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Genesis 2:16-17

Seventh Message

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# LIFE AND DEATH CHOICES

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Choices. Every day we make them, not all of them good. Some we quickly realize as wrong; some we recognize as wrong only much later; and some we know are wrong even as we make them. Many of our choices, especially the bad ones, we make thinking only of ourselves, insensitive to the many who will be impacted. Some choices work out just as intended, but many bring unintended consequences. Parents try to teach their children to make good choices, but then watch them make bad ones, starting in infancy and continuing into adulthood. Asked Augustine in his *Confessions*, “Who can show me what my sins were? Some small baby in whom I can see all that I do not remember about myself.”<sup>1</sup> Most parents have been embarrassed to see their bad habits mirrored back at them by their young children. The children are understandably confused if they are punished for choices which they see adults making. Looking back on his childhood, Augustine wrote,

we enjoyed playing games and were punished for them by men who played games themselves. However, grown-up games are known as “business,” and even though boys’ games are much the same, they are punished for them by their elders.<sup>2</sup>

We make choices leading to life and we make choices leading to death. This is our topic for this morning. Why do we make the choices we do? What enables us to make the right choices? Having made choices leading to death how can we return to making choices leading to life?

## The Ideal State in the Garden

God planted a garden in Eden, provided it with abundant water, and turned it into an orchard:

**The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:9 TNIV)**

Into this garden sanctuary he placed the man he had formed, giving him the twin commission to work and to guard, to serve and to keep. Now he gave him a single command,

**And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die.” (2:16-17)**

Here the Lord provided for the man’s needs. He had not made the man to work the ground, to provide for his own needs. Instead God provided for him, filling the garden with trees, each of them “pleasing to the eye and good for food.” These were to be the human’s food, heavenly food as it were, since the garden sanctuary was an intrusion of heaven on earth. Here the man was free to enjoy the bounty that God provided for him. There was much for him to enjoy, both esthetically and physically. God told him, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden.” “Free to eat” is the translators’ at-

tempt to capture the emphatic syntax of the Hebrew, which repeats the verb “eat” for emphasis. The man was invited not just to nibble but to feast.

Among the trees, indeed at the very center, was the tree of life. The life conveyed by this tree was something beyond the breath of life which God had breathed into the human body that he had fashioned out of the dust of the ground. The breath of life had made the inanimate body into a living creature, an embodied life. The tree of life was provided to give him eschatological life, life carrying on into the beyond. Presumably the human had full access to this tree, as free to eat from it as from any other.

Many religions have featured some sort of tree of life, but generally this tree could be found only after an arduous quest. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, the epic’s namesake went down to the ocean depth to obtain the plant that would restore his youth. But here in Eden, the tree of life was in the very center of the garden, freely available to the man. All he had to do was reach out and eat.

There was a second tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like all the other trees in the garden, this one also was “pleasing to the eye and good for food,” as the woman later saw (3:6). But the Lord God ruled this tree off-limits: “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die.” “Certainly die” has the same emphatic syntax as “freely eat.”

The man had no need to eat of this tree, no need for the knowledge of good and evil. God had not created him with the ability to distinguish between good and evil, nor the need to do so. Only the creator of something can determine if it is good. As one within the system, the man did not have the capacity to declare good from evil. Only God, being outside the system as its creator, had such capacity. Nevertheless, the man knew what was good, for God told him. All the trees of the garden were good, but eating of the one tree was not good. Not because there was something wrong with the tree itself, something about it that warned, “not good,” but because God said that the eating of it was not good. The goodness or not lay in God’s declaration. The reliability of that declaration lay in God’s character. The man’s freedom lay in acceptance of God’s word, in confidence in his character. His life lay in knowing God, not in knowing good and evil. Death lay not in something magical about the tree itself, whereby the fruit itself conveyed death, but in the disobeying of God’s command.

The man had a choice: he could obey God leading to life, or he could disobey God leading to death. Notice how heavily God had stacked the deck in favor of choosing life. In the garden he gave the man an abundance which he allowed him to freely enjoy. Only one thing out of very many was off-limits. Many people view God as a spoilsport, and think that Christians are characterized by what they are not allowed to do. There have been Christians who have focused on giving up things, but the Bible focuses on what God gives his

people. He is a generous God who wants his people to enjoy life. He creates humans with appetites and desires, and he wants to satisfy those desires. But the man was to submit the satisfaction of his desires to the will of his Maker and Master.

The man had the ability to choose. This was part of the dignity God conferred on him. He could choose to obey or to disobey, choose to act as a servant or as a rebel, choose life or death. As Augustine succinctly put it, *posse non peccare et posse peccare*, able not to sin and able to sin.<sup>3</sup> He had the choice and the freedom to do either.

What would motivate the man to make the right choice? There was nothing about the tree itself that repulsed him. Like the other trees it was good. It was the command not the tree itself that made the eating thereof bad. Therefore the man was to be motivated by the command not by the tree. Rather, he was to be motivated by his love for the giver of the command. He was to submit his own will to a higher will, and to delight in doing so. This is a hard word for us to hear, for submissive obedience and delight do not belong together in our thinking. Monks take a three-fold vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. They say that poverty and chastity can be learnt, but the really hard one is obedience. Adam did not yet know that struggle to submit oneself to one in rightful authority. There was as yet no conflict between submissive obedience and love.

Why did the Lord God give the man this commandment? In the preceding verse God had commissioned the man to priestly service, working and keeping, serving and guarding. Now he was being tested in his faithfulness to this commission. It was not a complicated test. He had only one choice and the deck was heavily stacked in favor of making the right choice. God's intent was that he pass, that he be proven as a faithful servant. But he also gave him the freedom to be able to fail.

It is customary to say that the man was on probation. We can conjecture that perhaps after a certain period of testing God would have declared his servant proven and removed the possibility of sinning. Unfortunately we don't get to find out, because as soon as the Lord provides the man with a companion to assist in this choice, they both fail. But we can see what God's intentions were by tracing this theme of life and death choices through the rest of the Bible: the unraveling of everything in the Fall; God's work of restoring humanity in Israel, Jesus, and the Church; and the achievement of his purposes in a restored earth at the End.

## The Fall

Within just a few verses both the man and the woman have eaten the forbidden fruit. The serpent's unraveling of the woman's will was two-pronged. He cast doubt on God's word and on his character, so that she doubted his goodness. And he focused her attention on the one thing denied so that she lost sight of the abundance permitted. Every temptation since has been but a variation on this approach. With her mind doubting God's word and character and her eye focused on the tree itself the woman made her own determination of what was good. She saw that it was good, she took, and she ate. She herself decided how to fulfill her desires.

When the couple ate the fruit they were immediately changed. They knew they had done wrong for they hid from one another and from God. They now knew good and evil, but this was not a good thing; it terrified them. God had not created them with the innate ability to discern and declare good from evil. He had not made humanity to carry that responsibility. But this first couple had assumed

that responsibility; it was a heavy burden. They had done what was right or good in their own eyes, but their choice led to death.

Contrary to the serpent's assertion, they did die. They died relationally: they immediately hid from one another and from God. They died spiritually: in their grasp for knowledge they no longer knew him and were cast out from his presence. They died eschatologically: expelled from the garden they lost access to the tree of life. They died physically: God decreed that henceforth humanity would return to the ground from which it was taken, *adam* would return to the *adamah*.

It was not only Adam and Eve who died. All humanity died with Adam, for we were all represented in him. He was our head, our federal representative. As our Scripture reading began,

**sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. (Rom 5:12)**

In community solidarity, we are all born into Adam; we are all born into sin. This doctrine of original sin is not popular, but it is unmistakable. As Augustine said, you have only to look at babies to find proof!

Again Augustine gives us a succinct phrase: no longer *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, all humanity had become *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin. This is the tragedy of total depravity. Not that every thing we do is bad, but that every part of us is touched by depravity, so that we are unable to live a sinless life, unable to make all the right choices.

This week I received an email from one of you: "Where is the Scripture that talks about that all men are sinners, and how do you explain this to an engineer?" Our Scripture reading (Rom 5:12-21) is unrelenting in its insistence on the universality of sin, but this theme runs throughout Scripture. It's not just engineers who have a hard time with this; all who insist on self, which is to say all of us, have a hard time.

When the first humans sinned, they were in the best of all possible worlds. It was in paradise that they made the wrong choice. This gives the lie to environmental ethics, that people make bad choices only because they are in bad environments. We all know that is not true. We see people make bad choices even when they have it all—especially when they have it all: look at Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse, Lindsay Lohan. Conversely, people in awful situations make very heroic choices.

Since Adam, every human life has ended in physical death, excepting only Enoch and Elijah. As many have observed, the success rate of death is 100%. Even Jesus died. In the OT when people died they went down to Sheol, to Death, to the Grave, to the Pit. The body decayed, but the self continued in a disembodied state. All peoples believed in the afterlife. Some societies made enormous efforts to ensure a prosperous journey into the afterlife, at least for royalty, the most extreme example being the pyramids.

The next few chapters of Genesis describe a downward spiral, as humanity sank deeper and deeper into sin: Cain murdered Abel and his descendent Lamech boasted of his violence; the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were good and they took; humanity gathered at Babel to build a tower to heaven. These chapters make it abundantly clear that left to its own devices the natural tendency of humanity is to spiral downwards not upwards, as William Golding shockingly portrayed in *Lord of the Flies*.

Thankfully, God has not allowed humanity to go to ruin, to frustrate the purposes for which he created it, and to take the earth with it. He has intervened to restore life to humanity. And not just life, but with it the ability to make right choices, to choose life. He has done so through Israel, through Christ, and through the Church.

## Israel

God liberated Israel from a harsh servitude leading to death into a service leading to life. He saved his people so that they might worship or serve him. He put his presence in their midst so that they might know him. To show them how to live in the presence of a holy God he gave them his law, his Torah, his instructions, whose general principle was, “Be holy as I am holy.” Through Moses he set these before Israel:

**“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live... This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...” (Deut 30:15-20)**

The Israelites had a choice to make, one path leading to life, the other to death.

But the Law intensified sin: sin was now disobedience against explicit command—613 of them according to the rabbis’ classification. Though Israel had been redeemed from bondage in Egypt, they were still the same people, still children of Adam, still *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin. The Law just made this more obvious, so that instead of sinning unconsciously they sinned consciously. But God provided for this, too, giving Israel a sacrificial system for the atonement of their sins.

But despite the Torah and despite the sacrificial system, every Israelite died sooner or later. They all went down to Sheol. But they began to see that something must lie beyond Sheol, that there must be a resurrection back out of Sheol into physical life. They began to see that Sheol, or Hades in the NT, is merely the holding place for the disembodied. They based this belief in a future bodily resurrection upon the very character of God.

## Jesus

Into an environment fervent in observance of the Law and in the hope of the resurrection, Jesus was born. He was tested in the wilderness, just as Adam and Israel had been tested. The issue was the same: obedience to God’s word. Three times Satan challenged Jesus. Each time Jesus responded by quoting God’s word from Deuteronomy. Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus did his Father’s will. Not only was he obedient, he also delighted to be obedient. It was his pleasure to do his Father’s will. It was his Father’s pleasure to say of him, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.” There was no contradiction between submissive obedience and love.

How was Jesus able to succeed where Israel had failed? How was he able to make the right choices? He was a human like us, but a different type of human. “Conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,” he was a man from heaven. He was not a man after Adam’s pattern; he was not “in Adam.” He was a new Adam, a new human in the image of God. The old image was so fatally flawed that

a new impression was needed. Jesus was this new image, as the Son took humanity upon himself. Like the first Adam in the beginning, but unlike every human since, he was *posse non peccare*, able not to sin. Unlike the first Adam who made the wrong choice, this second Adam made the right choice, the choice leading to life. He chose obedience, submitting himself to God’s will.

And yet he died, the only human to ever die sinless. “He descended into hell” as we affirm in the creed. That statement troubles many, but it’s asserting that Jesus really died, that he went to the place where all had gone when they died. But for the first time Death or Hades held one over whom it had no right. What would God do about it? How would God vindicate the choice of the one who had chosen life yet now lay dead, the only faithful and obedient servant the world had ever seen? Declaring that death could not hold this one, he raised him from the dead. He gave him back a physical body, but one unlike any body hitherto seen on earth. It was a transformed body, able to do things a normal physical body couldn’t do. After forty days God brought this re-embodied human back to heaven. The Son who had taken humanity upon himself when he came down from heaven did not lay it aside when he returned to heaven. For the first time there was a human in heaven; a human who was *non posse peccare*, not able to sin.

## The Church

That’s all well and good for Jesus. But what good does that do us who continue to be born into the first Adam? Just as the first Adam was the federal head of all who follow him, so this second Adam is the federal head of all who follow him. The first Adam led his followers into death. The second Adam leads his followers into life. How then do we follow Christ into life?

It doesn’t happen by keeping laws, by following a rule book. God has to do the work. He pours his Spirit into our lives to do several things. The Spirit opens our eyes to see ourselves as we really are, and it is not a pretty sight. This is the only way anyone, be they engineer or non-engineer, will ever come to a true assessment of themselves.

“Know thyself,” proclaimed Apollo’s temple in Delphi. Self-knowledge is indeed important, but true self-knowledge is not obtained in seminars that boost our self-esteem. God’s Spirit shows us not how good we are but how bad. This is the beginning of the road back to life. Having shown us ourselves, the Spirit then shows us Christ, to whom we come with the faith that the Spirit gives us. God transfers us from the kingdom of death into his kingdom of life, from being “in Adam” to being “in Christ.”

We are made the beneficiaries of the obedience of Christ. Our Scripture reading (Rom 5:12-21) developed this great contrast between the disobedience of the one man Adam which brought death and the obedience of the one man Christ which brings life. In Adam we all died; in Christ we are made alive.

Still the Spirit continues to work, transforming us so that we are able to make right choices. When we act in the Spirit we are *posse non peccare*, able not to sin. But we oscillate between acting in the Spirit and acting in the flesh, between not sinning and sinning. And God seems content to allow us to oscillate like this. Why? It certainly keeps us humble. It reminds us that all is of grace, not of self; that all is God’s gift not our own accomplishment.

We do not live according to rules or commandments. The general principle still stands: “Be holy as I am holy.” We do that not by look-

ing up the rule book, but by the Spirit in us. As we grow spiritually we find out what pleases God and do it.

Jesus Christ is described as the firstfruits of those who rise from the dead. He is our pioneer in this resurrection. But our passage from death to life is not a single event. Rather, it unfolds in three stages, in each of which we follow Christ our pioneer.

The first resurrection happens in the middle of our physical lives. When we come to Christ, God transfers us from being dead in Adam to being alive in Christ, from Adam being our federal head to Christ being our federal head. This is symbolically represented by baptism, in which we die to our old selves and rise to newness of life, identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection.

The second resurrection happens at the end of our physical lives. Our bodies decay, while our disembodied selves go into Sheol or Hades. But God declares that Death has no claim upon us, so he immediately releases us from this realm, for Christ has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18; 20:4). We are present with the Lord as disembodied selves.

The final resurrection happens at the end of time, when God re-embodies our selves. The new body he will give each of us is a transformed body of the same order as the body he gave Jesus. Our re-embodied selves will live on a restored earth, in full fellowship and peace with one another and with God. In that state we will be *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. Notice that this is a state beyond that enjoyed by Adam, who was only *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, not *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. This is God's intended destiny for humanity. But it will not alter our status as servants. Our destiny is to be God's servants in paradise restored, in which state we will have perfect freedom.

## Conclusion

To summarize, using Augustine's succinct phrases: mankind passes through four stages in its ability to make choices.

1. In Adam's pre-Fall state, mankind was *posse peccare et posse non peccare*, able to sin and able not to sin.
2. In Adam, ruled by our selfish desires, we are *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin.
3. Made alive in Christ, walking in the Spirit, we are *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, though too often we revert to walking in the flesh.
4. The day is coming when, as perfected human beings with resurrection bodies, we will be *non posse peccare*, not able to sin.

Such is the fourfold state of human nature.

Here we are today, in the third of these states, between resurrections. God has begun to make us alive, to release us from the tyranny of death, from the disastrous results of Adam's choice. He has transferred us from being in Adam to being in Christ. He has put his Spirit in us, and is at work transforming us. Empowered by his Spirit we are able to make right choices. God is especially concerned about how or why we make these choices, for right choices are made when we submit our will to God's. But too many Christians, insisting on a God-given right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, want God to affirm and bless their own choices. To give but one example, the Anglican Communion is on the point of breaking apart over the issue of homosexuality. On one side are those who insist that God affirm and bless their desires and choices; on the other are those who seek to submit their desires and choices to the will of the Father. But there are many other ways we expect God to bless our self-driven choices. Tragically, this often happens in Christian ministry.

Every day we face choices. Christian maturity lies not in asserting ourselves in our quest for freedom, but in submitting ourselves to God, whom to serve is perfect freedom. Moreover, we delight in doing so. It is those who truly love God who submit themselves to him and delight to be obedient. The choices of such are choices for life.

I close again with the Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo,

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... Amen.

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.7 (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 27.
2. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.9; 30.
3. Augustine, *Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*, 33.

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