

#7 – “Your Love”

Artist: Brandon Heath

Album: Leaving Eden

Well, hello again! Welcome back. I hope everybody remembered that we skipped our session last week since Todd and I were away at a worship leader’s conference in Kansas. The conference was wonderful but it’s great to be back home.

We’re going to start things a little differently today. I’m going to kind of work backwards. We’ll begin by talking about one of the touchiest of all topics, according to ministers (or at least every minister I’VE ever worked with!) That topic is sin. It’s not a fun topic to think about because it forces us to look in the mirror a little too closely, doesn’t it? It forces us to examine the “plank in our eye” instead of the speck in our neighbor’s. When discussing sin, our minds tend to gravitate towards the obvious ones...the “top ten” sins, if you will ☺. You know...the list of “Thou shalt nots” that God zapped onto that tablet and gave to Moses on the mountaintop... thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, etc. They’re what we usually think about when we hear the word “sin.” But there are other, more subtle sins that we probably don’t think about as much. And some people might not even categorize them as sins at all. But I think that they are some of the most dangerous ones – and we all deal with them. They are what I’m calling the SELF sins. One of the GPS topics from our last song dealt with these sins. Did any of you take a look at that? The scripture focus from that day was taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 16, verses 24 and 25. Let’s take a look at it:

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Now, I admit that this scripture doesn’t, at first, seem like it has anything to do with sin, does it? But in context to the MercyMe song that accompanied the scripture focus, “So Long Self,” this scripture begins to take on new life. At least it did for me. And it is a great jumping off point for us to begin talking about THIS week’s song.

Before we begin with the story behind the song, I'd like to take a moment to just have you help me list some of the SELF sins that we struggle with. I'm not asking which ones you, PERSONALLY struggle with – just ones that we all deal with from time to time. I'll start the list off with one: self-indulgence. Can you see how that might become a sin in our lives? Mandisa certainly did in hers, didn't she? What else? Here are some:

Self-importance, self-confidence or PRIDE, selfishness, self-centeredness, self-serving, self-aggrandizement, self-conscious, self-defeating, self-pity, self-reliance or self-sufficient, self-righteous.

I'm sure that there are more. What do all of these obviously have in common? They're all about SELF. And though these might not be considered SINS, they certainly have a lot to do with what moves us towards sin. One definition of sin is "missing the mark." Another is "a choice to turn away from what God would have us do." I like this definition of turning away, especially in the context of these self-sins. Instead of looking to God and what He wants, we turn the focus around and look to ourselves and what we want. "It's all about ME!"

Last week we focused on how God is in the agriculture business...he plants seeds of faith or forgiveness or inspiration or conviction (the list goes on and on) and then it's up to us to do the hard work of tending the soil of our lives, the pruning and weeding, in order to become fruitful. Well, I'm not much of a gardener, but I do know that anytime I'm trying to make something grow, a whole lot of weeds tend to get in the way! I've always wondered about that...how do they know? How do those weeds know right where to take root (usually in the middle of my flower bed)? And why does it seem so easy for them to grow, when it seems like I have to practically BABYSIT whatever it is that I actually WANT to grow?

I did a little bit of research on weeds. And here's what I found out: weeds are plants that are adapted to grow best in disturbed habitats...in areas that have undergone trauma or change. In nature, disturbed habitats occur wherever something messes things up. They can be small places like the disturbance of an uprooted fallen tree, or big like after fire or storm damage. Such

disturbed habitats are generally short-lived patches in unpredictable locations, so weeds are speed demons of growth and reproduction because they must reach reproductive maturity in a hurry and make lots of seeds so that some of their offspring have a chance of dispersing to a newly disturbed place. And here's the bad news...our gardens, our flower beds, our nicely tilled tomato patches that we've spent so much time and energy preparing for our little seedlings in hopes of a nice, juicy, red tomato by the 4th of July...these areas are disturbed habitats! And so the weeds settle in as if we've invited them in!

That's how our lives are, too. Just when we think we're doing things right...we're nurturing those seeds that God has planted within us and we're hoping to produce good fruit for Him...Satan jumps in with his fast-growing, genetically engineered weeds of SELFishness, SELF-centeredness, SELF-righteousness that threaten to choke out any good fruit we were wanting to grow in our lives! We've got to be ever-vigilant in our fight against them. And that's where our #7 song comes in.

The song is from an album entitled, "Leaving Eden." I'm going to ask you some easy questions that will lead us to what this title means. Ready?

What is "Eden"?.....the Garden of Eden.

Who was in the garden?....Adam and Eve.

Did they stay there?.....no.

Why not?.....because they sinned.

What sin did they commit?.....hmmm...this one is a little tougher!

God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden because they ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He had told them not to eat it, but they did anyway. Which of the 10 commandments did they break here? Let's take a look at what scripture says:

Genesis 3:1-13

¹ 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'?" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ 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.'" ⁴ "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing

to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. ⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." ¹¹ And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" ¹² The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

They didn't tell a lie – they were honest with God about what they had done (though they did a good bit of finger-pointing in the process!) Actually, it was Eve's desire to gain wisdom...to be like God...as well as the desire to indulge in something that looked so good to her...that caused her to disobey. She turned her focus AWAY from God and TOWARDS herself. Call it selfishness or self-indulgence or any of those "self" words we named earlier – but when it comes right down to it, she was simply looking out for herself. And Adam jumped right in. And the number one sin on God's top ten list is what?... "You shall have no other Gods before me." Adam and Eve, through their focus on themselves, had turned themselves into GODS!

Brandon Heath, the singer/songwriter of our #7 song, "Your Love," has done a lot of thinking about what happened in the Garden of Eden. And this idea of Adam and Eve choosing to turn away from God through their sin painted a picture in his mind...a picture of them leaving this place of perfection and a perfect relationship with God. And he realized that we all, in our own way, paint the same pictures for ourselves. We, in essence, purposely choose (through our actions) to leave Eden.

Brandon was born in 1978 and spent most of his childhood living in Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville is a big music town and from an early age, Brandon knew he wanted to go into music. He began writing songs when he was 13 – not Christian songs, mind you, because he wasn't really raised in a Christian home. His parents divorced when he was three and there was a lot of bitterness that permeated his childhood. But when he was 16, someone invited him to a Young Life camp and it was there that he first heard about Jesus. He says that Young Life "showed me Christ and got me plugged in to a church." After high school, he became a counselor at the same camp and continues to support the group today. Brandon was an English major in college and

during his senior year, his guitar was stolen. In order to earn the money to replace the guitar, he recorded a CD of his songs (with a borrowed guitar). It was that CD that started the ball rolling in the field of contemporary Christian music. He released a couple more independent albums until signing on with a recording company in 2006. He immediately began winning awards, earning top-ten status with a song he co-wrote with Jason Ingram called “Give Me Your Eyes.” It all happened very suddenly.

It’s happened in much the same way for all of the artists that we’re focusing on through the course of this study. And the one thing that they all seem to have in common is that once they hit it big, the pressure to do it again becomes almost unbearable. It is, after all, a business. And once you get signed by a company, they are kind of in the driver’s seat. The first records are fun, sort of no-pressure “shots in the dark” and if it fails, pretty much nobody is watching and it doesn’t affect anyone but yourself. But once you get signed, it’s a whole new ballgame.

Last week’s songwriter, Bart Millard from MercyMe, suffered from the same pressure. His big hit that catapulted him into stardom was “I Can Only Imagine.” It was a song that not only hit it big in Christian music, but across the board in pop, country, alternative – it topped the charts. And as soon as it happened, what do you think Bart was urged to do? Make it happen again! Suddenly there were all of these “suits” breaking the song down to figure out what made it such a hit. They eventually came to the conclusion that it was because the song wasn’t overtly Christian. And so they came to Bart and asked him to write another song like that...not overtly Christian. Hmm...they were wanting Bart to turn away from the one thing that made that song so beautiful – his deep and personal relationship with God. A relationship that was so deep that he could talk to Him like his best friend, and question Him without fear. And now they wanted him to almost DENY that relationship...all in the name of fame, wealth, stardom, success. I don’t know about you, but that’s starting to sound a little self-focused to me! And it did to Bart, too. This is what he had to say:

“You do kind of get hungry for mainstream radio once you’ve tasted it, and you start wondering, ‘Can we do this again? Can we get on Leno again?’ We had to go through [two more albums] to get to the point where we don’t care whether we get on Leno again or not. We sing about Christ in a bold way - this is what we’re called to do and what we’re most proud of.”

He and the band were finally able to look at it this way: You know, we don't care if this song makes it to the top of the charts. We don't care if it goes mainstream. We care that we're keeping our eyes on Christ. Because that's what He wants us to do. Or as Bart said, *"It's not about me anymore. I had to die to self."*

In the case of Brandon Heath, our artist for this week, he found himself in the same boat (though not quite as large a boat☺) as MercyMe did. He'd had a number one single, "Give Me Your Eyes" and the "suits" wanted him to do it again. They hired stylists to give him an image. They set up photo-shoots and hired hair people and make-up people. They brought in Jason Ingram, the man who co-wrote the first big hit, and put them together in a room, doing everything possible to ensure that lightning would strike twice. But Brandon knew that this wasn't the answer.

"My co-writer Jason and I felt a little pressure because "Give Me Your Eyes" is the biggest song that either of us have ever been involved with. And this is the first time we had been writing together since the last record and so we just wanted to dispel some of those pressures of delivering. The last time we wrote there wasn't any pressure; it was for the love, and for the fun and for the honor of getting to write songs. "Give Me Your Eyes" became a big hit, but it came from a really natural, easy place. So we asked God to bring that back."

Brandon felt led to create an album of songs that looked to that loss of innocence, the turning away that had happened in the Garden of Eden. He could see so much happening in the world, and in his own life, that was turning our eyes...his eyes....away from God. And he wanted to urge people to understand that, even if they find themselves leaving that Garden of perfection, they could still head in the direction of hope.

You can imagine this didn't set well with the "suits"! They didn't really like the idea of the album title focusing on SIN! Who wants to hear about that?! They pushed for Brandon to go in a different direction. But Brandon pushed back.

"I got a lot of pushback on that title, because it sounds so dark. But I want people to know that healing has been a big part of my journey in the last three years. It was prompted by a really hard break up...I went to a counselor after this break up, and we went really deep into my own history. My counselor said, 'Let's go all the way to the very beginning. Let's talk about sin. I want you to mourn the loss of Eden. Because it's something we all struggle with, and it's the root of all problems. And if you don't ever really face it, you'll always hold a little bit of bitterness.'"

So as Brandon and Jason sat down to write the first song on the album, they asked themselves a question: What is it that people need to know? What is the one thing that we truly can't live without? We THINK we can't live without a lot of things that, in the end, don't ever bring us peace. The thing that they felt we needed to hear is this: God loves us. His love is bigger and better than anything we, ourselves, can create, or buy, or earn. And so, from this mind-set, came our #7 song, "Your Love." We're going to listen to it now, with a brief introduction by Brandon Heath. In this intro, Brandon asks something very important: *"If I didn't know that God loved me, would I be able to handle all this stuff now?"* He doesn't go on to elaborate as to what the "stuff" was, but by reading so many interviews and blogs, I know that what he means is – I couldn't handle the pressure or the fame...the desire to have it be about mySELF...unless I know that God loves me. And it's through THAT love, that I find contentment and fulfillment. It's His great love for ME, that makes everything else pale in comparison.

YOUR LOVE VIDEO: [click here to watch](#)

If I had to guess, I would imagine that all of the top-ten artists we're studying struggle with ego...pride...self-importance. How could you possibly not? I found a series of videos based on the making of Brandon's album, Leaving Eden, and I was amazed at all of the hoopla that went into it. There was a stylist talking about how everything hinged on the photo that they'd use on the cover of the album. They rented several different locations to use for the photo shoots. They brought in a big motorcycle. They showed clips of the shoots where there were literally 3 or 4 people hovering around Brandon, tweaking his hair and powdering his nose and straightening his clothes. And then there are the fans! Hundreds, probably thousands of people lined up just to have Brandon sign their CD or their poster...or even their ARMS! They wrote little poems for him because they just LOVED him so much! How could this person NOT struggle with his ego...he's a ROCK star!

But of course we know that you don't have to be a rock star to struggle with these SELF sins. They've been around since the beginning and will be there until the end. There were certainly times, especially growing up, that I dealt with the same things. (And believe me, I still struggle with them today.) I was a kid who could do things on the piano and organ that most kids could

not. And it would have been easy to listen to all of the nice things that people said about my music and truly believe them. My head could have really been huge. But, thankfully, I had very wise parents who didn't want that to happen. All through my childhood (in fact until the day I left home)...I don't know when my parents did this, it's just always been that way...there was a note taped to my bedroom mirror. It said this – “Your talent is a gift from God. What you do with it is your gift back to Him.” Now, why would my parents tape that to my bedroom mirror? Probably because at some point, as my skill at the piano increased, so did the size of my head! And so they stuck that little note on my mirror so that every day, as I looked in that mirror to brush my hair and put my ponytails in, I'd be reminded that it's not about ME...it's about HIM. And now, years later, I find myself doing the same things for my kids. They are smart kids and each one talented in their own ways, but I want so desperately for them to know that they would be valued and loved by God (and by us) even if they weren't smart or talented. Those things are just gifts God gave them. They're incidental. The greatest gift that he gave them is the cross.

And that brings me to one more thought before we close. I'd like to share a little bit with you about another “rock star” who must have had his own battles with these same demons. His name is Isaac Watts. Anybody heard of him? You won't have heard any of his songs on The Bridge – and that's because he did most of his song-writing in the early 1700's! I suppose he couldn't be considered a rock star by today's standards but he was probably as close to it as you could be back then. One of his greatest hymns is one that mirrors the message told by our #7 song today, and because so many of you originally started coming to this study thinking that we'd be talking about hymns, I thought I'd at least touch on this one – When I survey the Wondrous Cross.

Isaac watts was born in 1674 in Southampton, England. He was, I suppose, a child-genius. By the time he was 13 he could speak Latin, Greek, French and Hebrew and had already become quite an accomplished poet. He'd studied theology and philosophy and went on to write several volumes which had a lot of influence on English thinking during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. One of his early concerns was the state of congregational singing at the time. He was highly critical of church music of the day – which was little more than singing of the Psalms in a manner where one line was spoken by the deacon, and then the church sang the line. It was slow and laborious – certainly not up-lifting or in any way personal– and I think that I would have to

agree with Isaac's disdain for it. But another thing that bothered him was that, since they only sang the Psalms, there was no mention of Christ in any of their music. No mention of Christ! He thought: how could they serve a risen Savior if they never mentioned him in their music? He complained about it to his father one day on the way home from church and this is what his father said: "Why don't YOU give us something better to sing?" In other words... "Why don't you stop looking down your nose at people for not singing what you think they should be singing? Why don't you use the talent God gave you to produce something that truly brings Him glory? It's not about YOU."

So Isaac started writing. He wrote a new hymn for each Sunday service. In fact, in his lifetime he wrote over 600 hymns. You've probably heard of some of them: "From All That Dwell Below the Skies", "I sing the Mighty Power Of God", "O God Our Help In Ages Past", and a little Christmas ditty by the name of "Joy To the World." Yeah...he was a rock star!

The impact of his hymns was enormous – not just because of their longevity or their popularity. His hymns began to take a look at the "self" thing that we deal with and turn it on its ear! Watts' hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" is clearly a response to those weeds, those SELF-sins that crept up in his life. But not only that, it clearly states (and possibly for the first time ever in an English hymn) that it was that SELF...it was ME...that hung Jesus on the cross. Take a look at the first verse of the hymn and you'll see what I mean:

*"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."*

In this Isaac is saying the same thing that Brandon Heath said – all of the stuff I own, all of the fame I enjoy, all of the talent I possess count for NOTHING. Your love...God's love...Jesus' love...given to us in the cross, is the only thing that matters.

WONDROUS CROSS VIDEO: [click here to watch](#)