

97-12-21a

This is Sunday, the 21st of December, 1997. Let's begin our worship, actually continue our worship this morning. We've had some wonderful music of the season from our very accomplished organist this morning, but let's continue by going to the Lord in prayer, and then we'll take a look at a passage of Scripture for our Scripture reading.

Father, we thank you for this day. We thank you for the festive air that surrounds this time of year. We thank you for the true reason for celebration that we enjoy, which is the wonderful life that you have given us in Christ.

This time of year for believers is reserved for celebrating the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth, emptying himself of the status and the rightful place that he bears as an equal member of the Trinity, and living among us, sharing our sorrows, bearing the burdens and facing the temptations and all of the vagaries of life that we as human beings experience, yet without sin. And in manifesting the fullness of deity and bodily form, he set for us a wonderful example of faithfulness and obedience. He has demonstrated for us the power of your Spirit and your Word to sustain us as human beings in the flesh, to learn and to do all that you have for us as a part of our calling.

We thank you for the culmination of his work here on earth on our behalf on the cross, for his resurrection and his life as he sits at your right hand. We thank you for the privilege that we have of sharing that life, the wonderful experience of life that we have now and the great expectation of life in your presence that sustains us and motivates us to fulfill all of the things that you have for us. We pray this morning as we worship together, as we meditate on the life of Jesus Christ, as we meditate on our place in history and our place in your plan, that God the Holy Spirit will enlighten us and sustain us by these things, that the truth of your Word will perform its transforming work and that we will carry forward not only through the holiday season the sentiments that are so often expressed of peace and joy and love for others, but that these will be genuine reflections of your presence in our hearts.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. For our scripture reading this morning, turn with me to Proverbs chapter 2. This chapter is, I will say, there is no more important passage of scripture in the Bible.

There is a sense in which they are all of tremendous importance and equal importance, but in my mind this is one of the most prominent and clear distillations of truth as it pertains to our daily life and our calling. Proverbs chapter 2. My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding, yes, if you cry out for discernment and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk uprightly. He guards the paths of justice and preserves the way of his saints.

Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path. When wisdom enters your heart and knowledge is pleasant to your soul, discretion will preserve you, understanding will keep you, to deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things, from those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perversity of the wicked, whose ways are crooked and who are devious in their paths, to deliver you from the immoral woman, from the seductress who flatters with her words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God. For her house leads down to death and her paths to the dead.

None who go to her return, nor do they regain the paths of life. So you may walk in the way of goodness and keep to the paths of righteousness, for the upright will dwell in the land and the blameless will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the earth and the unfaithful will be uprooted from it. The choice that is presented in Proverbs chapter 2 is the choice that has faced the human race ever since Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We have the choice of pursuing the knowledge of good or pursuing the knowledge of evil. This is one of the clearest passages to define the nature of that choice and the consequences of that choice. What is often overlooked, as in many other places in Scripture, is that this choice outlined here is the choice that faces a believer, someone who is in the family of God.

In the Old Testament this would have been an Israelite who believed in God, who had faith in God and understood that he was related to God by covenant. We tend to think, well, this is a choice between heaven and hell, between salvation and damnation. You will notice, however, that the choice represented by the immoral woman beginning in verses 15 and 16 is a way of forsaking.

The immoral woman in verse 17 forsakes the companion of her youth. She started out doing well and then forsook that. She forgets the covenant of her God.

You can't really say this of an unbeliever, can you? This is to abandon something that you once possessed, to devalue something that you once held dear, to betray and forsake something that you have a commitment to. It is so often overlooked in the passages of Scripture that present a choice to us as human beings that it presents that choice to us as believers. The consequences of failing to follow the way of faith, failing to follow the way of wisdom, the knowledge of the good, the consequences are significant, to put it mildly.

These passages are there to warn us. They are there to encourage us in the strongest possible terms to pay attention to the fact that we do have a covenant with our God. We have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and there is a lot on the line.

God expects much from those to whom much has been given, and we have been given a lot, especially in this age. If you turn with me back now to Genesis chapter 3, I'd like to summarize what we have learned in these first three chapters as we anticipate beginning chapter 4. We have seen God in His omnipotence, in His omniscience, in His absolute character in the process of creating the universe. His attributes have been displayed.

Not only the absolute, we think of the essence mocks and the contents of it, sovereignty, righteousness, justice, love, eternal life, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, immutability, and truth or veracity. And the objection has been made, well, you can't put God in a box. You can't define God by the nature of His essence, and there is a sense in which that is true.

Reviewing those things does not in any way begin to express the fullness of deity. It required the incarnation of Jesus Christ to even begin to do that. But some of the things that are summarized in those headings are expressed more fully as we see God at work in human history.

God's compassion, God's patience. I think patience ought to be up there in the essence box. If there is anything that God has demonstrated in human history, it's patience.

He is long-suffering. He is gentle. He reserves mercy for thousands.

And at the same time, God can be angry. God can exact retribution from those who ought to know better and fail to do the right thing. So there is a wide spectrum of expression of the character of God in Scripture, and we see the beginning of that in the beginning of the Bible here in the first three chapters of Genesis.

But what are some conclusions that we can draw from what we have seen in these first three chapters? These are just a few points of summary. I don't want to pretend that they are comprehensive, but these are at least a minimum of things that we should draw from what we have seen in these first three chapters. First of all, and I will confess that this is probably influenced by the deep immersion in the doctrine of the Trinity that I have recently survived in one of my last courses in seminary.

The Church for the first few hundred years was attempting to get a handle on the truth of the Scriptures as it pertained to the Church, and you see the evidence of this coming out when heresies began to spread, diverse opinions began to emerge about what is signified in the Scriptures, who was Jesus Christ, who is God, what is the place of the Church. And by the time you get to the 300s, the 4th century AD, you have councils

meeting and creeds being formulated to try to better express the truth of Scripture than Scripture said it itself, which I think is not necessarily a good thing, but that practice has persisted all the way down to the present. Most churches have a church constitution in which is a doctrinal statement that attempts to sum up, rather than saying we believe the Bible, which nobody knows what that means anymore, attempts to define what the fundamental core beliefs are, the most important things.

And the early councils and creeds were largely concerned with the persons of the Trinity. Was Jesus Christ in fact an equal of the Father? Is the Holy Spirit a person? Is he an equal of the Father and the Son? What is the nature of their relationship? And this was expressed in two different points of view, or two different categories. You have one area where you have God as he is toward us.

The expression of God's character in three persons toward mankind. How does God the Father interact with the human race? What is the nature of Jesus Christ and his contact with us, his living among us, and what is the nature and role of the Holy Spirit in his ministry to us and his actions with regard to us? And so you have what's called the Economic Trinity. God in the economy of the human race.

But people in those days and in these wanted to reach beyond that and try to understand the nature of God as God is in himself, as they say. God in his eternal nature. What is the relationship between the members of the Trinity as it was even before human history began and so on? Well, this can consume a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of creeds can be written, a lot of speculation can be done, and it winds up, in my opinion, getting further and further away from Scripture.

If you think about it, which way does the Bible present God? Does the Bible try to show us God in his eternal relationships within the Trinity? Does it spend a lot of time trying to explain to us what they call the ontological Trinity, God in his eternal nature apart from his interactions with mankind? It does not. The Bible is the expression of God's character toward us. He doesn't even spend much time in his dealings with the angels.

It is primarily God's creation of man and his redemption of man. And so that's where we ought to spend our time, and that's where Genesis spends its time. And so you'll notice as our first point that God is the originator of all things, but he dwells beyond and outside them as well as in the midst of them.

That's the message of Genesis 1. God is far beyond anything that we can comprehend. As mighty and as expansive as the universe is and everything in it, God spoke those things into existence, and he is as far beyond those as anything that we can imagine. And yet he also dwells in the midst of his creation.

He does not dwell outside it. He doesn't look at it from afar. Although his throne is unapproachable, God walks in the garden, so to speak.

And in creating the universe, he didn't wind it up like a clock and then walk away. And we see in this account that God is not only mighty and omnipotent and absolute holiness, but he is also a God of relationship. And that's the emphasis.

God desires fellowship with us. Now, we ought to be able to arrive at a conclusion that has some practical benefit from each of these points. What is the practical benefit of understanding that God is not only transcendent, but that God is also with us? Emmanuel is one of the terms that we hear most frequently around Christmastime.

God with us. So what? What difference should that make today and tomorrow and the next day as we live our lives? One of the things that is lost in the shuffle of Christian service and Christian environments and in the daily tasks of life is that truth that God is with us. You remember in John 15, 16, and 17 when Jesus is teaching his disciples, those who were closest to him and best understood him, he teaches about the indwelling nature of God in all three persons.

He says, If you love me, the man who loves me will have my words and will keep them. And I and my Father will come to him and will make our home with him. That is a real thing.

And you think, well, now what is the difference between two people, one of whom has the indwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ and the indwelling of God the Father, and another who does not? Do they glow in the dark? Do they utter prophecies? Do they have a transcending ability to navigate through life? What is the difference? What would be the difference in my life between experiencing and maintaining the fellowship of God the Son and God the Father in my soul and not? Well, think about the larger perspective. This life is short. Eternity is long.

What is the nature of the eternal future? Where are we going to be and with whom are we going to dwell? We're going to dwell with God the Father and God the Son for the eternal future to come. What will be the nature of that coexistence and that fellowship? We get a chance to develop that and to experience it and to understand and appreciate it now and to prepare for that eternal future. There are going to be people, many of us as believers, who are going to arrive in the eternal future completely unprepared, ill-equipped, without a clue and actually in fear of the presence of God.

And there's no need for it because God desires relationship. Adam and Eve did not run in terror every time God walked in the garden in the cool of the day, did they? It was not until sin entered the picture that they fled and the solving of the sin problem should reestablish for us the intimacy of the garden, the intimacy of fellowship with a God who is not only transcendent and absolute in all of these senses, but who is also personal and who is compassionate and who bears with us and loves us the way a father loves his child. That gets lost in a lot of theological systems that define God as distant and unapproachable and judgmental only.

He is only distant and unapproachable and judgmental to those who have refused His grace and to those who have misunderstood His purpose. So we ought to view our Heavenly Father as a sympathetic, understanding, and yet uncompromising Father who maintains a way of approach and who maintains a way of forgiveness and cleansing for us. All we have to do is claim it and approach Him on His terms and not on ours.

Understand Him as He is and not as we would like to picture Him. You see this especially in this season of the year. Many misdefinitions and misunderstandings of God and of Jesus Christ.

It's all just a warm, fuzzy feeling and so forth. The amazing thing about God is that even though He is absolute holiness, absolute righteousness, absolute justice, we have a way of approach through Christ. It is our privilege and it is our awe-inspiring duty to make sure we understand that and implement it day by day.

God is the originator of all things. He dwells beyond them and yet He also dwells in the midst of them. And it is that tension and that understanding of both of those poles of God's existence that should guide our daily lives.

When we begin to stray, we start to think about the absolutes that God represents. When we respond to His grace, when we claim His forgiveness, we move to that other pole of compassion and forgiveness. And the father of the prodigal who runs out to meet the returning son.

And it's important for us to keep our perspective of God in balance. That's what Genesis gives us, is the balanced perspective of God. He is almighty God who speaks everything into existence with a word, who judges it and sees that it is good.

And at the same time, He's the God who walks in the garden. It's interesting, throughout the Old Testament, you see this phrase, and we're going to see it this morning, the anger of the Lord was kindled against. How many times do you see that in the Old Testament? You don't see it in Genesis 3. The greatest failure, the failure that conditions the fate of all mankind, is there in the garden.

The least justification of any sin ever committed is the one that's committed in the garden. But you don't see the phrase, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Adam and Eve. You don't see the God of wrath and the God that opens up the earth to swallow the rebels.

You see the God of compassion. You see the God of forgiveness. You see the God who slays the animals and provides the clothing.

Who, even as He speaks discipline, and even as He speaks cursing, also speaks hope and speaks blessing and provision. So these are things that ought to come to our mind when we consider our relationship with God. And the reason for that is in our second point of

summary.

God culminates the creation of the material universe by making man in His image and after His likeness. And this implies responsibility. We have an obligation as human beings.

We are created in the image of God. We are after His likeness. You think about Romans chapter 1 where what may be known of God is manifest in His creation, His eternal deity and Godhead.

And this leaves man without excuse. How much more so ought what may be known of God to be manifest in our lives? To what extent are we in the image and after the likeness of our Heavenly Father? As believers who are regenerate, who have the right to be called the sons of God, to what extent do we reflect not only uncompromising dedication to righteousness and to justice, but also longsuffering and compassion and endurance of wrongs that are inflicted against us. This is the nature of God.

This is the image of God that we should reflect. God, thirdly, makes a place of communion with Himself for man to inhabit. You see this in Genesis chapter 2 with the planting of the garden eastward in Eden.

God dwells in unapproachable light. And God does not build a stairway. If you think about this, if you start with a blank sheet of paper and creation and so forth, there's lots of different ways the story could have gone.

We could have had the earth created. There could have been a golden stairway, Jacob's ladder or something, ascending up to heaven, which Adam and Eve could freely walk up and down, a little escalator to the third heaven where they could ride up and talk with God and ride back down and tend the garden and so forth. But even in perfection, even before the fall, there is a place where man enjoys communion with God, and it's not in the throne room.

It is in the garden. God comes and He's the one who makes the trip. He's the one who does the moving.

He moves toward man. And He comes down to planet earth and walks in the garden for fellowship with Adam and Eve. They don't ascend up to heaven on a golden stairway.

But that place of communion is something that God provides and something that man enjoys. And Adam and Eve in the garden, initially, that's all they know. That's their only experience.

They've never lived outside the garden. And so that relationship with God, proximity to God, communication with God, fellowship with God, is the only thing that they have ever known. And there is the inevitable tendency to take that for granted, to not assign it its

value.

And we begin to wonder if this isn't something that might have happened with angelic creation in the eternal past, having dwelt with God ever since their creation, having known nothing else, to not have understood the value and the preciousness of that communion and fellowship with God. The old truism goes that you never know what you have until it's gone. And you always tend to appreciate your family after a period of separation.

Those that have been in the military and have had an overseas tour, or it's even agonizing in the reserve to go away for a couple of weeks and be separated from those that you love. And when you return, it always gives you a fresh appreciation for simple things. And this is true in any area of life.

Everyone has had the experience of sort of taking something for granted, having it go away, whether it's health or just the use of your hands or the use of your eyes. I got hit in the eye with a snowball around this time of year when I was a midshipman. And there have been times I also got hit in the eye with a piece of bailing wire once while mending fence with my dad.

And you just take your eyesight for granted. You just operate with it. But if you have to have a patch over your eye for any length of time or you begin to try to operate without your sight, you are never the same again.

And any time you think of your sight from that time forward, it is a precious thing. And you value it and you cherish it in a way that you would not have before the experience of having lost it. And we begin to see that God is teaching us something in the loss of innocence, in the loss of taking for granted a fellowship with God in the garden.

And in a larger way, the angelic creation, which sees and experiences what it is like to not have that unbroken, unpolluted relationship with God. But God has made this place of communion with Himself for man to inhabit. And even in that perfected state, in the garden, you will notice that there is activity, there is purpose, there is service, and there is fellowship with God.

And we tend to forget that in the eternal future, we think, well, it's going to be sort of a state of fixed bliss. We'll just sort of freeze in a state of absolute happiness. And looking at the model in the garden, God always assigns purpose and function.

There is service involved even in the perfected state. And there is going to be activity and service and purpose in the eternal future. Are we going to be ready for it? Will we have our experience under our belt from taking advantage of the opportunity to learn in this life what is involved in that? With the fall, which we have seen in Genesis 3, comes separation from God.

Separation from the source of life. Separation from the sustainer of life. The Creator who walks in the garden in the cool of the day, He's not going to be walking outside the garden for Adam and Eve or any of their descendants to walk up and accompany.

The tree of life that is the symbol of sustained life with God is now unavailable. So, what happens as a result? Well, we saw this in the latter part of Genesis 3. There are curses associated with this. There are consequences.

And they come in the area of relationships. What is the nature of what God pronounces in Genesis 3, verses 14 and following? Well, the relationship of the human race to the other forces in the universe, if you will, the enemy represented by the serpent, the philosophy of evil, that which is not God and which is not godly. This is going to now be a factor where it was not before.

Now there is the choice between good and evil. The enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. That didn't exist before.

Now it's a factor that will color and define life for the human race from that time forward. The relationships that were taken for granted, that were just built in, Adam and Eve, their unbroken communion with each other. They had known nothing but that in the garden.

But now that relationship is going to potentially be a source of pain and be a source of strife. God tells the woman that her desire will be for her husband and he's going to have the rule. And that is going to create the potential for conflict.

There's going to be the potential to resent that relationship that God has designed rather than to see and find fulfillment in it. The relationship of mothers and children. Initially being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth was a blessing and a fulfillment of purpose in the garden.

But now it is going to be a potential source of pain and sorrow. This is often associated with the physical pain of childbirth, but that is really a metaphor for the whole experience of giving birth to children and training them up and then turning loose of them. The greatest sorrow.

You read the Proverbs on how much sorrow can be brought to parents by wayward children. And even in the best of worlds, the need for children to leave father and mother and cleave to their spouse and form the next generation, there is an inevitable sadness and sorrow involved in losing the relationship that you enjoy when your children are young. And so these things that were taken for granted, now life is cyclical and life requires separation and there is built in pain.

There is a potential for built in sorrow commingled with joy. And the man's vocation to till the garden and to keep it was his task in perfection. And it was an unbroken source of

joy.

Now it is toil. It is sweat and labor. And while it can still be a great source of fulfillment, it can also be the source of great sorrow and pain.

So we no longer take these things for granted in the course of history and in the course of our lives. There is in each of these not only the knowledge of good, but also the knowledge of evil. These things would have been nothing but good in the state of perfection man enjoyed in the garden.

Now there is a choice in each one. In marriage, in the raising of children, in the pursuit of vocation, each of these now presents us with the choice because we have the knowledge of good and evil. And this is the challenge that defines our life as human beings and especially as believers.

But blessing and fellowship, the good, can no longer be taken for granted. It's no longer automatic. It's something that has to be pursued.

How do we pursue those things? Well, that's our Scripture reading this morning in Proverbs 2. There is a way back to the tree of life and it is knowledge of the good. It is the pursuit of wisdom. And it requires effort on our part.

It doesn't mean that we earn or deserve God's favor or God's blessing, but it does mean that we have been assigned a responsibility. There is a way of approach to Almighty God. There is a way back to fellowship, back to communion, back to the blessing that comes from that fellowship and communion.

And it is the Word. The Word is the wisdom of God. In the ultimate sense, Jesus Christ is the Word and He is our way.

He is the truth and He is the life. And our way to the Father is by Him, as it says in John 14.6. Now, those things are all true and they are general principles that we extract from this. There are also some fascinating things that come from our analysis of these first three chapters.

We are going to pause and take our break and when we come back, we are going to find that these lead us to a very unexpected place in Scripture to see some truths and some presentations of our choice that you might not expect. So, let's pause and take our break and when we come back, we are going to see that we are going to move from Genesis to Numbers to Revelation. Let's pause and take a break.