

Reading 6: God leaves us room to be human

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CHAPTER 5

GOD LEAVES US ROOM TO BE HUMAN

One of the most important things that any religion can teach us is what it means to be human. The Bible's vision of Man is as fundamental to its overall outlook as its vision of God. Two passages at the very beginning of the Bible teach us about being human, and tell us how we, as human beings, relate to God and to the world around us.

The first is the statement in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis that human beings are made in the image of God. At the climax of the Creation process, God is represented as saying, "Let us make Man in our image." Why the plural? Who is the "us," the "our" of which God speaks? My suggestion for understanding that sentence is to see it as connected to the sentence immediately before it, in which God creates animals. In a description of Creation which is astonishingly similar to the evolutionary process as scientists have come to unravel it, God first creates a world covered with water. He then causes the dry land to emerge, fills His world with plants, fish, birds, and reptiles, and finally with mammals. Having created the animals and beasts, He says to them: "Let us arrange for a new kind of creature to emerge, a human being, in *our* image, yours and Mine. Let us fashion a

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creature who will be like you, an animal, in some ways—needing to eat, to sleep, to mate—and will be like Me in other ways, rising above the animal level. You animals will contribute his physical dimension, and I will breathe a soul into him." And so, as the crown of Creation, human beings are created, part animal, part divine.

But what is the part of us that lifts us above the animal level, the part of ourselves that we share with God in a way that no other living creature does? For the answer to that question, we must turn to the second of the biblical passages, one of the most misunderstood stories in all of the Bible, the story of what happened in the Garden of Eden.

After God created Adam and Eve, we read, He set them in the garden and told them that they could eat the fruit of all the trees in the garden, including the Tree of Life. Only the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was forbidden to them. God warned them that on the day they ate of that tree, they would die. Partly because of the serpent's urging, they ate the forbidden fruit. God confronted them with their disobedience and punished them in the following ways:

—They must leave the garden and no longer eat the fruit of the Tree of Life. (They do not die that day, but are told that they will now bear children and die, instead of living forever.)

—Eve will find the process of bearing and raising children painful. ("I will greatly multiply your pain and anguish; in pain will you bring forth children.")

—Adam will have to work to grow food instead of merely finding it on trees. ("By the sweat of your brow will you earn your bread.")

—There will be sexual tension between men and women.

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("Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you.")

When you first read that story, or when it was first taught to you in Sunday School, you probably understood it as a simple story of Adam and Eve disobeying God's command and being punished for it. That was an appropriate level for a child to respond at, and certainly a familiar message. ("Mommy told you not to play in the mud. You played in the mud anyway. Now you get no dessert.") Perhaps, depending on the religious tradition in which you were raised, you were told that all human beings, Adam's and Eve's descendants, were doomed to die as sinners because of that original disobedience. Maybe even then you felt that it was unfair for God to punish them and their descendants so severely for one little mistake committed by a couple of inexperienced people, especially if they could not have been expected to know what good and evil were before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

I think there is more to the story than a simple case of disobeying God and being punished for it. My interpretation may be very different from the ones you have grown up with, but I think it makes sense and fits the biblical context. I think the story is about the differences between being human and being an animal, and the key to understanding it is the fact that the "forbidden" tree is called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Human beings live in a world of good and bad, and that makes our lives painful and complicated. Animals don't; their lives are much simpler, without the moral problems and moral decisions that we

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humans have to face. Categories of "good" and "bad" don't really exist for animals. They can be helpful or messy, obedient or disobedient, but they can't be good or bad. Terms like "good doggie" or "bad doggie" don't refer to the moral value of what the dog chooses to do, but only to its being convenient or inconvenient for us, like "good weather" and "bad weather." Like our almost-but-not-quite-human ancestors, animals eat from the Tree of Life; they eat and drink, they run and they mate. But the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is off limits to them.

To use a term which no one before our generation could have understood, animals are "programmed." Built-in instincts tell them when to eat, when to sleep, and so on. They follow their instincts and have very few difficult decisions to make. Human beings, however, are unique in the world of living creatures. The "image of God" in us permits us to say No to instinct on moral grounds. We can choose not to eat even though we are hungry. We can refrain from sex even when our instincts are being aroused, not because we are afraid of being punished, but because we understand the terms "good" and "bad" in a way that no other animal can. The whole story of being human is the story of rising above our animal nature, and learning to control our instincts.

Let us look again at the "punishments" God visits on Adam and Eve. (I put the word "punishments" in quotation marks because I am not sure they are really punishments. They are the painful consequences of being human rather than being a mere animal.) Every one of them represents a way in which life is more painful and problematic for human beings than it is for animals.

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Sex and reproduction are natural and nonproblematic for all animals except Man. Females come into heat, males are attracted to them, and the species is maintained. Nothing could be simpler. Compare that to the sexual tensions existing among human beings: the teenage girl who waits for a boy to call her, feeling shunned and unattractive; the college student who cannot concentrate on his studies and is contemplating suicide because his girlfriend has broken up with him; the pregnant unmarried career woman who does not believe in abortion but is not sure what other choice she has; the severely depressed housewife whose husband has left her for another woman; the victims of rape, the patrons of pornographic movies, the furtive adulterers, the self-hating promiscuous "sexual athletes." Sex is so simple and straightforward for animals, and so painful for the rest of us (unless we are willing to behave like animals), because we have entered the world of good and evil.

But at the same time, precisely because we live in that world, a sexual relationship can mean infinitely more to us than it can to an animal, or to a person who sees sex only as an instinct to be satisfied. It can mean tenderness, sharing of affection, responsible commitment. Animals can mate and reproduce, but only human beings can know love, with all the pain that love sometimes involves.

For animals, giving birth to young and supervising their growing up is a purely instinctive process. There is much less physical pain, and much less psychological pain, involved for them than there is for the human parent. When our family dog had a litter of puppies, she knew exactly what to do without ever being told. Giving birth was uncomfortable, but not

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as painful as for a human mother. Our dog nursed her litter of puppies, and when they were old enough to take care of themselves, she began to ignore them. Now, when she meets one of her grown children, she recognizes another dog, but not necessarily one she is closely related to. Being a human parent can never be that easy. Giving birth, one of the most painful events a human body can experience, is in a sense the easiest part. Raising and teaching children, passing your values on to them, sharing their big and little hurts, being disappointed in them, knowing when to be tough and when to be forgiving—these are the painful parts of being a parent. And unlike the animals, we can't do it on instinct alone. We have to make hard choices.

Similarly, people have to work hard for their food, either growing it themselves or performing some service to earn money to buy it. The world provides food for animals, for those who hunt and for those who graze. A lion may have to exert himself to stalk and kill an animal, and it may be very hard for him, but it cannot compare to the human experience of being fired from a job or having to decide whether to withhold important information when making a sale. Animals can depend on instinct to guide them in their search for food. Only humans in their work have to worry about choosing a career, keeping a job, getting along with the boss. Only humans have to weigh the pros and cons of doing something that may be illegal or unethical to keep a job or make a sale. Once again, a major area of life which may be difficult for animals but is at least free of moral dilemmas, is for human beings a problematic and often painful area.

And finally, all living creatures are fated to die, but

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only human beings know it. Animals will instinctively protect themselves against threats to their life and well-being, but only human beings live in the valley of the shadow of death, with the knowledge that they are mortal, even when no one is attacking them. This knowledge that we are going to die someday changes our lives in many ways. It moves us to try to cheat death by doing something that will outlive us—having children, writing books, having an impact on our friends and neighbors so that they will remember us fondly. Knowing that our time is limited gives value to the things we do. It matters that we choose to read a book or visit a sick friend instead of going to the movies, precisely because we don't have the time to do everything.

This, then, is what happened to Adam and Eve. They became human. They had to leave the Garden of Eden, where animals eat from the Tree of Life, the tree of basic life-forces and instincts. They entered the world of the knowledge of good and evil, a more painful, more complicated world, where they would have to make difficult moral choices. Eating and working, having children and raising children would no longer be simple matters, as they are for lower animals. These first human beings were now self-conscious (after eating the forbidden fruit, they felt the need to put on clothes). They knew that they would not live forever. But most of all, they would have to spend their lives making choices.

This is what it means to be human "in the image of God." It means being free to make choices instead of doing whatever our instincts would tell us to do. It means knowing that some choices are good, and others are bad, and it is our job to know the difference.

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"Behold, I have set before you the path of good and the path of evil, the way of life and the way of death. Choose Life." (Deuteronomy 30:19) That could not be said to any other living creature except Man, for no other creature is free to choose.

But if Man is truly free to choose, if he can show himself as being virtuous by freely choosing the good when the bad is equally possible, then he has to be free to choose the bad also. If he were only free to do good, he would not really be choosing. If we are *bound* to do good, then we are not free to *choose* it.

Imagine a parent saying to a child, "How would you like to spend this afternoon, doing homework or playing with a friend? You choose." The child says, "I'd like to play with my friend." The parent responds, "I'm sorry, that's the wrong choice. I can't let you do that. I won't let you out of the house until your homework gets done. Choose again." This time the child says, "All right, I'll do my homework." The parent smiles and says, "I'm glad you made the right choice." We may have ended up with the preferred result, but it would be wrong to say that it was the child who showed maturity and responsibility by making that choice.

Now imagine God saying to a person, "How do you plan to get the money to pay your bills? Are you going to get a job, which means getting up early in the morning and doing hard work, or are you going to grab an old lady's pocketbook and run off with it?" The man answers, "I was thinking of going out and stealing a pocketbook." God says, "No, that's wrong. I won't let you do that. Choose again." This time the man reluctantly agrees to get a job. A robbery has been prevented, but has the man been permitted to

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operate as a morally free human being? Has God permitted him to choose between the path of good and the path of evil? Or has God reduced him to the level of an animal by taking away his freedom to choose, and compelling him to take the better path?

In order to let us be free, in order to let us be human, God has to leave us free to choose to do right or to do wrong. If we are not free to choose evil, then we are not free to *choose* good either. Like the animals, we can only be convenient or inconvenient, obedient or disobedient. We can no longer be moral, which means we can no longer be human.

None of us can read God's mind, to know why, at a certain point in the evolutionary process, He had a new kind of creature emerge, a morally free animal who could choose to be good or bad. But He did, and the world has seen a lot of nobility and a lot of cruelty ever since.

Our moral freedom means that, if we choose to be selfish or dishonest, we can *be* selfish and dishonest, and God will not stop us. If we want to take something that does not belong to us, God will not reach down and pull our hand away from the cookie jar. If we want to hurt someone, God will not intervene to keep us from doing it. All He will do is tell us that certain things are wrong, warn us that we will be sorry for having done them, and hope that, if we don't take His word for it, we will at least learn from experience.

God is not like a human parent who watches as his child takes its first shaky steps or struggles with an algebra assignment, and who says to himself, "If I intervene, I will spare my child a lot of pain, but how will he ever learn to do it for himself?" A human parent in that situation has the possibility (and the

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responsibility) to intervene if the child is on the verge of doing himself serious harm. But God has set Himself the limit that He will not intervene to take away our freedom, including our freedom to hurt ourselves and others around us. He has already let Man evolve morally free, and there is no turning back the evolutionary clock.

Why, then, do bad things happen to good people? One reason is that our being human leaves us free to hurt each other, and God can't stop us without taking away the freedom that makes us human. Human beings can cheat each other, rob each other, hurt each other, and God can only look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned over the ages about how human beings should behave. This line of reasoning helps me understand that monstrous eruption of evil we speak of as the Holocaust, the death of millions of innocent people at the hands of Adolf Hitler. When people ask, "Where was God in Auschwitz? How could He have permitted the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?" my response is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow men. In the words of a German Christian theologian, Dorothee Soelle, speaking of attempts to justify the Holocaust as God's will, "Who wants such a God? Who gains anything from worshipping Him? Was God on the side of the victims or on the side of the executioner?"

To try to explain the Holocaust, or any suffering, as God's will is to side with the executioner rather than with his victim, and to claim that God does the same.

I cannot make sense of the Holocaust by taking it to be God's will. Even if I could accept the death of

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an innocent individual now and then without having to rethink all of my beliefs, the Holocaust represents too many deaths, too much evidence against the view that "God is in charge and He has His reasons." I have to believe that the Holocaust was at least as much of an offense to God's moral order as it is to mine, or how can I respect God as a source of moral guidance?

Why did six million Jews, and several million other innocent victims, die in Hitler's death camps? Who was responsible? We fall back on the idea of human freedom to choose. Man, we discovered, is that unique creature whose behavior is not "programmed." He is free to choose to be good, which means he must be free to choose to be evil. Some good people are good on a relatively modest scale. They are charitable, they visit the sick, they help a neighbor change a flat tire. Others are good on a grander scale. They work diligently to discover a cure for a disease, or they fight for the extension of the rights of the poor and the powerless. Some bad people choose evil, but have the capacity to be evil only on a small scale. They lie, cheat, take things that do not belong to them. And some have the ability to do harm to millions, even as their good counterparts have the ability to be helpful to millions.

Hitler must have been one of those rare geniuses of evil who, having chosen to be destructive, had the ability to be more destructive than virtually anyone else in history. (This raises a question which is not really part of our discussion: Can we say that someone like Hitler *chose* to be destructive? Or would we have to go back and look at his parents, his home environment, his teachers, his early life experiences and historical circumstances that made him become the person he was? There is probably no clear answer to

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that question. Social scientists have been debating it for years, and will continue to do so. I can only say that the cornerstone of my religious outlook is the belief that human beings *are* free to choose the direction their life will take. Granted, some children are born with physical or mental capacities which limit their freedom of choice. Not everyone can choose to be an opera singer, a surgeon, or a professional athlete. Granted further that some parents mishandle their children badly, that accidental events—wars, illnesses—traumatize children so badly that they may not be able to do something they would otherwise be qualified for, and that some people are so addicted to habits that it is hard to speak of them as being free. But I will insist that every adult, no matter how unfortunate a childhood he had or how habit-ridden he may be, is free to make choices about his life. If we are not free, if we are bound by circumstances and experiences, then we are no different from the animal who is bound by instinct. To say of Hitler, to say of any criminal, that he did not choose to be bad but was a victim of his upbringing, is to make all morality, all discussion of right and wrong, impossible. It leaves unanswered the question of why people in similar circumstances did not all become Hitlers. But worse, to say "it is not his fault, he was not free to choose" is to rob a person of his humanity, and reduce him to the level of an animal who is similarly not free to choose between right and wrong.)

The Holocaust happened because Hitler was a demented evil genius who chose to do harm on a massive scale. But he did not cause it alone. Hitler was only one man, and even his ability to do evil was limited. The Holocaust happened because thousands of others

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could be persuaded to join him in his madness, and millions of others permitted themselves to be frightened or shamed into cooperating. It happened because angry, frustrated people were willing to vent their anger and frustration on innocent victims as soon as someone encouraged them to do so. It happened because Hitler was able to persuade lawyers to forget their commitment to justice and doctors to violate their oaths. And it happened because democratic governments were unwilling to summon their people to stand up to Hitler as long as their own interests were not yet at stake.

Where was God while all this was going on? Why did He not intervene to stop it? Why didn't He strike Hitler dead in 1939 and spare millions of lives and untold suffering, or why didn't He send an earthquake to demolish the gas chambers? Where was God? I have to believe, with Dorothee Soelle, that He was with the victims, and not with the murderers, but that He does not control man's choosing between good and evil. I have to believe that the tears and prayers of the victims aroused God's compassion, but having given Man freedom to choose, including the freedom to choose to hurt his neighbor, there was nothing God could do to prevent it.

Christianity introduced the world to the idea of a God who suffers, alongside the image of a God who creates and commands. Postbiblical Judaism also occasionally spoke of a God who suffers, a God who is made homeless and goes into exile along with His exiled people, a God who weeps when He sees what some of His children are doing to others of His children. I don't know what it means for God to suffer. I don't believe that God is a person like me, with real

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eyes and real tear ducts to cry, and real nerve endings to feel pain. But I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the sufferings of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion, even if His way of feeling pain is different from ours. I would like to think that He is the source of my being able to feel sympathy and outrage, and that He and I are on the same side when we stand with the victim against those who would hurt him.

The last word, appropriately, comes from a survivor of Auschwitz:

It never occurred to me to question God's doings or lack of doings while I was an inmate of Auschwitz, although of course I understand others did. . . . I was no less or no more religious because of what the Nazis did to us; and I believe my faith in God was not undermined in the least. It never occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with God, to blame Him, or to believe in Him less or cease believing in Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. God doesn't owe us that, or anything. We owe our lives to Him. If someone believes God is responsible for the death of six million because He didn't somehow do something to save them, he's got his thinking reversed. We owe God our lives for the few or many years we live, and we have the duty to worship Him and do as He commands us. That's what we're here on earth for, to be in God's service, to do God's bidding.

(Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*)