

The Fall into Grace

sermon digest

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Genesis 3:1-8; Romans 5:12-21

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The Fall, Albert Camus's last novel, is a play on the human struggle with sin, although Camus admittedly was never religious. The story takes place shortly after the war in a bar in the Amsterdam red light district. The description of Amsterdam is lifted from Dante's *Inferno*, the nine circles of hell. Jean-Baptiste Clamence begins his confession with glory days in Paris. He was a lawyer, rich, successful, attractive, charming, noble. He defended widows and orphans and enjoyed assisting the blind to cross the street. He was a man of justice. But everything changed one night as he was crossing a bridge in Paris. He noticed a woman peering over the rail. As he walked away, he heard her fall into the river. Rather than turn back to her assistance, he continued on his way. Giving aid was too much of a personal risk and inconvenience. But from that day, he had carried a burden of guilt, living in fear that he would be found out, that people could see through him and know his hypocrisy. He drags the reader through the mud of his past, not just wrong turns and bad deeds but dark motives and deep anxieties. The whole story is a confessional without a god to hear or care, and the only priest is the uncomfortable audience. Finally Clamence longs for a second chance to rescue the woman, but he shudders at the thought of the icy water. Actually he is relieved that we never get a second chance.

No one familiar with Camus's absurdity would expect a happy ending, but his critics wondered what he was after. Perhaps Camus was growing weary of his existentialist philosophy and was exposing the absence of hope. Some thought that Clamence was really Camus and that the novel was a personal catharsis, an attempt at cleansing the soul through confession. If so, it was a failed experiment. There is no priest, no absolution, no sense of forgiveness, no awareness of a loving God, no final redemption. The atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre thought it was Camus's best work, although the least understood, and Sartre offered no explanation.

The Fall is a biblical myth. Camus obviously borrowed his title. Christian theology has long identified the human problem with the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, the Fall. Genesis means *beginning* taken from the first Hebrew word in the book. Genesis proclaims the Creator, that the world and the lives we live are the work of our God, and it proceeds to identify beginnings. In addition to the beginning of earth and sky, sea and land, and all kinds of animal life, the second story of creation is about the beginnings of the human, man and woman, and the beginning of human failure, the sin in the Garden of Eden. The stories were never intended as historical documentaries or scientific explanations. The stories stand before history and above science. They are examples of biblical myth, stories to account for the realities of life in our walk with God. The story is loaded with symbols. Adam and Eve are more symbols than names. Adam is "man" and frequently treated as "humanity" and directly connected to the ground (*adamah*) from which he comes. The woman is named Eve (3:20) "the mother of all living." The serpent is "cunning," a play on a similar term in the story for "naked."

Biblical mythology responds to our questions, the questions of the child. As we grow into awareness of the human condition, we grow to wonder why we struggle with failure, imperfection, and evil. The story of the Fall is a story of beginning. Humans have long linked understanding to beginnings. If we can get to the cause, we might be able to understand the problem and find a solution. This kind of diagnosis is common in our culture from auto mechanics to medicine. Your physician might treat your illness with drugs that address symptoms, but if the illness persists, she needs to get to the cause, the point of origin and treat the disease.

I learned to read the story as the beginning of evil, often called "original sin." It has been addressed as the point of origin and the cause of the human problem. Augustine was responsible for the distortion that all of us are born damned, tainted with the sin of Adam. Understood as original sin, this story is about the corruption of humanity from the point of conception. The Fall, thus, is not about our decisions, choices, and commitments in life. The damned human condition is connected to factors over which we have no control. Can people be blamed for their skin pigment, gender, social class, or nationality? We do not choose our parents, our birthday, or our birth place. Science of the past twenty years has further changed the perception that our sexuality and proclivity toward alcoholism are just

choices. Genetic roots lie at the foundation of not only our physical characteristics but deeply affect our character.

We do not choose the context into which we are born or in which we are shaped. I am convinced that my religion would be different had I been born in another religious culture. The practice of previous generations of labeling a child “bastard” is far more evil and indicative of the human condition than the conception and birth over which a child has no choice.

When Adam and Eve are identified as the original cause of the human condition, we are justified in playing the ridiculous blame game that comes out in the story. When God confronts Adam’s new sense of shame and asks about his behavior, the man points to the woman, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” On close examination the finger of accusation is not only pointed at the woman but at the Creator, not just the woman, but the woman “whom you gave to be with me.” Then the woman points to the serpent, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” And you can almost hear Flip Wilson’s Geraldine saying, “The Devil made me do it.” And Original Sin has continued to serve the Jewish-Christian psychology allowing us to pass the blame to someone else.

Most of us find ourselves somewhere in the mirror of Adam and Eve trying to pass the buck. It is normal for teens to blame parents for unhappy circumstances in life. Although we owe a debt of gratitude to Freud for an analytical examination at the causes in personal history, pop psychology has also taught us to pass the buck and to avoid at all costs taking responsibility for who and where we are. John Drakeford was a psychology teacher in seminary who shared a poetic expression of the game with a play on Freudian psychology:

At three I had feelings of ambivalence toward my brothers
and so it follows naturally, I poisoned all my lovers.
But now I understand, the lesson this has taught,
Everything that’s wrong with me is someone else’s fault.

The Fall leaves humanity in limbo. A confession of failure could have been the first step toward redemption, but all we get in Genesis is a run for cover. Adam and Eve hide and they get caught in their attempt at deception. They are bare, exposed to the bright light of truth. There is no hiding place from God, in reality no hiding place from the truth. Because Adam and Eve fail to confess, they are like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car. They are paralyzed by the bright light of truth. They are exposed. Their new consciousness of being naked has suggested through the centuries a connection between sin and sex. A more likely connection is between sin and mortality. It is Job’s confession in his affliction (1:23): “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return.” It is another one of those basic facts of life. We leave this life on the same terms that we begin. We are stripped of all pretense; we are helpless, without strength or power, totally dependent on the help of another.

In Genesis, sin is exposed and punished. We get a sense of the need for true confession, but miss the opportunity. Rather, we get an explanation of the pain of bearing children, the justification for male dominance, the human attraction that leads to conception, and the explanation of work and the struggle to cultivate nature. Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden. In reaching for the forbidden fruit they get something of what was promised, knowledge of good and evil and responsibility for their own existence.

In this situation of judgment, the only positive note is the gift of clothing. The man and woman who tried to cover up with fig leaves are given animal skins to wear. The dis-covered pair are allowed to re-cover.

Where is the grace? I can’t fault Camus for parading the hopeless human situation in light of the message I get from that other story of the Fall. The best I can do is observe that, like all of the rest of the Bible, the story was never meant to stand alone. The message of the Fall cannot be torn away from the initial grace of creation, and it cannot be divorced from the Jewish understanding of the God of Covenant, the God of steadfast love.

After his Church had struggled with a new understanding in Vatican Council II, actually a departure from Augustine, a Catholic priest dared to suggest a different picture of the Fall. Anthony Padovano

wrote: "The most fundamental factor in the doctrine of original sin is not universal perdition but universal salvation. Original sin does not tell us that man is evil but that God is Saviour" (*Original Sin and Christian Anthropology*). The priest found grace in Paul's revisitation of the Fall in Romans that was not apparent in the ancient Jewish mythology of Genesis. In typical Pauline fashion, the first Christian theologian sees Jesus as the second Adam re-living the failure of Adam and opening to all of humanity the grace of God. Paul's focus is not on the hopeless estate of Adam and Eve, but on the grace of God revealed in Christ.

It almost sounds like Paul is offering a direct answer to Camus. Clamence's final word was, "We never get a second chance." True, many of us go through life with a sense of the Fall. We fall into adulthood by the slow process of maturation that makes us responsible for our lives and burdens us with all of the stupid mistakes and wrong turns we take in life. Some of us really experience a fall, like Clamence's moment of truth on the Seine Bridge. We can waste our whole lives in regret over one wrong decision that set us toward a hell of our own making. What seems worse is the countless numbers of people who will not face the past or acknowledge that they have failed. Some play the blame game from birth to death.

But some of us have found the absolute truth and absolute reality of forgiveness. We have found in love for one another the ability to forgive and to accept the things we cannot change, events we cannot undo, and people we cannot reform. In the full light of Christian grace, the love of God in which we are totally immersed in Christ, we are empowered to forgive one another and eventually to forgive ourselves. I think Paul was right. We have all fallen in Adam, but in Christ we fall into grace.