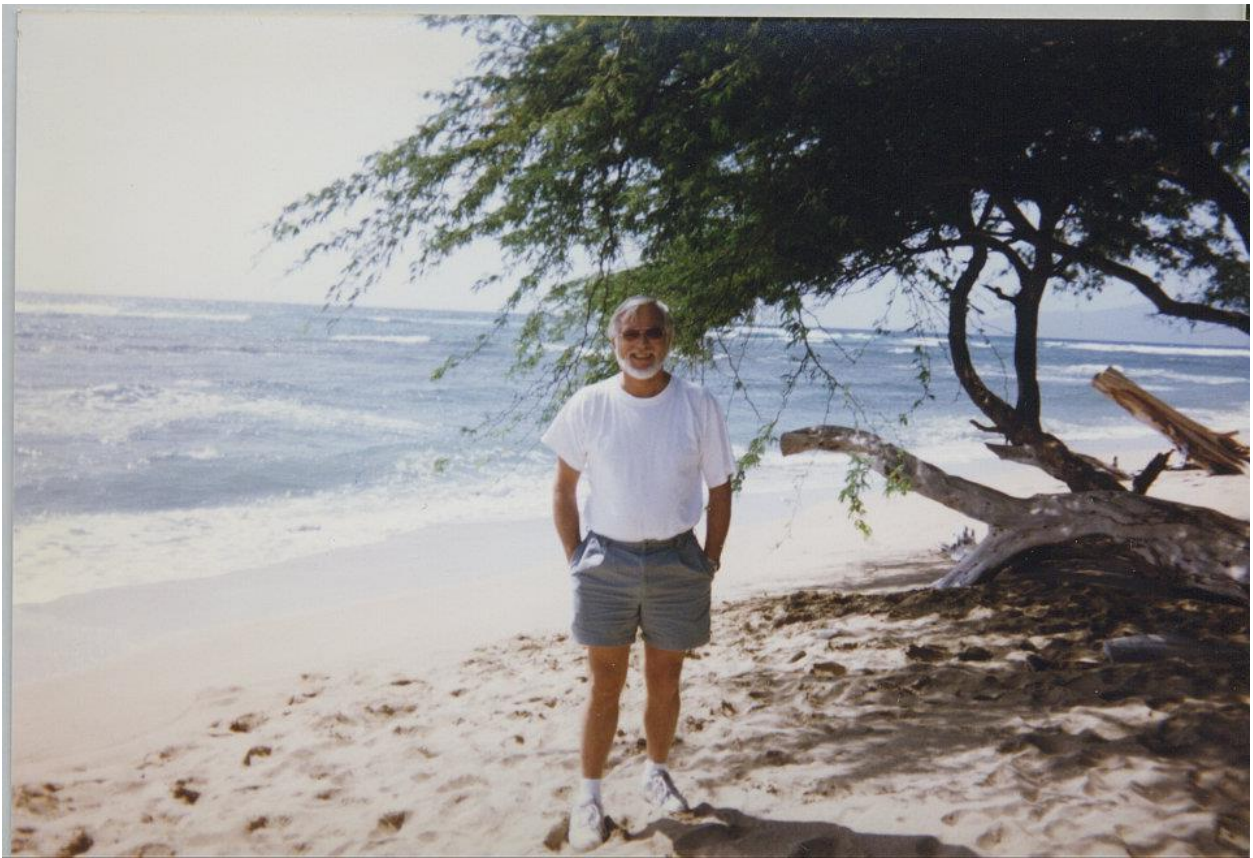


# THE MINISTER AND THE MOTIVATOR

Genesis and the Land Between



By Al Helder



## Introduction

The phone call came like out of a movie. It was 4:30 in the morning and I was in a daze as I picked up the receiver. Even in a fog, I could sense something was terribly wrong. Sandy spoke through her tears.

*“Chris, it’s Sandy. I have some bad news. Your dad just died.”*

It had been a call that I had thought about. He was 69 years old and in total he had suffered at least four heart attacks over the last 11 years. The real frustration was that I didn’t expect that call *NOW*. He had just gone home from a hip replacement surgery. He was *HOME*. The hospital sent him home so I assumed he was going to be okay. He was going to have a renewed sense of physical energy with that new hip.



My father wasn't ready to die. Some people probably are. My father was still working hard and, in many ways was doing his best work. At 69, he had found a peace which I believe had eluded him throughout much of my childhood. He was full of plans and goals for the next many years to come. When push comes to shove, that is the real tragedy. He had so many plans. He was really "*living*" his life.

I am typing this as we approach the one year anniversary of my father's passing. I am typing this on *his* laptop computer. I love the idea that my fingers are typing out his words on the same computer that he crafted his work.

Losing my father got me thinking about *legacy*. I watched my father speak every Sunday of my childhood. I watched him lead people and motivate people with his charisma, booming voice and influential words. He was a brilliant minister. It is important that the wisdom in his messages will not be forgotten.

It all has inspired to put together a collection of 12 of his sermons that speak about the challenges that human beings face in modern society. I have chosen these sermons from two of his favorite series, "Genesis" and "The Land Between":

1. The "**Genesis**" series challenges all of us in terms of our approach to our own spirituality. The sermons explore the topics of awe, humanity, stewardship, responsibility, sex, temptation, violence and the importance of rest.

2. The "**Land Between**" series focuses of how we deal with unexpected change or unforeseen events that rock the foundation of our lives. This series walks us through the process from the desperation of "*complaint*" and "*meltdown*" to the healing place of "*trust*" and "*growth*".

There is phenomenal wisdom on the following pages.

He was a minister and a motivator.

Dad, I miss you every day.



- Chris Helder (August 12, 2012)

## **PART ONE: GENESIS**

### **Sermon Number 1: In the Beginning...and Now**

This morning I would like to introduce you to a new series of messages. I almost feel like I should be a little apologetic about this series, and also a rather long introduction to it this morning. I recognize that preaching in our culture is often reduced to good story telling, good entertainment. I am asking you to enter a process, a questioning that will require you to work with me. It will require some thinking that is work. I believe it is important. In a world where it seems that so many people are talking about things spiritual and spirituality, my question is:

***What is spirituality?***

In a growing cynicism about the miracles of technology and their real prices, in disillusionment regarding political salvation, in the face of reality that having all the material toys this world has to offer will not make you happy or content, in the growing frustration and



loneliness of an individualistic society that leaves us just isolated instead of free, there is a turning to things “spiritual”.

I have the idea that our culture is suddenly into spirituality and it is dragging the church along with it. Of course, the church is supposed to have been about spirituality from day one, but something changed, someone changed the definitions. It feels important that we know who we are and what we are about because the church and Christians are getting dragged into a kind of spirituality that is as dangerous to the Christian faith. So I would like to take you on a kind of pilgrimage asking a lot of questions about the way things are and going back to the first dozen chapters of Genesis for some answers.

### **Are you spiritual?**

Are you spiritual? Are you a spiritual person? Have you heard that question? This gets discussed in our culture as if some people are and some people are not. It is like some people have discovered that they have a soul, a spiritual center, a place where they can reach toward something bigger than they are, while other people just have that piece missing.

We immediately suspect that the question is not whether or not people are spiritual. Again, if you are spiritual, there is a whole smorgasbord of spiritualities for you to choose from to meet your particular hunger for meaning. There is Eastern Mysticism, Buddhist spirituality, Hindu spirituality, New Age spirituality, Aboriginal spirituality, Muslim spirituality, and of course, Christian spirituality. As Eugene Peterson says, *“Shirley MacLean is placed along side of the prophet Isaiah as a guru of one more spiritual option.”*

I often hear people describe others as people “who go to church” and people “who do not”. What is the relationship between religion and religious participation and spirituality? How do they fit together?

Religion and religious practice, worship for example, is crucially important for human health and spiritual wholeness. Religion is what we do in response to God. It is our dialogue



with God. It is our structure. It is what we think and do and believe that holds things together for us.

Our religion helps us understand ourselves in community in relationship to God. Religion has to do with faith, with personal commitment to God, as well as commitment to people, and being responsible for our values. In other words our religion is what we do to live for and under God. So how does that differ from spirituality?

It isn't supposed to. Religion should be the context within which we grow spiritually. However, some strange things happen in "broken" people. Many people in our world are trying to be spiritual without being particularly religious while others are religious without being particularly spiritual. Interestingly as I will try to show you, both make God in their ***own image*** rather than the other way around.

Religion is here to enable our expression of and experience of a spiritual connection with God. Religion maintains community which we need. It encourages individual responsibility or accountability, and it is a gateway to a deep, personal relationship with God. Another way of saying that is to experience the "presence" of God.

Of course, we are saying that we need both religion and spirituality. They really go together, but in fact people in our culture are trying to separate them. We are led away from the truth when people say: "*We are spiritual, but we don't need religion.*" That means that I can experience God's presence by going inside myself to find God. I am the one who defines who God is. Or on the other hand, when people who are very religious act as if they only do religious things without concern for the power and life- changing presence of God in their lives they too have lost the true meaning of faith.

So, having said all of this, *are you spiritual?*

Confusing, isn't it? People have used this language to mean all sorts of things. Let's try to tie it down. People in our culture talk about spirituality, and they mean some sort of subjective journey inside themselves. As usual, it is about us, about going down into our feelings and values and dynamics in order to discover God there. And what god is it that is



found inside of us? Where is God? This is a call to discover the mystery of God through some technique – it might be silence or meditation or some other way of discovering a mystery or just who you were in some previous life. What am I saying? Meditation can be very good, depending on what you are meditating on. The point is that being spiritual is about connecting with a God who is outside of us, one who is beyond us, one who is greater than we are. Anything short of that is just making up some god in some subjective experience.

As Christians we begin *outside* of ourselves. This is terribly important. Worship is not first of all about some mysterious or emotional experience that we can reproduce if we play the right instruments or use the right music or create the right atmosphere. I am suggesting that if we can only experience God when the organ is played or when there is praise and worship music we have reduced God to some emotional experience or some feeling of nostalgia or being secure or our own definition of beauty. That is about us, not about God.

That is precisely the road our culture is leading the church down, calling our subjective feelings spirituality. As Christians we begin in another place. It is not about us, it is first of all about God. Spirituality is 90% about what God did and does. Everyone is spiritual because everyone was made that way by God – God external to us, God who created all things, God who made us so that we are spiritual. We have a soul so that we can relate to him, so we can meet him, so we can experience his presence. In other words, everyone is created in relationship to God.

This spirituality, this soul, this center of our being, this very center of what it means to be human, this definition of who we are is first of all about the God who made us. *We did not make him*. Spirituality is about our relationship to God. It is about what happens to us when we are in the presence of God. It is about being spiritual people, people connected to the God who made us.

**In the beginning God...**



Let's take a minute and come at this from another direction. When we meet and want to know each other more, we ask *"Where are you from?"* We make all sorts of assumptions about people based on where they came from. It is a little like those religious leaders who found out that Jesus grew up in Nazareth. They openly wondered, *"What good can come out of Nazareth, that hick town?"*

Who are you? Where are you from? Do you react differently when you hear the places? I know there is a certain reaction when I tell people I am from Grand Rapids – that's a little like Nazareth. *"Where are you from?"* If we take the question a little deeper, we are dealing with a part of who we are.

My parents are both dead, but I will never stop dealing with them. They make a big difference in my life and in my identity. I still hear the tapes in my head – the values, expectations, prejudices, and so on.

I am suggesting to you that spirituality is an identity question. It is a profound question of where we are ultimately from. In the beginning God – God created, God made order out of chaos, God made us. God made us as spiritual beings in relationship to himself. The answer begins in Genesis. The Bible begins declaring the most basic issue of our spiritual nature, the most basic tenant of our faith, the most fundamental piece of information regarding our identity (even though we have often misunderstood it).

Spirituality – soul – is the core of what it means to be a human being. Unlike those who can see God in themselves, see themselves as God, God is our creator and separate from us. Yet he made us to be connected to himself. Spirituality is the center of the human person. It is not like some appendix that you can live with or without. It is the structure within which all of our bodily functions and thoughts and feelings and values operate.

Everyone is first of all related to God. There is finally no escaping it. We can deny it, fight against it, demand that everything be about us while we look away from God, or embrace it with awe, love and joy, but Almighty God is where we come from. We are creatures created



by and related to God. That is what it means to be human! Now the question is: Who is this God and how do we relate to him?

Who is this God? Who is this creator of all things? Just look at the complexity and enormity of the cosmos. He made it. Who is this God? He is the God who communicates, who is the divine Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. He is a God who comes to us, comes to reveal himself, comes to “hover over our darkness” in order to create order.

He is Creator. He is Word. He is Spirit hovering, to reach into our spirits to be with us and save us in Christ from all that is anti-spiritual in us.

How do we respond to such a God? How does our spirituality get expressed? What do we do in the presence of such a God? Awe? Wonder? Worship? Praise? Adoration? The Bible talks about the fear of the Lord. Our spirituality is a strange and wonderful paradox. We are in the presence of a God who is so great, so fearful, so frightening, so awesome; and this is the God who comes in Jesus, in familiarity, in self-giving, suffering love. This is the God who tells us to call him “Abba” – Daddy. This is the God who comes in the Spirit to live within, the brooding, hovering, life-giving Spirit.

We live in a culture that makes everything about us – even spirituality. But first of all it is about God, about the awesome God of Genesis and the incredible saving Father and Lord of the Gospel. Then, once we have been to his presence, to hear him, to receive him, then we can ask about our response.

Walk humbly. It is not first of all about us. It is about whom our God is and what he has done. Only after we have seen and heard and taken it in do we respond spiritually. It is all just exactly the opposite of what our culture seems to be saying.

I hope you will come with me through this part of Genesis, bringing in other scriptures to ask again: What does it mean to be spiritual? Who is this God we worship? This morning I ask each of us to examine our own thinking. Have we, like our culture, made our spirituality and our religion about ourselves? It happens so easily, so subtly, and it is so devastating in the church.



Let's look again. What an awesome God we serve.

## **Sermon Number 2: God's Autograph**

Last Sunday we began a thinking process together in which we asked some questions about the meaning of spirituality. We tried to compare some of what we see as spirituality in our culture and what the Bible is saying about human spirituality. We began by asking: ***What is spirituality?***

We reflected on the spiritual search going on in the hearts, minds, and efforts of so many people – people searching for the missing piece, exploring to find something to fill the empty space inside. In our culture people are looking inside in their spiritual search, coming up with a spiritual hodge-podge which is a bit of this and a bit of that.

There are so many different possibilities, from the superficiality of using crystals to searching one's being for traces of who we may have been in a previous life. There are spiritualities related to every religion, along with male spirituality and female spirituality. The search becomes almost a kind of frenzy to fill the hunger, stop the doubt, solve the painful



“technodazzle” that produces more information than we can process while teaching us more and more about less and less.

We saw the beginning of an answer in the simple, ultimately profound statement that opens the Bible: *“In the beginning God...”* To understand ourselves we must first know that we are in relationship to God, the God who created our world and everything in it, including us. This is not a God within us, but rather a God *beyond* us. Biblical spirituality begins and ends with God. It is not a subjective feeling or some *“out of body”* experience, but it begins with a revelation to which we then respond.

There are two conclusions that come from the foundational faith statement, “In the beginning God...”: 1) that our identity as human persons can only be defined in terms of our relationship with God, and 2) that the meaning of our spirituality is found in the reality that we are responsible to God. This second one will become clearer as we go along in this series, and is often where the rub comes for many people.

What Genesis 1 teaches us is about the structure and foundation on which we understand our world, and from which we ask our most basic questions. Our question of *“What is true Christian spirituality?”* is really the question, *“Who are we? Where did we come from? Where do we fit in the scheme of things?”*

In this series we are going back to ask the most basic questions about us. That is why I said last week that this is about all of us doing some work together instead of my entertaining you. We live in a time when people are searching for the answers our faith in God offers. Because of that search, people are willing to listen for the reason for the hope that is in us. It gets tricky because they want to separate spirituality and religion, as we saw last week. It also gets difficult because we often do not know where to begin. In other words, we get lost in the search ourselves.

We live in what is called the post-Christian, post-modern era. We can no longer assume that people have any basic understanding of God or the Bible or Christianity. We have all become what some of us feared when we were adolescents listening to the gospel. Do you



remember thinking, *I really do believe, but if I admit it, what if God calls me to a foreign mission field?*” We have become foreign missionaries, and we have never left home. Where do we begin? We need to be clear about the foundations of our faith.

We begin with worship. It has been said that the thing the modern Christian church most lacks is a sense of “awe”. Of course, that reflects our whole society. Awe is the critical ingredient for worship, and for our understanding of our place in the universe. We need to be able to stand in awe of God. We need to accept in gratitude our places as creatures.

We do not control the world! (Have you noticed that?) To begin to really hear the message of Genesis we need a sense of mouth-hanging-open-wonder. It is so beautiful. Its poetic form calls for our worship. It is so simple – so profound – so complete. However, if you come to it asking questions God is not answering here, you will miss the whole thing. This is not some scientific document about how God did it. It is about the structure and foundation of reality – not “*how*” but “*what*”.

You see the parallel poetic structure with the 7<sup>th</sup> day of rest. It is a beautiful picture of an orderly and complete creation. Each part begins with the divine command, the divine word: “*Let there be...*” and ends with the divine judgment: “*And God saw that it was good.*”

In a few short verses we are given an overview picture of the world. Its simplicity, power, and beauty call us to our knees in awe before the creator. Try to sit back and take it in. Hear what God is saying to us about who he is and who we are. It is a faith statement. The truth is that everyone begins with faith, whether they admit it or not.

In the vastness of space, in the multitude of varieties of plants, animals and fish, in the miracle of small seeds producing large plants, in the wonder of birth, in all of it see the incredible power and wisdom of the creator. In the unity and beauty we see the autograph of God. On Friday I stood at the top of Whistler Mountain. Have you done that? The view from there makes you wonder: How big does a God who can create this have to be?

On Christmas Day 1968 the three astronauts of Apollo 8 circled the dark side of the moon – out of communication, needing to fire their rockets at the precise moment that would put them on a trajectory that would take them back to earth. Missing it would send them



helplessly into space. In the tension, suddenly over the horizon of the moon rose the blue and white Earth, garlanded by the glistening light of the sun against the black void of space. Those sophisticated men, trained in science and technology, did not utter Einstein's name. They did not even go to the poets, the lyricists, or the dramatists. The first words heard around the world as communication with earth was reestablished came from the awe-filled voice of the astronaut: ***"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."***

They could not escape the sense of the infinite and the eternal. Here is the true beginning of a spiritual search for meaning.

The restlessness, the anxious searching, the emptiness that comes in feeling that there is a piece missing comes as we cut ourselves off, as we lose touch with the reality that we – each one of us – were made for eternity, were created to be in eternal relationship with that infinite God. The search is intense because there is so much in the social, intellectual, and political fabric of our world that cuts us off from this self-awareness, this truth of what it means to be a human being.

After all his searching for meaning in all the things we think are so important, Solomon cries out in the book of Ecclesiastes: *"Vanity, meaninglessness, vexation of spirit – everything is meaningless."*

This is not so different from the post-modern philosophy growing in the hearts and minds of people, an approach to life that says there is no truth, no meaning, no reality – only the vast variety of individual experiences. Except, Solomon in the end sees what is important, what finally holds it all together: *"God has put eternity into your heart and mine."*

That sense of the eternal gives significance to every part of life. *To deny it leaves us empty* – anxiously searching for our missing piece, running around trying to create our own value and importance, unable to get beyond the struggles of life, unable to get above the pain and disappointments – stuck in the endless repetition of our feelings, chasing healing and peace that is always just beyond our grasp. You know, one of the problems with just searching for our spiritual meaning inside ourselves is that we are not all that interesting. There is not much there without the God who made us and loves us.

This morning we look again at the world and at ourselves the way God intended – a creation that breathes with unity, coherence, balance, and purpose. It also makes us aware of



how profoundly that wholeness has been disrupted. How well we know it. God's autograph scrolled across the creation seems momentarily so clear, but the story of alienation, brokenness, the ever-present threat of destruction, the reality of sin distorts the signature until it is barely readable in our daily lives. It is still there, but we need to refocus the binoculars to see it.

We need faith to see the real framework and structure of our world. The pretty morning glory becomes the enemy of farmers producing food. The man, the woman, created good and in harmony with all creation, in love with God and each other, become alienated from all three. The beautiful handwriting becomes distorted, sometimes almost illegible.

Genesis 1 calls for our praise and worship – our awe. It also provides a sad kind of beauty, a statement of *"it might have been."* The beauty and power remain, but now we see it in the mist of the *"whys"* of human pain and suffering. The delicate ecological balance is wistfully seen when it is destroyed. We see the sunrise, the sunset, the mountains, the power of the ocean, and we remember. But we keep coming back to the reality of a distorted world, a world where suffering, grief, pain, anxiety, and guilt keep us from looking beyond ourselves.

What does the sunrise have to say to human tears? What significance has the mountains when we feel lonely or rejected or empty? What have the stars to do with human guilt?

Has God anything to say in a world that is less than he made to people who seem to choose to be less than they are, to folks who love darkness more than light? People have lost sight of the real framework within which we live, and it is frightening. The modern answer is that life really makes no sense beyond this moment, this experience. In post-modern spirituality truth is what you make it. There are no connections.

Several years ago there was a new art center built at Ohio State University called the Wexner Art Center. It is designed with a post-modernist view of reality. The building has no pattern. Staircases go nowhere. Pillars stand there supporting nothing. The architect designed the building to reflect life. It went nowhere, was mindless and senseless. My architect friend stood gazing at it, then wondered out loud, *"Do you think they did the same thing with the foundation?"*



His guide assured him that you can't do that with the foundation because it would fall down. Good question before going inside. *What happens to human life that is not grounded, does not have a foundation in eternity, is not spiritually centered in the God who made it?* Is it still really, fully human?

Is there a word from God to people who have lost sight of his autograph? In trying to capture this sense of the eternal the Apostle Paul writes, (1 Cor. 2:9) *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."* God continues to call his people.

Still his autograph is seen, in creation, then in Jesus Christ who came to build the bridge so we could be saved from the aloneness, the alienation and guilt, so we could know God and thus begin to know who we are. John says that the Word that spoke at creation spoke again in Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth, calling us back to God.

That word and power seen in creation is among us. God can be seen by putting on the glasses of faith. It is in his word written and the Word incarnate that we see his autograph again. Only then are we ready to look inside and respond. Christ revealed the Father, and in him we again see clearly that our spiritual identity comes from the God who made us and loves us again in salvation. .

And where does all of this finally lead us? In the beginning God created... and we see his autograph, and in the middle God creates ... and in the end God continues to create.

Do you see God's autograph?



### **Sermon Number 3: What does it mean to be a Person?**

In recent weeks we have been doing a search together on the meaning of our Christian spirituality. This feels really important to me because we are getting all sorts of input about “spiritual things.” I have notice that often a method for becoming more spiritually aware is substituted for the spirituality itself. It has been suggested that you find the meaning of who you are spiritually in nature, or by meditating, or by learning to carefully listen to our feelings.

All of these may be valuable activities, even possibly helpful if we know what we are dealing with. They certainly may produce some interesting, helpful or even healing emotional reactions. The problem is that by themselves they are not going to open up Christian spirituality in our experience. By themselves they will lead us astray.

As I go along here I am beginning to realize that all of this is really important for another reason. Understanding and working on being truly Christian spiritual people is the antidote for just coming here week in and week out, feeling guilty, going home, but nothing every changes in our lives. Here we begin to see and experience God at work in our lives. Holy living takes on a whole new meaning.



What have we learned up to this point? What have we discovered in our search by studying Genesis and related passages? The first thing we have learned is that in a world where people seek a sense of spirituality by searching inside themselves, in a world where people tend to make everything first of all about us – we are always hero or victim – the Bible shows us that we must begin with God.

The second thing we have learned is that God made us to carry his autograph. Our spirituality is defined in relationship to him. God also gave us responsibility in and for his creation. The Genesis word is *dominion*. Therefore this relationship also means we are accountable to him for what we have done with our responsibility – with the life and opportunities and creation he has given us to care for.

You can see that following the Bible, we are working with two components as we talk about human spirituality:

1. Who is God? We need to answer that because we are made by him in his image and likeness.
2. Who are we?

### **Genesis 1 and 2: The “I-You” Relationship**

You may have noticed that Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of creation from two different perspectives. Genesis 1 tells the larger story of God creating everything, speaking the Word of creation, and then judging it to be good. Genesis 2 focuses on the creation of human persons – the man and woman.

This morning I want to focus your thinking on where being spiritual, experiencing Christian spirituality can be seen on the outside of people. The evidence that we are truly spiritual people becomes clear in the way we understand and deal with ourselves and each other. Every sin committed between human persons can be seen as people reducing each other to “it” as opposed to “you”.



The gateway to holy living, to living with God in spiritual solidarity, is the discipline of seeing **persons**. Christian piety is not possible if a person is reducing other people to “it.” No amount of religious activity can compensate for hatred that witnesses to the spiritual bankruptcy that reduces people to “it.”

What am I saying? We were created to be in “I-You” – personal relationships. To see a person is to see a “you”. That is the beginning of compassion. It is the beginning of understanding. It is the motivation to know and to care.

Do we hate or murder people we cherish and have compassion for? Do we steal from people we value? Do we lie to people when we understand their values and pain? Of course not.

The danger is when we reduce people to an “it” in our thinking. Violence, hatred and war are dependent on the propaganda that reduces people to the beast that needs to be destroyed. Clearly we have no desire to kill people for whom we feel compassion, people with whom we identify and whose life experience we have come to understand.

Do you see it? This reducing people to an “it” is the foundation of all national and tribal prejudice. It is the basis of racism. This “objectifying people” is the sin of all stereotyping. And the truth is that we who claim to be spiritual do it constantly.

Contrary to so much that is being said in our culture about being spiritual, it is first of all not about some private, personal feelings. That becomes a part of it when we understand that we begin with God and then we know who we are together as persons filled with his breath and made in his image and likeness. If you want to see examples of people reducing other people to an “it” all you have to do is listen to some of the rhetoric in the current disputes between employers and the labor unions. The sin of reducing people to an “it” is about using them for your own purposes. But it never works, so it is addictive.

It seems like we are going to get what we need, but we never do. That is so clear, for example in the whole business of pornography. It is about experiencing sexual feelings, sexual excitement, sexual fulfillment and release without having to invest in a person, without even



seeing a person. It is the never ending desire for more titillating scenes to keep the fantasy going that we can be sexual, be loved, and fulfilled without relationship, without intimacy, without commitment, even without any responsibility. Does it work beyond a few guilt producing minutes or perhaps it is just the experience ultimately of emptiness and loneliness?

The sin of objectifying people, of relating to people as if they are a thing, an “it” instead of a “you” – a person – is clearly a sin against the people who we attempt to scorn or use, and it is a sin against the one who made us, who breathed his breath, his life, his personhood into us. This is a tragedy that is an affront to the God who made us. Our culture is more and more a place of individuals who are more and more isolated in their individualism, more and more feeling like an “it” outside of a community of “you’s.”

We are not some dirt converted to animal flesh. You have the personhood, the breath and image of God. This sin of rejecting God’s creation has become a part of the fabric of a great deal of what is called Christian theology. It is preached as gospel truth from the pulpits of Christian churches.

I remember a sermon I heard when I was in high school. The minister was making the point about how sinful we are in the sight of God. The point was good and true until he tried to illustrate it. The fact that I remember it says something about it. He held up a bottle full of hamburger (note: I left this in as this is how Al said hamburger) he had left for a couple days in the sun, and said, “This is the way we appear to God.” Really?

If you start your theology from sin, then you can talk about “the lost” and many other such dehumanizing terms with pious judgment. Starting with sin is like the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee who stood in the temple thanking God he was not like other “it’s” – women, sinners, or like the tax-collector over there. On the other hand if we start with creation – if we see the image and likeness and breath of God in the person who does know who they are or where they came from we are filled with compassion, understanding, even identification – we are filled with the feelings of God. Are we like a bottle of rotten hamburger in the sight of God? Of course not.



Are we spiritually alive? It begins with God – with awe and love for the God who made us. Then it immediately moves to understanding who you are, and who the people around you are. Are we spiritually vital and alive people? How does your spirituality show itself?

Spirituality is to make sure that every human person we see is a “you” and not an “it.” This, along with true worship, is the beginning of holy living with God.

#### **Sermon Number 4: Sex was God’s Idea**

In recent weeks we have been searching together for some answers about the nature of “true” Christian spirituality. We have noted that there is a huge spiritual search going on in our culture: people looking into new versions of old Eastern Religions and in variations called the New Age movement. Some are looking deep inside themselves, trying to find traces of memory from previous lives. Still others are trying to find their sense of meaning and peace in meditation, communing with nature, on and on.

We’ve gone back to Genesis because it is here we see the true intention of God and the nature of sin -- what caused the distortions in human spirituality and identity. It is here that we begin to see both the cosmic and very personal meaning of redemption in Jesus Christ. Without this perspective, even our perception of the gospel and outreach is distorted. Without the creation perspective, our understanding of our spirituality becomes small, self-focused, and often trivial.



We are going back and forth between the two focal points of our spiritual understanding: *Who is God?* and *Who are we in relation to God?* This morning I want to focus on one aspect of our spiritual identity – our sexuality.

The foundation and structure of who we are is spiritual. All of what we are functions within a spiritual framework. We have a spiritual center – out of which we experience our relationship with God, with each other, with the world, and our self-awareness. We never really get a clear understanding of ourselves until we see the whole: the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual all function together in the context of our spiritual nature.

If we separate off one part of our spiritual nature, our whole perception of reality changes. For example, the dualist thought that evil came through the physical. Therefore some people indulged every physical desire because as spiritual people in dualism the physical didn't matter. Others beat their own bodies, deprived themselves of even bare necessities. Others decided that one is more spiritual if they are not married or celibate.

If we look around, we quickly realize that nowhere is the intention of God more distorted than in people's sexual identities. This morning I would like to take a little time to share a brief overview of a biblical view of sex and sexuality. This will not answer all the questions, but I hope it gives us a place to start to discuss and think about the meaning of our sexuality.

In his book on Christian marriage, James Olthuis says, *"Sexuality affects everything human, not just marriage. A woman walks, talks, thinks, feels, loves, believes, writes, paints, and buys like a woman. And man walks, talks, thinks, feel, loves, believes, writes, paints, and buys like a man. Both ways are human ways. To despise either way is to despise the creation. Male and female sexuality decisively influences all human relationships, most obviously marriage and the family, but all others as well."*

That is why it is important for us to come to terms with our sexuality as spiritual beings because we live in a culture that seems to want to exploit everyone sexually. Even in an advertisement about buying a car.



Please note that the Bible is not embarrassed by sex. If you doubt my word read through the “Song of Songs” in your Bible. It is a celebration of human sexuality. Sex and sexuality was God’s idea – a beautiful idea of human diversity, compatibility, and intimacy. As we have dealt with the creation, we have seen that it is necessary for us to think about 1) God’s intention in creation, 2) the effects of the entrance of sin and rebellion in that good creation, and 3) the redeeming call of Jesus Christ – a call to salvation, to wholeness, to the rejection of sin, to a renewed creation in him.

In order to deal with human sex and sexuality we need to do the same thing. It is easy to fall into a non-biblical way of thinking and separate sex, failing to see that this is a spiritual issue. With all the distortions in our society it is particularly important for Christians to be thinking and talking about this whole issue. To understand correctly we begin with the joy of acknowledging that sex was God’s idea, one that he judged to be good and beautiful. In 1:31 we read, *“And God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good.”*

Then, in the second perspective on creation in Genesis 2 we read, *“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a mate fit for him.’”* After reviewing and naming all the animals, and no companion was found for man (vs.21,22), *“The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”* (The first surgery?)

Like many other passages that have been translated and interpreted from a male-dominating perspective, these have often not been clearly understood. These passages speak of male-female equality. They are made from the same stuff. God did not create a “second-class” citizen or an imperfect man. They came to each other from each other; they belong together. *“God made them in his own image, male and female;”* and he gave them together dominion over creation. The human being is male and female.

Our sexuality reflects the image of God. This is a very important part of our understanding who we are. Adam celebrates because God brings him a partner, a companion,



an equal, a mate: *"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man."*(2:23) Adam and Eve are a unity. They reveal the image of God in their relationships. Their unity and that image are ultimately celebrated in the oneness of marriage and sexual intercourse.

The Bible affirms this unity by affirming the sexual differences. It celebrates their relationship of openness, mutuality, and interdependence. Genesis says, *"And the man and woman were both naked, and were not ashamed."* (2:25) In their sexual differences they form a whole. This unity and wholeness are affirmed many places in the Bible.

In Mark 19:4 Jesus said, *"Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?"* 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 says, *"In the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for a woman was made from man, so now man is born of woman. All things are from God."*

I recognize that all of this is a review for you. I go over it again, just in case you might not have seen it in the Bible, but also because our culture has attempted to separate sex and sexuality from our spiritual nature.

Sex has been reduced to animal instinct or lust that dehumanizes. It is just about meeting a need. Or, the wonder and beauty of sexuality and sex is reduced to something that sells, or a way to manipulate or control the opposite sex, or as we noted last week the dehumanizing of pornography. There are so many people, people presented in the media as typical, people who have no more moral, spiritual values around their sexuality than a rabbit.

We need to be talking about all of this with our children. Starting with creation we need to be no more embarrassed than the Bible is. We need to show them that only if they understand their sexuality as a spiritual treasure given by God and given only in the deepest commitment and love of marriage are they safe from the emotional and spiritual destruction that dehumanizing sex brings. It is not just about some rules to follow. It is about knowing who you are.



Human spiritual identity is sexual – precious, beautiful, a wonder in God’s creation of emotional and physical fulfillment of intimacy in the context of self-giving love and commitment. It is about trust and letting go of oneself in love for the other that can only reach its deepest joy in a relationship that is safe and as permanent as we can make it.

It has been said that the more beautiful, the more God-like, the more precious something is, the greater the distortion when sin gets hold of it. Genesis 3 records the distortion of God’s intention. Man and woman chose the word of the serpent over the Word of God. In breaking trust with God they broke trust with themselves, with each other, and with the creation.

The proverbial “battle of the sexes” had its beginning, not in creation but in the sin of rebellion. The symbol of what happened is seen in their loss of innocence, in their new-found anxious vulnerability: *“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.”*

The result was immediate. Quickly the two that were one in the Lord were pointing the finger at each other and God. They became competitors.

The results or the curses of sin were prophesied by God. The woman will feel pain in childbearing, yet her desire shall be for her husband and he will rule over her. The first words of sexual dominance come as a result of sin, not out of the creation order! Sexual dominance of all kinds is evil and the result of evil. Accordingly the man was cursed to sweat and toil, to struggle with weeds and sorrow and death.

The order of sin is competition, struggle to dominate, sorrow, pain, disunity, and defensiveness. The tragedy became clear that what was intimate sexual freedom became a tool to use and manipulate persons of the opposite sex.

At this point you and I are faced with the question of the meaning of redemption in Jesus Christ. What are we redeemed from? What are we saved to? Are we not redeemed from slavery to the curse of sin? Are we not redeemed from alienation to renewed relationship



with God and thus with each other? Are we not called to the healing perfection of love – for God above all and for the persons around us?

Paul says, *“in Jesus Christ all things have become new.”* We are redeemed from the order of sin, called back to the creation order, to the intention of God. To apply that to the relationship of the sexes; in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives, we are called to wholeness, to the unity, to the relationship between men and women that reflects God’s image. We are called to the equality of man – male and female in relation to God. Over and over we see this.

One example is the way in which Jesus broke all the rules of the patriarchal religion of his day regarding female inferiority, dealing with women as persons whom he loved. He died for women and men at a time when Jewish theologians were debating about whether or not women were human. He had the women announce his resurrection.

Our society desperately needs a healthy model. It is a ***spiritual issue*** – beginning with valuing and respecting others and ourselves as sexual beings called to cherish our differences and similarities so that we see ourselves as a whole together. We get rid of everything that reduces sex to something dirty or hurts people.

In terms of marriage, the first issue is the renewal of Christian marriage. Here we are called to respect each other, value and empower each other to use the gifts we have, and enjoy each other. Because we have been loved, forgiven, accepted by Christ; because we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to love with the healing love that breaks through defenses. We are called to risk the vulnerability and trust of the symbol of the nakedness of Eden so that we may be one in the Lord.

In a society full of stereotyping, objectifying persons, manipulation, and using people, we are called to be the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth”. We need to be people who treasure sexuality as a gift from God, and use it as a precious gift. We need to be talking about what is healthy, appropriate, and moral expressions of our sexuality and what cheapens



us and dehumanizes us. At the same time we need to be so aware that Jesus Christ gave himself so that we could be free of the patriarchal, hierarchy created by evil in our world.

### **Sermon Number 5: Stewardship – Spirituality at Work**

This spring and summer we have been on a pilgrimage together pursuing the nature of true Christian spirituality by beginning with Genesis. What we have found are some perspectives and understandings that are really quite foreign to our culture and to the spiritual search going on around us.

I have been thinking about what would happen to us if we really take this material in. How would it change us, these biblical ideas of the *meaning* of human value, of God who is beyond and yet close to us, of personhood, of our sexuality, of the integration of every part of our lives within our spiritual structure? It reminded me of a story about a little girl who experienced a major breakthrough in her life when she learned to tie her shoes. It felt like a whole new independence. Instead of excitement, she was overcome by tears.

Her father asked, “Why are you crying?”

“I have to tie my own shoes,” she said.

“You just learned how. It isn’t that hard is it?”



“I know,” she wailed, “but I’m going to have to do it the rest of my life.”

These biblical, spiritual understandings have the power to change our attitudes, and how we think and feel about God, ourselves and the meaning of our lives. In that sense, it gets a bit threatening.

We have seen that all of life is lived in a positive or negative relationship with the Creator who made us in his own image and likeness. In fact, we cannot escape that. It is here we begin to *understand* or *distort* our own value, the meaning of personhood, and the true nature of our sexuality. Beginning here makes us see the meaning of creation as the extension of God’s glory and love. Here we see the distortion of God’s intention by sin, and we begin to comprehend some of the depth of being redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Bottom line, the experience of true spirituality is living in accountability to God. Starting with Genesis it is unavoidable to see that everything comes from God, and we are accountable to God. That word has become distorted to mean we can do anything we want with something, we rule. It really refers to the kind of authority a government has in that it is there only to serve people, to protect them, to guarantee their rights, etc. We rule in order to preserve and strengthen. Of course, the center of human rebellion is the attempted refusal to be accountable to God. Underline attempted.

The foundation of the concept of stewardship is accountability. Spiritual accountability. We have seen some strange things happening in our culture and in the attitudes of people regarding accountability. We have become a people who are not at all sure we like the idea of being responsible for what we do, what we think, how we relate to others, even how we feel. I recently heard Marva Dawn say that it is because we have lost the big story – the common story that holds us together, the mega story of the scriptures. So now it is everybody fighting for their own rights, trying to be a greater victim than someone else.

There has been a growing attitude that I hope is being challenged. It is an attitude that we are really not to blame when we do something wrong. We are not really accountable for what we do.



The refusal to be accountable for our actions, if we hear the meaning of Genesis, is to refuse to be human, refusal to acknowledge we were made by God, in God's image, and for God. We also turn our backs on the honor given to people in Genesis when God calls people to be the stewards of his wonderful creation.

Here is our spirituality at work. Here is our relationship with God acted out. The concept is almost totally foreign, but according to God the very nature of our existence on earth is that of being his stewards. What is a steward? Biblically and in terms of Christian spirituality, this is a crucial question.

The term **steward** is a New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament concept. It comes from the Roman household where, for example, a Roman politician would turn over all his holdings to a steward, a person the landowner trusted to use his wealth, make decisions, operate it all, and make a profit. Meanwhile the owner was off doing the business of Rome. The steward was the most powerful person in the household – even more than wife, children, or parents. Yet, the steward owned nothing of his own.

We are God's stewards. In spite of everything we have been taught to the contrary, reality is this: we own nothing. Living is the business of using what we have been given to the best advantage, and then finally it is given back to its rightful owner. As evidence of that, this past week we said goodbye with the passing of a key member of this congregation. What did he take with him? He was given life, energy, opportunities, relationships, wife, children, things and money to use, but then he had to give them back and took nothing with him. I saw his casket. He took nothing with him. The same is true for everyone in this room, whether you think you own your stuff or not.

Think about that. We own nothing! Dealing with this truth will change how we deal with all of the stuff of life. It will change our spiritual experience. In a world where people judge a person's worthy by how rich she/he is, we really own nothing. It is all a farce. What did we come into the world with? Who chose our parents? We were born with all sorts of potentials, who gave them to us? Did we choose them? Who gave us the health to work? The time? The life? The brain? The gifts? To produce the resources we have? Did we earn, create



or buy these things, the raw materials that we have worked with? Who decided where in the world you would be born? What will we take out of the world with us?

This is radical spirituality. It has to do with the spiritual nature of reality. We own nothing. Ownership implies absolute control, do what I want with it. It is my body, my mind, my car, my house, my husband/wife/child, my land, my company, my time, my money, my church – on and on. Is it really? Do we really own these things? It is true that we have decision-making power regarding many of these things. But we are not owners because we are accountable to the real owner.

The understanding of stewardship was clear in paradise, but what happened? What does Genesis 3 say the promise in the temptation was? The serpent came and said, *“Go ahead, eat the fruit God told you not to. You can’t trust God. He just doesn’t want you to be like him, knowing good and evil.”*

If you eat you can be like God. You can be the owner! You can do what you want. The Bible tells us that our entire lives are the business of using what we have been given in the best, most responsible way possible. We are told that we are stewards, and when the king returns he will hold us accountable regarding what we did with our talents.

Our talents are nature, time, life, money, love and relationships, grace, the gospel. We are stewards and ambassadors of God and co-workers with Jesus Christ. This spiritual reality is taught over and over in the Bible. Someone has taken the time to calculate that the Bible has about 500 verses on prayer, about 500 verses about faith, but more than 2000 verses on the use of money and possessions. Jesus talked a great deal about it.

You see, Jesus knew what happens to us when we see ourselves as owners, in competition with other owners so we try to satisfy our need to be the center of our own greedy little universe. We worry, and ruin our health with stress. We begin to think our value comes from money, things, power and control. Have you seen the bumper sticker: *“Whoever has the*



*most toys wins!” Wins what? Jesus said, “If you gain the whole world and lose your soul, what have you gained?”*

We live in a world filled with people who are enslaved to finding their value and worth in success, in getting enough of this world’s goods, in being an owner. Jesus’ spiritual understanding of life is a lot more comfortable, healthy, contented, and more fun. He shows us that when we see ourselves as stewards we are free, we understand where the things we really need come from, so we can give up on the worry. Our joy is to faithfully use what we have, and ask for what we need.

He paints the picture of a life where giving is fun, sharing the resources we have with those in need is a natural part of the process of being free and content because that is what the owner wants. That is drawing interest on our talent. That is a good investment. The Apostle John writes, *“If anyone has this world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”*

The clear implication is that it does not abide in him. Contentment comes in the knowing the difference between what we want, why we want it, and what we really need. All of this is so radically different than what we hear every day of the week, I wonder if any of us can hear it. This Christian spirituality is foreign, sadly even to most Christians. I wonder how God feels about that.

As God’s stewards of his gifts, what would it look like? How would we use our time? The stress in the Bible is always about balance. We can balance our time in trusting God who gives everything to us.

How would we experience parenting if we clearly understood that these children are not here to make us look good or bad, but that we have a task to do for God in enabling them to be all they can be? How would our relationships change if we saw ourselves as experiencing a gift God gave us? Would that change the expectations we lay on the people we love? Would our attitudes change regarding empowering other people instead of competing with them?

How would we use our money? If we own nothing, and we are using God’s gifts for his profit, and he expects us to take care of the poor, how would our giving change? We are



responsible for our lives, and we are not responsible for the feelings of others. How would that change some of our boundaries? How would we deal differently with the environment?

The truth is that all of this carries with it a wonderful sense of freedom, contentment, balance and security – all of which is unknown in the materialism of our world. Is all of this difficult in a Western, individualistic, materialistic, post-modern, post-Christian culture? Oh yes it is.

We have been about looking at who we are and what our spiritual experience is or where it is empty. I would challenge all of us to take a hard look at being a radical, steward Christian. Here is a spiritual joy that eludes most people in our culture.

Can it be yours?

## **Sermon Number 6: Anatomy of a Temptation**

The story of the entrance of sin into God's good creation in Genesis 3 is one of those passages in the Bible that skeptics have often laughed at. At first glance it rings of fairy tales that we don't usually take very seriously: *perfect people in Utopia, talking snakes, good and bad trees*. Like the fairy tale about "Pandora's Box," it attempts to account for the bad things, the evil, the sin and distortion in our world.

However, there is something different here. Even those who do not start with assumptions about the truth of the Bible, smile only briefly. They quickly find themselves engaged in a dynamic, usually realizing the importance of the dynamic going on here. In this story we find communication about some very profound truth.

What happened is the issue of sin in the world. What happened is a statement about the source of the alienation between people and God, the beginning of the alienation of the sexes, the genesis of pain, suffering, fear, suspicion and death. But there is a great deal more



here than what happened. Although it is often missed when Christians try to make it all very literal, there is a great deal to learn from this story in how it happened.

The “how” or the “dynamic” shows us what happens over and over in our lives. The passage becomes important to everyone who has found themselves feeling the weight of guilt over some sin and wondering how they fell into it.

We have been talking together about Christian Spirituality, especially how it is revealed in Genesis, then in creation-fall-salvation understanding. Very quickly we saw that Christian spirituality begins with a God that is beyond us, a God that we are accountable to. This foundation is what distinguishes Christian spirituality from many other forms of spiritual search. In the context of our spiritual search, I would like to take this temptation apart, look at it, and see how it worked, with the goal of all of us gaining some insight as to how it works in our lives.

How does sin come create confusion and steal our joy? How do we end up doing what we know is wrong? How do we end up saying things that we really do not want to say? How do we find ourselves doing things that are destructive to our relationships with God, with each other, and within ourselves?

### **1. Majoring in the Negative**

There are several steps here that I expect we can all recognize if we try. The serpent comes to Eve for apparently a religious discussion. There are no red flags waving, no announcement that a temptation is about to begin. There is no denial of God’s existence. There never is. It begins with a catch question, a diversionary tactic: *“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”* It is sort of like this: *“Wow, this is a beautiful place. Look at those beautiful trees. I hear that you are not supposed to eat any of this beautiful fruit. God keeps you on a pretty tight leash, doesn’t he?”*

Maybe a contemporary version of it takes place when a friend or acquaintance finds out that you are a Christian and is very sympathetic with your unfortunate position. *“Being a Christian must really be difficult. There are so many enjoyable things you cannot do.”* The



truth, however is that most of our negative thinking does not come from someone else, not from some talking serpent, but it comes from our own thoughts.

How often doesn't it begin in our self-pity or in our pride, *"I should not have to suffer this way. I deserve to be understood, to be cared for, sympathized with. It is not fair."* Now we have the first step of the temptation going – majoring in **negative thinking**.

Eve is quick to defend God, *"Oh no, God is very generous, we can eat of all the trees in the garden. We can freely enjoy everything that life has to offer. There is only one point at which he draws the line. He said, 'You shall not eat of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, neither shall you touch it lest you die.' You see, there is only one place that God wants us to realize that he is God and we are creatures. That is his rule about that tree."*

The serpent has already won his first point. He has the conversation going in the direction of the negative. He has an opening to play with God's command. He can now proceed to major in the negative, giving Eve and Adam's imagination full reign. God has said, *"Don't eat of the tree, don't mess with it at all, avoid it. Accept the fact that I am God. Accept the fact that you are my creations. Trust me."*

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, *"lead us not into temptation,"* or stop us before we get close enough to be tempted. If we take a look at our approaches, they often reflect something closer to *'help us when we get into temptation.'* We get as close as we can, and then expect God to bail us out.

Anyway, the tempter has Adam and Eve close enough, with their help, to be tempted. He got them there by majoring in the negative. I say, "Adam and Eve" because verse 6 of Genesis 3 clearly says that Adam was with her the whole time – something that has been conveniently overlooked by male interpreters of the Bible. He evidently just watched, saying nothing to intervene even though he had received the command directly from God. Adam gave silent approval.



The serpent takes them to the tree. The negative again: *“Look what you cannot do. I am so sorry for you. Look at how you suffer. You poor deprived children. Think about how it might be if you didn’t have this oppressive rule hanging over your heads.”*

## **2. Persons Become Monsters**

Eve quoted God (in front of a silent Adam) in saying that they would die if they touched or ate from the tree. Once she is touching it mentally the next step is to get her to doubt whether God really meant what he said. *“Surely you don’t believe that nonsense that God would allow you to die and perish just because you wouldn’t follow this silly little rule of his. You don’t understand God. He doesn’t want you to eat of this tree because he knows that there is special knowledge in it. You will become like God – knowing good and evil. He just wants to keep you down. He wants to keep you from becoming like him.”*

What is happening here? 1) Begin by majoring in the negative. 2) That begins a process of distancing ourselves, getting out of intimate, personal relationship. In this case, it means no longer seeing God for who he is: the loving Creator and Father. We begin to doubt his motives.

The process is exactly the opposite of thanksgiving, of looking at all the good gifts in our lives and looking with love to the One from whom they came. God is not the loving Creator, according to this process; rather, he is the unreasonable lawgiver with ulterior motives. Once we distance ourselves, “monsterizing” becomes easy. Now all we think is negative.

God is not looking out for our best interests. In this scenario it is obvious that the monster of the heavens just wants to keep us from experiencing life to the fullest. He is a spoilsport, not wanting us to have any fun. He is not the loving Creator, he is just an uncaring, legalistic, judge who must be some kind of control-freak. When we are dealing with other people, here is where others become “they,” and where we come up with labels instead of seeing persons.

## **3. Be A Victim**



Once we have created the monster in our minds, it is clear to us that we are the **victims**. It is obvious that God or our history or some other person or our environment is responsible for our unhappiness. It is clear that it is not our fault. We are not responsible for our thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions.

It was God who is keeping them from being happy and all they can be – in this case knowing good and evil and being like God. It is then only right to rebel, to fight against this monster who is making us unhappy and hindering our development.

#### **4. Rebellion is the only reasonable reaction**

After all, we have to look out for ourselves, right? It is obvious it is “their” fault. Victims must defend themselves, get their rights, do whatever it is to get justice – which means what they want. Eve blamed the serpent. Adam blamed Eve and then God for making her in the first place. No one took responsibility for his/her own behavior. 1)Major in the negative, 2) make God or other authority figures into monsters, 3) be victim, and 4) then rebellion is the only reasonable course.

This process goes on over and over. It is all around us. It happens in our relationship with God, with authority figures in our lives, with mates, friends and other people. This is the business of justifying our pettiness, our rebellion, our irresponsible actions, and our prejudices. The examples are endless.

It happens so often in marriages. This is the seedbed for sin and justification of all sorts of sins. It starts by “*majoring in the negative*”. With a little work we can only see the faults and weaknesses of our partners, the inconsistencies, the things that bug us. We repeat over and over to ourselves something like, “*if she/he loved me then they would not do this or that.*”

Instead of dealing with those issues, we keep them boiling inside, always looking for more evidence until we can create a full-blown monster in our minds – a monster whose very existence justifies our anger, hatred and irresponsibility. This little process has justified more affairs, more shopping sprees, put-downs, and divorces than anything else.



Of course, all the time we convince ourselves that the other person is really responsible for our actions. The process of temptation and justifying everything from prejudice to criminal activity has not changed much. It always seems to involve the avoidance of personal accountability while making everyone else the bad guy.

Eve saw the fruit, and it looked good because it had secret knowledge, the new challenge for knocking God off the throne. The words communicate a sensual and intellectual fascination at work. They ate the forbidden fruit. True to form they blamed each other, and ultimately God for their actions.

## **5. The Prevention**

How does one stop the process? Can it be stopped? Isn't our desire for rationalizing our actions so great that the problem is impossible? God answered the question. Here is where seeing the whole picture painted by the Bible is so important. God answered the question in offering salvation through Jesus Christ and in sending his Spirit to live in us. First, through faith in him the price of guilt is taken away. Death is no longer the final consequence of our sin and rebellion against God. That grace in itself is overwhelming – that he loved us so much he was willing to take on our death, atoning for us.

However, people too often stop there. What God offers beyond forgiveness and eternal life is “spiritual health”. This is the power to overcome temptation at every step of the way. The process we have laid out is not only the anatomy of a temptation, it is the description of the symptoms of spiritual and emotional sickness in human beings. Salvation means health, wholeness and ultimately, life.

Spiritually and emotionally sick people focus on the negative in life, make monsters and blame God and others for every problem, feel the victim – therefore not taking responsibility for themselves. It is the sickness of humanity that destroys people, creates conflict in homes and churches, is the dynamic for starting wars, and prevents you and me from joy and spiritual/emotional growth. The tragedy is that in Christ God has given us the tools to combat



the anatomy of temptation. In contrast, here is the healing, life-changing power of God in your life and mine.

***Are you ready to hear it?*** The truth is we usually like temptation and spiritual darkness more than health and light. The question is how are we healed?

It begins in seeing our need for forgiveness and healing by God and in believing in Christ as our Savior. This opens us to new life within, a new spiritual center, a place where the Holy Spirit dwells. Now instead of the serpent the speaker within is the Spirit. Let's look at the steps again. They are the exact opposites as we saw in "Temptation":

1. When we are listening to the witness of the Spirit inside of us, listening the witness of the Word and the Spirit that we are "in Christ" – "the sons and daughters of God," then we begin to understand the constant biblical call to thanksgiving. Our inclination to see only the negative now does battle with love for and gratitude to God coming from the inside and the outside. You can quickly see how we are empowered against temptation and evil by the change in our thinking created in worship, in thanksgiving, in prayer and meditation on the goodness of God. Here we gain insight for life. The words of the Apostle Paul ring in our ears: *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing"* and many more such phrases that say, be careful what you think. You are either setting yourself up for joy with God or temptation. Avoid negative thinking. Avoid being influenced by people who only see the negative in things. They are very close to sin and spiritual destructiveness.
2. Over and over the Bible calls us to take on the attitude loving God and loving people. This is the summary of the law and the prophets. Staying in relationship with Christ and each other, being encouragers, caring, seeing persons instead of making monsters is critical to our spiritual health. We need to be on our guard for the symptom of thinking or talking about other people as if they are the reason for our unhappiness, monsters to be gotten rid of. Without love we live in a Halloween world full of monsters out to steal our happiness.



3. To be human, to be spiritually and emotionally healthy, to live out our calling as people who are redeemed in Jesus Christ means that we are accountable for our own thoughts, feelings and actions. To do less is to deny that we are even human. Blame when we need accountability is to give up human dignity and give up the possibility of change.
4. All of this adds up to true Christian Spirituality acted out in our lives. This is about being set apart for God – which is what holiness means. Helmet Thielicke looks at all of this and says, *“Between me and every dark and evil temptation stands Jesus Christ.”* That is true for people who follow the biblical prescription rather than get as close to temptation as they possibly can. Here is the choice.

Here is the anatomy of a temptation and the way of Christian spiritual faithfulness. This is basic. This is about making some specific choices and doing some self-discipline, first in our thinking, and then in our behavior. This is about consciously deciding to be a spiritually alive and healthy follower of Jesus Christ.

## **Sermon Number 7: Confronting the Cain in All of Us**

In the creation story we have seen that we were created to be spiritually connected to God – carrying his likeness and image. We were called to the vocation of being God’s representatives and loving stewards of his creation. We were made to be in a love relationship – receiving God’s care, living together in equality and respect, and faithfully carrying out our creative work.

The story of Genesis 3 demonstrates the devastating extent of human rebellion, the nature of temptation, and the distortion in our spiritual connection with God. Alienation from God, broken trust and fear between men and women, the curses of toil and pain, death and



eviction from paradise – it all demonstrates the radical nature of evil in contrast to the goodness of creation.

Yet, we are jolted at how quickly in the next chapter the story turns from the peace and beauty of Eden to hatred, violence and murder. (Genesis 4:8): *“Cain said to Abel his brother, ‘let us go into the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.”*

There is realism in the Bible story that stuns us. Its tragic power has all the punch of the morning paper where we see the seething discontent and anger that burst through the thin veneer of social control covering our neighborhoods. The other day someone who has been following our studies in Genesis said to me, *“I’ve been reading ahead. The stories of Genesis are like reading a manual on dysfunctional families.”* It is true. There is an amazing contrast that calls us to reality.

People can be so beautiful, so loving, and so honorable. We can admire the qualities of goodness and dedication that we see emerging from the human spirit and the God who it reflects. And in a shocking reversal, we see the evil created when the center is killed by human greed and self-centeredness. It is hard to look at the reality here. *It is painful because at some level this represents the two sides of the battle going on within us.*

God made us with a spiritual center connected to him. Life was to be lived from that center. All of life’s functions were to be lived within the power field of our spirituality. Every aspect of life – our bodies, our relationships, our work, our thinking, our feelings, on and on, -- every aspect of life was to be an expression of that spiritual center with its values, its love, and its connection to God. But what happens when we get off center? What happens when we make some other part of us the center?

It is then that the sarcastic statement becomes accurate: *“God made us in his image, and we are more than ready to return the favor!”* We have the dangerous desire to be the center and make what we worship look like us!



It is so easy for us to create our god in the likeness of our needs and desires, attempting to find our meaning and value somewhere other than the real spiritual center. In the story of Cain and Abel we see the reality, a conflict within all people that confronts us. At its center is this: To be spiritually alive we need to be willing to confront ourselves, to do the self-examination. The events that led to the first murder began in church in an act of worship.

Let's look at the story together. On the surface this story is much like one we might see in the newspaper. We first see what happened, but then we need to dig a little to understand **why** it happened. Abel worked with livestock. Cain was a farmer. They brought their offerings to the Lord, and without any reason given, we read: *"And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."*

Cain's response was anger, unhappiness, and resentment. Why did God reject Cain? Notice it is not just the offering, it is the person. God attempted to get Cain to look at himself. (This is really important!)

As we read God's challenge, we begin to see some 'whys'. There is something wrong between Cain and God, something Cain needs to do. It is not that God is capricious, and just decided to like Abel more than Cain. It is not that God liked animal sacrifices more than vegetables. There is a spiritual issue going on here.

### **Cain's Birth**

In Adam and Eve's relationship a baby was conceived. They had a son, and were very proud. They named him CAIN because Eve said, *"I have created a man with God's help."* They named him with great pride, "I have created," or "Cain". Incidentally, they had another son named Abel, meaning "frailty" or "weakness."

Yes, the first family of the Bible was *dysfunctional*. For anyone with any training in psychology, birth order, or family systems this is too much to pass up. Here we have the apple



of his parent's eye, the center of the family universe, and "incidentally." It is not dangerous to assume that Cain grew up the first-born son, expecting the universe to revolve around him; and Abel spent his time fighting for his place in the sun. (Does this raise any feelings of being able to identify with either of these two in anyone?). I will resist the temptation to lecture on family order and parenting with a couple of observations.

In the real world every family is dysfunctional to some degree, and no two children grow up in the same family. Some of us were greatly blessed by parents who made us feel loved and accepted for who we are, and so dealing with that piece of our identity is somewhat easier. Others of us grew up in difficult situations that demand a great deal of effort, pain, and time for us to work out and find some emotional health. In a world **without** perfect parents or perfect children, we all have the responsibility to work through this.

If we do not we are destined to repeat or enlarge the pathology of our family of origin. The key point here is our need to deal with our spiritual center, our connection or lack of connection with God. This, of course, is the issue of dealing with our identity at its core!

### **Cain's Reaction**

This leads us to the second thing we learn from this passage about Cain. Abel, that "nobody," had evidently been doing his spiritual homework, and God accepted him and his sacrifice. God and Abel had a relationship. Then God had the audacity to turn away from Cain's sacrifice.

Cain was angry, resentful, and hurt. He felt betrayed and rejected. And as far as Cain is concerned the problem is with others – with sneaky Abel, with God, with the bad breaks, and with his past. The one place he does not look is inside himself. He does not ask: *"What is God trying to tell me? What is wrong inside, spiritually, where my values and attitudes are formed? What do I need to learn?"*



For Cain, the source of the pain was external to himself, and he was angry about it. Cain seems unapproachable and un-teachable. He lacks a key Christian virtue: **humility**.

God does not leave Cain, but asks him some questions: *“Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?” (Literally, why is your face so long?) Why are you wearing that scowl? Why are you feeling so resentful? Why are you critical and sarcastic? What are you only looking outward? Look at yourself.”*

This is always the place we need to start when anger, resentment, frustration, and critical thinking begins to boil inside us. What is happening to us spiritually? Once we have gone to look inside and at our relationship with God, only then are we ready to deal with problems with others. The words of this story give the feeling that God is worried about Cain. It could be interpreted as: *“Look at yourself. Don’t blame Abel or me for your unhappiness. Take responsibility for your own feelings; look inside?”*

This is the moment of confrontation, the moment of choice, the moment of decision. On the one hand we can look inward, see and confess our spiritual failure of putting ourselves in the center of the universe, and then open ourselves again to God. Here God promises forgiveness, new life in Christ, healing power that enables us to again find reality, wholeness and peace. Opening ourselves in confession and humility we find cleansing, joy, freedom, and the love that renews our spirits and changes the course of our attitudes and actions. Or we build the defenses, justify ourselves and our feelings, and then even if there is some validity to our complaint about others, we deal with it badly.

### **God’s Warning**

The next place we learn something about Cain is in God’s warning. It is a warning that all of us need to take seriously in order to experience joy in life. *“Sin, turning away from God, getting off center and making a god in our own image; sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have us, but we must master it.”*



Cain is at that crucial point. He refuses to look inside. He continues to look at Abel as the cause of his pain. He refuses to take God and his own spirituality seriously. He rejects the need for a humble self-assessment first. He invites Abel to go out into the field with him and kills him.

Cain decided to “solve” his problem without the pain of looking inside. It is not unusual for us to blame other people for our feelings of anger, fear, resentment, envy or unhappiness. It is like saying, *“You are wrong God, I would be happy if I didn’t have to compete with my brother, if my parents were different, if my children were better, if my mate and friends treated me better, if I had a happier childhood. You are wrong, and beside that, it is too painful, too humiliating, too difficult to look inside. I refuse to deal with myself and my past. I won’t take the risk, I won’t change.”*

This is the devastating arrogance of false pride. This is sin lurking at the door, ready to master us instead of us mastering it.

Stories like this one show us the nature of reality in powerful ways. With very little effort we can see ourselves here. Our choices are the same: the forgiveness, healing, freedom, and joy that come through the painful process of self-examination and reaching out to Christ, or to take what looks like the easier way, and is finally the most painful of all. The price of false pride.... the price of refusing to look inside.... (Verse 16 says,) *“So Cain went away from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”* His immediate punishment was spiritual death. He lived away from the Lord’s presence.

All of this is here for our study and reflection so we can be called back to the wonderful good news of God in Christ. God is ready to renew our spiritual centers, our connection with him in the love and grace offered in Jesus Christ. He is ready to come and live in that center, the Holy Spirit within. Our choices are really about vibrant spiritual life with God, or being empty and spiritually dead -- life without God.



This story challenges us to go back and start again with the Lord, to go back and look inside in open humility with him, to do our spiritual homework with God, and then look again at those around us. Here is the beginning of a spiritual experience that really makes a difference.

## **Sermon Number 8: It's Okay to Rest**

What do you think of when you hear the words "Sabbath observance?"

I suspect that some of us had some ambivalence about the teaching and rules that we grew up with regarding what we could or could not do on Sunday. It was kind of strange now that I think about it, but one's piety was judged in the church I grew up in by what one did on Sunday. There were heated discussions in our house about the sins of swimming on summer Sundays at the lake, although it was conceded that God probably did not mind if we sat quietly on the dock with our feet in the water watching other people have fun.



I remember begging people to push me off the dock. Playing ball was definitely out, but a quiet game of catch was probably okay with God. All of that became a very important part of our religion. Looking back it is interesting that we almost had hold of something that was indeed very important, but in our house, we didn't quite get it. I have watched people rebel, and because some fine religious practices were justified on the wrong basis, some good things were lost.

We lost the spiritual principles in religious rules. Then we rebelled against the rules. Now we need to go back and start over regarding the meaning of what the Bible refers to as "sabbath".

First, let's try to define it. Sabbath does not really mean getting a day off, for all the good that does us. We need it physically. Our relationships need it. We do better work the rest of the time when we have time off. *"Sabbath means quit. Stop. Take a break. Cool it. The word itself has nothing devout or holy in it. It is a word about time, denoting our nonuse of it – what we usually call wasting time."* (Peterson, "Christianity Today", April 4, 1994)

In a world that wants more and more efficiency from us, we are called to quit, to rest, to trust God to meet our needs.

This stopping with a purpose is very important in the Bible. We see that keeping the Sabbath is commanded because God kept it. God did his work in six days and then rested. If God sets apart one day to rest, we can, too. The work/rest rhythm is built into the creation. The precedent to *quit doing* and simply *be* is divine.

*"The Deuteronomy reason for Sabbath-keeping is that our ancestors in Egypt went for four hundred years without a vacation (Deut. 5:15) – never a day off. The consequences: they were no longer considered persons but slaves, hands, work units – not persons created in the image of God but equipment for making bricks and building pyramids. Humanity was defaced."* (Subversive Spirituality, Peterson, p.31,32)

God's salvation of his people from the slavery of Egypt restored their freedom and their personhood. The parallel biblical reasons for Sabbath-keeping reveal the center of the huge



need for us to keep Sabbath: *praying and playing*. Praying is about our relationship with God. Playing is about maintaining our personhood. To keep a Sabbath means to quit working, to spend time with God, and to celebrate creation, enjoy family and friends and “play”. This is about “wasting time” with God.

In this context Jesus’ statement in Mark 2:27 rings out, *“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”* People had so lost the spiritual issue here that they seemed to think that God needed them to rest on the Sabbath. Even resting had become an anxious affair. Why did God institute this? Was it simply because he rested after creation? What is the meaning?

The Sabbath, as creation rhythm, was suddenly filled with even more meaning after the fall into sin. The curse of the fall was that work became toil, wearisome and endless, a life-style of anxiety about survival. God literally counter-acted the result of the fall one day a week. *Trust me*, says God, *you can rest*. I will take care of you. You can take a day off. The Sabbath is a time to enjoy anticipating the defeat of anxiety and the restlessness of evil with quiet, peaceful confidence in God in worship and then play.

Before we go further with this, let’s stop to think how this *Sabbath thing* is important spiritually. I have heard many Christians who are *intrigued with reincarnation*. Basically reincarnation teaches that how you do and how well you suffer in this lifetime is judged, and that determines which direction you are going in the next incarnation. The goal is that if you go through enough carnations you will ultimately reach god or nirvana. That sounds like a big job to me.

Can you ever quit? Can you rest? Is there any end to what you have to do to get it right so you will not go downward in the spiral? How does that compare spiritually to a God who says, *“Trust me. It is OK to rest. Relax. I will take care of you. Work hard when you work, then quit to pray and play. You will not earn it. I have prepared a place for you.”* What a powerful spiritual message! Why would one ever want to exchange resurrection for incarnation?



Let's go on. How does this carry over and evolve in the New Testament? Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Redeemer came as promised and fulfilled the symbolism of Israel's Saturday; that is, saved us from the consequences of sin. He came with the potential for peace with God, each other, and within ourselves.

Rest, in the sense of peace from the anxious alienation from and striving to please God, is no longer a one day a week thing. Rest from the fear of being inadequate and a failure is replaced with the assurance that we are the sons and daughters of God. In Christ rest is meant to be a way of life, a life free of the slavery of living with constant anxiety about our security, about our identity, about the future. On the basis of the atoning work on Calvary, believers have their sins forgiven and have peace with God. Romans 5:1 says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* This is the fulfillment of one part of Sabbath rest, an "already but not yet thing" that culminates finally in life with God after death.

What has all of this to do with our understanding of true Christian spirituality? Contrary to other spiritualities we live in the context of trust. It is first of all not about religious rules, but first of all about a relationship with God in Christ that takes us to an eternal Sabbath. It is all about peace with God. It is something we have. It is not something we need to discover within us or in some corner of the creation. It is not some secret and special knowledge we need to discover. It is not about earning our way up the ladder of the spiral of reincarnation. It is not about the ethic I grew up with that you had to justify any and all rest. We talked endlessly about how hard we worked, justifying our right to stop.

This is about faith, and in loving gratitude to God, it is still about praying and playing – just because we want to and need to.

The creation story calls us to balance of work, worship, and play. The gospel message comes with a foundation of peace on which to build that balance: peace with God, peace inside as the children of God, peace with others in practicing the grace of God in community, peace which is the condition of spiritual rest. Our spiritual experience is this: God says, *"Peace be still"* to us who worry as if our life and salvation depended on it. God says, *"I love you and have*



*loved you and will love you*” to you and me who strive for success as if it will give us personal worth or identity or security. God says, *“Peace”* to us who worry about what other people will think of us. His peace is a lifestyle. All of life is a Sabbath. *“Peace”* to you who live with fear, anxiety, and stress about things you cannot control, and fail to have balance in the one life you can control.

Sabbath rest is to pray and play without the striving stress of the world that says we are on our own, without the love of our God. We strive, we work, and we create. Sometimes we get over-committed. Interestingly that is not what kills us. It is not the work, but the stress, the anxiety, the worry and fear.

It is a lifestyle that is a lack of balance. We need desperately to practice Sabbath rest because even though we believe the right things, deep down inside our spiritual experience is one of aloneness, a kind of fear that causes us to function as if our security depends on our becoming indispensable. Our restlessness and anxiety builds in a feeling that there can never be enough of whatever we have decided will give us meaning and success. We believe, but we have a lot to learn about what a life of Sabbath rest is about.

Jesus call us to relax. *“Don’t be anxious about all these things. Don’t you know who your father is?”* Augustine said, *“Our souls are restless until they rest in thee.”* Here is the calm, the happiness, the contentment, the joy of being in Christ. Here is the spiritual experience that God is calling us to. We can work hard, relax, play – even sometimes do nothing – for the sake of our health and in trusting our God.

The experience of true Christian spirituality is to hear God say, *“Peace be unto you. Work is good. It is okay to rest. Play is the joy of trust.”* Is your life a spiritual joy in witness to the eternal Sabbath? It is worth thinking about.



## **PART TWO: THE LAND BETWEEN**

### **Sermon Number 1: Complaint**

I would like to start a new series of studies with you this morning. It is called *“The Land Between”*. The ideas here were inspired by a book by that name, written by Jeff Manion. A friend recommended the book, and the more I read the more I felt like I needed to share and develop some of the ideas with you. I saw us on every page.

What is the Land Between? It is a place where everything that has become normal is interrupted. Often the Land Between comes with a conversation that drops into our lives like an exploding bomb.



- ✓ It may be the 2:00 am phone call in which we hear: there has been an accident.
- ✓ Or, your position has been eliminated.
- ✓ The tumor is malignant.
- ✓ The fertility tests were inconclusive.
- ✓ I don't love you anymore.
- ✓ Your leg is broken.
- ✓ Your mother and I are getting a divorce.
- ✓ We're moving.
- ✓ Mom's had a stroke.
- ✓ We think the diagnosis is Alzheimer's.

Suddenly we tumble into the world of the unemployed. We are hurled into the land of the suddenly single. We are in the valley of the grieving. We acquire the new vocabulary of chemotherapy. The weekly routine of nursing home visits begin. The monthly heartbreak of infertility becomes painfully exhausting. Suddenly we are between – nothing is quite like it was and we are not sure of the road to a new place of security, hope and normality.

The Land Between is the space where we feel lost or lonely or deeply hurt. It is fertile ground for our spiritual transformation and for God's grace to be revealed in magnificent ways. It is also the space where we can grow resentful, bitter, and caustic if our responses are unguarded. The wilderness where faith can thrive is the very desert where it can dry up and die buried in cynicism and bitterness. The truly daunting part is that the Land Between usually determines the trajectory of our lives after it. Here we set the future direction unless there is intervention.

There is a narrative in the Bible that I think really helps us understand the Land Between. After generations of slavery in Egypt, God came to his people in Israel with the promise to release them and take them to the land promised to their forefathers, a land of freedom and flowing with milk and honey. They must have been in awe as they watched his power in ten plagues delivered by the hand of Moses. He took them out of Egypt carrying the gold and gifts of their captors. They stood in awe, having walked through the middle of the Red Sea, watching Pharaoh and his army drowned in the middle.

I would like to reflect with you on their story in order to find ourselves encouraged, warned, confronted, and rebuked. All of this is about continuing to seek a deeper faith and some wisdom about the Land Between.



As Israel walked away from the Red Sea they were no longer in Egypt; and they were certainly not in Canaan. They entered the Land Between. This is a place that can be profoundly disorienting, and can provide space for some of God's deepest work. As we reflect on Israel's wilderness journey let's remember that God's intention was for them to emerge radically reshaped.

This was the time for God to reveal himself to his people, establishing and deepening their covenant relationship. This was the time for God to reveal the Ten Commandments and to transform them from a huge group of ex-slaves into a nation, his people carrying his name. This was a time that God wanted crises to lead his people to trust and dependency – the trajectory of a life of trusting him and not Baal or other Canaanite gods when they leave the Land Between.

Let's remember that this is also his intention for us when we are in the Land Between – transformation, reshaping, trust and dependency that will give direction to the rest of our lives. This growth does not occur automatically. The adage that time heals all wounds is not necessarily true.

## **Crisis**

It did not take Israel long after leaving the Red Sea to find their first crisis. We need to notice that God did not drop them off in the wilderness like some parent at day-care hoping the babysitter would train the kids. God was there with them: a cloud to guide them by day and a pillar of fire at night – constant reminders that they were not alone.

They were sick of the manna. If we are going to learn from them, we need to identify with them. Can you imagine eating the same thing three times a day for a couple years?

MANNA means "What is it?" That is what they said when they first saw it. They gathered it, ground it or crushed it. They cooked it or made it into cakes, and it tasted like something made with olive oil. Imagine manna for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We raise an eyebrow if we happen to have the same thing for dinner we had for lunch. Three times a day, week in and week out. No pizza. No hamburgs. No ice cream. No chocolate. No chicken, fish or beef.



As we reflect on all their reactions, this is about more than the actual food. Sure, the manna was getting to them, but they were angry and bitter about the weary existence of the Land Between. We recognize the feeling. *"I'm sick of the pain. I'm sick of living in my in-laws basement. I'm sick of being asked about my work when I don't have any. I'm sick of one medical test after another without a clear diagnosis? I'm sick of waiting for the depression to lift. I'm sick of visiting mother in the nursing home when she keeps asking who I am. I'm sick of this manna!"*

Were they really saying they long for Egypt where they were enslaved? They were saying to God: *"We were better off WITHOUT you!"* This was not just complaining. It was a rejection of God. What is the difference between complaint and honest expression of our feelings before God? We know that God invites us to be honest with him. We know he wants us to share our needs, concerns, frustrations and dreams with him. God walks with us in the Land Between.

How different is it to share with him our frustrations and feelings in the context of, *"Lord, I trust you. I am dependent on you. I look back and I see your faithfulness in the past, so I know you will care for me. I trust you to work all of this for my growth and my good, just as you promised. Please give me the patience to do all of this in your timing, please come to us in our need,"* or to say, *"this crisis is your fault, you could have stopped it, I was better off without you, I liked it better being enslaved to the world than free and on the way to the promised land with you. Don't you try to reveal yourself to me or fix me with maturity and growth! It is all a lie."*

God took their complaining seriously. It was the refusal to trust, to be dependent on him, to learn or grow, or be open to a true relationship with him. This is the difference between transformational growth and bitter resentment. Remember that we said that how we respond to the Land Between is the trajectory, the direction, for our lives in the future.

In the background is the whisper of their creator and protector seen in the cloud and the pillar of fire: *"I am all-sufficient. Turn to me. Trust me. Come close to me."* God kept coming at them. Trust me and I will not let your shoes wear out. Trust me and your clothing will not be destroyed in the sun. Trust me and you will not get the diseases you saw in Egypt. Trust me and I will take you safely to the "Promised Land". Trust me because I am the God who rescued you and am now preparing you to become a great nation.



The other day I was talking with someone in this congregation who is very much in the Land Between right now. We were talking about trusting God to take us through the crisis. He said something that moved me deeply. *"Maybe this whole thing is about God trusting us." .... Trusting us to depend on him...to follow...to be faithful."*

It is easy to look at Israel and be amazed at how much they did not get what the Land Between was about. It is easy to see them as selfish, self-centered, and rebellious against God. It is easy... until we are thirsty or until we eat the same thing for breakfast, lunch and dinner for awhile, until we are sick of the Land Between and asking ourselves how we are going to deal with it. Be assured of this – every person here will have more than one Land Between in his/her life time. What trajectory for life will we come out of that time with?

### **The Models**

Israel failed to remember the love of God for them as he took them out of Egypt. They failed to see the constant care as the cloud and pillar of fire led them. They could not see the devotion of leaders like Moses and Aaron as they interceded for them. They seemed only aware of the discomfort of the moment. They also didn't look at the models they had been given.

Every night as they gathered around the campfires with their children they told the stories of their history and identity – the stories of creation and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They failed to see that their spiritual father, Abraham, traveled the Land Between and mostly modeled how it was to be done. Every child learned the story of Abraham.

(Manion, p. 52) "At the beginning of the story, Abraham was asked to trust God by letting go of the past – by moving away from his people and his country. Now near the end of his journey Abraham is asked to trust God by letting go of his future – releasing his beloved son Isaac through whom the promised blessing is to be fulfilled." When Abraham offered Isaac and God intervened – a picture of what God would do with his own son eventually -- God said, *"Now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*



Israel failed to learn from Abraham's model of how to live in the Land Between, and instead of cultivating a life of trust they responded with perpetual grumbling and complaint. Their spiritual endowment was being wasted. How do **we** deal with the Land Between?

In my past I have known two women named Jean. The first was angry the first time I met her. They came from Chicago to Colorado to get a new start. She was disappointed with her husband and made sure he was reminded of that every day. As her children grew, her anger out of control. She would rehearse the awful things they would do when they grew up. They ended up doing most of them, obedient to her words. 22 years later her husband is dead, she is alienated from most of her children, and is full of bitterness, loneliness, and anger at God and church and whoever else will listen. The pattern is consistent.

The other Jean spent years caring for the husband she adored as he died by inches with Lou Gerick's disease (ALS). She watched her vital and successful husband lose his ability to walk, then to speak, then to breathe on his own, then to swallow – until it claimed him. She worked in her care-giving until exhausted. Yet she never lost her hope, her optimism, her faith, her trust in God. Today she lives alone and we love visiting her. She has one of the sweetest spirits of anyone I know. The pattern is consistent. It is the trajectory, the direction for the rest of life.

What do we do in the Land Between? Do we withdraw emotionally and sink into depression? Do we choose seething rage, boiling just below the surface? Do we choose retail therapy – numbing disappointment by stuffing every storage space with things? Do we reveal in revenge fantasies? We always respond when we experience deep disappointment. The only question is how? The testing in our lives develops perseverance.

It feels to me like we have so many people in the Land Between right now. For the rest of us, we have either been there or we will eventually get there. It may be a time of great pain or loneliness or fear or discomfort or uncertainty. It is a time of huge potential for spiritual transformation and growth. It is a time of huge danger for cynicism and dying faith. I wonder if Israel had really understood the Land Between if it would have taken them 2 years instead of 40 to get to Canaan. Next week we will look at what can happen to leadership in the wilderness.

What do we do in the Land Between? Are we bitter or do we trust in the God who has been there for us in the past?



## **Sermon Number 2: Meltdown**

We talked about this place in our lives where everything that has become normal is interrupted. At some point it happens in every one of our lives, usually many times. I know, when we are there – feeling the pain or grief or anxiety or emptiness or wondering how we will make it to the next step – when we are there we tend to look around and wonder why other people go through life unscathed. At some point it happens to every one of us, and we need some tools to deal with it. Perhaps an illness is diagnosed. A relationship fails. Some sin entered our lives and led us by the throat to a place we thought we were above experiencing.



A job is lost. A loved one dies, and we feel grief that shocks us with its pain. Our children seem to need more than we have to give.

Sometimes the Land Between comes in a moment with a statement or a phone call. Two weeks ago my daughter-in-law was working out of town, walking out of a restaurant on her way to the next meeting when she slipped, tried to catch herself, fell, and broke her leg and ankle in three places with one being a compound fracture. Suddenly, within a second, meetings and plans and business were all replaced with paramedics, ambulance, hospital, surgery, casts, no driving or travel for three months – in the blink of an eye everything that has become normal is interrupted.

Sometimes it is more gradual, like for the man who shared with me recently, *“I look back and now I see my slow decline into false assumptions about myself, wrong values, and then destructive behaviors. Now I have the wakeup call that everything has changed, separated from my wife and children.”*

The Land Between is (Manion p. 19) *“that space where we feel lost or lonely or deeply hurt – and it is fertile ground for our spiritual transformation and for God’s grace to be revealed in magnificent ways... While the Land Between is prime real estate for faith transformation, it is also the space where we can grow resentful, bitter, and caustic. The wilderness where faith can thrive is the very desert where it can dry up and die if we are not watchful.”*

We’ve been walking with Israel in this pilgrimage in the land between – between Egypt and Canaan, between the old normal and the promised land of freedom flowing with milk and honey. We looked at it from the perspective of the people who grumbled against Moses and God when they were tired or hungry or thirsty or just plain sick of manna.

We saw the bitter, dying faith of people who rebelled against Moses and against God, the selective memory loss of people who remembered the Egyptian food while forgetting the endless hours of slavery, the turning away in angry frustration from being teachable and opportunities to grow and trust God into their future. We noted the difference between



rebellion and appealing in trust to God for help in the crisis. This morning I would like to take that a step further.

## **Meltdown**

What do we do when the pain of the experience feels overwhelming? How do we respond when it all feels too heavy, too hard, beyond our strength? What needs to happen when the thought of one more visit with mother in the Alzheimer's unit makes us physically sick? What happens when we move beyond the stage of being sick of manna to emotional meltdown? What do we do when it feels like we cannot go on?

Let's go back to the wilderness with Israel. You may recall from last week when the drama was unfolding in the desert and the complaint about manna intensified into exasperated rage. In Numbers 11:13 the people were screaming: ***"Give us meat to eat!"*** The complaint was directed at Moses.

Let's reflect on what was happening with Moses. You recall that when God called him to this job by the burning bush, Moses was not too excited about the job from the beginning. He said he felt totally inadequate for the task. Along with the people he had seen the incredible power of God, he had seen the glory of God, and he had listened to people who forgot all of that in three days and were sure that God had deserted them and that Moses could not be trusted.

God did all of us who find ourselves in the Land Between a huge favor by recording Moses' prayer in Numbers 11. In these words we see and hear one of the giants of faith on the edge of emotional collapse. Moses erupted with an exhausted rant. He fired questions at God about the unreasonable demands this assignment demanded. He could not carry the weight any more. Moses was so discouraged and weary that he asked to die rather than continue on like this. The Land Between is fertile ground for emotional collapse.



There are two things we need to see. First, there is a difference between Moses' prayer and the people's complaint. It was in Moses' attitude toward God. He went to God, opening his soul to the God he loves. The people were complaining **about** God. Moses just laid his heart bare before God: *"I cannot do this anymore. I cannot carry it."*

Can you identify?

The second thing we need to see is that if we have lived awhile, we have probably been there. We have been to that point of emotional exhaustion, and though we might feel like we are the only ones who ever felt the way we do, in fact we are in good company. *"I can't carry this anymore."*

I've shared with you that I grew up with an alcoholic mother. Looking back I have to admit I thought it was my job to fix her and fix the family. I graduated from Seminary without answers. I went on to get more psychology training, and at 26 years old was a chaplain therapist at Pine Rest Hospital. I was still without answers!

I clearly remember a Sunday night after church going to my office at the hospital to check the admissions sheet and there was her name. It was too much. I couldn't fix her and I couldn't get away. I couldn't carry it any more. After a little help with my emotional meltdown I realized that it was a transforming couple days. I no longer needed to do what only she and God could do.

### **The Language of Pain**

We need to see that we are not alone when we struggle, when we hurt, when we feel like we cannot carry the load any more. God preserved the prayers of spiritual heavyweights to give us a way to respond that is not just giving up, or just getting bitter, or just turning from God, or just running away. In fact, God gave us a language use.

Nearly half of the Psalms that David wrote are laments – the expression of tasting the brutality of life and the goodness of God at the same time. They are the expression of the total



frustration of the Land Between when we feel we cannot carry it anymore, and the trust in a God who can carry it. The Psalms often give us the music and poetry that are the language of pain, frustration and trust. The desperate prayer of Moses finds voice in David's Psalms. In Psalm 13 we heard the repetition of a heart-felt cry:

#### *HOW LONG?*

*"How long, Oh Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?"*

Yet after all the questions in which we can hear his pain, the Psalm ends this way:  
*"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me."*

God gives us the language to cry out; at the same time we feel the trust. The brutality of life and the goodness of God live next to each other in our hearts. Psalm 69 uses the imagery of drowning. Have you ever felt this way? *"Save me, Oh God, for the waters have come up to my neck."*

In Psalm 55, having been betrayed by a close friend, we imagine the King approaching a window ledge. He startles a nesting dove and then there is an explosion of beating wings as the bird heads toward the desert. David, enveloped in chaos, watches the dove grow smaller and smaller as it disappears on the horizon. He whispers, *"I wish I were you."* And a song is born: *"Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."*

God knows the pain and even the meltdowns of the Land Between. He gave us the prayers of some spiritual giants and the language of the Psalms. When we are in the Land Between we would do well to read them, feel them, identify with them; but we need to be sure to hear and feel and repeat the endings. *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me."* How do we know that is



true? How can we be sure we end up there, even while we are in the chaos of the Land Between?

It is all about looking past our pain, our frustration, our loneliness, and broken dreams to what God has done. When we want to be angry or bitter or to lash out or to turn away, we need just a little humility to look past to the end that takes us directly to Jesus Christ who calls to us when we are in that Land Between: *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

You may be in the Land Between where nothing is as it was, or you may be in the most joyful time of your life. Wherever you are today God calls us to trust him because of the love and sacrifice of our Lord. While he was on the cross Jesus experienced the ultimate Land Between – between heaven and hell, between life and death, being sinless he became sin for us. He is what God has done – all the suffering even to death, even death on a cross, so that in the worst that life has to offer he offers himself and his love.

### **Sermon Number 3: The God Who Sees**



The first two parts we have talked about the Land Between where everything that has become normal is interrupted. *“There are times when God allows us – as he did the Israelites and Moses – to suffer need. This need may be physical, emotional, spiritual, material or relational. Such needs have a tendency to either discourage and debilitate us or to drive us into God’s presence where we ask for his guidance and provision. God sees us – everything about us. He knows our need. And he is trustworthy. He wants us to learn to trust him to provide.”* (Manion, p. 102)

We might enter the Land Between in a moment through an accident or tragedy. It may be a diagnosis due to an illness, or a broken relationship, or a sin. It could be a job loss, some huge disappointment, or a falling stock market with the disappearance of retirement security. Many things can take us there.

By looking at Israel in the desert between Egypt and Canaan we saw God’s agenda for them in the wilderness verses their complaints and angry accusations that questioned God’s and Moses’ intentions for them. Last time we saw that emotional meltdown in the Land Between calls us to look at the experience of people just like Moses, along with using the language of the Psalms of lament, and finally hearing Jesus call, *“Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”*

When God called Moses at the burning bush he said, *“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.”* (Exodus 3:7) *“I have seen. I have heard. I am concerned.”* When we are in this place, are those the words we want to hear from God?

God’s plan was to take an unorganized group of people and reveal himself to them, and make them into a nation with himself as their covenant God, and to use their crises to teach them trust and faith as they entered a new land. Time after time their discomfort, weariness, immature faith, and total lack of trust and patience led them to grumble against God and Moses, accusing them of ulterior motives. They failed to trust the God who sees and hears and cares.



God doesn't want us to worry. The call is to be responsible with God's gifts and just trust. Jesus asked the question: *Why do you worry about clothing?* He reminds us who clothed the flowers and the grass. He later reminds us who cares for the birds. This is God's true identity: the God who sees, who hears and who cares.

## **God's Response**

We noted last time that God did not tell his heroes to suck it up and get more faith when they were having their emotional meltdown. How does he respond? God agreed with Moses, he could not handle it alone. It was too heavy to carry. He provided for Moses' need without criticism.

Sometimes the God who sees, who hears, and who cares call us out of the Land Between with opportunities, with another job, with healing. Sometimes he doesn't change the situation yet but gives us strength to carry the load. Often he gives us other people. It may be a special friend who comes along side. It may be people who lead with us like they did with Moses. They are people who share our vision and calling.

It may be people who are compassionate and meet needs and pray. Sometimes God gives us people to help us walk the hard road of the Land Between when we cannot yet see the Promised Land. And today we may be the people called to walk with others in the Land Between. God has agendas for our good. God has plans for our wholeness. God has dreams of our fellowship with him. God call us to peace and joy we have not yet imagined – in his time, at the right time.

The God who sees, hears and cares also responded to the people's anger about meat and Moses' frustration about not being able to supply it. This is one of those wonderful moments where God's love and frustration come together. He told Moses, "OK, I'll give them meat, but not for a day, or a week, but for a whole month." (vs. 18) *"Tell the people that the Lord has heard you when you were wailing that you were better off in Egypt. I will give you meat for a month – meat until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it."*



Moses was incredulous. “How are you going to do that? That wouldn’t work if we killed every one of our livestock.” God shook his head, “Oh Moses, don’t you remember Egypt? ***Is the Lord’s arm too short?***”

Those words came off the page for me. I felt slapped by them. I’m a pastor. I care about you. I want to protect you. I don’t want you to be disappointed or disillusioned. I don’t ever want you to feel I’ve led you astray. Can I tell you today that God sees, hears and cares about you in the Land Between. Do I know he will, without exception, respond for your good as you love and trust him in this place? Do I dare make that unqualified statement? Do I have enough courage and faith to say that, knowing it is not just preacher talk that will eventually leave people disillusioned? Is the Lord’s arm too short?

I’m forced to reflect on my life. When I have felt weak and needy, did he ever desert me? Was there ever a time when looking back I can say he did not come through? Sometimes I would have liked him to hurry a little more!

But no, the Lord’s arm is not too short. Several of you have come to me in the last couple weeks to talk about times in the Land Between where you were unemployed, but never missed a meal. When you were emotionally broke and some people came close with love and support. Another person mentioned feeling hopeless and then feeling God speak in a worship context that changed the perspective. Is the Lord’s arm too short? Can he be faithful today – in this time- in this world- in this age- in your life? Does he still respond to our meltdowns and needs?

So often we want the big, dramatic, powerful event that vindicates us and pull us out of the Land Between so that everyone can see it. More often the answers come in gentle whispers, the Holy Spirit speaking within. Jesus promised the Spirit who would come and live within us and show us the truth.

There are people here, sitting around you perhaps, that we are concerned for because they are in the Land Between today. Or maybe you are the one who is in the wilderness. The



God who called us to be his covenant community together, the God who loves our children and calls his people to faith, the God who sees, hears and cares, this God does and will respond.

His arm is not too short. He will not rebuke, but we need to be ready to hear a gentle whisper, to see his hand in other people, and to see his work in what we need to again find our way to full our way to full covenant life with him. Out of all of this, trust this, believe this: His arm is not too short to help us and be our God. ***Will we trust him?***

**Sermon Number 4: Discipline and Growth**



We began by seeing that the Land Between (our wilderness experience) can happen very quickly, and we suddenly realize that everything we have considered normal is interrupted. Whether we get there in a moment, or sort of slide there with wrong thinking and destructive behaviors, we all have understood that what we do with the Land Between determines the trajectory and the direction for the future.

Angry complaint, bitterness, resentment because we thought we should be entitled and this should not happen to us, rebellious refusal to trust – all of that leads to more of the same. We become bitter, unhappy people alienated from God and others. On the other hand trust, openness to learning and growth, acknowledgment of our pain, our dependency and our faith in God – all of that leads to spiritual and emotional healing and growth, to maturity, peace, and a gentle and teachable spirit. Of course, this is the picture of growing in Christ and learning to have the mind of Christ.

As painful as it may be, we know that the Land Between is a fertile place for experiencing God's grace in intimacy with him. It can also easily become the place where faith dies in bitterness. Without question our times in the Land Between are difficult and can take us to the edge, to emotional exhaustion and meltdown. We looked at the meltdown of Moses.

We saw God's gentle understanding response when they continued to deal with him and did not turn away. We have seen again who our God is: the God who sees, who hears, and who cares – the Lord whose arm is not too short to reach and meet our needs. He often uses his church as a part of his arm.

In order to dig deeply into Israel's experience and to understand our own Land Between times we need to go one very difficult step further. We've noted Israel's refusal to learn, their insistence on wasting the pain, their spirit of complaint and readiness to murmur against God and Moses. *"We were better off in Egypt,"* was the refrain with each crisis. In other words, *"We were better off without you, God."*

These events began within three weeks of crossing the Red Sea, and continued over and over for two years. They were rescued from each crisis. Then, with selective memory loss, they



forgot the power of God's plagues in Egypt and the most recent rescue. There was no open heart of trust and simple request for help as they engaged God.

Each time it was accusation, threat, anger, and resentment because of the crisis. Somehow, somewhere they thought they became entitled to life without trials. It is amazing when we think about it – after a history of slavery you would think these people would understand that life is difficult. We are not entitled.

God has promised, and we need to trust him. For them it was always *"It shouldn't be this way. We should not have the problem, the difficulty, or the crisis. It is God's fault! Moses is to blame. We should be safe, secure and comfortable. We should not have to stretch and grow."* Thus: resentment!

They had no sense that the Land Between was a place of preparation – a place of growth – a place of being groomed for a new place and time with God. Or course, we hear the Apostle in the background asking us: do we see the wilderness we are in? Are we learning and growing? Have we learned from them?

For Israel the wilderness was the place between Egypt and Canaan in which God was working out his plan for them. He was going to take an unorganized slave people who were saturated with the teachings and gods of Egypt and filled with pagan culture to a new identity: God's chosen people, a people set apart with his law, a people who functioned with trust, loyalty, and the joy of his dream of the Promised Land. The goal was an intimate relationship between God and Israel, a relationship of trust.

They had received the Ten Commandments on their way to the Promised Land. They were told who they were to become: a chosen people, a people protected by their God, a people set apart with the character of the commands of a loving God who rescued them, a people known for faithfulness, truth, dependability, and honor. With these kinds of goals, can you begin to sense why God got really angry?

Sometimes I think we underestimate the pervasive brokenness in our lives in contrast to the wonderful dreams God has for us. Like Israel we get so focused on the moment, the



discomfort of the Land Between, the telling ourselves it shouldn't be this way, that we can't trust the Promised Land he is calling us to. We can't see the new freedom, the joy, the wholeness, the peace of intimacy and trust in becoming what we were made to be. Or maybe things are great and we assume it will always be this way – as if we are entitled to it.

God took a loose confederation of tribes exposed to generations of Egyptian idol worship and called them to trust him. What happened when Moses went up to Mt. Sinai to get the Word of God for his people? While God was writing *"You shall have no other gods before me,"* down the mountain the people were building a golden calf to worship. The desert was supposed to serve the purpose of transforming the people of slavery to the people of God. God was asking: will you trust me when you have a limited water supply, when food is in short supply, when you grow tired of the food I have given you? Will you trust me? Unfortunately over and over they said *"No"!*

We need to look at God's discipline and its meaning in their lives and ours. Last week we talked about the people wailing, *"We want meat."* Then, after two years of dealing with this, Moses had his melt down and told God he could not handle it any more. God sent Moses some help, and told the people they would get their meat.

*"But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague."* We are told that many people died. What is this about? Did people have to die? Is this the same God we talked about last week – the one who sees, who hears, and who cares, the Lord whose arm is not too short? Why did God come on so strong? We need to think deeply about discipline. The meal of meat was a spoiled meal.

Manion offers an example that I think we will recognize (p. 127). *"The Johnsons grew increasingly ungrateful about their home. So many of their friends were 'moving up,' but they had to stay in the same house year after year. They felt as if they're driving in the financial slow lane, watching everybody else fly by. And they were tired of waiting. First, they did a little bit of plotting and stretching, then some scheming and more stretching, until finally, they moved into*



*the house of their dreams – with a staggering mortgage taking them close to the edge of what their income could cover.*

*Then there were those expenses to which the Johnsons willingly turned a blind eye – higher taxes, increased insurance, and more furnishings. Just to provide basic furniture for each room pushed them so close to the edge of a financial precipice that they could see the yawning ravine of disaster feet away. Then the word came down that Mr. Johnsons' hours at work had been reduced and that the "guaranteed bonus" wasn't coming through this year. Mrs. Johnson's work was cut from full-time to part-time. They tumbled over the edge. A second missed payment, a late notice on a credit card – the house of their dreams had become a financial nightmare.*

*'Why did we have to have this place?' they asked, sitting in the half-furnished dining room, arguing over which bills to pay and which to delay. They got the meal they demanded, but it was a spoiled meal."*

This discipline for Israel was necessary (1) because of their stubborn refusal to be transformed and (2) because God was trying to save them from disaster.

It had been nearly two years since crossing the Red Sea. They were approaching the borders of Canaan. Still their pattern of complaining, faithlessness, lack of trust was their mode of operation. They were at a moment – the defining moment that was going to go one way or another. It was a moment where they would learn and grow and mature and heal, or the pain would be wasted and the meal would be spoiled. I've seen that moment in my life. I've seen it in the lives of counselees – when we are headed for the Promised Land or back into the wilderness. God's discipline, like when we discipline children, is to prevent a greater pain. It is still his love.

Israel was a disaster waiting to happen, and God tried to get their attention with a 2 x 4 – a plague. Their pain seemed to go wasted. They had an attitude of being entitled and couldn't learn. Just one chapter later in Numbers God told Moses to pick 12 men to go as spies into the land of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey that he had promised his people.



Now is the big test. Two came back singing the praises of the land and the great victory God was about to give them in a new, wonderful land. “We can do this with God.”

The spies saw only the size of the people to be conquered, the height of the walls on the cities, the obstacles that needed to be overcome. Their conclusion in 13:33: *“We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”* The pain was wasted. Their God was too small. They didn’t get the point of the discipline.

They rebelled again and the consequence that God was trying to get them to avoid was 40 years of wandering in the desert until every person who came out of Egypt was dead and God had a new generation to work with. Israel had move from discipline to consequences. The Land Between got a whole lot longer and harder. They wasted the pain.

They were entitled and unteachable. The consequences were devastating – the very thing God tried to help them avoid. They wasted the pain.

There are times when life is difficult for every one of us. We don’t get through life without pain. Pain is the messenger that tells us something is wrong. Whether the pain is physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual – pain tells us something is wrong. There is something we need to do or change or learn or fix or care for. In order to deal with pain – whatever that pain of the Land Between is – in order to deal with it we have to own it.

If I tell you my hip should not hurt, there is nothing I can do about it. I can only redeem the pain by dealing with its cause when I own that it hurts. Then there is hope for healing and growth and a new time.

If our pain is due to a physical illness, I need medical help, trust in God, and letting others love us. If we deny it or decided that we are entitled so it shouldn’t be there its cause will probably eventually destroy us. If pain in a relationship is not dealt with, the cause of the pain will eventually destroy the relationship.

If the pain of guilt is not owned, confessed and dealt with it will eventually destroy our relationship with God and usually others. Pain must be redeemed and owned and the cause



dealt with – that is the beginning of growth. That is the beginning of transformation in us. That is the beginning of our being able to walk with God and others in the Land Between. And all of that is possible because our God knows and is ready to come to us to offer forgiveness and healing in Jesus Christ.

He walked our path. He lived the Land Between to the ultimate on Calvary. Our God is ready when we open ourselves and surrender to him to lead us to truth through his Holy Spirit.

As we try to put all of this together we see a series of statements. Every one of us has been, is, or will experience the Land Between – that place where all we have considered normal has changed. It is the place between what was and what will be.

The future will be determined by how we handle this land between. It was for Israel. It is all about whether we deal with the pain and struggle in the context of engaging God and trusting him, or if we see ourselves as entitled – people who should not experience this setback, people who have the right to be angry and resentful and bitter.

It all depends on whether we are headed for the bitterness of staying in the desert or moving to the “promised land” where there is peace with God. We are either growing and learning and redeeming the pain, or we are rebellious, angry, and faithless. Then the pain is wasted.

In our learning from Israel all of this is about a “faith check.” Athlete’s talk about a “gut check” when things get difficult and it takes courage to move forward. This is about a “faith check”.

Where is the base of our security, our anticipation for the future, our hope, our joy, and our faith? Is it in money? The stock market? Other people’s approval? Our skills? Family? Government? Race? Status? Power? Our strength and will? With any of these the Land Between will be a rough road.

The God who sees and hears and cares, the God whose arm is not too short, the God who loves to the point of death on a cross and resurrection, the God who lives in us and walks



with us through the Holy Spirit calls to us as he called to Israel. *“Trust me. Grow toward my dream for you. Get ready for the new Promised Land. Learn from the pain. Be my chosen people. Love me and each other there.”*