

Sin and Exile

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 6

Genesis 3:8-24

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

Sometimes kids say the funniest things to me. As we've been studying Genesis, a few have asked about dinosaurs. Some wonder what happened to them, and some just wonder which dinosaur is my favorite. I'm not sure what happened to those great beasts, but I'm certainly happy T-Rexes aren't wandering around inside the Beltway! One young fella asked me how tall angels were, and again I had to admit I was stumped. One young lady came to me after a service and asked what seemed like a serious theological question: "How long did Cain love his brother Abel?" I thought for a minute, and she said through a toothy smile, "As long as he was *able*." We both laughed.

But sometimes kids—free of inhibitions and so sensitive to emotion—say the truest things. Things that aren't childish, but actually articulate some of the deepest longings of the heart. "*I want my mommy or daddy.*" Or, "*I'm scared.*" To feel afraid, to want the presence of someone who loves you unconditionally and is powerful enough to help you—these are things we don't outgrow. There's another statement kids will make when they're in an unfamiliar place and feeling unsettled. And without realizing it, these words articulate a longing that originates in the Garden of Eden. This is when an unsettled child will say, "I want to go *home*."

Home is that place of love and safety, of familiar sights and sounds, filled with the people we are most at peace with. As we've studied Genesis, we've seen that the world was designed to be a *home*. It's structured for relationships—family, friendship, and fellowship. Just as our physical life needs the nourishment of food and rest, so too our spiritual side needs the nourishment of relationships and love—the nourishment of a *home*.¹

In Genesis 3 sin enters Eden and attacks our home. The chapter culminates with Adam and Eve being driven from Eden, cast out of their home: "God drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24).

Sin leads to something the Bible calls exile. Exile is being driven out of one's home because of one's sin. Since Genesis 3, to be human is to live East of Eden—it is to never quite be at home.

As we explore the second half of Genesis 3, verses 8-24, we'll be asking why sin leads to exile, how God responds to our exile, and what it means to find home. As we dive in, it may be helpful to briefly summarize how Genesis 3-4 are guiding us through Lent. Lent is that season when we reflect on our need to repent of our sin and turn afresh to Christ. Genesis 3-4 introduces us not only to what sin is but also what sin *does*. Each Sunday in March, we'll see a specific *consequence* of sin. Sin leads to (1) *shame*, (2) *exile*, (3) *bondage*, and (4) *guilt*. These realities intertwine, but each tells us something important about our present condition.

In diagnosing our problem, however, we do so as a good doctor—we do so with the aim of healing. And so, we will study sin only in light of grace. We'll place each consequence of this disease at the feet of our Great Physician, Jesus Christ, and consider how He treats it. If the original creation is a theater where we see the power of God, the fallen world becomes a theater where we see the heart of God—His mercy and love poured out for weak and weary sinners.

Let's turn now to the second half of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve have fallen under the deception of the serpent, succumbed to temptation, and broken God's command not to eat of the forbidden tree. When we left them last week, they were suffering in shame and hiding. Picking up at v. 9, we see that God will not allow sin to remain in secret, but He calls out and confronts.

I. Sin is Not Private, but Personal, Always Against Another

The first words spoken since the first sin make anyone with a guilty conscience shudder: "The LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) Adam emerges, explaining he was afraid when he heard God's voice, so he hid. An intense questioning ensues where God draws out the couple and further exposes the wiles of sin. Notice especially the blame-shifting:

Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:9-13).

Here is the first point to note in this section of chapter three: **sin is never private but always personal**. Adam and Eve simply took a piece of fruit, but in doing so they sent a spider-web of cracks into the relational structure of their home.

God's confrontation tells us that sin isn't private because it's always a personal affront to God. Adam and Eve bit into a random apple—but in doing so they spit on God. To sin is to rebel against God's Lordship, and to reject Him as the bestower of wisdom and truth. Adam goes so far as to blame God for his failure: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree (v.12). Sin eats away at one's relationship with God. We also see that sin isn't private because it leads to distancing in other relationships. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. And so, the other fundamental relationships of Eden—humans with each other, and humans with creatures—start to fracture, too.

The Consequences Pronounced (vv.14-19)

If we consider the consequences pronounced by God in verses 14-19, the alienation and relational destruction of sin only grow. As God addresses all three parties involved in the first sin—the serpent, the woman, the man—there is much to be seen. But let's briefly notice the theme of alienation that runs through them.

1. Humans and Creation

Sin leads to alienation between humans and the created world. Adam, made to work and guard Eden (2:15), is now set in a painful relationship with the very ground from which he was taken:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread (3:18-19).

While God ultimately rules and governs His creation,² He has given humanity a unique role in caring for and cultivating it. There is a relationship between the moral well-being of humans and the well-being of the world. So not only will humanity now be frustrated in their relationship with creation as they work and live in it. But also, creation itself, as Paul later explains, knows a "bondage to corruption and futility" (see Romans 8:20-22)—like a field suffering from a reckless farmer, or land whose stewards have either buried their talents or shirked their duties.

2. Humans and Humans

Humans are also alienated from humans. What was to be the sweetest of relationships between Adam and Eve, is now infected by a battle for power (v.16). And the gift of childbearing is touched by pain—perhaps along with physical, Eve knows the pain of giving birth to beings that will one day die (v.19).

3. Humans and God

We have already seen that sin is an act against God, and therefore it creates separation between humanity and their Maker. The world was made with a careful design, and all things are meant to turn on the axis of trust and honor of God. Adam and Eve have now said they'd like to be that axis; things should turn upon, revolve around, what they deem as right and wrong. And the distance this creates between the eternal and holy God, and the rebellious creature, is not a little distance, like a sick patient whom the doctors quarantine in another room. The sinner is now separated from God by an infinite distance, a gap uncloseable by human means.³ Hence when God drives them out of Eden, He blocks the way to the tree of life; meaning, they have no access to God whose presence is the source of life.

We tend to think of sin as moral rule-breaking, or as a crime, a legal infraction. And these things it is. But what is stressed in Genesis 3, is the relational destruction of sin. Like termites set loose in the walls of a house, sin eats away at the relational structure that made Eden *home*. Even before being physically cast out of their home, humans have already lost relationally and spiritually. Let's pause for a moment and ask what this *personal* and *relational* aspect of sin might be meant to teach us.

II. Lessons Regarding the Personal Nature of Sin

Sin Coram Deo

In seminary I kept running across a Latin phrase I didn't understand, *coram deo*. I googled it and found it meant "in the presence of God." Things happen *coram deo*, in the presence of God. It's a lovely idea to think about while doing your morning devotions; it's more than a little terrifying when you realize it also applies to your sin.

Sin is *coram deo*; it happens in the presence of God. This means more than God sees it because He sees everything.⁴ God doesn't just see sin. God *determines* what sin is. Sin is *coram deo* because sin is only seen for what it is when seen from God's perspective.⁵

We tend to understand sin in light of our own moral reasoning or our feelings. If something seems bad to us, then it's sin. And if we feel like we're bad or selfish, then we feel we are sinful. But this reduces sin to *coram me*, sin defined by me. Sin is not determined by our moral reasoning or our feelings. In God's word, He makes it clear that we are all sinful, and that sin is failing to live up to His glory: "All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As we surrender to God's perspective, through His word, and by His Spirit, He will reveal to us where we are in fact in sin. In both those outward ways, but also in the more subtle ways in which we are not keeping the great commands to love Him with our *whole* heart and with *all* our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. (see Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37).

We deal with sin by passing the buck

Another instructive part of this passage is how sin becomes a personal issue between human beings. We see this in the blame-shifting and self-justifying of Adam and Eve. Shifting the blame to others—pointing out their wrongs—is often a way to try and justify ourselves. But often our calling others out serves to cover a sin within us. We're hyper-vigilant about the errors in one political party but find it harder to see the faults in our own. We're quick to point out the licentiousness in culture, while we may be guilty of so much impurity ourselves. And even in our most accurate judgements of the sins of others, in pronouncing them we can so easily indulge in the sin of pride and self-righteousness.

Adam and Eve will always notice the sin around them. But they need to let the spotlight of God's presence reveal the sins within him. Only from this vantage point can they then learn how God, in His mercy, may help him. Sin is never private, but personal. And it creates more than moral problems; it creates relational ones. Sin alienates us from God and each other, and alienation, when fully grown, leads to exile. Sin leads to exile.

In 2010 hip hop artist P. Diddy, whose real name is Sean Combs, put out a hit single titled "Coming Home." The music video (viewed 319 million times as of this month) finds the rapper walking through a barren desert wasteland, strewn with burnt pieces of furniture, vestiges of a wrecked home. In the song, Diddy reveals the alienation he feels—in himself, in his relationship with his twin daughters, in his life.

What am I 'posed to do when the club lights come on

It's easy to be Puff, but it's harder to be Sean
What if the twins ask why I ain't marry their mom
How do I respond?
Just tell Keisha and Taresha I'll be better in the morn'
Another lie that I carry on

The chorus is the cry of a heart in exile:

I'm coming home
I'm coming home
Tell the world I'm coming home
Let the rain wash away all the pain of yesterday
I know my kingdom awaits and they've forgiven my mistakes

Asked in an interview with BBC what the song was based on, Diddy said:

I've been lost in life; I'm still lost in life.... Sometimes you get lost through drug addiction or you break up with up your partner or remission from cancer etc. you struggle to find your way back to yourself. That's what "Coming Home" is about.

Home is more than a place. Home is an entire life—a life without internal contradictions or alienation from loved ones.⁶

Alienation within ourselves

In Diddy's experience, we see that sin actually leads to an alienation within our very selves. We are no longer at home in our own skin. Humans are created in the image of an eternal God; their nature is as physical as it is spiritual. They are made for unique fellowship with God. But now they are both separated from God, and also set in motion towards death—"to dust you shall return" (v.19).

This leads to a deep unsettledness underlying all of life. Man no longer fits inside man. Our souls are imperishable; but our bodies are perishing. Our souls are designed for friendship with God, but they are now cut off from Him. Man's appetites outstrip his abilities and resources. Man's needs outsize his options. And so, man seeks satisfaction a spiritual appetite in things mundane; things that never finally satisfy him.

East of Eden, cut off from the spiritual oxygen of Eden and spiritual love of his Maker, man is now on unsettled, unmet, longing. How does God respond to our state of exile? What does He do?

III. God Brings Us Home

God comes to dwell

As the narrative of God's people unfolds, we see that God responds to our exile not by turning away, but by coming to us. God comes to dwell with His people—to make His home with them. In the Tabernacle, God comes to dwell with Israel in the wilderness. In the Temple, He makes His home with the nation of Israel. Then, most poignantly, He comes in the flesh in the Incarnation, as Jesus Christ, to dwell among His people (John 1:14). And Jesus' ministry involves not only atoning for the sins of God's people but in bringing them back home.

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:2-3).

Even now, God makes a home in us by His Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 3:16). This is our first taste of return to Eden; the loving presence of God our Father.

God is our home

Home is God's presence. Even in a broken world and in broken bodies, through Christ, we can begin to rest in this home. Our experience of exile at times is obvious but can also be subtle, an underlying sense that we're never quite at peace. C. S. Lewis' way of describing childhood after his mother's passing captures in a way our experience of exile:

With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.⁷

But in Christ, we can once again come home to God. George Macdonald once wrote,

God's thoughts, his will, his love, his judgments are all man's home. To think his thoughts, to choose his will, to love his loves, to judge his judgments, and thus to know that he is in us, is to be at home.⁸

Sometimes I feel the most at home when I am sitting quietly in a church sanctuary, praying to God. It feels like inside these walls another world surrounds me, where the lives of the saints are permanent, where the world becomes itself again, where death is swallowed up in victory—where I am finally *home*. I feel it too at times in the presence of Christian brothers and sisters. When we are talking about the truest truths, when our hearts are laid open before each other. I sense, in my soul, that I am with my eternal family—I am *home*.

I don't know how at home you currently feel. But behind the veneer of contentment, or beneath the noise of distraction, or in the middle of the chaos and sorrow, please know, *you are not home*—not in the sense of the home you're made for. But if you give Jesus Christ the key to your house, to your present life, He will come in. And in quiet and steady obedience to Him, He will give you a foretaste of your true home with Him. As you sojourn on your way there, He will show you how—as you walk alongside so many others living East of Eden—how to share a taste of this eternal abode with those weary travelers. And by His Spirit burning inside you, He will assure you in your best days and worst—you are *coming home*.

Endnotes

1. We're not workhorses to be stored in a barn; we're human beings designed to flourish in a home.
2. For example, and in contrast to any view that creation is *wholly dependent* for its wellbeing upon humans: God rules the heavens and the earth (Ps 103:19), stills the roaring sea and storm (Ps 89:9; 107:29), feeds the birds and lions (Matt 6:26; Ps 104:21), clothes the grass of the field (Matt 6:30), and owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps 50:10).
3. Owen Strachan, *Reenchanted Humanity*, 80.

4. Psalm 139 reminds us of God's ability to see and know everything about us: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether" (Ps 139:1-4).
5. In the Torah—the first five books of the Bible of which Genesis is the first, sin is ultimately defined in light of humanity's covenant relationship with God. And as Mark Boda explains, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament*, 119, "At the core of the covenant is the Decalogue, which defines sin first and foremost in terms of humanity's relationship with Yahweh, then in terms of relationships among fellow humans, and finally in terms of human's relationships to nonhumans."
6. I first heard the Sean Combs song referred to in a talk given by John Yates III, "Preaching the Gospel in an age without guilt," EFAC 2019. Yates is also treating the theme of exile in that part of his talk.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.
8. Augustine also wrote, "The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home."