

Camelback Bible Church



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THE SIN OF SELF-GRASPING

The Plan: Reclaiming All Things for God's Glory (Part 3)
Genesis 3:1-3, Romans 1:21-23

We take the sun for granted. But if you think about it, the sun is a flaming colossus. The core temperature reaches an astonishing fifteen million degrees centigrade. Fortunately we receive only a minute fraction of the energy produced in this nuclear furnace or we would all face a very quick incineration!

Given the sun's irradiating intensity, imagine how surprised we would be if someone were suddenly to exhort us to live to the glory of this bedazzling star.

“Glorify the sun!”

It would seem preposterous in the extreme. How does a mere mortal glorify a wonder of such incandescent splendor?

But here's the deal. If we're a human being – and most of us look like close facsimiles! – we've been exhorted to live to the glory of the Creator of a billion suns! And you're not only exhorted to do so, but we've also equipped for the task!

We *can* glorify this magnificent God. We do it by replicating his glory, by filling the earth with mirror-images of his extravagant self-giving goodness, by subduing creation in the most beneficial way imaginable, by subjecting all things to the unifying power of the self-emptying goodness of our Creator.

That's The Plan as God devised it. What a beautiful thing it is to be human according to God's plan!

Really?! The last time I checked on humanity, the adjective 'beautiful' didn't enter many minds. Not with all the division and strife there is among humans. Not with all the egotism and selfishness.

What's happened to the image-bearers of God? What's gone wrong with human beings? Let's let Genesis 3 answer that question. It explains everything!

The First Sin

Genesis 3:1 has perhaps the most succinct, compelling answer to this question, What happened to the image-bearers of God? Where'd we go wrong? *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman... A talking serpent? What's this? It's the devil and he can talk.*

Verse 1b – *He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?”* Actually, the Lord did not say that at all. He gave the first man and woman hundreds of trees from which to eat; perhaps thousands, maybe even millions. And he said to them, he actually commanded them, *You may surely eat of every tree of the garden* (Genesis 2:16). He said, “I gave you this endless orchard. Eat from it all!”

So the devil is using a bit of interpretive license when he asks, *“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?”*

And the woman's response is a good one. Verse 2 – *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 middle of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.”*

The serpent is saying what we all think the first time we read Genesis 3 – “How extreme. Doesn't God have anything better to do with his time than to isolate one tree and declare its fruit off limits on penalty of death?” It sounds like God is playing an arbitrary game with Adam and Eve. I say “arbitrary” because I don't think this tree's any different from the rest of the trees in the garden. According to the woman, verse 6, it's *good for food. It's a delight to the eyes.* Just like all the other fruit trees.

Why does God seem arbitrarily to prohibit this tree? It's like he wants to exercise his authority for authority's sake. Test the first humans. See if they'll obey him. That's what it is. It's a test. Many commentators take it that way.

I agree it is a test, but not of God's authority. Rather it's a test of Adam and Eve's affection.

Think for a moment. How do you affirm your affection for another? Well, I know how husbands and wives do it. They stand at the altar and take a vow. They promise to cling to each other and **to forsake all others.**

That last bit, forsaking all others, is really important when affirming your love. “I love you and no other!”

The first humans couldn't say that to God. They couldn't say, “I love you and no other.” Because there were no alternatives. You can't say, “I love you and no other,” if there is no other.

And there weren't any others. There were just millions of succulent fruit trees. All of those trees represented God's gift of himself to humans. God knew that if they were ever to be able to affirm

their love for him, he would have to supply an alternative to himself. Like a tree at the edge of the garden, so they could declare that he was enough. They didn't have to touch that tree. They had everything they needed in God, namely, the gift of God himself in all the other trees.

Sins Plural

But make no mistake: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a great gift to human beings. More precious than all the other trees combined because it enabled human beings to complete the circle of love between themselves and God. I enabled them to say that they didn't need more than what God had given us in himself.

But in the end they decided that what they needed was not more *of* God, but more *than* God. Verse 6 – *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.*

The most important word in that verse is the word 'took'. *She took of its fruit.*

Why did she do it? God had told her not to. But she saw it was good for food, delight to the eyes, desirable for wisdom. In a word, she did it because it promoted her interests, as she defined them. She took the fruit for her *self*. She was self-taking. She was self-grasping.

What does that sound like? It sounds like the exact opposite of what it means to image God's glory. Remember what we learned last week? We image God when we reproduce the sort of self-giving that marks the triune Family – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – from eternity past to eternity future, pouring themselves into each other. Infinitely self-giving.

And today we learn that the first humans not only got it wrong, but the opposite of right. Far from being self-giving, they were self-grasping. And their blunder has become every human's downfall.

There's a big argument right now about whether Adam and Eve were actually literally historical figures. Whether they actually existed or whether they're just metaphors for humanity. Well, they did actually exist. They're historical figures. And you know what? They still exist . . . in me! I'm far too self-grasping.

Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12). We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The most astonishing thing about it all is that it all makes so much sense of reality. We really are, as humans beings, self-grasping. We are not naturally self-giving. We are self-absorbed. We are self-interested. We are self-seeking.

Everything that ails humanity can be explained by this one universal impulse. Why is there anger? Because we are self-grasping. Why is there anxiety? Because we are self-grasping. Why is there war? Why is there poverty? Why is there pornography? Why is there divorce, exploitation, betrayal, division, addiction, abuse? Because we are self-grasping.

Every sin, all sins plural, are the product of getting it the opposite of right. Instead of self-giving, we are self-grasping. And most of us will admit it. It makes perfect sense of who we are. If to be self-grasping is to sin then we've all done a lot of sinning.

But while we will admit to sins plural, most of us will recoil at the idea of sin singular.

Sin Singular

What's sin singular? Sin singular is the sin beneath our sins plural. Sins plural: the wrong things we do. The lying, the cheating, the stealing, the exploitation, the greed, the adultery, the murder. All the self-grasping things we do, there is a sin singular that underlies them. Sin singular is what gives rise to sins plural.

We are guilty of the sins of self-grasping, sins plural. Why?

The devil hinted at it in Genesis 3:5 – *For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*

Like that's really something we want to know, the difference between good and evil! Better to leave well enough alone. Better to know just good. Better to enjoy a million trees. Better to find complete satisfaction in God and in God alone. Better not to know what it's like to look for more *than* what God offers in himself. Better not to know evil. And yet the devil knew our weakness. We humans are weak at precisely this point.

We want to be like God. We want to call the shots. We want to do our own thing. We want to pursue life in our own way.

Sin singular is the sin of usurping the throne of God, becoming gods of our own lives.

We are self-worshipping. That's why we are self-grasping. We commit sins plural because we are guilty of the sin singular of exchanging places with God.

Look at Romans 1, the best commentary in the Bible on Genesis 3. It pulls everything we've been talking about in The Plan together. Romans 1:21 – *For although they knew God. . . Who knew God? Well, the they is every human universally. Although everyone knows God – by the way, you say an atheist doesn't know God? In order to be an atheist you have to assume God in order to deny Him. Even an atheist knows there's a God!*

For although *they did not honor him as God. . .* The translators – how I wish they would've given the word *honor* its real literal meaning. It's the verb *doxazo*, which translated literally means to

glorify. Although they knew God, they didn't *glorify* him as God. They didn't seek to replicate his glory through his self-giving love.

Instead what did they do? Verse 21b – *but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man.*

Oh my! We exchange the glory of the immortal God.

A glory that is immortal, a glory that knows no death. We exchange it; we trade in the self-giving glory of God. For what? For images. What an interesting word. What's it doing here? It's a stroke of brilliance by the apostle Paul.

He's using it in two ways. A *double entendre*. Images. That's what we are. Images of God. But we're going to exchange the privilege of imaging God, of glorifying God by reproducing his infinite self-emptying love. We're going to exchange that for a different kind of image. By which he means we're going to exchange it for ourselves. We're going to turn the image of God into an *icon*.

Icon is the word in Greek. It has two meanings: image and icon or idol. We're going to take ourselves, images of God, and worship ourselves, as idols. We're going to take what was meant to reflect God's image and instead of doing that, we're going to idolize ourselves. We're going to do what we want to do. We're going to be our own gods.

There it is. Paul's explanation of sin singular. We become our own gods. And it's the root of all our problems. It's why the world is wracked by sorrow and pain, division and strife. It's why we are dysfunctional relationally. Because we have drained the glory out of God's image, making an idol of ourselves. Image-bearers of God have become self-worshipping, and, as a result, are now self-grasping.

Did you get that? We commit sins plural, the sins of self-grasping, because we are all wrong at the core of our beings. We are self-worshipping. Hence we are enemies of God, the only one worthy of worship!

Hold on now. That's going too far! I'm not an enemy of God! It's one thing to say I'm not perfect. I have done some wrong things. I've committed sins. There's been a little bit of self-grasping – I'll admit to that. But to say that sin is what I am at my core, an enemy of God? You got me wincing on that one.

Yeah. Wincing. Despairing. Agonizing.

And it's such a good place to be. Because it's only when you see how hopeless your situation really is that you begin to look for a big salvation.

The problem with Christendom is that it saves people lightly. We tell people all the things they've done wrong – that they've committed sins plural – and then we offer them forgiveness of

those sins, which they happily accept and go on their merry way. Omitting to tell them they are twisted at the core of their beings, that they want to be gods of their own lives. The glory is drained from their image. The true God is shut off from them.

Until you get a diagnosis of what the real problem is with humanity, you'll never be ready for the solution. If you have cancer and there's a treatment for it, don't you want to know you have cancer? You don't say, "I don't want to be negative. Don't tell me I have cancer." No. You say, "Please, I want to hear the truth, I want to know what my problem is, in case there might be an antidote."

And there is an antidote to sin singular!

The Consequence of Sin Singular

Before we examine the antidote, I want to point out what happened to Adam and Eve when they tried to become the gods of their own lives. They lost God. They were banished from his presence. Genesis 3:23 – *Therefore the Lord God sent them out from the garden of Eden. He drove them out, 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.*

You try to get more out of life *than* what God gives you in himself and he'll give you your way . . . right out of his presence and with re-entry debarred since, by definition, you cannot enjoy God's presence when you usurp his throne. And anyone trying to get back with God will have to deal with the flaming sword, and that, I suggest, is a battle humans can't win.

The only way back into the presence of God is if someone else is willing and is able to face that flaming sword in our place. If someone is willing and able to save us from our sin.

And, amazingly, there is such a One. Listen to the word of God.

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Luke 2:10-11; Matthew 1:21).

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Salvation from Sin

For a moment I thought The Plan, the plan of God, was spiraling out of control. He made us to image him, image his capacity to pour himself out into others, and hence to fill the earth with the glory of his self-giving love. And in our self-grasping we have made a complete wreckage of this plan. So much for The Plan!

No. Not even close.

God was neither defeated nor surprised by our sin. He even introduced the possibility of sin by providing an alternative to the other trees, The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, so that by refusing to eat its fruit we could affirm our love for God and no other. What a beautiful thing! But we turned it into something just opposite, something ugly; we used it as an opportunity to claim that we are our own gods.

But God knew it would happen. He knew we would sin. And – remarkably – he knew it would provide him with an opportunity to empty himself to a degree quantum leaps beyond any prior act of self-giving love. He knew it would provide an occasion to give us one final tree, teetering awkwardly on a hill outside of Jerusalem. A hill called Golgotha. And onto that tree would fall the full weight of that flaming sword keeping us away from God. On that tree the Son of God would absorb the blow of that sword meant for us. And absorbing it, he would remove the obstacle guarding the way back into God’s presence. He would save us from our sins.

See what the Bible is saying? The Plan would, because of our sin, drive God to provide humanity with an unthinkable crescendo. A crescendo far greater than had we never sinned in the first place. Where we will be after Jesus saves us is a far better place than had we merely been transported back into the garden before our sin. God knows what he’s doing! What a plan!

In fact, Paul says it in Romans 5:15. *For if many died through Adam’s trespass* (died in the sense that we’re debarred from God’s presence), **how much more will the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of Jesus Christ abound for many.** In saving us, Jesus will go far beyond anything else we have ever received.

Recognizing Our Sin

Do you see your sin for what it really is? Do you see how you have shattered the image of God? You say, “I’m still in the image of God. Every human is in the image of God.” Yes, but the sinner has drained God’s image of its glory, God’s glory. The glory of self-emptying love has run out of the image and all you have is this pale reflection that’s left.

Do you see that you are corrupted at the core of your being? It’s not just that you do bad things, you are **essentially** bad. I am bad. We are all bad. Do you see it at the core of your being? It is not negative to acknowledge sin. It is good. It is so good. Because only when you see how horrible and how horribly entrenched is your sin will you become desperate for a Savior.

Jesus said, *I did not come to heal those who think they are well, but those who know they need a physician.* Jesus is no use to you unless, and until, you know you need him desperately.

I know the skeptics will say, “You Christians are weak. You have to admit you need Jesus completely. You should be strong.” Karl Marx said that Christianity is the opium of the proletariat. It’s kind of the drug we take to pick us up because we feel ourselves so weak. You Christians are so weak, saying you need a Savior.

The skeptics are right. We do need a Savior. We all do.

Have you found a better expression of this world's problems? Have you found a better solution to those problems? The best philosophers and politicians have been working a long time on solutions and have not got very far. The world is still shut up in a dungeon of self-grasping, of self-worship. And we haven't come up with any solutions.

I talked to Jon and Lesli this week. They were on a transcontinental car trip to New Hampshire, where Jon will begin graduate studies. As they were planning out the route, I realized they were going to be going right past Niagara Falls. Neither of them had seen Niagara Falls. It's an incredible sight. It's a massive, and powerful, volume of water making its way unforgivingly towards the precipice.

When you go over to Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side, the Canadians aren't as concerned as Americans about putting up guard-rails or fences. You can walk right up to the surging river. It's just racing by you. You can put your toes in the water and the Falls are only a few yards downstream. They're that close. And you think, "One little slip and it's history for me!"

It's kind of like sin, isn't it? One little bite, one little slip, and it's over.

I was there as a junior higher and I remember thinking to myself, "What if I fell in?" A very frightening thought. I'd be history, just like that.

But then you could think of a man on a tree limb stretching out over the river calling to you as you struggle against the current, "Give me your hand." Would you give it to him? Knowing your need of salvation, I think you would.

And yet so many of us, wanting to be our own gods, think, "I'm not giving myself to anyone. I'm going to do it my way!" How such our thinking. How dark such hearts.

Yet, that's the way some of us are with God. We're not going to give ourselves to him.

Well, we've learned how self-giving God is. But we haven't learned anything yet. Rather than being permanently offended by our insolence, our refusal to give ourselves to him, he responds by giving even more of himself to us.

He says, "All right. Forget about giving me your hand. How could I expect proud and sinful men and women to give themselves to me? So, while they are still sinning, I'm going to give myself to them. I'm going to go and put my hands on the blood-stained cross. And now instead of shouting to you, the sinner being washed away to his destruction, 'Give me your hand!' I will say, in humility, "Take my bloodstained hand. Take the hand given to you. Take it! Take it!"

And when you see how much you need salvation and you see how humble God is in offering his hand through Christ Jesus, you will take it.

And if you have taken his hand, do you cherish the salvation it brings? Are you holding on for dear life? Many Christians neglect their salvation. *Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?* (Hebrews 2:1, 3)

Take Time to Spend Time with Jesus

Too many of us take our salvation for granted. How can you take care not to neglect your salvation? If you have taken the hand of Jesus, how do you take care to cling to it going forward? The answer: by spending time with him, with Jesus. Take the time to spend the time with Jesus. Everything starts there. It all starts with taking time. Are you spending time with Jesus? Do you start the day with Jesus? Do you look for that hand during the day? Are you taking the time to spend the time with Jesus? TTST. Take the time to spend time with Jesus.

I was at the workout room on Friday and I talked to a man I hadn't seen in a while and I asked him how his summer went. He said it hadn't gone so well. He didn't get up to his vacation home in Idaho. He didn't get the time he wanted with Idaho.

I wanted to tell him my summer didn't go so well either. I couldn't get myself to do it. I wanted to say I didn't get to spend my time the way I wanted to. I didn't get to spend time with my mom and my dad. And then without much warning, they were both gone. I wish I could have had more time to tell them how much I love them and what great parents they've been.

But we can still spend time with an even greater Father, our heavenly Father. Tell him, praise him, thank him, spend time with him – what a great Savior he is!

I know a man who saved me from poverty by putting a roof over my head and clothes on my back and food in my stomach.

I know a man who saved me from ignorance by paying for three degrees, enabling me to graduate debt free.

I know a man who saved me from impurity by teaching me how to love one woman.

I know a man who saved me from greed by showing me how to give what he has to people who don't have much.

I know a man who saved me from failure by noticing when I was putting a foot in the wrong place and telling me I should go in a different direction.

I know a man who saved me from anxiety, who was more in tune to what I was thinking than I was myself. He would come to me and say, "I'm going to pray for that."

I wish I could spend more time with that man.

But you know what? I know another Man who saved me from the flaming sword. Who saved me from hell. Who saved me from eternal death. Who saved me for life, for joy, for peace, for forgiveness, for hope, for faith, for justice, for eternity. Do I not want to spend time with him?

He's given me far more than what that first man gave me, although the first man gave me a lot and I want to spend more time with him. But I want to spend even more time with Jesus. I want to spend time with him.

Do you want to spend time with Jesus? Don't neglect your salvation. Take the time to spend the time with Jesus. He is your Savior.

One of the most wonderful things I've ever heard any human say came from the lips of Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century. He could see the value of spending time with Jesus. Listen to his words: "I would have no wish to be here without my Lord; and if the gospel be not true, I should bless God to annihilate me this instant, for I would not care to live if you could destroy the name of Jesus Christ."

[PRAYER]

Amazing grace deserves my life and my all. What a Savior. Into your arms we throw ourselves, maybe for the first time this morning, receiving by faith the forgiveness of sin singular as well as sins plural that Jesus has won for us on the cross. Oh Father, don't let anyone leave here this morning without trusting in Jesus as his or her personal Savior from sin. May we move forward by continuing to entrust ourselves to this Savior. Spending time with Jesus. May we not neglect this great salvation. May we get into our Bibles, may we look for Christ in our Bibles, may we listen to Christ in our Bibles, may we obey Christ, may we love Christ. May our lives be about Jesus. He is a great Savior and he's always with us and we want to practice his presence. Father, we love you so much for giving us Jesus. What a self-giving God you are. Father, take us out now to replicate that glory in our relationships in this world. We know we need to be drawing upon Jesus. TTST – take time to spend time with Jesus. Let it start right now.