

God at Work

by Ray C. Stedman

It always strikes me as strange that anyone can deny the reality of the story of the Fall of man, especially when the very man who denies it is himself repeating it, perhaps dozens of times a day. As we have discovered already, temptation follows the same pattern with us that it did with Eve in the Garden of Eden. Always there is first the arousing of desire; then the mind, seizing upon that desire, rationalizes it to make it seem reasonable, proper, and profitable. Then the will acts – and immediately confusion, guilt, blame, and a sense of limitation follow without fail. The process is absolutely relentless. We may think that we have hidden this from the eyes of man, and oftentimes many of us are deluded into thinking that because no human being knows about our guilt, nothing has happened. Yet within us, whenever we yield to evil, a darkness falls and death tightens its grip upon our throat.

We come now to the same passage we looked at last time together, but to look this time not at man but at God. For centuries there has been a dirty lie about God making the rounds which suggests that at the Fall of man God ruthlessly lowered the boom on guilty Adam and Eve, that he gave them no chance to explain but simply tracked them down, sternly rebuked them (my children would say he yelled at them), began cursing everything around in blazing anger and ended by booting Adam and Eve out of the garden and slamming and locking the door behind them. Nothing could be further from the truth! We must trace very carefully now the actions of God in this account because, of course, this is the same way God will treat us in the many times we fall in temptation.

God begins his dealings with man with **three questions** which will occupy us today.

The **first one** is found in Verses 8 and 9:

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, 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?” {Gen 3:8-9 RSV}

It is most striking to me that all religions, apart from Christianity, begin on the note of man seeking after God. Only the Bible starts with the view of God seeking after man. That highlights an essential difference between our Christian faith and the other great religions of the world. Furthermore, this first question here in the Old Testament is matched by the first question asked in the New Testament. Here it is God asking man, “Where are you?” and in the New Testament, in Matthew, the first question that appears is that of certain wise men who come asking, “Where is he?” {Matt 2:2}.

If we take this account in the garden literally (as I believe we must), then it is clear that God habitually appeared to Adam in some visible form, for now Adam and Eve in their guilt and awareness of nakedness hide from God when they hear the sound of his footsteps in the garden. This indicates a customary action on God’s part. He came in the cool of the day, not because that was more pleasant for him but because it was more pleasant for man, and he habitually held some form of communication with man. We know from the rest of Scripture

that whenever God appears visibly in some manifestation it is always the second Person of the Godhead, the Son, who thus appears. If that be true then we have here what is called a theophany, i.e., a visible manifestation of God before the incarnation. Thus the One here who asks of Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" is the same One of whom later men would ask, "Where is he who was born King of Jews?" {cf, Matt 2:2}.

Notice the importance of this question, Where are you? When a man is lost this is the most important question he can ask: Where am I? Suppose this morning the telephone rang here and you answered it to hear a voice ask, "Is this the Peninsula Bible Church?" You say, "Yes," and the person on the other end of the line says, "I'd like to come to your church this morning. I thought I knew the way, but I find myself very confused. Can you help me?" What is the first question you would ask? "Where are you?" That is always first. "Where are you?"

Today we are seeking to find a way out of a very confusing situation that prevails in our world. We will never do it until we start with this question which God first asked man, "Where are you?" Where am I? Perhaps the reason many are unable to be helped today is either because they cannot or will not answer that question. Ask it of yourself now. Where are you? In the course of your life, from birth to death, moving as you hope you are moving, to develop stability of character, trustworthiness, integrity of being, all these qualities which we admire in others and want in ourselves – where are you? How far have you come? Until you can answer that, in some sense at least, there is no possibility of helping you. What do you say?

Perhaps many of you will have to say, "I don't know where I am. I don't know. I only know that I am not where I ought to be, nor where I want to be. That's all I can say." If that is all you can say that is at least an honest answer, and, therefore, it is the most helpful answer you can give, and, in that sense, is the only right answer. "I don't know, I only know that I'm not where I ought to be."

God's **second question** to man is even more significant:

And he [Adam] said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He

[God] said, "Who told you that you were naked?" {Gen 3:10-11a RSV}

Let us be sure we read that question rightly. God is not asking Adam, "Look, who let the cat out of the bag about this? What rascal has been telling you tales out of school? Has the CIA been here, too?" He does not ask, "Who told you that you were naked, in the sense of, 'What person has come in to inform you of this?'" No, this is a rhetorical question. God does not expect a direct answer, but it is a question designed to make Adam think.

Who did tell him? That is, "How do you know this? You say you're naked; you didn't know that before. How do you know this? From what source has this knowledge come? Something has happened, a change has occurred; where did your knowledge come from?" The answer, of course, is: "No one told him." Well then, how did he know? Something within told him this. It did not come from without at all, it came from within. A change had occurred within him, and, instinctively, he senses that change and knows something that he did not know before. An evil knowledge has come to man, just as God said it would. The tree of which he partook was the tree of "the knowledge of good and evil," and, by partaking, man gained immediately an evil knowledge. From where did it come? From within. This is what God wants Adam to see.

In order to sense the full significance of this we must link it with the first question. That was, you remember, "Where are you?" and it had but one proper answer, "I'm not where I want to be. I'm lost, hopelessly lost, hidden. I don't know where I am." Well, why don't you? Why is it that we have such difficulty pinpointing ourselves in our progress and relationship to the world around us? Why? It is because of something within, isn't it? Remember that Jesus said, "It is not that which enters a man which defiles him, but that which comes from within," {cf, Matt 15:11}. "For from within," he says, "out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts, fornication, murder, adultery, covetousness, licentiousness, pride, foolishness, all these evil things come from within and defile a man," {cf, Matt 15:18-19}.

It is what I am within which makes me ashamed and guilty, and sends me scrambling for fig leaves to cover myself up.

I have often wondered what would happen if we had at the entrance to the church every Sunday

morning a television camera able to read people's thoughts without their knowing it, as they came in the door. What if every one of us, passing by, had our thoughts recorded and then we announced that next Sunday morning we would play them on a screen up front? How many would be here to see the show?

Someone has said, "If the best of men had his innermost thoughts written on his forehead, he'd never take his hat off."

We know this is true. It is that which is within which defiles us. Something has happened within. The basic fundamental issue of humanity is not what is happening outside, but what is happening inside, within.

Now God moves to his **third question**, and it is in two parts, one addressed to the man and one to the woman.

"Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of 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 beguiled me, and I ate." {Gen 3:11b-13 RSV}

There is something very interesting here. God asks both the same question, essentially. He is saying to each, "Tell me, what is it that you did? Specifically, definitely, clearly; what is it that you did?" But there is an exquisite touch of delicacy and grace here, which I hope you do not miss. He does not put the question in the same form to each. To the man he is forthright and blunt, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" But to the woman he puts the question much more softly and gently.

Every married man knows that his wife does not like a direct question. A man may say to his wife, "Where did you buy this meat?" Her answer is not, usually, "At Safeway," but perhaps, "What's wrong? Why do you ask?" or, "I bought it where I always buy it." If he says to her, "Have you seen so-and-so lately?" she says, "What's happened?" Or perhaps she says, "Well, I never get out to see anybody – you know that." Or, "Why would I want to talk to her, anyway?"

It is comforting to me to realize how fully God understands women and to see him put the question

to her very gently. He says, "Tell me in your own way now, what is this that you have done?"

In their answer it is significant that both of them come out at the same place. Each blames someone else (we now call this *human nature*, it is so widespread, so universally true) but when they come to their final statement they both use exactly the same words, "and I ate."

That is where God is wanting to bring them. That is what the Bible calls *repentance*. It is a candid statement of the facts with no attempt now to evade them or to color them or clothe them in any other form. It is a simple, factual statement to which they are both reduced, "and I ate." This is the point God has been seeking to lead them to. Notice how these questions have followed a designed course. God has made them say, first, "We're not where we ought to be – we know that. We ought not to be hidden here in the garden. We ought not to be lost. We ought not to require a question like this, 'Where are you?'" Then God has made them see, "It is because something has happened within us." They have seen that they are where they are because of what they are, and that it all happened because they disobeyed, because they ate the forbidden food, they sinned. God has led them gently, graciously and yet unerringly to the place where each of them, in his own way, has said, "Yes, Lord, I sinned; I ate."

That is **as far as man can ever go** in correcting evil. He can do no more than that. But that immediately provides the ground for God to act. This is where he constantly seeks to bring us, because it provides him with the only ground upon which he can act. You can see this throughout the whole Bible, in the Old and New Testament alike. When God is dealing with men he seeks to bring them to the place where they acknowledge what is wrong.

Remember Jesus' dealing with the woman of Samaria at the well? After they have been involved in some discourse about the meaning of the water wherein he awakened her curiosity and interest by offering her living water so that she would not have to come to the well to draw, then he forthrightly puts the demand, "Go and call your husband," {cf, John 4:16-18}. That elicits from the woman the only answer she could honestly give. "I have no husband," she says. Then Jesus lays it right out before her. "That's true, you have no husband.

You have had five husbands, and the man you are living with now is not your husband, in this you said truly.” He commends her for speaking the truth and from that point on he moves to open her eyes to the character of the One who stands before her.

This is what God is wanting to do with us. He finds us in our failure, our estrangement, our guilt, our sense of nakedness and loss, and immediately he moves to bring us to repentance. We misunderstand his moving. We think he is dragging us before some tribunal in order to chastise us or to punish us, but he is not. He is simply trying to get us to face the facts as they are. That is what he does here with Adam and Eve. It is the same thing we say when we quote First John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Notice in this account that as soon as Adam and Eve say these magic words “and I ate,” there are no more questions from God. There is no more prodding or probing on his part. God begins now to speak to the serpent, to the woman, and to the man. And what he declares now is not punishment. We shall look more closely at this in our next message. What he says to the man and the woman is not punishment, but grace. How badly we have misread these passages in Genesis. And when he gets through we read these wonderful words in Verse 21:

And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them. {Gen 3:21 RSV}

Here is the beginning of animal sacrifices: God sheds blood in order to make clothing for Adam and Eve. He made them from the skins of animals and therefore those animal lives were sacrificed to clothe Adam and Eve. This is but a picture, as all animal sacrifices are but pictures – a kind of kindergarten of grace – in order to teach us the great truth that God eternally attempts to communicate to us as men and women. Ultimately, it is God himself who bears eternally the pain, the hurt, and agony of our sins. As John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away [who is continually taking away] the sin of the world,” {John 1:29 RSV}.

Paul uses a wonderful phrase in Ephesians, “accepted in the Beloved One,” {cf, Eph 1:6 KJV}. When we have acknowledged our guilt, when we have acknowledged that what we have done is contrary to what God wants, and we stand there with nothing to defend ourselves with, and no attempt to do so, but simply in honest acknowledgment of our own doing, then, Paul says, we are “accepted in the Beloved One.”

Growing up as a boy in Montana we had many sheep farms in our area. Spring was the lambing season when the little lambs were born. But spring in Montana is not like it is in California. Sleet storms can come whirling down out of the north, and snow can still be three or four feet deep on the prairies. Often there are long, protracted seasons of bitter cold during lambing season. Of course, when the sheep must bear lambs in that kind of weather, many of the lambs and ewes die. As a result, sheep farmers have many mothers whose newborn lambs have died, and many newborn lambs whose mothers have died. It looks like a simple way to solve the problem would be to take the lambs without mothers and give them to the mothers without lambs, but, if you know anything at all about sheep, you know it is not that simple. If you take a little orphan lamb and put it in with a mother ewe, she will immediately go to it and sniff it all over, and then she shakes her head as though to say, “Well, that’s not our family odor,” and she butts it away and refuses to have anything to do with it. But the sheep men have devised a means of solving this. They take the mother’s own little dead lamb and skin it, and take the skin and tie it onto the other little lamb, the orphan lamb. Then they put the little lamb with this ungainly skin flopping around eight legs, two heads, in with the mother. She pays no attention at all to the way it looks, but she sniffs it all over again, and then she nods her head. The little lamb goes to work at the milk fountain, and all is well.

What has happened? The orphan lamb has been accepted in the beloved one. There came a time when God’s Lamb lay dead on our behalf and God took us orphans (he does it all the time) and clothed us in his righteousness, his acceptability, his dearness and nearness to him, and thus we stand “accepted in the Beloved One,” received in his place. That is where repentance brings us.

But **repentance is not only for the beginning** of the Christian life. It is the way you start as a Christian, it is true. You come to God, like Adam and Eve, and say, “Yes, Lord, I’m the one, I’ve been running from you, I’ve been hiding from you, I’ve been estranged from you. It’s because of what I’ve done. No one else is to blame but me.” Then immediately God says, “I’ve taken care of all that. My Lamb has died for you and you stand in his place, acceptable to me.” That is the way you begin the Christian life. But if you think that is where it ends, you are terribly wrong. Repentance is the basis upon which the whole Christian life is built. We must be continually repenting of those areas where we fail or fall back upon a way of living which God has said is not right. I find that, as a Christian, I am repenting far more than I ever did before – about things I never dreamed of repenting of before – because I am learning more and more that the Christian life is lived on a totally different basis. I find I must repent of my self-dependence – and so must you.

If tomorrow morning you businessmen go back to your office, after counting on God and depending on him to help you to teach your Sunday school class, or whatever it is you do on Sunday, and then you step across the threshold of your office on Monday and say to yourself, “Aha, now I’m back where I can handle things. I’ve got everything under control now,” you will need to repent of that. You cannot handle things any better there than you can here – without him. “Without me,” says the Lord Jesus, “you can do nothing,” {cf, John 15:5}. If you attempt to do anything apart from that sense of dependence upon him to work through you, you need to repent, to change your mind, to accept again the covering of God, the clothing of his grace, the cleansing of his love.

This can, and perhaps will, occur dozens of times a day until we learn at last, little by little, to walk in this way, to count on his working. He is ours, and all that he is belongs to us. This is Standard Operating Procedure, not just emergency treatment.

We shall come back to this next time to look at those very remarkable words that God addresses to the serpent. But for the moment we leave Adam and Eve standing before God, having acknowledged their sin, having said the same thing about it that God said, having admitted that they did the thing God said was wrong. Immediately his whole relationship to them changed and he is on their side; he is *for* them, as Paul tells us, God is “for us” (Rom 8:31). He has been this way all along but Adam and Eve could not enjoy it until they repented. But now it is all clear.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you that we can echo with the Apostle Paul these words, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” If his love is made available to us then nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. What can man do unto us? What is man that he can harm us or hurt us? Who can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord? We pray that this may have meaning for us not only on this Sunday but all through this week, as we learn to repent of our self-dependence and to cling consciously and helplessly to the continual flow of grace and strength from our loving God. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.