

## Lesson 1: In the Beginning (Genesis 1-4)

### History as the Story of God's Family

The story of the Bible, beginning with Genesis, is the story of God trying to bring humanity into His family. We see this from the first moment of man's existence, when God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."<sup>15</sup> What does it mean to be made in God's image and likeness? As we see in several other places in Scripture,<sup>16</sup> to say that Adam is made in God's image and likeness is to say that Adam is the Son of God. God wants Adam, Eve, and all their descendants to be His children, to share in His life and love. God is able to share His life with the human race because He created the humans with spiritual powers of intelligence and freedom that reflect the inner life of the Trinity. Through our capacity to know truth and choose the good (that is, to love), we participate in the activity of God Himself.<sup>17</sup> From the very beginning, however, God desired more for humanity than to simply share in His nature; He called us to enter into His life, to become His children.

The way God brings us into His family is through a **covenant**. A covenant is made by: 1) the swearing of an oath, and 2) a mutual exchange of persons: "I am yours, and you are mine." This is different from a **contract**, in which you just exchange property and say, "This is yours and that is mine." A contract makes people business associates, but a covenant makes people family.

From beginning to end, Scripture tells us about how God keeps using covenants to bring us into his family, and the covenants keep expanding to include more people. The first covenant is with Adam and Eve (a holy couple), then with Noah (a holy family), then with Abraham (a holy tribe) then with Moses (a holy nation) then with David (a holy kingdom). Finally, with Jesus Christ, God establishes a covenant relationship with His Church meant to include all people, in all places, at all times. In fact, the word "catholic" comes from the Greek word *katholikos*, which means "universal." The plot of the biblical narrative, then, is God bringing more and more people into his family through these different covenants.

So really, the story of the Bible is our story; it is a story we are born into – the story of God acting to save us through His covenant. Therefore, it is important to study this story, with its conflicts and resolutions, to help us understand who we are and where we need to go.

### Creation

The first question that we must face when considering creation is "Why did God create?" The answer to this is ultimately a mystery but it flows from the nature of love. God is love,<sup>18</sup> and it is the nature of love to give of itself. Every parent knows the experience of the intense desire to give of oneself for the good of his or her child. This is the closest we

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 5: 3; Luke 3:38

<sup>17</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #356

<sup>18</sup> 1 John 4:16

can come to understanding why God created and continues to create, He loves. “The world was made for the glory of God...God created all things not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and communicate it, for God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness.”<sup>19</sup>

And yet God goes even further by drawing humanity into His own life. What did God do to bring Adam and Eve into his covenant? He swore an oath and he made an exchange of persons. The way he swore his oath is connected to Scripture telling us that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh: “God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, he blessed it and made it holy.”<sup>20</sup> The number seven is poetic language. The Hebrew word for “oath swearing,” *sheva*, is based on the word for “seven,” so that in Hebrew to swear an oath is to “seven oneself.”<sup>21</sup> God was swearing an oath to creation and mankind. Therefore, the seventh day, or the *Sabbath*, was the sign of God’s first covenant. This act of creation is the first step in the story of salvation. As the Catechism says, “Thus the revelation of creation is inseparable from the revelation and forging of the covenant of the one God with his People. Creation is revealed as the first step toward this covenant, the first and universal witness to God’s all-powerful love.”<sup>22</sup>

But a covenant also requires an exchange of persons. This happens in Genesis 2:7: “The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.” The word for “breath” is *ruah*, which also means “spirit” and “wind.” We see the same word in Genesis 1:2: “the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind (*ruah*) swept over the waters.” The term is also an indication of life, since breath is the most basic sign of life. This means that when God breathed into man, He was pouring the Holy Spirit, all His divine Life and Love, His indwelling presence into the souls of the man and the woman. This made them God’s adopted children. God was the parent who had given Adam and Eve life – life in their bodies but also in their spirits as images of Himself.

### **The Fall**

Sadly, this happy state did not last long. God asked only one thing from His children: “The LORD God gave man this order: ‘You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.’”<sup>23</sup> What are we to make of this command? The **Catechism paragraph 396** states: “The prohibition against eating the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> CCC, #293

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 2:2-3

<sup>21</sup> c.f. Genesis 21:27-32

<sup>22</sup> CCC, #288

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 2:16, 17

<sup>24</sup> CCC, #396

In other words, we have to realize that we are designed a certain way, and there is nothing we can do about that design. We can't change what we are, or what is good and bad for us. We are not *absolutely* free. Our freedom is to decide if we will live according to the reality that God created, or if we will rebel against the way He designed us, and in so doing destroy ourselves. We cannot rewrite our own design.

Now, no one knows our design better than God, since He's the one who made us in the first place. So He gives us laws, or instructions explaining how we work. His law is our operator's manual, our blueprint for happiness. In essence he says to us, "I created you, and *I designed you for happiness*. If you live according to the way I have designed you, you will be happy. Whereas if you reject my design and my commands, you will find emptiness, sorrow and death. You will break yourself." The sin of Adam and Eve was doubting God's love and to fail to trust in His goodness. "Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness."<sup>25</sup>

### **Happiness and the Moral Law**

Think of the owner's manual in a car. It makes a lot of demands, like "use unleaded fuel only," "don't leave the lights on when you leave the car," or "change the oil every couple thousand miles." Isn't that outrageous! Why do these manufacturers feel they can just tell you what to do with your car? After all, it's your car! You're free to do with it as you want, right? Really though, the manufacturers who built the car and understand it are just trying to let you know how to get the most out of your car, how to keep it from falling apart. They're not trying to restrict your freedom or give themselves a power trip; they just want to tell you how to get the most out of your car. Of course, you're free to disobey them, but if you do your car won't last too long.

It's the same with God. He gives his fatherly instruction for happiness, not to *limit* our freedom, but in order to give us the freedom to make the right choices. Real freedom is to do what is good, whatever is in keeping with the truth of our design.<sup>26</sup> Yet we are still tempted by the thought of determining for ourselves our own standards for living, which will lead ultimately to a loss of freedom through a breakdown in ourselves.

The Serpent/Devil does his best to deceive us about all this. "He (the serpent) said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat of any tree of the garden"?...You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'"<sup>27</sup> Satan's lie is that if we break off from God, or if we don't follow His moral law, we can still be happy. Pope John Paul II states, "The devil seeks to abolish the Fatherhood of God by placing in doubt the truth about God who is love."<sup>28</sup> In other words, Satan recasts God as a master who is jealous of his power and uses his rules to dominate us and keep us in slavery. Satan whispers to us that God is

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<sup>25</sup> CCC, #397

<sup>26</sup> John 8:32: The truth will set you free.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 3:1,4,5

<sup>28</sup> *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p.228

oppressing us with restraints, and so we feel we must fight against God in order to break free from the chains that bind us and keep us from being truly free.

The devil attempts to sow doubt in our hearts, to make us think of our loving Father as a cruel tyrant. If we listen to the serpent, we lose trust in our Father, which leads to disobedience of his commands.<sup>29</sup> All sin, starting from the very first one, is 1) a mistrust of God's goodness and in His loving, earnest desire for our happiness, and 2) disobedience towards Him. This is precisely what Adam and Eve did. And what happened to them? What was the consequence of their sin, their disobedience?

### **Original Sin**

The answer is that Adam and Eve broke God's covenant and placed themselves outside of God's loving family. They went from being children of God to mere creatures. Further, by this action, they became wounded in every dimension of their being. First of all, they lost the supernatural life (grace) that God had given them. God had breathed His Spirit, His life and love, into the souls of Adam and Eve, and when they sinned, they lost that life, and so suffered a spiritual death.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, their human powers became disordered. Their minds grew dimmer, so that now it was harder for them to see what was true and good. Their willpower grew weaker, so that now it was harder for them to choose what was true and good. And their urges grew very strong and unbalanced; that is to say, human beings now find themselves often being attracted to bad things and unattracted by good things. This is called "concupiscence."<sup>31</sup> Our feelings, emotions and passions get out of control or go in the wrong direction, and it is very difficult for us to get a handle on them. From now on every human being would have to struggle to get their urges and emotions under control, otherwise we become dominated and enslaved by our own passions, which in turn leads to misery for ourselves and those around us.

Lastly, their bodies became susceptible to pain, weakness, weariness, sickness, disfigurement, degeneration, and finally death. So we see that sin affects even the body. The soul and body are united, and if you hurt one, you will hurt the other. This is what the Church means by *original sin*. In this sense it is a condition rather than a particular act.<sup>32</sup>

These tragic effects of the original sin have affected all humanity. Prior to the first sin, Adam and Eve lived in a state of *original justice*.<sup>33</sup> In this condition they had integrity of the body and soul. That is, their more basic desires (i.e. the appetite for sex, food and drink, and more) were controlled by the soul's pursuit of the higher goods such as justice and charity. They also possessed greater natural knowledge and physical well-being.

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<sup>29</sup> c.f. CCC, #398

<sup>30</sup> As St. Paul says, "the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23)

<sup>31</sup> CCC, #405

<sup>32</sup> CCC, #404

<sup>33</sup> CCC, #376-377

The body and soul were perfectly united in reflection of God's loving goodness.<sup>34</sup> Adam and Eve, however, threw away God's gifts for themselves and for their children. Adam had received original holiness and natural integrity not for himself alone, but for the whole human race, and when he lost it he lost it for the whole human race. You cannot pass on what you do not have, and so, after the fall and the loss of grace, our first parents transmitted to us a human nature deprived of grace. From this dark moment onward, all of mankind, save two, would come into this world without the presence of God dwelling in their souls. We would be born not children of God, but children of sin.<sup>35</sup>

### **The First Gospel**

Yet even then, God does not abandon us. He promises that the woman's seed will war against evil, and that ultimately the devil's head will be crushed. He says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."<sup>36</sup> This is called the *protoevangelium*, or the "first gospel," since it is the first promise of Mary and Christ.<sup>37</sup> He promises that there will come one who will undo what the serpent has done. There will be a New Adam and a New Eve. And to get to them, we have to follow the narrative of the bloodline, and see the covenants established by God with the descendants of the first parents. From this story we will see that God, in his omnipotence, permits sin in order to bring about a greater good, which is our participation in the life of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> CCC, ##362-365

<sup>35</sup> Ephesians 2:3

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>37</sup> CCC, #411

<sup>38</sup> CCC, #412