

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on that first sin... Part 3

*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 forever"—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.*

(Genesis 3:21-24, NRSV)

This is the third installment of some thoughts about the story of the first or "original sin" in the Bible. Now that Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, what happens next? Eve blames the serpent (Genesis 3:13) and Adam blames God (Genesis 3:12). They were told that if they ate of the fruit, they would die (Genesis 2:17; 3:2). But instead, God makes declarations assuming a long (though hard) life (Genesis 3:16-19). Beyond that, He exchanges their scratchy fig leaf clothes for clothes made of animal skins. What is going on here?

Some have argued that the serpent is right that they would not die from the fruit (Genesis 3:4), but this only makes sense if we apply our modern sense of God's actions in the world. For the ancient peoples, whatever happens is the result of God's actions. For example, Er was a man so wicked that the Lord put him to death (Genesis 38:7). It doesn't say how he died: an illness, an accident, a battle, or just didn't wake up one morning. But the people of the time, it was understood that God was in charge and acted. Even centuries later, the prophet would say:

*"I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things."*

(Isaiah 45:7, NRSV)

Not only did they believe that God was the cause of both good and evil, they believed that God could change His mind:

*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed His mind about the calamity that He had said he would bring upon them; and He did not do it.*

(Jonah 3:10, NRSV)

It was only later in their history that the ancient people began to grapple with the reality of evil in the world. Notice these two verses. The first one is from Second Samuel, early in their history, and the second is from First Chronicles, a few hundred years later. David takes a census of the people. The stories are told almost exactly the same, except they disagree about who is responsible:

*Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, count the people of Israel and Judah." ...*

*Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel...*

(2 Samuel 24:1; 1 Chronicles 21:1, NRSV)

All of this is just a long way to say that to the original hearers, God simply changed His mind. It was not that He lied; He just chose to allow them (and us) to live. And with that in mind, the statements about the hardness of life in Genesis 3:16-19 seem mild in comparison.

However, not only does God chose to maintain their lives, He goes further. Some believe that the early humans were vegetarians. This is possible, since meat is not mentioned in Genesis 1:29-30 and it is first mentioned in Genesis 9:3, after the Flood. Yet Abel keeps sheep (Genesis 4:2-4), and one might question whether they would have raised animals, used their skins for clothing and killed them for offerings, but did not eat them. In any case, Abel does not kill the first animal; God does. In Genesis 3:21 God gives them animal skins to wear as their clothes. So the irony is that not only does God choose not to kill the humans, but He decides to kill animals instead *for* them.

Throughout the rest of human history, it will be the case that in order for humans to continue to live – through food and clothing, at least – something else will have to die. I have sometimes wondered if when Jesus called us to remember Him, He wasn't just talking about that last supper, but any supper:

*In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."*

(1 Corinthians 11:25, NRSV)

Finally, there is that further action that God takes: He expels them from the Garden. As a child, I understood this as their punishment for disobedience, but Genesis 3:22-24 suggests something different. There was always another tree in the middle of the Garden, the Tree of Life, which God did not talk about. But apparently, whenever Adam or Eve would get around to eating from this tree, they would become immortal. This was something that *now*, God could not allow. It is the reason He expelled them, and the reason He placed heavenly beings and a sword at the entrance. So why? The story itself suggests that initially God was content for them to be become immortal, but not immediately. Now even if they were immortal, God could at anytime destroy them. But it appears that now that they have separated themselves from God, immortality becomes dangerous.

Can we imagine what it means if our lives are now lives filled with hardship, pain, guilt, shame, and separation from God, and we are immortal? Perhaps some of us could reconcile ourselves to an eternity this way, but we know that God has always intended something far better for us:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

(Revelation 21:3-4; 22:1-5, NRSV)

Yours in Christ,

