



1

The Person of Promise

Genesis 3:15

Everything around us whispers a double message to our hearts. On the one hand we hear the hints of original perfection: the stunning sunset, the intricate leaf, the refreshing breeze and the singing birds. At the same time we cannot miss the despairing groans of a broken creation: parched land in famine, ravaged forests, natural disaster and overwhelming death.

THE GREAT DESIGN

In the beginning God created everything, and it was good. The stage was set, the cast of creation swam and flew and grazed. And the main character, the pinnacle of creation,



came last. The human. Adam. Actually, Adam and Eve. The pinnacle of creation was not man alone, for that was not good; it was male and female humanity, united yet diverse, made in the image of the God who spoke it all into being.

‘Let us make man in our image.’ Accidental plural? ‘Royal we?’ Not at all. The clues in Genesis 1 point to a plurality in the unity of God. The language nudges us towards a relational understanding of the image of God. Humanity was not made in the image of a power-hungry dictator. The dominion described is not one of conquering and crushing, but of multiplying and caring. We were not made in the image of an abstract thinker, or a passionless decision maker, or even a praise-hungry egotist. There is nothing in the text to suggest such notions.

The language used is the language of generosity to all, of relationality, of genuine unity amidst delightful diversity. Now, with man and woman in place, it was very good. In fact, Genesis 2 reiterates the creation account, underlining the same emphases. God provided abundantly and lavishly. Rivers, trees, fruit, life. And the greatest gift from Adam’s perspective? When God introduced him to Eve, well, like many men since, the manual labourer became a poet!

The climax of the creation account is the ecstatic delight of Adam as he meets his bride. Thus, the creation account ends with a highlighter pen and double underlining to point us to the marital intent in everything: a man shall leave parents and be united to his wife, so that they, though two, shall be united as one. The Bible’s great picture. God’s great goal.

God wants the Bible reader to see, more than anything else, the great picture of marriage. This is not a result of the Fall into sin, or a pragmatic approach to societal structuring,

or a contracted agreement for mutual stability and benefits. Marriage is the great picture of God's intent to unite the diverse into the delight of true unity. And what is hinted at here in Genesis 1-2 will blow our hearts and minds by the time we reach Revelation and the marriage described there at the climax of history. But the wonder of that great marriage will not be truly felt unless we first descend into the valley of the shadow of Genesis 3.

THE GREAT TWIST

The third chapter of Genesis should shock the unsuspecting first-time reader. At the same time it should ring true to all of us who live in this broken world. Everywhere we look we see the aftershocks of Genesis 3—in creation, on the news, in society, in the mirror. In fact, we tend not to see the effects enough. We fail to notice how everything we do, the plans we make, the motivations we justify, even the religious and charitable philanthropy we generate, are so saturated in a post-Genesis 3 brine that corruption runs to the core of everything.

The news is bad. Very bad. In fact, much worse than we have dared to imagine.

Eve got into a conversation with the serpent. He was crafty, inviting her to consider possibilities that had never before entered her consciousness. Can God be trusted? Is He really good? Does He want the best for you? Doesn't He really want you to be making up your own mind? Independence, self-determination, God-like autonomy ...

The invitation to doubt God's word and add the knowledge of evil to their experience of good, to taste and see that God is not all good and that death is a false threat, and that being like God is the way to go ... and within

a few verses the fatal disease is contracted. It was not just the taking of the fruit. That was bad, of course. But it was the wanting to. She wanted to. Deceived, of course, but wanting to. And Adam too, standing there, not deceived, but his heart drove him to want the same.

They wanted, they took, they bit, they died. Or did they? Perhaps they just began to die. Perhaps God was not quite right when he said that ‘in the day you eat of it you shall surely die’ (Gen. 2:17). Maybe their bodies began to die, and maybe creation began to die, maybe the process of death entered through one man, but meanwhile they could strive to keep on living?

Here is the confusion in which we still live today. None of us believe we are really dead. Thousands of years later, a top religious leader came to Jesus for a conversation. Jesus basically refused. ‘Nicodemus, we cannot talk about God stuff because you are a dead man, you need to be born from above before we can talk about God stuff!’ (see John 3:1-15). Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, of all people, the expert in Genesis 3 no less, even he didn’t believe that he was dead! Neither do we.

Back to Genesis 3. If life consists in activity – independent breathing, independent decision-making, independent activity, etc. – then we are not actually dead. We may be dying, but we are not dead. But what if we are like goldfish that cannot see the water in which we continuously swim? What if we cannot see that the notion of independence *is* the very essence of death?

The clues in Genesis 1-2 are overwhelming. Life consists in divine generosity, mutual trust and relational unity in the midst of diversity. Life is not about independence and achievement, it is about connection and relationship.

Deep down, we all recognise that to be true. The greatest achievements in life – winning the tournament, receiving the doctorate, achieving promotion, earning a fortune ... they are all empty if we have no one to share them with. In fact, for many the greatest achievements are often followed by excessive drink or other experience-numbing escape routes. Why? Because all too often the achievement is hollow since marriage and family and friendship were compromised to achieve it. If life is about achievement and independence, then we may pour our energies into the pursuit, but the arrival tends to put the lie to it all.

Adam and Eve were alive in their relationship with God and each other, but they wanted independent God-like status. The God-likeness they wanted was a first-class lie. The only independent self-absorbed powerbroker deity figure is the fake god who was speaking with a hiss that day – the ‘god’ of this age. Yet still today we seem to believe that to be like God is to be independent and powerful and self-concerned and ... we are still dead in the lie that came with a hiss.

When they ate that fruit, they died.

Death was first and foremost in the soul. Their soul curved inwards. As Martin Luther put it, man is curved in on himself, and that is our problem. In fact, that is our death. Disconnected from God, we are dead. The bond that unites Father and Son in the triune God was withdrawn from the pinnacle of creation—the pair fashioned for fellowship with the Trinity. Now the Spirit that united them to each other and to God was gone. They wanted independence. God pulled back and let them have it.

The evidence of physical death took a while to manifest, but the evidence of spiritual/relational death was

immediate. They noticed for the first time that they were naked; they had never looked in that direction before. They began to cover themselves for the first time; they had never felt shame before. They hid from God; they had never felt the inclination towards separation before. They started to blame each other; they had never despised each other before. Welcome to death.

THE GREAT PROBLEM

Unless we really hear the Bible and grasp how deep the problem lies, we will always offer superficial explanations for sin: *Sin is trying hard, but not quite being good enough. Sin is about doing wrong. Sin is falling short so that if the pass mark is 50 out of 50, then our 49 is still not enough.*

Hang on. Where did talk of 49 out of 50 come from? The reality is that we are all at exactly 0 out of 50. Every single one of us is born dead in our sins. We are corrupt to the core. Some show that corruption in traditional sinful ways—the wild fist-shaking extravagance of rebellion in the far country. We all know what sin looks like: lust, theft, brutality, adultery, murder, deceit. But we fail to grasp that some show their absolute corruption in the other traditional sin mode—the self-righteous obedience of the religious son who stays at home.

When Jesus told the story of the two lost sons he set it up with two other stories (see Luke 15). A sheep lost in the far country, and a coin lost in the home. Then come the sons. The first rebels and heads off to Vegas or Amsterdam. He returns with his tail between his legs, his money spent, and his application speech lined up to become an employee who can earn benefits from a benevolent boss. The second stays home and works hard. The good son? Hardly. He also

shames the father, views him as a boss, and demonstrates his incurred motivations. The father humiliates himself for both sons, longing for both to come in and enjoy more than his benefits, longing for fellowship and relationship.

Whether we are rebellious or religious, we are dead in sin. The only hope is something, or someone, who can draw us out of our obsessive self-love and back into life-giving fellowship with God.

In Genesis 3 they made false modesty masks. We still do the same. They made excuses. Us too. But God took charge of the situation. God knew that to clothe an immoral soul in an immortal body would be cruel in the extreme, so He barred access to the tree of life. Before that, He demonstrated that sin means death as He slaughtered animals and made a bloody cover for the guilty pair. And before that He made a promise.

Genesis 3:15. The gospel, 'take one': 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. He shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' (Throughout the book I will use the term 'seed' in place of the typical 'offspring'. This helps to make the singular seed who fulfils God's plan more obvious to us.)

There is a solution to the devastation of sin and death. And it is not a 'what?' What shall we do? What can we say? What is required of us? None of that. The solution is a 'who?' He. The seed of the woman. As you read the Bible, be sure to be looking for him!



'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' ... Then the LORD¹ appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring (seed) I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

- Genesis 12: 2-3, 7 -

That only-begotten Son, who today is for us 'the splendour of the glory of God the Father and the very stamp of his nature' (Heb. 1:3), became known of old to the Jews.²

- John Calvin -

-
1. When the Old Testament refers to God as LORD, all capitals, it is indicating that the name of God is in the underlying Hebrew. This four letter name, YHWH, was never spoken, but instead pronounced as the word 'Lord,' which then became the convention in translations, using all capitals to distinguish the name of God from the title of 'Lord.'
 2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.9.1, McNeil ed. (London: Westminster, 1960), p. 424.

