

Series: TIME FOR TRUTH—July 2, 2006

**THE TRUTH ABOUT LIFE AFTER DEATH
Genesis 3:1-19; Ephesians 2:1-10**

I. INTRO

- A. How many of you have ever in your lives been lost? It's a pretty common experience. The **real** question is, what do you **do** when you get lost? Now, this could be very cathartic--helpful, cleansing. So we're all going to do kind of a mass confession this morning with a little quiz. The question is, what's it like in your car, what kind of atmosphere is there when **someone** gets lost--not necessarily you, of course.
1. I have four descriptive words in mind: Blame; denial; gadget freak; and **seek and ask.**
 - a. How many of you have someone in your car who blames someone else in the care for getting lost? **Someone**, not necessarily the driver, of course, was not watching the map.
 - b. How many of you would describe the atmosphere in your car as **denial? Someone** just figures if they make enough turns, keep driving their trusty steed will help them find the way home? After all, there are **many** ways home!
 - c. How many of you would describe that atmosphere in your car as *ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find* You actually stop and ask for directions or reads the map?
 - d. How many of you are gadget freaks with **Global Positioning Systems** in your cars so you don't have to live in the mortal world of lostness any more?
 2. Just about everyone here raised their hand when I asked who has ever been lost. Now, take a look at someone near you. Maybe you've been waiting to look at them--you could just sneak in a little wink.
-What does "getting lost" say about all them? Well, it says they're normal. We humans tend to be directionally challenged. Some more than others!
- B. It's interesting. Jesus, when choosing a word to describe human beings in general--human beings who needed Him--needed what He would do for everyone, He described them as **lost**. Not stupid, not necessarily wicked--just **lost**. He made it clear that his major mission on this planet was to **seek and save** the lost. Lost in what way? Well--lost to God. Separated from Him; separated from **Home**.
1. In the world of 21st century Toronto--the world of pavement--getting lost is more of a nuisance than anything. But if you watch the news, it becomes obvious that if you get lost in the wrong place, you can die.
 2. Being "lost" in the spiritual sense that Jesus put it is the most **tragic** form of lostness. **Staying** lost means never finding your way back to God--and to spiritual safety.
-The responses to spiritual lostness parallel, in many ways, the responses from the little quiz above.
 - a. Some people, instead of finding their way, focus on **blaming**, whether it's God, their parents, a church.

- b. Some people live in **denial**. Who? Me? Lost? Of course not! I'm just taking the **scenic** route!
It doesn't **really** matter which road you take, you'll eventually get there!
- c. And some people get help. They admit they've lost their way ask God for direction.
3. I want you to think about the world you and I live in. Think of how business tends to operate and what the bottom line is. Would you describe it as **lost** or **found**?
-Think of the way the political system works most of the time—who it celebrates, who it crushes, how it makes its decisions—think it's **lost** or **found**?
-Think of the status quo in the world—where a huge chunk of the world lives on less than \$2 a day and over 100 million people have no home, no shelter whatsoever—while the top chunk lives in luxury and is convinced it needs more. Think the way our world operates is **lost** or **found**?
-Think about the value system that gets blasted at us every day and what it says about rightness, what it says about reality, what it says about who's important and who isn't—think the value system is **lost** or **found**?
1. I think most people would agree that things are pretty badly screwed up in our world. And yet, this issue of **lostness** is without a doubt the single most counter-intuitive, offensive issue that the Bible reveals.
-And the reason, of course, is that it gets personal. The world doesn't change by angels stepping in—one to set businesses straight, one to set governments straight, one to straighten out Hollywood and Bollywood and Rogers.
-Jesus came to bring His Kingdom and change with world—one life at a time. He said that the issue of a world gone wrong is a **personal** one.
2. So, what did Jesus come to do? Well, he came to made a way for us to come into God's Kingdom—and under **His** leadership. And as He changes individuals like you and me—He changes all the places and people we touch through our love, goodness, kindness, patience and grace.

-The status quo in the world is changed—redeemed—one person at a time through those who are willing to follow the leadership of Jesus Christ. This morning, I'm going to ask you to think about three questions—and make a decision:
*The first is: Was Jesus right? That **all** people are lost and that **He** is the way back to God?
*The second issue is: Am **I** lost or found?
*The third question is: What does God want to do through **found** people to bring His Kingdom? To bring "up there"... "down here?"

II. THE TRAIN WRECK: WHAT HAPPENED?

- A. Most of you affirmed that we live in a world that's lost it's way. I don't think that news is radically new. In fact, I don't think anyone can see the effects of Nazism and 9-11 and ethnic purging and AIDS and extreme poverty and not agree that **something** is **terribly wrong** with our world.
1. I think the disagreement comes over **why**? Some people would say, "It's an **institutional** problem—created by corporate greed and bad government leaders

and poor management.” And that’s partly true. But what’s behind the institutions? Jesus’ answer was that all brokenness starts personally and internally.

2. Right at the beginning, the Bible tells us exactly what happened. You can read about it in Genesis 3. Let me net it out:
 - a. God creates a perfect planet--a perfect context to live--and then He creates two perfect people. And He gives them an amazing gift. The gift of free will. The choice to love and trust him--or to **not** love and trust Him. And they chose **not** to—and believed the enemy of their souls instead. And it’s gone downhill ever since.

-This issue was *not* the brand of fruit they tasted; it was believing what Satan had to say about God. Specifically, it was mistrust; of God’s love, God’s motivation, and God’s wisdom.
 - b. If you read the record, you find out that this decision to defect **twisted** all of creation--it cursed what God had intended to be **immensely** good. Even though this planet, and what we see in the animal kingdom and the nobility of humans is intricate and breathtakingly beautiful—it is a **shadow** of what it once was. We haven’t evolved; we’ve **de**-evolved.
2. The Bible makes it clear that no one has escaped without being damaged. The book of Romans says that we all tend to turn away from God and what He says about life. We want to do life our own way—and that damages our lives and the lives of others.
 - a. And then there's this amazing statement in vs. 23...**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23 NIV)**. That’s a fascinating statement, because the word **all** includes everyone from Hitler to Mother Theresa. What this is saying is that God’s standard for life is perfection—and we all fall short.

-Look at this scale for a minute, and it will give you an idea of what passage is saying.
 - b. If you were to talk to Mother Theresa—or Billy Graham—you would find that both are very modest about where they would put themselves on this scale—despite how magnificently God has used them. The point is that this magnetic pull toward rebellion and running from God has affected everyone. From the earliest days of life.

-I started attending church 3 times a week when I was 2 weeks old--I was taught the Bible, knew about Jesus--I **bleed** this stuff, but I can't remember a time when I **didn't** have a rebellious, wayward heart that seemed magnetically drawn toward doing wrong. If you’ve ever raised a child, you know **exactly** what I’m talking about.

-How many of you parents had to teach your child how to grab things and say **Mine!** Or how to scream, throw themselves on the floor when they didn't get their own way? It comes **naturally**.

3. There's a word the Bible consistently uses to describe our spiritual health apart from Christ. Anyone know what that word is? **Death!** Listen to a passage that gets very specific about this problem:

Once you were dead, doomed forever because of your many sins. You used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passions and desires of our evil nature. We were born with an evil nature, and we were under God's anger just like everyone else. (Eph. 2:1-3 NIV).

4. According to the Bible, it's very clear: spiritually, we're a total write-off. It's not saying that we're ax-murderers, child-molesters or horrible people. It means that we're infected with and carriers of a spiritual disease called **sin**. We **fall short** of what God originally intended. Not only are we powerless to deal with it ourselves—it is spiritually fatal. We've taken a hit in the engine room--we're dead in the water--unable, and usually unwilling to move toward God.
- a. Most people would say that, in this condition, they're doing their own thing. This passage says that we're actually under the influence of someone who hates God and hates us: Satan..
- b. That's why, for some of you, choosing to be a Christ-follower is so **huge**. That is why most of us struggle with talking about our faith. There is this massive, invisible, spiritual war over who the people of this planet will align themselves with. And Satan has the home court advantage.
6. That's why **lostness**—and the brokenness it brings is so profound. It affects **everyone**. And over thousands of years, it has done a **lot** of damage. It is behind all the pain and regret—and unspeakable things that go on in our world every minute of every day.

-It gets worse. Because of our sin, we are separated from God. Let me draw and illustration I've used before--a kind of spiritual grand canyon between us and a God who is absolutely pure and righteous--repelled by sin. And unless something changes, it will separate us from Him forever.

- a. Let me tell you what I mean by that. Heaven is the presence of God--the epitome of all that is beautiful, right, good, pure, healthy, joy-filled, peaceful. But we can't come into his presence without dealing with the sin issue. Why? Well, because it is the very thing at work destroying everything He created, everything He loves.

-Most of us have had someone in our world touched by cancer—as I have recently with my mother. She had a scan this past week to see if the cancer is anywhere else besides her lung. What if the oncologist said, "Well, it's **mostly** only in the lung. That's the big one. But there's just a teeny, tiny spot of it in the liver." Is that good news? No. That's horrible news—because cancer is not content to stay small. And neither is sin. The only thing that will keep earth's disaster from over-taking Heaven is if sin is completely and finally dealt with.

- b. Friends, if we choose **not** to deal with the sin issue, the only other alternative is isolation from God's presence forever. That's what hell is. Separation from God.

-According to Jesus—and He taught more about Hell than He did Heaven—hell means isolation—not just from God—but from all the good things that come from Him—love, tenderness, companionship, friendship, sexual pleasure, beauty—everything.

- c. Jesus' term for it was **perish**. He came so that **no one** would have to experience it. Remember John 3:16? ***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him WOULD NOT PERISH but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV).***

- B. Friends, the Good News is that Jesus gave his life as the ONE **SOLUTION** for the sin problem. It's not something we can earn by living a decent life. We can't find it by following our heart and sincerely believing whatever it leads us to. Listen to what God did for us. Eph. 2:4ff:

C.

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so very much, that even while we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's special favor that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ, and we are seated with him in the heavenly realms--all because we are one with Christ Jesus.

And so God can always point to us as examples of the incredible wealth of his favor and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us through Christ Jesus. God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it (Eph. 2:4-9 NLT).

1. God saw the awful mess we were in, stepped onto this planet through Jesus Christ to forever pay the price of sin--death--on a cross. It's the **only** way.

-And now, the ball is in my court...**your** court. The Bible says that you and I...everyone, really...has to make a decision. What are we going to do with Jesus Christ?

- a. This truth about our lostness—and Jesus as the only solution is totally **counter-intuitive**. When lostness is mentioned, most people's pride kicks in about then. "Lost? Not me! Sure, I've done some messy things, but I'm basically a good, kind person. I'm no worse than anyone else!"
- b. Let me tell you what the alternative solutions are to receiving the life Jesus died to give. It's to either live a perfect life yourself or pay for your own sins. Anyone who hasn't ruined the perfect life thing yet? I have—and I don't want to have to pay for my own sins.
-Anyone here who's lived a perfect life—even for one week? Anyone here interested in paying for your own sins?

2. Let's get even **more** offensive and counter-cultural. If the Bible is true, and if Jesus Christ did in fact come to this planet, and if He was, in fact, God in flesh, there **is** no other way to Heaven except through Him. That's not something others attributed to Him years after He lives. In our world—survey says—"there are many paths to God."

-Jesus says, "I am the **way** and the **truth** and the **life**. **NO ONE** comes to the Father except through me." Notice that He didn't say, "I am **a way**." That is precisely what got Jesus crucified.

3. And of course, this raises another huge issue—especially for us as Canadians where tolerance is such an important value: What about people of other religions, other faiths? Well, it raises the specific question of where they got their belief system—and how their belief system tackles what is clearly the biggest problem in our world—sin.
 - a. The Bible says that sin is not basically a dietary issue or even basically a moral issue; sin is defiance and rebellion against God and what He says. The solution is to restore the relationship with God—and that Jesus paid for our sin so that could happen. It's sin that offends God and separates us from Him.
 - b. My understanding of other religions is that they are helpful in some ways, but don't offer a solution to the sin problem. Some people in our culture say, "Well, all paths lead to God—everyone knows that!" The problem is that each faith says radically different thing. Sometimes opposite things—about how to come to God and how to please him. They can't all be right!
4. Let me tell you what I **want** to believe. I **want** to believe that every person on this planet will eventually make it to Heaven. That's what I **want**. But my conclusion after reading the and studying the Bible for 30 years is that what Jesus has done on the cross to pay for sin is the only way back to God. If Jesus is not God in flesh—and the only way back—then He lied to His Followers. And if He lied, He's not worth following at all.

-There's another problem with believing that all the people on this planet are going to somehow make it back to God apart from Jesus. If that's true, why would God send His Son to die a messy, bloody, excruciating death on a cross--and say that He was dying for the sins of the world?

-If people could be saved simply because they are ignorant of the truth of Jesus, then why would God's Son tell his followers to go everywhere and risk their lives to tell everyone the good news? That would be like a death sentence to those who refused to choose Jesus as their forgiver and leader. People would be better off **not** to know.

-To say that people can just take any route to God—just so they're sincere—totally contradicts everything the Bible says. In fact, no **other** religion teaches that either.
6. Now, one of the immediate issues that gets raised is, "That's not fair! God can't be fair and do that!"

-And so we are forced us to answer the same question the original couple was faced with: **Can God be trusted?** I believe that God is the kindest, tenderest, most loving and compassionate Being in the universe, and that He can be trusted to do what's right. Do I understand it all? No. But I **do** know that He has called me to believe—and to spread the news.

From everything I see, God has lovingly intervened in history to keep this whole planet from self-destructing; at great cost to Himself, He sent His Only Son to make a way when there **was** no way. I can't improve on that—and I don't believe anyone else can.

-Know what happens? Sometimes people get all wound up on all the philosophical implications of this issue and never deal with the issue between **themselves** and God. So, I want to ask you: What are you doing with the truth you **do** know--about sin and salvation?

III. THE MASSIVE IMPLICATIONS

I believe this truth has **massive** implications for me and you.

A. First, there may be some of you here who have heard enough to understand lostness, understand what Jesus has done, and to understand that your debt has been paid in full--you've just never really acted on it. Maybe you didn't know how. Maybe you're never really thought about it.

1. To make what I say as clear as possible, I'm going to continue with the imagery I gave you before—of the chasm between us and God created by sin. The Bible says:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23 NIV). If you want to cross the chasm of death, you need a bridge.

a. There are a lot of people in this world who **mistakenly** believe that you can build your own bridge to get to God, to get to Heaven. Whole **religions** are built on this premise. Go to church, read holy books, light candles, do good deeds, pray, give money, meditate, go on special diets. These are sometimes good things to do, but you CANNOT build a bridge to God with them.

b. There's only one bridge. Jesus Christ. That's what the verse I quoted from Romans is saying. The eternal life we long for is a gift—and it comes through Jesus Christ.

c. The cross Jesus died on canceled the debt of our sin, and made a way to God for **everyone**—no matter what they've done or religion they've followed.

2. This morning I think some of you may be on the far side of the bridge, and I want to ask you: What are you going to do about this gulf between you and God? Are you going to try to do a running broad jump—or pole vault? Are you going to just pretend there is no canyon? Are you going to try to make your own bridge--something Jesus said is impossible--or will you bow your knees before God, admit your sin, and just accept the gift of eternal life Christ died to give? What, right now, is keeping you from crossing this bridge?

-You know what you have to do to cross the bridge? Just come to Jesus Christ and admit that you fall short of what He wants and expects. TALK TO HIM! Invite Him to be your Forgiver, your Leader, and your best Friend. Trust that what He

went through on the cross was enough to pay for your sins—and accept the gift of eternal life He offers. That can happen **right now!** God is a whisper away.

- B. There's something really important I need to tell you about this life. It's not a form of life insurance—or fire insurance. You know, the basic minimal requirement to get into Heaven. Receiving this gift means entering Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

Receiving life from God is not about getting your pass to Heaven—then sitting around waiting to die. It's about being a part of the establishment of God's Kingdom here. In short, making a difference in the effects of sin on this planet. Righting wrongs. **That's** when life gets exciting—when through your life, God begins doing powerful, life-changing things. Random acts of kindness! Bringing "Up there"—"Down here!"

-One of the main barriers to that is the...**dark side**. To me—and to you!

1. A number of years ago we took our former pet, Luci on vacation with us. We had good luck fishing that year, and so, after cleaning the fish, I threw the fish carcasses in the weeds for the raccoons to eat. A day or so later, Luci, who had been roaming around, came up to us--and she looked a little oily--her hair matted. -When she got closer, we could barely stand the smell of her. See, dogs have this instinct to roll in things that will mask their odor. As much as we loved Luci, she was **magnetically** drawn into total depravity-- to roll in those stinking fish carcasses. So, I took her to the lake and scrubbed her good. "Bad dog! Don't you **dare** follow your instincts again!"

-Even though I buried what I thought were the remaining rotting fish carcasses, she rolled in them again. Two more times! One on the very day we were leaving. She had no problem finding them!

2. Now, I probably gave you more details than you wanted—but the point of the story is—and there **is** a point, even after coming to Christ **we are magnetically drawn to the rotting, stinking things of this world-system**. Things we hate. Things that make it tough for those who love us to be around us!

-And if you don't understand that, you will not grow and you can potentially destroy your life. I'm **telling** you--sin **never** makes sense. I've watched too many friends destroy their lives—people who **knew** the dangers of sin and **talked** about the dangers of sin. Don't get over-confident.

3. What do we need to do? Well, don't say, **Not me!** Every day of our lives we need to admit to God, "Today it **could** be me! **HELP!** And He will!

-The point is—**don't live in spiritual denial**. Humble your heart every day. Listen to God.

If you know you have weaknesses in certain areas--and you'd better know what your weaknesses are--then **take wide detours**. If you fall, ask for God's forgiveness, get up and keep going. And carefully watch how you think about and treat others.

-Jesus said that **his words** had a sanctifying--purifying influence on his disciples. So, get to know His counsel on life. Read God's Word—and be accountable to others in a small group—ask them for help in living well—and **finishing** well!

4. Can I ask you a kind of pointed question? Where, right now, are you potentially in danger? Is there a little flirting going on that you **know** isn't right? Is there some dangerous stuff going on with your computer? Is there a streak of greed that tempts you to cheat around the edges? Are other people frequently the topics of your conversation? Don't live in denial. Don't say **Not me!** Be honest.

- C. This issue of lostness had **huge** implications for this church--and therefore, for you and me. There are lots of good things we can do to see injustices corrected, to bring comfort to those who suffer, and to be part of what God is doing to make the crooked path of this world made straight. One of the main ways God is working to right wrongs is by reclaiming leadership I people's lives; helping people first find grace for their own sin—and then offer grace to the world.

-Most of the people you see and pass in the world have no idea that this is God's plan, and that it includes them. And unless something changes—they may pass from this life and never give eternity a solitary thought.

With that in mind, how many of you this morning think it would be perfectly okay for a church to concentrate all of its energy on making the people it already has better, more educated Christ-followers?

1. When He walked here, Jesus was a friend to people who were the farthest from God; His mission was to seek and save the lost. That's why the mission of The Olive Branch is to be a safe community for the undecided to decide and become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We have to be both a safe community for the undecided—**and** a place to fully engage the darkness of this world as redeemed people.
2. I know someone who **would** like this to be a place that never reaches out to the undecided. It's the same one who lies to people about their own lostness; the one who lies to us and says, "It's okay. I wouldn't get too worried about others. There's plenty of time—besides, you're a busy person." Jesus said that Satan is a liar. Like, it's his native language, and he can't speak the truth. Jesus said that he **came** to seek and save the lost. And we continue His mission.
3. God has given us this amazing opportunity to be a part of redeeming the brokenness and pain and lostness of this planet. I know it all seems overwhelming--but you know what He does? He uses weak, frail, scared nervous people--just like you and me. Eternities get changed and the world gets transformed--one life at a time.

-And God uses a very simple thing called friendship. Between 75 and 90% of the people who come to Jesus Christ do so because of a relationship with a neighbor, relative, or business acquaintance.

-And **you can do it!** God has sent you right where you are. If you'll make time and space in your life--if you'll offer yourself to God and say, "Use **me** God. Guide me, give me strength; help me to invite other and talk about what you've done for

me." And He will. He will. Jesus still turns our bag lunches into banquets—if we put them in his hands. The question is--will **you?** Will you prioritize your life, cut out some of your busyness, and open your heart up to what God would want to do? Would you ask God to let you see this world through **His** eyes?

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. You know, it could be that this morning will be the defining moment in your life. You know about the gulf between you and God. You know you cannot build your own bridge. You know that the results of sin are death. You know that Christ, through His death on the cross for your sins, has made a way. You've just never crossed the bridge. I want to ask you this morning--what could possibly stand in the way of you coming right now--receiving the life God longs to give you--coming home?

- B. This morning, I'm going to pray--and I'm going to invite you to pray with me--and to cross the bridge.