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The Gift Spurned

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The story of God's creation of the cosmos, and more specifically of the earth and of human beings, paints a beautiful picture for us. We see God building a glorious temple for himself and then creating human beings to worship and serve him in his temple. Everything he does as he creates is for the benefit of his priests whom he so dearly loves and cares for. And as Chapter 2 ends we see the two priests brought together by God in the first marriage; and in that marriage the man and the woman offer each other the very love that God has shown in his creation of them. The story ends by telling us that, "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). Not only did they live with each other in complete openness, but they lived before the face of God in complete innocence; with no shame and with nothing at all to hide.

That's what God intended for us. And yet the story is in *stark* contrast with the reality of human life. As much as God's creation is filled with beauty, you and I all struggle to survive. We can see the beauty and majesty of God's handiwork all around us, but we hardly feel as though we're living to worship and serve God in his temple. And where the man and the woman lived in open and unashamed fellowship with God, we have trouble doing that even with each other. We struggle with sin and we live conscious of God's judgement. All too often our good works are motivated less by a desire to serve God out of thankfulness than out of a desire to placate his anger with us. Ancient people made these same observations. How did we go from living as priests in the perfection of God's temple to living our lives beating on its doors, trying to get back inside? Genesis 3 tells us. And in this sense it's a fulcrum point of Scripture. The Bible is God's revelation

of himself to us, and more specifically it's the story of God's redemptive acts in history. Chapter 3 shows us why we need to be redeemed; it tells us that we've fallen—that God gave us the gift of life and that in response every one of us has rejected him, rejected his gift, and chosen death instead.

What we read in Chapter 3 raises again issue of the historicity of Adam—the issue of whether he was an actual man who lived in history or whether he is simply a symbolic character in Scripture meant to teach the spiritual truth of our sinful condition. I want to address this because I know it's an issue with which many Christians struggle in light of what the current scientific consensus tells us about human origins.

So, first, was Adam a real person in history? The single greatest piece of support for this side of the debate is that the Bible *does* present him as an historical character. Not only is what we have in Genesis 2 to 4 historical narrative, but Adam turns up again in the genealogy at the beginning of Chronicles and in the ancestry of Jesus. Most importantly, St. Paul's theology of Jesus as Saviour seems to be rooted in the idea of an historical Adam. Think of Paul's teaching in Romans 5, specifically verse 19:

For as by the one man's disobedience [that's Adam] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [that's Jesus] the many will be made righteous.

Paul describes Jesus as a "second Adam" and, of course, how can you have a second Adam if there was no literal first Adam? St. Augustine developed this idea in his theology of original sin and for that reason those of us—Lutherans and Calvinists and Anglicans—who have inherited our theology from Augustine have struggled with this problem. How can there be such a thing as "original sin" if there was no historical Adam to sin in the first place and to pass his sin on to his children?

On the other side of the debate, we find that it's difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile an historical Adam with

science. The current consensus tells us that the human race was never as small as a single pair. Even Genesis itself seems to admit that there were other people. Seth and Cain had to find wives somewhere and Cain built a city. Even if that city was only a village by our standards, there must have been other human beings around to inhabit it. And, of course, we also have Cain's plea to God that if he is cursed to wander the earth as punishment, he will certainly be lynched for having murdered his brother.

One of the observations we made in our study of Chapter 2 is that, historical or not, Adam is presented very much as an Everyman. He represents all of us. Even his name, Adam, makes him a representative of the whole race. God created *adam*—the "earthing"—from *adama*—the earth. And when God created the woman, she was very much presented as an "Everywoman". We've also seen in our study so far that God speaks in the language and into the cultural context of the people who originally heard him. That means that we can't impose our modern understanding of what constitutes history onto ancient narratives. Ancient people had no trouble writing historically about things we would consider to be "legend" or "symbol". Again, our mindset is scientific and materialistic. They were concerned with purpose and function, which they often communicated in symbolic ways.

The difference between the Old and New Testaments is striking as well. Adam turns up in the genealogy at the beginning of Chronicles, but that's the *only* place after Genesis 5 that we find any mention of Adam until the New Testament. You might think that the man responsible for our painful lot in life might turn up more often, but instead we see over and over in the Old Testament that, yes, we are all indeed fallen sinners, but we are also all responsible for our own sins. The New Testament doesn't change any of that, but it's also the first place where we see our sinful state traced back to Adam by St. Paul. And yet we also know that Paul leans on the Old Testament very much as the rabbis did and that means

that Paul's understanding of Adam could very well have been symbolic.

This is an old debate, but about a century ago it was shut down in Evangelical circles by the Fundamentalist movement. It's just been in the last few years that it has been opened again. I say this as a committed Augustinian: It's a debate we desperately need to have. Is the problem of sin universal because of an historical Adam who sinned first, or is Adam a symbol meant to point to the condition of our universal sinfulness? Either way, the key point is that human beings have a universal sin problem and need a Saviour. It will be a while—if ever—before the debate is settled. In the meantime we need to show charity. I often see those in favour of an historical Adam characterise their opposition as Bible-trashing, liberal heretics and those in favour of understanding Adam as a symbol trashing their opposition as a bunch of knuckle-dragging, fundamentalist Neanderthals. The fact is that both characterisations are equally false. Both sides are committed to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, both sides are trying to be faithful in their understanding and interpretation of it, and both positions uphold Scripture's key point here: *Humanity has a universal sin problem.*

Now, onto the story itself: when we left the man and the woman they “were both naked and were not ashamed.” Look with me at Chapter 3, verse 1:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

There's a setup here that doesn't come across in English. The Hebrew word for “naked” in 2:25 and the word here for “crafty” rhyme. In English we might say that the man and the woman were *nude*, but the serpent was *shrewd*. They're sitting ducks, in other words. God created them in innocence and that's how they lived. They lived in perfect trust of their Creator; they lived in perfect trust of each other; and they lived with no knowledge of sin. They

had only *one* command from God. They could do whatever they wanted so long as they didn't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Now into this idyllic scene comes the serpent. It's subtle, crafty, and shrewd. The serpent stands in sharp contrast to the man and woman and draws our attention to their vulnerability. They were nude, but the serpent was shrewd; they were innocent, but the serpent was crafty. Right from the beginning we know that this isn't going to end well.

As for the serpent, Genesis doesn't tell us his identity. You and I have read the rest of the story; we've seen him later revealed as Satan—the “Adversary” or the “Accuser”—and we've especially read the end of the story where the serpent reveals himself finally not as a simple garden snake, not as a cobra, not even as a great python, but as a great *dragon—the* dragon—whose mission is to take down the kingdom of God through the corruption of his Creation. But why doesn't Genesis tell us who the serpent is? We can't know for certain, but I'm inclined to think that it's because of our human tendency to shift the blame for our sins. Think how commonplace the phrase “The Devil made me do it” is. It's so commonplace that we've made a joke of it. We put it on bathroom scales. The point of the story is that the man and woman fell to temptation and sinned. The serpent—Satan—may have been the source of the temptation in this instance, but the man and woman are ultimately responsible for their own choices.

Again, Adam is Everyman; Eve is Everywoman. Think of all the times you've sinned and blamed someone or something else instead of taking responsibility for your own actions. We get angry and we blame it on stress or we blame it on the person we're angry with. The other night I was trying to spoon sauce out of a pan on the stove. Human beings have been doing this from the beginning. We've even institutionalised it in Freudian counselling and psychology: “Tell me about your mother.” Because, of course, we can probably trace all your problems

back to her and if not to her, then to someone else in your past. If we can shift the blame, we can avoid responsibility for our sins.

The story here reminds us that we need to watch out for sources of temptation, but that *ultimately* the responsibility for our sins is our own. We'll never be able to deal with our sin problem and to move forward in our sanctification—our being made holy—until we're willing to face up to our sins and stop blaming them on others. “The devil made me do it” won't hold up as an excuse when we stand before God's judgement.

The story goes on in the second half of verse 1:

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”

Notice the finesse of the serpent's manipulation of the woman. Think of the setting. The man and woman are living in God's temple-garden. He's provided everything for them. They live in direct fellowship with him. Everything is good. Life doesn't get any better than this. And they only had *one* command to obey: Don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If life was that good, who would care that there was one tree you weren't supposed to eat from? And that's not to mention that the man and woman were living in perfect trust in God to provide. If God said not to do something, it wouldn't have occurred to them to breach that trust.

But breaching that trust is the serpent's strategy. He causes the woman to question God's goodness and in doing that he erodes her trust and her faith in God. He does this when he tempts us: he draws our attention away from all the good God has provided and introduces discontentment into our hearts by turning out attention to what we don't have. Here he asks the woman, “Did God really command you not to eat from the trees of the garden?”

That's not what God commanded. God only commanded them not to eat from

one specific tree, but the serpent is twisting God's command to direct her away from God's provision and instead to focus her thinking on God's prohibition. He's taking God's loving command and twisting it into something harsh and restrictive.

And 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 midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" (Genesis 3:2-3)

The woman corrects the serpent, "No. We can eat from any tree we want to; it's just that *one* tree over there we're not supposed to eat from." But notice how the serpent has very subtly—very craftily—twisted her thinking. God had told the man that on the day he *ate* from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil he would surely die. The woman now goes a step further; she adds to God's command, "God told us not to eat *or touch* the fruit of that tree lest we die." That's not what God had said. God said not to eat it. And as much as it was almost certainly a bad idea to touch the fruit, God didn't actually said anything about touching it. At the same time, the woman is softening God's warning about death. God told the man he would "surely die" and now the woman is softening that to "lest you die".

The serpent sees that he's got the woman hooked with his subtle dishonesty. Now he reels her in with a blatant lie.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely 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." (Genesis 3:4-5)

Once the serpent had the woman questioning God's goodness it was easy to completely subvert her trust in him. It's sad that in the midst of the paradise that God had so lovingly provided for the man and the woman, the serpent had to speak only *two* lines to subvert her

trust in God and to convince her to disobey his command. And yet if we look at our own lives, how often does it take even less to convince us to sin? God provides for us and blesses us day in and day out, he has caused his Word to be written that we might know him, and he has sent his own Son to be a sacrifice for our sins, and yet temptation comes—something we see, pressure from a friend, or even something as small as a flitting thought—and immediately we doubt God's goodness, we forget his commands, and we throw ourselves headlong into disobedience.

After getting the woman to question God's goodness, the serpent now stirs jealousy and resentment in her heart for the first time: "God only told you not to eat it because he's holding back; he knows that when you eat it you'll be like him and he doesn't want that." Oh, to be like God! Ever since that first temptation by the serpent this has been humanity's desire: to be like God. But, brothers and sisters, to take God's role on ourselves is what lies at the root of all our sin. We fall into the trap of thinking that we know better than God, that as good as he is, he's really been giving us the short end of the stick—holding things back—and that if only we could be in charge and call the shots, things would be so much better.

The problem is that God did not create us with the ability to know good for ourselves. We lack his omnipotence; we lack his omniscience. Our vision is too blinkered; too short sighted. We might choose what looks good today only to find it leading to disaster tomorrow. Only God sees perfectly. And yet look at verse 6:

So when the woman saw [she takes God's role on herself] 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.

Up to this point in the story only God "sees". That's his role because, again, only he sees perfectly. Human beings

were created to trust in him for his ability to see—to know—what is perfectly good and to trust him to provide it. That's what we've seen him doing all along. Notice, up to this point God has always been the one who sees and who judges something to be good. Verse 6 makes a dramatic shift. Suddenly the woman sees and judges good for herself. She's trying to take God's role on herself. She's cast aside his promise of provision and care and tries to meet her needs and desires apart from him. That's what sin is. When we sin, we reject God's authority, we reject our faith and trust in him to provide. We try to meet our needs on our own terms and in our own power.

And so the narrator tells us that the woman took the fruit and ate it. How quickly we sin once we've made the decision! The woman wanted wisdom apart from God. The tragic irony of the story is that what the serpent promised her is what she got—but it wasn't what she expected. The man and the woman were already "like" God as his image bearers. The serpent had promised that she would know good and evil just as God knows good and evil. She thought that once they had this knowledge of good and evil she and her husband could enjoy the good all on their own. What never occurred to her was that she and her husband would end up condemned by their loss of innocence.

What's truly sad is that the story tells us that the man was *right* there. We have a common image of the woman and the serpent having this conversation alone and that the woman ate and then went looking for her husband to convince him to eat. In fact, the story tells us that he was with her all along. As his wife's protector, the man failed in his duty by allowing this conversation with the serpent to happen in the first place and then by standing passively by as his wife ate. The man was as convinced by the serpent's arguments as his wife was. She ate and passed the fruit straight to him and he ate too.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together

and made themselves loincloths.

(Genesis 3:7)

When the man and the woman were first described as being “naked” in Chapter 2 the word used describes innocence. This word in verse 7 is different; it describes someone being stripped of his or her clothes—it describes being naked in the sense of being defenceless, weak, and humiliated. Once they had declared their independence from God, the man quickly realised that if his wife was willing to defy God for her own advantage, what was to stop her from defying him too? The woman realised the same thing of her husband. Trust was gone between them and so they hid from each other. To protect themselves, they sewed flimsy coverings out of fig leaves.

When God arrived on the scene they realised that they were also naked before him in a way they hadn’t been before. Look at verse 8, which I want to read from a different, I think, more accurate translation:

Then the man and his wife heard the thunder of the Lord God as he was going back and forth in the garden in the wind of the storm, and they hid.¹

Fig leaves might hide them from each other, but not from God. They heard God coming in judgement. They should have approached him in humility to confess what they had done and to ask for mercy, but instead they foolishly did what we so often do: they tried to hide from God.

That’s as far as we’ll go in the story this week. What does what we’ve read so far mean for us? Let me first say that the serpent’s temptation is particularly relevant today. We live in a culture dominated by Postmodern thinking. Everything is relative and maturity is seen as being able to choose right and wrong for oneself. In contrast, Scripture teaches us that when God created us he spared us the burden of having to know

good and evil, because he knew that we aren’t equipped for that task. In the Garden it wasn’t an issue. We simply trusted God to provide the good. But as a result of disobedience, humanity lost that innocence. We know that good and evil exist; because we know, we have to choose for ourselves; but we’re left in this horrible position of not being equipped to make that determination. We don’t have the knowledge or the wisdom. God came to our rescue, in part, when he gave us his law. In the law he gave us a standard. And, because we no longer live in his direct presence, because we no longer know him personally as we were created to, he gives us his Word that we might have a means of knowing him again. In our fallen state, it’s his Word in which we find a measure of life and it’s his Word that gives us relief from the impossible burden of having to determine good and evil. This is why, in Deuteronomy 8:3, Moses declared “that man does not live by bread alone, *but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*”

Thanks be to God that by his grace, through the Cross of Jesus Christ, we can be restored to a spiritual state in which we can once again live by the Words that the Lord speaks. But even covered by the blood of Christ, we still struggle with temptation and regularly fall to it. We need this constant reminder that sin, that our disobedience to God, happens when we forget his good provision for us and choose instead to focus on the prohibitions, when we forget that only he is wise and that the prohibitions are there for our good. We need to remember this when we’re tempted to choose for ourselves what is good and what is evil. God has promised to provide the good for us and he’s given us the Scriptures in which we can find example after example that prove he will do just that. We overcome temptation in making Christ our Lord, in following him, and in trusting him to continue to provide the good—even when the good might look bad from our limited perspective. As we pray in the Great Litany: “O Lord, let thy mercy be showed upon us; *As we do put our trust in thee.*” Amen.

¹ Niehaus, Jeffry, “In the Wind of the Storm: Another Look at Genesis III 8,” *Vetus Testamentum* 44 [1994], pp. 263-67.