

# The “Fall” - A Second Look

## A Literary Analysis of Genesis 2:4-3:24

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The biblical narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 2:4-3:24) is one of the best-known passages in the Old Testament, perhaps even in the entire Bible. Unfortunately, it is also easily misunderstood and misinterpreted.<sup>2</sup> It has been used to prove all sorts of theological theories, some acceptable, others absurd. Through the centuries, it has been a source of speculation about God, the world, and human beings.

Most traditional interpretations of this passage are rooted deeply in the theology of Augustine (5th century) that was later adapted by John Calvin (16th century). The idea of the “Fall” of human beings from an original state of Adamic perfection to a state of total sinfulness dominates most discussion of the passage. Some theologians have combined the idea of a “Fall” with Paul’s concept of the first Adam (Romans 5) and developed various formulations of a doctrine of original sin or inherent depravity. With the traditional doctrines of the Fall and original sin tied so closely to Augustinian and Calvinistic presuppositions, most interpretations of this passage—even by Wesleyans—tend to operate with these same presuppositions.

This is not to suggest that these ideas are necessarily wrong in themselves. The point here is that the interpretation and resulting theology of this particular passage has traditionally been seen primarily in relation to larger systems of theology and philosophy. The narrative itself has usually taken a back seat to the broader debates concerning the historical origin of sin in the world, the incapability of human beings to do good, and the historical reliability and accuracy of the details of the account. The story itself, with which we are so familiar, has lost its freshness and vitality; and so it has lost its ability to grip us with its marvelously simple message about God that is especially relevant for those who see human freedom and responsibility as a major factor in relationship with God. It is this message that we will try to hear, and proclaim, anew.

Here I would suggest a fresh perspective, what Northrup Frye calls a “second naïveté.” This approach asks us to listen to the narrative as if we were hearing it for the very first time on its own terms for what it is: a narrative, a story. If we could suspend, for a moment, what we think this passage is *supposed* to mean, perhaps we could regain the vitality of the story itself and hear its message in a new way. If we listen, this is a story that pulls us into it and makes us see ourselves, and God, in a new light.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note [H. Ray Dunning]: The traditional way of reading the first chapters of Genesis in a historical mode tends to insulate us against the real impact of their message. Professor Bratcher does a magnificent job of helping us read the stories in an existential mode. This does not invalidate the former but is probably much closer to the intention of the original author(s). . . . Its relevance to this section [of the book *Biblical Resources for Holiness Preaching*] on “God’s Purpose for His people” should be also obvious when we consider that we are looking at God’s created intention for humanity as well as our distortion of that intention. Holiness is the divine attempt to restore us to that original design.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching, Interpretation Commentary* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 11.

## Guidelines and Limitations

Since we often do not approach the Bible from this perspective, some preliminary observations and working guidelines will be helpful. **First**, we will try to remove to the background the familiar categories of systematic theology that speak of a Fall, original sin, depravity, etc. These are valid and helpful doctrines in some contexts. Yet, they may unnecessarily confine our interpretation if we *begin* with them, and may not actually be at the heart of the story itself.

**Second**, we need to listen to the story in its own context. This includes both the setting within the spiritual life of ancient Israel (cultural and historical context), as well as the setting within the book of Genesis (literary context). This suggests that the literary context, the flow of thought of the surrounding material, actually helps define and give meaning to single stories within that larger context. There is a danger in moving the story too quickly to address New Testament and Christian issues. Likewise, to import ideas from the New Testament or even other Old Testament books into the story as keys for interpretation is to risk making the story say something that it never intended to say. This story, as Scripture, must have its own theological integrity, or we risk having doctrine sit in judgment over Scripture.

**Third**, we need to see the story in its entirety. The tendency to focus on single verses or short paragraphs of Scripture can easily allow us to read meanings into a passage that the larger narrative does not support. Authors often build and develop themes, motifs, definitions of terms, and the impact of ideas throughout a narrative. Usually, the entire flow of a story is necessary to understand the intended message. The entire narrative often carries the theological message, not just particular catch words or phrases.

**Finally**, we need to recognize the limitations of our method. By focusing only on the story itself and its message, there are several sets of questions that we will not be able to address. We will not be able to answer the theoretical questions that have preoccupied theologians for centuries. How is Adam's sin passed on to other human beings? What would have happened to Adam and Eve had they not eaten of the forbidden tree? Where was the Garden located? What was the talking serpent?

We will also not be able to answer questions about early human existence. Most of the events in Genesis 1-11 are beyond our realm of experience; they are pre-historical. This does not mean they are not historical events. It just means we have no way to relate them to other events in any meaningful way. Also, we will not be able to answer questions raised by modern science. While many of the issues in the science-religion debate are important for the Christian faith, this ancient Israelite story will not address those twentieth-century issues directly. To use Genesis 1-3 as a textbook of modern science is to misunderstand the nature and function of Scripture. We would *like* answers to these questions, and a host of others, to satisfy our curiosity. But there are no biblical answers to them, only speculation. Speculation rarely leads to good theology, or good preaching!

## Historical and Cultural Setting

With many passages of Scripture, good interpretation begins by seeing the text in relation to a particular historical setting. However, there is no such historical context for this passage. We could try to reconstruct the specific time period in which this story was used in the community of faith, but such an undertaking would be speculative and tenuous at best.

It would be helpful to place our passage against the larger background of Israelite culture and religion, since ancient Israelite culture was radically different from our modern world. This can be done with a much greater degree of certainty. While Israel was struggling to understand the same God and the same truths about relationship to God that we do, the specific issues facing them 3,000 years ago were different from today. The way this biblical story is told, the metaphors and symbols used, the manner of speaking, the specific issues addressed, even the conception of God, are all expressed in the cultural language of ancient Israel. It will take some effort not to read too much of our modern world into the story.

Whatever else it may be, it is a story about who God is, who we are as human beings in God's world, how we respond to God, and how God responds to us. It is a story about the human condition. *Ultimately, it is a story about us.*<sup>3</sup> It is a story that confronts us with who we are in relation to God. If we listen carefully, if we allow ourselves to be caught up into the story, we begin to see *ourselves* standing before the forbidden tree, torn between obedience to God and our freedom to choose our own way.

## Literary Analysis

All biblical scholars acknowledge that in these three chapters we have two different accounts of creation (1:1-2:4a, 2:4b-3:24), although there are various views as to **how** they differ, and why. Most agree that they come from different sources and embody different motifs. They cannot be collapsed into a single account. However, it is a mistake to stress the differences in the two accounts without also acknowledging the close literary and theological affinity between them. The community of faith has placed these two stories together in the canon, so we must hear them together.

We can only give some passing attention to the first creation story, but some observations are necessary in order to understand its relationship to the second account, which is the focus of our study. The first creation account focuses on God as creator. Throughout most of her history, Israel struggled against the prevailing mythically based, polytheistic religions of its Canaanite neighbors.<sup>4</sup> To a people who were used to hearing creation described in terms of the myth of Ba'al, in which the world was created rather accidentally as the result of a battle among the gods, this account is a bold and powerful statement of faith. It declares that God and God alone is Creator.

The first creation account (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) is a direct challenge to the Ba'al myth, using much of the same imagery to express its theology. It is God, not Ba'al who controls the cycles of nature. It is God, not Ba'al, who calms the raging deep and brings order and stability to the world. Creation is deliberate and purposeful, willfully done by God alone. In countering the Ba'al myth in this way, the Israelites portrayed God as doing what was attributed to Ba'al by the Canaanites. Thus creation is described in terms of order and stability. The entire account describes God as setting boundaries and limits on creation. Boundaries are set between light and darkness, between waters above and below, between sea and dry land. There is even emphasis on boundaries between different kinds of animals and plants (each after its kind). These two concepts, seeing the world in terms of either order or chaos and seeing God as the Creator who sustains the world by setting limits and boundaries in His creation, are crucial as background for understanding our story in Genesis 2:4b-3:24, to which we now turn.

## Exegetical and Theological Motifs

**Creation and Responsibility.** Our story begins with some introductory comments about the lack of vegetation, rain, and human population on the earth (vv. 4-5). In terms of the story, these details serve two purposes. First, they establish the barrenness of the earth in the absence of God's creative activity. Second, by the brief references to water, key elements of the Canaanite Ba'al myth, God is established as the only Creator and Lord of His Creation.

While the first creation story focused on God (*theocentric*) it quickly becomes apparent that humanity is the concern of this story (*anthropocentric*). The note in verse 5 that there is "no man to till the ground" indicates that creation is not complete without humanity. In this account, the man is created first and the

<sup>3</sup> We might observe that the word "man" (*adam*) is not used as a proper name until late in the story, probably not until 4:1, although some have suggested that *adam* could be a proper name as early as 3:21 where the woman is first named. In most of the story the term is simply generic: "the man," or perhaps better "human being" or "humanity." The literary designation for this kind of story is *archetype*.

<sup>4</sup> See Conrad Hyers, "Baal and the Serpent of Fertility" in *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 115-137. Also see the article [Ba'al Worship in the Old Testament](#) for a summary of the Baal myth and its symbolism.

world is then created for him; he is at the heart of creation. This underscores the commission given to humanity in 1:28: “have dominion” (KJV) or “rule over” really means “to be responsible for.” Later in this story the man is given a specific commission to care for what God has created for him (2:15). Creation is given to humanity to hold in trust. From the agrarian context of ancient Israel, tilling the ground is used as a metaphor for this trust that God has placed in humanity; it is symbolic of the relationship between human beings and God and of the commission given to humanity. It is important to note that the man ends the story tilling the ground but in drastically altered circumstances (vv. 17-19).

In verse 7, the close relationship between the man and his world is emphasized by the similarity of two Hebrew words: the man (Hebrew, *adam*) was created from the ground (Hebrew, *adamah*). “Ground” and “dust” (v. 7) serve to emphasize the fragility of humanity and the total dependence of the creature on the Creator. In this story, humanity possesses no inherent immortality, no spark of the divine that removes him from his earthy existence. The man is simply given breath by God, something which he shares with animals. Some older translations use the word *soul* in this verse. The Hebrew word (*nephesh*) has a wide range of meaning but here simply means “person” (as NIV, RSV). There is no sense of the later Greek and Christian ideas of body, soul, and spirit. Such conceptual categories are alien to Hebrew thinking and complicate the passage with ideas not related to the story. The point is simply that this dust does not live and cannot live until God gives it breath. Breath, life itself, is a gift from God.

If we are not careful, as we move into verses 8 and 9, we will begin losing track of the story. We will want more detail concerning the garden, its location, and the meaning of the trees. If we are going to be faithful to our method of hearing the story on its own terms, these questions are extraneous. The storyteller gives us no more information with which to work. He either assumes we already know the details or such information is not relevant to his purpose. In either case, we must ignore the temptation to speculate about these elements of the story. These verses affirm the dignity and worth of this frail human creature. He has a special place in creation because God himself has prepared the world as a place in which he can live. This faith affirmation about the place of humanity in God’s creation is sustained throughout the biblical traditions. The issue the story is subtly developing involves what humanity does in God’s world.

Verse 15 completes the deficiency in creation noted in verse 5. As in the first account (1:28) humanity has a responsibility in God’s world. The man is to care for and keep the world in which God has placed him. He is not to withdraw from the world nor to look at it as evil and a place from which to escape. He is to take active responsibility for it. Humanity is expected to share in God’s work in the world.<sup>5</sup> Later philosophy (mainly Platonic and Neo-platonic) and theology (mainly Augustinian and Calvinistic), and to a lesser degree some Jewish tradition (mainly intertestamental apocalyptic), began to see the physical world and human existence as inherently evil. Here, in both accounts, creation is seen as the direct work of God, and therefore good.

Verses 16 and 17 move to the climax of this section of the story. The man is given permission to eat freely of any tree in the garden. This tells us that humanity is given freedom to live in God’s world, to carry on the activities necessary to maintain life. But this freedom is not absolute. There is a limit placed on the man, one tree from which he may not eat. Here the idea of boundaries, central to the first creation account, again comes to the foreground. Just as boundaries exist to define the physical world, so boundaries exist to define human existence in God’s world. And there is a firm warning embedded in the prohibition, a consequence of crossing the boundary (v. 17b). Here we must listen to the story carefully for it is quite explicit about the consequences of disobedience: they will be immediate (“the very day”) and final (“you will definitely die”). At this point in the story there is no alternative to God’s justice which will be enforced if the human crosses the boundary of God’s prohibition.

As we listen to the story here, our immediate question is, Why? Why are there boundaries in God’s world? The question is not answered in the story and actually plays no part in it. There is only the *fact* of God’s

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 46. Here is a substantial basis for addressing some of the environmental problems faced by our modern world, although these issues are not directly part of the story.

boundaries. He sets the boundaries of existence in His creation; he determines the order of the world. It is the task of humanity to recognize those boundaries and live within them.

Here we need to realize that we have begun to be drawn into the story. It is rapidly becoming our story, for we human beings, even approaching the 21st century, do not like limits and boundaries. Maybe the fact that we tend to focus on the one prohibition, the one forbidden tree, reveals something important about us. We too frequently see God as One who prohibits. But He is also the God who permits. Why do we not ask about all the other trees that *are permitted*? Why does the prohibition bother us so? This preoccupation with the forbidden moves to the heart of the story!

**Community and Relationship.** The story moves in a slightly different direction in verses 18-24. God is concerned for the well-being of the man and this concern prompts Him to new acts of creation. The details of the story are not as important here as the impact of God's new activity. The new acts of God are intended to alleviate the man's loneliness. Companionship and community are established by God for the sake of the man. The focus here in the story is not on the man and woman, on sexuality, or even on marriage, although those are important elements of the story.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is on well-ordered, harmonious relationships that exist in the context of human community. The creation of a community in which the man can exist in interaction with others is the crowning point of creation! This is an acknowledgment that human beings are social creatures. Part of their essential character is to exist in relationships: with creation, with other people, and with God.

This is the real impact of verse 25. The couple are naked, and *unashamed*. Again, we risk losing the story if we focus on the sexual dimension of nakedness here. The fact that they are unashamed indicates that they are comfortable with who they are; they accept themselves and each other. Their relationships are well ordered. They are in harmony with each other, with God, and with the world. Here is the will of God for His creation, captured in the later Hebrew term *shalom* (peace, well-being). This figurative use of nakedness becomes the key symbol in the story and its recurring use clues us to the central message of this passage.

**Disobedience.** A major shift occurs in 3:1, and the story begins to move quickly. Creation is complete and the couple are established in God's world. Yet their freedom to live in God's world has not yet tested the boundaries of God's creation.

In 3:1 we must really strain to follow the story. There have been so many interpretations of this verse that it is easy to lose our way amid the clutter of speculation and theories. One of the most common interpretations is to identify the serpent with the devil or Satan. Notice that our story does not so identify the serpent. Nowhere in the Old Testament is such an identification made, although it is made in the New Testament (see Rev. 12:9). The snake was a standard symbol of evil in the ancient world.

The focus of this story is not on the serpent and his trickery but on the man and the woman. We must leave them at the center of the story. To do otherwise would be to shift the story away from the responsibility of the couple and place it on the serpent. That is exactly what the woman tries to do later in the story! We are again unwittingly drawn into the story in seeking to blame the serpent's trickery and temptation for the humans' disobedience. We find ourselves wanting to find an excuse for the disobedience of the couple, wanting to shift the blame away from them . . . from us? . . . from me? It is easier to externalize blame for wrong decisions to someone or something else rather than to take responsibility ourselves. "The flesh is weak." "Society is to blame." "The devil made me do it." All are cheap and immature ways to avoid facing our own failures. Again, we find ourselves in the story.

In verses 2 and 3 the woman begins to dialogue with the serpent concerning the single prohibition in God's world. As she quotes the command of God, indicating that she knew exactly what the boundaries in God's

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<sup>6</sup> The close relationship between the man and the woman are emphasized by the introduction of two closely related Hebrew terms to describe the humans. The man is now called *ish* (man, male) and the woman is called *ishshah* (woman, female).

world were, she subtly but significantly distorts it. God had only said not to eat of the tree, but the woman narrows the command to not even touch the tree. She has twisted the command into a legalism, to an almost unreasonable demand. Unreasonable demands are easier to violate! The dialogue portrays that movement toward disobedience that begins with chafing at the unreasonableness of the boundary (vv. 2-3), moves to contemplating a rationalization that nullifies the prohibition (vv. 4-5), and concludes with gazing longingly at the forbidden fruit (v.6).

Verse 5 contains an important element in the story. It is understated and could be easily missed, but it summarizes the entire struggle leading up to the choices made by the man and woman. The couple are lured by the promise of absolute freedom, the ability to become gods. As such, they would have no boundaries except those of their own making. Once again we are drawn into the story, for we humans too often long to be free of restrictions and limits, free to choose our own way with no consequences. We simply do not like boundaries. But, as the story unfolds, the promise is empty and false, a product of human selfishness and a destructive desire for independence and autonomy. We learn still more about ourselves.

Verse 6 graphically portrays the woman silently pondering “the forbidden.” Like a child who ignores a parent’s warning because she is fascinated by a pretty--but deadly--blue flame, the woman does not trust God’s love in the prohibition. She thinks that her judgment is wiser than God’s, and human autonomy wins over trust in God’s care. By this time we have been drawn deeply enough into the story to realize that it is not just the woman and the man who once stood before “the forbidden.” We have all stood in the same place. And we have all made the same choice.

The couple now stand outside the boundaries of God’s purpose and have taken life itself into their own hands. They knew the order that God had established in the world, they knew what the penalty was for violating it, and yet they willfully chose to act contrary to it. The word is never used anywhere in our story, perhaps because the message is so clear. We call this sin!

**Disruption.** Immediately the couple’s well ordered, harmonious world begins to disintegrate. There is no more talk of tending the garden. There is no more walking with God in the garden. There is only mistrust, blame, guilt, and alienation.

Verse 7 is another of those verses that are overlaid with a history of interpretation that may cause us to lose the story. From the reference to nakedness, many have seen this verse depicting sexual awareness and somehow associate the “Fall” of humanity with human sexuality. Such an approach probably says more about the persons and cultures who see such interpretations than it says about this passage. Human sexuality is never seen as evil or sinful in the Old Testament; in fact, it is often praised as part of God’s good creation.<sup>7</sup>

What is crucial to our story is that this is the *second* reference to the nakedness of the couple. While the story first told us that they were naked and unashamed (2:25), now their nakedness causes them to hide (3:8). The only thing that has changed is that they have crossed the boundary of God’s order in the world and disobeyed. Nakedness here becomes a powerful symbol for the shame and guilt of disobedience.

One of the most significant aspects of the story can be missed if we are not listening carefully. The couple’s attempt to cover their nakedness with crude garments of leaves depicts the feeble and futile efforts of human beings to address the guilt of sin. Yet, there is also a positive aspect of the couple’s nakedness: they have seen their nakedness and are ashamed. While their remedy is not adequate, their capacity to acknowledge guilt and transgression is affirmed and valued.

Verses 8-11 continue describing the widening circle of disruption caused by disobedience. The couple find that they have lost the capacity to relate to God in the way they did before. Their shame and guilt cause

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<sup>7</sup> The Song of Solomon, apart from the classical allegorical interpretation forcing it to apply to the church, is a poetic celebration of human sexuality (note also Proverbs 5:18-19).

them to try to hide from God. God the Creator comes to have fellowship with them but must ask, “Where are you?” If we have allowed ourselves to be caught up in the story, we realize the depth of emotion, the pathos, the sadness in the man’s reply: “I was afraid because I was naked.” Afraid of standing naked and ashamed before the Creator on the wrong side of the boundary! There is nothing there but death.

Then, in verses 12-13, we see that the chaos they have introduced into their world grows to include their relationship with each other. Instead of mutual support and love in community, the man blames the woman for his disobedience. In referring to the woman “you put here with me” there is a subtle hint that he even blames God for his failure. The woman likewise blames the serpent for her failure. There is no love here, no mutual trust, no sharing, no mutual accountability; there is only guilt, blaming, trying to avoid responsibility, even to the point of endangering relationships within community. As a shrewd observer of human nature, we once again hear the storyteller describe us.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that at this point in the story God has not come and imposed some external judgment on the couple. The intruding chaos that begins destroying their world starts with the couple themselves; their world collapses from the inside out. A basic Old Testament perspective, repeated often in the prophets, is that sin brings its own consequences simply because that is how God’s world is constructed. In fact, there are hints throughout this story that the limits and boundaries imposed by God are for the very purpose of allowing humans to exist in His world without causing the disruption portrayed here.

Finally, the couple is alienated from the world itself. The curses in verses 14-19 reflect the disruption brought into the couple’s world because they have failed to live in God’s world on God’s terms. The curse was an ancient cultural means of invoking divine judgment against someone who had committed a crime or offense, especially one that was not easily brought to accountability by human effort, such as perversion of justice (Deut. 27:19).<sup>9</sup> The impact of God himself pronouncing the curse is the certainty of its effectiveness, another way of affirming the magnitude of this offense and the sureness of the consequences.

As we move into verses 14-15, we once again must resist the temptation to make the story say more than it says and so lose track of the message. The “conflict” between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman refers to the continued hostility between them, the ongoing struggle between the seemingly overwhelming human tendency toward evil and a desire to do good (cf. Rom. 7). Still, there is a hint here that sin will not finally triumph in the world.

Verses 16-19 portray something far more than a simple explanation of why giving birth is so painful and why life is hard and often precarious. If we listen to the story carefully, the curse is not directed against humanity, but against the ground, God’s ground. Sin unleashes a turmoil into the world that has far reaching effects. The disorder introduced by violating God’s boundaries not only disrupts relationships between persons but also disrupts the world itself. Sin affects the very fabric of creation whose harmony is disrupted by the creature who aspires control over the Creator, but cannot. And so the human beings, who have chosen self-rule rather than abiding by God’s commands, experience the world as harsh and cruel, because of a disruption they themselves have introduced into it. The very things that define who humans are as persons are experienced as joyless and painful. In is in this sense that Paul speaks of all creation groaning for its redemption (Rom. 8:18-25).

Verse 20 continues the negative consequences, although in a more subtle way. In ancient Israelite culture, naming something meant to exercise control or mastery over it. This is the significance of the man naming the animals that God created (Gen. 2:19-20), and also accounts for the refusal of the messenger of God to tell Jacob his name (Gen. 32:24-30). But here the man names the woman, indicating domination and control over her. While some would like to see male domination rooted in the created order and biblical

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Gowan, *Genesis 1-11: From Eden to Babel in The International Theological Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 in Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 78.

patriarchal culture as the divine will of God, this rather astounding comment clearly places such attitudes as part of the disordered world that results from sin.<sup>10</sup>

**Grace.** The climax of the passage can be easily missed if we have not been listening to the story carefully. Once again we must resist the temptation to let later theological formulations obscure the thrust of the story. The command of God, the boundary set by God in His world, carried with it a consequence: “In the *very day* that you eat from [the tree], you will certainly die.” The couple knew the penalty of crossing the boundary, of trying to live life outside God’s order, yet they chose to violate it anyway. At this point in the story we would expect God to carry out his threat. Justice demands it.

But here we learn that God is more than a God of justice bound to a law of judgment and retribution. The curses imposed in the previous verses are heavy; but they are not death. *God does not carry out the death penalty.* We dare not spiritualize this fact away by speaking of some kind of spiritual death. The story says nothing about spiritual death. We also should not see here a loss of immortality and the introduction of physical death into the world that would not have come if the couple had obeyed. The story is not concerned with a loss of immortality. The simple fact of the story is that God does less than His own law allowed. He lets the couple live and gives them the gift of life a second time, on the other side of the boundary! Here is a profound affirmation of the nature of God. God responds to disobedience, not with the full weight of justice, but with mercy and grace!

The divine provision of clothes is a symbol of grace and forgiveness. Again, the metaphor of nakedness comes into play, only this time it is in a positive image of God Himself providing a covering for the nakedness of the sinful couple. What they could not adequately do for themselves, He did. And it was at a cost. While the couple does not die, there is clear implication that part of God’s creation dies to provide clothes of animal skins for the couple. While there are clearly overtones of the later sacrificial system here, the real impact is not that a legal requirement must be met to satisfy divine justice (see [Old Testament Sacrifice: Magic or Sacrament?](#)). The confession here is that sin is costly, but that God will meet the sin of humanity with grace. There are few more powerful and more moving pictures of God in Scripture: God responding to sinful humanity with forgiveness instead of death. We do not know in this story just how far God would go to forgive sinful humanity. But we have a clue from the very beginning that He has made a commitment to humanity that He will not allow even sin to undo.

But verses 22-24 clearly show that forgiveness does not alleviate all the consequences of disobedience. The Tree of Life is not explained in the story and lies outside our realm of experience. Whatever it is, it should not be seen in terms of a magical tree. The implication is that there is still a potential of further disruption from the couple in God’s world. So God does not restore them to the garden. The couple cannot go back and live as if nothing had happened. They will live their lives East of Eden, in a world disrupted by their own disobedience. They can choose to disobey, but they cannot choose the consequences of their disobedience! The next 11 chapters of Genesis unfold the ever-widening ripples of consequences of the couple’s actions.

## Theology of the Passage

By trying to look at this passage in a new way, fresh insights about the human condition--about ourselves--emerge. These are important truths for theology and preaching and provide a firm theological foundation for understanding and proclaiming scriptural holiness. We here summarize some of these theological truths.

**The Nature of Sin.** All human beings come into the world thinking that they are the center of the universe and that no boundaries really apply to them. A baby is concerned with nothing else than having its immediate needs met. This is simply the way humans are. In fact, this “instinct for self-preservation” as we call it can even be seen as part of God’s creation. We usually do not see anything sinful in a baby’s cry

<sup>10</sup> “Only in a world perverted by self-assertion, by the claim to personal autonomy, by the loss of harmony among humans and God, does the man rule over the woman.” Gowan, *Genesis 1-11*, 59. See also Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 50-51.



when she is hungry. Yet, this aspect of human existence has enormous potential for disruption in the world. It is one thing for a week old baby to demand that her world serve her; it is quite another thing for an 18-year-old (or a 40-year-old!) to make the same demands.

At its most fundamental level, this is the nature of sin. It is the human tendency to be autonomous, responsible to no one but self and serving no ends but self-satisfaction. In this sense, it is “original,” because it lies at the very heart of who we are as human beings.<sup>11</sup> While the story portrayed sin in terms of crossing God’s boundaries, it should not be seen solely in legal categories as a violation of external law. Ultimately, for the first pair sin unfolded in disrupted *relationships* resulting from their self-serving exercise of autonomy in God’s world, a world in which they could not be gods.<sup>12</sup>

There is really no concern in the story with how a single (“original”) sin by the couple could contaminate humanity (the “Fall”). There is only the recognition that all the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve<sup>13</sup> live East of Eden; that is, that all human beings enter God’s world with the capacity to choose, but exercise that freedom toward selfish ends and bring disharmony and chaos into the world. Sin, then, is not something external to human beings that operates apart from human decision; it is personal and relational. Neither is it a flaw in God’s creation; our tendency toward autonomy is a fact of who we are, a gift of God. It is our perversion of this gift, the infantile grasping of this freedom to ourselves, the refusal to turn away from our self-oriented desire for the one forbidden tree and “grow up” into responsible, God-oriented and other-oriented persons, that is sin.

**The Nature of Grace.** If sin cannot be seen in legal categories, neither can God’s response to the couple’s sin. In fact, it should be understood from nearly the opposite perspective. God’s response to the couple is not the automatic working out of some divine order of cosmic justice. It is not even obedience to His own law. We see in this passage the most positive dimension of the sovereign God. Here is a God who is not bound to any necessity, who is not locked into a box of His own making. He is free to overrule legal justice, free to violate His own law for the sake of mercy.

Here is a God far removed from Zeus or Thor who were all too anxious to hurl lightening bolts of judgment at errant humans. Here is a dimension of God far different than that seen by legalistic Israelites in the time of Isaiah, overly pious Pharisees in the time of Christ, or indulgence-selling priests in the time of Martin Luther. He is a far cry from the Unmoved Mover of classical philosophy or the cosmic clock maker of Deism. He is even different from God as portrayed in the preaching of Jonathan Edwards<sup>14</sup> or the “hell-fire and brimstone” sermons of American revivalism. He is not eager to carry out the prerogatives of divine justice. God is Master of His creation and will not easily yield it, or His creatures, to the chaos of sin.

From this story we learn that God chooses to exercise His sovereignty for the good of His creation and for humanity. God simply chooses to offer forgiveness rather than impose what His own law requires. God is not “just” in this story, at least not by any external standard of legal justice. This willingness of God to be “unjust” in order to reclaim His creation is the definition of grace. God’s merciful “unjustice” both allowed the couple to live and covered their guilt. This “unjustice,” this grace remains the only hope that any sons of Adam and daughters of Eve have.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Later Jewish teachers gave this tendency a name, the *yetsar harah* (evil inclination or intent; cf. Gen. 6:5). Some have suggested that this might be a better concept by which to describe humanity’s sinfulness than the ideas of a “Fall” and “original sin” somehow transmitted from the first man Adam.

<sup>12</sup> It is in this sense that John Wesley’s definition of sin as “a willful transgression of a known law of God” is especially appropriate. Here Wesley had in mind, not just the legal dimension of transgression, but the deeper level of intent.

<sup>13</sup> This poetic designation of humanity is from C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1950).

<sup>14</sup> The reference here is to Jonathan Edward’s classic sermon on this topic was “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God.”

<sup>15</sup> Editor’s note [H. Ray Dunning]: The concept of legal justice applied to God is foreign to the Bible anyway. According to Norman Snaith, “Just, justice,” *Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson, this language is not really biblical since the words translated “just” and “justice” are actually the words for “righteous” and “righteousness” and in this context these terms refer to God’s

**Implications for Christian Living and Holiness.** While a doctrine of holiness is not directly part of the story here, both of these elements are crucial to this Wesleyan perspective. That God can actually work with human beings to transform them into something more than they are as self-directed persons is crucial to the doctrine of holiness. Sin understood as relational in nature and the result of infantile selfishness carried to its conclusion leaves the possibility open that relationships can be restored and that spiritual wholeness and maturity are actually attainable.<sup>16</sup> The grace of God operating with humanity even in the midst of their rebellion affirms that God is not willing to abandon His creation to sin. He will go to great lengths to meet human needs even across the boundary, even allowing the Innocent to suffer for the guilty.

Holiness, then, becomes a totally positive concept, the redirection of the person from self toward God; or, as Wesley put it, “love excluding sin.” It is this redirection of the person that is reflected in the saying of Jesus: “A person has no greater love than when he lays his life down for a friend.” (John 15:13, NRSV). This is the ultimate transformation of the negative tendency of our “instinct for self preservation” and is at the heart of the message of holiness.

16. In Hebrew the word often translated “perfect” (Hebrew: *tammim*), when used of people, is better rendered as “whole,” “complete,” or “mature.” Rather than referring to a *state* of being without flaw, it refers to a *relationship* that is healthy and wholesome (as in Gen. 6:9). This Hebraic idea is behind the command in the sermon on the Mount that immediately follows instructions in relationships and motives toward others: “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48). If we speak of Christian “perfection” at all, it should be with this implication of wholeness and spiritual maturity rather than errorless, sinless perfection (see [The English Term “Perfect”](#)).

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faithfulness to His word or nature and not conformity to some standard of legal rectitude. Such alien theological ideas have been imposed on the discussions by Western theologians influenced more by Roman concepts of justice than by biblical truth. This insight is revolutionary in interpreting Paul’s discussions of the Atonement in Romans.

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