

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Week 1 - Day 4: The Opposing Kingdom

Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. – C.S. Lewis

Have you ever had a moment where you were so tempted to do something, even though you knew you weren't supposed to do it? We face tempting situations daily. Some big, some small, but in each moment we make a choice. I can still remember the moment when I was 7 and I had decided to cut my own bangs. When faced with the question, "who cut your bangs?" it was all too tempting to try and blame someone/something else rather than to take the blame myself. We want to hide in these moments because something in our hearts knows that we are wrong.

Our free-will often gets us in trouble, but it is also our free-will that brings out the beauty in our actions. That free-will, that opportunity to decide for ourselves, allowed humanity to choose a way back in the garden. When we think about the Creation story, we must remember that Adam and Eve were not robots or God's puppets, they had options. And Satan was all too aware of that fact as we dive deeper into the story in Genesis.

Genesis 3:1-13 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Some of you may be thinking, "Where did the serpent come from?", "Why did God create the serpent?", "How can God consider His creation to be 'good' if an opposing serpent exists?", "Did Adam and Eve really have a choice or were they destined to fall?" These questions become a real stumbling block for many Christians! Some of us might respond by saying that with the free-will to do good, there must be the potential for evil and thus the existence of the serpent. Others might say that since God knows all things, He intentionally designed the serpent so that humanity would sin as part of His grand plan. Oddly, the Bible seems okay with the tension that these two positions create in our minds.

Regardless of where you land on this philosophical issue, it does not change the fact that Genesis is portraying a grand moment of truth for Adam and Eve. And If we are honest with ourselves, all of us have experienced this moment of truth in our lives too! We exercise an ability to choose just as the woman saw that the tree truly had good food to offer. The message of Genesis is not necessarily philosophical reasoning, but to depict this shared human experience of temptation!

All things shift after Eve's decision to eat the fruit and share it with her husband. Suddenly,

the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Here is another feeling that all of us can empathize with: Adam and Eve hid! They hid because the guilt and shame that had hit them, unknowingly, like a wave. Their hearts knew they had sinned and gone against God so of course they didn't want to face Him.

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? 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."

Can anyone empathize with the blame game? Adam blames Eve for partaking of the fruit. Eve blames the serpent for tempting her. I wanted to blame someone else for cutting my bangs. Who or what do you blame for your mistakes? If you are still on edge about the existence of the serpent, perhaps there is a desire in your heart to blame God for evil rather than looking at your own heart and your own decisions? The human experience is that we have all faced this choice, we have all fallen short, and we all carry that responsibility!

Later, in Job, we get another glimpse into the way Satan is at work in people's lives. He never wants us to follow God. His desire is to destroy God's work, testing us and trying to pull us away from a relationship with God.

Job 1:6-12 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

The important point to remember in this conversation is that Satan and His kingdom are real regardless of where they came from. When Adam and Eve decided to eat from the tree, the human race gave up their place in the kingdom of God and traded it for an allegiance to the kingdom of the serpent. Satan's kingdom authority on earth is limited but we've all had moments, even as Christians, where Satan works to try to pull us from doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord. This is part of our human experience; an ability to choose our own actions and our own path. That choice is a part of what brings about the daily struggles we face in a fallen world.

Ephesians 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

This battle is constantly taking place as we live each day. The reality is, from the beginning of creation, Satan has been hard at work to keep us from God. He is crafty and we often fall prey to his ways. What a harsh blow this moment brings – to go from the perfect paradise God created for humanity, to a world marked by sin.

For us today, sin is a reality we inherit from the decisions of Adam and Eve. It is a common ground we share with everyone else on earth as we have all felt the pangs of guilt when we submit to sin rather than to the Lord's rule. That guilt is often accompanied by a desire to live for something more.

But the story is far from over! There is hope for something more because God always had a plan!

-Annie Wilson

Share the gospel: Consider starting with a simple conversation about temptation. We have all fallen into temptation; from the time we were young, the very things we are told not to do seem to be the things we just can't help ourselves but to do them! Some things are minor and we forget them in a moment, but we can all probably think of moments where we have been guilt-ridden over our decisions. Consider opening up about some of your guilt and shame which can open the door to the amazing truth of God's grace which covers it all! Remember, the story didn't end in the garden, it has only just begun.

Personal Observations, Reflections, and Prayers: