

THE STORY OF YOU AND ME

The story of Adam and Eve is huge in our culture. That does not mean that everybody has pondered it or understood it, or ordered their lives according to its insights. Nor could we expect to understand its many facets at one sitting, or to pretend that there is only one way to grasp or explain its meaning. The story is timeless, and will doubtless go on having its impact for at least as many generations to come as it has for generations now past.

That said, it is not my impression that any of you are neophytes, either to the Bible or to the Christian Life. On the other hand, I have been around the church for many, many years, and over and over I have run into people, even some very faithful friends, who do not get this story. At least they do not get what is most meaningful and important to me. They know it, teach it, and even tell it better than I do. But from my perspective, many of them never add things up. They shy away from conclusions that I think are obvious, but that do not match what the church usually teaches. Did God set it up so that Adam and Eve would eat that fruit? Did God know they would? Did God expect and *want* them to eat that fruit? Absolutely! Apart from that, there isn't any story! God is the Creator, and God created all we have ever seen or experienced. And God wanted us to be individuals – sentient beings – with minds and wills of our own, and with the power of choice. To eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is to become aware that we have the power of choice. The fruit is not an apple – the apple is not sex. This story is even bigger than the story of “Snow White.”

To be fair, most of us who have heard Bible stories started hearing them first primarily in Sunday School when we were children. Not surprisingly, that means we heard a very tame, watered-down version of the biblical stories. Sunday School teachers soften and edit the stories until little of the meaning remains and most of the real issues are lost. This also means that the punch line – the message – of the stories is also reduced to something bland and inane. It's not the fault of the Sunday School teachers; if they didn't do this, the parents of the children would rise up in wrath and either fire the Sunday School teachers or leave the church. Actually, most of us have seen both of those things happen every so often. The problem is: Bible stories were never written for children. The Bible is about real life and a real God, and lots of people walk away

from the church and from religion before they figure that out. Then some of them – almost by chance, it often seems – get intrigued or hooked by something years later and start to come back to the Bible, often in astonishment at what they discover there. It is a very different matter to study the Bible as adults, especially if we consider and talk about the stories with other pilgrims who are serious about the Christian Path. But enough preamble.

The story of Adam and Eve is as foundational to our western culture as it is possible to get. A whole host of presuppositions crucial to our way of understanding life – and its problems and purposes – are contained in this story. Every philosophical or religious construct about the meaning of life rests on presuppositions of some kind. They are all questionable – that is, open to doubt. No presupposition, by definition, is provable. We hang on to presuppositions and learn to trust some of them because life itself keeps proving them – that is, our experience here keeps corroborating their truth.

In any case, I will not go very deep into the details of how this story is written, on the assumption that you are reading it and pondering it yourselves. But I do want to check off some of the important settings to make sure we are on the same page, and so we can move on to what makes this story so fascinating and relevant even today.

Where does this story come from? It is pre-Jewish. Abraham brings it from Ur. (Some will argue that it comes from the Babylonian Captivity, fifteen hundred years later. I mention that only to keep us from getting sidetracked into a “fact flurry.” Meaning: yes, I have heard the theory; now back to the story.)

We have several stories in early Genesis that are obviously related, and doubtless reworked to some degree from a Jewish perspective. But the stories of early Genesis (that is, up to the story of Abraham – Genesis 11:31) pre-date Judaism. So I will ask you: Do you have a basic, if general, timeline in your head? It’s hard to learn or remember anything if we don’t have hooks to hang it on. (Is Elijah before or after Joshua? Are the Children of Israel wandering around in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula before or after Gideon? And who are the “Children of Israel? If you have to stop and ponder such things, you are making things harder for yourself than they need to be. A very simple, basic timeline for openers: 2000 B.C. (Abraham), 1000 (King David), 0 (Jesus), 500 (Muhammad), 1500 (Luther), 2000 (you). Then it’s much easier to start adding in other dates that matter to you.

“Adam” means mankind (humankind) in Hebrew. This is crucial. “Adam” is not the name of a specific individual, but a composite of all individuals. This is the story of us. It is, technically speaking, a myth. It is not historical. It is bigger than a history lesson. It tells about life, and why it is so hard here. We live in a broken world, alienated – separated – from God (separated from the will and design of God). Things were created “good” but have strayed away from their true design, because we do not care very much about “the will of God.” (At least not consistently, and not a very high percentage of us.)

Okay, before I meander us out of all our time, here is what we really need to know and remember from this story. Four things:

1.) Everybody who comes to this planet must eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is the will of God, and necessary to God’s purposes. What is the fruit of this tree? Individuation. Consciousness. Free will. The power of choice.

We eat of the fruit of this tree and become individuals – real persons. We become conscious as individuals – true human beings. (“I gave you minds; learn to use them. I gave you free will, and the ability to choose. You have to learn to use that also, and that is huge – there is more to learn than most can learn in a single lifetime.”)

And where do we find ourselves? In a limited realm. Time and space and physical realities limit everything here. Therefore nothing lasts here. There is a built-in safety valve so that we cannot ruin things forever. We find ourselves in some kind of “classroom,” some kind of boot camp.

Where do you think we are? (In Heaven?) No, we live in a broken realm. We are here to learn about life, get some experience with its principles, and begin our pilgrimage toward becoming “real persons.”

2.) Consciousness and free will are huge gifts. There is no possibility of love, meaning, purpose, kindness, or goodness apart from consciousness and free will. But, as with all true gifts, consciousness and free will are laced with potential disaster: evil, cruelty, mayhem. We can start thinking mostly of ourselves. We can stop caring about our Creator, or the plans and purposes of our Creator. Kids on a playground fighting over the ball. A husband and wife arguing over what is best for the children. Nations at war. Environments ruined. Thousands starving. Yet everybody means well, from their own perspective. When was the last time you looked at the skyline of Seattle or Los Angeles or New York?

How is it possible that so many people could pool their energies and resources effectively enough to accomplish such things, to build a city? On the other hand, not all the people in such cities are happy or fulfilled or working together to make life better for each other. We live in the midst of unbelievable achievements, and we live in the midst of unbelievable need and evil.

Again, all true gifts are laced with potential disaster. Nobody uses the gifts of free will and individual choice very well at first. If they ever do, it is after long, hard, sometimes bitter experience. Will those of you who have never had a bitter experience please raise your hands?

Our greatest gifts are always the other end of the spectrum from our worst detriments. Our best character traits and our worst character traits are always linked together. What matters is which end of the spectrum we are working from.

3.) The Curses

What is the result of eating the fruit – of coming to conscious awareness of good and evil, knowing that we are individuals with minds and wills of our own? All of this is potentially wonderful. But it also brings what this story calls “the curses.” To know I am “separate” – an individual – is to know separation. That opens up two possibilities.

On the one hand is *relationship*. If I am not a separate individual, I cannot relate. I cannot respond as an entity different from you. I cannot respond to God either. Relationship requires dialogue of some kind. If initiation, invitation, getting together, doing things together, working together, seeking truth or beauty or meaning together, protecting each other – if that is taking place within some kind of caring, it can be very desirable, from our perspective.

And yet, on the other hand, all of us have experienced the opposite reality. The same possibility of relationship can turn into one of the many forms of *alienation*. Some relationships are hurtful instead of helpful. I doubt if I have to persuade any of you of this reality. All the way from two first-graders who get angry at each other in the school yard to Nazi death camps, we know that alienation and separation can be horrible. We are often aghast when we see the evidence of such evil and such complete non-caring. We say, “What were they thinking?” It is hard to imagine human beings doing such things. But the answer is simple: “They were thinking of themselves.” God was not real to them. Other

people were not real to them. Even their own souls were not real to them. And then the real jolt: I have not done such things in such magnitude, but I have “been there” – been in such a frame of mind. O help! Please, somebody help me.

I know some people who are still trying to understand life in terms of “the good guys against the bad guys.” And they act really surprised if one of the “good guys” betrays them or gets caught doing something wrong. There does seem to be various degrees of evil. Sometimes it really does seem like the people we thought were going to help us fix things the most end up doing more damage than anybody else around. But are there really some “good guys” among us? Have we never heard of “The Fall”? Where do you think we are? Has somebody convinced you that this realm is Heaven? What are we expecting in a broken world? You see, if we don’t have our expectations in line with our truth, we are constantly in trouble with what is going on all around us. Why would I ever be surprised at injustice or betrayal? I should only be surprised when I am loved, cared about, forgiven, welcomed, cherished. Wow. Some people are no longer totally controlled by the curses? Now *that* is amazing, and wonderful! But what do I know and expect if I really know and believe this story? Well, I’m way ahead of myself, I suppose. On the other hand, shouldn’t this story, and the truth it proclaims, be clear and obvious to all of us long since, and all along the way?!

Free will is an incredible gift. Apart from it there is no love, no honor, no purpose or meaning possible. But what is the result of our free will? Alienation and separation. Our story lines it out. The curses:

Alienation: Between us and nature
 Between men and women
 Between us and each other
 Between us and God

By the way, Jesus came to reverse the curses. Reconciliation with God does indeed reverse the curses.

Again, will those of you who have never tasted, experienced, or contributed to the curses please raise your hands?

4.) All human history, if you will, is the story of a trek – a pilgrimage – between two gardens. Not that many humans ever make it entirely from one garden to the other, but it is the real drama going on here, whether we know it or not.

The Garden of Eden = My will not Thine be done.

The Garden of Gethsemane = Thy will not mine be done.

We cannot fake. We cannot pretend. We wander until, of our own free will and desire, we choose God intentionally and on purpose. We choose God's will as higher and more desirable than our own will or purpose. There is no other way to choose God, since God is greater than we are.

All my gifts, abilities, desires, and purposes are switched to a new desire to love and serve God. (Does that sound like the first and greatest commandment? Of course.) But if I subvert my will to God's will, do I not cease to be fully human – and cease to be myself? This is the age-old fear, and it causes us to duck and dodge and to hedge our bets – for years. It certainly does seem to us like we will lose all our individuality, and everything we value about our “selves,” if we walk on into a genuine conversion. But true Christians are never selfless; they are not really self-sacrificing. If I trust God's love, do I not know that God's will is better than my own? Do I not know that it will work out better for me (and for many others) if I do go with God? Will that not end up being better than anything I could ever imagine, design, or desire? Well, yes; I know it in theory. But do I actually and truly believe it?

* * *

MUSINGS

Jesus came to reverse the curses. But it is a lot tougher than any of us would have guessed at first. If the heart is not truly reconciled to God – if the alienation is not truly changed to love and trust between me and God – no amount of effort or determination on my part can make a serious dent on the curses for more than brief moments. Then it will all revert back. Some of us have had the experience of learning a lesson over and over. It may come in different guises and in different circumstances, but we discover that we are somehow “stuck” at this place or on this level until we truly see and learn. That is, it all keeps going around again – reverting back to the same place – for as long as our learning is superficial.

What is the “problem”? The problem is not something to be fixed. That is, the problem is our free will. And our free will is essential – absolutely necessary to the whole purpose. In the imagery of the story, it is God’s will that we eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We must become conscious beings. We must begin to make choices. The hope is not a recall of free will (though many have tried to say so). The hope is that we will one day use our free will to choose God.

By the way, how is it possible for Adam and Eve to “sin” – to do any wrong – *before* they eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? How can God instruct Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of this tree if there is no awareness of obedience or disobedience? Often people speak of this story as “The Fall.” Fall from what? A fall from an ideal realm where we have no free will, no choice? Usually it is painstakingly explained to me that the story cannot cover all the details, and that some contradictions are bound to occur. Therefore I should ignore what doesn’t fit. So, unlike me, the storyteller is stupid and did not notice the problem? I prefer to think the storyteller is brilliant, and put this incongruous hint in the story on purpose. That is, God never intended the possibility that Adam and Eve would not eat the fruit.

We are designed to be creatures capable of many dimensions: love, sacrifice, duty, allegiance, purpose, friendship (to name a few). None of these things are possible apart from free will. Even *with* free will, we have many limitations. But within our limitations we can still choose many wondrous things. That is what makes life meaningful. That is our glory. But it is also the source of all our worst problems and defects.

There is absolutely no way to get from Eden to Gethsemane except by dying to our willful, rebellious, alienated selves, and being raised from these ashes to our true selves. Endlessly, various members of our race (the human race) have tried to find an easier, less complicated way. None have succeeded.

The greatest misunderstanding (and foil) for our kind is to think that the solution to the problem is for us to be “good” instead of “bad.” If we are moral, generous, good-hearted, and care about our neighbors, that will get us from Eden into the other Garden. But that has no effect on our dilemma whatsoever. Good people can be just as separated from

God as bad people. In fact, Jesus said point-blank that the harlots and tax collectors were getting into Heaven a lot faster than the “good guys.” The obvious sinners know their bankruptcy – their utter need for God – and the morally upright are frequently unable to see their need, or admit their true condition.

Another little insight from Jesus: The problem is not just in our behavior, which is only a symptom of inner things – like fear, a desire to be liked, a desire to succeed in this world, or sometimes even a genuine “caring” about another person. But our problem is the rift, the gulf, the separation between us and God. The problem is whether we are saying, at the core of our beings, “Not Thy will but mine be done,” or whether we are saying “Not my will but Thine be done.”

This “separation” is so basic that it is often hidden under many layers of denial. But the fact is that there is no way to cheat on this one. Have we been crucified with Christ? Or, if that language eludes you: Have we turned our wills and our lives over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or have we not? That has nothing to do with how good or bad we are in the eyes of this world or in our outer behavior patterns. Do we trust God’s love for us enough to love God back? Or are we still trying to take care of things ourselves?

This is your story and my story because nobody comes to this planet without facing these issues. It doesn’t matter what time in history we arrive here, or in what family, country, culture, or religion. This myth, this story of Adam and Eve, tells us the true situation – the true condition – of life here, and what we are all up against.

We all eat the fruit. This place is designed that way. And then the race is on, so to speak, between the two Gardens. Not everybody makes it into Gethsemane in this lifetime. Lots of folk spend their whole lives struggling with the curses, both inside and out. And no amount of effort to save themselves or anybody else from the curses does any significant or lasting good. It’s a real pisser. The story of Adam and Eve is only trying to help us see what our reality is really like and what we are up against. But if we don’t know the story, how can we get oriented, how can we learn, how will we recognize any of the real issues or understand what is really going on? You are Adam! You are Eve! This is not about somebody else. This is your story.