

Going Off the Rails

Genesis 3: 1-13

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Someone at a party asked me if the congregation was going to buy me a plane.

Well, of course, that is because a television evangelist in Louisiana has asked his followers to pony up for a fifty-four million dollar jet that he wants to use for his ministry. Actually, I had never heard of evangelist Jesse Duplantis until he made the headlines with his outlandish request. What we learned is that the leader of *Jesse Duplantis Ministries* is already the owner of three other private jets. But he says he needs a Dassault Falcon 7x, a fifty-four million dollar jet.

Duplantis says the planes get him closer to the Lord — both literally and figuratively — and that he had a divine conversation in which Jesus asked for the new aircraft by name.

“It was one of the greatest statements the Lord ever told me. ‘Jesse, do you want to come up where I’m at?’” said the evangelist. “I want you to bleed me for a Falcon 7X.”

Now, the term *bleed me* is curious. Apparently, meaning *ask for donations*.

Duplantis tells his followers that jets, especially nice ones with good fuel efficiency, allow him and his ministries to reach more people around the world. And no, it would not technically be his, but the ministry’s.

“All it’s gonna do is it’s going to touch people, it’s going to reach people, it’s going to change lives one soul at a time,” Duplantis said of the aircraft.

“I really believe that if Jesus was physically on the earth today, he wouldn’t be riding a donkey,” he added.

Where is Billy Graham when you need him?

If this all seems like religion gone off the rails, we need to be reminded of the concepts behind the Christian prosperity gospel. According to prosperity gospel preachers and believers, nice things like jets and cars and homes are God’s way of blessing people for a faithful life. And by their logic, sharing your wealth with the church will make God bless you even more. Sounds like a good stewardship theme for the fall!

In my mind, the prosperity gospel is Christianity gone off the rails; It turns Jesus from the Lord Christ into a means to gain financial prosperity and other amenities. The Jesus who said, "Take up your cross and follow me," has gone missing.

I

Well, going off the rails could be a theme of human history. The story of Adam and Eve is the epic and archetypal story of human beings going off the rails.

Adam and Eve. We all know this story, don't we...the first man, the first woman and their experience in the Garden of Eden. Now most of us don't understand this story as history, *per se*, with Adam and Eve and a talking snake being, literally, the first man and woman on the planet. Homo sapiens appeared about two hundred thousand years ago, say anthropologists. However, when the ancient Hebrews asked questions such as "How did the world begin?" or "How did sin first come into the world?" One of the elders of the Jewish tribe would tell the story of Adam, Eve, and a serpent in God's magnificent garden. When the story was over, those listening would nod their heads in affirmation... understanding something, about the human race and about God. Genesis is full of stories like this. I compare these stories to the parables of Jesus, stories with great theological truths that are inspired and authoritative, revealing much to us about who we are, who God is and the nature of the relationship between God and us.

In the story, the garden is a magnificent place, a gift from God to Adam and Eve, as the earth is a gift to us. And God had warned them not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden.

Things were going well when one day the serpent said to Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Now what I suspect here is the sarcastic tone of the question. The serpent, perhaps representing evil, Satan, or life's temptation, is mocking God, sneering at God, inserting doubt into God's authority. "Did God really say that? That is laughable. That is ridiculous!"

Eve replied that they could eat of any fruit tree except the tree in the middle of the garden, for God had said they would die if they did so. The serpent, sarcastically, came back, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God."

Well, we know what happened. The tree looked delightful, of course. Everything that we are *not* supposed to eat looks delightful, right? And everything we are *not* supposed to *do* looks enticing, doesn't it? Just tell us not to do it, and we shall want to do it! Thus Eve ate the fruit, and then she gave some to Adam, who also indulged. Then the text says, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."

Along came God... and Adam and Eve went into hiding, causing God to ask, "Where are you?" In God's presence, Adam, of course, looked at Eve and said, "The woman whom *you* gave to be with me...gave me fruit." Then Eve, now on the defensive, said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

Shifting blame, pointing fingers and making excuses. We human beings have a long and sorry history.

II

So what *is* this story about? Hang on.

Now the early theologians used this story to talk about original sin. Their idea went something like this: the first man Adam sinned, and his sinful nature has been passed down to all other people like a hereditary disease. In the same way that we inherit bad genes, for instance, we inherit sin.

However, more contemporary theologians look at this story in another way. They say the story of Adam and Eve is the story of every person; that in the garden, Adam and Eve stood as representative man and woman; that what Adam and Eve did, everyone does. What Adam was, we all are. Indeed the character of human history, is expressed and exposed right there in the garden. For the truth simply is that people in all times go off the rails, repeat over and over the same sin and with the same consequences. In that sense, you see, this story is our story.

III

What is this story about? The big lie! God has said, "Don't eat of this tree," and the serpent comes back and says, "You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened."

That's the big lie. We get persuaded that if we follow God, obey God (that is, don't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden), live as God wants us to live, that this will keep us down somehow; that we will miss out; that broadening our horizons will not be an option; that if we obey God we won't be happy. If we follow in the way of Jesus it will cut us off from a life that is exciting and vibrant...keeping us from being all that we can be, all that we want to be.

The big lie is that if you and I will trust ourselves, take our life into our own hands, then we will be happier and better off.

And over and over again, we human beings fall for the big lie. We replace God's authority with our own.

As adolescents, our issue is whether or not we shall be under the authority of our parents. Right? And then the issue for people of faith is whether we will be under the authority of God. As someone has wisely said, we all want God as a Savior, but we are not so keen on the idea of having a Lord and a Master. We want someone to save us, but we don't want anyone to have authority over us, who will put limits on our freedom.

IV

After they ate the fruit, their eyes were opened and "they knew they were naked."
Naked. Vulnerable. When that happens we become defensive and look for someone or something to blame for our failures and mistakes.

For Adam, it was Eve.
For Eve, it was the serpent.
For you and me...who is it?

Our parents...
Our spouse...
The politicians...
The teacher...
The boss...
The church...
Anyone in authority?

Somehow *the big lie* goes back to trust.

And when we mistrust, we put ourselves in the place of God. When you and I can't trust God, then we have to do it ourselves. This is where most of our anxiety comes from....believing that the future depends entirely on us! Talk about anxiety.....when we believe all depends on us, (and we know how messed up we are) we *should* be anxious about the future! So in the end, believing the big lie means believing we are ultimately in charge.

Do you know about William Borden? William Borden grew up in Chicago in the late nineteenth century and went off to Yale in the 1890s. He was part of the *Borden Family* as in Borden Dairy. He was extremely wealthy.

But a funny thing happened at Yale: he sensed God's call to the mission field.

When he announced to his family he was going to do missionary work, this was appalling to everyone. A man of his stature, of his wealth, of his station in society just didn't do that. He got opposition from his family and friends. But he was resolute.

When he graduated from Yale, he gave his entire inheritance to mission agencies.

Now in relative poverty, he moved to Cairo to learn Arabic. Just out of college, with his whole life ahead of him, within a few weeks he had contracted spinal meningitis, and within a few weeks after that he was dead. After his death, they found in his diary these words — as he lay dying: “No reserve. No retreat. No regrets.”

Why wouldn't he have written in his diary, “God, are you serious? All my obedience, all my commitment, all my promise, all of my money, all of this preparation. And this is what I get?”

“No reserve. No retreat. No regrets.” He didn't get sucked in by the big lie. He trusted God to be God.

No reserve, no retreat, no regrets. ⁱ

Sourcesⁱ

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