

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #107:

FIG-LEAF RELIGION

By John Temples

It's getting harder and harder to make sense of the world we live in. In trying to understand why things (and people) are the way they are, I find myself returning to a certain passage again and again. I'm referring to Genesis 3:1-7:

“Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said, “You shall not eat of every tree of the garden”?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, “You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.”’ Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.”

Adam and Eve once enjoyed a perfect world, free of sin. Death was unknown. But Eve listened to Satan, ate forbidden fruit, and then persuaded her husband to break God's law as she had done. (Have you ever noticed that sinners are not happy unless they can get someone else to sin along with them? Misery loves company.) Death and decay entered the world, Eden was lost; and so it remains today.

Eve was actually a very “modern” person. Like many folks today, she thought God's law was negotiable. She assumed it could be disregarded or changed at will. In fact, she managed to make three assaults on God's word in one fell swoop:

- She *added something* to God's word.
- She *changed something* in God's word.
- She *deleted something* from God's word.

What did she add? Recall what she said in verse 3: "nor shall you touch it." If you go back to God's original pronouncement in Genesis 2:16-17, you will find that while God forbade eating the fruit of the tree, He said nothing about not touching it. That was Eve's interpretation and addition, and it was wrong. She in effect made a law where God had not made one--something many people do today.

She also changed something God said. Look at verse 3 again: "Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" The word *lest* expresses conditionality or possibility. It means "if perhaps you might" or "for fear that." What did God actually say? "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 surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Eve changed "you shall die" into "lest you die." She changed a *certainty* into a *possibility*.

In that same context, Eve omitted something from God's decree. She left out the word "surely." ("You shall surely die.")¹ Satan was quick to pick up on this. He immediately said to Eve, "You will not surely die" (verse 4). He got rid of that troublesome word--he tied a "not" in it! People today are still doing the same thing. They read the certainties of God's decrees, and they say, "Well, that may or may not be--God is a loving God, and He will cut me some slack, etc."

Having done away with the certainty of God's word, Satan quickly said, "For God knows that in the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Up to that point, Adam and Eve did not "know" (have experience of) evil; they knew only good. Satan used one of his favorite tactics: he led them to believe that *God was keeping something from them*. Notice the

¹ In defense of Eve, some commentators have pointed out that God evidently gave the original instructions to Adam before Eve was created (Genesis 2:13-17); hence, she must have learned of God's decree from her husband. He may have been responsible, then, for Eve's misquoting of the decree. Nevertheless, God held both accountable (Genesis 3:16-19).

tempting promises Satan made: “Your eyes will be opened...you will be like God...you will know everything.”

Eve was thoroughly won over, and she ate the fruit. And I can just hear Satan saying, “See? Nothing happened!” People break God’s law today and say, “See? Lightning did not strike me.” It’s like the man who jumped off the roof of the Empire State Building--as he passed each floor, he said, “So far, so good.”

Well, at least one thing Satan said would happen did come to pass. Verse 7 says, “Then the eyes of both of them were opened.” Their eyes were opened, all right; but to sin and shame. They felt something they had never felt before: guilt. They realized that they had lost their good judgment, and that they should have never doubted God and His goodness.

It’s interesting that the first thing this eye-opening experience brought them was a fixation on their reproductive organs. “They knew that they were naked” (verse 7). Why the sudden interest in those areas of the body? Perhaps this is the reason: they remembered that God had told them to “be fruitful and multiply.” Knowing that those organs of the body were for that purpose, they came to the realization that they had brought biological death into the world, and that this death principle would be passed on to their children and to their children’s children. (To be clear, it is not the guilt of Adam’s sin that we pass on to our children, but the consequences of it--physical death.) The sight of each other’s sexual organs brought feelings of shame.

In their embarrassment and shame, they made themselves fig-leaf garments to cover their nakedness (verse 7). This has tremendous implications for us. The mistake they made is the mistake men have continued to make through the ages: **thinking that sin is merely some external imperfection or character flaw that can be covered by our own ingenuity and good deeds.** But sin is not only a flaw of character, it is an infection of the heart--it is guilt before God. Sin means we are legally guilty in God’s court. Those fig leaves only covered the shame they felt at seeing each other’s reproductive organs. They did nothing to remove the guilt or cancel the consequences of sin. Mark it down:

WHENEVER MAN TRIES TO SAVE HIMSELF--COVER UP HIS OWN SINS-- THAT IS "DO IT YOURSELF, FIG-LEAF RELIGION."

Imagine having a big hole in your wall. How do you deal with it? Well, you could hang a picture over it. You don't see the hole anymore, but you haven't repaired the hole. That is fig-leaf religion.

What did it take to really "cover" sin? Nothing "man-made" could do the job, so God stepped in. "Also for Adam and Eve the Lord God made tunics of skin and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). This verse also has tremendous implications for us. Remember, the Lord formerly walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, evidently in human form. (This could have been Jesus in a pre-incarnate state.) Adam and Eve must have watched in stunned disbelief and silent shame as the Lord took an animal--possibly one of their friends--and killed it before their eyes. He took the skin and made aprons or tunics. No doubt when Adam and Eve saw that animal die, they thought, "What have we done?"

All of this was symbolic, to teach Adam and Eve (and us) that there is only one remedy for sin that avails: the shedding of blood. Leviticus 17:11 was given to the Jews to remind them of that same principle: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; *for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.*"

Fifteen minutes after Adam and Eve sinned, blood began flowing as a sacrifice for sin, and has flowed ever since. That is what it takes to truly cover sin. Everything else is just fig leaves. Man's remedy for sin is basically to simply cover up the evidence, to put some fig leaves over it. What are some "fig leaves" we use to hide the ugliness of sin?

- Re-defining sin as just a personal shortcoming that can be fixed with an attitude adjustment.
- Blaming others for not understanding and accepting us the way we are.
- Self-mortification and penance.
- Assuming that just doing something nice--good works--will negate and cancel sin.

- Coming up with elaborate rituals or ceremonies that make people think their sins are removed.

By our own efforts, the best we can do is suppress or hide sin. What we really need is cleansing on the inside, the decree of a “not guilty” verdict in God’s court. And that requires a sacrifice, the death of an innocent victim in our stead. We need a substitute. For Adam and the Israelites, it was the blood of an animal. For us, it is the blood of Christ.

Folks, there have been only two systems of religion in all history: fig-leaf religion and God’s blood-atonement plan of redemption, paid for by the death of Christ. Fig-leaf religion says, “Sin is not really that big a deal--let’s just cover it up, dress it up, and give it a nicer-sounding name.” Fig-leaf religion says, “No need for God to get involved; nobody has to die...there’s no need for bloodshed.” God says, “*Without the shedding of blood there is no remission*” (Hebrews 9:22). Which religion are you following? --John Temples