

The Creation and Fall of Man

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon explores the theological implications of the creation and fall of man, emphasizing original sin and the divine purpose behind humanity's existence.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:7, Genesis 3:6, Romans 3:23, Romans 5:8, Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:10, James 1:14, 1 John 2:16

Topics: "Creation Theology", "Human Nature"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the certainty of God's existence and the distressing sight of a world seemingly disconnected from its Creator, leading to a profound mystery beyond human solution. He explores the biblical account of creation and the fall of man, emphasizing the myth as a necessary stage in human development and a preparation for understanding Christian truths. Curtis highlights the significance of man being created in the image of God and the divine purpose of establishing a racial brotherhood of moral persons. He discusses the motive of creation as rooted in moral love and the principle of self-expression, leading to the ultimate purpose of expressing God's inner life through mankind.

Transcript

Starting, then, with the being of a God (which, as I have said, is as certain to me as the certainty of my own existence, though when I try to put the grounds of that certainty into logical shape I find a difficulty in doing so in mood and figure to my satisfaction), I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth of which my whole being is so full ; and the effect upon me is, in consequence, as a matter of necessity, as confusing as if it denied that I am in existence myself. If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me when I look into this living, busy world and see no reflection of its Creator. . . . To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not toward final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of

sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary, hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the apostle's words, "having no hope and without God in the world"--all this is a vision to dizzy and appall; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.

What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from his presence. Did I see a boy of good make and mind, with the tokens on him of a refined nature, cast upon the world without provision, unable to say whence he came, his birthplace or his family connections, I should conclude that there was some mystery connected with his history, and that he' was one of whom, from one cause or other, his parents were ashamed. Thus only should I be able to account for the contrast between the promise and the condition of his being. And so I argue about the world ; if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. This is a fact, a fact as true as the fact of its existence ; and thus the doctrine of what is theologically called original sin becomes to me almost as certain as that the world exists, and as the existence of God.

-- John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, pp. 241-243.

The Scripture Account. By a number of mediating theologians this biblical account of the creation and fall of man is regarded as a myth. The term myth itself is not precisely fixed in its meaning; but it may mean something far beyond an intentional fiction, it may mean even a crude expression of real belief. It is in this higher sense that the term is used by the more conservative of these mediating theologians. If they are evolutionists, as is usually the case, the myth is to them the distinctive mark of a necessary period in man's normal development, "an inevitable product of the human mind in certain stages of culture."

Holding this higher view, they never throw a religious myth away; rather do they study it with large seriousness, expecting to discover -- important data for anthropology. Belonging, as a choice inner circle, to this conservative group, there are a few writers who add a further and most important point, namely, that the biblical myth, although it has no historic worth, does have a Christian worth, inasmuch as it teaches such moral and religious truth as tends to prepare the mind for the full appreciation of the later Christian spirit and doctrine.

In all fairness it should be said that this view possesses much apologetic force and is capable of an extremely conservative exposition. Possibly it is the only view which now can be honestly held by a great many thoughtful Christian men. And yet I cannot accept it. It seems to me to be nothing but a restless pause on the way to rationalism. There is a better view, I am sure -- a view which is reasonable, and which has in it the soul of the Christian contention for the supernatural.

Doubtless we have here, in this Scripture account, a world-tradition which is not to be taken in bald literalism; but I can see no forcible reason why it may not be a picture-narrative of actual fact. Why may it not be solid history in naive drama? Neither the word poetry nor the word symbolism is nicely adequate, for both these words suggest a purpose too deliberately idealistic for this chapter of the childhood of mankind. Could we hear an American Indian (one not yet sophisticated by civilization) describe an event of great importance to his tribe, an event perhaps involving war, his whole power in single aim to tell the exact fact, we would certainly understand the dramatic naiveté of this biblical account.

The rib, the tree, the apple, the serpent, are a picturesque way of talking, that is all, and just the kind of language men would everywhere use had we dared to keep close to the glory of our childhood. That there

may be no chance for misunderstanding, I will give an analytical statement of my full view: 1. This scriptural account of the creation and fall of man is a record of historic facts. 2. These facts are given in naive dramatic form -- "the primitive style of narration characteristic of the age in which it was written." 3.

The account was handed down from the beginning as a world -- tradition based upon an original revelation from God. 4. This world-tradition was, at last, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, cleansed (an examination of the traditions in the ethnic religions will show how necessary such a cleansing came to be), cleansed for a redemptional use. 5. As thus cleansed this world- tradition was established in the canon by the Holy Spirit. 6. Thus, what we have is a world -- tradition cleansed and indorsed by the Holy Spirit for its redemptional meaning.

The Significance of Man. If, with this conception of the account, we examine it closely, we shall find that it teaches certain things which are, from a redemptional standpoint, of the utmost importance in bringing out the significance of man: 1. God himself made man. Man is of divine origin. 2. Man was made as the summit of creation. The whole universe is but a getting ready for man. 3. Man was created in "the image of God." That is, man has moral personality like God himself. The exegesis which makes this "image of God" to mean man's delegated rulership over the animal kingdom is exceedingly superficial. He was placed over the animal kingdom because he was a moral person at the summit of creation. 4. Man was created a social being under a racial plan.

The Purpose of Creation. By noting all these items of significance the divine purpose in creating man becomes evident. God purposed to have not a higher animal, not a more consummate automaton, but a moral person, a creature free under supreme moral demand; not an isolated moral person, but a race with the most intricate social entanglement. Bringing together the three features, the personal, the moral, and the racial, we may concisely state the purpose of creation thus: The aim was to obtain a racial brotherhood of moral persons.

The Motive of Creation. To hold, as many do, that God's motive in creating man was love is perilously insufficient. If we keep in harmony with the conclusions reached in our Introduction, the least we can say is that the divine motive was moral love. But even in saying this we do not quite touch the root of the matter. To touch this root, I need to make reference to a basal principle which will come up again in a most serious discussion, namely, the principle of personal self-expression. It is inherent in the very nature of personality to seek objective expression. Personality must get out in some manner, or violate its own law of structure. Pure subjectivity is a primal personal experience, but it is far from being the entirety of a person's normal life. Nor are we passing into what we considered under man's social urgency. The need of self-expression is not a part of that need of companionship which arises from personal loneliness. Give a person all the companionship his nature craves, companionship of the greatest variety and of the finest quality, and still he will keep trying to express his inner life. Again I say, and, if possible, a little more emphatically, that a person is fundamentally a creator. The moment he has self-knowledge of an inner world he wants to make an outer world. This imperious law, or principle, of self-expression is the very nerve of great exploits, great art, great literature. I do not say that utilitarian motives may not be added I do not say that utilitarian motives may not help. But the initial thrust for any great creative work is the personal longing for self-expression; and there are instances where this personal longing furnishes the entire motivity. Recently I heard, with increasing wonder, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. And after coming out of the rapture of the bewilderment I said: "There is only one way to explain the enormous prodigality of this symphony: Beethoven was trying to fling out every thought and every feeling of his soul! He wanted to express himself."

This principle of self-expression must ever be kept in mind, to understand the divine prodigality in creating the universe. There are countless things in the world which burst the bands of all economy. "Every flower is useful, if we only know enough to find it out." Yes, useful as a part of the vast creation made to express something of God's inner life. And this cosmic expression is a preparation for a later and more sublime expression of God's inner life. In that one comprehensive way I can allow you to preserve the idea of utility. Now we are perhaps open to the important point: The race of mankind is, in plan, a brotherhood of moral persons -- created to express the love of God which is both social and holy. In our final discussion of the Trinity we shall try to see all that this statement means. Now it is enough to affirm that it is only from the standpoint of the full Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as one organism of three self-conscious persons with interrelations of holy love, that the creation of man can be explained without yielding to the philosophy of pantheism. From this Trinitarian standpoint, we can discover perfect divine motive, and still not swamp the motive in a divine necessity. In the words of Bishop Martensen: "In a certain sense one may say that God created the world in order to satisfy a want in himself; but the idea of God's love requires us to understand this want as quite as truly a superfluity."

An Analytical Interpretation of the Fall of Man

1. With the New Testament teaching in mind, one should, I think, give Satan historical position and emphasis in any surface interpretation of the Scripture account of the fall of man. But in any deeper philosophical interpretation he has no significance other than that of method in test. Man fell as a moral person responsibly free, and the external form of the temptation, whether this or that, could make no essential difference. Satan could create no motive; he could simply bring to pressure motives which man himself must sooner or later feel.
2. Looking closely at the case of Eve, we discover three essential motives for sin, namely: physical craving; second, cosmic curiosity; third, the personal spring toward self-assertion.
3. "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes." This surely means that the senses were involved, that the bodily life was bound up in the temptation. And this is precisely what we would expect, for man can have no bodily life, with a conscience, and not be tempted at some time. Even our Lord did not escape this test which comes from the body. There are several sorts of physical craving, but, philosophically considered, they are all equally significant. They, all of them, are natural urgencies which are to be controlled under higher concern. To have any worthy moral character a person must master his entire body in the name of his moral ideal.
4. "And that the tree was to be desired to make one wise." The thing meant here is not that larger wisdom which is charged with moral quality, but rather that experience which one gets by finding out for himself what there is in the world. It is just the experience which Goethe was ever seeking; to find out all there is, whether high or low -- to exhaust the cosmos. The eager curiosity which urges a person to make this quest I have called cosmic, or world, curiosity. As a motive it is even more fundamental than physical craving, and is very essential to man's development and to the progress of civilization.
5. "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" This plainly means that the temptation was an appeal to the spring of self-assertion, which is in our personal makeup even more profoundly than is cosmic curiosity. Personal freedom itself implies not only the power for self-assertion, but also the spring, the leap of the person toward it. Take any boy, however noble, and tell him that he must not do a certain thing, and even if he submits to natural or moral authority his first healthy impulse is to resist the

command. The entire psychological movement is gathered up by that phrase of the common people, "It wasn't easy, but he gave up."

6. The most convincing line in Milton's epic is this: "From thy state mine never shall be parted." Of course, this is, on the surface, a poet's large license in dealing with the Scripture words: "And she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat." But, in the depths, Milton has found the fact of social influence, C an influence which often operates with the three inherent motives already mentioned. If your wife, or any friend, or even any associate, does wrong, it is harder, other things being normal, for you yourself to do right. No man, in personal health, wants to be holy all alone. Thus, when any person sins, or when any person resists sin, the whole psychological situation - - is suddenly changed. No new cause of personal volition is produced, but the occasional background is changed.

7. There are now two things which should be lifted into the utmost emphasis: First, these four motives -- physical desire, cosmic curiosity, the personal spring toward self-assertion, and social influence -- are, in and of themselves, not only good, but absolutely essential to the development of the man, and to the progress of society. Second, every one of these four motives becomes at once bad when it urges a moral person to disobey God, or to violate any moral ideal. In other words, the possibility of sin is necessarily involved in the fact of moral personality itself. There cannot be a free person placed under a moral demand without his having both the volitional ability and the personal motive to violate that demand. Either the universe must be altogether automatic, with no opportunity for moral character, or there must be granted the possibility of personal sin. This endless discussion of "the mystery of evil" -- how superficial, how lacking in all moral acumen, it is! In any serious home, in the upbuilding of the moral life of any child, there is seen, again and again, the clue to this "mystery beyond all our wisdom." Let a father once say to a child, in the name of higher concern, "Thou shalt not!" and there will be the personal battle of Eden all over again. God did not want transgression, but he did want the possibility of it, because he wanted personal sainthood. All evil in possibility is the awful price which had to be paid for any personal sainthood.

But, it is often urged, the Edenic test was unfair because our first parents had no knowledge of the dreadful consequences of their disobedience. "Had they only known they would have obeyed." This objection also reveals a lack of moral grasp. Every moral conflict is a personal conflict under an ideal; and never can the personal significance of the struggle be changed by knowledge of any sort or amount. Excepting this: There are times when complete knowledge of results creates such an overwhelming fear that all personal action, and so all moral meaning, becomes impossible. In such cases, the moral probation must be shifted to another point where there is less knowledge.

The first sin was a personal act of disobedience. It was a taking of self in place of God. In the startling words of Philippi, "Man's self-assertion to Godhead was his fall." Personal sin is the supreme egotism of a moral person. It is getting one's own way over against duty. It is selfishness. One of the characters in Tennyson's *Becket* is made to say, "If I had been Eve i' the garden I shouldn't ha' minded the apple, for what's an apple, you know, save to a child?" Every such treatment of the account (and there are many) misses in the accidents the supreme selfishness of the scene. Man did not care enough about God to do his will. That was the fall of man.

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