

The Great Rift

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

May 2, 2021

©2021 Scott L. Engle

Genesis 3:1-13 (NRSV)

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?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶So 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. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Ephesians 2:1–3 (NRSV)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

The story we tell – from darkness to light.

Today we begin a six-week series on Paul’s letter “to the Ephesians,” which wasn’t written to the Christians in Ephesus, but was written to circulate among the communities of believers established in western Asia Minor in the 50’s AD. It is likely that Paul is writing from prison – in Ephesus – where he spent a lot of time. Perhaps reflecting the darkness of his own circumstances, the letter is a beautiful piece of writing. Three chapters on the theology underlying the Good News and then three chapters on living that theology. And smack in the middle, Paul urges these novice Christians to lead lives worthy of the calling to which they had been called (4:1). This brief introduction by N. T. Wright and Michael Bird will give you a sense of Paul at this time:

Imagine Paul in prison in Ephesus. He is probably malnourished and short of sleep. He may well have suffered horrible illness; he will certainly have been beaten up by guards and perhaps by other prisoners. He feels helpless and alone in the dark and damp, with the smell of rot, excrement, and death all around him. Picture him then, either scribbling away on a small sheet of papyrus, squinting for lack of light, or else, hearing at last someone whispering through a slot in the door, talking to a visiting colleague and telling him what to put in a letter to one or more of the central Asian churches.

This is a far darker image than the usual portraits of Paul, sitting peacefully at a desk, quill in hand, with a pensive look on his face like Wordsworth writing about daffodils. What Paul experienced in an Ephesian prison was not serenity, but searing hardship, not soothing tranquillity but brokenness and anxiety. So it is all the more remarkable that it is from this tumultuous period of Paul’s career that we get from him, not only the letter to the Philippians, but also the letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the circular letter we call ‘Ephesians’. The church in Colossae, inland from Ephesus, seems to have been founded only recently, with Philemon as one of its local leaders, and a particular problem has caused Paul to write to Philemon as an individual while sending a letter of encouragement, rich

with the sense of the Messiah's supremacy over all things, to the new believers there. Ephesians may then have been written shortly afterwards, to be sent to all the churches in the region. These letters all emphasize the universal sovereignty of Jesus and the call for the churches to model, in their own communities, the cosmic reconciliation achieved by God through him.

The Great Rift – the problem -- sin

Paul's presentation in Ephesians begins, as it must, with our rebellion against God (2:1-3). We shouldn't be surprised that we, or Paul, so often return to the opening chapters of Genesis. One of the great Old Testament scholars, Gerhard von Rad, once

What is Sin?

I get this question a lot in my classes and I've come to realize that sin 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 what 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 God came to walk with them in the evening and Adam hid from God! *Separation*.

In the biblical view, 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. Sin is what separates us from God. God is holy; thus, to grow in our own holiness is to reduce that separation. But in the end, the gap is only fully closed when we claim Jesus' holiness as our own.

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, Jesus came to make right what went so terribly wrong in the garden.

And so, let us return to the story of Adam and Eve's tragic choices and listen for something we might not have heard before. For as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1, we are dead in our sins, a story that begins in the garden.

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 second sin that is often overlooked.¹

¹We'll be using Ellsworth Kalas' *Old Testament Stories from the Backside* in this sermon series. All of Kalas's " . . . from the backside" books are excellent and I highly recommend them. In them, Kalas is always looking a less-than obvious way into a Bible story.

The devil made me do it

It can take us a little time to grasp the second sin, but once we 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 (2:18). 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

The story told in Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and it is foundational to all that follows. In it, we learn that there is a God who created everything and created humans in God's image. We learn that God gave the humans a beautiful place to live and to work, a place in which their relationship with God could thrive. But we also learn that, in their desire to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed all this away, doing the one thing God had asked them not to do. Through this act of selfish defiance, the humans' relationship with God was deeply mangled and, indeed, all of creation became misshapen and only a shadow of what God intended. All of this happens in the first three chapters of Genesis!

The rest of the Bible is the story of God's efforts to make things right, to restore creation, and to bring humans back into a right relationship with their creator – our creator.

The story of Noah is really a story of "uncreation" and new creation, a fresh start. But this start goes wrong too. No sooner do the humans get off the ark than they begin building for themselves a tower that would reach to the heavens. Again, they would seek to be like gods. So God dashes the tower to the ground and scatters the people, even going so far as to burden them with a multitude of languages.

So . . . in the 12th chapter of Genesis, we learn that God undertook a new way forward, ever determined that his people would be restored to a right and loving relationship with God. We meet Abram, later called Abraham, the man God chooses to be the father of a people, God's people, through whom God would put things right. As Genesis unfolds, we meet Abraham, his wife, Sarah, their sons, Isaac and Esau, and Isaac's son, Jacob. Jacob, in turn, has twelve sons, from whom would come the twelve tribes of Israel. And, of course, the story of this restoration reaches its climax in Jesus Christ who, as Israel's representative king, would do for Israel what the people were unable to do for themselves.

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. But as the remarkable story of South Africa

has unfolded, we've seen the power of confession and repentance. The underlying premise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that the only way to mend relationships and build a lasting peace was to begin with honest confession and forgiveness – amnesty was granted to those who came forward admitting to human rights abuses. Who would have ever guessed that apartheid in South Africa would have been ended without a civil war?

Next week, we turn to the great mystery of God's solution to the problem of sin, a solution built on faithfulness.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Jude

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: *Contending for the Faith in the Age of Nones*

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.