December 9/10, 2023

The Fall

Christmas in Context Series

Genesis 3:1-7 and **Romans 1:18-32**

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Last week as we gathered, we were invited to remember, once again, that the world that we wake up in every day, is a world that is filled with wonder. God has set forth beauty and wonder that is absolutely astounding! And if we just stop long enough to consider it, we will be pulled up, drawn up into worship. The essential goodness of God's creation is laid bare in the very first chapter of your Bible. Genesis Chapter 1, the first page or two of the Bible you have in your hands right now, talks about this astounding creation and the powerful creator that brought it all into being. In that first chapter, there is one word that is repeated seven times over. It's the Hebrew word *Tov* and it means *good*. Over and over again, God creates, and He looks at His creation and He says, "It is good…It is good." One 'good' for each day of creation. But when we get to the pinnacle of that chapter, verse 31, the moment when God creates man and woman in His image, He looks at His creation, and He says, "Now it is 'very good'." It is a beautiful opening to the Scriptures, a beautiful opening that fits the beautiful world that God created. It just confesses to His amazing grandeur, His magnificence, His might! If we stopped to take it in, we will be astounded with wonder! And yet, if you look around, you might find yourself asking, "With all that essential goodness in God's creation, what happened? What happened?" Of course, we all know the answer to that question, don't we? We all know the answer to that question, because it stares us right in the face each day, either through our own actions or things that occurred or happened to us. What happened is, sin happened. The Fall happened. In that moment, what was very good was forever changed. That's what we want to talk about today.

Now I know, and let me give a little caveat upfront. I know that considering that the Fall is not necessarily what people during Christmas time are looking forward to, but I want to challenge you to just linger here for a moment. It's been said before that this season of Advent is not for the faint of heart. It's not for the faint of heart, because to consider, to understand the absolutely astounding nature of the good news of Jesus Christ, you must be willing to grasp the human predicament. You must be willing to look directly in the face of the fallenness, the corruption that has occurred in the world. So that's precisely what I'm going to invite you to join me in, in these next few moments, to sit and linger and consider the human predicament, the reality of sin. In order to do that, I'm going to ask you to turn your Bibles to Genesis Chapter 3. We're going to spend a little time there, and then we're going to move forward to the New Testament, to Romans Chapter 1. So, we're beginning in Genesis chapter 3, verse 1:

> **Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that**

> **in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 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 desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.** (*NASB, Genesis 3:1-7)

Innocence lost! Of course, prior to this moment, Adam and Eve were living in what the Bible describes as paradise, an absolutely perfect environment for them. You may be familiar with the Hebrew word *shalom*. This word is still used today as a greeting between Jewish people. If you were to go to Israel today, you would hear this greeting, "Shalom," and in its most basic form, it just means *peace*. That's a simple translation of the word shalom, but that translation—*peace*—barely does that word justice, or at least does the biblical idea of shalom, justice. One author describes shalom this way. He says, "Shalom describes universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight. Shalom is the way things ought to be…the way things ought to be!" If you've ever wondered what it was like for Adam and Eve as they lived in that garden, the answer is, "It was precisely the way things ought to be, man and woman living in perfect relationship with their Creator, living in intimate, good, loving, trusting relationship." That's what we see in the first two chapters of Genesis. But then we turn the page, and we see the serpent enter the scene, and he sows a seed of doubt. And he says, "Did God really say that?" And in that moment, Adam and Eve question God's very goodness. Perhaps they thought God prevents us or is preventing us from having something that is really good. Maybe he's a withholder of something good. After all, Eve looked at the fruit and she said, "Man, it looks like it's good for food, and it's pleasing to the eye, and it's desirable to make us wise. Maybe God is withholding." And so in that moment, with that thought, Adam and Eve chose to take for themselves what they ultimately desired. And in that moment, in making that choice, everything changed! The world went from the way things ought to be, to the way things are now. Sin entered the world. It entered the world and, indeed, infected, corrupted, and vandalized, God's good creation. What happened? Sin happened! The Fall happened! Sin entered the world, and the wonder of creation was submitted to the ruin of sin. Everything changed. Everything was affected, including us. Now, I know that this was a long time ago; obviously that goes without saying. But we have to keep in mind that every sin that occurs today, it mirrors this very first sin. Adam and Eve, struggling to trust God, and choosing to take for themselves that which they thought they needed, was an inclination to believe that God was a withholder of good. He wasn't someone that can be trusted. Therefore, they did it on their own. Every sin that you and I commit, it follows that same pattern…questioning God's very goodness.

Now Genesis 3 kind of highlights this particular sin of Adam and Eve. But what we find is that as we move forward in Scripture, and by the time we get to Paul, what we see is Paul begins to speak, not in the specific sense of this sin, but in the more generic sense of just the way that humanity falls into sin, the way sin works. Paul, in Romans 1, gives us a treatment of sin, and he highlights for us exactly the way sin—this corrupting power in the world—progresses and moves forward in the lives of people just like you, and just like me. So, turn with me to Romans 1, verse 18. Now there's no question that in Romans 1, Genesis 1 through 3 sits kind of in the background. Paul is considering the goodness of creation, but he also is asking, "What went wrong?" And he's explaining what went wrong so that he can get eventually to this glorious description of the good

news of the gospel. Before he gets to the good news, he lays, in incredible detail, the nature of the bad news, the human predicament, the progression of sin. Romans 1, verse 18:

> **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.**
>
> (Romans 1:18-23)

We don't talk about God's wrath very often, but it's important that we think correctly about it because, so often, it seems like we kind of think of it as just this unbound anger. But that's not the biblical portrait of wrath at all. In fact, here in Romans 1, in these verses, what we see is that wrath is clearly God's response to a creation that has been subject to decay. It's God's appropriate response when He considers the goodness of what He created. But then He sees things that are out of place in the world that He ordered in such a way that it was just the way it ought to be. When there are agents that come in, that don't belong in that created order, God's response is wrath, and that's a corrective, active response. He is going to resolve what is wrong with the world. **Unrighteousness** and **ungodliness**, those certainly are two words that have no place in the goodness of God's perfect created order. They have no place in a realm marked by the shalom that God intends for His creation. His wrath is not some kind of irrational severity or just His unbridled anger. No, His wrath is corrective. His wrath is gracious, in that it intends to bring back into being that which He initially set up. That's what we mean when we talk about God's wrath here in Romans 1: It’s corrective!

Now it's important, as we think about this progression of sin, for us to just kind of follow what Paul is doing. See, Paul identifies the source of ungodliness and unrighteousness in this passage. He tells us that the place that all comes from, is ***when men suppress the truth about the reality of who God is and, instead, choose to believe a lie.*** Suppressing the truth, choosing to believe a distorted image about God, that sounds a lot like Adam and Eve. He makes it clear that God has provided abundant evidence for who He is—His eternal power and His divine nature. And yet Paul says human beings willfully chose and still choose to disregard that, to set it aside, to rationalize it, to dismiss it. And Paul makes it clear, and this is instructive for us: he makes it clear this is the path that sin takes; this is the progression of sin, always starting with a thought, a diminished thought of God. When you see a diminished thought of God or a thought that leads you not to be thankful for who He is, make no mistake, sin is crouching right at the door, ready to take advantage! If that thought is not seized, and it's not corrected, the next thing that will flow from us is a sinful action, choosing to do in our own power that which is supposed to occur in cooperation with God. Not seeking Him, being dependent upon Him, what Paul makes clear is that we, as people—our hearts, our minds—become increasingly darkened, and we start to lose sight of who God is. We must have a realistic, reality-based picture of who He is, and also who we are, and the way He designed us to be as His people. He designed us; we were designed; we were created. And

part of the way we were designed is that we were designed to worship. We were designed to give thanks. That's at the very core of our being.

And so it's no wonder that, throughout history, idolatry has been something that human beings have turned to over and over again. We were made to worship, and if we dismiss the thought of a creator, we will direct our worship towards something. And of course in the past, over and over again, and even in this current day, in certain parts of the world, that generally has been directed towards things like animals and created beings. I don't think that's necessarily our struggle, though. Just because we aren't tempted to make a statue of a horse or a cow or something, don't let that lead us to believe that we aren't. We are people prone to worship something other than God as He really is. Oh, I think today, if we are honest, I think, in our culture in America, the greatest temptation is to worship ourselves. *My* ideas, *my* rights, *my* world, I kind of direct myself. I'd like to climb up on the throne, "Thank you very much." I deserve to be satisfied. If you want to know who the American Idol is, we just need to look in the mirror. I think that's our greatest temptation. We're still bound to dismiss God. Left to our own devices, we will dismiss Him and replace Him with an idol of our choosing. As Paul continues with the progression of sin, we're going to see in a kind of surprising way, one form that God's wrath takes in verse 24:

> **Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.** (Romans 1:24-27)

Before we jump into some of the details that Paul unpacks in verse 26, let's return for just a moment to this idea of wrath. We talked for a moment about how wrath is corrective. It's how God works and how He's working to correct that which is broken and that which is corrupted. And a surprising form that takes is made clear in verse 24, and again in verse 26. What's clear is that what God does, in response to rebellion is, He allows it to occur. He allows it to occur, not necessarily what we think of when we think of God's wrath. It says, **Therefore, God gave them over**. As human beings, part of the way we were created, part of what it means to be made in the image of God, is that we were given a will. We have volitional will; we can make choices. Adam and Eve were given a will. They were given a choice. Now the way God designed us is, we are supposed to submit to Him ultimately…direct our will to Him. Surrender, be dependent, that is the choice He intends for us to make. But left to our own devices, that is not what we do. That's not what Adam and Eve did. That's not what we do. Paul makes it clear over and over again. What we do, as human beings, is we reject God, and we choose to do it our own way. And what is astounding about God is, He lets it happen. He allows us to make that choice, to rebel. He honors the fact that He created us the way He did. In doing that, He honors the fact that He gave us a will, knowing that might mean that we rebel. That's precisely what He did. But in permitting that rebellion, inherent in that permission, there is a penalty, because sin always keeps receipts! Sin is, in and of itself, often its own penalty. It leads to destruction. It leads to disorder. It leads to chaos. A life of sin is no way to live. It brings a penalty because it leads to absolute chaos and ruin in your life.

CS Lewis, so often, said things just so well. And as he was talking about this aspect of choice and the way this works, he had this to say. *"There are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'In the end, thy will be done."* Either we look at God and we say, "I will surrender to Your will," or God says, "Have it your way. It's not good for you, but you can do that. Have it your way."

And what we see in Romans 1 is Paul's description of what it looks like when people like you and me, when God looks at us and says, "Thy will be done. You can take those steps." So, where does Paul say that rebellion leads? We've already talked about a refusal of God, a diminishing of Him in the mind and in the heart, and how that leads to worship of lesser gods. And here, as Paul continues, he hones in on how this particular refusal of God and His design will lead to an expression of an embrace of distorted sexuality, essentially using our bodies as our primary source of satisfaction, and doing that in ways that run contrary to what God designed, designed with what's so clear as the progression looks like this. When we become our own gods, what starts to happen is pleasure and satisfaction become paramount. It becomes the most important thing to us. Throughout human history, what that always leads to is sexual indulgence because our body is our primary place of pleasure. And so we say, "Okay, how do we experience the most pleasure, and when that is combined with a rejection of God and a rejection of His created order, well, what Paul makes clear is that this progression of sin leads to a determination to satisfy desires by any means possible, even if that means doing it in ways that run contrary to what God intended, to what God designed. These passions, these desires, they're good. God created them, and He designed these desires to be to be satisfied sexually in a one-man, one-woman union in marriage. But what Paul tells us is that as we give ourselves over to indulgence of any and every desire, what starts to happen is everything starts to go in a disordered way. Everything starts to depart from what God intended. Men with men, women with women, and there's no doubt this is a graphic example that highlights the core issue. And the core issue is the way that sin leads us to reject what God designed, to reject the world as He intended it to be. Too often, throughout history, this passage has been used to single out the specific sin of homosexual acts as somehow other-than or worse-than everything else. But that is not the point at all. The point is to describe what happens when sin runs its course. Here is what happens when we start to glorify ourselves. We try to satisfy ourselves, and we live with unleashed desires and unleashed passions. What starts to happen is we reject all of the ways that God has designed the world to be, and we try to satisfy ourselves by whatever means necessary. There is a way the world ought to be, and sin takes us in a direction that is completely counter to the way things ought to be.

I guess the question is, "Should this surprise us at all?" It shouldn't surprise us. This is really pretty logical. This is the way you would think it would happen. If you reject a creator, then you reject the intent behind creation. If you reject intent, then there's really no purpose at all in life. If there's no purpose at all in life, you have to ask what motivates you to get out of bed in the morning? What enlivens you, what stirs up your passion, your desire to live? The only thing you can think of as human beings, it's just what we do over and over again. We say, "I just need to feel good." So, it makes perfect sense that we say, "Let's try to use our bodies to feel good. Let's have that be the primary thing we do." There's nothing wrong with passion. There's nothing wrong with desire. God put that in us. In fact, He put it in us with the intention that all of our passions, all of our desires, would be completely satisfied in Him. What he intends is that you and I, as people, would be so caught up in the astounding work that He is doing in the world, be so caught up in the drama

that God is unfolding in the world, that our passions wouldn't be unfulfilled, but they would be absolutely just over-the-top fulfilled, that we'd be living in perfect union with Him, living in the drama of what He is doing in the world. That's what God intends for you and for me. God intends that our passions be absolutely fulfilled and enlivened by the very God that created them. But the truth is, if you reject God and you reject being caught up in His drama, what you have is a life that will be marked by unfulfilled desire, constantly searching for something that will satisfy.

As Paul continues in verse 28, he begins to use very inclusive language, just in case someone is prone to think, "You know what? I don't struggle with this stuff. And sexual immorality isn't an issue for me." Just in case that would be the thought that would come to mind, which isn't what Paul intended, but just in case, Paul becomes very inclusive in his language, and he highlights all the various ways that the progression of sin leads us away from what God has designed, what God intends for you and for me and for His world. Verse 28:

> **And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,** (…even disobedient to parents. I remind my kids of this verse all the time☺) **without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (**Romans 1:28-32)

Many of these sins he just named, I sometimes remind myself that I can sometimes start to put them in a category that I kind of call "acceptable" sins. These are the ones so often that we just kind of tolerate; we turn a blind eye to. Paul is so inclusive in his language. He is highlighting the fact that, given over to sin, the world has run away from what God intended. This is all a description of a world that is completely contrary to what God intends. **Greed**! The hard thing about greed is it is hard to identify. It's even easy sometimes to explain it. Sometimes we glorify a person that is very successful: maybe greed is at work. **Envy**! We can hide envy pretty well. **Strife**! We might say strife is just what you do at family gatherings. That's just part of the deal, right? **Gossip**! Gossip is insidious, but it's so easy to slip into explaining it away by just saying, "I'm just processing with this person," and **slandering**, maybe. Sometimes in the Christian world, we say, "Well, that's a prayer request." **Boastful**! That's what we do on social media, right? That's what it's all about. And finally **disobedient to parents**! Oh, there's a deep truth in that though. God intended parents and children to be living in fruitful harmony together. The world is not as it ought to be.

Paul's point is that the effect of sin is pervasive, and it has affected absolutely everything. What happened? Sin happened! So, here's a question for us this morning. "Do we take sin seriously?" So often, when we're in this moment of Advent, we're kind of anticipating Christmas, we love the creation story, but we want to zoom right by the fact that our world is a fallen place. It's a broken place. The world is not as it is supposed to be. Do we take sin seriously? Do we take it seriously on the grand level—just that the world—the created order—is not what it is supposed to be, and there will be a day that Jesus will restore it.

But do we also take it seriously in our own life? There are ways that we diminish God, ways that we continually choose to do it our own way. Do we take it seriously? And do we long to be people that align with the world as God intended it? Surrendered to Him? Sin has entered. It's vandalized; it's distorted everything. God created a perfect world. It was ruined by sin—this willful choice of Adam and Eve. That's some bad news! Is it any wonder that Paul opens this passage by saying God's wrath is the response? God is saying, "I will correct it."

As I was thinking about God's created order kind of falling into disarray, an amusing story came to mind, and we need an amusing story, maybe at this moment. It takes me back to when I was probably about ten years old. My younger brother is five years younger than me, and he was a fun little brother to have because he was a very creative kind of kid that loved animals and always watched the Discovery Channel. And he was the kind of kid that, when you upset him, he didn't yell at you or hit you, or any of that. He would do an animal noise. So, he would hiss at you like a snake or like a cat that is angry or something else. You know, a unique child, *(laughter)* but sometimes his creativity got him into trouble. There was one time I remember when we went over to my best friend's house. Our families were really close, and my best friend's older brother was a brilliant guy, very meticulous. He still is, a pastor who lives in Omaha, and I still know him well. He was the kind of guy that loved to make model cars and model planes and helicopters, things like that. But he wouldn't make the kind of models that I often bought, which are just kind of these snap-together kind of cheap things. No, his were quite intricate…took a lot of time, weeks, if not months to complete these models. They were beautifully crafted, beautifully painted, and proudly displayed on the shelf in his bedroom. So one day we were over at my best friend's house, and on this particular day, my brother was not pretending to be an animal. Sometimes he also liked to pretend that he was a superhero. And this day, my five-year-old brother drifted. He was the Incredible Hulk. Now the wonderful thing about these really kind of intricate models is that they have so many pieces that when you smash them, the pieces explode everywhere. It's a glorious mess! And Shane took these models, little five-year-old Incredible Hulk, and he smashed all of them! That's right. How do you think my friend's brother responded? Devastated! Tears of disbelief! He couldn't believe it! He couldn't believe his eyes! He had spent so much time and had poured so much energy, so much love, and weeks and weeks if not months of work, all of it ruined! Anger! Wrath! An intent to somehow fix it or at least a longing to fix it? You better believe it! My brother was five; all he could do was say, "Sorry." I don't even know that he understood what he had done. Now, thankfully, in time, my friend's brother could restore some of those models.

The Creator can do that! Oh, but that doesn't diminish the grief of that moment. This was a devastating mess. Our world is broken. It has been subjected to ruin and decay. We look around at a glorious mess. We see it in creation. We also see it in our very lives and our relationships. Everything is not the way it's supposed to be. Sin has entered the world, and sin has affected everything…including us. On that night that Jesus was born, the angels appeared to the shepherds out in the field. And do you remember what they said? They said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy." Good news! The good news of Jesus Christ comes as a response to the brokenness of our world.

We began by talking about how Advent is not for the faint of heart. To really understand the absolutely astounding nature of the gift of Jesus Christ, we have to be willing to linger for just a moment, to linger in the brokenness of the human predicament. We live in a sin-stained world, a

world that is full of chaos and discord, with relationships that unravel in a world that is not the way it's supposed to be. No! Sin is not the end of the story. Sin is not the end of the story, but to understand, to fully glory in and worship at the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Oh, it's good for us to linger here in this low moment, for just a bit to linger…for just a moment…and allow this lingering to stir up for us hope, to have it be the kind of thing that kind of sinks down in our bones when we look at our own life and we cry out with every ounce of our being, ***Come, Lord Jesus, come and deliver us.*** Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are so grateful that in Your Son, You have begun a deliverance and we are marks of that deliverance. But, Lord, we know the world is not as it should be. And even in our own lives, there are still parts of us that do not surrender fully, do not worship you as God. We are so prone to wander some more, whether that be us, whether we be people who walk with You but still struggle, or whether we have never, never surrendered to You in the first place. I pray by Your Spirit this week, this day would be one where we would say to You, "Lord, we want it the way You designed it to be. We long for that. And so we say, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

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