

Our Greatest Problem and Our Greatest Hope

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Genesis 3

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Why should you care about an archaic story about a fruit, a snake, and some fig leaves? A story that has many parallels with ancient legends, and consequently a story most people think is simply a myth. Why should you care about Genesis 3?

Well, for one thing, I suspect that most of you care about our world. And if you care about our world, then you're faced, daily, with an overwhelming question. Why is the world so messed up? Why is there chaos and suffering of biblical proportions? Pandemics, hurricanes, human trafficking? As Shakespeare wrote, *'Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven on the face.'*

Well Genesis 3 gives us an answer to this overwhelming question. Now you certainly don't have to accept the answer. But if you're a thoughtful person with intellectual integrity, you should at least give the Bible's answer a hearing.

And today, that's what we're going to do. We're going to look at the Bible's account of why the world is messed up. And we're going to look at:

1. The nature of sin.
2. The consequences of sin.
3. The remedy for sin.

First, the nature of sin. We're all familiar with Adam and Eve. They were tempted by a snake and ate a fruit they shouldn't have. But there's actually a lot more to this story. The Bible's account is nuanced. The nature of original sin is not *simply* disobedience, but rather a progressive revision of God's Word.

Notice first the serpent. He says to the woman in verse 1, *'Did God actually say 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'* Now this is blatant misrepresentation of God. God had said the opposite, *'You may eat of EVERY tree in the garden, except for one.'* There's incredible generosity and freedom with God. But the serpent takes the one restriction and magnifies it.

And notice Eve's response in verse 2. She rightly corrects the serpent, but not entirely. She says, *'[Actually] God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that it is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'*

Here, Eve makes a couple of revisions to what God said. First she adds the words 'neither shall you touch it.' But God never said anything about *touching* the tree. Just don't eat it. Eve exaggerates the restriction.

And secondly, she minimizes the consequences. God had said, 'you'll surely die.' But Eve changes this to 'lest you die.' There's no longer the certainty of death, simply the possibility.

And don't we do these same thing in our world today? Did God really say? Perhaps the defining revision of our age is, '*Did God really say that marriage is between a man and a woman?*' Was God really that precise? Or wasn't it more like, 'Marriage is between two committed adults who love each other?'

But no, the Bible could not be more clear about the nature of marriage. And yet, there will always be those like Bishop Bennison who infamously said, '*We wrote the Bible, we can rewrite the Bible.*'

And of course there are plenty of other revisions. Did God really say we should give generously and sacrificially to the poor? Did God really say we should not be unequally yoked? Did God really say that following Jesus will involve suffering? Did God really say?

But secondly, in addition to revising God's Word, don't we also, like Eve, minimize the consequences of sin? Don't we diminish the justice of God. You know, isn't divine judgment just an old Testament thing? Wasn't God kind of grumpy in the past, but turned a corner in the NT?

No my friends, the truth is, there's as much judgment in the NT as in the Old.

What did Jesus say about God's wrath? 'There shall be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people' (Luke 21). Or John the Baptist: 'Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him' (John 3). Or how about Paul? 'For those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, there will be wrath and fury' (Rom. 2). Or the apostle John: 'The Son will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God' (Rev. 19). What do we say every week in the creed? 'He will come again to judge the living and the dead?'

But the trouble is, once we start to slide down the slippery slope of doubt and revision, we inevitably go astray. And so Eve eats the fruit, gives some to Adam, and their doom is sealed. They realize they're naked, feel terrible shame, and try to hide and cover themselves with leaves.

But even here, God still treats them graciously. He doesn't smite them on the spot. No, He comes to them with questions. '*Where are you? What have you done?*' Of course, he knows where

they are and what they've done, but God is a Wonderful Counselor. And he gently invites them to repent.

But no, Adam and Eve respond not with repentance, but blame. As the joke has it, *'Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the snake, and the snake didn't have leg to stand on.'* But seriously, blame is one of the deadliest of all sins. When we blame others we are pushing ourselves into the outer darkness.

How many of you like Calvin and Hobbes? I think it's the best comic book ever. However, it can actually be a little too real. We have to ration it in our household, because we've found it can influence the behavior of small boys. In one comic Calvin says, *'Nothing I do is my fault. My family is dysfunctional and my parents won't empower me! Consequently I'm not self-actualized. My behavior is addictive functioning in a disease process of toxic codependency. I need holistic healing and wellness before I'll accept ANY responsibility for my actions.'*

So kinda funny, but disturbingly real. *You know people like this.*

The late psychologist Scott Peck, in his chilling book *'People of the Lie'* points out that truly evil people are far more common than we think. And typically, their profile is a lot more like Ted Bundy than Jeffrey Dahmer. But one of their telltale giveaways, is that they rarely apologize. In the words of Peck, *'The central defect of evil is not the sin, but the failure to acknowledge it.'*

And so here's a test you can do at home. Ask your spouse, or your kids, how often do I apologize? And if you hear 'never' or 'rarely' you just might have a problem. It's like those jokes, *'If your family tree doesn't fork, you just might be a redneck.'* And if you don't ever say you're sorry, you just might be a sociopath, or at least a narcissist. Saying sorry is one of the simplest ways of assessing character.

And remarkably we see these blame dynamics in other ancient legends. Earlier I mentioned how Genesis has lots of parallels with old myths. And this is exactly what we would expect if the Bible were true.

We expect to find what Tim Keller calls 'memory traces' in other cultures. BUT we would also expect that there would be key *differences* between the divine revelation of the Bible, and these cultural memories. And this is exactly what we find.

So for example, many myths and legends, like the Epic of Gilgamesh tell how the gods created man, how man lived among the animals, was tempted by a woman, covered his nakedness and was forced to leave his land.

But here my friends is a crucial difference. In these other accounts, when humanity loses immortality, *it is through no fault of their own*. So in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the snake simply *steals* man's immortality. It's not our fault! And thus we can see how deeply blame is imbedded in these narratives.

So point one: sin is often marked by revising God's Word, minimizing God's justice, and subsequently, blaming others.

Point 2, the consequences of sin. After the Fall God tells Adam and Eve there'll be consequences. In short, women will have painful childbirth and men will experience thorns and thistles and sweat as they seek to work the ground.

And this is all pretty self-evident. Carol Burnett said that childbirth is like taking your lower lip and stretching it over your head.

And do I need to say anything about the thorns and frustrations of work? Thank God it's Friday.

But I'd like to spend a little more time on the interpersonal consequence of sin. In verse 16 God tells Eve, *'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'*

Part of what this means is that women will be tempted to idolize relationship, and men will be tempted to oppress women. And again, this seems self-evident.

I've seen so many smart, thoughtful women, who are so desperate to be in a relationship that they settle for guys who are complete idiots. Total buffoons. Now fortunately, my wife Caity was one of these women, but the point still holds. Why do they do this? I once read a book by a Ph.D. Christian therapist entitled, *'She's Got the Wrong Guy: Why Smart Women Settle.'* It all comes back to this temptation to idolize relationship. And then once in a relationship, the word 'desire' can also have a nuance of 'preoccupation with,' or 'taking control.' Ring any bells?

But the flip side is that because of the Fall, men will also be tempted to oppress women. And I want to be very clear. This is not feminism, Marxism, or critical theory. *This is the Bible*. And we have thousands of years of cross-cultural evidence that what the Bible says about misogyny is true.

Now sometimes, the oppression is so extreme it seems like a joke. Ackbar Rafsanjani, former president of Iran noted - *'It's the obligation of the female to cover her head because women's hair exudes vibrations that arouse, mislead, and corrupt men.'*

Now we can laugh at that, but misogyny is not as distant as we might think.

There are about 100,000 American Citizens alive today, who were born when women could not vote in the United States.

And misogyny can also be expressed in more subtle ways. The great Dorothy Sayers, once contrasted this subtle misogyny with Jesus's treatment of women:

'Perhaps it's no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man — there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There's no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature. But we might easily deduce it...from His Church to this day.'

And so guys, if the Bible is true, we need to examine our lives. Are we loving, serving, and honoring women the way Jesus calls us to? And if not, we need to repent. We need to make it right.

So Houston, we have a problem. What do we do with these sins and a zillion others? What's the answer to this mess? Point 3, the remedy for sin. You know, if we're honest with ourselves, we're all trying to cover our shame. We're all grasping for fig leaves. We're all trying to do something to feel OK.

Your fig leaves might be leading a moral life, or having a strong work ethic, or serving a noble cause. But we're all doing something, in the words of Rocky Balboa, 'so that we know we're not a bum.' And yet the harsh reality is that deep down, we know there's something wrong with us. And our fig leaves don't cut it. We're like lady Macbeth scouring our hands, trying to get rid of the sin and shame. 'Out damn spot.'

Fortunately, our text gives us the one true answer in verse 21: '*And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them.*' You see God provides the answer. God provides the covering. And the crucial point is that something has to die for the shame to be dealt with. An animal had to give it's life to cover the sin. This is actually the first sacrifice in the Bible. But it won't be the last.

Earlier I said that there's the same amount of judgment in the NT as in the Old. The crucial difference, is that in the NT, that judgment and wrath is poured out on Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus takes all of the curses of Genesis 3, into himself.

Jesus toils in garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood, so that one day our sweat and tears can be wiped away. Jesus wears a crown of thorns, pressed into his skull, for the sake of a day when 'no more will sin and sorrow grow, or thorns infest the ground.' Jesus dies naked, in abject shame, completely exposed on the cross. So that our shame can be covered by his righteousness. And as the curse was unleashed when Eve took the fruit and ate it. So it's reversed in the words, 'Take and eat, this is my body broken for you.'

My friends, whatever your sin. Whatever your shame. Whatever your suffering. Jesus Christ wants to take it from you. The Bible goes so far as to say that Jesus 'Became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.' (2 Cor. 5.21). The Bible says Jesus redeemed us from the curse by becoming the curse for us (Gal. 3.13).

What does it mean that Jesus became sin, became a curse? Simply that Jesus willingly experienced the destructive power of the curse that was unleashed in that garden, so that one day we could be free of it once and for all. So that one day we could be friends of God once more.

How do you become friends of God? You do the opposite of Adam and Eve. You step out of the bushes, you acknowledge your sin, and you embrace the covering provided by God in Jesus Christ. 'What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.' Let's pray.

Gracious Lord, thank you for your Word. Thank you for dealing with our sin and shame on the cross. Help us to accept the gift of forgiveness, healing, and freedom. That we may be your friends. For Jesus' sake.