

## Out of the Depths

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Our readings today are from the Old Testament, from Genesis, Samuel and the Psalms. The theme that brings them together is the fall from grace.

The fall is a simplified mythological story told to explain why there is evil in the world. We hear in our readings of the expulsion of humanity from paradise, of the fraught decision of ancient Israel to put trust in a king rather than in God, and of the Psalmist's profound voice of hope from the depths of our anguish that God will forgive our sins.

The Genesis text begins with a remarkably human depiction of God on earth, strolling around in the garden of paradise in the cool of the evening. God is wondering what has happened to Adam and Eve, who are nowhere to be seen. As we know, they are hiding from God because their mentality has been transformed by eating the forbidden fruit and they are newly ashamed of their nakedness.

This story imagines the presence of God together with humanity in a world of peace and plenty, a picture of our ancestors in easy communication and dialogue with our divine Creator. That picture of divine harmony, life in a state of grace, then contrasts with the harsh news of the Fall. God expels Adam and Eve from Paradise for their breach of trust when they ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The surface story of the fall invites us to explore its deeper meaning about the nature of human existence and history. The surface story is entirely symbolic, and its meaning points toward a remarkable match to the real events of big history. Big history is the emerging approach that places written records in the context of the whole of history, putting traditional stories into the context of archaeological, geological and cosmic time. Biblical interpretation can be placed in the context of the scholarly scientific accounts presented by big history, to see how the stories relate to what accepted research tells us actually happened.

The fall from grace into corruption is a central idea of the Christian theology of sin. The story of the fall seeks to explain the pervasive depravity of the world, the sense that humanity has lost our connection to God and is on a trajectory toward destruction. Looking at the Biblical story of the fall against big history, we can compare the mythology of the fall to the slow historic shift over many thousands of years from the nomadic economy of the stone age to the settled agrarian culture of Biblical times. For tens of thousands of years through the ice age, all humanity lived in small clans moving around large areas, hunting for food and gathering wild plants. However, as population grew, people found that growing crops offered a more secure life, as the romantic image of freedom and abundance in stone age life became impossible. Settling in one place enabled the growth of technology, with major innovations including metal, writing, housing and agriculture.

Economic progress brought discovery of how to smelt copper and tin, then to combine these metals into bronze alloys, and then to use the higher temperatures needed to make iron tools and weapons. There is an interesting paradox here. The technological advances of the Bronze Age and the Iron Age over the millennia before Christ are seen in mythology as bringing a moral decline, a fall from grace. The widespread myth tells of a descent from an original long golden age through successive morally worse and shorter ages of silver, bronze and iron, characterised by steadily growing ignorance and violence. This combination of material progress with spiritual decline is a key element of Biblical theology, firstly in the expulsion from paradise and then in the story of God's anger inspiring the flood, and then in the demand from Israel for a king. Analysis in terms of big

history has also shown a direct correlation between these changes in social organisation and underlying drivers of natural climate change.

The Bible picks up on this mythology in stories such as the murder of the nomadic herder Abel by his brother the settled farmer Cain. These sons of Adam and Eve came into conflict over divine favour. Cain won through violence, reflecting how agriculture created economic power and social hierarchy. The Bible story can be read as a parable of how progress came at the price of the loss of the freedom enjoyed by the earlier smaller mobile human clans of the paleolithic period. The social control required to manage an agricultural economy enabled a larger population, but it also opened the way to methods of slavery and war, with systemic inequality between classes generating power and wealth by inflicting suffering. The agricultural diet provided more food but at lower quality, which is why people today see the paleo diet as more healthy.

These issues around the fall from grace flow through into the story of Samuel and Saul, where Israel faces a political dilemma, whether to maintain its old traditions of rule by men of God or to follow the path of other successful nations and appoint a king to rule over them. Samuel points out the likely negative effects of this decision – that a king will use absolute power to oppress and enslave and tax the population in arbitrary and unfair ways. But the elders can see the military risks of not having a king. They see that the unity brought by a rigid social hierarchy will enable defence of the land against invaders, whereas the older informal reliance on the wisdom of initiated elders and social equality lacked the efficiency needed to run a national army. The elders point out to Samuel that they trust him but not his sons, showing that the old ways of handing on knowledge to govern the society are failing. The source of power is shifting from the knowledge of the elders to the economy of the king, as metal and writing and agriculture overwhelm the old traditions, and practices with roots in nomadic culture had to be abandoned.

This story of the demand for a monarchy reflects how the social evolution from nomadic to settled life required a hierarchical state. This social evolution brought the victory of monotheism over polytheism, as societies organised in larger units, and also the victory of patriarchy over the older morality that recognised greater local autonomy for small clans which had allowed greater equality between men and women.

There are many stories in the Bible that reflect what we could call the tectonic forces of social evolution. The story of the fall from grace is the big shift, as the changing economy forced changes in belief and social practice, coming like an earthquake after the plates of the earth had built up enough pressure. One remarkable example of this shift of thinking is the second set of Ten Commandments issued by God to Moses, described at Exodus 34. The first command is to cut down the Asherah worship poles that communities used to worship the divine feminine. In early times the God of Israel was known as El, and was married to the goddess Asherah, reflecting a belief in gender equality, or at least female autonomy. The divorce of Yahweh from Asherah led to this commandment from God to Moses to smash the Asherah religion. The underlying causes included the pressures of military security, as the people of Israel found that national defence required social unity that was impossible with the older decentralised systems of gender equality. Like the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the destruction of older religions came like an earthquake for the society of Israel.

The Old Testament and Mosaic Law supported the system of hierarchical patriarchal monotheism that came into power as a direct response to economic and social forces that can be equated with the fall from grace. As a small nation surrounded by large empires, Israel had no choice but to ensure social unity and political security through shared religion. This situation brought forth the call of prophets like Samuel that the national unity of Israel required the moral unity that could only come from faith in God. The prophets taught that the only hope for national sovereignty was found

in divine sovereignty, and that faith in God would enable friendship between Israel and the great powers based on moral standing and reputation and mutual respect. The story of the prophets is that the failure of Israel to generate moral unity – a failure caused by the fall from grace - was a major factor in its loss of national political freedom.

The Bible puts all this material into the context of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Second Adam. As Saint Paul tells us, in a powerful symbolic myth in Romans 5:12, death came through Adam and life and grace came through Christ. My reading is that this message of redemption through Christ is the central story of human history, but in an entirely symbolic rather than literal meaning.

I mentioned the myth of descent from a golden age. This story appears in the Bible with King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue with head of gold and feet of clay explained by the prophet Daniel. This story of a lost golden age of wisdom and peace originally came from India, with the descent over twelve thousand years from the golden age into an iron age of ignorance and war, followed by ascending bronze and silver ages to a new golden age.

Christ appears at the low point of this cycle, representing the spirit of eternal truth in the midst of darkness and ignorance. As the spirit of the golden age in the midst of the iron age, Christ shows a path to universal redemption of the world through his willingness to suffer death on the cross. The resurrection of Christ symbolises how goodness is stronger than evil and love will win over hate.

The Genesis story of the fall ends with God telling Adam and Eve that they must not be allowed to eat from the tree of life and live forever. The tree of life is a remarkable image appearing at the start of the Bible in Genesis and then not until the final chapter of Revelation. The tree of life symbolises the state of grace that existed in paradise before the fall, and also the expected future return to a state of grace, with the vision of a time of the healing of the world when God will again be present in the garden of the world, like in Eden.

As we ask now where our focus should be to somehow restore our lost state of grace, at one with the tree of life, Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that the key is to treat the least of the world as though they were him. The moral framework of the Bible cannot be used to validate traditional social hierarchy, with its separation of spirit from nature. Jesus tells us the return to a state of grace will require an inversion of the prevailing values of the world, placing human dignity and equality at the centre of an ethic of love. The Bible provides a wonderful and realistic story of planetary hope, explaining the source of our problems and a path to their solution through Jesus Christ.

**1 Samuel 8:4-20, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)-**

8:4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah,

8:5 and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."

8:6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD,

8:7 and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."

8:8 Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.

8:9 Now then, listen to their voice; only--you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

8:10 So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king.

8:11 He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;

8:12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

8:13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

8:14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.

8:15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

8:16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work.

8:17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

8:18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

8:19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said "No! but we are determined to have a king over us,

8:20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

11:14 Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship."

11:15 So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

### **Psalm 138**

138:1 I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;

138:2 I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

138:3 On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

138:4 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.

138:5 They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.

138:6 For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

138:7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

138:8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

### **Genesis 3:8-24**

3:8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

3:9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

3:10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

3:11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

3:12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

3:13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

3:14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.

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

16 To the woman he said,

"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;  
with painful labor you will give birth to children.  
Your desire will be for your husband,  
and he will rule over you."

17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'

“Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 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.”

20 Adam[c] named his wife Eve,[d] because she would become the mother of all the living.

21 The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. 22 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.” 23 So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side[e] of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

### **Psalm 130**

130:1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

130:2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

130:3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

130:4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

130:5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope

130:6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

130:7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

130:8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

### **2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

4:13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture--"I believed, and so I spoke" --we also believe, and so we speak,

4:14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

4:15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

4:16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

4:17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,

4:18 because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

5:1 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

### **Mark 3:20-35**

3:20 and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

3:21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."

3:22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

3:23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

3:24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

3:25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

3:26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

3:27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

3:28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;

3:29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"--

3:30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

3:31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

3:32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."

3:33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

3:34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

3:35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

- [1 Samuel 8:4-11, \(12-15\), 16-20, \(11:14-15\)](#) and [Psalm 138](#) •

- [Genesis 3:8-15](#) and [Psalm 130](#) •

- [2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1](#) •

- [Mark 3:20-35](#)

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Order of Service

Call to Worship,

Indigenous Acknowledgement

158 God Has Spoken By His Prophets

Readings: Genesis 3:8-24, 1 Samuel 8:4-20

Responsive Prayer – De Profundis: Psalm 130

De Profundis <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDqP7kcr-sc>

TIS 683 God! When Human Bonds are broken

Sermon

Goodness is Stronger than Evil

Prayers for Others

Benediction

## Prayers for Others

God of love and grace, we bring you our prayers for our community and our world.

The Covid pandemic remains at the core of our concern, with the latest outbreak and lockdown in Victoria. Those of us who have friends and family in Victoria pray especially for people we know personally, and for people in aged care homes, for people in quarantine, and for authorities responsible for managing and preventing the spread of the pandemic.

The Synod of the Uniting Church in NSW and ACT has met online this week. We pray for the Synod, for the Moderator and General Secretary, and for the advocacy work of synod in areas including aged care, education, drug addiction, indigenous reconciliation and climate change.

We pray for our church at Kippax, for our leaders Karyl Davison and Aimee, for our church council, for Uniting Care, and for all who volunteer their time and care. We pray especially for the family of Mandy Pearce as they grieve her untimely death.

As we come to the end of Australia's National Reconciliation Week, which runs from 27 May to 3 June each year, our prayers are with Australia's indigenous people. **At its heart, reconciliation is about strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians.**

"... A reconciled Australia is one where rights of First Australians are not just respected but championed in all the places that matter ..."

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Australia's colonial history is characterised by devastating land dispossession, violence, and racism. Over the last half-century, however, many significant steps towards reconciliation have been taken.

Reconciliation is an ongoing journey that reminds us that while generations of Australians have fought hard for meaningful change, future gains are likely to take just as much, if not more, effort. In a just, equitable and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Indigenous children, and the length and quality of a person's life will not be determined by their racial background.

We pray for the national vision of reconciliation based and measured on five dimensions: historical acceptance; race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity and unity.

We now take time to pray for people we know who need our care, either quietly in our hearts or shared together with all of us.

Amen

From Reconciliation Australia <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

These five dimensions do not exist in isolation, but are interrelated. Reconciliation cannot be seen as a single issue or agenda; the contemporary definition of reconciliation must weave all of these threads together. For example, greater historical acceptance of the wrongs done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can lead to improved race relations, which in turn leads to greater equality and equity.

"Reconciliation must transcend Australian political theatre and promote a sense of national unity ..."  
Patrick Dodson – *The State of Reconciliation in Australia*, 2016

"Reconciliation isn't a single moment or place in time. It's lots of small, consistent steps, some big strides, and sometimes unfortunate backwards steps ..." – Karen Mundine – Chief Executive Officer, Reconciliation Australia

The Five Dimensions of Reconciliation

## Race Relations

All Australians understand and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures, rights and experiences, which results in stronger relationships based on trust and respect and that are free of racism.

**Goal:** Positive two-way relationships built on trust and respect exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians throughout society.

**Action:** Overcome racism

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## Equality and Equity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate equally in a range of life opportunities and the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and upheld.

**Goal:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians participate equally and equitably in all areas of life—i.e. we have closed the gaps in life outcomes—and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are self-determining.

**Action:** Renew focus on Closing the Gap

## Institutional Integrity

The active support of reconciliation by the nation's political, business and community structures.

**Goal:** Our political, business and community institutions actively support all dimensions of reconciliation.

**Action:** Capitalise on the RAP Program to create a wider range of opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

## Unity

An Australian society that values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of a shared national identity.

**Goal:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are a valued and recognised part of a shared national identity and, as a result, there is national unity.

**Action:** Achieve a process to recognise Australia's First Peoples in our Constitution.

## Historical Acceptance

All Australians understand and accept the wrongs of the past and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australia makes amends for past policies and practices ensures these wrongs are never repeated.

**Goal:** There is widespread acceptance of our nation's history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated— there is truth, justice, healing and historical acceptance.

**Action:** Acknowledge our past through education and understanding.