

We All Need Christmas

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

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Genesis 3:1–10 (CEB)

The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn’t eat from any tree in the garden?”

²The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees ³but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴The snake said to the woman, “You won’t die! ⁵God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

⁸During that day’s cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God in the middle of the garden’s trees. ⁹The LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

¹⁰The man replied, “I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

Isaiah 2:1–5 (CEB)

This is what Isaiah, Amoz’s son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In the days to come
the mountain of the LORD’s house
will be the highest of the
mountains.

It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.

³Many nations will go and say,
“Come, let’s go up
to the LORD’s mountain,
to the house of Jacob’s God
so that he may teach us his
ways
and we may walk in God’s
paths.”

Instruction will come from Zion;
the LORD’s word from Jerusalem.

⁴God will judge between the
nations,
and settle disputes
of mighty nations.

Then they will beat
their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning
tools.

Nation will not take up sword
against nation;
they will no longer learn
how to make war.

⁵Come, house of Jacob,
let’s walk by the LORD’s light.

Jeremiah 33:14–16 (CEB)

¹⁴The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called, The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

We look forward to Christmas. We enjoy Christmas. But do we need Christmas?

As I write this, the nation is embroiled in a profound controversy around Starbucks paper cups. I don’t go to Starbucks, so I’m not very qualified to jump into this – but it has something to do with Starbucks not using winter/Christmas-themed cups this year. They are going to use a red cup – but sans snowflakes or other wintry decorations. And, here’s the punch line, some Christians are making a stink about it. . . . Really?? It’s

coffee cups! Besides, what does winter have to do with the birth of Jesus? Nothing really. . . . I just don't get it.

The world is so desperately in need of Christmas. Always has been. Is now. Dark, despairing, soul-rending need. How could someone look at our world and not grasp that we are lost without a rescuer? The world is not aching for a paper cup with snowflakes, a straighter Christmas tree, a tastier Christmas cookie, or yet-another TV special. Humanity yearns for restoration, renewal, peace, joy, love. But sadly, we will never find what we are looking for so long as we look only within ourselves. We are missing something. There is a wrongness within us that we cannot fix. We are the problem, not the solution.

Our deep yearning for rescue can be heard in the Advent carol, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Pay attention to the lyrics and hear the longing that springs from deep in the story of Israel. Indeed, to truly grasp the world's need for Christmas we have to go back to the beginning of the story.

We shouldn't be surprised that we so often return to the opening chapters of Genesis. One of the great Old Testament scholars, Gerhard von Rad, commented that it is impossible to "over-interpret" Genesis 1-3. He meant that every bit of it is packed with meaning and significance. I once heard a 12-part lecture series on Genesis. It took the professor six lectures to get out of the first three chapters! This emphasis on the opening chapters is more Christian than Jewish. This isn't surprising when we remember that, for Christians, we read the Genesis stories in the light of the New Testament, for Jesus came to make right what went so terribly wrong in the garden. And so today, we return to the story of Adam and Eve's tragic choices and listen for something we might not have heard before.

The Truth about Sin

I remember leaving a St. Andrew worship service some years ago at which I overheard a young woman say to her friend, "There was simply too much talk about sin today. That was such a downer." Ok . . . those may not have been her exact words. I don't think young people actually use the word "downer" anymore. But her point was clear to me.

Sin may be a "downer," but if Christians are anything, we are realists. Rose-colored glasses have no place in our pockets. Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about ourselves and our world. The problem when we begin to talk about sin is that it is commonly misunderstood.

We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. But this is not the best way to go about understanding sin.

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we chase after false gods or dishonor our parents or covet our neighbor's house or commit adultery, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God's way. And the result was that when God came to walk with them in the evening, Adam actually hid from God! *Separation*. The biblical story is about God's work to put back together what was torn apart that day in the garden.

In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve's choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by us all, that we can call Sin.

The first sin

It is not very hard to see the first bad choice made by Adam and Eve. It gets most of the press. In their desire to be like gods themselves, to be equal with the divine, they do the one thing that God asked them not to do – the one thing. And their relationship with God is torn apart. And even more astoundingly, all creation is burdened by their bad decision. In the words of Paul, from that day forward, all creation would groan awaiting its own redemption, its own renewal and transformation (see Romans 8:18-30). Adam and Eve's choice had far-reaching consequences. It certainly reminds us that our own choices can touch lives and events in ways that we never imagined. But it is Adam and Eve's next sin, their second sin, which is often neglected.¹

The devil made me do it

In my classes, it often takes students a little time to grasp the second sin, but once they do, the room is filled with knowing and guilty smiles. God asks Adam and Eve why they took a bite of the forbidden fruit. Well, the answer is so human, so typical -- Adam quickly blames Eve and, by extension, God, for who came up with Eve in the first place! For her part, Eve points her finger at the snake. So far as Adam and Eve are concerned, they didn't really do anything wrong. They aren't really responsible. It is someone else's fault. The devil made me do it.

The writer of Genesis knows us so well . . . God knows us so well. We are giant excuse factories. Somebody else is to blame for everything "bad" that happens to us. Commentators often call America a society of victims. Nothing just happens anymore – it is always somebody else's fault, never our own.

One of the tough theological questions is centered upon God's rule over all of creation and our own freedom. How free are we? How much of our lives and actions does God control? The biblical view is that however we think of freedom, we are free enough to be justly held responsible for what we do, for the decisions we make. God created us to love, but we are free to not love. God desires us to be merciful, but we can be mean and uncaring if we choose.

The great tragedy

There is a larger stage on which the second sin is played out. A wise person (I wish I could remember who!) once remarked that the great tragedy of humankind is that we can find a reason for everything. To put it another way, there is no evil that humans can't rationalize or excuse away. Auschwitz? Wounded Knee? Apartheid? They were all justified in the minds of the perpetrators.

If we will only open our eyes, we'll see that the world is not "ok," and that we are not "ok." Tears, grief, pain, loneliness, anger, hurt, separation, sickness, death. These are with us all.

And it was just as true 2,700 years ago when Isaiah brought God's Word to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom. By almost any measure, times among the Israelites were about as bad as they could get. The northern kingdom of Israel had just fallen to the mighty Assyrian Empire, who seemed poised to sweep across Judah in the south, taking Jerusalem and everything around it.

In the midst of all this, Isaiah brought a word of rescue from God, the promise that despite the darkness in which his people lived, God would lead them to a time of plenty and of peace and of prayer. The world would be remade; spears and swords would be things of the past, to be no more. All the peoples of the world would come streaming to the mountain so that they might know God and his ways.

¹Our Advent series this year is based on Ellsworth Kalas' *Christmas from the Backside* in this sermon series. This perspective of the second sin is also from one of Kalas' "backside" books. They are all excellent and I highly recommend them. Kalas is always looking a less-than obvious way into a Bible story.

The anticipation of such rescue is what Advent is all about. The birth of the infant Jesus would soon bring the rescue project to its climax more than thirty years later on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

Between-the-times

Though the infant Jesus was born 2,000 years ago, we still look forward to the coming salvation, the full flowering of God's kingdom. Writing only twenty-five years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Paul spoke of salvation "being nearer to us now than when we were believers." The full realization of God's promises to rescue all creation was still ahead, still something to be anticipated and for which Paul and his readers needed to prepare themselves. All this, even though Paul knew quite well that God's victory over sin and death had been won by Christ on that cross many years before. "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

Paul was neither stupid nor a sloppy writer. Rather, he was convinced that he, and we now, are "between-times" people, the "ones upon whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Corinthians 10:11), the age of death and the age of life, the age of the earthly kingdoms and the age of God's kingdom.

It is odd isn't it. If we see God's rescue project, our salvation, *only* as having been completed in Jerusalem long ago, Christmas becomes a remembrance and Advent a time to prepare ourselves to be thankful for what has been done for us . . . but no more.

And if we see God's rescue project, our salvation, *only* as something still to be awaited, then Christmas is still a hope and Advent a time to cultivate reassurance . . . but no more.

Yet the life- and cosmos-changing birth of the Christ child encompasses past, present, and future. Advent is a time to fall on our knees in grateful appreciation of what God has done for us *and* it is a time to prepare ourselves for the new world that will be ushered in when Christ returns.

As Paul puts it, let us not live in the darkness, given over to strife and hatred and envy, but let us live in the kingdom of God, living honorably in the fellowship that God's Spirit has created and of which we are all a part. The time is now . . . Christmas fast approaches.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons, like Lent and Advent, at all?
2. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith?
3. Sin. Not something we talk about very much. Why is that? Does it make us uncomfortable? Does it make us feel guilty? Perhaps we feel that talking about sin only reinforces the prevalent notion that God is The Great Rule-maker, always devising ingenious ways to catch us doing something wrong. If we see God as this rule-maker, we will naturally see something like the Ten Commandments as a list of rules that we are to keep, rather than instruction as to what it really means to love God and others.
4. Adam and Eve forgot that they were creatures, not gods; that they were dependent upon God, not independent of God. Like them, we are created to be in loving relationship with God and one another. Sin, then, is far more than rule-breaking. It is a distortion of our relationship with God and others and it has dire consequences, so dire that in the end God himself must put things right. How would seeing sin as the distortion of relationship and seeing God's Law as teachings about relationship change your reading of the Bible? Knowing that the Holy Spirit helps us to overcome sin and separation, what are some concrete steps we could take to diminish the grip of sin in our lives?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 3:22-4:16 Adam and Eve leave the garden; Cain murders Abel</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 53 Could it be that Israel's salvation will come through suffering? This passage is a mini-summary of Jesus' vocation.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 5:12-20 Death through Adam, life through Christ (The fact that this is a 2nd reading from Romans highlights how foundational Genesis 1-3 are for NT theology.)</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 8:18-30 All creation groans awaiting its own liberation.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Corinthians 4 Present weakness and resurrection life</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

