

**Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith**  
**Sermon #2: "Original Sin...Paradise Lost"**  
**Genesis 2:4b – 3:24 (excerpts) (and Romans 5:12-21)**  
**By John Gill**

Today we begin our journey...a journey of faith. As Methodists, we have a grand and glorious legacy in the person of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.

Two weeks ago, we heard the story of how Wesley, a priest in the Church of England, struggled to experience the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Even though he had become a priest and had studied the Christian faith, he knew something was seriously missing in his life.

He spent years striving to live a holy life, a life filled with methodical spiritual disciplines, but he was miserable. He had trouble believing the Gospel he was preaching.

It wasn't until he attended a bible study in a meeting house on Aldersgate Street in London that he experienced his heart "strangely warmed," and for the first time in his life, experienced the joy of his faith and the assurance of his salvation. That "Aldersgate" Experience on May 24, 1738 changed his life and the world forever!

From that moment on, John Wesley began preaching a message of salvation that set off a revival that swept across the British Isles and skipped over the Atlantic to transform America, as well.

Key to Wesley's new-found passion was his conviction that salvation is available to us as an ongoing movement of God's amazing grace at work in our lives. To help his followers understand this process of faith, he described a "Way of Salvation", - a spiritual path we all must travel – a journey that begins the moment we are born and continues, through the working of the Holy Spirit, until we take our last breath, and beyond.

This Way of Salvation is the subject of the Sermon Series we begin this morning, and will continue for the next eight weeks. I hope you will make it a point to be with us for each service, as we explore God's amazing grace at work in our lives! This morning, we will consider the "first step" along that journey: - The confession of our ORIGINAL SIN.

As you may know, we have had several of our youth involved in a confirmation class. Unfortunately, due to the Covid virus, we have had to put that on hold. We'll get back to that once this all passes. But recently I came across a cute story about two girls in a Lutheran Church who were in a confirmation class.

The girls were comparing their progress in memorizing the catechism. If you don't know, the catechism is a series of questions and answers about Christianity that some denominations require young people to memorize before they can be confirmed as members of the church. As one girl was bragging about how many questions she had already memorized, she said proudly, "I've come to Original Sin. How far are you?" "Me?" replied the other, "Oh, I'm already beyond Redemption!"

Yes, Original Sin IS the first step... It is the first step toward our Redemption.

Today, as we think about the subject of Original Sin, we will see that, as a result of the corruption of sin, we are totally depraved and separated from God. But we will ALSO come to see that, thanks to Jesus Christ, NO ONE is “beyond redemption!”

When we think about Original Sin, we automatically think back to that ancient creation story about Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit, and that wily serpent.

Whenever this story is read it has a tendency to set off a divisive debate among Christians between those who choose to read this story as literal history and others who prefer to interpret this story as just that...an ancient story, but full of symbolic power. This debate has split Christianity unnecessarily because, when you get right down to it, the MEANING of the story is identical, whichever view you take.

If one insists that the story must be interpreted literally as historical fact, then there is a temptation to distance ourselves from the sin of Adam and Eve. If Adam is the “original sinner” who somehow passed sinfulness down to us like a bad gene which we inherit, then we might be tempted to SHIFT THE BLAME of our own sin onto Adam.

If we take that view, we can fall into the same trap as did the characters in the story. When confronted about his sin, does Adam accept responsibility? No! He blames Eve...and even blames God for giving Eve to him! And does Eve own up to HER guilt? No! She points to the snake...in essence saying, “I’m not responsible for my actions... ‘the devil made me do it’.”

No, we dare not see Adam only as some long-distant first-father whose sin you and I are still paying for. That’s a cop out! The story is clear ...that ALL the characters in the creation story share the guilt, and that each must be honest about owning up to their own sin.

That’s why I prefer to read this story as being symbolic. The way I see it, this story has more in common with the parables that Jesus told than with historical reality.

The power of a “parable of Jesus” is that WE CAN SEE OURSELVES IN THE STORY ...as the prodigal son, or his elder brother ...as the wounded man, or the Samaritan who came to his aid ...as the lost sheep found by the shepherd ...or as good or bad soil on which the seed of the gospel is cast ...or as guests invited to a wedding banquet.

You see, in a parable, the stories are not MEANT to be “history; nor are the stories about some fictitious characters of Jesus’ imagination that have no bearing on our lives. While not LITERALLY factual, parables are, none-the-less, profound stories filled with eternal truths ---- ...about you and me ...about our relationship to one another ...and about our relationship with God.

The power of a parable is NOT in its historical reality, but in the symbolism of the story that PULLS US INTO THE PLOT so that we can identify with the characters, and lets us learn important truths about God, and about ourselves.

You are welcome to interpret this story any way you like, but this is how I like to read the creation story in Genesis ...as a parable.

For me, Adam and Eve are not merely historical figures from some ancient past who we can blame for our own sinfulness. In the story...YOU AND I are Adam...YOU AND I are Eve! We can't have the luxury of seeing them as the "original sinners" causing us to sin - because, in the story, WE ARE ADAM!

In fact, interestingly enough, the literal meaning of the Hebrew name "Adam" is "earth creature" or "human being." "ADAM," THEN, IS SYMBOLIC OF ALL HUMANITY. This story is NOT just a story about Adam and Eve, so much as it is a story about US – about what it means to be human!

So let's think about this story for a moment:

Like Adam, God created each of US in His image, and intends for us to live in complete communion with Him. That union with God would be a blissful "Eden." God did NOT create us to be robots, however. To be created in God's image means that we have "free will." God loves us so much that He gives us the freedom to choose to love and serve Him...or not! We can conform to God's will for our lives, or we can prefer our own willfulness. We can obey God's commands, or we can choose to sin.

There is a cute story about three preachers who were out in a boat fishing one day, and got to be good friends. Soon they began confiding personal matters and problems they were having in their congregations.

After a while, one of them said, "We all have our little sins. Let tell each other ours. I confess that I like to take a little nip now and then." The second one said, "I confess that I like to look at women." Then they turned expectantly to the third preacher, who said, "I like to gossip...and I can't wait to get back to shore!" Yes, even preachers sin!

As you are beginning to see, Original Sin is not so much about Adam's sin as it is about everyone's TENDENCY to sin. Because we all have free-will, the Scriptures tell us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

You know, most of us aren't comfortable with this doctrine of Original Sin...especially when the accusing finger is pointed at US. As a rule, most Americans today see themselves as essentially "good people," and when you ask them to name their sins, they have a hard time thinking of any to confess.

I'm reminded of the comment of an elderly Methodist bishop who taught one of my classes in seminary. He said that he never liked to pray those printed prayers of confession we sometimes use in church because HE wasn't guilty of all those sins!

It's like the time a visiting preacher was delivering a powerful sermon on the 10 Commandments. After the sermon was over, one woman called out from the congregation, "At least I haven't made any 'graven images'!" We don't like to be reminded that we are sinners.

We may not be comfortable ADMITTING our sinfulness, but we ARE SINNERS none the less. The doctrine of Original Sin says that we sin simply because we live in a fallen order – (The "Fall"). It emphasized that sin just permeates our existence. It is pervasive and inescapable. It include the bad things we have done, as well as the good things we have left undone - ...our conscious sins...and sub-

conscious sins; ...our intentional sins...and our unintentional sins: ...our personal sins...and our corporate sins.

No matter how “good” we may TRY to be, we are STILL trapped by our Original Sin.

St. Augustine was a great churchman in the early centuries of the Christian church. After confessing his part in a childhood prank where he and some other boys stole the pears from a neighbor’s tree, Augustine said that it wasn’t so much that he stole something that bothered him. It was that he was CAPABLE of stealing. THAT is Original Sin...the capacity to sin – which inevitably leads to actual sins.

As a result of our sin, we must pay the price. As in all things, “we reap what we sow.” It has been said that “You must watch out what you plant! The crops come in. Some people want to sow wild oats, and then go home and pray for a crop-failure!” Or as Paul so eloquently and succinctly put it, “The wages of sin is death.”

The “wages” of sin are powerfully portrayed in the creation story ...separation from the presence of God, and banishment from the Garden of Eden...“Paradise Lost.”

That is the sad state of affairs in which we find ourselves WITHOUT Jesus Christ. The entire Old Testament can be summed up as the story of humanity’s attempts to set things right ...to return to the paradise of the Garden of Eden ...by their own effort and merit. But they couldn’t do it.

So God gave the Law to His people in order to help them know how to live in relationship with Him as He intended. But they STILL couldn’t do it.

Human effort could not keep the Law, and the Law degenerated into an oppressive system of rules and regulations. The “spirit” of the Law was forgotten, buried under legalism. Rather than being their salvation, the Law became their prison ...UNTIL JESUS CAME ...and the death-grip of Original Sin was finally broken!

Let me try to describe the meaning of Jesus’ coming into the world, using an illustration. Picture, if you will, a level plain. As a result of our the corruption of sin in our lives – our “total depravity,” or “original sin,” – there exists a huge gulf between God and humanity. It is a cavern so deep and wide that none may cross, with God on one side, and humanity on the other.

The Old Testament records the futile efforts of humanity to try to build a bridge across the chasm of sin, but to no avail. God saw that we couldn’t return to Him on our own. So God did FOR US what we were unable to do for ourselves. GOD built the bridge from HIS side ...and that bridge - was the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Thanks to Christ, NOW we have access to God again. If we choose to...IF we CHOOSE to...we can cross over the bridge and enter into union with God, just as He intended from the very beginning! Because of the sinfulness of the FIRST Adam (in us), Paradise was lost.

But thanks to the Cross of Christ, the SECOND Adam, we can live in Paradise once more! Paradise lost --- Paradise restored!

So NOW you see why our Path of Salvation must begin with an awareness of our “Original Sin.” Awareness of our Original Sin is vitally important because it reminds us that we cannot save ourselves.

We must confess that we are sinners, in need of a Savior! Jesus Christ will never mean anything to us unless we recognize how lost we are without him.

My friends, where are you today?

- On which side of that great sinful divide do you find yourself?
- Do you know the joy of living in union with God, or are you still lost and separated from God, looking for a way to overcome your sinfulness?
- Do you long for that “Eden” but can’t find it because of the emptiness of your soul due to sin in your life?
- Have you tried your best on your own to recover that Paradise you long for, only to discover that you are more discouraged than ever?

If so, - you are still trapped in your sin!

But, my friends, there is hope! The Good News is that you can let the Cross of Jesus Christ be the bridge to carry you back to “Eden” and safely into the presence of God. You can ...IF you can recognize that you are a sinner, acknowledge and own up to your sinfulness, and claim Jesus Christ as your Savior.

In a letter John Wesley sent to his father, Samuel, six months after his Aldersgate experience, this is what he wrote: “By a Christian, I mean one who so believes in Christ as sin hath no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word, I was not a Christian till May the 24<sup>th</sup> last past.”<sup>1</sup>

See, John Wesley says that we must confess our “original sin” as the first step toward salvation. I hope you’ve taken that step. But, if you haven’t, that you will today. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> October 30, 1738 <https://www.seedbed.com/on-john-wesley-quotes/>