

“Beginnings: The Fall”

Genesis 3-1-21

This is our second beginning. It's the beginning that is the end. It's the beginning that brings death. It's the beginning that begins with a question. A spiritual question. A pious question. The question of the serpent. The question, “Did God say...”

Adam and Eve answer. And their answer is our answer. What happened in that garden is the shadow that covers all humanity. This is the beginning of the fall. An inconceivable, shocking, ripping, tearing away from the goodness of God's Creation. This is our beginning. In Genesis chapter three, “we ourselves are the ones who are affected, are intended, are addressed, accused, condemned, expelled.”¹

This is the beginning of the *impossible*. God declared the world good! All of Creation was good! There was no evil. The serpent was good. Adam and Eve were good. There was no room for anything other than *goodness*.

And yet the impossible possibility happened. Adam and Eve reached for what was not theirs. They reached for the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. They stretched out their hands for the one thing that God had said no to. The one thing that was off-limits. They had one limit, one thing they could not eat, and they yet they ate.

When we think of a limit we usually think of a boundary on the outside like a fence on a property line that marks the outer edges. But in the garden the limit is actually the center. The limit is the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which Genesis describes as being at the middle of the garden.

The center is *God* from whom life and knowledge flow. Instead of a limit on the outside, it's a limit at the center.

If you're wondering what a limit at the center means, imagine our solar system. There is no boundary, no fence on the outside keeping all the planets in their places. What actually keeps the planets all together? It's the sun, which is at the center. This one point at the middle—in the center—defines all the other points. The sun's gravity puts each planet in its place. Because of each unique place in relation to the sun, every planet is able to have its own special characteristics. Saturn has its rings. Venus its extreme heat. And the earth—because the sun holds the earth at the exact distance where it's located—the earth is able to have liquid water and organic material and human beings. *The sun is what makes the earth, the earth*. The sun, the limit at the center, gives life and definition and being.

When Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they are putting themselves in the center of the garden. They are making themselves the limit. They are putting themselves where no human being was ever meant to go because the very fact of being *created by God* means not *being God*. Creatures are not their own creators. Being a *creature* means living with a limit. It means living from the center, which is God.

Imagine for a moment, the absurdity of earth trying to replace the sun! It would be consumed. It would lose everything that makes the earth, the earth. And more so, in the absence of the sun, all of the other planets would be flung out into outer space. This is what we are saying when we talk about the fall. Adam and Eve fell. And in their

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Creation and Fall,” 82.

fall the whole world fell too. The fall means that world went to pieces because human beings tried to be the sun. Our fall, our original sin, the sin that begets all other sins, is that we tried to be God. We tried to be God, and the life and being that came from God was lost. Death came into the world. That is the heart of the matter, Adam and Eve tried to be God—but for human beings being God can only mean death. As we attempt to replace the sun with ourselves, we are scorched.

This is the original sin: that humankind put themselves where only God can be: at the center of human existence. This is the original sin: that humans try to become their own Creators and own centers, and believe in their arrogance that they can give life to themselves. The original sin is the origin of all of our sins. All of our sins spring up from this root. Sin is the many forms that humanity attempting to be God takes.

This past week I was with a man who's a pastor. He's not Baptist, and he doesn't live in this area, so none of you know him. When we were together, he started telling me about how he was a contractor before he was a pastor. He's not a paperwork person and during his contracting days he had been between administrative assistants and had let a whole stack of receipts and papers pile up. Well, when he finally got a new admin and she started going through the receipts, he would hear her laughing over this huge stack she had to get through. After hearing her chuckle every so often for three or four days, he went out to her office area, pulled open the bottom drawer of her desk, took out a cancelled check that had made out to her and said, "Look at this. Look right down there at the bottom line. Who signs your checks?" "You do," she said. "That's right," he said. "I do. I'm the boss. I sign the checks. Don't forget it. And stop laughing."

If his response doesn't horrify you, it should. What this man—who is currently a pastor—was saying to his administrative assistant when he

pointed to his signature was "You depend on me for your sustenance, I hold the power of life and death over you, I am your center." This is what it looks like when a human tries to be God. This man was claiming what only God can give: the power over life and death. And here's what's deeply ironic: this man who is currently a pastor told me that story with no remorse, but with pride. He told how he asserted his power over this woman to take away her livelihood, implicitly denying that everything that he had was given by God. He was saying that his contracting business and his income and his status as a boss, that that was something that he did, that he created, that he gave life to. He refused to acknowledge his Creator.

This is what it looks like when humanity refuses to recognize its own limits. This is a man who is *self centered*. His center is himself. Even if his words from the pulpit say otherwise, his life declares that he thinks he is his own creator. He is the boss. From him comes life and goodwill and the good ideas and favors. And he expects respect and admiration and subservience in return.

What every despot who has broached no disrespect, what every master who has owned a slave, what every boss who has asserted her power over the paycheck has wanted, is this: to be the "creator: the source of life, fountainhead of the knowledge of good and evil."²

In fact, this is one of the fundamental reasons Christians wholeheartedly reject slavery. No person has the right to control another person's access to life and the basic necessities of life. No person has the right to rename grown adults in his own image, branding them with his own last name and erasing their birth name. No person has the right to be another person's God. We reject slavery because we affirm that in the

² Bonhoeffer, 142.

beginning only **God** created the heavens and the earth.

Fallen people want to live without limits. This is our temptation. To question God's word, to think we know more than God, and to live out of our own resources and not God's.

That contractor turned pastor is just one example of living without a limit. But sin is always original. It always keeps cropping up in new forms and in new ways. Our desire to be limitless, to be our own gods, to transcend our createdness can look as different as there are people or centuries or cultures.

Adam and Eve are our history. Their fall is our fall. Their curse is our curse. We are marked by an insatiable desire to be the authors of our own lives, to live out of our own resources, to be self-made, self-reliant men and women. To people at the center, *dispensing* life and grace and favor for others rather than *receiving* life and grace and favor from God.

We have died. We became like God, and we died. Because on the day we became our own centers, the day we became our own Creators, we found ourselves alone—hidden from God, hidden from one another and hidden from the rest of Creation.

Think back to that pastor. Do you think he had a real relationship with his administrative assistant after that day? Do you think there was mutuality and genuine respect and care for one another? No. Being self-centered is a curse because in the end you're all alone. The fall sends everything and everyone spinning out into black loneliness of space, farther and farther away from the center and farther and farther away from one another.³

³ For a great example of this, read *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis where hell is people building houses farther and farther away from one another.

But the curse is not the only word in Genesis 3. There is also a promise. The promise is that God comes to the garden in the cool of the day, searching for Adam and Eve. God comes searching! God, the true center, our Lord and giver of life, doesn't let the universe spin out into oblivion forever. This is our promise. God creates and then in an act of mercy greater than we could imagine, God saves. God searches us out. The Lord God comes to take back the center.

In our baptisms, this is what we affirm. We affirm that we have truly died. We have died with Christ to the beginning principles of the world. The Adam and Eve principles of the world. We have died to thinking we can do this whole life thing on our own. We have died to trying to depend upon ourselves. We have died to trying to be God. We have died. But then... we are raised to walk in the newness of everlasting life. A life which isn't self-made. A life that is given. By *God*. An *eternal* life. A creaturely life dependent upon the God who made us. Everything that Jesus did was to remove the curse, and to reconcile—to draw back—to himself a Creation that was spinning out into nothingness. This is God's glory: that while we were still sinners, self-centered and living in darkness, Christ died for us. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.

A question. A fall. A flight from God. We reached for the sun. We lived without our limit. And we were consumed. The curse descended. But this is not the last word. God is on the move. On the third day, the sun will rise again. The promise will not be shaken. Amen.