

PARADISE LOST

by Steve Zeisler

Ezra 3 tells of a lament combined with a song of praise. Ezra's ministry took place after Israel had returned from captivity to the land of promise. Jews were once again living in Jerusalem. They wanted to give God honor by putting his temple, which had been destroyed, at the center of the city once again. They made earnest efforts to begin rebuilding the temple. When the work of laying the foundation was completed, the people gathered for a time of worship. Many sang God's praises, but in the midst of the song, the old people wept aloud. Ezra records that the noise was great, because it combined both singing of praise and lament. The lament came from those who could remember Solomon's temple. The rebuilt temple would never be what it had once been. The temple that Solomon built, scholars agree, was the most remarkable of buildings, a place of immense wealth and beauty. No temple built by the generation who returned from exile would ever equal what had been lost when Jerusalem was destroyed.

I read recently about recordings that are being made in former Yugoslavia, especially by residents of Sarajevo, for today's children, to tell them what that city used to be like. Today's children know it only as a place of ruin and warfare. They don't know what their grandparents and parents know, that it was once a beautiful city. And so some are recording stories of what it used to be like before everything was ruined.

You can imagine a parent wistfully trying to tell a little child of what Grandpa was like before he had Alzheimer's Disease: "I wish you could have known your grandfather when he was a man of capability and strength and wisdom. He wasn't always like this. But what he was is lost now, and all we can do is tell you what we remember of how he used to be."

We've come to the end of Genesis 3 and the end of the Garden of Eden. There is a door that will be slammed shut in the final verses, an end to something very beautiful that can never be recovered. Cherubim with a flaming sword will stand guard outside, forbidding entry back to the innocence, beauty, and wonder of the garden that used to be. It's a sad end to the story. I'm sure that Adam and Eve must have told their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren stories of what the children could only imagine: the magnificent garden, the walks with God in the cool of the evening, righteous choices that were effortless.

Let's read verses 20-24, the final stages of the loss of Eden:

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

There are actually some wonderful indicators of hope in these verses, which we will look at in a bit. But this is a sad story about a curtain rung down, a door slammed shut, the end of something marvelous. As we come to this section, we're like "boat people" taking a final, wistful look at the land as the boat pulls away and the future of the race is changed forever. It will do us good to remember it a bit, to go back over some of the lessons that we've encountered as we studied Genesis 1-3 together, to look back at God's establishment of this world before it was ruined. We'll do that by highlighting a few themes.

ONE LAST LOOK BACK

The very first verse of the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Most of us come at life with the theme "In the beginning I..." rather than "In the beginning God..." That is, we orient life around ourselves-our needs, our desires, our hopes, our dreams, our memories, our efforts, our accomplishments.

I was watching a baby girl who visited our home this week. She had discovered her toes. Frequently, she pulled her legs up in the air and grabbed her toes. It was a marvelous adventure-tactile sensations in both her feet and hands. Very exciting! We all start out that way, being the center of our world. Parents exist so that we can be fed and clothed and changed. They have no meaning in life other than to take care of us. When we feel bad, everyone ought to rally around to make us feel better.

Too many of us, no longer infants, approach God with a therapy-mindedness, if you will: "I'm going to have a relationship with God because I know exactly what I want and need and deserve, and religion ought to supply it to me." Whether we admit it or not, the world consists of ourselves, and all else is given meaning by its usefulness to us.

But the Scriptures say, "In the beginning God..." And it is a measure of maturity to become people who see the cosmos and evaluate history with the priorities of God; who adopt an attitude of worship and humility before the One greater than themselves.

A second theme to recall is that God gives order to chaos. In the modern world, intellectuals champion chaos, and universities teach literature by trying to destroy or undo what has been written. Everything is viewed as socially constructed. Nothing, therefore, is true or beautiful; there is no objective sense in which something is worthy. There's no basis for morality, only for apportioning power. We live in a day and age in which experiments are considered more important than solutions, questions are to be preferred over answers, and chaos is the environment for creativity.

God hovered over a world that was formless and void and dark, and brought light and order and purpose to things. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, said, "The truth sets you free." Because God has established right and wrong, we can choose what is best and turn from what is wrong. There are foundations to creation that don't change. Looking back to the beginning, we must reject our modern era's preference for chaos.

A third theme is that human beings are the crown of creation. The six days that brought everything into existence ended at its highest point. And at the highest point, the greatest thing God made was human beings. Therefore, every instinct we have to hate ourselves, knowing of our weakness, our foibles and failures, and all the reasons why we should be rejected and go unloved in life-is all contradicted by the word of the Creator. He made human beings because he intended, and does forever intend, to love us and value us. There is nothing more remarkable that you can be than a human being. The image of God is stamped on humanity and nowhere else.

A fourth theme we might look back on is the glory and mystery of being made male and female. Whatever our culture, wherever we're from, what we've learned to consider normal needs to be judged by God's intention in creating marriage and sexuality. A conviction that the most traditional way of thinking about these things is the best, or that the most contemporary and nontraditional way of thinking of things is best, and everything in between, needs to be judged by the word of God.

The last theme I want to mention is that spiritual warfare and struggle are inevitable. The tempter was permitted in the garden. Choices had to be made to believe God against the lie before sin ever entered human experience. If that was true before we were subject to sin, it is certainly true now. There is no way to be human without being engaged in a struggle, without having to make tough choices, to walk by faith, not by sight.

LIFE TO COME

Now let's turn to the five verses at the close of Genesis 3. What do they teach us as the door to Eden is being closed? First of all, verses 20 and 21 are unexpected. Verse 19, which we talked about in the last message

(Discovery Paper 4559), is the end of God's statement of consequences. It speaks of a terrible sense of meaninglessness:

**"...Until you return from the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return."**

And then we would expect verse 22 to follow; that is, that God would take the action of banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. But that isn't what happens. There are a couple of significant verses positioned before verse 22.

Both verse 20 and verse 21 are wonderful indicators that although the garden will be tragically lost and innocence can never be regained, there is a hopeful future. The end of Eden is not the end of the story. And the rest of the Bible is going to tell us that the greatest story ever told is the redemption story.

Verse 20: "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." God said, "You will surely die." Then later he said, "From dust you were made, and to dust you will return." Why would Adam turn to his wife at this point and name her, of all things, the mother of all living? What can he mean? Adam is hearkening back to verse 15, to the promise God made when he was cursing the serpent, that one would come from the woman who would crush the head of the serpent and challenge the reign of death. So Adam in faith says, "I believe that the Life-Giver is going to come from you. You are the mother of Life itself. We have a future. There is a Savior to come."

It's also important to note that this new home represents reconciliation between the man and woman. Surely there must have been walls of blame and disappointment between them. Adam blamed Eve for offering him poison. He complained to God about "the woman you gave me." Eve must have looked at her husband with a sense of deep disappointment in her heart that he had not acted to protect her. Each of them had significant reason to distance themselves from the other. And yet as they are leaving the garden, refugees stepping into the boat and pushing off from shore, they are doing so together. That is also one of the great reasons for hope in verse 20. Adam and Eve are going to have children. They were given back to each other, and they don't have to face the future alone.

GOD'S PROTECTION

Consider the message of verse 21-God puts clothes on Adam and Eve. Remember, when they first knew they had sinned, they made fig-leaf aprons or loincloths for themselves. They hated to look at themselves. They had an awareness of personal shame that made them want to cover themselves up. There is a different motive here. God is not ashamed of them, covering them so he doesn't have to see them. What he is addressing here is their vulnerability. No longer will an unfallen creation respond to their authority. There was a time when Adam and Eve could command gentle weather, when they would not be threatened by disease, the climate, or anything else. Adam was the lord of the earth. But now they need protection. They are in danger wherever they go. Sickness, death, cold, storms, thorns, and poisons endanger them. And God's action declares that he knows what they need, and he is going to provide for them.

We should recognize, too, that the clothing of skins cost some animals their lives. The sacrifice of these animals anticipates the sacrifices of Israel's temple worship. And every lamb ever slain because of human sin pointed to *the* Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Finally, God's actions in verse 21 remind us that we need to be clothed with Christ. The great truths of a believer's union with Christ; putting off the old nature and putting on the new, are hinted at in God's gift of clothing for Adam and Eve.

Every time we read of sanctuaries and hiding places and arks and a Savior, every time we see God intervening to protect us when we are vulnerable and frightened and needy, every time he covers us and makes us safe in the midst of dangers, it takes us back to the time he covered this first pair in their vulnerability. Are we vulnerable? Are we needy? Are we incapable of survival on our own? Our heavenly Father will meet our need as well.

DEATH, THE GATEWAY TO LIFE

Verses 22-24 are mysterious to me, frankly. But there are some observations we can make clearly. First of all, God is determined that the man and woman should not be sealed forever in their status as rebel outcasts. Verse 22: "He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." It is better for us to be sentenced to die than to live forever as sinners estranged from God. A death sentence is preferable because, wonder of wonders, God knows that Another will pay this awful price for us.

Because we are mortal we must contemplate our end. That's a gift of God. Do you know that? To know that you are going to die means that you have to make provision for your own death. To know that you will not go on as you are forever means you need to ask hard questions, ultimate questions: What will happen to me when I die? What kind of life is worth living?

I've said before that the worst horror stories (fictional accounts) are about those things that can't die--ghouls that can't be killed, vampires that live forever as bloody and terrible victimizers, unable to die although they wish to, ghosts that have to drag chains on and on forever. Those are the most terrifying things. And God doesn't want that to happen to his children. He says, "I'm going to place a date out there in your future when your life will come to an end." This life is actually the gateway to the next. Because this life will come to an end, we can choose another life for eternity: a life with God, or a life without him. It would have been a much worse tragedy for us to be sealed exactly as we were forever, with no hope of being redeemed.

LIFE MUST COME FROM GOD

The second thing we can say with conviction regarding verses 22-24 is based on God's saying, "They may not find their own way back to the tree of life." He stations the cherubim, terrible figures of power wielding a sword of flashing light, at the way back, and he says, "No! I will not allow the man and woman to save themselves. They may not win their own way back. Whatever effort they expend to find life on their own, they won't be able to do it. I'm forbidding them to find the tree of life by their own strength."

We need to conclude from this that we are always going to be dependent on God. If there is an answer, it's his, not our own. We will never be strong enough to make our way back. And further, regaining innocence is impossible. The answer doesn't lie in going backward, by becoming innocent again. The answer lies in going forward. We cannot go back where we are forbidden to go, but we can believe that God has something for us in the future.

THE GREATEST STORY-REDEMPTION

And so the door slams shut and the curtain comes down and the boat pulls away from the shore. The orphans look back wistfully at what was once possible for them, and they know that they will never have it again. And it's a terrible loss. But let me end by saying what this passage doesn't say but the rest of the Bible says: Another extraordinary journey began when this husband and wife began theirs: The Son of God got up from his throne, laid aside his deity, and he began the process of leaving heaven behind to join them. God didn't send us out into the world without going with us himself. He loved us too much to thrust us out on our own. And so God the Son became the baby born into this race in Bethlehem. God said, "I'll go with you." And that's why the redemption story is the greatest story ever told.

Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says, reflecting on the Savior who came with us, the God who didn't banish us to make our way on our own, but who joined us outside of Eden: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-that is, the devil-and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (2:14-15.)

Since the children whom he loved faced fear, mortality, slavery, and devilish condemnation, he came with them. As they were banished, he banished himself. They were doomed to die, and he said, "I can die for you." And he broke the power of the evil one. The loss to Adam and Eve was terrible, but the hope they had, though they couldn't see it clearly, was that God would make something good come of it. And the good thing was unimaginably good-the incarnation! God would become a human and join them.

Romans 5:20 declares, "...Where sin increased, grace increased all the more..." Paul is saying that wherever the tragedy got worse and worse, the grace of God got greater and greater. And it's not a stalemate in which every evil thing that happens is met by an equally weighty act of grace, so that we end up with good and evil barely canceling one another out at the end of the gospel. The worst that sin could do was met by an overwhelming avalanche of grace! It turns out that, as remarkable as Eden was, God didn't just give us back Eden. He gave us something more-union with Christ. God entered the story of sinners, and he offers us life in his Son, so that the redemption story exceeds the creation story. That's why we sing at Christmas, "O come, let us adore Him,"¹ and gaze at the Child in the manger, imagining the angel choirs that sang.

It is fitting to end a study of Genesis 1-3 in early December. Honest acknowledgment of the reign of death, of paradise lost, will allow us to appreciate the wonder of Mary's child.

"Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,

Born to set Thy people free;

From our fears and sins release us;

Let us find our rest in Thee." 2

NOTES

1. *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, text ascribed to John Francis Wade, translated from Latin by Frederick Oakeley.

2. *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, text by Charles Wesley.

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