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Genesis 3:7-13

Tenth Message

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FACING GOD

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

I heard from several people after last week's sermon about temptation and sin. One of you wrote, "I listened attentively to your sermon today and have a small question. What happens once your 'eyes have been opened?'" That's not a small question! She continued, "What does the Lord provide when one's eyes have already been opened?" This person speaks for all of us, for we have all followed in the footsteps of the first man and woman. All of us have had our eyes opened to the knowledge of good and evil. For the next four weeks we'll look at what happens in the immediate aftermath of the first sin, at what happens when the eyes of the first couple have been opened. We'll look at the responses of the man and the woman, and, more importantly, the response of God.

Last week we saw the woman succumb to the serpent's temptation. Yielding to his lies and half-truths, her world collapsed in on herself. She forgot God and thought only of self. She forgot all that she had and saw only what she did not have. In this self-focused frame of mind, she herself decided what was good. She saw that the fruit was good and she took.

As soon as the man and woman ate the fruit their world changed:

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. (Gen 3:7 TNIV)

An observer, had he been present, would have seen no change in their environment. The garden remained the same, filled with the same trees. The man and the woman looked the same on the outside. The change was in their internal world not their external world. Though their external world remained the same, now they saw it differently because now they were looking through new eyes. Their eyes had been opened, just as the serpent had promised. But far from this being a liberating experience they found it to be terrifying. Their perception of their world had radically changed.

Their eyes were opened to a new consciousness of self, of one another and of God. It was not a pleasant experience. Just a few verses before they had been at peace with themselves, with each other and with God. Now they found they couldn't live with themselves, with each other or with God. As they looked at themselves and at one another they now knew that they were naked. They had been naked all their lives but had thought nothing of it. They must have known, in a sense, that they were naked, but that knowledge conferred no shame. Their new-found knowledge did confer shame. Shame is "the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something improper done by oneself or another."¹ There was a silver lining to their shame, for it showed that they had a conscience. Their consciences were given them by God to prod them, to show them that they had done evil. They now had the knowledge of good and evil, but they knew it from the wrong side. They knew it from the side of evil. Their shame showed that they knew they had done evil. It also showed their inability to handle this new-found knowledge. They

were unable to handle it because they had not been created for it. How were they now to deal with their shame? How were they to assuage their troubled consciences? The next few verses show that they tried three remedies.

First, they tried to deal with their shame before one another. They hid themselves from one another among the leaves of the garden, sewing fig leaves into skimpy coverings. In their self-consciousness they were each ashamed to allow the other to see themselves as they really were.

Next they hid from God among the trees of the garden:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (3:8)

What they heard was not a new sound; they had heard it before. It was only God moving around in his garden. It was, after all, his garden, his sanctuary on earth. God was taking a stroll through his park, just as we might take a stroll in the evening. There was nothing unusual in this: he did it every day. But what the man and woman had formerly found unremarkable, a normal feature of every day life, they now found terrifying. Already ashamed of themselves and of one another they now found themselves ashamed of God's presence, even at a distance. Unable to bear facing God they hid among the trees. This was, of course, ludicrous. How could they possibly hide from God? That they even tried shows their desperation, shows how troubled were their consciences. They had been created for fellowship with God. He had conversed with the man in the garden. They had been made for his presence, but now they could not abide that presence. They couldn't bear to feel him in their lives. His presence, which should have put a spring in their step, was now an oppressive weight. The problem was that they had accepted the wrong presence. They had had no trouble with the presence of the serpent; as a result they could not now abide the presence of God. They had listened to the wrong voice. The woman had listened to the voice of the serpent; the man had listened to the voice of the woman. As a result they could no longer bear to hear the voice of God. They didn't want to see God and they didn't want to be seen by God. And so they hid.

But there is hope. Notice that it is the LORD God who was walking in the garden. The serpent did not know God as the LORD, his personal name Yahweh by which he is known to those in relationship with him. The serpent had rejected relationship with the LORD, and so knew him only as God. He had deceived the woman into seeing him only as God, no longer as the LORD. But the narrator knows that it is the LORD God who was walking in the garden. Though the serpent, the woman and the man no longer knew him as such, he still remained the LORD. He is not a distant creator, but a relational God. Though the man and the woman had bought into the serpent's lie of dismissing God as the LORD, the LORD had not dismissed them. Though they were hiding from him, he came after them. He did not allow them to stay hidden.

But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” (3:9)

With the question, “Where are you?” the LORD God summoned the man into his presence. It is the briefest of questions: a single word in Hebrew. But it is one of the most urgent questions, then and now. The LORD didn’t need to ask the question for his own sake. Since he is God he already knew exactly where Adam was. But Adam needed to be asked the question. What would Adam do with this question? Would he allow himself to be found? Would he accept that God was still the LORD who was inviting him to return to relationship with himself? Would he accept the invitation to confess his sin? Would he accept the invitation back into the LORD’s presence?

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” (3:10)

Adam was honest in his reply, confessing that he was hiding from God. But it was a partial honesty. He confessed to being afraid of God’s presence, but he didn’t confess why this now provoked fear. He confessed to being afraid of being naked in God’s presence, but he had always been naked in God’s presence. He had never been afraid of God’s presence before. Summoned to give an account for himself, he was back in God’s presence but unable to enjoy that presence. He was unable to admit what he had done.

The LORD God did not give up on the man. He continued to pursue him, asking two more questions:

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (3:11)

Again, the LORD didn’t need to ask these questions for his own sake. He knew full well what the man had done. He asked these for the man’s sake, giving him further opportunity to confess. But the man refused to avail himself, instead adopting a third method of dealing with his shame. He had already hidden from himself and his wife among the leaves of the garden. He had hidden from God among the trees of the garden. Now he hid from responsibility by passing the blame:

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” (3:12)

The man was again partly honest. He had eaten the fruit of the tree, but he confessed this in such a way as to absolve himself of all responsibility. How could he be responsible? It was the woman who did it! And it was God who did it, because he put the woman there! It’s as if the man were saying to God, “I didn’t ask for her. She’s yours not mine. Look at what she’s done. It’s her fault, and she’s your fault.” And so the man claimed the time-honored status of victim.

When the man ducked responsibility by passing the blame the LORD declined to question him any further, and turned to the woman:

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (3:13)

The woman followed the lead of her husband. She, too, claimed the status of victim. While admitting that she had eaten, she, too, refused to take responsibility for her actions. The man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on. Yet, by passing the blame, the woman had continued to cede leadership to the serpent and the man had continued to cede leadership to the woman, and implicitly to the serpent above

her. Though the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on, he was at the top of the pile.

In the space of just a few verses the created order has been turned on its head. The LORD God had settled the man in the garden to serve and to guard. To assist him he had provided the woman. As God’s designated ruler and steward he had authority over the earth and its inhabitants. He was to listen to the LORD’s voice, and the woman was to listen to his voice as he passed to her the command the LORD had given him. Instead, the order was stood on its head. The woman listened to the serpent, and the man listened to the woman. This reversal of order is indicated by the narrator in a subtle way. We are introduced to the characters in their correct order, in their pecking order as it were: the man (2:7), the woman (2:22), the serpent (3:1). Their rebellion happens in the reverse order: the serpent, the woman, the man. Leadership in sin happens from the bottom up as the man fails his duty to guard and the woman fails her duty to help him. The LORD corrects the order, speaking to the man, then the woman, then the serpent. He offers the man the opportunity to resume leadership in accepting responsibility for his actions. But by taking the role of victim the man accepts his position at the bottom of the pile; he places himself under the woman, and the woman places herself under the serpent. In the next six verses (14-19), which we’ll look at in the next two weeks, we’ll see that the LORD reverses the order again. He does not give the serpent a voice, but passes directly to judgment upon him, then upon the woman, and finally upon the man. The LORD will act to restore the proper order.

In the meantime I want to explore what the man and the woman should have done. The man and the woman hid from each other because they were ashamed of self. They hid from God because they were afraid of his presence. They hid from responsibility because they were ashamed of guilt. The serpent had promised them knowledge. They did obtain knowledge but it was not the knowledge they needed. To correctly handle this knowledge they needed to know two very important things: they needed to know themselves and they needed to know God. More specifically, they needed to know how bad they now were and how good God remained. It is the same for us today. We need what has been termed the double knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Only with this knowledge can we face God. Here’s how John Calvin begins his *Institutes*:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern... [T]he knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.²

What the first couple needed to know, and what we need to know today, is that God forgives sin. Indeed the forgiveness of sin is a fundamental aspect of his character wherein he reveals his glory and power. The man and the woman were too ashamed and terrified to come into God’s presence in their sin, but therein lay their hope. Coming humbly in confession and repentance they would have found a God who forgives.

Much later, God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. He brought them to Sinai where he entered into covenant with them: to be their God, to take them for his people, and to dwell with them. He gave them his commandments, his Torah. When he sealed his covenant with his people, they said, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exod 24:7). Their confidence was misplaced

for within just forty days they were worshipping the golden calf. This provoked God's anger: he said to Moses, "Stand aside while I wipe them out, then I'll begin again with you." Moses had the audacity to plead with God, urging him to remember his promises to Abraham, urging him to relent from the disaster he was about to bring on his people. The LORD did relent from bringing this disaster (Exod 32:10-14). That word "relented" is one of the more difficult words of the Hebrew Bible to translate, but it's a most important word. It is variously translated as *change one's mind, relent, repent, take pity, be grieved*. We are uncomfortable with the idea of God changing his mind, but our life depends upon it.

In the next chapter, Moses made a request of the LORD:

"If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." (Exod 33:13)

When the LORD agreed to do so, Moses made a further request:

"Now show me your glory."

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence." (33:18-19)

This is one of the high points of the Old Testament. The LORD is about to reveal his glory to Moses, to reveal what it means to be the LORD. What would you expect the LORD to proclaim about himself? His holiness? His awesome power? He hid Moses in a cleft of the rock.

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands [of generations], and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished..." (34:6-7)

That's who the LORD is. His love is overflowing, not because of his people's faithfulness, but because of his faithfulness. He's a God who forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. I think this took Moses completely by surprise, as shown by his response:

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped. (34:8)

Moses knew that this was Israel's only hope. Her only hope was to have a God who forgives sin, a God who relents of bringing the disaster he has pronounced upon his people. Our only hope is to have a God like this.

Less than a year later Israel was again in deep trouble. The people had moved on from Sinai and were on the edge of the Promised Land. They sent in twelve spies to scope out the land. But when they brought back a report of the strength of the inhabitants, the people were afraid and rebelled against the LORD and Moses. The LORD again told Moses to stand aside while he wiped the people out after which he would begin again with him. Again Moses urged the LORD to relent. But now he had an extra argument:

"Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion...' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."

The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked." (Num 14:17-20)

Again the LORD relented of the disaster he was about to inflict on his people. Thereby he showed his great strength, not weakness.

This self-characterization of the LORD as the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin became a rock for the faithful within Israel. Repeatedly the prophets urged the people to throw themselves upon the LORD's mercy. Joel, for example, pleaded:

**"Even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart..."**

Rend your heart

and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,

for he is gracious and compassionate,

slow to anger and abounding in love,

and he relents from sending calamity.

Who knows? He may turn and relent

and leave behind a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)

Isaiah invited God's people:

**"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the LORD.**

**"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;**

though they are red as crimson,

they shall be like wool." (Isa 1:18)

But the people persisted in shutting their ears. More typical of their attitude was what Jeremiah twice said of the people of Judah:

Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?

No, they have no shame at all;

they do not even know how to blush. (Jer 6:15; 8:12)

Nevertheless Jeremiah saw that the LORD would bring a day when his people would wake up to their sin. On that day they would say,

"After I strayed,

I repented;

after I came to understand,

I beat my breast.

I was ashamed and humiliated

because I bore the disgrace of my youth." (Jer 31:19)

To which the LORD's response would be,

**"Is not Ephraim my dear son,
the child in whom I delight?**

Though I often speak against him,

I still remember him.

Therefore my heart yearns for him;

I have great compassion for him,"

declares the LORD. (Jer 31:20)

When the people of Israel and Judah would come to realize how bad they were, they would realize how much God still loved them.

This comes to fruition in the New Testament when that day arrives. The early chapters of Acts record the first preaching of the gospel after Pentecost. Again and again Peter proclaims, "This Jesus, whom you killed, God has raised up to life. Therefore repent and find in Jesus Christ the forgiveness of sins." This unholy alliance of Jew and Gentile had done the most heinous thing imaginable, executing God's son. Yet still God abounded in love; still he was willing to forgive. And he still is, for it is God's glory and strength to forgive sin.

Adam did not understand this about God. Though the LORD had not yet revealed himself as a forgiving God, the man would presumably have found forgiveness had he confessed his sin, had he thrown himself upon the mercy of God. The LORD has now revealed himself as a God whose glory and strength is to forgive sin, transgressions and iniquity. How much more reason for people today to throw themselves upon God's mercy.

The man and the woman made their excuses, but they never asked God for mercy. God doesn't forgive the excusable. He forgives the inexcusable. That's mercy. In his address "On Forgiveness" C. S. Lewis said,

I find that when I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing... If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites... we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves... All the real excusing He will do. What we have got to take to Him is the inexcusable bit, the sin.³

My correspondent asked, "What happens once our eyes have been opened?" Once our eyes have been opened and we have grasped the knowledge of good and evil, we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. But when we confess our inexcusable behavior and throw ourselves on God's mercy in the name of Jesus we find that God is abounding in love and forgiveness. The further question was, "What does the Lord provide when one's eyes have already been opened?" by which was meant, "What happens when we have already experienced the Lord's forgiveness and still we sin?" Again we confess our inexcusable behavior, throw ourselves on God's mercy in the name of Jesus, and find him to be abounding in love and forgiveness. Moses interceded for God's people, asking God to forgive them. We have a greater than Moses interceding for us, even the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sang earlier, "Thy mercy is more than a match for my heart."⁴ For he is

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

*Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.*

*Blessed are those
whose sin the Lord does not count against them. (Ps 32:1-2)*

1. "shame." *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* at dictionary.com.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), §1.1.1, 35-37.
3. C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness" (1947), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 178-180.
4. John Stocker, *Thy Mercy, My God, Is the Theme of My Song* (1776).

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