



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **We All Fall Down**

*A Christian Worldview: Second of Seven in a Series*

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*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).*

Some of the deepest truths in the Bible come from stories that are not meant to be taken literally. The Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis is a perfect example. The basic point of the story is that, almost from the beginning, human beings have made a mess of things by not being faithful to God. In the tale told by the Bible, the entire universe and life on earth are created on page 1; human beings start messing things up on page 2; and the next 1200 pages are all about God's redeeming work to clean up the mess—a work that's still going on, and will continue to the end of the age.

The story of the Fall points to the human predicament, and ultimately to why we need Jesus, so it sketches out the second major theme of our Christian worldview. If the first theme is that everything belongs to God, the second is that we human beings all fall down, individually and collectively. We fall short of God's will for our lives, or as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The problem is serious enough, and runs deep enough, that only God can fix it. That may sound like bad news, since it means things are worse than we might want to believe, and none of our human solutions can solve the problem by themselves. This fundamental Christian claim about the human condition comes as a blow to our vanity and complacency, so it's no wonder people resist it.

But once we get past our pride, which itself lies at the heart of the problem, even this part of the Christian worldview turns out to be good news. It's good news, first, because it brings a deeper diagnosis of our illness that can keep us from falling for all sorts of superficial and ineffective cures. And then again, it's good news because there is a cure, after all, and the cure comes from the one truly reliable source in this world: a good and gracious God who is always working to bring salvation, not only to individuals, but ultimately to creation itself.

First, a story about the diagnosis. Genesis 3 tells the story in marvelously mythical form. When I say "mythical," of course, I don't mean "not true." In everyday conversation when we call something a myth, we usually mean that people may believe it, but it really isn't true. In scholarly circles, though, and in the sense I mean it here, to say that a story is mythical is to describe the package it comes in, not the truth of its meaning. The story in Genesis 3 is profoundly true, but there are signs within the story itself that its truth is not to be found on the literal surface. The truth lies much deeper, like some precious mineral to be mined underground.

The first clue that the story isn't meant to be taken literally is the obvious fact that snakes don't talk. The point is not that once upon a time snakes could talk, or that the writer of the story believed they could talk. Literalist interpreters fall down a rabbit hole when they think they have to believe in talking snakes in order to defend the Bible's truth. In fact, the story makes more sense when we take the talking serpent as a sign that what's coming is a powerful truth in mythical form.

Then again, there's the forbidden tree. It's not an apple tree, as far too many people who should know better tell the tale. There's no apple in the story at all. The notion that Adam and Eve ate an apple, and God got really ticked off and has punished the entire human race ever since, is a silly story; but that's not what Genesis says. The tree that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat is called the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." You won't find it in your field guide to trees, and that's not because the species has gone extinct. It's because the tree in the story is manifestly a metaphor. It's a wonderful image which, precisely because it's not literally real, can stand for anything people do by way of disobeying God, and so come to experience something of what evil is.

In fact, I think it's hard to imagine a richer image than eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Insofar as it has to do with disobeying God, and in that sense separating ourselves from God, the act is almost the opposite of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In the sacrament, we take Christ into ourselves on the way to redemption, reversing the effects of our pride and disobedience. But that's getting ahead of our story. We'll come back to that part of our Christian worldview next week.

There are other signs that the story of the Fall runs much broader and deeper than the literal sense. "Adam" in Hebrew is not only a man's name but a noun that stands for all humankind, and in fact he's simply called "the man" in Genesis 3. "Eve" comes from a word that has to do with being a mother, but here she's just called "the woman"—pointing again to how this story is about all of us. The woman sees that the fruit is a delight to the eyes, but their eyes not "opened" until after that—which is to say that "seeing" is yet another metaphor. The man and woman see

that they are naked now, but the whole notion of nakedness is different once innocence is lost.

Another dimension of the story comes in the aftermath of the Fall. God comes walking in the Garden—not reflecting a naïve notion that God is just like one of us, but recognizing that God can appear in all sorts of ways—and God asks where the man and woman, “Where are you?” “I hid because I was afraid,” the man replies. “Why were you afraid?” God asks again. There had never been a reason to fear God before, when humans lived in harmony with God. “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat?”

The man answers in the way that men always answer: “The woman you gave me—she gave me the fruit and I ate.” You can hear the double accusation, as Adam tries to deflect the blame, not only to Eve but all the way back to God. “She was your idea, after all,” Adam reminds God implicitly. “What have you done?” God asks the woman now, and she blames the snake. When people do wrong we often look for somebody else to blame, and so our sin drives all kinds of wedges—between human beings, including the ones closest to us; between ourselves and God; and between the parts of our divided minds, when we won’t admit our own deep faults.

Now what part of that story is not true? The whole tale is revealingly, dramatically, painfully true, because it describes the truth we see every day, the bent reality of our human condition. The struggle within our own souls, the tensions in our relationships, the chronic conflicts among groups of people, and our alienation from God all find their seeds in this story of the Fall.

The traditional Christian shorthand for this fallen condition is called “sin.” It’s an ugly little word, because the condition it points to is ugly, so it’s no wonder people tend to be awkward around the term. A few Christians seem to have an almost prurient fixation with the notion, possibly reflecting their own inner turmoil. Others try to tame the word by making it sound innocuous, as when they talk about a “sinfully delicious cake,” for example. Lots of people, if they’re willing to discuss their shortcomings at all, prefer the much milder language of making a mistake—as if our moral and spiritual faults were more like taking a wrong turn in the road or getting the wrong answer on a test, instead of disobeying and disappointing Almighty God. Most people just avoid the word altogether.

Sin is an ugly little word because it points to a condition that’s far more serious and harder to overcome than anything we can accomplish on our own. Our self-esteem tends to hang on thinking we’re pretty good people after all, which is why we’re so quick to confess other people’s sins, and so slow to confess our own.

But confession is good for the soul—not least because it recognizes the truth of our condition. The first step to finding a cure is to diagnose the sickness, and part of the sickness of sin is denying that there’s anything deeply wrong with us. But as John’s first letter in the New Testament says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Self-deception is itself a symptom, and it’s striking that our first response to all sorts of problems, within us and around us, is denial. We’re like Adam and Eve, hiding in the bushes. We don’t want to face the truth about what we’ve done or failed to do, so we hide from God, because we know deep down that, even if we can fool ourselves and other people, God cannot be fooled.



That's why the second thing we do every Sunday in worship, after we sing the praises of God, is confess our sins. If we have any sense at all of God's goodness, and what God wants from us in return, and if we're willing to be the least bit honest when we hold a mirror up to our soul, we know that we're always standing in the need of prayer, always in the need of God's grace. The only sensible thing to do then is to confess. *Confess* our sins, not deny them, or minimize them, or try to console ourselves by imagining that God grades on a curve and at least we're better than somebody else we can call to mind.

We may try to hide from God, or hide the truth from ourselves or from other people, but the very act of hiding means there's something wrong that needs to be hidden. And it takes emotional and spiritual energy to keep things hidden. Often it takes lies, too, and lies in turn take their toll on the soul, on our relationships, and on society as a whole.

But when we confess, an amazing thing happens. As John says again, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When we come clean to God, God can begin to clean us up. All the darkness, the hiding, the lies, and the rupture of relationships begin to melt away, because God wants nothing more than to restore us to the image of God in which we were made.

People try to deny their own sinfulness because they think a sense of sin threatens self-esteem. But denial doesn't make the sin go away. It only compounds the problem and makes matters worse. What saves us from sin is the grace of God, and the good news is that God is gracious. What lets God's grace into the soul is confession. Then confession turns out to be the key that unlocks the

door. It lets us come out of hiding and stand unashamed and unafraid in the presence of God, who always comes looking for us.

We all fall down, but God lifts us up whenever we confess. That's why John's little letter talks about sin and confession in the context of joy. When we walk in the light of God's grace, we know we are loved by the One who matters most, and we can start to live in the truth that sets us free.



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