

Beauty for Ashes

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Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

—Genesis 3:21

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If you've ever flown on a very stormy day, you will remember the darkness, the wind, the pelting rain. But then, after spending what seems such a long time flying through the thick cloud cover, there's that moment when you burst into the clear blue sky above the clouds where it is calm and full of sun. This illustration can prove helpful when facing difficulties either self-made or those made by others: we may think all is cloud and storm and darkness, but the reality is that the whole time there is, as Calvin once put it, "a calm serenity in heaven," the Holy One arranging all for His glory.

Genesis 3 has been called one of the darkest, if not the darkest, chapter in all of Scripture. But though what was recorded there was awful, it was certainly not altogether dark and foreboding. When Scripture says, "The LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations," that also applies to Genesis 3. Let us look unto the Lord, beloved, in silent prayer, asking that He

might help us see His glory and the hope that is in Christ Jesus, even amidst the tragedy we call the fall of man.

Man's fall

We know that chapter divisions were not in the original Scriptures but were added later in history. So it's quite striking to think that the words "the man and his wife... were not ashamed" appear immediately before, "Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field." There stood the first couple, God's crown jewel of creation. They were perfect, sinless, ideally suited for one another. They were married by the Lord Himself, set in the most beautiful circumstances imaginable, enjoying God's perfect love, His blessed favor, and they could love Him and each other with a sinless, selfless, abounding love. Adam and Eve, literally, did not have a burdensome care in the world. They could look God and each other in the face without shame. They had no sorrow, no pain, no trouble—only joy and peace and glory.

"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made" (v. 1) The word translated "subtil" has the sense of clever or crafty. The word "serpent" of course carries a double-sense throughout Scripture. It not only refers to a certain kind of reptile, but it is also used to refer to the evil one, the fallen angel, Satan. Here we already have our first lesson, namely, that Satan almost always disguises himself, hiding the true nature of sin from us in order to deceive as many as possible.

"And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (v. 1). If you listen to the wording, it's as though Satan was insinuating they couldn't have anything. "Shall not eat of every tree...?" Even the first word, "yea," makes us wonder if these words were a continuation of a previous exchange of

words since we don't normally begin a conversation with the word "yes."

"Hath God said?" These words can be interpreted any number of ways. "Hath God said?" as in, "Is that what you remember Him saying?" or perhaps, "He didn't say that, did He?" Either way, this way of speaking is meant to do one thing to Eve—cause her to doubt. Satan wants us to doubt what God says—His meaning, His truthfulness. Satan loves to try to make God look stingy, as if the Lord is actually withholding something good from us, leaving us with what is worse or with nothing at all. So many temptations come to us in the same way, don't they? Has God said you can't have physical relations before marriage? Has God said you can't do anything on the Lord's Day? Has God said you always have to be honest? Thus Satan tries, often successfully, to make the fear of God, a life of holiness, look dreadfully boring, quite lacking in comparison to the ways of sin. Consequently, many try to straddle the fence. They want to be Christians, but they so want a piece of the world's action, too!

We need to examine ourselves carefully in this regard. We are all relatively new to the art of temptation when compared with Satan; he has had six thousand years of practice and experience. Let's not therefore think too highly of our own power to resist or recognize temptation, even when it is sometimes right in front of us!

Satan's words in verse 1 constitute the first attempt in history to bring God into question—His words, His intentions, His character. Eve tried to put things in a better light (vv. 2–3): "And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." We're not sure if Eve added the words "...neither shall ye touch" to God's original warning, since

Scripture doesn't always tell us all the details involved in a particular history. But we do know one word was added—"lest"—as in "lest ye die." This little word opens a huge door of opportunity for the Evil One. The word "lest," in the underlying Hebrew, introduces the idea of "perhaps." Don't eat of it because you might die. But God's warning was straightforward and unambiguous: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

After sowing doubt, Satan then tells the first outright lie in history. "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). In John 8:44, Jesus refers to the devil as the father of lies. If Satan had said only this much to Eve, she might have been taken aback since this creature was now blatantly contradicting God. But Satan never tells us lies without trying to make them attractive. He adds, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Let's unpack this.

"For God doth know..." These words insinuate that God purposely withheld knowledge from Adam and Eve, knowledge of the supposed benefits of which Satan would soon speak. "God knew this all along," Satan suggests. How many, ever since, have been tempted to blame God for all kinds of things, simply because the Almighty is omniscient. "If He knew, why didn't He...?"

"In the day ye eat thereof." "You won't have to wait," is the temptation here. "You'll have all the benefits immediately! You don't have to live a long life of obedience. Have it all now!" Satan wants to rush us so we don't think too long about temptation. What will they have, according to the Evil One? "Your eyes shall be opened." "Eyes opened" insinuates that God created them blind. How often doesn't Satan tempt us to explore the forbidden, the unknown, wanting us to poke around in the mystery of iniquity. How many look at those of us who are trying to

live holy lives and think or even say, “You don’t know what you’re missing,” as if a holy life is somehow deficient.

“Ye shall be as gods.” Put in other words, “You can live your own life, set your own rules, do what you want. Serve God? Follow His rules? You’ve got better things to do. Just be free of all that. Be independent. Why serve when you can rule? You don’t need all this church stuff. Church people are strange anyway. Normal people don’t live this way—rules and more rules. Just head out on your own, be your own boss. So maybe you’ll upset some people at first, but they’ll get used to it. They’ll have to eventually.” The temptation to be autonomous is very powerful and particularly so in the culture in which we live.

“Knowing good and evil.” Here again, the temptation is, “There’s a whole world out there that you don’t know about. Just take a peek. See what you’re missing, what ‘everybody else’ is talking about or doing or seeing,” as if there is something really great about knowing evil! So the illicit relationship, which began with flirting at first perhaps; or just a quick peek at the dark side of the Internet; or the parties—you just wanted to see what they’re like, etc. Satan suggests that God knows all about this and is keeping it from us. “Don’t be too serious. Adopt a little religion to get by, to keep the right people at a distance. But look at all that you can’t do if you’re a serious Christian—the places you can’t go, the kind of girlfriend/boyfriend you can’t have.” He would have us think of God as stingy, as withholding what would really make us happy. He wants us to think that following God is just a negative kind of life. He wants us to think God’s ways equal a life wasted, that the world and sin will get us where we want to be.

Finally, Satan uses the most powerful weapon of all—silence. He puts the temptation right there, in front of our eyes, inside our ears, before our mind—and lets it just sit

there, working on us. And sure enough, instead of being repulsed, Eve toys with the temptation instead. Note carefully the steps that turned temptation into sin, into the fall. “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food...” (3:6). She’s not going to take it just yet; but she’ll just look at it, just to see.” The Evil One loves to tempt us with, “No, you’re not going to dive into that wickedness—just take a peek, dabble a little, a minute or two—that’s all.” So we can become accustomed to toying with temptation in our minds. We convince ourselves that’s no big deal. But we tend to forget that this feeds and draws in our heart through our desires. As James later writes, “When lust [desire] hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (1:15). So we simply cannot play with temptation—not even a hint of it. We tend to think we’re much stronger than we actually are.

“And that it was pleasant to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). How much sin passes under the guise of art or culture or aesthetics! There is much beauty in creation, but some of it was meant to be reserved and to be enjoyed in God’s way and in God’s time. Too often we are drawn in by what is pleasant to the eyes, even as a fish is drawn in by the attractive lure, one that hides the deadly hook from view.

“And a tree to be desired to make one wise” (v. 6). That was the clincher. They had plenty of food, plenty of beauty all around them, but this? It appears Eve had little apprehension of the tremendous wisdom with which God created Adam and her. What is wisdom? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of it, and to walk in His ways is the furtherance of it. Wisdom is a godly application of what one knows to any given situation. For Eve to disobey the Lord would be the very opposite of wisdom. James describes such wisdom this way: “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish” (James 3:15). Did you ever feel as if the world is turning

upside-down in this respect? Evil is good and good is evil. It's only the unenlightened, the simpleton, that believes in God; the truly wise are too sophisticated to be associated with such things. But let's be honest with ourselves. Apart from God's grace, we too will be embarrassed to stand out as a thoroughgoing Christian, someone totally committed to God and His ways.

"She took of the fruit thereof and did eat." It was done. Satan couldn't be happier. He hadn't been able to successfully rebel against God in heaven, so he tried the next worse thing—to destroy God's image bearer. Knowing the judgment he received for rebelling, he probably thought the same would happen to Eve: no mercy forever.

As the saying goes, "Misery loves company." Not content to rebel against God herself, her mind now alienated from Him, Eve gives to her husband, apparently without explanation or excuse: "and gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat" (Gen. 3:6). Did "with her" mean Adam was there all along? Or does it simply mean she gave of the same tree for him to eat as she had? Some "help meet" Eve was, plunging her husband and progeny into ruin! Some "head" Adam was, breaking covenant with God!

So there it was. I could only wish we could really see in this deed all the ugliness, all the wretchedness, all the sinfulness that it really was. We lost it all, beloved. We lost our God. We lost our innocence. We lost our dignity. We lost our lives. We died spiritually, we began dying physically, we were torn asunder relationally, and we ruined the creation through the curse we earned. God would have been just to end it all right there. The ingratitude! The arrogance! The pride! He had given them far more than we could ever imagine, and they trampled upon it all, casting Him aside.

God's Judgment

You may think, perhaps, that we spent a great deal of time during this message on the fall. Is it really necessary to sludge through all that again and again? There is certainly no pleasure in doing so; but it really has to be done. With sin becoming more open, public, blatant, and pervasive, with temptations literally everywhere, we really need, by God's grace, to see sin in the ugliest light possible because it offends Him deeply and is the cause of literally every single wretched occurrence that ever happened on earth. War, sickness, hatred, poverty, disease, disasters—we did this! Sin did this! God is deadly serious when He tells us the friendship of the world is enmity with Him (James 4:4) and that we cannot love God and mammon (Matt. 6:24).

Adam and Eve's eyes were opened all right (v. 7), and what they saw horrified them. First, they were ashamed, ashamed that they had no covering. Did their appearance change so that they needed clothes to cover it? No, it wasn't their appearance; it was their mind and soul that became ugly in their eyes and needed a covering. Guilt entered into the world and shame followed on its heels. Isn't this scene re-enacted over and over in our own lives? We try to cover sin, suppress guilt, hide the dark side of us. If we're so sure of ourselves and our sins, why do we hide? This thought leads to one of the reasons Christians will be persecuted here in our land. Our voice, our lifestyle, our testimony, as a noteworthy Christian apologist recently pointed out, still stings the conscience of people who are trying to suppress any sense of guilt due to sin.

Adam and Eve do two things. They try to hide and they try to cover themselves. Instead of delighting in the presence of God, they fled from it. How do we feel about being in church? Praying? Hearing or reading God's Word? Is it our delight or can we not wait till it's over? Adam and Eve would have thought themselves happy if

they never saw or heard from God again. Think about that! Is that me? Is it you?

But then we have verse 9, one of the most remarkable verses in Scripture: “And the LORD God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou?” How remarkable! God didn’t lose Adam; Adam lost God in exchange for sin. But instead of Adam seeking God, and repenting before Him, he ran away. But here in verse 9 we have the beginning of the gospel of God’s mercy. God sought Adam and Eve; He called them out of their hiding place. Yes, He would chasten them—severely, in fact—but not to destroy them. God could have done that in an instant if He wanted to.

Has God ever said to you, “Where art thou?” How about right now? We’re not talking about an audible voice or vision. But have you ever come to a point in your life where you knew God was closing in on you, as it were, showing you in no uncertain terms that He was calling you out of the darkness, summoning you to Himself? Beloved, we can run from God, but we cannot hide. Adam presented a poor excuse for hiding, an excuse that actually condemned him, for why would he now be ashamed and afraid? Here we see how hopeless a case man is apart from grace! When God asks Adam point blank if he ate of the tree, Adam tries to shift the blame to Eve and, indirectly, to the Lord Himself for giving Eve to him in the first place. “The woman, whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat” (v. 12). Pathetic, isn’t it? “It’s really Thy fault and hers!” And aren’t we also sometimes prone to blame God when things go wrong in our lives? After all, He could have prevented it, right? What is man!

But it goes no better when God questions Eve as to what she did: “And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me and I did eat” (v. 13). “It wasn’t my fault. I wouldn’t be

in this mess if it wasn't for that snake." She might as well have added, "The serpent Thou didst make!"

Repentance can't be found in either one of our first parents. In themselves, they were truly hopeless, hapless, hardened sinners—just like those of you who are reading this message. Some of you might think that it's God's fault for not converting you. Or it's God's fault for leading you to your lousy job. It was His idea that I marry this good-for-nothing spouse. If others only knew my situation, they would know it's not my fault—none of it! Well, maybe a little bit is my fault, just as Adam and Eve tacked on the briefest of confessions at the end of their replies.

God doesn't ask the serpent what he had done. Did you ever wonder why not? God was not giving Satan any opportunity to repent, no opportunity to confess. He was done: "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life" (v. 14). That was for the snake for allowing himself to be so used of Satan. But the next words are for Satan himself and far more astonishing.

Gospel Mercy

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (v. 15). There is no time limit on this promise. It started then and it will end on the Judgment Day; God started a war that will rage till the end of time. It will be His children against Satan's followers. That battle still rages—in our homes, in shops and schools—everywhere. Satan tries his worst to overthrow the church and yet God preserves her. And so Satan with all his willing followers cannot stand against the onslaught of the Son of God through His Spirit, His Word, and His grace. The gates of hell shall not prevail against

His church (Matt. 16:18). The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4). Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Yes, Adam and Eve would face grave punishments due to sin. The woman's sorrow would be multiplied, as would the pain associated with childbirth, as if to remind every woman with every birth that it was a woman who ushered sin into the world. When God said to Eve that her husband would rule over her, we recall that she was already given to him as a help meet for him. So it's no punishment for her or anyone to be under authority, for man was under God's authority prior to the fall. Instead, the chastisement was that Eve was now subject to a sinful husband. It may sound a little harsh coming from a man, but every time a man in authority acts harshly or ungodly, he will be judged by God for that, but the roots of his being so can be traced to Eve. She led her formerly perfect husband to ruin and now had to live under his sin-affected authority as does every other woman under male headship.

What was Adam's chastening? Perhaps we seldom think about all God says in verse 17: "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it..." Of course, God was not saying husbands don't have to listen to their wives. However, He was saying that men must not follow their wife's advice when it would be sinful to do so. In this instance, Adam didn't lead Eve but was led by her into sin. Had he been the man he should have been, he would have corrected her. The feminist movement might not have had the effect it did on Western culture had it not been for so many men not taking the lead, especially spiritually, in the manner God would have them, or if they hadn't abused their God-given authority in ungodly ways. What a temptation for women to step

into the vacuum men create through neglect, or step out in rebellion when oppressed by ungodly abuse of authority. These are explanations, not excuses, for women who sin by casting off the rightful authority of their husbands, fathers, or other lawful authorities.

“Cursed is the ground” (v. 17). Our days really are labor and sorrow; we work very hard to gain anything from a now-grudging earth. Instead of joyfully gathering the delectable fruit of Paradise, thorns and thistles now greet us in our gardens and fields. We never have to try to produce weeds. And every weed that challenges our produce is a reminder that we’ve made life difficult for ourselves, whether we are farmers or occupy a different calling. Man will have to work until he drops back dead into the ground from which he was originally created.

So what did Adam and Eve do in the face of these chastenings? Repent? No. By nature our attitude is, “We’ll beat this! We’ll invent gadgets to save us work, herbicides to rid us of the weeds, invent an extra day off per week and call them weekends or extend them further and call them holidays or vacations. We’ll retire. We’ll pursue medical advances to stave off death, live longer and longer, and hopefully find a cure for death itself!” Of course, this is not to say that those things are sinful rebellion. However, could we not safely say that if we spent a fraction of the effort seeking peace with God, repenting of sin, striving to enter in at the strait gate, and living holy lives to the glory of God, we’d be far ahead of where mankind is today despite our cleverness? This is what the fall did to us, what we did to ourselves: blindness! So ever since that day, unregenerate people spend their whole career and their whole lives trying to limit the symptoms of the fall rather than addressing the root of it. How can we make ourselves less dependent on God rather than more dependent?

But this is why the conclusion of this chapter is such a wonder. God knew we would never be able to fix the problem, never even be able to want to address the root cause of the problem, but instead only complain about and labor to reverse the consequences of our sin and fall. He allowed our sin to wreak such havoc upon life that we would be led to realize, by His grace, that our fixing is hopeless and that He is our only hope. Thus the “beauty for ashes” title of this message. We burned down the house of our happiness around ourselves, and out of those ashes God built the stately palace of the gospel, the King of which is neither Adam nor Eve, but Jesus Christ the Lord. All who enter into that city of refuge are safe, not just for twenty or thirty years, but forever—saved in this life and safe in eternity.

One of the most pitiful sights in all the world is to see a grown man or woman or a child, sitting among the ashes thinking himself happy, the castle door within a step or two of their ash heap! The gospel is not about us finding God, beloved. It’s about Him awakening us to the reality that we’ve lost Him, but then drawing us to Himself through Jesus Christ in mercy. Beauty for ashes. The first Adam failed us miserably, and we’ve added to his folly. But the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, failed not. All who put their trust in Him, rather than themselves, will come to experience that all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth indeed (Ps. 25:10).

Verse 21 says, “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.” God made the coats. He clothed them Himself. These coats came by way of sacrifice, an innocent animal having died to provide the only covering for Adam and Eve’s shame that He could accept. You can almost see the Lord, as it were, draping the clothes over them. “Here. Put these on. I made them for you.” Yes, He sent them out into the cold

cruel world their sin had made; but He didn't send them destitute of hope.

Let us take one last lingering look at Paradise. The blessed place God had planted and from which Adam and Eve were now driven, and to which they would never return? No, not that Paradise. The covering God gave them and the promise He gave them would, if embraced by faith, bring them to a Paradise unlike anything they had ever seen or known. It brings sinners to heaven itself and to the new heavens and new earth. So it will be for any and all who give up trying to create their own version of Paradise and who, by God's grace, start seeking a city that has foundations, everlasting foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Paradise was lost. But through Jesus Christ, God's Son, Paradise is gained forever. Forever with the Lord, forever without sin, sorrow and sighing forever flown away, tears wiped from all eyes forever, eternal security in the eternal Son of God—this is the beauty God gives in place of the ashes of the fall, the ashes of our sin-ravaged lives in a fallen world. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." To God be the glory, now and forever, amen.