

“The Saddest Day in History”

Genesis 3:14-24

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Corrie TenBoom’s sister, Betsy, made famous by the book and movie “The Hiding Place,” was the sister who died in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp toward the end of WWII. In that place of freezing cold, inadequate food and work that eventually killed the strongest men, she tried desperately to keep a young pregnant prostitute alive but failed - young mother and baby died. As she watched friend after friend succumb to the starvation, the life-draining work and the brutal beatings, she finally, in near despair, looked at another friend and said, “Everything here dies!” Betsy could have been describing accurately not only a concentration camp but also Genesis chapter 3 and for that matter she could have been describing this world, this life - “Everything here dies!”

The end of Genesis chapter 3 is the saddest section of Scripture I know. I struggled for hours with how to present this passage. I must have read it scores of times looking for the positive. I found myself resisting the message of this text - “It’s too negative!” “It sounds too much like doom and gloom.” Who wants to hear that? We want to hear happy news, good news, peace and light and all those good things. Remember “The Sound of Music” with its “Pollyannish” look at life: “Rain drops on roses, whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles, warm woolen mittens, brown paper packages wrapped up with string... these are a few of my favorite things. When the dog bites when the bee stings when I’m feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad.” Cute but wishful thinking!

The real world of Genesis chapter 3 is the world we try hard to ignore. But as much as I don’t like to think about it, since Adam’s sin, the world we know is a world filled with struggle, pain, and death. In fact I think that is a partial summary of what this part of the chapter is about. We can try to pretend otherwise but reality eventually catches up.

Chapter 3 is describing the saddest day in human history. Eve and

Adam did not trust God and they rebelled against the will of God. And when confronted by God, they refused his mercy choosing instead to deny responsibility for their sin. That first sin dramatically and drastically changed the entire landscape of life. Rebellion against a sovereign God brought punishment that affected every aspect of human existence.

Fairly obviously, there are four parts to this section of Chapter 3:

1. God's sentence on the serpent/Satan. Vv14-15
2. God's sentence on the woman. V 16
3. God's sentence on Adam. Vv 17-19
4. And finally banishment from life as it was meant to be. Vv 22-24

Read it in Genesis 3:14-24:

“So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.”¹⁵ And 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.”¹⁶ To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.”¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.”¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”²⁰ Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.²¹ The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.²² And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”²³ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Ever since Adam's sin, the world we experience is a world filled with struggle, pain and death.

First God confronts the snake, the serpent, but as we know and those first readers would have known - the curse is not only on the serpent but on Satan behind the serpent. Revelation 12:9 “The great

dragon was hurled down -- that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.” And what does God say to this Satan/snake: “Because you have done this...” Done what? You aided in rebellion. “Because you were an accomplice in this rebellion against the sovereign God, you are cursed.” And the curse is that instead of proud rebellion you will live the rest of your days in humiliation crawling in the dust of death. The serpent’s fate was sealed.

But the curse on the serpent not only affects Satan but it affects us. The 15th verse describes the ongoing struggle between Satan and humanity - particularly between Satan and God’s people. An evil has been loose in this world since the day of Adam’s sin. Whether it is Germany’s Hitler, Russia’s Stalin, or Serbia’s Milosovich, their actions cannot be fully accounted for by saying the men were tyrants. There is an evil pervading their actions and the actions of the thousands who did their bidding. It in no way suggests those men or we are less responsible for our sins, but it does acknowledge that a power greater than us is behind the extent of the evil that is perpetrated on the world. And that power is none other than Satan’s. There is hostility between him and humanity. The Scriptures tell us that Satan’s desire from the beginning has been to take as many people to hell with him as he possibly can.

And the extent of evil in this world is hard to exaggerate. Doesn’t the starvation in Sudan and the brutality in so many parts of the world shock us? Some time back, Serbian policeman were stopping straggling ethnic Albanian refugees, looting them, sadistically beating them, and then murdering them - young children and infants included. We have reached the sophisticated, technologically advanced, intellectually enlightened 21st Century and yet as many people are being killed in wars and avoidably starved as at any time in history. We can sit in our relative affluence and pretend it isn’t happening but we are only aiding the evil by our silence and our inaction. That’s the world in which we live and it started with Adam’s sin.

The judgment was not on the serpent only. When we come to verse 16 we find that God speaks to the woman. The first part of

her punishment is aimed at one of her primary roles in life: child-bearing. That will now be painful, toilsome labor. Now one of her God-appointed roles would be made more difficult - He said, "I will greatly INCREASE your pains"

But that is not all - The woman's sentence affects not only her but all humanity. God says to her, "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." Though it is hotly debated today in evangelical circles, the Apostle Paul apparently believed there was something to a functional hierarchy in the home and church. In I Timothy and in I Corinthians Paul claims that male leadership is based in the creation order - man was created first and then the woman. And here, early in Genesis, two times it is mentioned that the man names the woman - and naming something in OT times usually meant a kind of authority over the thing or person being named - as in the case of man naming the animals. So when God says to the woman that your husband will rule over you - God was not describing what ought to be, he was describing how men would pervert their role and would rule harshly, exploitatively and would subjugate women. Woman's life would be blighted by sinful men.

But the sin would not be only **man against woman**. It would also be **woman against man** for God said, "your desire will be for your husband." The word "desire" here is the same word used in 4:7 when it says that sin was crouching at Cain's door and it "desires" to have you..." So here in 3:16 it is suggesting that the woman desires to be independent of the man and even to dominate him. (Susan Foh (WTJ 37 1974-75, 376-83)

Woman at her worst would be a nemesis to the man and man at his worst would dominate the woman. And though we joke about the battle of the sexes and people make money on books like, Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus, the truth is that the hostility between men and women is a blight on the human race. And it is never uglier than in divorce and that which leads to it.

She walked into my office for a meeting but pain was written all over her face. She was only 16 but she knew full well the implications of her parents separation. We are rearing a generation of children and high school students who are either the victims of divorce or the

victims of never having a loving two-parent home. What ought to be the safest and most intimate of relationships turns into the most vicious and destructive. Why? Because of Eve's sin and ours.

And finally God sentenced Adam himself. "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree..." This is not God's counsel to men never to listen to their wives. Part of Adam's sin lay in his willingness to obey the sinful suggestion of his wife rather than obeying God. That is what God is condemning him for.

And just as God's sentence on the woman affected two of her primary roles in life (that of mother and wife) **so God's sentence on the man affected two of his primary roles in life** (that of husband and provider of food). The perversion of his role as husband we have already seen. Now here it is his role as a provider. The curse on the ground meant that making a living would no longer be the easy and pleasurable work it was in the garden. But making a living would tax the man and be painfully toilsome.

Centuries later the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote what many people feel intensely: Ecclesiastes 2 "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind... What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors... All his days his work is pain and grief, even at night his mind does not find rest."

The stress, the heart attacks, the dog-eat-dog competition, the joyless labor of so many are not what work was supposed to be. Work was appointed and blessed of God in the Garden of Eden, but the painful toil of work is the result of Adam's sin.

And the last sentence, likewise affects us all: "For dust you are and to dust you will return." Death is the result of Adam's sin.

On the way to the hospital, to meet with a family whose child had died, I could not help but think of my own family. How do you cope with the death of one of your children? When I walked through the hospital emergency room doors I immediately saw grief personified -

the body and face of a human being dramatically change when they bear the weight of grief. What do you say, not to the head, but to the heart of someone in such pain? I was escorted down the hospital corridor and met other members of the family - the same grief weighed their bodies down as well. We stood mostly in stunned silence - not able to speak not knowing what to speak if we could.

As accustomed as I am to being in such circumstances nothing can prepare anyone to look into the face of an infant who only minutes or hours earlier was so alive. Death is horrible! That death this past week brought a harsh and present reality to Genesis chapter 3. We may avoid it for 30, 50 or 90 years, but Betsy TenBoom was right - "everything here dies!"

And the last part of the chapter only put the finishing touches on the saddest day in the history of humanity - **Mankind was driven from the garden - out of life as God originally intended it to be lived forever** - and all because of sin - rebellion against God.

Try as we might to put a happy face on it that is the world in which we live and humanity has lived for thousands of years. And for all our sophistication, on our own, our future is no brighter these thousands of years later. Any thinking person ought to be in total despair when they rightly understand the hopelessness of our situation.

I have wondered for three weeks why this section of the chapter was written. Was it simply to tell what punishment was dished out on Adam and Eve because of their sin against God so we wouldn't do as they did? Was it simply to explain why things in the world are as they are? I don't think so.

I think this sin-infected description of our world, and of ourselves, is given so we would realize how hopeless life is - how hopeless we are. And in our hopeless, helplessness we would be ready to reach out to the only help there is - God's intervention in our world and in our lives.

Many years ago I heard the evangelist Vance Havner say,

“You have to get people lost before you can get them saved.” This chapter of the Bible clearly shows our helplessness, our hopelessness - we are in need of a savior or we die.

And so, scattered throughout this description of struggle, pain and death are several glimmers of hope that no careful reader can miss.

First of all, at the end of verse 15 the implication is so noticeable 3:15 *“he (Christ) will crush your head, and you (Satan) will strike his heel.”* For all of Satan’s power and ability to destroy and loose evil on this world, for all of his ability to harass God’s people, a day was coming when he would be crushed. From as far back as we know the Jews and the Christians following them understood this as a reference to the coming Messiah’s defeat of Satan. By the time of the New Testament we learn that is exactly the case: In John 12:31, speaking of his own death on the cross , Jesus said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” What Satan and the world thought was their victory in getting rid of Jesus, actually formed the basis for God’s ultimate victory over Satan. In Romans 16:20 Paul wrote, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Satan will not always have the ability to tempt and destroy - his days are numbered. Even now, those who are trusting in Christ, “have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son” - Jesus.

We also find hope in verses 20&21. *“Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. ²¹ The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”*

Immediately after speaking of the fact that all humanity dies, the author strategically places this reference about life: “Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.” Even though physical death would be the destination of every human being from that day forward, and even though that physical death was symbolic of spiritual death as well, God apparently wasn’t through with the human race. He decreed that lives should be born. Carl Sandburg wrote that a baby is God's opinion that the world should go on.

But why should babies be born if all they will do is grow up, sin like their first parents Adam and Eve, and then die? Because God in mercy will provide a covering for them just as he did for Adam and Eve. Look at verse 21 *“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”* I know there is no direct reference to sacrifice for sin in this verse but I can’t help but recall who the first readers of this book would have been - the Israelites, the Jewish people, of Moses’ day. Back in the earlier part of this chapter they would have read how Adam and Eve made clothing for themselves but it was wholly inadequate. But now God provides for them. And those first Jewish readers would have been fully aware of the animal sacrifices God later instituted to cover their sin. So here as early as Genesis 3 there is this allusion to sacrifice for sin - God graciously providing for Adam and Eve what they could not provide for themselves.

There is hope. There is light. There is a savior. We are not lost forever, death is not the end - everything doesn’t just die as if that is all there is.

And so the chapter is written so that we would know how much we desperately need God because, since Adam’s sin, the world we know is a world filled with struggle, pain, and death but that is not the world it ought to be nor is it the world it will be. When I am brought back to this reality then I reach out for God’s mercy and grace. Do you?