

In the Beginning:

The Fall

Genesis 3

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Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

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. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ 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.’ 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.

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.’

To the woman he said,
‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.’

And to the man he said,
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,

and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it”,
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.’

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Benjamin Franklin once said, in words that could be engraved above the bedroom door of every young person, “Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.” That sage observation is the best form of advice: both judgmental and consoling. *Yes, you blew it. Yes, it is your fault. Yes, I did the same thing, or something very much like it, when I was young. Yes, you will learn from this. Yes, it will get better. Yes, I still love you.* There are many wonderful reasons to be young—energy, enthusiasm, opportunity. You will never be as good looking or as fit as you are when you are young. But being young has a particular set of challenges. It’s great being young, but it’s also really, really hard.

Adam and Eve were young. They were children in adult bodies. They didn’t know how to be adults, because they had no role models. Still, they blew it. They didn’t blow it because they wanted to sample some appealing fruit. They blew it

because they believed the lie that they could be like God. Basically, the serpent said, *God is lying to you. God is ripping you off. If you do this one thing God told you not to do, you will not die, you will be like God.* The oldest temptation in the world is still around today. We are still tempted to believe that God is lying to us about the consequences of violating God's commandments. Adam and Eve believed the serpent, and disbelieved God, and ate the fruit. Afterwards, there is a telling phrase in the scripture: "Their eyes were opened." They had dwelt in a state of blissful ignorance before. They hadn't known good from evil before; they hadn't experienced shame. Suddenly, they knew both. The way they reacted when the Lord found them was the way children behave: trying to hide from the authority figure; trying to shift the blame when they were caught. "The snake made me do it." "The woman YOU gave me, Lord, made me do it." Translation: *It's your fault, Lord, Mom, Dad—it's all because of you.* Adam and Eve had been children in young grownup bodies. But then the hard reality hit: they were accountable for what they had done. They didn't get to be children anymore. It is worth noting that when God warned Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God *didn't* say, "If you eat it, you'll *sin*." The word "sin" doesn't appear in the Bible until later, when Cain murders his brother, Abel. We'll talk about that next week. What God had said to Adam and Eve was, "If you eat it you will die." *Welcome to adulthood, kids. Choices have consequences.*

There follows a whole series of things known as "etiologies," i.e., explanations for the way things are. Why do women give birth in pain? Why do people have to make a living by the sweat of their brows? Why does the ground spring up with thorns and thistles and mesquite? Why do men lord it over

women, when that clearly wasn't God's intention at Creation? The answer is, we live in a fallen world. This is not what God intended, but humans, given dominion over the earth, messed it up for all Creation. Not only did thorns and thistles sprout from the earth, but innocent animals had to die to provide them with warm clothing for their exile from the Garden. I'm always surprised when believing Christians say that humans can't really affect the natural world for the worse. Whatever the science of climate change is, the Bible says we *can* mess up the earth, and that we have.

But I don't want to leave it at that, because it's as if God looked at these children and relented in his anger. Earlier, he had said, "If you eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, on that day, you will die." But they didn't die on that day. In fact, they didn't die for about another 900 years. It's as if the Lord said, "I know I said you'd die the day you ate that forbidden fruit, but I don't have the heart for that. You do have to leave, though. But I can't let you go out dressed like that." In Biblical theology, that's called God "repenting of his wrath." Maybe one of the ways God's tough love was manifested was in letting them grow up; in giving them the authority to make decisions of moral consequence; in not letting them abide in a state of perpetual juvenilia, however pleasing that might have been to God (and however pleasing it might be for parents today, who often miss, and long for, the childhood of their adolescent children).

If you were here last week, you may remember that we briefly talked about Dr. Andrew Solomon, the psychiatrist who interviewed Tom and Sue Klebold, the parents of Columbine High School killer Dylan Klebold, who, with an accomplice, massacred twelve schoolmates and a teacher in April, 1999. He also

interviewed Peter Lanza, the father of Adam Lanza, the deranged murderer of 20 children and six teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December, 2012. Dr. Solomon concluded that all three parents were decent people who were not responsible for what their sons had done. That conclusion did not deliver any of them from the wracking guilt that still besets them. At the time of the Sandy Hook murders, Peter Lanza, despite repeated attempts to reach out to Adam, had not seen his son in two years. Adam's mother Nancy, with whom he lived, and who was the first victim of his murder spree, did not insist that their son talk to his father. She was evidently trying to get by without upsetting Adam; in Dr. Solomon's words, she "chose the days over the years." In interviewing them, Dr. Solomon noted a difference in perspectives between Peter Lanza, a father, and Sue Klebold, a mother. Sue Klebold said she sometimes wondered what would have happened if she had never met Dylan's father and Dylan had never been born. But then—even acknowledging the anguish of the parents whose children were murdered at the hands of her son—she admitted that she still loved Dylan and remembered him as basically kind and generous. "Over time, I came to feel that I loved the children I had so much that I don't want to imagine a life without them...while I know it would have been better for the world if Dylan had never been born, it would not have been better for me." By contrast, Peter Lanza said that it would have been better for everyone if his son Adam had never been born.

Dr. Solomon said there were various reasons for the differing perspectives between Sue Klebold and Peter Lanza: the passage of time, the difference in personalities, the fact that Dylan's disturbances were masked while Adam's were on full display. But there was another large factor, Solomon said. "What she [Sue

Klebold] said was more the voice of a mother...what he [Peter Lanza] said was more the voice of a father.”

“I think motherhood and fatherhood remain distinct,” Solomon noted, “despite our living in an era when those two notions are merging. I think motherhood has always been the language of forgiveness. I think the language of fatherhood has traditionally been a language of righteousness.” He said you could see that as far back as the ancient Greek tragedies. Of course, you can see it in scripture as well. Choices have consequences. Justice requires that wrongs be punished, and terrible wrongs be terribly punished. But mercy...mercy has other requirements. When the Lord warned Adam and Eve that if they ate from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they would die, it was as if he was speaking with the voice of a father: “I am warning you not to do this. You have been given the freedom to disobey me, but if you do, there will be terrible consequences.” That’s the voice of righteousness; according to Dr. Solomon, the voice of a father. When God relented of his wrath—when the sentence was commuted from immediate death to a long life, with the assurance of sustenance if they worked hard, plus the prospect of parenthood, with its attendant joys and sorrows (along with the bonus of warm clothing for the trip), it was as if God was speaking in the voice of the mother. Righteousness and mercy are both attributes of God in the story of Adam and Eve. “Let us make humankind in our image,” the Lord said at Creation. *In God’s image, he created them. Male and female, he created them.* [Genesis 1.27].

Biblical religion contains, as the British theologian N.T. Wright says, many “binaries”—two different things that complement one another. Classic examples include heaven and earth, righteousness and mercy, law and grace, Christ and the

Church, crucifixion and resurrection. Today's scripture contains another binary: Adam and Eve, male and female.

Very often, especially in academic circles, you'll hear criticism of what is called "binary thinking," especially when it comes to choices. It's true that sometimes choices are not exclusively black or white; there are many shades of grey, a whole array of beautiful colors on the palette. The normal human eye has three types of cone cells—for the nerds among us, that condition is called "trichromacy"—and most of us can perceive up to 10 million shades of colors. Pigeons and butterflies have five types of cone cells, and can purportedly see up to 100 million shades of color. But sometimes, in life, there really are only two choices. Growing up, when my father cooked dinner, he only gave us two choices: take it or leave it. Eat it, or go hungry. There were no other options.

When Moses was about to die, and the Israelites were about to cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land, he said to the Israelites,

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live...[Deuteronomy 30.15-19].

Life or death; prosperity or adversity; blessing or curses. If you don't believe in the binaries of the Bible, do you believe in the binaries of the code that make up the algorithms that operate your smart phone, and your computer, and the internet and every electronic device you own? Those all operate on binaries—on a code that consists exclusively of 0's and 1's. Whether you believe in "binary

thinking” or not, binaries still direct a huge part of your life. As the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick said, “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” Whether you believe in God or not, God is not going away.

Jesus addressed God as “Father,” but not because God is exclusively male: Once again, “God created humankind in his image...male and female he created them.” I think Jesus called God “Father” not only because of paternity—Son of God, child of Mary, fully human and fully divine—but because, in part, because of the title’s powerful implications of righteousness. But Jesus also lifted up, even more frequently, those qualities of God more usually understood as maternal, specifically forgiveness. Forgiveness is much more heart-warming than righteousness. But without righteousness, forgiveness is meaningless. There can be no mercy unless there is justice; there can be no grace unless there is law. The night of his betrayal, Jesus said it would have been better for Judas Iscariot if he had never been born [Matthew 26.24-25]—the same thing Peter Lanza said of his son Adam. And yes, it would have been better for Judas Iscariot if he had never been born. That is the voice of righteousness: better for Judas not to have been born than to commit such a terrible betrayal. But as he died on the cross, Jesus also asked God the Father to forgive those who were responsible for his crucifixion [Luke 23.34], for they knew not what they did. Judas Iscariot would have been among those on whose behalf Jesus offered that prayer. In his very being, Jesus exemplified both righteousness *and* forgiveness. Son of God, child of Mary. Fully human, fully divine. Fully righteous, and filled with mercy.

In his image, God created us. Male and female, father and mother, son and daughter, judged and beloved, in Jesus’ Name. Amen.