



Dr. James C. Howell
Genesis 2 and 3, selected verses
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When I woke up in the middle of the night to this torrential downpour, I decided to not preach on Adam and Eve but proceed to Noah's Ark. But then it was calmer this morning, all is well, so back to Adam and Eve. It's a great story that Michael read, and we'll look at this in considerable detail tomorrow night and Thursday morning. We'll ask questions like, the Garden of Eden, could you locate it on Google Earth? Adam and Eve, how do we make sense out of that in light of what we know about DNA, science and so on? It will be great fun, indeed.

This morning, talking about Adam and Eve, we're starting a program called Year Through The Bible. Don't do this thing where you go charging out for three weeks and then it fizzles. Stay with me all year. In thinking about Year Through The Bible, what a way for God to start off with this downer of a story. You'd think if God had any sense at all, God would understand human nature, and God would start off with, you know, the first five or six Books of the Bible being, oh everything was wonderful and everyone was wonderful and everyone was wonderful to one another, and it was just wonderful. You'd think God would have done that. It's like those Christmas letters you receive. People send you these things, and it's as if nothing tawdry has ever happened, no one's ever had much ugliness in the past year. It's the children are making straight A's and they're stars on their soccer teams and we had a fabulous vacation and everything is sunny at our house. God should have started the Bible that way. Or perhaps, like Facebook.

I am now on Facebook. I believe I'm the fifth oldest person in the world on Facebook. The day after Christmas, you know, my daughter knew how to do this thing, got me on Facebook, and this is just the coolest thing because you go on there and before you know it, I've got friends, some of you in this room, you're my Facebook friends now. And the people in there, I've never heard of them before. And on there you find really exciting things about people, you know, like here's a photo of my cat, or I had tacos for dinner, or I'm forming a group of people to watch the season premiere of "Scrubs." It's really deep, profound stuff that I can hardly keep up with, and no one's done anything tawdry or evil...I tried to bait people into something more in depth, because there's a thing that says what you're doing right now. And people say, I'm taking a nap or I'm going shopping. So I got bold. I put James is thinking about Adam and Eve. No one rose to that.

Sometimes I worry that we become sort of Facebook people. We've got this sort of aahhh, sunny, here's the latest photo from my camera feel to life. God doesn't start the Bible that way. Here's some camera photos that you might enjoy. No, God starts right in with a sad story. God creates the world and it's ridiculously wonderful. They could have spent their entire lives relishing the great wonder of God's world, but in no time, they squandered it. They'd blown it. They'd heard God, they'd heard each other, they'd messed things up royally for so many people. It's like the old saying... I have a friend who's a college professor. He says, College is wasted on the college students. And it is. Life is wasted on us. Something happens. It's called sin. I hate to have this sermon early. I know some of you, you're no regular church-goers, you thought

I'm going to go to church in '09, and then this first Sunday, Howell comes out of the barn calling you a sinner. It used to work once upon a time. Once upon a time, preachers talked to people who knew that they were sinners. The issue was could you persuade people that God's mercy was attainable. Now it's very different. Now preachers have an uphill battle persuading you that you might actually need God, that you might be broken, that maybe you're in dire need of forgiveness. It's an uphill battle. I understand, because maybe if you have some religious past you may have heard some preacher who called you a sinner and yelled at you, and that's not helpful. Or we see things in the last election. There were some leaders of the church who declared the people were sinful for voting a certain way. It becomes so manipulative and misused in so many ways, so I get it, I get it, I get it. But the fact is, the Bible begins with the story that tells us the truth about ourselves. The Bible could flatter us. What did Aristotle say? The opposite of a friend is a flatterer. And God loves us too much to flatter us. God loves us too much to leave us with a superficial veneer, Facebook view of ourselves. God cuts to the quick and to the inner depths of our heart, and the truth is, you and I here today are sinners.

We get confused about this. Adam and Eve, once they've sinned they hide themselves. They run around in fig leaves. That's not a very good covering now, is it? And the mask that you and I wear is that we're pretty good people. We're pretty good people. We're pretty nice people. I look out there at you, and you look pretty nice. You're pretty nice people. Well, actually not always. Sometimes I hear reports about people ferociously trying to grab parking places out in the parking lot, and evidently, everybody's not as nice as they appear once they get in here. But we're pretty nice people. We're pretty good people. When the Duke lacrosse case broke, it was very interesting. You had this thing in the news, and people kept saying, I know some of the Duke lacrosse players, they are great guys. They are great guys. And I'm sure they were great guys, but it's a really bad idea to have a party and get drunk and pay for a dancer to come in. But they're really great guys, aren't they? We're all really great people. We almost have the view that God grades on the curve. And if God grades on the curve, we're going to do pretty good. We'll be up on the upper echelon of the class given what all's going on out there.

We confuse sin with crime. We think crime is bad. Somebody like Bernard Madoff takes millions and billions of dollars from people and wastes it, loses it in this pyramid scheme and we say that's wrong. That is wrong. But the very desire to have more money, the very craving and coveting of ever-finer things never strikes us as problematical at all. It seems to us to be the good life. But the things that we will learn in this Year Through The Bible – that most of what we assume as a society, it's better to have more money, it's better to get richer, I want more money, I want more things – is problematical in God's eyes. There's something in that, weirdly, that actually creates a big barrier between us and God.

We think about terrorists. We think, Oh, that's evil to kill innocent people. How terrible is that? We have a sense of right and wrong, and it's wrong to be a terrorist, but we don't realize that Jesus said, if you harbor anger in your heart, you're guilty of murder. It's a sin to harbor anger in your heart. We miss this. We miss this. I think what happens with us I think is best described by C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis said that God created everybody and they were enjoying it. They were enjoying God, but then one day, somebody, Adam, Eve, each one of us, one day this fateful decision is made. As we look at God and we're saying, God, thanks for all this world that you've made, but there's this little corner of my life over here, and frankly God,

this is none of your business. This is none of your business. You can have the rest of it, but this little corner of my life is none of your business. Or, we think, OK, God, you may have told me some things about how to do certain things, but I know better. I know better than you do, God. Or probably worst of all, we don't really bother to find out what God's told us. We just kind of live our lives and we want God to be a blanket around us and to help us get what we're after, for God to support my agenda. That's going to be one of the hard things in Year Through The Bible'. I wish I could tell you that we'll learn the Bible together and it will just cheer you on and it will bless and sanctify everything you've ever done and your life is already arranged exactly the way God wanted it to be. Hallelujah! But this is not the case. It will feel more like when you go to the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist starts poking around inside your head and, Oh, my goodness, there's some things that are kind of fouled up in there. Or you go to the doctor and she starts feeling around and there's something there. What is that? You've got a disease, and it will be the death of you if you don't deal with that, and it's painful to deal with that. You've got to change your lifestyle. You've got to have some surgery. You are a sinner.

Most of sin, I suspect, are matters of omission. God puts Adam and Eve in the garden, he gives them a job. Till the Earth, keep it, but we get busy doing other things, and we omit to do the things that God wants us to do, or. Or we intend to do the things that God wants us to do, but we're in delay mode. You know. God, I'll get around to that when it's more convenient. God I'll do that when I retire. God, I'll do that when my life gets in order. God, I'll do that when... Fill in the blank. Sins of omission, sins of delay if you will. We just plain hurt each other, don't we. And if you don't believe this is at the heart of human nature, take a whole bunch of children and just put them on a playground for a while and watch how they do. Oh we love to look at children and think, Oh, they're such pure, loving, sweet creatures. But you actually put them on a playground for a while and before you know it, one of them has got a stick and they're hitting the other one on the head, and one group has ostracized another kid and they're making fun of him because he's short or she's tall or has red hair or something. Kids are terrible to each other, and they're just one up for adult life. Because in adult life, we just hurt each other. Sometimes we do it from the silence from the inside of our minds, but we're throwing darts at somebody. Married people, they'd intend to love each other and encourage each other, but they just hurt each other. They don't mean to, but they really hurt each other. Parents hurt their children. They love them too much to hurt them, but they just hurt them. And children hurt their parents. Think how much we hurt our own selves. Maybe I can avoid hurting other people, but think of the damage that I do to myself in my own soul.

We all have secrets. I think I've told some of you before about a friend of mine who's a professor of sociology. I've been with her in party settings before, and she'll say, I'm in sociology. And sometimes people will press the question a little further and say, Well, what within sociology is your specialty. And she says, Family secrets. There's a little pause. The first time she told me this, she said family secrets. And I said, come over here.... I told her this thing. She says everybody does that. Everybody's got a secret in their... You'll tell me one after church today, I can feel it coming. People have secrets in their families. And some are kind of juicy and fun to whisper, but there are other secrets in all of our families and in all of our souls that you would never put on Facebook and you would never tell to a soul. You don't even admit it to yourself. There's some little dark corner, and it may be chewing you up, it may be eating you alive, but you just don't go there. Secret. It's a secret.

There's a social element to our sin, isn't there. Think about the trouble that we get into with other people. When I was a little boy, I was generally a nice enough little boy, but on various occasions I would get together with some ridiculously stupid juveniles, and together, we would just create some havoc indeed. It was Adam and Eve who sinned. Alone one might have done better. Hmm?

What happens with us, it's always about desire that's run amok. We've just got to admit we live in a consumer society. What did Adam and Eve do in that garden? They consumed. God let them consume. God says, I've made a good world for you to enjoy, but they can't stop consuming. They cannot put any limit on their consuming. There's one tree and they're supposed to avoid it, and they can't. They can't do it. They cannot do it, and they consumed, they consumed, they must consume. It looks just like us, and the advertisers know this about us. That serpent in the Garden could so easily manipulate Adam and Eve. It didn't take a long time, just one little suggestion. Eat the fruit of that tree. And they got it. And the advertisers look at you and me all the time, and they say, easy marks. Easy marks. Those very fine Christians out there, they're easy marks. We can talk them into consuming whatever we want to sell them. And we fall for it hook, line and sinker every time because we believe that desires are natural and they must be satisfied. Part of the point of Year Through The Bible is for it to be a school of desire. You do not naturally desire what you desire. You do not naturally desire God. Your desires have to be schooled. There has to be some refraining from consumption. There has to be some discipline. There has to be some learning because you and I are sinners. And it's the sad truth, and yet it's the happiest truth. It's the most hopeful truth. The church does you a big favor every week, and none of you ever come out of church and thank us for it. I've actually said that. This is my fourth sermon, and no one's thanked me yet for it.

As every Sunday, we invite you to do something that nobody else in the world invites you to do. You go other places in the world and people say get rich. They'll say be healthy. They'll say exercise. They'll say take care of yourself. They'll say be a good neighbor. They'll say be honest. There are all these messages that you'll get out there, and they're fine messages, but the one thing the church invites you to do that nobody else out there will ever invite you to do is every week to come into the church and fall on your knees and say to God, I've not done the things that you wanted me to do, and I've done things that you would not want me to do. I've thought thoughts that are unclean. I have veered off and done my own thing instead of paying the slightest attention to you. I've hurt other people. I didn't want to. Oh God, there's no health in me. Could you forgive me? See, until we do that, we get kind of stuck by pretending to be somebody that we aren't. And another thing I think happens, if you don't come and grovel every week in church... It's a good thing to grovel before God in church every week. Sometimes I think if we don't go through the purging activity of that, that sometimes there's stuff inside us that festers and you never deal with it and you wind up like, did you read about the guy that went to the movie and somebody was talking in the movie and he took out a gun and he shot him? I read that and I thought, They ought to let that guy off. I'm joking. Come on, stay with me. Because I go to movies and people are talking in the movies and it gets on my nerves. I'm going to strangle somebody one day. But we come in regularly and we confess and we deal with it and whatever subterranean can come up, it can be healed, it can be dealt with. The other thing, until we begin to confess our sins and understand that we are broken, that we are

lost, that we have veered very far from God, that being nice is nothing, that being a pretty good person may really only be a facade that keeps us from dealing with the truth about ourselves. Until we recognize that in ourselves, do you know what we really miss that's most tragic? We miss the love and mercy of God. If you think I'm a pretty good person and God grades on the curve, and if God grades on the curve I'm surely in the upper heap, then you never know anything about the mercy of God. You always miss the love of God, the amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a really nice person like me. No. That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost... You've got to know you're lost before you can say now I'm found.

Jesus came. Jesus came to the Earth, this Earth, not to crown our goodness and our niceness, but to give up his life, to suffer because of his love for us. On the cross, Jesus looked at the very perpetrators of the evil against him, which they thought was very necessary to maintain a smooth society as they understood it, and Jesus looked at them who had no clue they were doing anything wrong at all, and Jesus said, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. And we come into church every Sunday. We have no idea what we're doing, but we want to know. We want to learn. We want to grow. We want to know the love, the mercy of God. Because you've been missing it. It's like college is wasted on the college students. Life is wasted on you and me. What happens as you go through life and you just have this nagging sense that something's missing. It's all pretty nice. I've got a pretty nice house, I've got a pretty nice job, everything ought to be just hunky dory, but something is missing. Something is missing. The reason we say college is wasted on the college student is that we wish we could go back and learn again. We wish we could go back and enjoy again. Before it's over, look at our lives and say I'm broken, but if I end up broken it's a good thing, because that's the window into the love and the power of God, and as I begin to be healed and changed and reformed by God, as I begin to become the better person that God wants me to be, then I begin to discover that's what I was missing. The joy. The joy. I've been having fun, but I've missed the joy. And we don't know the joy until we begin with the truth about ourselves, that we're broken, and we're lost. But God is good, God loves. Thanks be to God.