



“The Great Rift”

Genesis 3:1-13; Ephesians 2:1-3

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 (2:13). 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 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 his second sin that is often overlooked.¹

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.

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

WHAT IS SIN?

I get this question a lot 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.

¹ We'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. I highly recommend them. In them, Kalas is always looking at less-than obvious ways into a Bible story.

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.