

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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." Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "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." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 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. They 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. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

Romans 5:1-2, 17-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

When I was a boy, my father always had a large vegetable garden,
and every evening when Dad got home from work,
first thing, he would go out and check on it.
Sometimes I would eagerly wait for him to drive up,
and we would walk and talk together, there in the garden.

But, when I'd misbehaved, and was having on one of those

"just you wait until your father gets home" sort of days,

I didn't wait expectantly for him near the garden,

but would try to avoid and disappear when he came home.

I realize now that my hiding and avoidance behavior

probably told him that I had gotten into trouble

even before he heard about what I'd been up to...

... and that hiding from my father was **more than just not being seen.**

It also signal that there was something wrong between us,
my misbehavior & fear interfering with our relationship.

Reading the story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

always reminds me of my hiding and my father's garden
and how sin and guilt interferes with our relationships.

The Garden of Eden is a picture of delight and idyllic contentment,
describing how God walked with his beloved human-creatures
during the cool and comfort of the evening in the garden.

Imagine the closeness and openness they shared with their Creator,

until the fall, when sin lead to suffering and death.

The couple had been given full freedom and run of the whole garden.

It is all there for them to eat and enjoy,

except for the one limitation and boundary... vs. 16-17

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat ... "

The Bible doesn't explain exactly why God made that prohibition,
though scholars and commentators love to speculate freely.

As I consider my life experience with this God of Scripture,

I am quite certain that it was not an arbitrary restriction.

I know that because ultimately all of God's laws & commandments
are intended to serve God's good purpose and desire to bless us.

Boundaries & restrictions from God are always in our best interest,
given for our benefit and most often meant to guide and protect us.

In the next scene, Eve is confronted by temptation & deception, vs. 1

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the

woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

There's nothing in the text to indicate that the serpent
is anything more than a crafty animal created by God.

And one important application and message to us might be
that anything in God's good creation can become a temptation
and potentially seduce us away from our relationship with God.

Adam and Eve were blessed with an abundant variety of food choices,
but rather than gratitude for all that had been provided for them,
tempted and enticed by the serpent's lies and false claims,
their focus shifted to **the one thing** they were not to eat.

More than just a simple story about a single event from long ago,
it's a lesson about sin due to human arrogance and willful-self.

It's really my story. It's also your story and for all of humanity.

**It's a metaphor that describes how temptation toward sin
seduces and draws us away from the blessings God intends.**

Sin is not simply the foolish, hurtful & the wrong that we say and do,
but includes **anything & everything that separates us from God,
anything that distracts & interferes with our walk of faith.**

It is far more than just the things we do and say against God's Law.

Sin is **a condition of decay** set loose in creation by disobedience
that distorts life and interferes with God's will and purpose.

Adam and Eve rejected & ignored God's warning, truth and commandment,
and chose to do what had been forbidden regardless of consequences.

They chose to disregard, question and doubt God's wisdom and love,
and instead they fell for temptation and accepted the lie, vs. 5

... eat of it your eyes will be opened, **and you will be like God...**

Having turned from God, enticed by the serpent's false claims,
the harmonious life God intended for them quickly disintegrates
as they lost their capacity to relate to God as they had before,
then tried to hide as if God wouldn't know that they had sinned,
much like when I foolishly tried to avoid my father.

Having rebelled against God, now they are afraid and ashamed, vs. 8-9

They 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. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

"Where are you?" -- that is a critical and multi-faceted question.

God really didn't need to ask that question to be informed,
but it was intended to make them pause to think more deeply,
and consider where they were and what they were doing.

God knew where they were, but did they appreciate where they were?

Where are you ... what is going on with you, and how is it with your soul?

God asks because sometimes, we hide and try to avoid the truth.

Sometimes we hide by pursuing worldly success and accomplishment,
as we try to fill our emptiness with impressive things of this world,
in an attempt to hide and crowd out emptiness of our lives
that only a real and growing walk with God can fulfill.

Sometimes we hide through endless effort of religious good works,
which is not the same as listening and waiting,
and having an authentic relationship with God.

In his letter to the Christians living in Rome,

Paul reflects on humanity's condition of separation from God,

& what God has done about that problem through Jesus Christ. vs. 1-2

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus

Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Do you remember when a few years ago,
it became necessary to include dialing the area code,
otherwise your telephone call wouldn't connect?

Similar to that, **Jesus is the area code we need** to have peace with God.

Paul points toward the story about sin and the Garden in Genesis,
noting that **separation from God is our heritage through Adam**,
for we too let other things seduce us, scare us into hiding,
rather than from walking in faithfulness with the Lord God.

Just as sin and death **came to us through the one man**, Adam,
so too, God's free gift of grace and life over sin and death
is offered & **comes to us through the one man**, Jesus Christ. vs. 18-19

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the **one man's disobedience** the many were made sinners, so by the **one man's obedience** the many will be made righteous.

We were created to live in a relationship of grace with God
and nothing will fit and fill that hollow **God-shaped space**,
other than an authentic relationship through Jesus Christ.

Grace is not a reward for goodness, righteousness or obedience,
but grace refers to **God at work** in the world and in our lives,
and it's **the process of undoing the destructive power of sin**.

Paul is describing the contrast of before grace and after grace,
the same contrast that **redefined everything about his life**.

Paul had been a very conscientious and driven Pharisee,
actively trying to crush Christianity, in God's name.

But when he encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ,
and received God's grace and call on that road to Damascus,
it changed everything about Paul's life, and his walk with God.

**Instead of trying to climb the ladder of the Law and religion,
through Christ, now he could ride the elevator of God's grace.**

All of his good works and efforts to please God by scrupulously
obeying religious rules and following religious rituals,
he now viewed as trash **buried under an avalanche of grace...**

... as Paul explained in his letter, *Philippians 3:7~9*

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ ... I regard them as rubbish not having a righteousness of my own.

Paul's life was no longer about
how good or how religious he could be, or about trying harder,
but was entirely about the gracious love of God in Christ...

... and having **a righteous relationship with God through Jesus,**
based upon what God had done, the Lord's love and mercy, rather than
whatever righteousness Paul could achieve.

The driving force of Paul's life was **the theology of grace,**
that if Christ saved him even while persecuting Christians,
then no one can possibly be outside or beyond God's love.

As Paul boldly declares in *Rom 8:38~39*

If God is for us, who is against us? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, ... nor things present, nor things to come, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sometimes having been around religion and church for a long time
we lose sight of how wonderful and amazing God's grace really is.

So today as we begin our season of Lent in preparation for Easter
let us reflect on our humanity, review and renew our commitments
to live and serve as the beloved who belong to God in Jesus Christ,
and sort out the voices and influences that would seduce us,
and deal well with the trash that accumulates in our lives.

With all the wind this week, when I got to the church one morning,
there were fast-food wrappers, cups and plastic bags
caught in the fence, around the doors and walkways...
... trash and garbage that the wind had blown in.

Our lives can be like that. **We don't mean for it to happen,**
but trash & garbage of the world we live in blows in somehow.

We can be seduced to ignore and compromise with God's truth,
and despite our best intentions, the lives we live can be
far less than the abundant blessings God intends for us.

And the way that God's grace works, transforms and changes us,
is that even if we have been running away, denying or feel distant,
God is gracious and seeks the lost, the defeated & struggling
with gracious love that invites by asking, "Where are you?"

When I was a boy,
and didn't greet my father to walk with him in the garden,
I remember one time when he came looking for me,
and through tears I told him about what I had done.

But it didn't go as I expected. He didn't get angry or upset with me.
My normally undemonstrative father put his arms around me,
and he held me as we talked about what I had done, why it was wrong,
and we discussed what I needed to do to try and make it right.

And then we went into the house, **forgiven and reconciled,**

and we sat down to enjoy an evening with our family together.

So today as we begin Lent, it is the season of the Christian year

in which we reflect on our humanity and renew our commitments

to live as those who belong to God in Jesus Christ,

and deal with the trash that accumulates in our lives.

**Lenten spiritual practices aren't about proving something to God,
but are intended to improve our hearing & response to God's grace.**

**Let our Lent be about seeking our BEST walk of faith with our Lord
toward the blessed & most meaningful life Jesus intends for us.**

As we move into this 1st Sunday of Lent, isn't today a very good day,

and isn't this the right time to reflect on important questions,

where am I?, and is my life, the way I am living in sync with God?

The point is, don't walk away or hide in fearful and guilty shame,

but consider this: **where and how are you today, right now?**

Close to God or feeling distant, fearful and estranged from God?

Know this, the Lord never abandons and isn't the one who has moved!

Listen again to our true hope in God's promise and command:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth." [Psalm 46:1, Joshua 1:9 and Psalm 46:10]