

A Lively Time: Genesis 3:19 and Suffering

By Brian Coatney

The men's Bible study at the jail has averaged about ten in recent months, but this Thursday, several new ones came. Usually we discuss our way right on through the text—the book of Hebrews serving as our staple since summer. I noticed the last few studies, that no sooner do I read and comment on our next verses that the questions and discussion carry us through to the end with hardly two or three verses covered. That can be a happy dilemma.

This night, in Hebrews Chapter Twelve, we stopped to review the premise of the book, the complete severance of the authority of the Old Covenant from us in light of the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, a succession of Levitical priests, ordained according to God's command, and following precisely the genealogy from Aaron, offered animal sacrifices yearly for sins, under a system originating under the inauguration of Moses. Subsequently, many of the Jews glorified Moses and remained overly attached to the temple worship, even after the advent of Christianity. With still a mixed understanding of the two covenants, suffering for being Christian tempted many of these Jews back toward the Old Covenant.

The book of Hebrews, therefore, while recognizing the authority of the Old Covenant before the death and resurrection of Christ, nonetheless, dismisses the Old Covenant as superseded in light of the totality of revelation in the person of Jesus Christ as Hebrews 1:1-3 establishes: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom he appointed heir of all things (...) and He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature (...) When he had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (NAS). The writer proceeds to show the superiority of Christ over Moses and the Levitical priesthood under the Old Covenant. In short, all

forgiveness of sin for all time took place in Christ in his one sacrifice; no further offerings for sin of any kind pertain and would now mean insult to the grace of God that concluded atonement for sin in one sacrifice, never to be added to. The Gospel distills to Christ plus nothing, requiring only faith to receive that fact. This faith does not amount to religion, for religion means someone trying to improve the self, to get better, to conform to a morality that pleases God; whereas, faith assumes the human to be a vessel with only the function of containing.

Recognition of the human as only a vessel, to contain deity through Christ's once for all sacrifice, energizes the Eucharist. Life centers in eating and drinking. But note the fashion in which Jesus introduced this radical aspect of faith: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Had Jesus not already secured intense fidelity from his disciples, he would have lost them at this seemingly blasphemous statement—blasphemous sounding to any Jew, for eating blood under the Old Covenant meant, by God's decree, being cut off from the election of faith. Now Jesus opens the door to union with God through the faith principle, "what you take, takes you," as Norman

Grubb so often put it. The cutting edge of faith slices to the root of self-righteousness, for that cutting edge insists that no one can improve morally to attain acceptance with God: one may only attain righteousness by eating and drinking it. We elevate to Christianity not by imitation, but by consumption of what we are not.

Norman often told the story of his missionary days when he found his early zeal distracted by a sense of the need for more love. Crying out to God, he prayed a fine sounding prayer: "God, give me more love." To his surprise, the Holy Spirit answered, "Shut up." After a pause and discreet obedience, the Holy Spirit continued: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Norman then saw that love is not something God dispenses to us in packets that become ours. This led him to the clarity of Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me (...)." The Christian life then does not mean that the human improves, but that the human contains, abides in, lives in union with, and consumes the life of Jesus Christ himself—the one who is the second person of the trinity. No wonder religion fails and Christianity propels itself on the life of One other than ourselves.

Returning to the Bible study and our review, therefore, we affirmed that adding anything to the completeness of Christ's work means nothing less than the sum of all iniquity. Arthur, one of our regulars for awhile, and one who has loved the Old Testament as I do, commented on his recent experiences in a twelve-step group and how some still attempt to work to improve, rather than see the meaning of powerlessness. Arthur, moving to New Testament terminology, said, "I died with Christ and now live in the power of his resurrection."

After our review of God's complete forgiveness in Christ, without the need of penance to improve or persuade God to accept us, Chris asked, "Does God mean for us to be in jail?" I answered that in a Christian world, I would see two reasons for jail: first, someone still a danger to others requires a restrictive environment; second, God's push always moves toward productivity, not punishment, and all discipline carries this aim.

Two examples from Scripture reinforce this: King David committed adultery and murder, either offense calling for execution under the Old Covenant; second, Saul, the murderer of Christians in his zealous conviction that Christians deserved execution justly

as blasphemers, received God's mercy and lived a dynamic life in freedom, except when incarcerated for his faith. Therefore, we see that God does not insist on a judicial system that orders just punishment for sins committed.

This does not mean, however, that we did not deserve punishment, or that punishment for sin is unjust. It does mean that those abiding in the sacrifice of Christ receive no punishment for sin—only restorative discipline. The world, however, does not operate under the New Covenant, and the New Testament does not indict the world system of justice as unjust: "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities (...) he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves" (Romans 13: 1-2).

In summary, I answered Chris that his incarceration is not unjust, but as Christians, we rejoice in all Christ's mercies that flow into the system of justice. But the one demanding mercy as a right or entitlement fails to recognize the meaning of repentance and the justice executed on Christ for offenses.

After this discussion, Michael said that God does not mean for us to suffer, a statement not anchored in the truth of Romans

8:17, "and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with Him." This brought up the question, "What is suffering about?" The answer lies in three kinds of suffering.

The first kind of suffering comes from the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). God means someone to experience the inner guilt and torment of a sin consciousness until receiving Christ. That sin consciousness comes from the inner union with Satan brought about in everyone descended from Adam and results from the human vessel's capitulation to Satan's lie in Eden. Our unknown eucharist has been with the devil in our lost estate, a fact little known and discussed in Christian circles. Few ask the pertinent question, "If the Christian life means Eucharistic living with Christ by faith, since to be human means to be a vessel, who then did we contain before conversion?" A battery of scriptures addresses this point—namely that we formerly expressed the nature of sin, and sin is nothing less than the nature of Satan¹.

The second kind of suffering occurs in the Christian still trying to be like Christ. This suffering despairs of the "I" and nowhere finds clearer testimony than in Romans Chapter Seven,

Paul's famous chronicle of effort and resulting failure to keep God's law. When he despairs completely in his own efforts to keep God's law, he cries out, "Who will set me free?" (Romans 7:24). This suffering ends with the discovery of walking in the Spirit, not as an independent "I." All life and freedom come from the supply of the Spirit of God lived out in our forms.

The third kind of suffering has nothing to do with sin or the self-focus of Romans Chapter Seven, but comes to us as heirs of Christ. We no longer look at ourselves in our suffering and ask, "What's wrong with me; if God were happy with me, I would not be suffering."

At this point, Jason read Genesis 3:19 about the toil and sweat of our labors, resulting from the Fall. I responded that of course we live in a world still experiencing the effects of the curse, but that as Christians, we no longer drag around with the sense of a curse on us as sons of God. After conversion, God could take us immediately into immortality, but He leaves us on the earth to finish a job. I told Jason, "I live to hear one sentence when I die and come before the Lord: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'" Therefore, I do not look at my life in light of Genesis 3:19 in the

sense of personally being cursed. Christ broke the curse. All toil and sweat now is intercessory, the mission of a divinely adopted son serving at His pleasure for the good of others.

How exciting! In Christ all we know is blessing, blessing, blessing. The suffering of sin gives way to the completeness of justice paid through the mercy and atonement of Christ—the one who embodies the completion of all the Old Covenant, divinely intended for a time as it was, could never complete. The suffering of self in the drive to perfect the self, revealing only the misery of the deception of independent “I” gives way to walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. The sufferings of Christ as heirs left here on a mission brings only glory to eyes that see it. We find ourselves left behind for a reason—to intercede.

Poor devil—every chain he forges breaks in the sunlight of God’s love. Glory to Jesus Christ and glory in the sons of God