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Eternity to Eternity

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NEW HOPE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a blue-collar home I came to believe that true men came home from work with dirt under their fingernails. As a boy, I would assess the worthiness of all the men I met by the condition of their hands. Those men with callouses and dirt on their hands were worthy of my respect according to my worldview assumptions. I'm somewhat embarrassed by the foolishness of that thinking now but as a child I would have defended my worldview with strong emotion.

Our worldview is our grid through which we interpret every aspect of life. We unknowingly are answering big questions with our worldview that we do not even know we are asking. Questions like, "Who is God and who am I?" or "What is an American and even what is a man?" Deep within our psyche we are unconsciously bending our thoughts around our fundamental assumptions about every part of life.

God gifted us a psyche with the ability to store our assumptions about reality so we would form correct opinions about Him and make wise, informed decisions throughout our lives. I had formed my opinions about manhood before I had good biblical information. After studying God's word, I realized that a man is one who should do the spiritual "heavy lifting" in His world. He does this by honorably bearing God's image in all he says and does. Jesus Christ was the truest manly man. You can see how God's Word began to inform my worldview. Now by God's grace I am growing to live according to God's reality instead of the false narrative my culture told me.

If you let it, this study can provide you with desperately needed biblical perspective to inform your worldview. Lacking Biblical perspective, you may circumvent God's plan and manufacture your own reality, inviting the harsh consequences God promises for those who do not live according to His design. Speaker and author Greg Koukl says this about God's Word, "This is the Story of reality-a story about things that really happened or in some parts, things that are going to happen. It started a long time ago and will end (probably) long after you and I are gone. It is a story so wonderful in some places-some might even say magical-and so frightening in other places, it is hard to imagine it can be true. But when we think about it carefully, we

realize deep inside it all makes perfect sense.”¹

Some of you will be studying this book in a small group setting. You will be encouraged to listen to Pastor Mark’s sermon(s) on each lesson before discussing it in your small group. Encourage each other with how the lesson challenged your historic worldview assumptions. Trust God to enable you to learn from His Word, love others sacrificially, worship Him exclusively, and pray diligently. We included a page with small group instructions that highlights both learning and doing.

My son Richard Bruce III, winner of a national writing contest, edited each lesson. Retired MSU professor, Jeanette McWaters, painstakingly proofread each lesson. Darla Prether, New Hope’s graphic design professional, prayed fervently as she expertly designed the book’s cover and interior layout. Sam Fray, New Hope’s website administrator is working diligently to give the Eternity to Eternity series an online presence on our church website. Abel Miller, missionary to Africa, graciously contributed thoughtful insights.

Our sincere prayer as a New Hope Staff is that you will enjoy this book as much as we enjoyed producing it for you. May God’s view of the world be yours.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RKB III'.

Rich Bruce, Discipleship Pastor

LESSON 1

Eternity Past

Picture yourself trapped in an hourglass. Each grain of sand represents a moment of your lifetime. Each conscious moment of your life, each memory, each hope, and each dream fall relentlessly through the neck of the glass. You struggle to free yourself in vain. The sands of time gather in mounds above your legs, eventually cover your torso, and press up around your neck, slowly suffocating you. Claustrophobic, desperate, and close to blacking out, a shimmering portal opens beside you. With your last ounce of energy, you fling yourself through the portal and find that you are instantly transported to eternity past.

Eternity past is a realm, where running out of time, being trapped in a space, and feeling choked, no longer exist. In eternity past you could never run out of time, you could never get in someone's space, and you could never say, "Don't touch me." Because in eternity, nothing would exist in a material form. There would be no matter or material to touch.

God dwells constantly in the absence of time, space, and matter. This attribute of God is called His eternity. Let's consider carefully the following verses that speak of God's eternity:

Key Scripture

Psalm 90:1,2 *Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.*

Psalm 90:4 *For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or like a watch in the night.*

John 8:58 *Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."*

Job 36:26 *Behold, God is exalted, and we do not know Him; The number of His years is unsearchable.*

Revelation 1:8 cf. 4:8 *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."*

4:8 “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.”

1 Kings 8:27 “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!

Colossians 1:17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Our eternal God exists outside of time. He created within time an earthly cradle in which to nurture mankind (*American Standard Version Bible*, Ps 90:1-2). He made Himself, or His presence, our permanent address.¹ Eternity became the backdrop against which mankind lives out his earthly existence. God’s eternity may be defined as follows: God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in His own being, and He sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time.² Consider the following:

1. God’s eternity means that nothing can improve or limit Him. Time does not change Him. Blemishes never appear in His character. God doesn’t gain greater knowledge from what He observes, and He is never surprised. God lives all of our yesterdays and tomorrows as one moment. God doesn’t experience time as a succession of events, like we do rather: “...God stands above time and is able to see it all as present in His consciousness.”³ Because of these characteristics, His prophecies never fail to later bring events to pass.

2. Our enthusiasm for God can be clouded with thoughts like, “Could God create something so large, even He couldn’t pick it up?” We must understand that God is existing in a realm where there are no limitations of matter, time, or space! A thought like this, that could be meant to sow doubt, is a futile attempt to bring God down to the level of humans and saddle Him with human limitations. Our God has no limits. He is eternal. He’s got this!

3. As a member of the triune God, Jesus also actively occupies eternity. Jesus stated emphatically that before Abraham came into being, He already existed (John 8:58). This made Jesus uniquely qualified to step from eternity past into a current time to act as mankind’s redeemer. After satisfying God’s demand for justice for sin, Jesus stepped back into eternity to act as our high priest in God’s presence. Jesus left us many examples of how to live healthily engaged in time, while still

maintaining an eternal perspective. Thank you, Jesus!

4. As humans we forget that our short lives are bookended by eternity past and eternity future. Our existence is like a single grain of sand between two mountain sized sand dunes representing all of eternity. Perched on this tiny speck, we exhaust ourselves seeking momentary pleasures while angrily panicking over every moment of discomfort. We describe earth as our *final* resting place. What are we thinking? Earth is only a *temporary* tent camp. We will be *forever* homesteading in a mansion He prepares for us!

God's eternity changes everything. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes," (James 4:14). God, on the other hand, has always existed. He graciously invites us to join in with His eternal perspective. He challenges our desire to put deep roots down here, when eternity with Him awaits us.

Point to Ponder

Every action in our lives touches on some chord that will vibrate in eternity.⁴

From Learning to Living

How does the lens of eternity change your perception when other drivers cut you off in traffic? Do your health problems and financial burdens feel lighter when they're seen through the lens of an eternity with God? Why do we excessively eat, drink, or pursue the pleasures of this life, if being filled with the fullness of God and His presence awaits us just beyond the shimmering portal? Our momentary, light affliction produces for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Prayer Point

"Dear eternal, unchanging God. You are inconceivable, inexplicable, and limitless. May these truths about You direct where I spend my time, what fills my space, and how much my material things matter."

Holy, Holy, Holy

1. Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

2. Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

3. Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,
only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
perfect in power, in love and purity.

4. Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy name, in earth and sky and sea.
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

Written by Reginald Heber, 1826
Public Domain

*Day and night
[the angels] never stop saying:
“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”*

Revelation 4:8

LESSON 2

The Triune God

Christians have debated the topic of the Trinity for centuries. Attempts to use earthly models can't really explain a clear picture, because these models include separate parts that comprise a whole. For example, a shell, yolk, and white are the separate parts of an egg. A solid, liquid, gas are separate forms of matter. These earthly models fail to adequately explain the three entities as one. Of all the major world religions, only Christianity asserts that one God exists in three persons. Theologians define the Trinity as, "The godhead existing undivided in three persons."¹ The word Trinity does not appear in scripture. However, the Bible presents a clear picture of a triune God that exists in three persons. Consider these verses:

Key Scripture

Genesis 1:26 *Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth."* [plural pronoun 'Our' for God]

1 Peter 1:2 *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.* [all three members of the Trinity are mentioned having God authority]

Matthew 28:19 *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.* [all three mentioned as doing God activity]

Romans 15:15-16 *But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given to me from God, 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.* [all three members of the Trinity with God tasks]

John 14:16 *I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, so that He may be with you forever; [example of the godhead relating to each other]*

John 20:21-22 *So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be to you; just as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." [all three members of the Trinity with roles complementing the other members]*

The core doctrine of the Trinity is this: First, God exists in three persons. Second, each member of the Trinity is fully God. And third, there is one God.² Each member of the Trinity has distinct roles and characteristics, but they exist as one God. A careful reading of the above scriptures affirms the varying roles and often overlapping responsibilities of each member of the godhead. For example, "God the Father has foreknowledge the Holy Spirit sets apart for a special relationship with God, and the blood of God the Son atones for sin." (New American Standard Bible, 1st Peter 1:2). This doctrine may be difficult to grasp and fully accept. "God eternally and necessarily exists as the Trinity."³ God never changes. The entire godhead participated in acts like creation and the baptism of Jesus. Think about the following:

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the Christian faith. Consider the consequences if God the Father was not fully God. He would have no grounds to demand holiness from us, His creation. Jesus's sacrifice would have accomplished nothing if He were not both fully God and fully human at the same time. If the Holy Spirit were not God, then He could not serve as the first fruit of our salvation (Romans 8:23), or the guarantee of our Heavenly inheritance (Eph 1:13). Our Lord Jesus is uniquely positioned to act as the Savior of mankind and provide complete salvation.

2. Practically, the inter-dependent relationship among the members of the Trinity can be a great model for believers. Thoughts like, "I got this!" "Leave me alone!" and "You do you and I'll do me," reflect attitudes of individualism. By contrast, God sent Jesus to earth (Jn 3:16), who was aided by the Holy Spirit to bring His salvation program to completion. We can humbly participate with other believers and still be significant. We can value another person over ourselves and not feel like a loser. The Trinity is an example of healthy relationships.

If we fashion our relationships with believers after the Trinity, we can live without drama and competition. Two believers, with completely different roles, can contribute to the whole, and not feel like one is winning and the other is losing.

Renowned Christian author, A.W. Tozer said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²⁴ How about you? What do you view in your mind when you think about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as the Trinity?

Point to Ponder

Try to explain it, and you will lose your mind, try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul. – unknown author

From Learning to Living

Are you feeling separate and less significant than others? Is your life filled with the drama that comes from competing with others? When you invest your time and money in the church do you sometimes feel used and unappreciated? Your answers to these questions may indicate whether you have a healthy view of relationships, such as embodied by the Trinity.

Prayer Point

“Dear God the father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Thank you that you occupy every facet of my being. As my father you created and own me, your son died to save me, and your Spirit dwells within me. Thank you, God.”

Blessed Assurance

1 Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Refrain:

**This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.**

2 Perfect communion, perfect delight,
visions of rapture now burst on my sight.
Angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love. [Refrain]

3 Perfect submission, all is at rest.
I in my Savior am happy and bless'd,
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love. [Refrain]

Written by Fanny J. Crosby, 1873
Music by Phoebe Knapp, 1873
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LESSON 3

The Spirit World

Eight in ten Americans believe in angels, according to an Associated Press poll.¹ The same study showed that the majority of non-Christians believe that angelic beings exist! Despite the fact that no physical or sensory evidence exists for angels, belief in angels persists. Have you ever sensed or felt the presence of another being in a room when you needed help most? We may even unknowingly interact with angels who appear in human form (*New American Standard Bible*, Hebrews 13:2). Let's consider thoughtfully the following verses about angels:

Key Scripture

Psalm 148:5 *Let them [angels] praise the name of the Lord, For He commanded, and they were created.* [God created angels as beings that are limited in wisdom and power]

1 Timothy 5:21 *I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.* [The fact that God chooses some angels indicates they can hold different positions in His kingdom]

Job 38:4-7 *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, 5 Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? 6 On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together. And all the sons of God shouted for joy?* [The angels accompanied God at creation]

Hebrews 1:14 *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation.* [Angels serve as “helpers” to believers]

1 Peter 1:12 *It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.*

Mark 12:25 *For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor*

are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. [Angels do not get married like humans]

Luke 20:36 *for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.*

1 Kings 19:5-8 *He [Elijah] lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." 6 Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So, he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. [Angels served as God's agents of help and communication to Elijah]*

In the previous verses, angels act as God's agents of help, comfort, and communication. Like humans, God created angels as highly intelligent, moral beings with individual personalities. They fulfill God's plans to humans who would otherwise be unaware of angelic intervention. Consider the following:

1. The existence of angels teaches us about God. God drew angels in close to rejoice with Him over the majesty of creation. In scripture, God uses them as spirit messengers to carry out His plans. Angels confirm another timeless principle about God i.e., He is a communicator. God lovingly uses angels to instruct humans about His purposes. Put yourself in Elijah's sandals for a moment. Elijah was fleeing from Queen Jezebel and was convinced he was the only true believer in Israel (1 Kings 19). In a heartwarming scene, God used an angel to reveal His heart by communicating information to Elijah. God provided comfort for Elijah through an angel. God gives his creation the privilege of collaborating with Him. God needs no help. He rules as king and asks that His loyal believers share His creation with others. What a wonderful God!

2. Angels remind us that the spirit world is real. With even a casual reading of the Bible it is difficult to conclude that angels are insignificant to the Biblical story. The different orders of angels teach us that God instituted tiered leadership structures within His creation. Angels use the abilities God assigned to them to honor and draw

attention to Him as the creator. Angels worship God and give Him glory. (Psalm 148:2) What a privilege!

3. Hosts of angels comforted our Lord Jesus after Satan unmercifully tempted him for forty days in the wilderness. This comfort is even more powerful when we consider that Christ Jesus, as a member of the Trinity, created the angels that ministered to Him (Matthew 4:11), and knew each of the angels by name. He not only created them but related to them in eternity past. Angels, or spirit messengers, are personal beings with unique personalities and individual traits (1 Peter 1:12, Luke 2:13, Jude 6).

4. Life only makes sense when, like angels, our heart's desires and activities align with God's desires and activities. The worldly ideal tells us to follow our hearts and do what feels good, but nothing could be further from God's plan. When we use our God-given bodies and minds for other than God's purposes, life becomes senseless and irrational.

Since the completion of the canon of scripture, most conservative Bible scholars believe that human sightings of angels are probably very rare. Others would deny the possibility altogether. However, God acts according to His own will and can use angels how and when He sees fit. Be cautious, however. Our human limitations can restrict our view and influence what we say about angelic activity. Beware of Christian experts who make specific claims about the spirit realm. They have human limitations just like you and me. Instead of fixating on and trying to explain angels and their activity, stick to what the Bible states clearly—angels watch over both our sinful and selfless behavior (1 Corinthians 4:9). Pause to consider this fact the next time you're tempted to live outside of God's purposes.

Point to Ponder

The study of angels contributes to our view of God, who *created* them, *organized* them, and *communicated* with His people through them. These qualities are who He is.

From Learning to Living

Many think worship takes place on Sunday morning, and only pastors and missionaries proclaim God's message. But God made us like the angels and wants us to proclaim and bear His message 24/7. Consider carefully this week how much time and energy you exert fretting about your own interests. Make adjustments to bring your thoughts, emotions, and energies into alignment with God's purpose for your life.

Prayer Point

“Dear Creator God. The existence of angels teaches me so much about You. Move me to cooperate with you by advancing Your agenda and not my own.”

LESSON 4

Satanic Evil

Bridgette tells her heartbreaking story in a TV special produced by WLNS.¹ Raised by Satanists, who began selling her for sex at a very early age, Bridgette recounts incidents where, as a child, her father also repeatedly sexually abused her. Her father indoctrinated her into a cult, which she describes as Satanic. Alongside repeated sexual abuse, the cult members would allegedly waterboard the children as a method of control. It's hard to even imagine experiencing her devastation: loss of childhood innocence at three years old, and the unspeakable damage done to her soul by her callous parents. Human trafficking is wholly evil. Lewis Sperry Chafer said, "Evil derives all its properties from the one and only fact that it is unholy," i.e., unlike God.²

The story of Satan and His rebellion against God provides many lessons about the nature of evil and how it entered God's perfect universe. Consider the following verses that describe the pride in Satan's heart as He worked to dethrone God and enthrone himself:

Key Scripture

Isaiah 14:12-14 How you have fallen from heaven, You star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who defeated the nations! 13 But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

Ezekiel 28:14-17 You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; You walked in the midst of the stones of fire. 15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you. 16 By the abundance of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; Therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, you covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. 17 Your heart was haughty because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I threw you to the ground;

I put you before kings, that they may see you.

Christian theologian Charles Ryrie said, “Satan had unparalleled beauty, habitation, function and perfection.”³ “Satan was the epitome of God’s creation.”⁴ and a prime minister of sorts over the Heavenly realm. It is important to note that, “Satan was a free moral agent, capable of choosing evil but not obliged to do so. That He chose evil must ever be to his own condemnation [and not Gods’].”⁵ Consider the following:

1. Satan made a career choice. He gathered an army of spirit beings and declared war on God. He constantly schemes to “...steal the hearts of the unfaithful in the kingdom of God, and, through subtlety, to gain a kingdom for himself. He would thus become an object of worship and attract attention from other beings to Himself.”⁶ The challenge for us is to recognize His subtle wooing that seduces us from the safety of God’s arms and leads us into destruction. For thousands of years, Satan has been crafting and perfecting his tempting words and actions to try and capture our hearts.

2. People tend to think Satan tempts them directly, but in reality, Satan cares little about us individually. In fact, as a finite being limited by time and space, Satan has to spend his time wisely. Satan crafts world systems that trap and enslave all of mankind in error and wrong thinking. For example, the system of modernism gave rise to the idea that humans alone could discover and fix the world’s problems. It drew mankind away from God as the explainer of all things, and it turned hearts to science for absolute answers. This resulted in Naziism, for example, which encouraged evil acts like slavery, abortion and genocide, etc. After modernism, Satan crafted the current system of postmodernism, which rejects the notion that universal truth exists, and instead makes truth individual and tied to personal sentiments and community. This system has led to confusion about gender identity, the definition of marriage, and even the sanctity of human life. Satan has proven his ability to sedate a hurting world with tempting lies that appeal to our fallen natures. Modernism and postmodernism have led untold numbers of people away from worshipping God, instead focusing on their personal sentiments and tastes.

3. As the Righteous Judge of the universe, God created a Lake of

Fire to brutally and eternally punish Satan and His comrades (*New American Standard Bible*, Revelation 20:10). Satan's forces will be demolished at the end of time. His influences over God's creation will cease and God will usher in a time of rest and flourishing with Christ as king. Thank you, God!

4. We may think what we view and do in private, "Isn't hurting anybody." Enjoying media that depicts sex, violence and godlessness encourages the same system of evil that Satan crafted and that victimized Brigitte. Our self-righteous, unapproachable attitudes towards God mirror the proud independence of Satan and echoes postmodern individualism. Scripture likens sin and evil to yeast and cancer. Yeast and cancer begin small but soon grow to overtake the host. The single spore of yeast contributes to a rising loaf of bread, and the single cancer cell invades and grows in the body. According to the analogy, any evil act and any sinful thought contributes to the present-day system of evil.

Satan's influence is everywhere. Satanic political, economic, and social systems entrap, enslave, marginalize, and ultimately destroy all who participate in them. The world's system of greedy and lustful thinking can draw us in with unnerving precision, like the finest needle winding its way through smooth silk. For example, God told Adam to work the ground, but an online gambling commercial with promises of easy money might catch our attention. The world holds many empty, but appealing promises devised by Satan to satiate our individual propensities toward sin. Satan, the architect of evil, presents himself as an angel of light desiring to dethrone God and enthrone himself as the sole object of human devotion.

Point to Ponder

"There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch of ground; every split second is claimed by God and counter claimed by Satan."⁷ C.S. Lewis.

From Learning to Living

Become more self-aware this week. Pray for discernment to recognize when your words, thoughts, and actions lend strength to the present-day postmodernism system of evil. In what ways have you substituted self for God and followed your heart instead of trusting God?

Prayer Point

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this information about Satan’s fall, present program, and future judgment. I pray for those who are involved in human trafficking. I pray comfort for the victims, punishing justice for the handlers, and humiliating jail time for those who solicit disadvantaged women. Give us wisdom to walk as children of light in a dark, evil world.”

LESSON 5

Creator God

Creator God gathered all the spirit beings of Heaven, and as they gazed into nothingness, He said, “Let there be...,” and Heaven erupted into a cacophony of praise and worship as billions of galaxies made of countless atoms exploded into existence. (New American Standard Bible, Job 36:4,7). Try to wrap your mind around this: The observable universe contains, “a hundred million trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion elementary particles [atoms, etc.] (10^{80}).”¹ If that doesn’t blow your mind, ponder the dimensional symmetry of the universe compared to humans. The universe measures 10^{27} meters in size, while the dimensions of the smallest subatomic particles are 10^{-26} meters. Humans measure in at around a meter (or 10^0), which positions you and me right smack dab in the middle dimensionally.² In other words, humans occupy the center of the created order. Above us there exists an enormous, unseen mass of microscopic particles equal in extent to the universe. Marvel for a moment at our unfathomable God’s wisdom in creating us and the universe!

The story of creation answers the most fundamental questions about us. God reveals Himself through His creation, showing off His character and original intentions for the universe. The scripture that follows is the Genesis account of creation. As you read the passage keep your heart open to see God’s blueprint. Discover anew how you fit into it all. Look for clues about how God designed creation to relate to Him, and for subtleties about the nature of our creator/owner relationship.

Key Scripture

Genesis 1:1-25 *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 And the earth was a formless and desolate emptiness, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.*

3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light “day,” and the darkness He called “night.” And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

6 Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 God made the expanse and separated the waters that were below the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse; and it was so. 8 God called the expanse "heaven." And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

9 Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. 10 And God called the dry land "earth," and the gathering of the waters He called "seas"; and God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit according to their kind with seed in them"; and it was so. 12 The earth produced vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, according to their kind; and God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

14 Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and they shall serve as signs and for seasons, and for days and years; 15 and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. 16 God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. 17 God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

20 Then God said, "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens." 21 And God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind; and God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

24 Then God said, "Let the earth produce living creatures according to their kind: livestock and crawling things and animals of the earth according to their kind"; and it was so. 25 God made the animals of the earth according to their kind, and the livestock according to their kind, and everything that crawls on the ground according to its kind; and God saw that it was good.

To help understand the power and goodness of God, consider these three foundational truths: first, “And God said...,” second, “and it was so...,” and third, “God saw that it was good.” He is so powerful that with only His Words, God brought previously non-existent materials into being. Bible commentator Allen Ross states, “‘and it was so’ that [what] God created took its fixed place in time and was made perfect in conjunction with all other aspects of creation.”³ Each aspect of creation works in perfect symphony with the others, like a well-orchestrated musical performance. Everything is in perfect harmony. God was thoroughly satisfied with His creation, and He declared it good (or pleasant, agreeable). God admired over us and all His creation, and we can bask in the sunshine and joy of His admiration. Consider the following:

1. Since God made everything in existence, He owns it. He owns every microscopic atom and every distant galaxy. He owns the time He created to age the matter He created to fill the spaces He made. It all belongs to Him and as owner, God has ultimate authority. God answers to no one. The Psalmist compares God’s rule over creation to the earthly reign of kings, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness.” (Psalm 45:6). The Lord’s prayer, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” (Matthew 8:10) reminds us of a beautifully simple truth: God rules authoritatively. The fact that we exist on the earth does not make us owners. We’re more like *caretakers* stewarding the master’s property until He returns (Matthew 25:14-30). God imprinted the natural world with His unique qualities. God used the *visual description* of creation in Genesis to show us His variety, His goodness, and His power. Simply by observing nature we can learn about God’s orderliness. When we look at nature and say, “That’s beautiful,” we should add, “God, You are beautiful, and You made everything beautiful.”

2. God created everything to exist in harmony and interdependence. God’s acts of creation give God authority over our lives. We are not in control. God created the universe to function in an *orderly* manner. For example, He wants us to keep aspects of our lives in order, such as our finances and relationships. Keeping track of where our money goes and asking God to help us differentiate between wants and needs is more orderly than chaotic spending without saving or tithing. God desires that our relationships are marked by pleasantness and not drama. God wants us to take care of our bodies and not abuse them by bad choices.

His original desires for His creation are our marching orders and they determine our playing field.

God, existing from eternity, spoke everything into existence from nothingness. He had no needs that stirred Him to act. He is all powerful, all knowing and fully capable of all He purposes. He included the hosts of Heaven by inviting them in close to share in the joys of creation. He is the Owner/King of the universe who rules decisively over His creation.

Point to Ponder

“Creation is the canvas on which God has painted His Character.”⁵

From Learning to Living

Take some time and get out into nature. Find a secluded place and simply ponder the character of God as seen in creation, look at a flower under a magnifying glass, or look at a bug under a microscope. Try to name as many characteristics of God as you can from what you observe. Or stare up into the night sky and join the chorus of angels already praising Him.

Prayer Point

“Creator God, you leave us speechless. The greatness of your creative acts produces a visual aid that will never stop demonstrating your goodness. We stand amazed.”

LESSON 6

Made in God's Image

Professor Robert Sapolsky stunned the Stanford graduates and parents on class day 2009. As an avowed atheist, he maintains humans are nothing more than complex animals. His life's work found dozens of similarities between humans and animals in areas like aggression, theory of mind, and empathy. However, during his speech, he acknowledged one tendency humans have that they share with no other animal species. The human capacity to love the unlovable confounded the learned professor. Visibly humbled, Sapolsky admitted to the crowd that chemical signals and biological evolution alone cannot explain why a Catholic nun would give her life ministering to death row inmates. Sapolsky quipped, "the less lovable a person is, the more you must find the means to love them." As Christians, we understand that God imprinted man with aspects of His nature that we do not share with animals!¹

As the spirit beings of Heaven rejoiced over the beauty of creation, God announced His grand finale. God created Adam and Eve, the crowning jewel of all His creative activities. Adam and Eve were God's image bearing representatives. God gave Adam access to pleasure gates (sight, taste, etc.) to fully experience the garden, and He imparted to them special responsibilities to have dominion over the created world. Then God blessed Adam and Eve, giving them freedom to love and enjoy all of His creation as a gift. What a privilege! Read the following verses and pay close attention to the honor God bestowed on Adam and Eve as His representatives:

Key Scripture

Genesis 1:26-31 26 Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth." 27 So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the

sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” 29 Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; 30 and to every animal of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. 31 And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 And so the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their heavenly lights. 2 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The Creation of Man and Woman

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven. 5 Now no shrub of the field was yet on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. 6 But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living person.

Man became God’s earthly representative. Esteemed theologian D.A. Carson said Adam and Eve could represent God by ruling over creation, “for its own good and not for exploitation.”² By ruling justly and with love, man radiates God’s image to the created world, the way the sun radiates warmth through the window on a cold winter day. God also legitimized responsible human consumption of the world’s resources by giving, “every green plant for food” (*New American Standard Bible*, Genesis 1:29). God created man to be rulers of the world and to *subdue* it, but not *dominate* it. He created Adam and Eve as a man and woman with differing qualities to be ambassadors of His image together. Consider the following:

1. We often joke and say that a child is, “the spitting image of his father or mother.” Think about this. We have parts of us that, in a sense, are the *spitting image* of God. In order for a relationship to even be possible there must be some degree of sameness between

human beings and God. We have, for example, a dislike for acts of injustice, such as children being abused. We share that dislike with God. Bible scholar R.C. Sproul said, “Believing that God created man and woman as His image bearers gives us the grand identity of those who reflect the very glory of God.”³ Man is not equal to God, but we bear the image of God by having personality, intelligence, and a moral nature, i.e., the ability to gauge what we believe to be right from wrong.⁴

2. God generously lavished His image on mankind. God included man by creating an unspoiled paradise that He and man can enjoy together. God gave man special abilities with which to experience the euphoria of the perfect garden setting. He gifted mankind with a mind to consider God, a heart to love Him, a will to choose Him, and a conscience to guide his desires. Instead of creating man as a mere observer, He included man in experiencing this paradise and ruling over it with Him!

3. God created man to depend on, have fellowship with, and to obey Him. Life for man makes no sense outside of a relationship with God. Man must take his cue solely from God. In the creation story we see God declaring reality and man responding to those declarations. God established man as earth’s ruler and commanded him to subdue it. God expected man to joyfully fulfill that privileged role without complaining. For humankind, life with God became a walk of faith. Would man trust God or not? Would man obey God or not? Would man depend on God or not?

4. As God’s image bearers, there’s no need to have an identity crisis. Feelings of insignificance or superiority melt away in the light of God’s image. Earthly achievements and human accomplishments do not determine the worth of ourselves and others. Our value and worth is based on the glorious privilege God gave us as earthly ambassadors of His image.

Man occupies a very special place in God’s economy. We are not merely another species of animal that shares similarities with other animals. We have been given the ability to love, which gloriously sets us apart by God to share in His nature. We bear His image. He tenderly drew us close and graciously included us in His plans. He gifted us with the ability to choose Him, and lovingly take on the

roles He chooses for us with joy. That's amazing!

Point to Ponder

“Man was made in the image of God, and nothing will satisfy man but God in whose image he was made” – Charles Spurgeon.

From Learning to Living

This week consider the things in our lives that may be propping up a false sense of security and significance. What do we believe, own, or do that makes us feel worthwhile and safe? Are there thoughts, behaviors, or material things in which we put false hope, because we think they make our lives better? Where are we solely trusting in human accomplishments (or bemoaning the lack thereof)? Mankind's worth comes from God. He imprinted us with His image. When the going gets tough, encourage yourself and others with this life changing fact.

Prayer Point

“Dear Generous God, You identified me as your image bearer. You gifted me the privilege and responsibility to be the ambassador of your image in all I say, do and feel. May I steward your image wisely and bear your name well.”

LESSON 7

Garden Life with God

My wife and I love our backyard. We mow it, tend it carefully, and fill it with toys for our grandkids to enjoy. We put away any dangerous tools when the little ones come over, and a tall fence establishes a boundary that keeps them safe from outside dangers. Watching them play all over the yard and explore its treasures makes all our efforts of mowing, cleaning, and organizing worthwhile. Our backyard represents an ideal place where we help our grandkids grow, share in teaching moments with them, and tend to their bumps and bruises.

In similar fashion, God graciously prepared an indescribable paradise garden to enjoy with Adam and Eve. God anticipated all that Adam and Eve would need to keep them safe. He supplied an endless variety of foods to sustain them. God rejoiced as Adam and Eve freely made choices about which parts of the garden to explore within the boundaries He specified. Like any good parent, however, God established fair consequences for crossing those boundaries. Read on to see how God describes the backyard He made for his beloved creation.

Key Scripture

Genesis 2:8-25 *The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God caused every tree to grow that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

10 Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. 11 The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there as well. 13 The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of

Eden to cultivate it and tend it.

16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it you will certainly die."

18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 And out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the livestock, and to the birds of the sky, and to every animal of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "At last this is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called 'woman,' because she was taken out of man."

24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed.

God designed the garden as a place where man could thrive spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Adam enjoyed an ideal companionship with God. He placed Adam in this garden to enjoy it and to care for it on His behalf. He even gave him the privilege of naming all the animals. Consider the following:

1. The creation story highlights several of God's attributes. God is relational. He chooses to relate to the created world by enjoying it with man. God is also emotional. We see God rejoice over His creation like a father rejoices over his children. In the garden, God is the provider and the sustainer. God provided all that mankind needed. God is authoritative, but He also gave man the freedom to choose. He gave man prohibitions, like the tree, and clearly warned Adam of the consequences of disobedience. God is good all of the time.

2. The ancients entered in to covenants with God. Much like modern

day marines who swear an oath of honor to defend the constitution, obey orders, and keep people safe, God makes and keeps His covenants with His people. He made what theologians call the Adamic Covenant with Adam and Eve. The covenant protected their innocence and kept them safe from evil. God swore a twofold oath of honor to Adam and Eve. First, God swore that He would bless them in the garden, but if they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil He would curse them with death. Secondly, after Adam and Eve sinned, God swore to send a deliverer to redeem them from the curse of sin (*New American Standard Bible*, Genesis 1:26-30; 2:16,17; 3:16-19). Bible scholar Irwin Busenits said, “When God enters into a unilateral covenant guaranteed by His own faithfulness... [the covenant’s] significance cannot be overestimated.”¹ God made covenants with man at critical points throughout biblical history. On God’s honor He will keep His covenant promises!

3. After Adam named the animals, God put him to sleep, took one of Adam’s ribs, and formed Eve. When God presented her to him, Adam exclaimed, “At last this is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” God created the perfect partner for Adam, to bear God’s image equally but express it differently. In partnership they honorably represented God’s image to the rest of creation. How tragic would it be if we rebelled and allowed male and female differences to annoy us or come between us!

Many scholars call this idyllic garden time *the Dispensation of Innocence* where Adam and Eve existed in *unconfirmed holiness*. They existed not in a state of God-like perfection, but in a state of *blamelessness*. By following God’s simple and fair rules, as well as maintaining His boundaries, Adam and Eve remained innocent. When they chose to disobey, they threw away God’s rule, enthroned themselves, dishonored God, and faced His righteous wrath. God is an *authoritative* choice-giver. Welcome to life with God!

Point to Ponder

God created you for unhindered companionship with Him. Life makes no sense without Him.

From Learning to Living

In what ways do you choose to live within the boundaries of God's creation ideals? Does this affect how you relate to Him? He created you to be dependent on, obedient to, and in fellowship with Him. Consider if the choices you are making, such as media, relationships, thought life, etc., are getting in the way of your fellowship with God.

Prayer Point

“Dear choice giving God, thank you for the ability to choose You. Thank you for your kind protective boundaries that preserve my innocence and keep me from information and experiences You did not intend for me.”

LESSON 8

The God of Creation

During a flight to Costa Rica, I struck up a conversation with two young people randomly seated beside me. While they enthusiastically made small talk about their indulgent plans to become beach bums for a week, I successfully steered the conversation toward spiritual matters. I asked them their specific views of God. One thought that God could exist, but denied that humans could personally know Him. The other one seemed a little more sensitive to spiritual things. I posed this question, “What is the most beautiful thing you two can think of in the natural world?” They became quiet. “The ocean,” and “The universe,” they individually replied.

So, I asked my new friends, “If the ocean and the observable universe were all you could know about God, what would He be like?” They became quiet and thought seriously for a moment. “God would be good and God would be orderly,” one said. The other replied softly, “God would be beautiful.” Their frank admissions created a worshipful moment for me. I prayed their insights would soften their hearts toward God. The concept of knowing God by observing Him in His creation is called *Natural or General Revelation* by scholars. God’s Word speaks to this concept in the following scripture verses:

Key Scripture

Job 12:7-10 *7 But just ask the animals, and have them teach you; And the birds of the sky, and have them tell you. 8 Or speak to the earth, and have it teach you; And have the fish of the sea tell you. 9 Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this, 10 In whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?*

Psalm 19:1 *The heavens tell of the glory of God; And their expanse declares the work of His hands.*

Psalm 104:24-25 *Lord, how many are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all; The earth is full of Your possessions. 25 There is the sea, great and broad, In which are swarms without number,*

animals both small and great.

Romans 1:19-20 *because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

The term, “What has been made,” reveals God’s characteristics (*New American Standard Bible*, Romans 1:20). Nature reveals God’s creative ability, His beauty and His generosity. God grants us, just like those two young people on the plane, the ability to use our senses to observe the natural world and marvel at His character. Consider the following:

1. God created us with DNA, which is just one component of a human cell. Dr. Richard Swenson in his book *More Than Meets the Eye* explains that a strand of DNA from a single cell, that stores the information for everything from the size of your foot to the tone of your skin, only weighs 0.2 millionths of a millionth of an ounce! If you could remove that strand of DNA from *one cell* and stretch it end to end it would be over five feet long. The DNA from *all the cells* in your body, stretched end to end, would reach a minimum of 10 billion miles!¹ Each time one cell divides, three billion base pairings within the DNA must be perfectly replicated. Over the course of time as your cells are being replaced, these base pairings are replicated trillions of times in trillions of cells. In case you are in danger of losing sleep over cells not dividing correctly, “The DNA has its own spell checker of sorts, an enzyme that examines the newly copied DNA for errors. When an error is found that segment is replaced.”² Pause for a moment and consider the genius and goodness of God’s creation! I will ask you a similar question to the one I asked the young people on the plane, “If DNA were all you could know about God, what would He be like?” Would you feel in awe, and like them think God is good, orderly, and beautiful?

2. When was the last time you engaged your senses to take in God’s created world? Maybe it was springtime in a park or watching a beautiful sunset. God created us to have awe and to worship Him. God designed us to live in a relationship with Him and others, to be stewards of His creation, and to live with an attitude of worshipful submission to Him. We begin to live out God’s desires for our lives

when we find awe in Him as the creator and owner of our majestic, natural world.

3. It's easy to blindly worship the fame of recent well-known athletes, actors, and famous bands. Breathlessly we recite close brushes with one of these human superstars. Our captivated audiences are amazed and cover their mouths in awe. They gasp in appropriate places as the story unfolds. Meanwhile, does God's breathtaking, beautiful, created world go unnoticed? God wants us to live humbly, worship Him, and be captivated by His beautiful, natural wonders. When we are in nature we can be jolted into deeper submission to Him. The grandeur of God's craftsmanship leaves us reeling at the awesome power of God's greatness! (Acts 17:28)

4. God created the world to give mankind (Romans 1:19-20), "Physical and mental capacity to recognize God's existence."³ God's created beings are imprinted with a knowledge of Him, and like Adam and Eve are given enough information to choose or reject His moral standards. Noted author Rene Lopez said, "...God makes plain of Himself through natural revelation (i.e., creation) ...humans are not intrinsically atheist, agnostic, or devoid of moral knowledge (Romans 2:14-15). Discoveries of all civilizations show the opposite, for all of them give evidence to have a god-conscience by their cultic-worship-systems and rule of law."⁴ No need to angrily argue on social media or with others about divine and moral realities. God's answers to mankind's deepest questions are as plain as the nose on our faces!

The natural world presents countless opportunities to discover the attributes of God. His crafting of DNA shows He is infinitely beautiful, orderly, creative, shockingly powerful, and remarkably unassuming. He graciously shared His created world and made us participants with Him in its wonders. God made us to gratefully steward over His creation, be productive managers, and enjoy His amazing creation to the fullest.

Point to Ponder

"I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in." – George Washington Carver

From Learning to Living

Google the song, “This is My Father’s World,” and enjoy this old hymn of faith. Then consider the implications. Your internet browsing, TV watching, relationships, thought life, money spending, and food choices all take place in God’s created world, not ours.

Prayer Point

“Dear Creator God, forgive me for not living with a continual sense of worshipful awe in Your created world. Forgive my prideful indulgence and for living as if I own the gifts you give me.”

LESSON 9

Satan the Cruel Deceiver

Satan can't go toe to toe with God and win. No being can. However, Satan can seductively try to ruin God's image in man, cunningly cast a pall on God's character, and hijack God's relationship with His creation. As God's *image bearing* ambassadors to the rest of creation, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect companionship with God. The sights, sounds, and tastes of the luscious garden portrayed the goodness of its Creator. As tenants Adam and Eve contentedly and innocently cared for God's paradise.

Unbeknownst to them, a powerful spirit being who hated God stalked them in the shadows. Satan enticed Eve with the idea of self-rule as an alternative to God's rule. With steely precision Satan concocted a different reality where, instead of being privileged tenants caring for God's garden, Adam and Eve could be landlords and rule the garden! Carefully consider the following verses:

Key Scripture

Genesis 3:1-6 *3 Now the serpent was more cunning than any animal of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" 4 The serpent said to the woman, "You certainly will not die! 5 For God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil." 6 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 desirable to make one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate.*

Satan uses the same tactics today as He did in the garden. Methods he has used through the ages. He disguises himself. He takes the form of another reality or creature to carry out his well-planned deceptions.

He also uses doubt-provoking questions that cast suspicion on God's motives for His moral boundaries. Adam and Eve began to view God's plan to preserve their innocence as a deceitful power play. Captivated by Satan's indictments of God, Eve became her own source of truth by adding to God's words. Eve claimed that God had prohibited them from eating or touching the tree, but God had never said not to touch it, only not to eat it. As Satan lured them deeper into his trap of deceit, he brazenly contradicted what God warned by claiming, "You certainly will not die!" (*New American Standard Bible*, Genesis 3:4). Eve was captivated by the visual appeal of the fruit, convinced Adam, and they both disobeyed God's plan for them. Consider the following:

1. God rules the universe. While God ultimately owns all of reality, He graciously allows us a *free choice* to accept His truth or to make up our own. As lawgiver and judge, He allows us to choose for ourselves, even if it means disobeying His clear commands. Satan used the same lie we hear in our culture today, "You do you, Eve." Influenced by Satan's ruse, she followed her heart and did what she wanted.

2. What happened fundamentally at the fall of Adam and Eve? Scholar and author Greg Koukl says, "At the Fall, an alternative 'truth' prevailed, the truth within, 'my truth.' The revolt in the garden was a rejection of the *external* source of truth in exchange for an *internal* authority. Self-rule replaced God's rule. Mankind embraced itself. This outside/inside distinction—God's truth vs. individual truth—may sound familiar. It is the root of relativism, the primal heresy."¹

3. Never mistake the freedom God gave us to choose with the power to create our own truth. God granted Adam and Eve the freedom to make choices within the moral boundaries that He established *outside* of them. This means, for example, that we have the freedom to choose our social interactions, what we watch on TV, and even our favorite flavor of ice cream. However, moral relativism allows God's *outside* moral boundaries to be replaced with *inside* thinking and behavior. These behaviors include re-inventing gender designations and redefining marriage between a man and a woman. Relativism is also seen in God's morality about sex, which He said is to be enjoyed privately within marriage. But God's people can choose their own *inside* truth and watch paid actors on television or the internet. Some

even make jokes about sex, or look the other way when close family members, for example, make bad choices with it. Moral relativism allows for humankind to make up their own rules in spite of God's clear declarations.

Eve was deceived, Adam knowingly disobeyed a direct command from God, and death began to reign. Satan's subtle deceptions influenced Adam and Eve to throw off their perceived constraints of God's declarations and enthrone themselves inside their own reality. With no consideration of God's love for them, they shamed God by ignoring His outside, established boundaries. This chapter is pivotal to understanding human history. Before the fall, we find mankind thriving and resting in God's provision. After this chapter we see hatred, jealousy, murder, and chaos. Before the fall mankind found truth outside of themselves i.e., in God. After the fall, mankind found truth inside themselves, something we were not designed to do. While we may get to choose our beliefs and behavior, we do not get to choose the consequences.

Point to Ponder

“We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has at its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires.” – Joseph Ratzinger

From Learning to Living

Thoughtfully ponder areas of your life where you may have substituted your own inside truth for God's outside boundaries. Areas like work, money, relationships and child-training are great places to start. For example, God, through many biblical principles established that the ideal way to make money is by producing goods and services, not borrowing it. Choose an area that concerns you, and study God's Word to know if you have wandered from God's truth and followed your own desires.

Prayer Point

“Dear God of all truth. Give me discernment to know where I have substituted myself for You. Help me graciously avoid compromise with the culture around me that celebrates its own truth and rejects Yours.”

Nothing But the Blood of Jesus

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain

**Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.**

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

Nothing can for sin atone,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

This is all my hope and peace,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

Now by this I'll overcome—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus,
Now by this I'll reach my home—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

Glory! Glory! This I sing—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus,
All my praise for this I bring—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

Written by Robert Lowry, 1876
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LESSON 10

Blood Substitution

When you see a new doctor for the first time do you feel unsettled, uncomfortable, and anxious? They ask personal questions and their procedures often probe sensitive parts of our bodies. Unbidden thoughts about this person's expertise, professionalism, and character may come storming into our mind. As a profession, doctors are mostly honorable and truly remarkable, and generally bring pride to the medical profession.

However, a USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University physician, Dr. Larry Nassar, brought great shame to himself, his institution, and his profession by continuously abusing countless women over many years. People trusted in his care and revered his renowned reputation. But he caused immeasurable pain and suffering to vulnerable patients, their friends, and their families. The effects of his crimes will haunt the medical world and the national arena for years to come.

Adam and Eve felt shame when they sinned against God and rejected His gracious protection and bountiful provision. Adam and Eve chose to spit in God's face and follow Satan. Read the following verses on the consequences of the first man's and woman's sin with this in mind:

Key Scripture

Genesis 3:7-24 *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves waist coverings.*

8 Now 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. 9 Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." 11 And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me some of the fruit of the

tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” 14 Then the Lord God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all the livestock, And more than any animal of the field; On your belly you shall go, And dust you shall eat All the days of your life; 15 And I will make enemies Of you and the woman, And of your offspring and her Descendant; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise Him on the heel.” 16 To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall deliver children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.” 17 Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; With hard labor you shall eat from it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; Yet you shall eat the plants of the field; 19 By the sweat of your face You shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.” 20 Now the man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. 21 And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

22 Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out with his hand, and take fruit also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” — 23 therefore the Lord God sent him out of the Garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove the man out; and at the east of the Garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

Placing blame can become a natural defense. When questioned by others or confronted by legal authorities, Nassar blamed their *misinterpretations* of his necessary medical procedures. When God confronted Adam and Eve about their sin, Adam blamed both Eve and God, “The woman whom You gave to be with me...” (*New American Standard Bible*, Genesis 3:12). Eve defended herself by blaming the crafty serpent. Adam and Eve experienced shame for what they had done. They tried to fix it themselves with a Band-Aid of fig leaves instead of turning to God. God even asked, “Who told you that you were naked?” to try and get below the surface of their actions and

make them self-aware. But they remained stubbornly clueless. After God cursed the serpent, He doled out Adam's and Eve's everlasting consequences. He cursed the ground to make productivity forever difficult, and he made difficult pronouncements on womanhood including making childbirth a painful experience. Consider the following:

1. The garden catastrophe teaches us many things about God. First, God patiently and relentlessly pursues mankind. Adam and Eve ran but God searched for them. Second, God deals with man lovingly and graciously. God chose to allow man to live while preventing man from eating from the tree of life, which would have prolonged their punishment indefinitely. Finally, God freely gives man choices while punishing swiftly and justly. Adam and Eve disobeyed, and God made sure Adam and Eve experienced daily, throughout their lives the consequences of their sin.

2. God utterly rejected the efforts of Adam and Eve to save themselves. God rejected their lame fig leaf attempts to cover themselves. Instead, He shed the blood of an innocent animal to provide appropriate coverings for Adam and Eve's sinful shame. From this point in history until the cross, the shed blood of an innocent animal would act as a temporary substitute or *covering* for God's people.

3. Adam and Eve left the place of sin with an informed conscience about good and evil (Genesis 3:22). Concerning this alteration of God's program with man, Bible scholar Clarence Larkin writes, "It [the Dispensation of Conscience] shows what man will do guided only by his conscience. Adam and Eve had no conscience before the 'Fall.'"¹ Larkin further notes, "Conscience may produce fear and remorse, but it will not keep men from doing wrong, for conscience imparts no power."² This time-period wherein mankind was guided by the witness of his conscience lasted until the flood of Noah's time.

4. God promised a redeemer who would shed His blood and crush the head of Satan, who would merely bruise the redeemer's heel (Genesis 3:5). These words have been called the *proto-evangelium* (first gospel) and the *birthplace of all promises*. In His mercy, God announced deliverance for humans even before He proclaimed their sentence. It has been said, "The Friend of Sinners stood that day in Eden."³

What a tragedy! Like Nassar brought shame to his profession Adam broke the Adamic Covenant and brought shame and sinfulness to God's Garden paradise. Then... what beauty! God extended His hand of mercy to Adam and Eve. He shed the blood of an innocent animal to cover Adam's and Eve's shame and promised a future deliverer who would one day break the stranglehold of sin forever.

Point to Ponder

Religion is man seeking God. Christianity is God seeking man. When it comes to salvation, God doesn't need us to help ourselves. He did it all for us.

From Learning to Living

Sit quietly before the Lord and consider the original sin's influence on you. Do you blame God and others for drama you helped create? Do you hesitate to admit wrong? Do you hide your sin and reject God's pursuit? Do you bristle at questions that may expose your true motives? Confess these fleshly tendencies openly to God. Be honest with the Spirit of God.

Prayer Point

"Dear God of relentless pursuit. Thank you for not leaving me to myself and my own feeble efforts. Thank you for working out a salvation in me which I contributed nothing to. You truly are a good, good father."

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The purpose of the Small Group Ministry is to be a vessel, through community, for discipleship. Small Groups are meant to reinforce the four scriptural principles set forth as the purpose of New Hope Church:

*“The purpose of this church is to glorify God by producing maturing followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ through the four scriptural principles of **Learning, Loving, Worship and Prayer.**”*

Small Groups will seek to accomplish this through creating a safe and supportive atmosphere for people to wrestle with the truths of God as they mature in their faith.

As Pastor Mark says, “What you believe about *GOD* determines what you *DO* next.” Based on this week’s Scripture, sermon, and devotional reading, please consider the following questions placed within these two categories:

GOD

1. What do you believe about God? What do you learn about God’s character from this week’s Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
2. What stirs up praise, love, or thankfulness to God? During prayer time, PRAISE HIM for who He is, His character, His attributes, or THANK HIM for what He has done/is doing.

DO

1. What do you learn about humanity or yourself specifically from this week’s Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
2. Is there something God is asking you to do? What do you believe you are to do next? How will you seek to be obedient to what you are learning?
3. What is the tension/challenge in obeying God? Can you identify what you are feeling or what’s causing a reaction?
4. How can your small group support you in yielding to what God wants you to do?
5. How can you pray for yourself or others according to these verses?

PRAYER TIME

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