

Genesis 3:1–8 (NIV)

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴ “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Genesis 3:23–24 (NIV)

²³ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴ 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.

Genesis 4:6–10 (NIV)

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.

Genesis 6:5–8 (NIV)

⁵ The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

⁶ The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. ⁷ So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them.” ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Genesis 9:13–17 (NIV)

¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Genesis 11:8–9 (NIV)

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel —because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The true story

Tragically, darkness falls across God’s good creation as the humans rebel against their creator, doing the one thing God told them not to do. In that decision, they are separated from the One who loves them and from each other. They are cast out of the garden and will not eat from the Tree of Life, thus, death will now be theirs. No sooner do they leave and start a family, then one son murders the other. This is what their rebellion against God has wrought. Soon, it is evil, evil, evil everywhere, from morning thru the night. God tries a new start with Noah and his family, but again, the humans set their own course, building a tower to the heavens.

What will the God of the Heavens do?

Leave the humans to their own devices? Start over, yet again?

Already, the first act in the story of God’s work in this world is behind us. Genesis 1 & 2. That’s it. As the curtain falls on Act 1, all is bright and hopeful. But then, as the curtain rises on Act 2, a dark shadow has fallen, a shadow that is with us still. By way of reminder, here is the outline of the six-act play. The larger biblical narrative can be thought of as a six act play¹:

Act 1 – God **creates** everything, including humans in God’s image

Act 2 – The humans **rebel** against God, separating themselves from God and one another.

Act 3 – God chooses and saves a people, **Israel**, through whom God will restore all humanity, indeed, all of creation.

Act 4 – When Israel, God’s people, proves unable to be faithful, God provides one faithful Israelite, **Jesus**, through whom God’s restoration is achieved.

Act 5 – God’s renewal project continues as the Spirit of God empowers **the church** to build for the kingdom of God.

Act 6 – Jesus returns and God’s **restoration and renewal** is fully consummated in the arrival of the new heavens and earth.

Act 2 -- Rebellion

One thing. There is just one thing that they are supposed to leave untouched. But they can’t or won’t. A serpent approaches Eve and tells her what she most wants to hear, that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she can know what God knows; i.e., she can be like a god herself. Who among us could resist such a promise? So Eve eats the fruit and then Adam does the same . . . and it all plunges into ruin.

This act of rebellion, doing the one thing God asked them not to do, tears everything apart. Instead of walking with God in the evening, they hide from God, for shame has been planted in the garden. They point the finger at each other when God asks them what they have done. Relationships have been ripped apart; the man and the woman are estranged from God and from each other.

And so God sends them out of the garden. They will not be able to eat from the tree of life and live forever, instead, they will now die. Death comes as a consequence of their sin, their act of separating themselves from God. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “For the wages of sin is death . . .” (6:23).

¹ I first encountered this way of teaching the story in the work of N. T. Wright, who used the metaphor of a five act play with an epilogue. Later, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen wrote a book, *The Drama of Scripture*, built on Wright’s structure, though they changed it to a six act play.

All the rest of the Bible is the story of God's work to put right what went so wrong in the Garden of Eden. It is the story of God's rescue project.

The story of the Fall,² as it is often called, is a sad story of human pride, imagining that we could be like God, that we could know what God knows. Indeed, the next major story in Genesis is Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. It is a short walk from rebellion against God to envy and murder. And it goes downhill from there.

To grasp the larger story of Scripture, we have to see God's larger purposes at work. Ever since the rebellion in the Garden, God has sought to rescue humanity and all of creation, to put right our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. Thus, for example, when Jesus is asked for the most important teaching that God has given us, he responds that there are two: love God and love neighbor. In the Garden both were true – until Adam and Eve succumbed to pride and ate the forbidden fruit.

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! The 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.

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 rebel

The Truth about Sin

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.

²The label, the Fall, though commonly used by Christians is actually derived from Plato. It describes the time when immortal human souls fell from the world of the forms (true reality) to be imprisoned and encased in mortal bodies. Thus, death frees the immortal souls to return to the world of forms. In Plato, it is the place we are meant to be, our true home.

against God, doing the one thing that God asked them not to do. 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 the second sin that is often overlooked.³

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 uncaring if we choose.

Indeed, this is horribly demonstrated in Genesis 4, when we learn that one son of Adam and Eve kills the other. Cain slays Abel out of envy and uncontrolled anger. Sin is like a monster waiting for us to open the door. . . . and Cain does just that (Genesis 4:7).

And Noah?

The too well-known⁴ story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6-9) is a bit of a trap. It is easy to get caught up in questions like: Could it really be *all* the animal species? How could the ark be large enough? Did water really cover the whole planet? Wouldn't it have to rain 15 feet each hour for forty days to cover even Mt. Rainier, much less Mt. Everest?

In the end, such questions are futile. Better questions are these: What does this story tell us about God? Why such destruction? Why not just do away with humankind entirely? Did this fix the problem created by Adam and Eve? Why a second chance?

*"People thought evil, imagined evil — evil, evil, evil from morning to night"*⁵

As we've seen, once Adam and Eve, desiring to be like gods themselves, had made their choice to turn away from God, things went downhill quickly. Eve gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Foreshadowing the darkness that is with us still, Cain envied his brother and murdered him. As the generations proceeded, the darkness grew until, as Peterson renders it, "God saw that human evil was out of control" (6:5a). It is hugely important that we comprehend God's response to the evil wreaked by his children.

³From Ellsworth Kalas's *Old Testament Stories from the Backside*. All of Kalas's " . . . from the backside" books are excellent and I highly recommend them. In them, Kalas always looked for a less-than obvious way into a Bible story.

⁴This isn't as odd a notion as you might think. Believing that we "know" a story from the Bible gets in the way of our reading it carefully and seeing other viewpoints.

⁵Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Genesis 6:5b in *The Message*.

Indeed, a close reading of the story of Noah and the flood might reshape your understanding of the God we worship.

When God surveys the horrors being visited on his creation by those made in his image, God is neither angry nor vengeful. Instead, God's heart is broken (6:6b). God grieves. The pain cuts into God's heart like a knife. This is a portrait of a loving parent whose much-loved child has done something so heinous that, in her suffering, the parent regrets giving birth in the first place. The biblical portrait of a God who suffers is not limited to Jesus on the cross.

The writer paints such a stark picture of human evil that one might think God will simply wipe out humanity, admit the experiment has gone tragically wrong, and pour out his creative energies elsewhere. Indeed, God's judgment is swift and sure. A flood will cover the planet and every living creature on the land will be destroyed.⁶ In essence, it seems that God will "uncreate." Or will he?

A God Who Grieves and Remembers

There is not only one portrait of God in the Bible. On my shelves, there is a book that looks at eight portraits of God; e.g. God as loving father, good shepherd, and righteous judge.¹ None of the portraits are sufficient in themselves; all are important to grasping the fullness of God.

It is easy for us to bring to each a portrait of an all-knowing, all-powerful, changeless God to the story of Noah. But when we do, we miss so much of what is here.

In the story, God is sorry that he ever made the humans in the first place. In this, his grief is so sharp that it hurts God's heart. God is not an angry and vengeful judge, but a grieving and pained parent. Despite the flood that "blots out" nearly all humankind, God is not remote or indifferent. God is no absentee landlord, he is deeply involved in all of creation, always caring, always loving.

1. *Portraits of God* by Allan Coppedge. Intervarsity Press. 2001.

Uncreation?

God's act of "uncreation" is not complete. Yes, water again covers the entire planet, but God chooses Noah to carry on. Noah is to build a large box (the ark) and load up a male and a female of every species. It is through Noah that God's work will go on. God desires a people that will live in right relationship with him and if that takes a second try, then so be it.

"But God remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:1)

Today's scripture passages bracket the story of Noah and the flood. But 8:1 is the pivotal verse – God *remembers* Noah. That seems an odd choice of words. After all, how could God forget something? God has not forgotten Noah; but he is now turning his attention back to Noah.⁷ Later, Israel would sometimes think that God had forgotten them (don't we?) and the biblical emphasis on God's remembering ought to assure us of God's constant care for us.

So God remembers and recovery begins. The waters subside. Noah, his family, and all the animals disembark. It is a fresh start, but things are not as they were in the Garden of Eden before the fall. The present is still burdened with the past. When Noah builds

an altar and offers pleasing sacrifices, we get a peek inside God's heart. God knows that the human heart is still inclined toward evil. As we'll soon see, the flood doesn't "fix" the problem of human sin. Still, very significantly, God promises that he will never again "destroy every living creature." What a remarkable promise. Have you ever stopped to consider how this promise limits God's actions from that point on? What can't God do, if God is to remain faithful to his promise?

⁶ It is worth noting that God uses creation itself as the instrument of justice. It rains, a lot, but it is still only rain.

⁷ There are several occasions in the Old Testament when we are told that God "remembered." In each, case it isn't saying that God somehow forgot; instead it is a Hebrew way of saying that now the time has come for God to take action.

The Rainbow

When God gives new significance to the rainbow, it is a sign of the covenant that God makes. In this case, the covenant is simply a promise; nothing is asked of Noah or his family. The rainbow is a symbol of peace and goodwill. Never again will such devastation be brought upon humanity and the rest of God's creatures.

As Terence Fretheim writes, "The covenant will be as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in eternal faithfulness. It will never have to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise." After the flood, God knows that evil still lies in the human heart (8:21), but God cares so much for creation that God heads in a new direction.

So what is God like?

Given that the story of Noah follows on the heels of the creation stories, Terence Fretheim⁸ lifts up several aspects of the story that challenge the notions of God held by many.

First, God is deeply and emotionally bound up with us and all of his creation. God can be hurt. God grieves. This is the consistent biblical witness and, so far as I can see, the only reason so many people envision a remote emotionless God is because they have been too heavily influenced by Plato and certain philosophical notions of God. But there is nothing "remote" about the God depicted in the story of Noah.

Second, God *regrets* he made the humans in the first place! "And the LORD was sorry that he made humankind on the earth" (6:6). This seems to imply that God couldn't have been certain that Adam and Eve would rebel. Perhaps we are to grasp that though God knows all that can be known, there is an uncertainty to the future that even God must deal with. Further, God *changes his mind* about blotting out humanity (6:7-8). This is another common, but surprising, theme in the Old Testament depictions of God.

Third, it seems obvious from the story that God has chosen to put limits on the exercise of his power.

God is in charge, but will not always be in control. God has taken the option of "uncreation" off the table. And we know that humanity is just as prideful, violent, and rebellious, after the flood as before. But God is committed to the rescue of humankind and must do so *through* the suffering created by humankind. If God is to be faithful to God's promises, it can be no other way. Here, we gain a deeper understanding of why God had to enter into that suffering in order to accomplish the rescue of humanity and all of his creation. . . . All this and more just in the opening chapters of Genesis. Amazing!

On to the Tower of Babel

One often-overlooked aspect of the creation story is that the humans are to be part of God's creative activity. They are to have dominion over the earth. They to tame and master it. They are to be fruitful and multiply. They are an integral part of the creative work that spans the globe. Terence Fretheim helps us to see that the story of the tower is the humans' attempt to thwart God's work, thereby endangering themselves and the future of humanity:

The key is in the motivation, "otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." This central human failure inheres in the straightforward moral-order talk (the punishment fits the crime); it corresponds precisely to God's judgment (vv. 8-9). Most basically, humans fear what the future might bring, evincing deep anxiety and insecurity about what lies ahead. We do not discover fear of other human beings, but fear of not being able to keep their community intact in the face of a perceived peril of dispersion into a threatening world. Only because of this motivation do their objectives of building a city/tower and making a name for themselves become problematic. The building projects constitute a bid

⁸From his 2010 book, *Creation Untamed*.

to secure their own future as a unified community, isolated from the rest of the world.

Hence, their action constitutes a challenge to the divine command to fill the earth, . . . but *not* simply in a spatial sense. Their resistance to being scattered (this word occurs positively in 10:18; cf. 9:19; 10:5, 32) occasions a divine concern for the very created order of things, for only by spreading abroad can human beings fulfill their charge to be caretakers of the earth. According to 1:28 and 2:5 (cf. 2:15), the proper development of the creation depends on human activity. For the builders to concentrate their efforts narrowly on the future of the (only) human community places the future of the rest of creation in jeopardy. An isolationist view of their place in the world, centered on self-preservation, puts the rest of the creation at risk. The building project thus understeps rather than oversteps human limits, for it prevents scattering and taking up the creational command that put the creation at risk.⁹

What will we do?

The ancient people of Genesis 11 thought they could use their construction to defy God, and insulate themselves from their responsibility to spread across the earth and exercise godly stewardship over creation. Just as God had banished Adam and Eve from the garden, God frustrates the ambitions of the tower builders, even going so far as to divide their languages. The humans have little choice but to go on and play their role in God's purposes.

Technology has given humanity such profound good. Until the middle of the nineteenth century life expectancy was little more than it was in the ancient world; but clean water and antibiotics have driven life expectancies skyward. But the technological advances also bring the possibility of great harm, even ruin. In this, the question for us is the same as it was for the ancient tower-builders. Will we seek after God's way in the development and use of existing and new technologies? Will we heed God's warnings about pride and greed and lust and envy? Let us pray that we do, before God has to smash our towers.

Next week -- Act 3, a new rescue plan

God's rescue project will have to proceed on a different course. We might be tempted to think that God would just wave his magic wand and make all things right. But love, and God is love (1 John 4:16), is not a matter of magic but, instead, is about faithfulness, trust, kindness, and more that is *freely* given. Even God cannot force or bribe someone to love genuinely, for then it would not be love.

So, when the curtain falls at the end of Act 2, a deep darkness has fallen across the story. Not only are the humans separated from God, they have fallen into murder, envy, hatred, and all that plagues us still. To make matters worse, as Paul writes, all creation groans in labor pains – all creation awaits redemption.

Genesis 12 to Revelation is one over-arching story . . . the story of God's new way to put things right. God will come next to one man and one woman, Abram and Sarai, through whom God's work of salvation and redemption will move forward. Act 3 begins with their story and will take us all the way to Jesus.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

We've just begun a study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

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

⁹ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 412–413.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We've just begun a study of John's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry 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." **Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".**

Scott's Sunday Class

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

This week: We just began the nine-month journey through the Bible, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

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.