

The Long Descent: Falling into Domination 3.1.09

Hello everybody. We're in the midst of a sermon series we're calling "The Long Descent," talking about what theologians call "the fall of humanity," the event in Genesis chapter 3 where Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil...chose to distrust their creator and chose to know the difference between good and evil by experiencing evil. And the image of God, the glory they were created for, was broken in them. We've covered how that one act by those first humans began a long descent for all of humanity from the love and community and creativity and goodness they were created to experience as creatures made in God's image into a new reality radically altered by sin.

A long descent that leads to alienation – a sense of disconnection from God and those who should be close to us. A descent that leads to frustration both in our work as well as in our desire to control and inability to control others. A long descent that leads to isolation – as Brian spoke of last week when he spoke of how the way back into the Garden of Eden, into innocence, into pure and trusting relationship with God, that way back to the Garden has been barred because of Adam and Eve's act of defiance. We live now outside of Eden and we are unable to get back in on our own.

This week will finish up our series about understanding our brokenness from the perspective of the fall by looking at the end result of sin's long descent - domination. Falling into domination.

I'm calling this message falling into domination, because that word illustrates something about sin's

influence on us that I think sometimes we like to forget. You see, we like to think of ourselves as free here in the United States. We like to think that we just look at the choices in front of us and choose well or poorly totally independently. Our whole government structure is based on the idea of freedom of choice, right? There's this great optimism that individuals, given basic human rights and dignity, will choose good for themselves and society. Did anybody take American history in Jr. High?

Now on the one hand, this idea of freedom is fabulous. I love the freedom we have here in this country, and I love the idea of personal responsibility... that we are individually free to choose, and thus responsible for the choices we make. That wouldn't have been the understanding of, say, China or other Marxist countries during the period of time when they were embracing that philosophy more heavily. They saw the world much more in terms of class struggle... that individuals are carried up in the struggles and larger dynamics of economic and class struggle. Under that system, individuals were thought of as being trapped in an unjust system, enslaved, really, by something larger than themselves. The value was placed on a larger class of people, not so much on one person. The individual was not very important in the grand scheme of things.

So I do prefer, honestly, the value that our society places on individual people. But in some senses, the view we have of ourselves as moral free agents, able to choose right or wrong as equally weighted choices in any given situation, is a little naïve. According to the Bible, our inherited state is not freedom, but slavery.

Slavery to sin. That is our inheritance from Adam and Eve.

Let's pray.

Let's start with our main Bible passage for today. It comes from the book of Romans, chapter 7. If you have your Bibles, you can turn there with me. We're going to read through a good chunk of this chapter because it really cuts to the heart of what sin's domination looks like in our life. This is what our lives look like under sin's domination. Paul starts out by talking about the law – the 10 commandments and related teaching that God gave the Jewish people to show them how to live rightly.

Romans 7: 14-24

So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God’s law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this body of sin and death?

Let’s read that last paragraph again...**re-read**...Can anyone relate to that?

We all can, can’t we? Or at least we can if we have ever tried to live by any sort of objective standard. We want to think of ourselves as good people, but whenever we try to actually do right over the long haul, we find ourselves enslaved by something inside of us that sabotages all of our efforts and turns us back toward selfishness or deception or that addiction or other destructive behavior. The Bible would call this our “sinful nature.”

I learned something interesting this week about that phrase “this body of sin and death.” Scholars believe that Paul might have been referring to a practice in the Roman Empire where a person who was guilty of killing somebody else would be punished by tying the dead body of the person he had killed to him. Then the killer would be condemned to drag that dead body around with him until he himself died. Sometimes this would happen just from the exhaustion of having to drag this load, sometimes the body could become diseased and he would succumb to those diseases. Either way, if this is what Paul is referring to, doesn’t that paint a powerful picture of our situation? We are all

dragging around with us a “body of sin and death” because of sin’s domination of our lives, which brings me to the first of a series of thoughts about falling into domination.

Without Jesus and the intervention of God’s GRACE, we are, every one of us, under the domination of sin.

We are all in that situation that Paul described so eloquently in Romans 7. Wanting to do right, we often find ourselves under the influence of a strange compulsion toward the very things we don’t want to do. I think if we asked for a show of hands, we would find that every person in this room has found themselves doing something they don’t really want to do and they know they should not do...something destructive that drags them away from God and away from other people.

It could be eating way beyond what your body needs. It could be lying. I read an article this week about a woman who tried to be absolutely honest for one week and failed miserably. Instead of concluding she was a mess, she decided lying was a helpful practice after all. Your destructive choice could be using a chemical or alcohol to soothe the pain. It could be crossing a sexual boundary because it seems ridiculous to trust that God is really going to care about your fulfillment. It could be, as was the case with me this week, simply choosing procrastination – playing video games or watching television when things truly needed to get done. It could be any number of things, but we are all, apart from God’s grace, enslaved to this sinful nature we have roaring about inside of us. We are not free.

This "sinful nature" has been passed on to us by those who have come before us, beginning with Adam and Eve. We are all slaves to sin by choice but also by default. We have inherited a sinful nature. It is a heritage. Just as much as we inherit blue eyes or dark hair, or freckles or near-sightedness, we have a spiritual heritage. We are greatly influenced, for better or for worse, by the spiritual choices of those who have come before us. We see this in families, don't we? If you come from a family where there has been alcohol abuse, you are much more likely to abuse alcohol. Obviously, this has something to do with your experiences growing up in that house, but interestingly, geneticists are discovering more and more that a proclivity toward alcohol abuse or other addictive sins is actually genetically inherited as well. Just this week, I had the opportunity to talk to a couple of people who are struggling with things that their families have struggled with for generations. They are living the reality of the curse of sin being visited on the children to the third and fourth generations.

That's a bit of a challenge to our individualistic mentality, isn't it? We like to think of ourselves as those moral free agents, free from outside influences. But the Bible doesn't seem to share that view, or at least not entirely.

We see this generational inheritance aspect to sin in Adam and Eve. We've been looking at how Adam and Eve chose to break trust with God and try to change the balance of power in the relationship by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the next generation, their son Cain murders his younger brother

Abel because God appeared to favor Abel, and Cain felt threatened.

If we look at Abraham, he told a couple of half-truths about Sarah, his wife, being his sister so that powerful kings wouldn't kill him to get his wife. Now those were half-truths because she was in reality his half sister, but he said that intentionally to deceive. Isaac, Abraham's son, told the same lie about his wife, this time not bothering with the half-truth part of it. By the time we get to Jacob, Abraham's grandson, the guy is so good at deception, he is actually known as Jacob, the deceiver.

I was reading through the Bible reading plan for this week, and I came to Exodus 20: 1-6, which is the 10 commandments passage.

Then God gave the people all these instructions:

"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. "You must not have any other god but me. "You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.

Guys, whether we like it or not, we are all, in our nature, slaves not only to our own sins, but also to the sinful nature that we have inherited, and also to specific sins passed down to us from our predecessors. Does that mean we really don't have a choice? No. It means the odds are stacked against us. We are more likely to sin in that direction than not.

And here's the bad news about sin: sin brings death to us. Sin brings death. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because he knew this truth: being cut off from relationship with God through sin means we are like plants cut off from the sun. Though everything might look ok for a short while, without sunlight, plants die. They are designed to receive their life from the sun. We are designed to find our life in intimate relationship with our creator. When we are cut off from loving relationship with God through sin, we die, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

When Adam and Eve ate that fruit in the garden, they were buying in to a lie. We can look at them from the distance of time and wonder what possessed them to believe the serpent? And yet, don't we all still buy into those lies at times? What did the serpent say to them? "Surely you won't die." And yet we know where believing that lie got them. And we know where believing that lie gets us.

Think of the college student who gets in the car after having consumed a few beers and causes an accident that takes the life of a young mother. Think of the death experienced not only by her family, but also by the young man who has to spend time in jail, giving

up his shot at a degree and watching his friends pass him by.

Or maybe the death is experienced more slowly or more on an emotional/spiritual level. Think of the young girl watching her family fall apart due to infidelity and the death that that brings to her sense of security and emotional openness.

Or a friend I have who got in a brief fist fight in a less-than-stellar moment. Because of that, he lost his job caring for disabled adults and ended up at a job where his fellow employees encouraged him to head back down the marijuana road. Heading down that road brought death to many good things in his life.

Romans 6:23 tells us the wages of sin is death. It is still true that eating that fruit will bring death, and we still hear that serpent's voice telling us, "surely you won't die." And we still buy into it, and we begin to die.

Now at this point, some of you are probably asking yourselves, "Gee, why did I even come to church today? Who needs this bad news?" Right?

Here's why we are spending some time telling it like it is: if we don't perceive the reality of the situation we're in, we will not really understand or appreciate God's solution. If we don't perceive that we are spiritually enslaved...powerless to escape the domination of sin, then why reach out for anything beyond ourselves?

Have you ever heard stories about people in natural disasters who refuse to leave their house, even as the floodwaters rise or the fire races toward them? And all along help is available to them. But they don't perceive their need for it. They think in a very literal sense – "Surely I won't die." It can't be all that serious.

The truth is that on our own, every single one of us is cursed by sin and death.

So what is God's solution for our domination by sin? What has God done to free us from this terrible curse? Let's look at what Paul writes right after he asks that agonizing question, "who will rescue me from this body of sin and death?" Romans 7:25-8:3

Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!....

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.

Here is what we discover about God's grace toward us. When we were slaves to the law of sin, Jesus took our death on himself and gave us his life. When our sin had accused us in spiritual court, and we were pronounced guilty, Jesus died our death so we could be set free. And now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Can you imagine what it would feel like if you were traveling in some foreign country and broke a law for which the sentence was death by firing squad? When that judge pronounced your sentence, how would you react? In a very real sense, we are all in that situation. Every one of us is guilty of sin, for which the penalty is death.

Now what if that same judge looked at you with love, came down off his bench, took your handcuffs off,

placing them on his own wrists, and put his judges robe around your shoulders. And then said to the courtroom, "I will take this punishment. Let this person go free. I give my life freely in his place." And then walked out of the courtroom and was shot.

That's essentially what Jesus did for us. He was entirely innocent and served our sentence of death. Here's what Isaiah 53:3-6 says,

He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down.

And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins!

But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed.

⁶ All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own.

Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.

When we are condemned by the law of sin and death, Jesus offers his life so we can go free.

When we are enslaved by our spiritual heritage of sin and death, Jesus offers us the opportunity to be adopted into a new family. Transfer of family – from Adam's to Jesus's – being "born again" as Jesus explains to Nicodemus in John 3. When we receive Jesus and what his death and resurrection means for us, we are

born again...not into an earthly family, but into God's family through his Holy Spirit who comes to live inside of us. So instead of a heritage of sin and broken trust, we can really begin to live a family heritage of joyful obedience and tangible closeness.

I had a friend in college...we'll call him Stan. Stan had grown up in a family that had some great aspects to it. His family went to church regularly, were kind to each other, good citizens, etc. But Stan also remembers being exposed at an early age to pornography. His mom and dad had gotten married while in college because she had gotten pregnant. So there were some negative spiritual dynamics going on that weren't so healthy. At 6 he remembers thinking about older girls in a sexual way. When I met Stan in college, he was deeply troubled by his inability to keep his thoughts going in a pure direction.

Stan was troubled enough by this that he went for prayer ministry with some women who regularly prayed for people to be released from spiritual oppression. They prayed with him for a while, having him repent from and reject the evil that had dominated him, and asking that Jesus' blood would cover him and free him from the power those sins had had over his life. And he experienced significant freedom...so much so that we, his friends, could physically see the difference in his face. We could see the freedom. And the power of those sins to dominate his life was broken. Jesus had brought tangible life to him. He had traded a heritage of domination by sin for a heritage of peace and life in Jesus.

We're going to go back into a time of worship, here. So I'll have the worship team come back up. Here's a

final thought I'll leave you with. If you have been following Jesus for any length of time, the ideas in this message will not be new to you. They are the core of the good news. But here's my question for you...are you experiencing all of the freedom from sin's domination that Jesus paid so dearly for? If not, take the opportunity today to talk to God about that...maybe come up and pray with somebody on the prayer team, maybe ask somebody in your small group to be praying with you. If you are here today and this message I have shared rings true in your heart for the first time, if you recognize you are not able to fix yourself, and you are ready to reach out for a solution that's beyond you, why not begin that forever relationship with Jesus today? Anybody on the prayer team would be thrilled to guide you through that process.

Either way, here's what the Bible I think says to all of us: (2 Cor 6:1-2) "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Don't spend another minute under the domination of sin and death. Receive God's power, presence, and the grace he offers you today.