

## Holy Fire (2): The Fall and Sin

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*Genesis 3*

*Colossians 3:12-17*

A friend of mine, also a pastor, had abdominal surgery just before Christmas. She laid on the couch for a week after the surgery, doped up on painkillers, and the only work she had to do was write thank you letters to her congregation from the pledge drive. Those days on the couch, she wrote the most soaring, electrifying, sometimes brutally honest, percocet-induced thank-you letters that the members of her congregation had ever received. One said “thank you for your glorious commitment to the ministries of God in the world of Bethesda and beyond!” One just said: “I hope you come to church more in 2018.”

It was just a few verses ago, that we heard Adam wake up from rib surgery. A minor procedure in which God removed a rib, and made with it... a woman. No doubt, Adam went fully under for the operation. People waking up from anesthesia always have the best things to say, and Adam is no exception.

He wakes up, lays eyes on Eve for the very first time—and soars:

“At last, bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

Boy did he call it right. In the shortest engagement of all times, precisely one Bible verse later, Adam and Eve became ONE flesh, the scripture says. We all know what *that* means.<sup>2</sup>

They become one flesh. *Do* we know what that means? Sure, we can assume sex is a part of this arrangement. But it’s more than that...theologically, becoming one flesh suggests a profound connection, a harmony; “communion” might be the best word to describe it. The way mother and child in the womb share just about everything and yet remain distinct. A unity, a wholeness that doesn’t just belong to the two of them— it’s also communion with the earth, the garden, and the inner voice of God’s love, this God with whom they take regular walks in the breezy part of the day.

Right after the scripture says that Adam and Eve became “one flesh,” it says “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”<sup>3</sup> The nakedness

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 2:2

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 2:24

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 2:25

suggests that this profound connection between the two of them was vulnerable. That is a good thing—without vulnerability there cannot be deep love and care. And with deep love and care—there can be great vulnerability. But the harmony of the garden was vulnerable too, so vulnerable that with one greedy bite into the wrong apple, it fell. We call it “the fall,” because the relationships—the one fleshness—of all creation fell apart, and we are still today suffering the consequences.

Adam and Eve are cut off. From each other, from God. From the earth. They are naked and ashamed. They hear God coming near them and hide behind the bushes. They try to take fig leaves and sew garments to cover their shame. They are banished from the garden. And the inner voice of love—God’s love, becomes to them a faint whisper.

I’m going to quote Ronald Rolheiser at length:

“The word “sex” has a Latin root, the verb *secare*. In Latin, *secare* means (literally) “to cut off,” to sever, to amputate, to disconnect from the whole. To be “sexed” therefore, literally means to be cut off...were you to take a chain saw and go to a tree and cut off one of its branches, you would have “sexed” the branch. This branch, could it feel and think, would wake up on the ground, severed, cut off, disconnected, a lonely little piece of wood which was once part of a great organism. It would know in every cell that if it wants to continue living and especially if it wants to produce flowers and bear fruit, it must somehow reconnect itself to the tree.

That is precisely how we wake up in the world. We wake up in our cribs, not serene, but crying—lonely, cut off, severed from the great whole. Long before we even come to self-consciousness and long before we reach puberty when our sexuality constellates so strongly around the desire for sex... We wake up in the world...sensing that we are incomplete, unwhole, lonely, cut off.”<sup>4</sup>

What Adam and Eve experienced in the fall, is much like the feeling of waking up the morning after a one-night stand or a casual hook-up. That once heated connection has cooled rapidly, you are painfully aware that this other person can get up and walk out before breakfast, and with a nagging insecurity, you wonder where your clothes are. Intimacy is holy, a holy fire, but intimacy without commitment is just a fire that burns things down.

Sensing the absence of the inner voice of love, we can admit that the impulse to use sex to get love, and to put relationships back together, is at its core—a good impulse.

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*: (USA: Random House, 1998), 193-194.

Sex is the fruit of a powerful connection, given by God. But it is the fruit of the tree; it isn't a glue that will help you take a cut-off branch and reattach it to the tree.

Still, our culture has taught us to “use” sex to try do just that. [According to society:] Sex is supposed to be the cure-all. It's happiness. It's liberation. It should be accessible at all times. It's at the same time “the-end-all-be-all” and “totally casual.”” But “using” sex for anything is like Adam and Eve using fig leaves to cover their nakedness.

A preaching professor tells the story about how some of her seminarians decided that they would try to make clothing out of fig leaves—just to see if they could do it. What they discovered is that they would sew together this garment, but just as soon as they got the second leaf sewn on, the first one would shrivel up, and as soon as they got the third leaf sewn on, the first one would shrivel up. So the finished garment covered just about nothing.<sup>5</sup> Our world has strung together so many fig-leaves thinking they will help us reconnect. Tinder. Playboy. “Casual Sex.” But they shrivel up just as quickly as fig leaves, and they shred our hearts in the process.

Rolheiser suggests that while sex is responsible for most of the ecstasies in the universe, it is also responsible for a lot of murders and suicides.<sup>6</sup> The realm of human sexuality is one of the arenas in which we most clearly see the Christian doctrine of sin and evil played out in real-time. I don't say that in a moralizing sense, the way it is usually meant to shame people. I mean we've inherited a world where the relationships that bind us God, to each other, to the earth as one—have fallen apart. And so the good gift of sex has been twisted, and distorted so that we hardly even recognize it as being from God.

So how did this happen, how did one little piece of fruit come to stand for all that has gone wrong? Eastern and Western Christianity have taken different viewpoints when it comes to understanding Adam and Eve and the story of forbidden fruit.

The West has seen Adam and Eve as guilty ones in the story. To be frank, they sinned, turned against God, and succumbed to temptation. Eve saw that it was good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and so she took it. Maybe it was greed, maybe it was pride, but ultimately, Adam and Eve were saying to God: “what you have provided for us is insufficient.” With nearly the whole garden of Eden at our fingertips, with beauty unimaginable, we are still not satisfied. We are going to take the one apple that is not ours to take.

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<sup>5</sup> I heard this from Anna Carter Florence.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*: (USA: Random House, 1998), 193.

In week 4 we'll talk more about how good sex is meant to be a gift—given freely, mutually, consensually, equally, given and received by two people who give their whole selves to one another to cherish and love. There is no “taking” in this kind of arrangement, only giving.

But Adam and Eve become dissatisfied with what has been given by God, and they take what is not theirs.

The parallels with distorted sexuality are endless. For example, the use of pornography is a dissatisfaction with what is; and it's a taking of what is not yours to take. Not only is pornography disturbingly distanced from reality, research has shown us that the more one uses pornography, the more dissatisfied they become with what is real. Many regular users of pornography can no longer receive the gift of a flesh and blood real person.

One of the questions that is helpful in all our sexual encounters is this: Is this a fruit that is not mine to take? Do I want this fruit because I cannot enjoy what is already real? The world has shown us time and time again, the grave amount of violence that is perpetrated in the realm of sexuality when people *take* or *use* what is not theirs, what can only be *given* and *received* as a gift.<sup>7</sup>

While Western Christianity has seen Adam and Eve as the original sinners, Eastern Christianity tended to see them more as naïve, innocent children. In this approach, Adam and Eve are like children—they are vulnerable, and capable of being wounded or deceived. Naturally trusting, Adam and Eve don't realize that the serpent wants to take advantage of them. The serpent offers them a sweet treat to eat, that will make them more like mommy and daddy. Adam and Eve do what many children would—they take the fruit. Elaine Heath writes out of her own experience of child sexual abuse “the serpent comes in the guise of Daddy or Aunt Mary or the grandfatherly man next door.” It's not that Adam and Eve sinned, rather, they are sinned against—just as victims of sex abuse have not sinned, but are sinned against.<sup>8</sup>

Heath continues: “When Adam and Eve eat the fruit, they swallow a cancerous shame that begins with their sexuality. The leaf of the fig tree is irritating to human skin, not unlike stinging nettles. The shame and pain of what has happened to them spread from their sexuality to every part of life. Their precious freedom to trust God, one another, and themselves is broken. Their unselfconscious playfulness is gone. The natural world that used to be a safe space is now filled with danger and

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<sup>7</sup> I'm trying to make an intentional distinction between the words “take” and “use” as indicative of unhealthy sexuality versus “give” and “receive” as healthy indicators of sexuality.

<sup>8</sup> Elaine Heath. *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Assault*. (Brazos Press: 2011).

threat....No aspect of life is left untouched... The consequences of their deception and abuse would include a male drive to domineer over women, and a female struggle with enmeshment and fear. The original wound has become the source for patriarchy, the first systemic sin in the Bible.”<sup>9</sup>

But there is good news in this story—it’s God’s judgement against the serpent and all that the serpent stands for. Genesis 3:15 speaks of the day when the head of the serpent will be crushed. While they’re eyes cannot be unopened, Adam and Eve will go into the world beyond the garden...but God will go with them. And God does a remarkable thing.

This is the first act of grace—God gets out a sewing machine and makes clothing for Adam and Eve. They can put away their fig leaves because God has it covered. Just as we can put away our fig leaves, and any shame we might feel about the fig leaves of the past. Because God has us covered.

It’s a beautiful image that reminds me of a story in the New Testament. I saw a one-man performance the Gospel of John, and when the actor got to the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery, he made an interpretive move I have never forgotten. First, he showed the men, with their arms raised, stones in hand, ready to pounce. And then he showed Jesus, kneeling down beside the woman who was caught in the act—and covering her with his cloak. It was hearkening back to that primordial sign of grace, when God made clothes to cover Adam and Eve.

Christ will do more than cover our nakedness—Jesus wants will make us holy. To restore in us a holy fire, a sexuality that becomes a force for giving life, not taking it.

Scripture says: “beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”<sup>10</sup>

Harmony, there’s that word again.

Our lives and sex lives can be about greed, selfish gain, and power.

Or they can be about compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and love.

Our sex lives can shred the hearts people we know, or they can re-connect us to the inner voice of love.

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<sup>9</sup> Elaine Heath. *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Assault*. (Brazos Press: 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Col. 3:12-15

We can choose again and again to wear the fig leaves that sting ourselves and others, or we can allow God to dress us in the robe of one-flesh.

One flesh—Adam and Eve became one flesh in the garden—and their whole life, just as our life—is a return to, a deepening of that harmony between us, and each other, and the inner voice of God’s love.

I want to close with a picture of what this one-flesh looks like, in their later years, when two people—we’ll call them Adam and Eve—find harmony again.

Before I read it, I will admit that it may sound underwhelming. You may have been hoping for something a little more glossy, a little more center-fold, but when your eyes adjust to real beauty, you will see it for what it is.

A poem, by Wendell Berry.

They sit together on the porch, the dark  
Almost fallen, the house behind them dark.  
Their supper done with, they have washed and dried  
The dishes—only two plates now, two glasses,  
Two knives, two forks, two spoons—small work for two.  
She sits with her hands folded in her lap,  
At rest. He smokes his pipe. They do not speak,  
And when they speak at last it is to say  
What each one knows the other knows. They have  
One mind between them, now, that finally  
For all its knowing will not exactly know  
Which one goes first through the dark doorway, bidding  
Goodnight, and which sits on a while alone.<sup>11</sup>

They have one mind now, the poet says, one flesh.

The fruit of their lives together, given and received, day after day. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Wendell Berry. “They Sit Together on the Porch,” in *A Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint Press: 1998). Accessed <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48563/they-sit-together-on-the-porch>