**Genesis 3:1-24**

**The Grace of God**

So we are continuing our series on What Christians Believe, having started a couple of weeks ago by looking at the Creation Story and realizing that the very reason we were created was to worship God. The worship of God is our destiny, it is what we have been made for and, as Christians, we need to shape our lives so that the worship of God is at the centre and everything else revolves around that and is born out of that.. Living in that way, with worship as our priority, is the only way to find true happiness, because it is the only way to fulfill who we are and what we are here for.

 And wouldn’t it be just wonderful if we could easily live like that, so that we could just slip into our destiny, and find ultimate happiness without any real effort whatsoever? But, of course, life isn’t like that: we all struggle with worship, we all struggle to put God at the centre of our lives, we all struggle to make him our first priority. Not just because of the busyness of the modern world, or the demands made on our time, but also because, if the truth be known, few of us have the actual inclination or passion for God to put him first, to make him the centre.

 Something has gone wrong.

 We were created to worship God, we were created to enjoy time with him, to live on that eternal Seventh Day that I spoke about last time.

 But something has gone wrong.

 For some reason, we don’t desire God anymore or if we do desire God, we don’t desire him enough. Or maybe we are even running away from him, wanting to hide from him, wanting to cut him out of the equation of our life.

 Something has gone wrong.

 And that ‘something’ is described to us in the passage we just heard read from Genesis 3, which, if you want to follow it with me, is on page 2 of the Pew Bibles.

 Now, before we get into the text itself, let me just make two general comments about this passage.

 The first is to address the question of whether this story is literally true or not. Are Adam and Eve historical figures and did this event actually happen? Are we reading early human history here?

 The truth is, I don’t know – and I don’t think it really matters. If you want to believe in a historical Adam and Eve, that’s fine. And if you want to see this as a myth, a legend, a story told round the campfire, then that’s fine too. Because the point of the story is not whether it happened in history. The point of the story is that it describes for us the human condition and how God responds to that. The story contains Truth with a capital ‘T’, even if it is not historically true. And it is the Truth with a capital ‘T’ that we are concerned with.

 Second, I want to say that, in one sense, this story actually isn’t that important. Now that may seem a strange thing to say, because it is one of those stories that we have been taught since childhood and also this notion of ‘original sin’ that runs throughout all humanity has been used as a defining doctrine, a foundational belief, for the Western Church for thousands of years. When people are introduced to the Christian story, almost the first thing we tell them about is ‘sin’ and how we are alienated from God. And the Church has used this story about Adam and Eve as a foundational teaching that all people need to know about before we introduce them to Christ Jesus. However, it might surprise you to know that this story is never mentioned again in the Old Testament and Jesus never refers to this story and it is never referred to again in the New Testament. Now, isn’t that interesting? This Biblical Story that the history of the church has made so much of is never referenced anywhere else in Scripture or by any other Biblical writer. If it really was the starting point for us understanding our Christian journey, we might expect more to be made of it…So in one sense, this is an important story because we have much to learn from it - but in another sense, it’s not that important.

 And if there’s one thing I want you to remember from this sermon series, it’s this: you are defined by what we talked about last time: being beautifully and wondrously made in the image of God. You are not defined by what we are talking about this week, which is a broken and sinful person. Yes, we are all frail and broken and yes, we do all sin and get things wrong. But when God looks at you, he sees beauty, not brokenness. When God looks at you, he sees his child, not a corrupted creature. And if we are to journey into the love of God, and move into fulfilling our destiny, we must increasingly learn to see ourselves as God sees us. Stop seeing ourselves as failures and start seeing ourselves as children of Light, with a destiny wrapped up in our worship of the Living God.

 And that’s why, this morning, I want to focus on what I think this passage really says rather than on what I think the church has said through it over many, many centuries. Because, in reality, I don’t think that this is really a passage about sin and brokenness. I think it is a beautiful exposition of the grace and mercy of God. Let me tell you what I mean…

 The story starts with a talking serpent, as all good stories should, of course! And this serpent makes a suggestion to Eve about the consequences of eating the fruit on the tree that had been forbidden by God. Now, in just about every piece of art you will see of this story, Adam and Eve are eating an apple. But actually, the original Hebrew doesn’t refer to an apple at all and it’s more likely to have been an apricot that they ate - but let’s not get sidetracked with that right now…

 And you notice that the temptation isn’t to do something in absolute opposite from God, but it’s a temptation to doubt God’s word just a little bit…“Did God really say that to you? Are you sure? That can’t be right, can it?” - sowing that little seed of doubt in Eve’s mind that is enough for her to then disobey God’s word.

 That’s how sin works in us, isn’t it? Rarely are any of us tempted to do something truly awful, truly evil, truly demonic. But most of what we get wrong in our life is a little bit to the left of Good or a little bit to the right of Good. None of us, I assume, are deeply wicked, evil people with bad intentions. But all of us fall a little bit to the left or right of the target and the little falling is a miss of the target all the same…

 So Eve eats the apricot, and gives another apricot to her husband Adam and, as we read in verse 7: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” Following on from this act of disobedience to God’s Word is a sense of guilt, shame, and a fear of being unmasked. The psychological impact on us when we turn our back on God is immense and deep: and it manifests through many different emotions; guilt, fear, anger, self-justification, blaming others for the situation in which we find ourselves and so much more…

 But the Fall of Adam and Eve is just the first part of the story: setting the scene, if you like, for the second part, which is far more important. Because in the rest of this passage, we are introduced for the first time in the Bible to the immense, immeasurable grace and mercy of God that meets us when we fall short in our daily lives. And this happens in four ways, so let’s look at what happens here.

**1. God goes looking for them**

In verse 8, we read that because they felt so guilty for what they had done, “Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God”. But then, in verse 9, we read this: “But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’”

 God came looking for them.

 God’s desire was to have a relationship with Adam and Eve, despite what they had done, and he wasn’t prepared to let them go, such was his love for them.

 There are times in our lives when we feel that we have failed so badly that we want to hide from God, to run away, to leave faith behind us. But God won’t let us do that: he loves us so much, he will always come looking for us. At the end of the day, all God wants to do is to love us and to have us love him in return and so he will pursue us because his passion for us will not allow him to let us go.

 I remember many years ago, during a particularly dark time in my life, I wanted to run and hide from God and give it all up. But a Christian far wiser than me said this: “Steve, you can run if you want to. You can hide from God if you want to. But you will never be happy. Because, right now, you have too much of the world in you to be happy with God, and too much of God in you to be happy in the world.”

 And he was so right…Once we have experienced something of God in our lives, we can never be happy again without him because we have had a glimpse of what we are missing out on. There is no point running from God as a result of anything that we have done in the past. We won’t be happy without him – and he’s not going to let us go anyway…so we may just as well stay in his presence and work it all out with him.

 God loves us too much to let us go. It’s as simple as that…

**2. God gives them what they want**

Now this is a really strange thing that we see happening here. As a result of God’s grace, he does not deny to Adam and Eve the very thing they were seeking.

 They had been told by God not to eat of the fruit of the tree but they disobeyed him because they wanted to be like God, to have God-like qualities. And look what happens in verse 16: the woman is given pain in childbirth and in verse 17, the man finds physical work, the labour of his hands, to be difficult.

 Now it seems to me that both childbirth and manual labour are metaphors here for the creative urges in humanity. And whereas, prior to the Fall, engagement in creativity would have been both pleasurable and pain-free, now, after the Fall, the very acts of creativity become filled with pain and agony. And that is because God is giving them what they asked for: so they could experience the divinity within them. God is saying, “If you want to be like me, then OK – I am a Creator God and you can share in my creativity. But you need to know that creativity, for me, is a painful act of self-giving”. And that is certainly true of God: he gave of himself in great pain to make a world that he knew would fall and his greatest act of creation was on the Cross of Christ where his Son Jesus experienced the ultimate pain and agony by dying for us and creating our salvation.

 So it is that, even when we are tempted to turn our back and God and chase after things that he has warned us against, he doesn’t take away our free will, and he allows us space to pursue these things but he has warned us that, most often, there will be pain involved if the decisions we make are not grounded in obedience to him.

 So first and second then, when we fall from God in his mercy, he will always come looking for us and will seek us out but, in his mercy, he doesn’t force himself upon us and leaves us with free will to pursue the path we have chosen, even though the consequence of that may be painful.

 Thirdly…

**3. God clothes them**

Adam and Eve have disobeyed God, and gone against him in their decision-making and they have now begun to realize the cost of that and the consequences of that. But then, again, comes a great act of mercy and grace on God’s part, verse 21: “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

 God knew how distraught they were feeling, he knew their shame and sense of guilt, but there is no sense in which God tells them off, or rubs their face in it. There is no sense in which God exhibits any anger at all towards Adam and Eve. Instead, he shows only pity, grace and mercy as he clothes them and covers them to take away their shame.

 And that is how God is with us when we fall short through disobedience. We cannot begin to comprehend or find the words to explain the depths of God’s love for us, and the pain he feels, when he sees us hurting as a result of life-decisions we have made. We cannot begin to find the words to explain just how important it is for God not to punish us or make us feel worse about ourselves, but how he longs to cover us, hold us, embrace us, cry with us, love us and tell us that everything is going to be OK.

 We find it much, much harder to forgive ourselves than it is for God to forgive us.

 We find it much, much harder to restore ourselves than it is for God to restore us; who does it immediately.

 There is a verse in the New Testament that says this, from 1 John 3:20. Now listen to this very carefully because this is one of the most liberating, freeing verses you will ever hear from Scripture, and it says this: “Whenever our conscience condemns us, we can be reassured that God is greater than our conscience…We can therefore look boldly to God.” Let me say that again: “Whenever our conscience condemns us, we can be reassured that God is greater than our conscience…We can therefore look boldly to God.”

 That is the truth of the matter: it is our consciences that condemn us, not God, and we mustn’t allow our conscience to rob us of the freedom that we have as a result of God’s grace towards us.

 God and our consciences operate in two completely different ways. Our conscience wants to condemn us, our conscience wants to rub our face in the mistakes we have made, the things we have neglected to do. Our conscience wants to make us feel so guilty that we become emotionally and spiritually paralyzed and we will feel so unworthy that we will not allow ourselves to be loved by God. But God is so, so different from that. God does not condemn us – he clothes us. God does not rub our face in our mistakes – he takes them away on the Cross of Christ. God does not want us to feel guilty – our gilt has been transferred onto Jesus Christ God does not want us to feel unworthy – he wants us to know that we are beloved children.

 It’s all about grace with God – and we must not let our conscience rob us of that…

 So, when we fall, God seeks us out but does not rob us of our free will and he is desperate to clothe us and embrace us with his love.

 And finally…

**4. God protects them from the eternal consequences of our bad life-decisions**

Now, here we come to our final few verses that, I think, have been mostly misinterpreted through history: the part of the story where God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

 This part of the story is often read as the ultimate punishment from God; that because Adam and Eve have behaved so badly, God is really angry and will punish them by taking away their wonderful gift of Eden.

 Isn’t that how we so often read these verses? Isn’t that so often how we believe God responds to us in our sinfulness - that he is so angry, he’s going to take away everything good in our lives?

 Well how about if we read these verses in a different way? How about if we see in these verses not God’s anger, but another example of his abundant grace?

 Here’s the part of the story, verse 22 onwards: “And the Lord God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever. So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

How about if this is not an act of punishment by God, but is, instead, the ultimate act of mercy towards Adam and Eve?

 Don’t forget, Adam and Eve have made their decision, and God has told them that they will now experience pain in their lives as a result. So what’s going through God’s mind here? He is so distraught for us, so distraught at the thought of us having pain for all eternity by living forever that he decides, as an act of kindness, to get Adam and Eve out of the Garden so that they don’t eat from the tree of life and therefore live forever. A life of eternal pain is too much of a prospect for God to bear for us, so he removes Adam and Eve from the Garden and bars their way back in to protect them from such an awful prospect.

 And then God is in a position to reverse the error that we have made in Eden by sending his son Jesus to die for us, to take away our sin so that now, through Jesus, eternal life is one of pleasure in the presence of God, not an eternity of pain and regret for our fallenness.

 You see how it all hangs together?

 God shows compassion and mercy on Adam and Eve in Eden: he seeks them out, he won’t let them run away, he doesn’t take away their free will and turn them into robots, he clothes them and covers their shame and then by banishing them, he protects them from the eternal consequences of what they have done. And then, he sends Jesus to take away our sins on the Cross so that, when we die, we can spend an eternity in the presence of God to fulfill our ultimate destiny, which is to worship him and love him as we were first created to do.

 That is how God was to Adam and Eve - and that is how God is to you and me.

 We are no longer hostages to our sin, we are no longer captive to the errors of the past. We have been set free, we have been sought by God and clothed by him and we have prepared for us an eternity in his presence where we can become for all eternity the people we were created to be.

 So Genesis 3, is in one sense a story about Adam and Eve and a story about sin. But more importantly, it is a story of grace and compassion and mercy and love through which God finds us and restores us.

 So each one of us needs to know, we need to hear today, that there really is nothing that you and I have ever done that can separate us from the love of God. Not only shall we be free in the future – we have been set free today, and we can live in that freedom every day for the rest of our lives and into eternity.

 God’s grace is everything.

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 God’s grace is everything.

 Experience that grace today, and live in it: forgive yourself – don’t let your conscience condemn you, and then you will be free to know the freedom of God in your heart.

 And once you truly embed that experience of God in your heart, I promise you – your life will never be the same again. As the New Testament writer says, “If the Son of God has set you free, you shall be free indeed”.