

# THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

“Love and Sacrifice”

*“He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” Genesis 3:15*

For the first few weeks or so of January, the number one podcast on Apple Podcasts was a Roman Catholic podcast called “The Bible in a Year with Father Mike Schmitz.” The podcast is basically an overview of Scripture, taking listeners all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, discovering how the story of salvation unfolds and how we fit into that story today. It’s not a bad idea. So, I began listening. The first episode was fine, covering the first two chapters of Genesis. But the second episode is where I stopped listening.

To be fair, Father Mike made a lot of good points. He talked about the Fall and how Adam and Eve were deceived by the serpent, who is the devil. He pointed out how the devil, who is said to be “more crafty than any other beast of the field,” doesn’t overtly challenge God’s existence or even His authority; He doesn’t try to convince Adam and Eve that God doesn’t exist or that He’s not really God. But He *does* challenge God’s trustworthiness. When he asks the woman if God actually said that they may not eat of any tree in the garden, he knows that’s not true. God never said that. But there is *one* tree in the midst of the garden, the fruit of which God *did* say, “You shall not eat...lest you die.” And that’s where he wants the conversation to go. Telling the first lie in the Bible, he says, “You will surely 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,” the implication being that God doesn’t *want* them to be like Him; that He’s holding out on them, keeping the best of His creation for Himself. All Adam and Eve had known up to this point was that God loved them, giving them life, a home, and each other. And the serpent’s challenge here is, “He doesn’t actually love you, because, if He loved you, He would allow you to eat this fruit.” So, it says, the woman “took some of its fruit and ate, and she gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Then their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” They knew they had sinned. They had failed the test. And they were ashamed. And God knows it, the *minute* He comes strolling through the garden, asking, “What have you done?”

But that’s where the episode took a sharp turn. Talking about the curses in verses 14-19, Father Mike said, “There is only one curse. The serpent gets cursed. What God says to Adam and Eve are not strictly speaking curses. They’re more *remedies*.” He went on to explain these “remedies” and how Eve, by suffering pain in childbirth, and Adam, by the sweat of his brow, would learn the lesson they had failed to grasp in the garden: that love requires sacrifice. By disobeying God’s command, they, who were made for

love, had failed to choose love. Now, they had a second chance, a way to *prove* their love for God. They had sinned, but there was a solution, a way to make things right again: love and sacrifice.

And that's it. That's how the episode ends.

Now, to the untrained ear, that may all sound fine. But I *hope* that your Lutheran senses are tingling, because there's definitely something missing from that presentation of Genesis 3. Hearing this for the first time, I remember being on the edge of my seat, waiting to hear what never came: the gospel. There wasn't a shred of it in the entire episode. And the reason is not that there *is* no good news to be found in Genesis 3. It's not even that I disagree with the theme of love and sacrifice. The question is *whose* love and sacrifice? This podcast made it all about us, *our* love and sacrifice: "The remedy to your sin, your shame, your failure to love God, is *you*. All you have to do is love, and love requires sacrifice." But is that the message of Genesis 3? Is that the "good news" God has for us? That through pain and the sweat of our brow we may learn to love God and so earn our place in paradise?

But if failure to love is what got us into this mess in the first place, then how could love get us back out? Remember what Paul wrote in Romans 3: "by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (v. 23). The law exists to lead us to *repentance*, not to provide us with a means of escape. If our only hope of rescue from the devil and his temptations is *our* capacity to love and sacrifice, then it's a poor remedy indeed that God has given to us.

Fortunately, that's *not* the message of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve may have sinned, they may have failed the test, they may even not have exactly been cursed in the same way as the serpent, but their hope was never in themselves. It was never in *their* love and sacrifice.

And this is because of Genesis 3:15. That verse is known in Christian theology as the *protoevangelion*, the "first gospel," because that's what it is: good news. When God cursed the serpent, He said,

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her Offspring;  
He shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise His heel.

Early Jewish writings understood these words to refer to the Messiah, as have centuries of Christian theologians, the only difference being that we have a *name* to put to this person: Jesus Christ. "He will bruise your head," God says. Some translations

have “crush” or “trample,” but it’s the “head” that’s significant. If you want to kill something, you go for the head.

And that’s what Jesus did. Paul describes Jesus as a second Adam. Whereas Adam *failed* to love, and this one trespass led to condemnation for all people, so Jesus’ life of *perfect* love and obedience to the Father, even to the point of death on a cross, has brought justification, or forgiveness, to all who believe. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” writes the author of Hebrews, “but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*” (4:15). We saw this in today’s Gospel lesson, where Jesus successfully resisted all three of the devil’s temptations. The crafty serpent *thought* he had Him when he later entered into Judas and got him to betray his master, but little did He know this was the plan. Like the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus’ allowed His heel to be struck; but with those fangs firmly entrenched, He stepped down *hard*, conquering death and thus crushing the devil’s ability to accuse God’s people ever again.

*This* is the hope Adam and Eve had: not the remedy of their *own* love and sacrifice, but the salvation of the promised Seed of the woman, who would fight *for* them and win the victory. This means that their punishments were just that: punishments, and ones that we *all* must endure, having inherited Adam’s sin. But knowing the solution, overhearing God’s words to the serpent, telling of his defeat by the love and sacrifice of Another, let them know their suffering would only be temporary; that there would be a day when their pain would cease and every tear would be wiped away from their eyes. It possible for them to keep going, to press on, confident that God would not hold out on them, but that He was indeed trustworthy and true to His word.

In the meantime, they had work to do. Yes, that work would be hard. It would hurt. But Eve would still get to have children. She would still get to participate in that wonderful vocation of bringing forth a human being with the help of the Lord. She would still have a husband, someone to love her as Christ would one day love the Church, giving Himself up for Her.

Adam would still be able to work. That wasn’t part of his punishment; God had previously taken the man and put him in the garden of Eden *to* work and keep it. Work is *good*. As it says in Ephesians 4, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands” (v. 28). But, “Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys” (Prov. 18:9). He would still have a wife, someone to be his helper, entrusting herself to him as the Church submits to Christ.

And perhaps they *would* learn something of love. After all, love is the fulfilling of the law. But that love would merely flow from their faith in the *real* remedy of *Christ's* love and sacrifice.

We're in the season of Lent, which means that everyone is talking about what they're giving up for the next 40 days, whether it's chocolate or Facebook or alcohol. This ancient practice goes back at least as far as the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus instructs His disciples not to look gloomy when they fast (give up food for a period of time), not to *advertise* the fact that they are fasting, that their fasting may be seen by others. That's something that's supposed to be between you and God alone. It's supposed to be a way to subdue the flesh, to remind yourself that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. It's not something you do to impress anyone, not even God.

But we want God to be pleased with us. So, what do we do? Love and sacrifice. Only, we do it on our *own* terms. We love according to what *we* love. We sacrifice that for which God never asked. And we think that's the remedy.

But what does David say in Psalm 51?

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
 you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
 a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

God's not looking for you to impress Him. He's not looking for you to prove yourself, learn your lesson, pass the test. "The sacrifices of God are a *broken spirit*." When He comes asking, "What have you done," He's not looking for excuses; He's looking for *repentance*. He's looking for someone who *knows* their love has failed and has no other hope in the world but the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. *That's* the kind of heart He will not despise.

Now, does that mean it doesn't matter what we do? Of course not. We've all got work to do—children to bring up in the instruction of the Lord, parents to obey, husbands to help, wives to love, and neighbors to love as ourselves—just not to *save* us. Not as the remedy. The serpent's head has *already* been crushed. The victory *has* been won in Christ.

In our pain, then, in our suffering and misfortune, we keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, awaiting His glorious return and the fulfillment of all that He's promised. God

is good. He is faithful. And His steadfast love endures forever. He has opened to us the way of paradise, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

*In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen. The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

*Soli Deo gloria*