

I don't know what is emptier: the streets of Italy, the shelves at Costco, or Rudy Gobert's head. Rudy Gobert is the Utah Jazz player who joked about the coronavirus and then touched a number of microphones at a press conference. Then he was discovered to be infected with the disease.



There is panic. The apocalypse has arrived! It's the end of the world! There is no hope!



Hold it . . . there *is* hope. A Canadian (of course) team of researchers has isolated the virus and is working on a vaccine. And we can take steps ourselves, from self-quarantine (although obviously you did not quarantine yourselves this morning) to washing your hands and practising good hygiene – and practising good hygiene every day (I couldn't believe it when I read that 51% of people don't wash their hands after using the bathroom).



Hope. Last week we talked about being train wrecks. About living our lives without much hope. About trudging along, day to day, wondering, wondering, wondering if we were trapped as we were. But as Offer Shlomi, better known as Vince Offer or Vince Shlomi or "[The ShamWow Guy](#)", would say, *But wait!*

Why is it – why do we do the things we do? The philosopher Aristotle suggests the theory of Tabula Rosa – that we are born without built-in mental content – with a blank slate – and that everything we know (or become) comes from experience or perception. We learn or are taught how to act, or others drive us to do what we do.

Saint Augustine offers a different theory. He looked at the Bible, in particular at Genesis 3, and suggested that we are born sinful. And sin begets sin: *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* [Genesis 6:5, [NIV](#)]

Do we have a hope, any hope at all? As we continue our series, I'd like to suggest the answer is a resounding *yes!* Turn with me to Romans 3. Bear with me as we read this difficult passage from the New International Version:



²¹But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to

demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.



The **problem** – you’ve heard this how many times before though we should never ever forget it – is sin. Maybe you don’t like that word. So how about if we call it spiritual rebellion. *Spiritual rebellion*, that caused our broken relationship with God – as Paul wrote, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* [Romans 3:23]. *All have sinned. We . . . are . . . sinners.*

We go back to Eve and her forbidden fruit. *When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it . . . she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate* [Genesis 6:1]. She looked . . . she was tempted . . . she fell.

If we are honest with ourselves we’ll admit to having the same problem that Eve had. We face the temptation of some sort of “forbidden fruit”. David’s forbidden fruit was Bathsheba. Peter’s forbidden fruit – the disciples’ forbidden fruit – was self-preservation, in that they (using IMF/the Impossible Mission Force/Mission Impossible terminology) disavowed any knowledge of Jesus.



And you? What is your . . . apple? What is your forbidden fruit? What is it that sparkles in your eye and distracts you from God? What is your – using another metaphor – spiritual kryptonite? What draws you to evil and away from God?

You reach for it. That forbidden fruit. *Forbidden . . . forbidden* means that you aren’t supposed to touch it. Common sense says that you shouldn’t even go near it. But it is alluring . . . *so alluring . . . it wouldn’t be temptation if it weren’t!*

So the temptations come and you decide – *you decide* – you *choose* – whether or not you will give in to it or to or stay strong and run away from it. You can turn the Bible around and ask *what do you expect – I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me* (that’s the New King James translation of Psalm 51:5); you can say *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me* (that’s the NIV translation), but that’s just an excuse. *It’s not my fault!* you say. *I was born this way!* you say. But in the end *you choose* to listen to God and do what is right, or you choose not to. And the natural inclination is to choose not to.

You reach for it. You take it. You eat it. You despise yourself for doing it, but it happens again and again and again. You know you shouldn’t. You are embarrassed. You feel guilt. It weighs on you. And you hide yourself from God. The relationship broken. Destroyed. You are spiritually destitute.

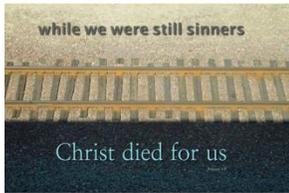


Now . . . if that were the end of it we would truly be lost. Without hope. Permanent train wrecks! But we aren’t trapped. There is a **solution**. There is redemption: *all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus* [Romans 3:24]. Later in the letter to the Romans Paul makes it clear: *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* [Romans 5:8].

There is nothing that we can do on our own. We try. We know the rules and we try to follow the rules and if we aren’t sure of the rules we try to interpret them so that we don’t break them. But we do. And the sin and guilt continue. *Sin trips me up*, says Paul *O wretched man that I am!* he says [Romans 7:24] And we know just how he feels.

But. What a great stop-word. *But. However.* I'm, sinful, *but . . .* I'm a sinner, *but . . .* Sin has got me down and out and I'm far from God, *however . . .* there is hope. There is a solution. Not that I can do anything on my own or by myself to make things right. I've tried. Oh, I've tried. But I know that what I do isn't enough. *But . . .*

And there it is. The solution. Outside of anything that I could hope to do. *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* [Romans 5:8].



It is nothing that I have done, It is only what God has done. What He started. What He finished (the celebration – Easter – is coming!). He initiated – no, He undertook – our renewal. He got us out of the mess we find ourselves in. Both the King James and the New King James translations of Romans 3 use the word *propitiation* (if that isn't yet another *churchy word* I don't know what is!) – which is why we used the New International Version today.

Propitiation. Atonement. Reconciliation. God showed us His love, God forgave us our sin, God made us new, and whole, and His.

So when I say that we are forgiven sinners, I want to emphasize that we are forgiven, not that we are sinners. That we are made whole in Him. That we are spiritually renewed, or new. That we are not trapped.



There is a **purpose** behind this. We *were* sinners. We *are* forgiven. We are made righteous: verse 26 says that *righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*. We are not trapped in sin. Our lives which *were* train wrecks have been put on the tracks once again. I suggest that we have a better life with God. A better life with ourselves. A self-understanding that leads to self awareness and to better choices. A better relationship with God and a better

relationship with other people.

We become a little bit selfish and a little more aware of the world around us. A little less like the priest and the Levite in that well-known story, and a little more like the Good Samaritan. Perfect? No. Not yet. That sin nature still has a solid hold of us. But when we realize what God has done for us through Jesus and when we accept what God has done for us through Jesus and when we commit our lives to God because of what He has done for us through Jesus . . . well, we don't automatically reach for the forbidden fruit when it is offered to us. We may yet take it – we aren't perfect – but in committing ourselves to follow Jesus we begin the transition from being lost in sin to being found in Him.

It's a choice, though. God gives us a choice. We may be chosen by Him but we are not compelled to follow Him. We can accept forgiveness and a relationship with Him, or we can refuse forgiveness and a relationship with Him. And though He is, as Peter writes, *longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance* [2 Peter 3:9]. The essence of Christianity is that God wants to forgive us and to make us whole. The first step to spiritual wellness is to turn our lives over to Him. The next step is to open our lives to Him so that we can grow closer to Him.

I like how THE MESSAGE translates our passage – Romans 3:

in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness [Romans 3:21-24, 26].

Here is Portia Nelson's Autobiography in Five Short Chapters again:



I. I walk down the street. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost...I am helpless; it isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

II. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place; but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

III. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in....it's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

IV. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

V. I walk down a different street.

Let me rework that, will you?



I. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I immediately pick and eat it.

II. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I pick it. I shine it. I eat it.

III. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I pick it. I shine it. I put it on the counter. I eat it.

We know that our problem is sin. We know that it keeps us from God. Not Him from us. Us from Him. Because we are embarrassed. Because we are guilty. Because we are spiritual train wrecks.

God doesn't want us to be train wrecks He sees us in our need . . . in our spiritual need . . . in our sin . . . and has made the way of escape for us . . . has put us back on the tracks where we want to be. So we are not sinners but we are – we can be – forgiven sinners.

I. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I immediately pick and eat it.

II. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I pick it. I shine it. I eat it.

III. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I pick it. I shine it. I put it on the counter. I eat it.

But that's not the end of it.

IV. I see forbidden fruit. It looks good. I leave it on the tree.

V. I stay in another part of the garden.



And we move from train wrecks to forgiven sinners to . . . next Sunday . . . *Saints in the Making*. Our call. Our purpose. Our hope.

But before we get there, I must ask . . . where are you on our time line? Are you a train wreck? If so, will you let God put you back on the track this morning?

It's easy, even as we live our lives, to pick that forbidden fruit and stay in the wrong part of the garden. Take a few moments in quiet reflection to make sure you are where you should be in Jesus.