

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark Twain once saw a man shot in the street. It gave him recurring nightmares in which some fool placed a large family Bible on the old man's chest to help him, but it only made it harder for him as he struggled to breathe. Twain then remarks, "In my nightmares, I gasped and struggled for breath under the crush of that vast book for many a night."

As we enter a season of repentance, we must grapple with what we think of the Bible, particularly of God's law. If we think of the Bible as a book of arbitrary rules and boundaries that thoroughly restricts our humanity, slowly crushing the life out of us like an anvil on our chest, then it will be extremely hard to engage in anything like repentance. If we are honest, we would likely end up with resentment. Sure, we can try to act like good Christians and conform externally to the demands of God's law, but if we are not convinced in our hearts that this way of life laid out in God's law is what it looks like for humans to thrive, then we run the risk of accumulating bitterness and resentment over time. At some point, we may even ask ourselves, "Was it worth it?"

But the creation account in Genesis 1 encourages us to think of God's law not as a heavy burden restricting us but as a set of boundaries that open up a protective space for life to flourish. Take day two of creation, for example. God separates the waters from the waters. He installs the sky to keep the waters above away from the waters below. This space is where life flourishes. God fills this space with dry land and oceans, plants, fish, birds, and land animals. Finally, with Adam and Eve. If God had not established these boundaries, we would have nothing but watery chaos. Maybe the fish would be ok, but the rest of us creatures wouldn't have a chance. Later we witness the devastating consequences when God allows these boundaries to flex in the flood.

Created in the image of God, we imitate this boundary-making activity in many aspects of our lives. We build houses, little artificial skies that keep the waters away from us. We even clean and organize those houses, which is another way we try to order our environments to create a space to live and thrive. And likewise, the rules we impose are, hopefully, designed to keep danger and chaos at a minimum. "Don't play in the street." That's not an arbitrary exercise of impulsive parental power. It's meant to keep our children safe.

God's laws are precisely this kind of boundary. In the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder," God sets a boundary on human behavior to create cooperation and love in society. If you remove that rule from human consciences and societies, what would daily life be like? You would have to be suspicious of every stranger. You would always have to be on guard, ready to fight or flee. You could have no pleasant interactions outside your immediate family. If you step out into the world, you step into a space that is continually seeking to collapse on you. It would overwhelm and exhaust you.

Or, to return to the example of houses, what would happen if we took the view that the structure of our house is arbitrary and overly restrictive? I don't like that my kitchen window separates me from the outdoors, so I break it! I don't like a wall there, so I knock it down. That worked well, so I decide to take out another. Oops, apparently, that one wasn't so arbitrary. Soon, the rain is pouring in, and I am sitting in a pile of rubble.

The ashes on Ash Wednesday are a sign that we humans have wrecked our homes. God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his face the breath of life. But when Adam and Eve broke God's command, God pronounced the curse, "Dust you are, and to dust you will return." He reversed the original creation by taking back the breath of life and leaving Adam to revert to the earth from which he was taken. It's a kind of poetic justice. "You don't like the way I put you together? Then I will take you apart." And that is the situation of every one of us.

Our bodies are the houses that we destroy because of sin. The ashes remind us that we all labor under that curse that turns us into rubble. There are some sins for which the rubble is obvious. An addict, for example, likely knows he is ruining his own life, even if he can't break free on his own. But more often, sin is more subtle. We must listen to the hints that the Spirit gives us, hints that something is not right.

From the outside, John looked like he had a perfect life. He was married with two kids. He had a good job and a spacious home. Everything was going his way. But none of these things filled the emptiness and vague sense of longing that he had. It was as if he had some sort of wound in the core of his being. He lived a "life of quiet desperation."

A sense of emptiness is a hint that all is not well. It is a hint that our decisions and our achievements have pulled us out of step with the way that God designed the universe and us. Honest repentance is coming to terms with those things. It means admitting that we have crossed God's boundaries, that we are a pile of rubble, and it means desiring to turn away from disastrous living to live more and more in that created space where life can flourish protected by God's law.

But this is a large problem to grapple with, and we don't have the resources to fill our emptiness or create a space full of life where we may thrive, much less to overcome death and condemnation. So, as we start our journey toward Easter, we recall that our Savior also talks about a house. Not just a house but a temple, the house of God. He says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it." He was not referring to the temple in Jerusalem but the temple of His body. This is the place where the boundary of heaven and earth collapsed and collided together.

As a Man, God took our place under the ancient curse and allowed His body to become a pile of the rubble, to return to the dust. Well, not quite all the way to dust, for in His death, He overcame death. His death created a void in death where life may thrive. His body did not see corruption, and on the third day, He was raised by the Father. Through His Son, God restored life and immortality to humanity. He rebuilt the human house not with flesh or blood but by the very will and power of God.

The power of that very same resurrection of Jesus promises to give to us. In Jesus, a new space is created for us to live and thrive, protected by boundaries that sin, Satan, and death will be unable to trespass. As we wait for this new home to be revealed, we prepare ourselves for its coming by turning to God's law and receiving it for what it is: the boundaries God has set to create a space for us to live and thrive. Only then can we take an honest look at ourselves and desire to live in accord with God's Word. Only the promise of eternal life can make honest repentance possible. Amen.