

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 4: To Be As Gods! (Genesis 3 - 11)

by Virgil Thompson

You wouldn't necessarily need Luther to appreciate that the first two chapters of the Biblical story are pure paradise, although his insights certainly enrich the promise of these chapters for faith. The goodness of creation may be seen as clear as day on every page of the Genesis story. It certainly is clear that the Lord is pleased: "*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good*" (Genesis 1:31). The man and the woman, as well, seem pleased with the handiwork of the Lord. As the story tells it, "*The husband and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed*" (2:25). By the end of Genesis 2 it is pure paradise all around. But, as Luther points out, to read the story today leaves a bittersweet taste in the mouth of faith. We recall the story with a sigh, for paradise has been lost and is not to be recovered in this life.¹ Sadly, Genesis 3–11 tells how humanity grew too big for its britches and lost paradise.

Paradise, the Creation of God's Promise

According to the story, God's promise alone creates paradise on earth: "*I am the Lord your God, you shall have no others.*" Moses records these words of the Lord as the law of what God demands of us, and no doubt he is correct about it. God commands us to fear, love and trust Him above everything else. But at the same time, there is nothing stopping us from hearing this commandment as a promise. If you have an ear for it you can hear in these words the voice of God, saying, "*Trust me to be God for you! Trust me to guard and protect you from the dangers of life. Trust me to be God and you will be free to take care of and enjoy the creation, including the neighbors with whom I have given you to share it.*" As Luther points out in the Small Catechism, when we trust the promise of God for us we are in paradise.²

That is the point of God's warning to the human creation, "*You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die*" (Genesis 2:16-17). God is looking out for us. God is protecting us from what

surely will prove deadly. The fruit of the tree, the knowledge of good and evil, is not in itself poisonous, Luther points out. Like the fruit of the other trees, the knowledge of good and evil is good and necessary to the life of creation. But the fruit is not intended for human consumption. God knows that being in charge of good and evil is a very tall order. God alone is big enough to administer good and evil in a way that serves the wellbeing of the entire creation.

God's commandment promises to save us from attempting to take good and evil captive to special interests or personal advantage. When that happens, says Luther, the fruit of the tree becomes "*more injurious than any poison,*" on earth.³ He explains that God created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that Adam, and we too, might have a definite way to show our worship and reverence toward God.⁴ Obedience to God's command not to touch the fruit is an outward way to show our heartfelt trust of God as God.⁵ Trusting God to be in charge of good and evil is our charter of freedom to frolic and thrive within the creaturely bounds of our humanity. In the vocabulary of the Bible, such a life is called paradise on earth.

Losing Paradise

Our freedom proves, however, as short lived as our reverence and trust for God. Genesis 3 tells how trouble comes into our lives. By the end of the story we find ourselves on the outside, looking over the fence of paradise lost. Trouble in paradise erupts in the human encounter with the serpent, "*craftiest of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made*" (3:1). The green-eyed monster tempts us with the prospect of being as gods. And notice, as Luther points out, the place where the temptation occurs. It takes place in church of all places! No place is so sacred that the tempter can't weasel in to catch us with our guard down. Only the Word of God purely proclaimed can protect us. Just ask the first man and the first woman of creation. Adam and Eve could tell the story of how paradise was lost when they departed from the pure word of God. With a devious twist, Satan was "johnny-on-the-spot"

to fill the void with a sermon to cast doubt on the truth of God.

With this purpose in mind the serpent coozies up to the believer as a slick, smooth-talking preacher, “*Did God say that you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?*” Eve seeks to set straight the theological record. However, her sermon of God’s Word against the tempter’s twisted truth contains one slight, but fatal, alteration of God’s original command. As Luther points out, God had warned the humans to steer clear of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “*for in the day you eat of it you shall [surely!] die.*” But Eve changed God’s “*surely you will die*” to “*perhaps you will die.*” In that little departure from the pure Word of God, everything is lost. The serpent has now only to reel in Eve and her husband. “*You will not die,*” Satan coos to the couple. “*God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*”

Adam and Eve find the thought to be irresistible; they take the bait, hook, line, and sinker. They obtain what they thought they wanted. At least they get part of it. As promised, their eyes are opened. But they do not see what they thought they were going to see. Instead of seeing as all-knowing gods, they see their naked vulnerability as humans without a God to protect their safety, freedom and innocence. As Luther explains, they desired to be as all-knowing gods and they end up as miserable, frightened, shame-faced human beings. So, they head for the cover of the tall weeds.

East of Eden

That’s where the Lord God finds them as He strolls through the garden at the time of the evening breeze. Imagine—humanity hiding from God, as though God is a threat to our safety and freedom. Luther draws out the meaning for faith:

By nature we have become so thoroughly frightened that we fear even the things that are safe ... Adam and Eve lost their confidence in God and are so filled with fear and terror that when they hear a breath or a wind, they immediately think God is approaching to punish them; and they hide.⁶

“*Where are you?*” God calls to Adam and Eve. Confronted by God, they blame each other and the serpent for their troubles. Adam explains that his troubles started with the woman, “*whom you gave to be with me,*” he empathizes to God. “*She gave me to eat and I ate. She is to blame, not me.*” In fact the man blames God. If God hadn’t given the woman to him in the first place, Adam reasons, he wouldn’t be in this fix. For her part, Eve blames the serpent. And the serpent slithers away into the brush, its mission having been accomplished.

What seduced Adam and Eve, leading to the loss of paradise, was their discontent to live as mere human beings trusting God to be God for them. They desired to be as God, to be in charge of their lives, as well as in charge of the lives of others. That continues to be the story of creation as it unfolds in chapters 4–11 of Genesis. God, grieved to the heart, regrets ever having created us in the first place (Genesis 6:5-8). Fed up with the wickedness of humankind, the thoughts of their hearts continuously evil, God decides to blot out everything He had made and start anew (Genesis 6:1-8).

But even this plan meets with mixed success. No sooner does Noah’s ark sail into the harbor of God’s forgiveness, making landfall on Good Earth, than the humans are up to their old tricks. Unified by good will and common purpose, they resolve to build a civilization with its towers in the heavens (Genesis 11:1-4). God sees where that effort is headed. So often it’s what is best about us that tempts us to overstep our creaturely bounds, living as though we do not need God and have only ourselves to thank for our success. God, however, is not so easily put off as the God-despisers might like to imagine. God comes down to put an end to it. God “*confuses human language and scatters the humans over the face of the earth*” (Gen. 11:5-9). You might imagine that the story would end there. You couldn’t blame God if He should choose to give up on us entirely. But God does not give up. As God had lamented and vowed to Noah, “*the inclination of the human heart [may be] evil from youth, but I refuse to give up my creation*” (Genesis 8:20-22).

Looking Ahead to the Next Sessions:

The story of God’s decision to save creation from self-destruction begins anew with Abram and Sarai. In the next sessions we will track the story of God’s promised salvation through four generations of faith: 1) Abraham and Sarah; 2) Ishmael and Isaac and Rebekah and Leah; 3) Esau and Jacob and their families; and 4) Joseph, his brothers and all their wives and children.

See page 8 for the Bible study portion and for the notes.

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reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series will offer suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Gerhard Forde, one of the foremost American theologians in the Lutheran tradition used to refer to Genesis 3 as the story of the “upward fall.” In his classic little book on Luther’s theology, *Where God Meets Man*, he explains, “The temptation is to become like God ... to reach for something that does not belong to [us] ... to leave the earth for some spiritual paradise ... to refuse [our] creaturehood It is [our] God-like aspirations that destroy our life and seduce us to make life miserable for our fellow men” (p. 53). Discuss, with examples from life, this profound insight about the nature of sin.
2. In one sense, this theme—the human desire to be as gods, refusing to live down to earth in service and enjoyment of the creation—runs through all the chapters of Genesis 3–11. From these chapters read, consider, and discuss selected stories of your choice in light of this central theme of the human story in relation to God.
3. Luther suggested that Psalms 148 and 149 provide the litany of everything for which humanity may be grateful to God, our Creator. Read these psalms, consider and discuss on their basis what gratitude humanity owes to God.
4. Finally, our study of Genesis 3 – 11 has focused on the central theme of “original sin,” namely, ingratitude and distrust toward God. What other aspects of the stories do you find interesting or challenging? Discuss these themes with friends. Consider:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the passage?*
 - b. *What additional background knowledge would help me better engage the passage?*
 - c. *What does the passage promise to faith?*
 - d. *What does the passage demand of faith?*

On the Wild Creation of the Wild Creator

While it is not completely central to the story of paradise lost, we should not allow it to go unnoticed. In these chapters of Genesis we learn it is a Biblical fact: neither God nor God’s creation is altogether safe and tame. On this point the Bible is completely in tune with reality as we know it. If the tumultuous creation is anything to tell, then we must conclude that the Lord God has a wild streak! This is exactly the conclusion that the psalmist draws on the basis of human experience in creation. God, the psalmist points out with some trepidation, along with other wild things creates the wild Leviathan just for the sport of it (Psalm 104:26).

No matter how much securer we’d feel with a domesticated God, who never colors outside the lines of safe and sound, that’s not the God we get in the Bible’s story of faith.

Outside of God’s promise in Jesus God is a completely wild God, Creator of wild life—sea monsters, tornadoes and all manner of things that go bump in the night. You can take it from God’s Word in the story of the Bible or learn it the hard way as did Job and his friends, but there is a wildness to God and to God’s creation that we are not in charge of (see Job 38:1-40:2). The Biblical fact of it puts the “good news” into the Good News of Jesus, by whose promise we may trust the Lord God to keep us safe and secure within God’s tumultuous creation.

Notes from article on pages 6-7:

1. The first six volumes of *Luther’s Works* (Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Minneapolis, Fortress-Concordia, 1958) are devoted to Luther’s lectures on Genesis, which he gave toward the end of his life. See volume one, pages 90ff. for the fuller context of his observation.
2. This theme runs consistently through the Small Catechism from beginning to end. In the Bible Study section one of the questions invites readers to locate passages where this theme is evident. It won’t be difficult. The theme is encountered on every page.
3. *Luther’s Works* 1:96.
4. *Luther’s Works* 1:94.
5. Luther even suggests Psalms 148 and 149 provide a fitting litany of praise for the goodness and graciousness of God, our Creator and Redeemer.
6. *Luther’s Works* 1:170.

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