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## THE CURSE AND THE COVERING

Genesis 3:16-24

By

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February 4, 1996

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Genesis Lesson 10

## The Curse and The Covering Genesis 3:16-24

A sign on a convent read: "Absolutely no trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Signed, The Sisters of Mercy." That sign reflects a problem Christians wrestle with, namely, confusion about the relationship between God's grace and judgment.

Some say that God is so gracious that He overlooks our sin. These Christians pride themselves on their tolerance and acceptance of everyone, no matter how terrible their sin. Their theme verse is, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Others emphasize God's judgment of all sin. These folks are stern and judgmental, like their God. Their favorite verse is, "Prepare to meet thy God."

Neither side reflects the full biblical picture of God. The first group stresses God's love and grace, but loses His holiness. The second group emphasizes His holiness, but loses His grace toward sinners. The biblical picture is that God is both loving *and* holy, gracious *and* righteous, merciful *and* just. Since our view of God affects the way we live and treat others, we need to be careful to reflect the biblical revelation of who God is and how He deals with our sin.

Genesis 3 gives us the proper view of God. When Adam and Eve sinned, God did not strike them dead on the spot, as His holiness alone would have required. Nor did He say, "That's okay, don't worry about it," as His love alone may have allowed. Rather, God dealt with their sin as a serious matter. He imposed the penalty their sin required; but He interposed His grace, so that the fallen couple could be restored to fellowship with Him. There was both the curse and the covering for their sin. These verses teach us that ...

God allows us to suffer consequences for our sin but also He provides salvation from sin's ultimate consequences.

We need to keep both aspects in tension. In our day of “hang loose” Christianity, we need to remember that we cannot sin without consequences. Grace does not nullify the law of sowing and reaping. But also we need to remember that God is gracious, that He Himself paid the price for our sin, to deliver us from His ultimate judgment.

1. God allows us to suffer consequences for our sin: The curse (3:16-19).

As we saw last week, when Adam and Eve sinned, God graciously sought them, confronted them, and offered the promise of deliverance through the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. It was gracious because Adam and Eve deserved judgment, not a promise of deliverance.

But then God deals with the woman and then the man. He does not curse them directly, as He did with the serpent. But He does impose penalties for their disobedience. Even though God forgives the ultimate penalty of their sin, He still allows some of the consequences to continue.

We need to understand that the penalties imposed on Adam and Eve affected not just them, but every person in history after them. All sin is like that. We never sin in isolation. Even sin done in secret affects others. This talk about what goes on behind closed doors between consenting adults not being anyone else’s business is sheer nonsense. Sin always affects others, not only in this generation, but also in the generations to come.

Why did God curse these particular things? I think God cursed the woman’s childbearing process and the ground on behalf of the man because these things represent the chief role of each sex. The woman’s main role (biblically) is that of homemaker and mother; the man is to be the provider. That is not to say that the woman does not provide anything and that the man does not involve himself in the home. But these are the main responsibilities. In Genesis 1:28, the couple was commanded to be fruitful and multiply, and to subdue the earth. That command involved work, but not toil and pain. But now God introduces toil and pain as the necessary price to fulfill these primary roles.

- A. The curse as applied to the woman (3:16).

The curse as applied to the woman involved two main areas: She would experience increased pain in childbearing; and she would be in a new relationship with her husband in which he is said to rule over her.

With regard to the first, the curse means that the physical pain of childbirth was magnified. Down through history, many women have died in childbirth. In spite of modern techniques, childbearing involves pain. One reason God may have increased the woman's pain in childbearing was to give us an object lesson of the pain which God would now endure in order to bring forth spiritual children. His own Son, the second Person of the Trinity, would have to go to the cross and suffer not only the physical pain of the crucifixion, but also the indescribable agony of separation from the Father as our sin-bearer.

God mercifully tempers the pain with the great joy which children give. As Jesus said, "Whenever a woman is in travail, she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child has been born into the world" (John 16:21). The most joyous moments of my life have been the births of our three children. Children who grow up to follow the Lord are a great source of delight to godly parents. But as any parent knows, you open yourself to great risk of pain when you enter into the God-given miracle of bringing a child into this sinful world. Because of the fall, you can't have the joy without the risk of pain.

The curse as applied to the woman not only affected childbearing, but also her relationship with her husband. The last half of verse 16 is difficult to interpret. Two views are the most likely. The first is that in spite of the woman's increased pain in childbearing, she would continue to have sexual desire toward her husband. Sex was not cursed by God. The woman has as much right to enjoy sex in marriage as the man. Two things commend this view. The word "desire" is used in Song of Songs 7:10 to refer to the desire of a lover for his beloved. And, the woman's pleasure in sex serves as a gracious blessing to offset the preceding curse of pain in childbirth. Just as God curses the ground, but graciously allows it to yield sufficient produce; and, He curses work with toil and sweat, and yet work also is a blessing in that it forces us to discipline our unruly

fallen nature and it yields the sustenance we need; even so, God ordains pain in childbirth, but graciously allows the woman to enjoy the act that leads to conception.

The second plausible view is that “desire” is used in the same sense as Genesis 4:7 (its only other occurrence in the Old Testament), meaning the desire to dominate. The woman who usurped authority from her husband by eating the fruit is cursed with the inclination to dominate him, but he is ordained to rule over her. The strengths of this view are that it fits in with the last phrase of the verse and it uses “desire” in the same sense it is used a few verses later. If this is the correct view, it alerts us to the inherent tendency of the fallen nature of each sex: of the woman to dominate her husband; of the man to dominate his wife. Both militate against the beautiful “one flesh” relationship that existed before the fall (2:24). Thus as Paul ordains (Eph. 5:22-33) that to recover that intimacy, the wife must submit to her husband, and the husband must tenderly love and lead his wife.

I find it hard to decide between the two views because both have their strengths and both express truths taught elsewhere in Scripture. If the second view is correct, it does not justify the abusive dominance of men over women; nor does it lend support to the egalitarian view, in which it is claimed that there are no gender-based role distinctions because Christ overcame the curse. It means that godly women must now fight the tendency to dominate their husbands, and godly men must fight the tendency to dominate their wives. Both must learn to love one another in the context of the proper roles ordained by God.

#### B. The curse as applied to the man (3:17-19).

Adam sinned not only by eating the forbidden fruit, but by allowing his wife to have dominion over him. God says, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife” (v. 17). Sometimes listening to the voice of your wife is the wisest thing you can do! But it is wrong to listen to your wife when she contradicts God’s word. Adam abdicated leadership to her, deliberately disobeying God by setting his wife above God. God holds the man accountable for the direction a family goes. Many Christian men are passive with regard to the family. They don’t take responsibility to train the children. They focus on their job and leave the home to the wife.

When problems come, they blame her. It is not wrong to delegate things to your wife, but there's a big difference between delegating and dumping. When you delegate, you retain final responsibility; when you dump, you abdicate responsibility. Scripture clearly holds the man responsible for his wife and children.

The curse on the man covers two areas: the ground is cursed; and physical death is mandated. Just as the curse on the woman also affects the man, so the curse on the man affects the woman. The curse on the ground meant that man would have to toil to bring forth the crops to survive. I understand the curse to be much wider than just the thorns and thistles mentioned here as representative. As Paul explains in Romans 8:20-21, the whole creation was subjected to sinful man. An unfallen creation could not be ruled by a fallen lord. So everything in creation which is now opposed to man--from mosquitoes to viruses to natural disasters--stems from the fall. All suffering and pain ultimately can be traced back to the first sin.

The second part of the curse as it applies to the man is the affirmation of physical death. Our bodies will return to dust. Since the fall, death is the enemy of every person. We can spend our lives working toward certain goals, and yet be struck down any day by the most trivial of accidents. Death is no respecter of persons: young and old, rich and poor--all must face death. But as terrible an enemy as death is, even it has its side of blessing: It forces us to come to terms with God and eternity. Very few of us would do that if we didn't recognize our mortality. Death shouts at us that we desperately need to be right with God.

So the curse shows us that God allows us to suffer consequences for our sin. Sometimes those consequences are directly related to some sin we have committed; at other times we just suffer the consequences of living in a fallen world. While God graciously tempers the severity of the consequences with glimmers of grace, the consequences are real. They remind us that with the holy God, sin is serious. But God's grace triumphs in that He doesn't leave us to suffer the ultimate consequences of sin:

2. God provides salvation from sin's ultimate consequences: The covering (3:20-24).

At first glance, verses 20 and 21 seem out of context. But they fit in perfectly.

A. Salvation is through faith in God's promise (3:20).

After the morbid words of verse 19, you would expect something like, "Now Adam called his wife's name the Grim Reaper, because she was the mother of all the dying." But instead of the Grim Reaper, Adam calls her "Eve," which means "life-giver." And even more strange, she has not yet had any children (see 4:1).

What does this verse mean? It is Adam's response of faith to God's promise to send a Savior through the seed of the woman (3:15). Adam heard and submitted to God's penalty of death (3:19); but he also believed God's promise that there would come forth from the woman one who would bruise the serpent's head. And so by faith Adam named her Eve, the mother of all living, before she had conceived.

Salvation is now and always has been by faith in God's promise. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, a person's faith looked forward to the promised Savior. Since Christ, faith looks back to the Savior who came. But God always has granted salvation in response to a person's taking Him at His word. It has never been based on keeping the commandments or on balancing out a person's good works against his sins. Adam took God at His word. At that instant he was delivered from the ultimate consequence of his sin: eternal separation from God. God responded to Adam's faith by providing a graphic object lesson of salvation:

B. Salvation is through God's provision (3:21).

This verse shows how God met the practical need for clothing. But obviously it goes far beyond that. Just as man's nakedness (3:7) goes beyond the physical and points to the nakedness of soul which resulted from sin, so God's provision of clothing goes beyond the need for garments. It is a beautiful illustration of what God would do through the Lord Jesus Christ to provide salvation for all who stand before Him, naked due to their sin. This verse shows us four things (I have adapted the following four points from James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:189-192):

(1) *Man needs a covering for his sin.* The thought of standing with our sin exposed before the light of God's presence should be more

intolerable than the thought of going stark naked for a job interview at the White House. We all need some sort of covering for our sin.

(2) *Man's attempts at covering himself are inadequate.* Adam and Eve's fig leaves wouldn't do. Man often tries the fig leaves of good works to make himself presentable to God, but God cannot accept that. All the good works in the world cannot erase our sin, which is the problem.

(3) *Only God can provide the covering we need for our sin.* He takes the initiative in properly covering man. He strips off the fig leaves and clothes Adam and Eve with animal skins. Adam and Eve did nothing; God did it all. We cannot receive God's salvation as long as we offer Him our fig leaves. We must let Him provide everything, as He has in fact done in Christ.

(4) *The covering God provided required the death of an innocent substitute.* If, as I think we can assume, Adam and Eve witnessed the slaughter of these animals, it must have shocked them. This was the first time they had seen death. As they saw the animals (perhaps lambs?) having their throats slit and writhing in the throes of death, they must have gained a new awareness of the seriousness of their sin and of the greatness of God's grace in providing for their sin. They learned that without the shedding of blood, there is no adequate covering for sin, but that God would accept the death of an acceptable substitute. Of course the blood of animals cannot take away our sin, but only the blood of Christ, to whom the animals pointed.

You are either standing before God clothed in the fig leaves of your own good works, or clothed in the righteousness which God provides in Jesus Christ. The only way you can hope to gain entry to heaven is to accept the covering God offers through the death of the Lamb of God.

C. Salvation is from the ultimate curse (3:22-24).

Having clothed Adam and Eve, God expels them from the garden. Art Linkletter saw a small boy drawing a picture of a car with a man in the front driving, and a man and a woman in the back. When Art asked who was in the car, the boy replied that it

was God driving Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden. That's not quite how it happened!

First God states the problem: "the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil" (3:22). By eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man had become like God in the sense that he related good and evil to himself. In the case of God, this is right, because He is the only perfect One who is the measure of all things. But in the case of man, it was sin. Now man knew evil like a cancer patient knows cancer, whereas God knew evil like the cancer surgeon knows cancer. The implication of God's unfinished sentence (3:22) is that if they had stayed in the garden and eaten from the tree of life, they would have lived forever in their sinful bodies. So God banished them from the garden and Paradise ceased to exist on this earth.

But even this penalty contained a blessing. As Donald Barnhouse observes, "How often it is necessary for God to drive us out of an apparent good to bring us to the place of real good!" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], p. 28). Once sin had entered, to live forever would have been hell on earth. To set us free from sin and death, the Savior had to come who could rightly claim, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies" (John 11:25).

### Conclusion

Barnhouse also tells the story of Sir Edward C. Burne-Jones, a prominent 19th century English artist, who went to his daughter's home for tea. During the tea, his little granddaughter misbehaved, so her mother made her stand in the corner with her face to the wall. Sir Edward did not interfere in his granddaughter's discipline. But the next day he arrived at the house with his paints, went to the wall where the little girl had been forced to stand, and proceeded to paint a number of pictures that would delight a child--a kitten chasing its tail; lambs in a field; goldfish swimming; etc. If his granddaughter had to stand in the corner again, at least she would have something to look at (*Let Me Illustrate* [Revell], pp. 145-146). Judgment was tempered by grace.

Because of the fall, we are all under the curse of sin. But while God allows us to suffer the temporal consequences of sin to warn

us and to turn us from sin, He also paints a picture of grace by providing the covering we need to protect us from sin's ultimate consequence. Today you are either standing before God in the fig leaves of your own good works, in which case you are under sin's full curse if you should die; or, you have come to Christ, the Lamb of God, and have allowed Him to cover your sin with His shed blood. Along with the curse, God provides the covering. Make sure you're under God's merciful covering!

### Discussion Questions

1. How can we hold to God's grace without excusing our sin, and to His holiness without hindering intimacy with Him?
2. Does the curse doom husbands and wives to rivalry for power? Is a husband supposed to exercise his authority to get his wife under his rule?
3. Some argue that the curse of a woman being under her husband's rule is abolished in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Is this valid?
4. Does God soften the harvest of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-8) for the believer? Base your answer on biblical examples.

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