<u>Series</u>: *BETWEEN THE TREES* - March 14, 2010

A PLACE, A PEOPLE, A TRAINWRECK
Genesis 3-11

1. Is there anyone here who, so far, has made ***all*** good choices? Good, the playing field is level. Is there anyone here who has ever ***bad*** choice? How many of you are sitting ***next*** to that bad choice?

   -I've made some bad choices—where the effects are very limited. Like, ordered something at a restaurant I didn't like. I've also eaten things that didn't like ***me—***and the effects last a little longer. But the choice wasn't a catastrophe. But, probably like you, I've made some bad choices in life that have only created regret.

   -The ***worst*** decisions—the most ***catastrophic*** decisions—the decisions that send shock waves and sometimes do permanent damage—usually involve betraying, or hurting, or defying someone we love—and who loves us. And bad decisions like this don't just affect us. They affect the **people** around us—and the **place** where we find ourselves—sometimes for whole generations.

   -And if you're a person with power and influence—like Hitler, or Saddam Hussein, or Milosevic a bad decision can have devastating effects on ***everyone*** and ***everything*** downstream from you and even send shockwaves around the world.

   -In Act 1 of this story of the Mission of God, we've seen how God has made ***everything*** good and called us to love and respect Him—and care for what He's made; we've seen how that at the end of time—***all He's made*** will be rescued and made new. But today I want to talk about the transition; about where things went horribly wrong—so that we find ourselves, today, where we are. And my prayer is that you will see how ***sin*** wrecks everything we want in life, how God loving intervenes through it all—and how determined He is to rescue and redeem ***everything!***

2. What you see in Genesis, this book of ***Beginnings*** is, at the core, a story about God. A God who created ***everything*** we see—and created it ***very good—***and intended for everything He made to fit together, work together in harmony. The Hebrew word for this is ***shalom*—the way all things *ought* to be.** All of creation was to exist in total cooperation and fruitfulness and joy. And then God put the two people, created in His image, in charge of it all. His instructions were, "Be fruitful—and fill the earth! Make something really good out of all I've given you!"

   -But He gave Adam and Eve, the first two people, a very powerful gift. The gift of will. Choice.
   See, to truly love someone, you have to have the freedom to choose ***not*** to love them. For humans to truly be people with dignity—made in ***His*** image—they would have to have the power to ***not*** choose to listen to Him, love Him, respect Him, follow Him, and let Him lead. And this gift was communicated in the form of
   a ***warning:***

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die."
(Genesis 2:15-17 TNIV)

a. Think about the context these first two people found themselves in. Perfection. No mirrors—or need for them. Imagine having a ***perfect*** spouse! Perfect relationships with each other and with God. No guilt; no shame; no hostility—nothing to cry about, worry about, get depressed over. Just imagine what it would be like to ***live*** like that? Without fear—and fully satisfied—and completely loved.

b. The ***one*** thing that ***was*** out of reach—was the ability to be God. To be the final authority and say, "***I*** will have the final say on what is right—and what is wrong!" And that's precisely where the temptation came from:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
(Genesis 3:1-5 TNIV)

-Most temptations come to us with a question about what God has said about life—and the sense, "I can get away with this!"

-We aren't told how long Eve toyed with this idea—fantasizing about what it would be like to have what seemed just out of reach, but there came a point when she just went for it. And so did Adam.

-Sometimes people think, "Wow! What a big deal over a piece of ***fruit!"*** The issue wasn't the fruit; it was rebellion. Defiance, really. Disbelieving God's character—that He loves us—and knows what He's talking about.

-We tend to think of sin in terms of specific things we do wrong. What sin is at the core is rebellion. Specifically, **I will what's right and what's wrong for *myself!* I will be God of my own life!** And that was the problem—and still is!

c. The effects were immediate. The tumble they took went ***way*** deeper than they had ever dreamed.

-There was this sick feeling inside of fear, nakedness and vulnerability. The ***shalom—***the sense of all things being right between them and God and each other—and all that had been created was shattered in a millisecond. And, for

the very first time in history: Fear. This awful gnawing sense of foreboding and darkness and shame and vulnerability settled in. Anyone ever felt that?

-But as they hid, naked and quivering, this Creator God, the One they'd just flipped off, came ***searching*** for them—when they were the ones that had ruined what he had made.

3. Anyone here, besides me, ever made a stupid decision—thinking that you could do what you wanted, and ***everything would just stay the same?*** It doesn't, does it. See, the deal is that ***shalom—the way things are supposed to be*** is the way that has already been blessed by God—and it ***leads*** to shalom.

But defiance—no matter ***what*** form it takes is always under God's wrath-God's judgment. Not because He's uptight—or a prude—but because He's God. Because everything outside His plan is touched by death—and kills. Us, the world, relationships—everything it touches.
-Here's the deal—please understand this.

No one can choose a way that God has judged—that He has called ***sin***—and have it bring life. And we do ***not*** have the right to change the rules—because we think He's being unfair—or because we live in the 21st century. God's words to Adam and Eve make the downstream way we have inherited quite clear.

To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."
(Genesis 3:16-19 TNIV)

-God is ***not*** spanking Adam and Eve for their disobedience. God is simply describing that when ***shalom*** is broken, ***everything*** becomes ***not*** the way it is supposed to be. Life becomes hard.

The call to fill the earth—has pain attached to it. The joy of harmony between men and women—gets tangled in competition.

-The call to manage under God's leadership gets frustrating and unproductive. See, you can't vote God off the island and still feel His blessing on your life, your work, and your relationships. We work to survive—and then we die.

-But that's not where this story ***starts—***and that's not where it ***ends.*** In the process of describing the consequences of rebellion—there's the fresh breeze of hope. Speaking to the snake—aka, Satan, God says:

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."
(Genesis 3:15 TNIV)

-God is not telling us why women hate snakes. This, friends, is a partially hidden flash of prophecy telling us how God will finally solve the problem of sin. Now we know; God would become flesh, and Satan would strike His heel—He would end up dead on a cross.

But the ***comeback—***the resurrection—would crush the power of Satan once and for all. God was ***not*** going to just let everything disintegrate. ***He*** would step in. ***He*** would engage. As uncertain as this point was—everything would ultimately be rescued.

-And this passage closes with God's first act of both mercy and redemption:
The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."
So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:21-24 TNIV)

- The first blood to ever be shed on this planet comes when God takes the lives of the animals he has created to cover our nakedness. It's the first taste of ***grace*** in the Bible—foreshadowing a Savior who would give his life—so we could have life.

-And, believe it or not, the banishing of Adam and Eve from the Garden—specifically, the Tree of Life—was an act of mercy. If they had eaten from this tree—and as they approached death, they ***would*** have, the effect would've locked them in their fallen state forever. And God had something ***way*** better in mind. Forgiveness. Resurrection. Making ***all*** things new! And despite the ongoing rebellion of the human race, God has ***relentlessly,*** from that moment, actively worked to make ***all*** things new and restore what's been lost.

4. But the story continues—and things get worse. In fact, the story of God's mission shows us just how devastating the Fall of humankind really was.

a. The next chapter tells how the children of Adam and Eve inherited the rebellion of their parents—but didn't stop with eating forbidden fruit. It's a fairly simply story. Two sons, somewhere in the lineage of Adam and Eve's children, come to offer God gifts as an act of worship. Abel's gift—the best from his flock--is accepted. Cain's gift—some of his produce—isn't. The issue seems to be his arrogance—that God should accept ***whatever*** he decides to bring. And boy is ***he*** angry! God pleads with him to let go of his anger. He says,

"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Genesis 4:6-7 TNIV)

-But Cain didn't do what was right. He let his anger simmer—and eventually butchered Abel out in a field. What's surprising is that even though Cain flipped God off—this amazing, missionary God, still comes to him and offers him mercy; protection. But Cain still turns his back on God—and in further defiance, builds a city.

-And this tragedy continues as Cain's whole lineage unravels—down to a guy named Lamech. Not only is he the first polygamist, he is a violent man. He threatens his wives—and even ***taunts*** God with his violence—bragging about the people he's killed;

"If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." (Genesis 4:24 TNIV)

b. But after this power-mongering and fist-shaking—God ***still*** has a plan to redeem His creation. Listen to this word of hope:
Adam made love to his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him." Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD.
(Genesis 4:25-26 TNIV)

-Are you noticing a pattern here? Things go really bad—to the point where it seems that all is lost. And then ***God*** raises up someone who will be faithful. And people turn toward Him.

5. As you read the next narrative of history, it simply looks like the lineage of people who live a long time. But the thing that distinguishes this from other lineages in the Bible is the haunting statement at the end of every description. It tells how long they lived, then says, …***and he died.*** After everyone. **He died. He died. And *he* died.** Think the author might be trying to make a point…***when you sin, you will <u>surely</u> die!***

-But the downhill slide of the entire creation continues—to the point of crisis. The language at the beginning of the story of Noah is quite mysterious; that the ***sons of God*** married the ***daughters of men.*** The implication is that the people this produced were so arrogant and self-reliant, the entire race of humans pretty much just flips God altogether. Listen to what happened:

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.
So the LORD said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along

the ground—for I regret that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Genesis 6:5-8 TNIV)

-This account says several things. If given enough time to live, humans don't get better, they get worse. It also says that God's heart is soft and loving and gracious enough to be wounded by evil and the damage that it does.

But—and this is where the story changes—God is ***always*** looking for someone to use. And He finds one.

a. As I thought about this situation—and ***why*** God would choose to destroy what He had made, I thought about ***cancer.*** Some of you have been touched by this chilling word, haven't you? Me too.

   -Two and a half years ago, I watched my Mom gradually have ***everything*** taken away from her by cancer. Her independence, her home, her dignity, the things she loved to do—even her hair. And then—her life. If the cancer could've been cut out to preserve her life, I ***guarantee*** you that she would've gladly chosen that. But when cancer metastasizes--gets to the point of no return—it takes everything.

b. In looking ahead to His ultimate plan that ***love*** would win, not evil—in looking ahead to His Son's coming—and to us—his only option was to wipe out everything and start over.

   -Interesting, isn't it, that God didn't build a ship—or an island—and tell Noah to get on it. He had him do the painstaking work of building a massive ship ***all by himself—***for his family and to preserve the animal kingdom. Why?
   -Peter, an early leader in the church, calls Noah a ***preacher of righteousness.*** The ark it took him 100 years to build was both an object lesson and an example of God's patience—giving **everyone** a chance to turn from their arrogance. But they didn't turn—and only Noah and his family were saved.

c. Incidentally, the imagery for this church, ***The Olive Branch,*** comes, in part, from this story. At the end of this story Noah and all the life on the ship—or giant floating box he created—waits to see if anything will grow again. He sends a dove out—and when it brings back a freshly plucked olive branch—a symbol of ***hope*** after the greatest catastrophe the world has seen. ***The Olive Branch--***in this sea of mud and death--, made it clear that life would once again flourish.

   -This God of mercy and hope starts over with a small group of people who will follow Him.

6. You read this story, and you think, ***Finally!*** God has preserved a group of people who ***get it!*** Who understand that sin brings death, that God tells the truth—and that God

loves and preserves and saves those who follow Him! Surely this new generation will chose to love and respect and obey God!

-But that's not what happens. Initially, Noah builds an altar to God—and God is pleased and moved—and makes a covenant with all life on the planet:

I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:11 TNIV)

The sign would be the rainbow.

-I want you to think for just a minute about the catastrophe of death that Noah and his family witnessed. The details are sketchy, but it was cataclysmic in scale—to the point that it changed all the weather patterns.

And yet the story ends with Noah lying drunk and naked in his tent—with one of his sons who ***saw this disaster firsthand—***apparently taking advantage of his vulnerability. And the curse begins again—and follows this son's lineage through Canaan. And the corruption of sin continues to spread.

-Sin and evil ***never*** stay still. Like cancer, they metastasize and suck the life from everything they touch. And once again, evil grows to colossal proportions—and crests at a point of unified defiance against God. Let's read what it says:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.
Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 1-4 TNIV)

a. Just a note here: One thing you notice in these early accounts is the moving ***East*** is synonymous for distance from God. When Adam and Eve rebelled, they went ***east*** of Eden. When Cain murdered Abel, he went ***east*** to the land of Nod.

   -This building project was a symbol of a world in unified defiance against God. They were building with junk—clay bricks and pitch—and yet their arrogance is massively ridiculous. They were going to establish a name for ***themselves*** as they thumbed their noses at God. And once again—being able to see what the future will hold—God steps in and stops them by simply confusing their speech. They got so frustrated—they left their building project. It was called ***Babel—*** **confusion**.

b. When you see God stepping in to divide people to frustrate the progress, your tendency is to think, "Oh man, God—***why'd you do that? We've been divided***

ever since? But again—this was redemptive. When people unify ***against*** God, it's a symbol that everything is about to go down—as it does in the Book of Revelation when the people of the planet unify again—only under Satan. God stepping in was an act of mercy—saying, ***Not yet! NOT YET!*** I have a ***lot*** more to do—and say—in this story!

c. Friends, what you and I ***have*** to understand as we read this story is that it is about the ***mission of God.*** This is the story of how He, through history, has given humankind the choice to do what they want—hate Him, ignore Him, taunt Him—but ***He*** will shape history in redemptive ways. He has the final word—and the final word is shalom, not chaos. Love, not evil. And life, not death!

Understand—please understand as we read these ancient accounts--that if God ***had NOT*** intervened and acted redremptively—the place and the people God lovingly created—would've been lost long ago. That's what sin does. -His plan is to rescue ***everything—***and no one can stop it.

7. How many of you are tired from this gallop we've taken through history. We've been through a **lot** of history—thousands and ***thousands*** of years of it. A lot of these accounts are very sketchy when it comes to details—but two things are ***crystal*** clear. First, sin—all sin—is devastating. It kills all it touches. Second, ***that's*** why God is patient—and full of grace—but ***dead*** serious in dealing with the sin problem of this world.

-Several weeks ago I asked the question: What is your dream for this world? I got a lot of responses. No more war. No more suffering, starvation, or oppression. Everyone is loved and valued. No greed or arrogance or selfishness. No mental suffering or depression. Our dream for this world, friends, is what God calls ***shalom—*** where everything ***is as it SHOULD be—***as God created it to be.

-Sin, at it's most basic point, is the world ***not as it should be.*** Sin is the twisting of the way God made things to be. And ***everything the Bible identifies as sin*** leads to death. All of it. Always. And it leads to deep regret. And it doesn't just affect us—it affects the people around us—and the people around them. Sin—all sin--has a corrosive, destructive effect on ***everything*** it touches. Sin twists us, twists our relationships—it deforms everything away from what it was created to be.

-Our problem, specifically, is that we live in a world that really, ***really*** doesn't ***believe*** that. Not at all. And here's my suspicion. I'm not sure ***we*** believe it—at least as deeply as God teaches it.

a. Again, let's be clear on why the first couple devastated the planet as they did and got thrown out of the Garden. The fruit wasn't the ***real*** issue. It was ***disbelieving*** God. It was, "I will decide ***for myself*** what is right and what is wrong." And if I do that—what role am I playing? It's simple. I'm playing God. And reality says, ***God*** is God—and I am ***not!***

-And I'll tell where that gets played out. We act as if because the ***world*** has changed it's opinion of what is right and wrong, politically correct or incorrect—we can just ***change*** what the Bible says. Again, let's be clear—***who's God?*** Our culture does ***not*** judge God—God is the final judge of our ***culture!***

b. When we blow off what God says about what leads to life—and what leads to death—we tend to minimize the consequences of sin and the far-ranging effects it has on our lives, on our culture, on our family—on everything we touch. ***That's*** what's clear in these stories.

-Why do we do it? Ignore the warnings? I have a one word answer. ***Shortcuts.*** When I look at my own failures and sins—especially the intentional ones—I would have to say I ***chose*** to do wrong because it seemed more attractive to me at the time. I was deceived into thinking that it was the ***easy*** way to bless myself. Make myself happy—or at least gratified. And nothing could've been further from the truth.

-And I may be weird in some ways—but I think my instincts are normal. And that is a ***weird*** way to live, isn't it. Do things I know are wrong—and therefore under God's curse—to ***bless*** myself. Satisfy myself. Sometimes we choose to stay angry—or rebellious—or malicious—or hold a grudge—why? Because it's so life-giving, so my fun? No! To deal with that crap in us is humbling—and sometimes we'd rather go to hell than humble our pride. Just like Eve, we think that defying God is no big thing—and it will satisfy our deepest desires for pleasure, happiness—or ego. Being right. Being important. Seeming successful.

-And, in turn, I—***we—***fall for the same, stupid, destructive tricks that they did. And sometimes we get addicted to wrong. We back ourselves further and further into situations—to the point that there's no nice way out.
-And the ***truth*** is—sin leads to death. Proverbs says that there is a way that seems ***right*** to a man—but it leads to ***death.***

c. Let's just be clear about something, okay? The cartoon image of an angry God waiting to throw lightning bolts through people who fail is not right. God has built this planet and created life to be lived ***the way things ought to be—***in short, ***shalom.*** By its very nature, rebellion and defiance is, as the Bible puts it, ***under His wrath.*** It ***never*** turns out right—as much as we convince ourselves it will.

-And the big problem, as you can see in the trip we've taken today, our sin, our pride, our defiance doesn't just affect us—it affects all we touch—and all the people we love. And every day—we use that ***incredible*** gift of choice God has given us—and we choose either life—or a form of death; the way that has been blessed—or the way God has cursed.

d. There are two really, ***really*** important things you need to know about God—and about His grace. He is the **Missionary God** who still comes searching for

people like you and me when we go astray. Even when we're ashamed and don't want to be found. He calls to me—and to you. And He says, "Where are you?" He ***knows*** the answer to that question; He just wants ***us*** to know where we are.

-And He comes with a tender heart, full of grace and forgiveness. He comes ***looking*** for a way to redeem us. He wants ***everyone*** to believe, to come back, to be rescued—and to be made new.

-But friends, I ***must*** be honest about the ***other*** side; God will not play games with us. If there's no other way to redeem us—or to keep us from trashing someone else's life, He ***will*** discipline us. Stop us in our tracks if He has to. And it's because He loves us ***too much*** to see us just waste our lives and our opportunities. See, He is a God of both ***grace—***and ***truth.***

8. It could be, this morning, that there is some area of your life where you have been living in—well, let's just call it what it is—defiance of God and what He has said is true and right. Maybe you're not ready to deal with it—and I respect that. But just know that any wrong path leads to regret. You can claim that it's okay and that it's not all that bad; but the longer you stay on it, the more regret there is—and the more damage that gets done.

-But maybe you're ready to turn from whatever detour you're on—and detours come in lots of shapes and sizes. And if you will come to Jesus, the Missionary sent by the Father's ***extreme*** love you can find forgiveness, grace, and life. He is the ***only*** One who can transform our hearts and free us and give fresh starts.

-And that can happen as we celebrate this God at the Communion Table—who relentlessly goes about His mission to rescue and renew everything—particularly people. The Bible calls what He does…grace. ***Amazing, scandalous, beautiful grace!*** **Grace** is the gift God wants to give to you right now.