

Reconciliation

Let's look at the opening chapters of the Bible, because there's something exceedingly important there that's easily missed. Genesis Chapter 4 is really a component of the Fall narrative that's in Chapter 3, showing the immediate consequences of the Fall. The two chapters, 3 and 4, thus should be read together. And when we do that, what the author is telling us is stark: Mankind is alienated from God, who had just lovingly created them.

After the disobedience in Genesis 3:1-6, the alienation between the man and his wife hits us, "they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." That alienation returns forcefully in verse 12, "the woman you put here with me..." it's all her fault, he says. And then come the judgments of verses 14 to 19, which every expositor and preacher focuses on, so we needn't review that. And then comes the clothing of skins, which also is preached from every evangelical pulpit because it's a type of Christ. But what comes next is of supreme significance: God banished them from where He dwelled (v. 23). This is the climax and the point of the whole chapter!

The man and woman were created to reside in the presence of God, to delight in His goodness and His many other perfections, to be blessed by Him for an eternity. But not now. That blessing is now no longer available. They're on their own, away from God in a wilderness. And then, Wham! Chapter 4 hits us with an impact that's tough to take. One of their sons deliberately, violently, spitefully kills the other son. And what's God's response? Banishment! We can't miss it. It's the essence of the Cain and Abel story. Cain is driven away from God's presence to dwell in a land east of Eden. Twice the text tells us that Cain was driven from the Lord's presence. Mankind is alienated from their Creator because of rebellion and sin, separated from a loving but holy God whose intent was – and evidently remains – to bless.

But alienation is more than separation from God. We were created not just with status, but with purpose. We were to serve God in a manner that can best be understood as a kingly/priestly role, under His authority. Alienation means God's intended role for humanity was lost. God's intended purpose in life was lost. It means that all mankind was transferred to the dominion of Satan and his host of demons. Humanity had to serve those wicked powers.

That alienation persisted all thru the subsequent, sordid chapters of the Prologue, 2,000 years of history, until we reach the Abraham narrative. There God took the initiative to end the alienation. And end it He did, a further 2,000 years later, when the Son entered His Creation, taking upon Himself humanity, in order to make reconciliation possible. "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." The Jewish Messiah became the propitiation needed to end the alienation. The Jewish King, representative of His people, took upon Himself the wrath that all Israel, indeed, *all humanity*, rightly deserved and brought alienation to an end.

And so we read in Colossians,

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...this is the Gospel" (1:19-23).

The word reconciliation basically means to restore fellowship. It means the relationship between man and God has changed. But what's involved theologically is this, Our changed relationship is because Christ has changed us. Our identification with Christ, our union with Him, means that we died with Him on the cross, so our sin nature is dead. This was essential, because no one with a sin nature can be in God's holy presence and live. At this point, open your Bible and read Romans 6, it's that important. And Christ's righteousness is ours, understood as imputed to us or ours by our union with Him. What the Jewish Messiah did was reverse the cause of the alienation that began in the earliest chapters of the Bible, at the beginning of history. And it's all God's doing. He initiated it, for His love is transcendent; it's a giving, self-sacrificing, supremely generous kind of love that includes kindness, mercy and compassion.

We're reconciled to God through the Person and life of Jesus (Romans 5:10). And this new relationship, this now possible intimate fellowship with God that was intended at Creation, extends for an eternity, because Christ Jesus is an eternal Person, and we're forever united to Him. He not only ends the enmity and brings us to God, he makes it possible for us to be "partakers of the divine nature." What this means is, in some way, we participate in the fellowship of the Godhead. We do not become God, or join the Trinity, or become gods (as Mormons believe). But Scripture reveals in

several places that we are to become like Jesus (see 1 John 3:1-2, for example) with a glorified body, transformed into His likeness. That's why Scripture demands we become sanctified now, in this life, because we're in the process of becoming what we'll one future glorious day actually be ("let us live up to what we have already attained," Phil 3:16).

Reconciliation not only changes our status and nature, it returns us to being under the authority of God. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves" (Col 1:13). Sadly, in this unique transitional church era, believers may still submit to the authority of the wily serpent. We're the servant of the one whom we choose to obey.

But now we also read in 2 Corinthians Chapter 5 these compelling words,

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation..." (verses 18-19).

Gave us the ministry of reconciliation!!! Never mind all the disorder that's current in our nation. Satan's machinations occur incessantly in every society as that proud being exercises his malignant powers. Satan appears to have been given liberty to play with America (as occurred in the Book of Job). Ignore politics and the turmoil of an election. Forget the chaos and disruption due to the coronavirus. None of these issues are important, compared to what God has committed to us: The message of reconciliation. The pursuit of happiness is for unbelievers. Our pursuit is faithfulness to Christ's will and transformation into His image, God's purpose for us in our new life in Christ.

There's a world of humanity still alienated from God. And the surpassing goodness and grace of a loving God wants them all to hear and respond to His Son, so that they too can benefit from the reconciliation the Son effected. And that's our job, it's the mission of each one of us. It's our responsibility to share the Gospel, maybe with our neighbors or maybe somewhere else in the world. Church attendance on Sunday mornings doesn't satisfy the text. Putting money in the plate so that professionals can do it doesn't satisfy the text. "He has committed to us [that is, to anyone who is in Christ, who is a new creation, verse 17], the ministry of reconciliation." Every one of us is a missionary.

Reconciliation is possible for anyone who, by faith, unites with Christ. Although God by grace has made it available, it's effective only for those who take responsibility for their sins, who understand the necessity of forgiveness and embrace the Gospel. If not, they remain alienated from God and subject to His fierce indignation. Do we understand the horrible destiny of those who pass into eternity apart from Christ? Don't we care?

But now some readers undoubtedly will protest: "Certain Christians may have the gift of evangelism, and I welcome them to do it, but I don't agree that every believer should be doing it. No, what all Christians are called to do is worship, and we do that in church on Sundays. That's what God expects." And I respond thus:

(1) Believers in the early church shared the Gospel with others; that's how the church grew. (2) Christ commanded evangelism, and love demands it. (3) The theme of the Bible and of all history is the *missio dei*, God's mission to recover His beloved lost humans, and we're to participate in that mission and purpose. (4) A "gift" of the Spirit means that the Spirit enables us when we're ministering; it doesn't mean that only certain specifically gifted persons carry out specific ministries. (5) There's no mandate in the New Testament to attend church on Sundays. In fact, there's no command even to worship; indeed, some in the Scriptures did, and we all should want to, but what God expects is love and service 24/7. (6) John 20:19 and 26, Acts 20:7, and 1 Cor 16:2 are verses that specify Sunday, but they don't therefore mean that's the pattern God intended for church meetings. The early church consisted heavily of slaves, and their tasks would have prevented them from meeting on *any* morning. Sunday morning "worship" comes to us from Emperor Constantine thru the Roman Catholic Church. (7) Worship is "worthship," which means we show God how much He is worth to us by how we serve Him. (8) Of course believers are to gather. But the only Christianity most people today know is Sunday morning church attendance. And this church attendance has displaced obedience! Refusing to obey God is inexcusable.

The world we inhabit is filled with people who are hostile to God, who flaunt their sin nature. They hate God because that's all they know to do. They don't know all that God in love has done for them. They don't know how wonderfully blessed they could be if only they were reconciled to God. They don't know how beautiful the Person of Christ is, that He's the greatest reality that there is. They don't know. So why don't we tell them? If Christ's love has changed us, let us jettison the indifference that today perfectly describes the church in America, and the excuses, and join Christ in His work of bringing people into the Kingdom. It soon may be too late.