

From Eden to Babel

“The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

Genesis 6:5-6

Eugene Peterson was asked why he had remained a pastor for so many years. Without pausing, he shot back, “Because of the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition.” The quickness of his answer surprised himself. He had never thought of it quite that way before, but how true. Anyone living honestly and faithfully in the real world is impressed with the nature of these two inseparable realities. Neither the Lord God nor humankind are riddles to be solved. Life isn’t something we figure out. It isn’t neat and tidy. The goodness of God is far more radical and awesome than we ever imagined. The apostle expressed it well when he wrote,

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his
counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay
him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To
him be the glory forever! Amen” (Rom 11:33-36).

And what shall we say of evil? Is it not more pervasive and pernicious than we ever imagined? It is so deceptively subtle and unthinkably cruel that we remain perpetually shocked by human evil. We know all too well how it manifests itself in our own soul and displays itself among the nations.

Those who are intent on neatly packaging God and avoiding the mess will find their souls anemic and their lives trivial. We are better off delving passionately into the mystery of God and working faithfully in the mess of the human condition. We do so without any illusions of mastering either the mystery or the mess. Today we all live east of Eden in cultures reminiscent of Noah’s time. We

are immersed in the ethos and strategies of the tower of Babel; surrounded by cultures committed to human autonomy and self-promotion. Evil, however, has not lessened the majesty and mystery of God which shines through the darkness. As tragic as the hard news realities of Genesis 3-11 are, they do not overwhelm the grace of God.

Litany of Depravity

Our first exposure to evil is in the Garden. We are not given a lecture on the principles of evil. Instead, we listen in on a conversation between a talking serpent and the woman, which begins, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The serpent’s subtlety is consistent with its craftiness, and its anonymity conceals its identity. The symbolism of the serpent remains unidentified in order to emphasize the dialogue. The storyteller gives neither credit nor excuse to the demonic, but focuses on a devious twisting of the Word of God by both participants in the dialogue. The serpent’s question is sin’s question. It rests entirely on deception, while projecting an air of innocence and openness.

Note that the dialogue zeroes in on the prohibition and ignores both the vocation and the permission given to man by God. When Christians begin to move away from discussing God’s calling and God’s freedom in their lives, to debating God’s prohibition they fall into trouble. The precedent for a denomination, Christian college or mission society, to pride themselves on debating and dialoguing over what is clearly prohibited by the command of God, is found in the Garden. It is the first step toward putting the Word of God aside.

The woman might have responded to the question emphatically, “No, of course not. We can eat of all the trees of the garden, including the tree of life. It is only the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we cannot eat.” Instead, she exaggerated the prohibition and played into the hands of her debater. “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *and you must not touch it*, or you will die.’” (3:2-3). The serpent’s response is an emphatic denial: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4-5). The deceiver’s deception was based on half-truths and distorted the true meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The truth was that man would go on living, but the living would not be life; and yes, he would be like God, but in his own eyes alone.

As we said earlier in chapter 2, eating this fruit meant assuming the prerogatives of God. It meant taking over from God the right to define good and evil the way he saw fit. The creature willfully displaced the Creator, and thus crossed the line from obedience to disobedience, from communion with God to personal alienation and autonomy. When the serpent said “their eyes would be opened,” he meant that human beings would insist on seeing things their way, rather than God’s way. Such openness is synonymous with emptiness, loneliness and nothingness. It is the openness of the wasteland. It is like being lost at sea with nothing on the horizon but a mirage. It is an openness associated with exposure, not insight. The story gives us a pathetic, embarrassing picture: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (3:7).

Run any specific sin through this dialogue and it will be exposed for what it is. Hear the deceiver say, “Did God really say that sex is bad?” “Did God really say that you have to be close minded?” “Did God really say you can’t have fun?” The distortion skews the dialogue, plays off our pride, impugns the character of God, and places us on the defensive. From this we learn that depravity has its roots in deception, disguised as innocent questioning and designed to undermine the Word of God. Having sinned, Adam and Eve feigned innocence before God and played the blame game, but there was no excuse and they knew it. Eve was no more prone to this deception than Adam. We cannot argue that her gender was a factor in her culpability, any more than we could argue that older brothers are more vulnerable to temptation than younger brothers because of Cain.

The litany of depravity continues with Cain. The story pictures evil for us in ways that are all too familiar. We don’t have the convenience of generalities and abstractions that allow us to hide behind theory and ideology. The true story puts all that aside and we see ourselves in Cain’s sin. This is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: selfish insistence on having our own way, disappointment with God, jealousy over someone else’s faithfulness and life-taking rage. Cain’s insistence that God should be happy with the fruit of his labor imposes his will on his Creator, the Holy God. As the story reveals, God was not arbitrary in favoring Abel’s sacrifice over Cain’s gift. God is being fair with Cain. The story is not about what to do when you think life is treating you unfair, nor is it about God favoring shepherds over farmers. It’s about atonement over appeasement. It’s about pleasing God rather than satisfying yourself. It’s about giving the Lord your whole life instead of merely writing a check for the offering.

Being well intentioned just doesn't cut it in the presence of God. Cain's reaction both to God and his brother proves what we know to be true, that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Is 64:6) and that our hearts are "deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer 17:9).

What if Cain had been filled with grief over the death of his brother and he had come to God, confessed his sin, truly repented and cried out for God's mercy? Would God not have responded to him out of love and grace? Instead, Cain challenged God with an insulting rhetorical question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" His sarcastic question echoed the dogma of human autonomy and alienation. His response to the judgment of God is no less selfish. "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me" (4:14). After all he had done he could not stop thinking about himself! Why did he seek pity when he could have sought mercy? Why did he imply blame ("You are driving me from the land..."), when he should have pled for God's blessing? This real life scenario is played out all the time. Cain's response is the antithesis to Jesus' beatitudes in the sermon on the mount. He has a pitiful spirit, but he is not poor in spirit; he mourns for himself, but not for his sin.

Cain's way of life evolved into a world-view epitomized by Lamech. Five generations after Cain, there are urban centers. Human labor is beginning to specialize. There are musicians and craftsmen, farmers and tool makers. But the true ethos of Cain's descendants is captured in Lamech's proud poetry. Lamech is the self-made man, a polygamist, who intimidates his wives with a vain and violent boast: "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." What a striking contrast between Lamech's rhetoric of violence and the voice of God speaking creation into existence! Lamech appears oblivious to God, his Maker. He knows only his own ego and cares only for himself. Let anyone cross Lamech and he's a dead man.

Up to this point the litany of depravity has been illustrated by particular individuals, Adam and Eve, Cain and Lamech. But after Lamech, the description of evil covers society as a whole. From psychology to sociology the assessment of man is consistent. The intensity and extent of evil appears to evolve, increasing with each generation. It is interesting to note that as the Bible moves back from an

up-close and personal look at evil and observes culture with a wide-angle lens, the focus changes to humanity's false sense of self-sufficiency and the power of human solidarity. Ground level jealousy, rage, infidelity, deception, pride, greed and narcissism take over in the quest for human self-sovereignty. The beautiful side of evil is the product of Cain's restless drive to make something of himself, as well as the result of Lamech-like competition and intimidation. Our powerful political, corporate and religious structures often appear impressive and self-sustaining even though they manifest virtually no regard for the sovereign will of God. This is the kind of evil we see in Genesis 6-11.

Two situations of systemic evil are described in Genesis: the production of the human race and the development of the human community. From ancient times to modern times humanity places its hope in various forms of human engineering and human solidarity. In Genesis 6 the identity of the "sons of God" and the "Nephilim" remains obscure, but their efforts appear directed toward producing a superior race. The specifics of this apparently successful attempt to breed beauty and brawn are lost to us, but what stands out is that the culture lost all contact with its Creator. The inevitable truth of the refrain, "and then he died," spoken throughout the genealogy from Adam to Noah in Genesis 5, is now resisted in a marriage of lust and autonomy designed to produce immortality. We can read the situation in the light of God's verdict, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years" (6:3). Genesis 11 describes how a fearful humanity sought to guarantee solidarity by building a city, "with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (11:4).

The scary truth that emerges in this litany of depravity is that human evil, left unchecked, can become very powerful. There is a form of success that can be achieved by man that has nothing to do with the God of creation and, in fact, violates his will for an abundant life. This "success" is a parody of God's creation and mocks the order, beauty and freedom God intended for life. God's verdict on the tower of Babel implies that man has become a danger to himself and the rest of God's creation. "The Lord said, `If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other'" (11:6-7).

Liturgy of Grace

We have become used to engrossing descriptions of evil, to the point that we can hardly imagine literature and movies without the likes of Cain and Lamech playing starring roles. We are captivated by today's version of sensual celebrities and success strategies. It is hard to pick up a modern novel that is not a litany of evil. But evil is not the only reality to capture our imagination as so many modern works suggest. I have purposely told the story of evil without emphasizing the most important truth. I have saved the heart of the story until now. God's grace runs through this story in a powerful, life saving way.

When the author of Hebrews referred to Genesis 3-11, he highlighted the faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah. In spite of the fact that they were surrounded by evil, their living legacy of faithfulness still speaks to us today. Abel offered a sacrifice that pleased God not himself. Enoch believed in God and earnestly sought him, even when everyone was living as if God did not exist. Noah accepted the warning of God and out of "holy fear" built an ark to save his family (Heb 11:4-6). Their message is clear, that true faith in God persists even among families and cultures that do not honor God. If we find ourselves, and we do, in families, cultures, and institutions that do not obey God, much less consider God, we have significant role models to learn from. When we feel family pressure to conform to their religious expectations instead of giving ourselves to the Lord, we can remember Abel. When no one around us appears to be walking with God, we have a true hero in Enoch. When the flood of evil threatens, we, like Noah, can grab hold of what God has called us to do and trust in him for our salvation. God doesn't call us to save the world singlehandedly, but to live for him faithfully. We are invited to walk with God in this long obedience in the same direction, with eyes wide open to his grace and mercy.

However, even more impressive than the faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah, is the insight the story reveals of God's love and character. The important truth that we learn from Genesis is that the Lord God agonized over humanity's wickedness. Man deserved to be wiped out, abandoned, and cleansed from the face of the earth, and God came perilously close to doing just that in Noah's day, but instead, the Lord chose redemption. There are hints of hope and redemption in everything the Lord did. Our earliest foreshadowing of the cross of Christ comes in God's curse against the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (3:15). Even as God made plain the dire consequences for their fall, he reveals his tenderness in clothing Adam and Eve with "garments of skin" (3:21)

and placing his mark of protection on Cain (4:15).

We hear the loving sternness in the Lord's warning to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (4:6-7). God was aware of Cain's internal struggle and intervened to avert disaster. He warned of sin's threat and invited obedience. The personal involvement of God and specific direction becomes especially evident with Noah. I can't read the specifications for the ark without being impressed with the fact that God's desire is to work out redemption right to the last detail. God's heavenly design for our salvation is worked out in specific detail on earth. The grace of God is manifest in the way he established his covenant, not only with Noah, but with us as well.

The curse was designed to draw man away from false visions of human autonomy and self-centeredness and back to his true nature as a creature made in the image of God. Obviously the curse was not so devastating as to prevent the frightening rise of great human wickedness. In spite of significant hindrances, man continues to have the freedom to keep choosing autonomy and self-sufficiency and using creation against God. I believe it is important for us to see that God's judgment was and is necessary to protect man from himself. For this very reason man was driven from the Garden. "He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (3:22). Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolized usurping God's authority. Man assumed God's prerogative to determine good and evil. Therefore it was only consistent and wise that man should be barred from eating from the tree of life which symbolized unbroken fellowship with God. Perhaps we should read the symbolism of the cherubim and a flaming sword at the entrance to the Garden of Eden as a vivid reminder to us that there is no humanistic way back to the fullness of life apart from the grace of God.

The strength and solidarity of evil in the human community had grown to such an extent during the time of Noah that God went to extreme limits to wipe out evil. But God's judgment was never vindictive, always redemptive. Protecting man from his own sinful ways was uppermost in his mind when he judged the tower of Babel. He confused human language and scattered mankind over the face of the whole earth, because of the frightful possibility that "nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (11:6).

As we move from Eden to Babel we cannot help but be depressed by the mess of the human condition. Genesis offers a devastating description of the state of human affairs which has only been confirmed by the history of the human race. However, the heart of the story is not the mess of the human condition but the mystery of God. Philosophers and theologians may discuss the mystery of God by exploring his omniscience or omnipotence, his immutability or his eternity, but Genesis gives us a different insight into the mystery of God. When we read, “The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain,” we have to cease our debating about God and bow in humble worship.

How could we possibly read this saga of evil and the loving persistence of God’s gracious embrace and then complain that God doesn’t care about us? What grounds do we have for being disappointed with God, when God has every reason to be disappointed with us? This is the real mystery of God. I read Genesis 3-11 and my heart goes out to God. With his help I want to be like Abel or Enoch or Noah. I want to respond to his undying love, the love of the Cross. We see this love from the beginning. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). It is only because God chose to stay in the story that we can stay in the story!

