring to as someone who has done nothing wrong? The Bible clearly teaches that sin has taken hold in all of our hearts, that we’re all rebels against the rule of God, that we’ve all decided, at some point in our lives, that we know better what’s right and wrong for us. Are you saying you’ve never rebelled against God, against the teaching of the Bible, or even against your own conscience? Never?

“Well, I’ve done little things wrong, but I’ve never done anything really bad. I’ve never done anything that deserves the death penalty, that’s for sure! And I know lots of people who are really good people, who do kind things for others, who are generous, who help people in trouble, stuff like that. Do you think they deserve to die?”

What I think is irrelevant. God has decided that living forever is not a wonderful thing for people who are avoiding Him, and who am I to argue? And calling our common fate the “death penalty” sounds entirely like its a punishment for breaking a law. I’m not sure that’s the case, but I am sure that, according to the Bible, God said that if we were to disobey Him, we would not live forever, that death would become the destiny of everyone.

Okay, no more interruptions for a little while, because this next part is really important. Even though the Bible teaches that the wages of sin, the payment or consequence for us walking away from God, is death, it also says that the gift of God is eternal life. You see, God actually designed us for eternal life, for being in relationship with Him forever. And His plan, from the book of Genesis on, was to heal our broken relationship with Him and to have that friendship forever. But He couldn’t just overlook our rebellion - He had to take it into account somehow.

“Why? Why couldn’t He just overlook it?”

Because He’s just. We want justice for mass murderers and terrorists and people who steal from little old ladies and people who just hurt people for no good reason, but we don’t want justice for ourselves, for the things we’ve done wrong. But God isn’t like that. He doesn’t promise justice for the bottom 5% and the rest get off for free. He’s consistent and fair and so everyone will be weighed in the scales of justice. We’ll all be held responsible for what it is we’ve done that’s against God’s laws and we’ll all be held responsible for what we haven’t done that He has told us to do. So, the way things were working out, we were all on the outside looking in, and His plan for eternal friendships with people He loved was looking bleak.

But, of course, God knowing everything, He knew that all of this was going to happen and so He prepared for it. He gave the opportunity for one nation of people to show the rest of the world how worth it it is to walk in the love of God, to experience

forgiveness for their sins and to have frequent celebrations of His goodness and grace to them.

“Hold on a minute. One nation gets to walk close with God while the rest of us are on our own? That doesn’t seem fair to me.”

That one nation was given a mission to show the rest of the world what blessings and peace could come to them if they would submit to God’s ways and honor Him as He deserves. God knows, and tells us in the Bible, that what we worship will determine what we become. So He tried to show us that worshiping the Creator, the God of grace and truth and love and justice, would create in us the desire for grace and truth and love and justice. We would become people blessed by God and blessed by giving our obedience to Him, so that the world could joyfully enter in to those blessings.

Unfortunately, the people He chose, didn’t get the vision. They tended to see the rest of the world as enemies and couldn’t get the concept that the rest of the world was a mission field for God’s purposes. So those purposes got ignored, except by just a few, for hundreds of years.

“So the plan wasn’t maybe the best because it depended on people taking risks to include nations that maybe they were afraid of. I thought God was supposed to be smarter than that.”

Let’s face it - we humans are so proud of ourselves that we can’t easily accept God’s opinion of us. I think He gave that nation a chance because He knew that most of them wouldn’t go along with His plan -- and that the rest of us could figure out that we wouldn’t have gone along either. Anyway, His ultimate plan for restoring our broken relationship with Him was through that people. Into that nation, the people He had chosen to be His, God came to earth. He came as an infant child into one family and grew up to become the Savior of the world.

“Okay, so that’s a pretty wild story -- how did this child born into one nationality become the Savior of the world?”

Remember that the appropriate wages, the thing that God decided was the right consequence, for people who live in rebellion against Him and against His plans for us, is that we wouldn’t live forever -- and so death entered the grand scheme of things. For God to overturn that consequence would require a victory over death. So, He came into the world, He lived the perfect life, selfless, truthful, bringing blessing and hope to many ... and the authorities killed Him for it. They hated that He threatened their popularity with the people and they hated that He exposed their hypocrisy and their errors. So, just as was prophesied hundreds of years earlier, they had Him executed and, after three days, He rose back to life, with a new and indestructable body, the first of its kind. Death had been knocked out cold -- there was, for the first time since the first sin -- hope that death could be overcome.

“So, nobody has to be afraid of death anymore ... is that it?”

Death is still an enemy. It separates us from people we love. It is still the consequence of the sin that separated humans from God in the first place. So, death should never be seen as a friend or an escape from the pain of life. But for those who put their hope, their trust, their faith in Jesus, this Savior of the world, death will ultimately be overcome and believers will be given a new resurrection body.

“Oh, so there’s an exclusive club at the end of the line, eh? There’s a privileged few who have the secret and they get to live forever while the rest of us are eternally lost. Is that it?”

There’s no secret and there’s nothing exclusive about this. People have travelled to the ends of the earth and given their lives so that others could know this provision of God. There are books written, open meetings, church services, evangelistic meetings, personal testimonies -- nobody is trying to keep this a secret or to make it exclusive. The invitation is open to everyone. If you want to get right with God, to have all your sins forgiven, to live forever in His presence, He would like nothing better. He loves you. He made you. He wants you to be with Him.

“But on His terms, right? He doesn’t include people of other faiths, even though they’re very sincere. He doesn’t make the same promises to them, does He?”

There’s a hundred ways to answer that question. What other faiths are interested in finding forgiveness for their sins? What other faiths believe in or have any hope for, eternal life? What other faiths believe that at death our spirit lives on? What other faiths believe in a relationship with God that endures beyond death? How can you have such spectacularly diverse views of human existence and of the divine and say, “We’re all going to end up in the same place, because we’re sincere”?

Look, God knows the heart of every human and He is also the One who will judge these things. What you and I think about it is not going to change that. But here’s the thing that you and I have to answer: God says that we’ve blown it, that we’re rebels, that we have sinned, and that we can find forgiveness for those things we’ve done wrong or failed to do right, by putting our whole trust, the weight of our being, on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If I were God, and you can be thankful that I’m not, if someone came to me and said, “I’ve come up with a better plan, one that suits my personality and wishes, better than your plan to give your life blood for the sin of the world,” I’d be angry. I’d slam the door in their face and yell at them as they left, “You mock the sacrifice I made for you. You treat it as if it were nothing and so I have nothing but grief for you.”

I’m saying that’s what I would do. I’m not saying that’s what God does. I know that He is visiting thousands of people in their dreams at night and asking them to respond to His grace. I know that He has sent us into the world to tell people the good news of the forgiveness of sins and that many have gone. But I also know what’s written in the

Bible, that He will not let Himself be mocked. In other words, those who look down on His sacrifice, who reject His love and His offer of forgiveness, will not receive the blessings He promises to those who trust Him.

The sin problem is the single most important problem in human history. It's not primarily a problem because we hurt one another or because we are selfish or because we break laws or cheat people or do things we feel bad about. The main reason sin is such a serious problem is because it broke our relationship with God; it was outright rebellion against Him. Genesis 3 is about separation from God, about a huge gulf that was created that has, ever since that time, acted as a barrier between us and the kind of life we were created to live and the kind of knowledge of God that we were intended to have.

And, as we work through the books of the Bible, we find this huge problem surfacing in every way imaginable. It's not possible for us to please God, to do enough that's right, to honor Him as He deserves. Every great effort in the history of God's people was followed by great failure and tragic consequences. The sin problem had to be solved or there would be no glorious future for planet earth. And the most obvious conclusion from all of that history was that humans were not going to be the ones to solve it.

No, God did that. God solved the problem that sin created, the problem of our separation from Him. He has built a bridge, in His own blood on the cross, that allows us full and free access to the throne room of heaven. God loves us so much that He did everything that was necessary to restore the damage caused by our pride and our desire to be independent from Him. It's all been taken care of. The prophecy in Genesis 3 that a man would crush the serpent's head and that the serpent would strike his heel, was a foreshadowing of the cross, where Satan was crushed, where God's victory over sin was fully accomplished, the payment made, freedom won and forgiveness made possible.

Glory and praise and thanksgiving belong to Him alone.