



7. Sin

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe nobody's perfect.

This session will enable participants to discuss the Presbyterian understanding of sin through discussion of:

- The Book of Genesis in general,
- Genesis 3:1–19 in particular.
- Romans 3:23,
- 1 John 1:8, and
- Romans 5:8

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
Faithful God,
we are aware that, despite our best efforts,
we often deny our dependence on you,
we separate ourselves from each other,
we separate ourselves from you,
and we deny our responsibility for our own decisions and actions.
Forgive us, God, when we fail to be the people you intend for us to be.
Remind us of your abiding grace,
and help us to live as forgiven and forgiving people.
Amen.*

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and UKirk Collegiate Ministries.

Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because the Bible talks about sin a lot. We recognize ourselves, and our world, in the Genesis story of the first humans eating forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. We see denial of dependence, denial of responsibility, separation from each other, and separation from God every day in our individual lives, in our life together, and in our world. We know sin is part of the truth about each of us and all of us. We believe it's important to acknowledge and remember that.

But we also know sin is not the whole truth about us.

Presbyterians don't talk about sin just to make ourselves and others miserable. Our intention is not to humiliate people or cause them to fear punishment from an angry God.

Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because we believe it is important for us to recognize and remember the difference between who we are and who God intends for us to be. We talk about sin a lot because the world where we wake up every day is filled with hatred, violence, warfare, abuse, and greed. Thinking and talking about sin enables Presbyterians to look clearly and honestly at a world in which many suffer (including us) and many cause others to suffer (including us). Presbyterians talk a lot about sin because we recognize it every day in ourselves and in our world.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Let's think for a moment about the book of **Genesis**.

To understand what we've got in Genesis, we need first to look back at a passage (**Exodus 34:6**) we discussed in the first "Why Presbyterians Are Like That" study about how and why Presbyterians read and study the Bible.

Exodus 34:6 says:

*The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,
"I AM, I AM,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*

Your Bible probably says "the Lord, the Lord" but God is using the Divine name—Yahweh—in this verse. "I Am" is a better translation.

That's a hugely important verse in the Old Testament. There are six other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that use that same language to describe God:

Gracious
Merciful
Slow to anger
Abounding in steadfast love.

Biblical scholars think that's the oldest language in the entire Bible. It's like a creed, a sort of definition of who God is. It was part of the Hebrew oral tradition before any of the texts in our Bible were even written down.

From as far back as we can know, the Hebrews understood themselves to be uniquely related to a gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

It's important to understand that before we turn our attention to the book of Genesis.

Genesis was written in a community of people who worshiped and sought to serve their gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

But the world as they encountered it raised some questions for them.

- Where did all this come from?
- Where did we come from?

If God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—which we believe—

- Why do people consistently disappoint and betray each other?
- Why are we scared of snakes?
- Why is childbirth so painful?
- Why is it so hard for us to get enough food?
- What's the deal with that flood that destroyed everything a few generations ago?

The book of Genesis can be helpfully and appropriately read as an attempt by pre-scientific people who knew about God—and also knew about literature and metaphors—to make sense of their imperfect world without abandoning their faith in their gracious, merciful, patient, and loving God.

If we read the book of Genesis as an attempt by a faithful community to address some questions about the world as they encountered it, **Genesis 3:1–19** can be read as a story that addresses questions like:

- Why do people consistently disappoint and betray each other?

- Why are we scared of snakes?
- Why is childbirth so painful?
- Why is it so hard for us to get enough food?

Think of Genesis as a collection of stories intended to help faithful people make sense of the world.

GENESIS 3:1

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

It is highly unlikely that anyone who wrote, read, or heard this story when it was originally created ever took it literally.

The ancient Hebrews knew about metaphors.

Taking the Bible seriously does not necessarily mean presuming that it is exclusively a record of historical facts.

Presbyterians do not believe that the meaningful ideas and insights in this story depend on a belief that there ever was a talking snake.

GENESIS 3:2–3

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

The woman is quoting **Genesis 2:15–17**:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

It’s not clear exactly what God is up to in those verses. Does God not want these two new humans to know the difference between good and evil? How would that make sense? Does God want to keep the humans ignorant about evil (which apparently exists before Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit)?

Or is “good and evil” a colloquial term that encompasses everything in creation—all the good stuff and all the bad stuff? Is God concerned that these fresh new people will suddenly know, or think they know, everything about everything?

GENESIS 3:4

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die,

The serpent is directly challenging and contradicting what God just said in Genesis 2:17.

GENESIS 3:5

for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The serpent is suggesting that if Eve eats the fruit that God told her and Adam not to eat then she'll know as much as God knows and so won't need God any more.

“It's all just a scam to keep y'all dependent on God—a cheap ploy to make you think you're not good enough to get by on your own.”

GENESIS 3:6

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Eve, and later Adam, eat that tasty, pretty, nutritious food because they want to be “wise.”

They eat that fruit because they want to know everything about everything.

They don't want to be dependent on God any more.

The first thing the humans do in this story is *deny their dependence*.

They eat that fruit because they think they can handle everything by themselves.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How is the notion of sin as denial of dependence relevant or helpful for you as you think about your own life?*

GENESIS 3:7

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

This is kind of a bizarre development.

Clearly, Adam and Eve had been naked all along.

But now, after eating that fruit, their nakedness has become a problem. All of a sudden, they feel compelled to cover up their “private parts” with fig leaves (that would be the “loins” that the “loincloths” were intended to conceal).

After eating the forbidden fruit, Eve and Adam suddenly feel something like shame. And they feel the need to protect themselves from each other and the world. They feel vulnerable in a way they didn't before.

The second thing the humans do in this story is *separate themselves from each other*.

GENESIS 3:8

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees in the garden.

Eve and Adam hear God coming and decide they need to hide.

All of a sudden, they're no longer comfortable facing God.

They're afraid.

They're ashamed for having done what God told them not to do.

And they feel vulnerable because they're naked.

So they hide.

The third thing the humans do after eating the forbidden fruit is to *separate themselves from God*.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How does this language about sin as separation from each other and separation from God help you think about sin and the disappointments and difficulties that arise in our everyday lives?*

GENESIS 3:9

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

This is a huge verse.

The very first thing God says after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, deny their dependence, and separate themselves from each other is “Where are you?”

Sin shows up early in the third chapter of the first book of the Bible. The remaining 65 books and 48-plus chapters are about how God responds to human sin.

God’s first response to human sin is to seek the sinners, to ask “Where are you?”

GENESIS 3:10

[Adam] said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Adam, Eve, and God had been getting along fine.

Remember when Adam got to name the animals in **Genesis 2:19**?

Good times in the Garden of Eden.

But now, after they have denied their dependence on God, and after they have felt it necessary to separate themselves from each other with loincloths, they are suddenly uncomfortable in the presence of God.

And, apparently, it was the nakedness that did it.

GENESIS 3:11

[God] said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

“Since when has nakedness been an issue?”

“What are you worried about?”

God has asked Adam a direct question: “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

Watch what Adam does next.

GENESIS 3:12

The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”

Adam doesn't deny that he has eaten the forbidden fruit. But he sure tries to dodge the blame.

“The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit from the tree and I ate.”

Without actually denying that he did precisely what God told him not to do, Adam tries to blame everybody else in the story.

“It's not really my fault.

You gave me the woman.

And she gave me the fruit.

You can't really blame me.”

GENESIS 3:13

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

Eve blames the serpent.

Nobody takes responsibility for their behavior.

The fourth thing the humans do after eating the forbidden fruit is *deny responsibility for their own actions*.

So in these first 13 verses of Genesis 3, we see the first humans:

- deny dependence on anything beyond themselves;
- separate themselves from each other;
- separate themselves from God; and
- deny responsibility for their own actions.

One doesn't need to believe in talking snakes to recognize all those behaviors in the world where we woke up this morning (and in our own lives).

As you read Genesis 3:14–19, remember that these words were articulated in an ancient, pre-scientific culture. This text was produced in a community of people who saw themselves as specially related to the one and only God who created an orderly world, loved that world and its inhabitants, and expected them to care for themselves, each other, and all that God created.

Given that understanding, read these verses as attempts to make sense of the facts of the real lives of real people in a specific context.

- **Why don't snakes have legs and why are we so scared of them?**

GENESIS 3:14–15

The LORD God said to the serpent,

**“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.**

**I will put enmity between you and the woman
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.**

- **Why is childbirth so difficult and painful for women?**

GENESIS 3:16

To the woman [God] said,

**“I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”**

That sure looks like a clumsy rationalization for a patriarchal social order.

Chauvinist patriarchy can be found all over the Bible.

As we have studied the whole Bible prayerfully and together over the centuries, Presbyterians have rejected any interpretation of this passage or any others that implies that:

women are inferior to men in any aspect of our life together;

sexual desire is related to sin; or
heterosexuality is normative for all people.

- **If God loves us so much, why do we get hungry and why is it so hard for us to get enough to eat?**

GENESIS 3:17-18

And to the man he said,

**“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you
‘you shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.**

- **Why do we die and why do we decompose?**

GENESIS 3:19

**By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”**

Genesis 3:1-19 contains complicated, interesting, insightful, and troublesome ideas.

At times this passage can seem like a story about a petty, jealous, and capricious God who overreacts and punishes when the first humans do human things.

Yet Presbyterians believe there are significant and important insights in this story. This account of the actions of the first humans includes four particular things we believe are characteristic of every human since then—including us. In one way or another, we all deny our dependence on anything beyond

ourselves, separate ourselves from each other, separate ourselves from God, and deny responsibility for our own actions.

In **Romans 3:23**, Paul says *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.

First John 1:8 says *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*.

Presbyterians recognize that.

We believe we're all sinners.

That's why we don't ever give absolute power or ultimate authority to any single individual.

It's why we confess our sins as part of our regular worship life.

But it's important to note that we don't confess our sins in order to be forgiven. We confess our sins because we recognize that we have already been forgiven.

CONCLUSION

Romans 5:8 says *God proves [God's] love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*.

Presbyterians believe it's important for us to recognize that we are all sinners. But we also believe it's important for us to remember and recognize that our sin is not the last word.

Look back at **Genesis 3:9**: *But the LORD God called to the [human] and said to him, "Where are you?"*

Presbyterians believe God always responds to our sin by coming after us; by taking the steps to restore us to the relationship with God and each other for which we were created.

That's news that brings joy to the world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

**BEST PRACTICES FOR
PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY**

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that all humans deny dependence, separate themselves from each other, separate themselves from God, and deny responsibility for our own actions?*
 - *Perhaps more importantly, what best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the fact in Genesis 3:9 that God's first response to the first sin is to seek and call to the sinners?*
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