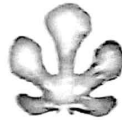


Martyn Lloyd-Jones

The Gospel in Genesis

Chapter 6

THE CHERUBIM AND THE FLAMING SWORD



And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

GENESIS 3 : 2 2 - 2 4

We have seen that the Bible always speaks to us about the precise condition in which we find ourselves and that it has a great message that covers the whole of life. And so, without entering into the details of what is happening in the world today, the Bible speaks about them in a profound manner that nothing else can approach.

Nothing, I sometimes think, so proves the truth of the biblical teaching as the way in which men and women refuse to consider it. You would think that a time of crisis and turmoil and confusion in the world would drive them to the Bible, but it does not. They turn in every other direction; they consider every other possible solution. And there is only one explanation for that attitude, the one the Bible itself gives us. Scripture tells us that men and women are spiritually

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blind and that to the extent that they do see at all, they see only in a human and materialistic sense. They are blind to the really vital issues, to the unseen powers and forces, and these are, after all, the most important realities. The tragedy of men and women in general is that they only see the visible—they do not see the invisible. Therefore at the present hour they do not see the real cause of their troubles. They think in terms of certain individuals who have done this or that, what they should not have done and what should be done and so on. And they get excited about all that. But these are merely symptoms. It is what cannot be seen by the visible eye, what lies behind all this, that really accounts for all that takes place in the world.

Now the Bible is interested in all that. The Bible is a very old book; it has been in this world for such a long time and has seen many a crisis come and go. The Bible was here during the Second World War. It was here in the First World War. It was here, exactly as it is now, in the time of the Napoleonic Wars when people got so excited and thought that the world had never been in such a situation as it was then. The world is always saying that. Every generation tends to repeat it. But the Bible, as it were, looks through all that and says, you are interested in the manifestations and the symptoms, but the tragedy is that you do not see human nature and life in this world as they are, the problem that keeps on creating these crises. You do not see what turns the world into what you are now seeing, the condition that your grandfathers and great-grandfathers and generations still further back saw in their day. So the Bible says, why will you not come and consider what I have to say, for here is the real and the only answer?

The Bible tells us the answer to the two questions we should all be asking. The first is, why are things as they are? The second is, how can they be put right? That is the whole problem, is it not? It really comes down to that: diagnosis and treatment.

But here lies the rub, the difficulty. The world really does not want to consider that first question. It is only interested in the sec-

ond. And the world does not like the Bible because it says that you cannot come to the second question unless you have truly understood the first. The Bible stands against us at that very point and says, you cannot have the treatment until you have submitted to the diagnosis.

But the world hates this diagnosis. It says, I'm not interested in that. I don't care what the cause is as long as you can put it right. It is the same with our physical illnesses. When we are suffering an acute pain, the doctor comes and looks at us and asks us a number of questions. Then he begins to examine us, and he puts his hand on us and listens to our heart. Meanwhile, we are saying to ourselves, *Why is this man wasting time? Why doesn't he relieve my pain?* That is a natural human reaction. But the doctor knows very well that until he is fairly clear in his mind as to the cause of your pain, it is very dangerous to attempt to relieve it. But we do not like probing analysis like that found in the Bible. We know what it is going to say about us, and we do not want that. The world today really hates the first part of the gospel; it wants the cure immediately.

In this little paragraph in Genesis that we are now looking at, these two aspects are put before us. What a perfect picture they give us of modern people and the modern world. Look at Adam and Eve. There they are, out in the great wide world in the wilderness of life. They have been driven out of paradise. They have been driven out of the place where they simply had to pick the fruit and eat it. And here they are, alone and isolated, faced with a barren wilderness, at the mercy of all sorts of animals and beasts, not knowing what to do, frustrated and confused, feeling a terrible loneliness, with the problem of life coming down heavily upon them.

Is that not a perfect picture of men and women today? They are confused. They feel they are in a wilderness. They do not understand life. It does not seem to be turning out as they had thought it would. It is not as they would like it to be. But here they are. They cannot help themselves. They find themselves on the outside, always trying to get back somewhere and failing. Let

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me analyze verses 23–24 in order to bring out the two sides—the diagnosis and the treatment.

There are the man and the woman outside the garden of Eden, driven out by God. But why are they outside? Why should these two, who have known such a perfect life, suddenly find themselves surrounded by problems and difficulties, battling against immensities they do not understand, conscious of having lost something? How have they come into such a position? This is just another way of asking the question, why is the world as it is today?

Here is the first answer. The human race is as it is because man refused to realize at the beginning who and what he is and tried to be something that he was not and was never meant to be. The Scripture puts this in a very brief word: “Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.” That is a tremendous statement—“to till the ground from whence he was taken.” What a tremendous statement about human beings. What does it tell us? It tells us that man is a created, finite being. That is not the modern view, is it? But that is the truth. Man was taken from the ground. God took some of the dust of the earth, and from that he made man and then breathed his spirit into him. That is man’s origin.

But man was not content with that. And the Devil knew it, so he knew exactly what to do. He said to Eve, “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”

“Well,” Eve answered in essence, “we can eat the fruit except from one tree.”

“Well,” said the serpent, “I’ll tell you why he said that. ‘For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.’”

Adam and Eve, of course, jumped to the bait. They accepted the serpent’s words at once. They did not like any suggestion that they were finite and were dependent upon God and had to lead a life of obedience. They pulled themselves up to their full height. They were not creatures who had come from the dust. Man is a

kind of god! That was their conception. There is no limit to man. Marvelous man! So when the Devil came, they were ready indeed to listen to his suggestion that if only they would disobey God and eat this fruit, they would become—indeed, would then be—*as* God. And they felt they had it in them to stand there and to be equal with God. So they ate the fruit.

That and that alone explains why men and women are as they are today. That is why Adam and Eve were thrust out of the garden. People are as they are because Adam and Eve refused to realize who and what they were and tried to be something they were never meant to be. And the whole story of the human race, the whole history of the world, stems out of that one primary, original, fatal fallacy.

I do not want to dwell too long on this first point, but it is of the very essence of the preaching of the Bible and the gospel to say that the chief trouble of men and women is still their great conceit. The apostle Paul puts that in this way in writing to the Corinthians:

Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.
(1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Then the apostle winds it up with a quotation of Old Testament Scripture: "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (v. 31). In other words, God has made a way of salvation in which human pride, and especially pride of intellect, is humbled and abased.

But, you see, that is the very thing man refused to do at the beginning. That is the thing he still persists in refusing to accept. Fundamentally, man has a false view of himself—of his potentiality, his ability, and his power. He feels that he really is a king or a giant

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or a genius and that he is capable of anything, and he worships himself. Now I am not exaggerating. I am not overdrawing the picture.

You and I, my dear friends, have the misfortune to be living at a time when we are reaping what has been going on for about a hundred years. There has been a great turning away from God, and it has all been due to the fact that man really began to believe that he was so wonderful that he did not need God. He felt there was nothing he could not do. He could make a paradise, a perfect world. And this ancient fantasy persists. Man forgets that he has come from the ground, from the dust; he hates the idea. But he finds himself constantly groveling in the dust. God keeps on reminding him that he has come from it. So every time man exalts himself, he is stricken down, and there he is licking the dust again. "Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken."

I pass from that to my second principle, which is this: all that man obtains in this folly and sin of his apart from God always disappoints him and always leads to further trouble. Here is how the Scripture puts it:

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden. (Genesis 3:22-23)

Notice that Adam and Eve, as the result of their action in eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, did obtain a knowledge of good and evil. They thought that if they ate of that tree, it would enlighten them, and they would be as gods and would know everything and have knowledge of evil as well as good. That was what they wanted. Before that, they had been ignorant of evil. They had been living in paradise, in perfect communion with God. They had never known anything but blessing. They had not had to work to get food. They had always enjoyed peace and happiness and joy. Until this point their life had been a life of unadulterated joy and

bliss. But they thought that this knowledge of evil as well as good would enlarge their scope. So at the suggestion of the Devil, they did what God had told them not to do, and as a result they obtained the knowledge of evil as well as good. But, alas, the moment they put the fruit into their mouths, it became sour. And that is the whole story of the human race—the fruit becoming sour, the coveted knowledge that supposedly was going to make everything perfect turning against those who longed for it.

Now I want to show you how that happened immediately when man sinned and fell. You see, man looked at all these things theoretically, and his position was, *Now I have such a great capacity. There is nothing really that is beyond me. I'm capable of taking it all in and holding on to it all, and I can enjoy it all.*

So man gained the knowledge of evil. Yes, but he discovered that the knowledge of evil that he obtained was not the knowledge of evil that God has. God looks upon both good and evil from the outside, objectively. He looks down upon them. But alas for poor man, his knowledge was not objective. The knowledge he obtained was subjective. And what was that knowledge? It was the knowledge of the fact that the moment he ate that prohibited fruit, he became the slave of evil; he was under the power of evil, under the dominion of Satan and of sin. Yes, he had a knowledge of evil. We all have it. But what is this knowledge? Well, here it is, says the apostle Paul:

To will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . But I see another law in my members [dragging me down], warring against the law of my mind. (Romans 7:18-19, 23)

I have a knowledge of evil, and you have it, too, do you not? Man wanted the knowledge of evil. Well, this is it. Within us there is a kind of inferno. You are conscious of it, are you not? Every one of us is conscious of some terrible power operating inside us. You wake up in the morning, and before you have had time truly to wake up

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and to think actively and positively, an evil thought comes to you. You may walk down the street as innocent as a child, as it were, and suddenly you find there is evil within you.

Man did obtain a knowledge of good and evil, but I say again, it is not God's knowledge. God sees evil and hates it and is above it and is going to destroy it. But man has come to know it as an incubus that is upon him, something that grips him not only externally but within. We have an appalling knowledge of evil, every one of us. It is inside us. Man, in seeking it, has found it. But it is not what he had anticipated; it is not what he had expected.

Another part of the knowledge of evil is this—man has not only come to know evil as a great and malevolent influence and power in his life, but he has also obtained a knowledge of it in its evil consequences. And what are these, over and above the ones I have mentioned? Well, here is the first: punishment. Man was thrown out of the garden, shivering in the cold, out in the great wide world without any protection, having to slave and work and labor. That is the consequence. Man had never known that before. You cannot sin without immediately receiving a certain amount of punishment.

A second consequence is remorse. Feeling you have been a fool. Wondering what it was that made you do it again, though you were so miserable the last time you did it. You kick and berate yourself. Remorse. Shame. And accompanying this misery is depression, fear of the future, wondering what is happening, what you can do.

And then, looming at the back of it all and perhaps most terrifying of all, is the certain knowledge that it all leads to death. Man was placed on probation by God; and if he had only obeyed God and continued to obey him, he would never have died. Death would never have come to him. If man had only obeyed God, God would have allowed him to eat of the tree of life, and he would have obtained immortality as a reward. But he took the law into his own hands, and therefore the curse came upon him: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). And the specter of death appeared before him. He was thrown out of the garden,

and there he was facing death. It stood far away on the horizon, but it came nearer and nearer. And we are all aware of it.

That, you see, is life as the result of the Fall and the result of sin. That is how it happened at the beginning, and that is how it is still happening. We are all born with this knowledge of sin and of evil. In our way and in our own day and generation we are doing exactly what Adam did. The trouble with man has always been that he has put his faith in knowledge instead of in God; he puts knowledge in the place of God. That is what Adam did, was it not? He said in essence, "If only I can get this knowledge, I won't need God and can afford to disobey God. With this knowledge I will be absolutely complete. I will need nothing further."

I would remind you again that during the last hundred years there has been a great departure from God. You know, by going to a place of worship, we are great exceptions. The vast majority of people do not attend a place of worship. They do not listen to sermons about God. Why not? Well, about a hundred years ago, people decided that knowledge—and especially, of course, scientific knowledge—would render them independent of God. With our latest discoveries and inventions, they argued, we will not need God at all. We'll be able to create heat, and we'll be able to produce artificial rain to fructify our crops. God won't be necessary. People in the past, because of their ignorance, prayed to God for the blessings of the harvest and so on, but we're independent. We've put our faith in science. We've split the atom.

And what is the position at this hour? Is it not just a repetition of what happened at the beginning? The fruit has become very sour again. The knowledge that we thought would solve all our problems is actually our greatest problem of all. The atom we have split, the very knowledge to which we have pinned our faith, constitutes our greatest problem, just as it became the greatest problem for poor Adam and Eve. *Oh, they must have thought to themselves, would to God that we had remained in ignorance! Why did we ever ask for this knowledge of evil? Oh, that we had gone on as we were.* But it

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was too late. They were away from the garden and away from God. Man is so slow to learn that lesson. Do you still feel, my friend, that with all your modern knowledge and learning you have no need of God? Well, that is the sort of thinking that puts man out of paradise and into the howling, barren wilderness.

But that brings me to my next principle, which is this: in spite of all this, man is foolish enough to try to evade the consequences of his own sinful action. He is still trying to clutch at certain blessings that he desires. Here it is put in this form: God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us." You see there the doctrine of the Trinity, do you not? God is not talking to angels or to men. God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are having a conversation among themselves. "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever . . ." (Genesis 3:22). Because of that possibility, God decided to drive him out of the garden.

In other words, God knew that man in sin would act in this manner, that though in his folly he had brought calamity upon himself by his disobedience, he would now stretch out his hand and clutch at that tree of life so he could still go on living. Though he was fallen and sinful and had the knowledge of evil, he would continue to defy God. So God sent him away.

It is at that point that I see most clearly of all the parallel between man at the beginning, the moment he fell, and man as he is at this present time. Indeed, I would venture to assert that this one statement is the whole explanation of the history of civilization. Read your history books. Do not just take it from me. Do not only read your Bible—read your secular history books. And do not only read about kings and marriages and births and wars and deaths, read about the history of thought. Go back and read Greek philosophy. Read mythology, and read about people planning their utopias.

What does it all mean? Just this: man thrust out is always trying to get back. He knows that in that garden there is a tree of life,

and he wants it. He still will not admit that he is wrong. He will not admit his sin. He will not admit his dependence upon God. He wants to go on in spite of God. He wants to live an independent life that will be an eternal life while leaving God out of consideration. And he has been doing that throughout the centuries.

The whole story of civilization is the history of men and women trying to make a perfect world for themselves without God. And every one of us has done that in our own lives. Everybody in the world today is seeking peace, happiness, joy, life. Yes, but the trouble is that men and women are looking for all that without God. They do not think of God. They do not worship God. They do not pray to God. They have no interest in him at all. They are not interested in the Lord Jesus Christ.

People are trying in every way they can to find life, joy, peace, and happiness on their own, and yet they can never find it. They are always outside. They are trying to banish death. They are trying to conquer the grave itself. They are trying to extend life. The ingenuity, the cleverness, the ability, all this, all along the line, is the attempt to perpetuate humanity without God. But the whole enterprise is tragic folly. And the first great message of the gospel, in a sense, is just to say that this endeavor is utterly impossible.

“Where did you find that?” asks someone.

I find it in the last verse: “So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep [to guard] the way of the tree of life” (v. 24). God knows man, and he knows man in sin. He knew that though he thrust man out, man would say, “If only I could get back there, if only I could get just one piece of fruit from the tree of life, if only I could eat that . . .” He would be constantly trying to get back. So God put the cherubim and the flaming sword to guard the entrance, the way of entry, to the tree of life.

What does this mean? This is the position of humanity today. This is the explanation of the fact that in spite of all the culture and the philosophizing and the thinking and the social action and the

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politics and the wars of two thousand years and more, men and women are as they are today. They are still outside. They cannot get back. Why not? Cherubim! The flaming sword! Whether you like it or not, my friend, this is a fact. You may be trying to get in, but you will fail, just as all your forebears have failed. No one can get in. The cherubim! The flaming sword!

What does that mean? What are the cherubim? Well, they are there to indicate and to represent the presence and the unapproachability of Jehovah God. Go through your Bible and look for every reference to the cherubim, and you will always find that they are used to depict and represent the majesty, the might, the ineffable glory of the presence of God. When God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, one of the things he told him to make was a box, the Ark of the Covenant. And in that box he was to put the Ten Commandments, the moral law of God. Then on top of the box he was to put a kind of lid, a covering, and on top of that two cherubim made out of gold. This lid was called "the mercy seat," and these two cherubim were looking down upon it. They were, you see, the representation of the holiness of God, that which looks down upon the law of God, the expression of God's holy nature (Exodus 25:1-22).

God put cherubim at the east gate, the entry to the garden of Eden through which he had just expelled Adam and Eve. That means that whenever man tries to come back to obtain this blessing of life and joy and peace, he immediately comes face-to-face with God, the everlasting and eternal God, the God who is light and in whom is no darkness at all. Read of the men who have come anywhere near him or have seen just a glimpse of his glory. They fall down. They are helpless. They do not know what to do with themselves. The cherubim represent the ineffable glory of God.

And what else? Consider the flaming sword that turned every which way. If you suddenly see it on the left and think you can slip by on the right, it is there before you can move. It is turning everywhere, and you will never escape it or avoid it. This, my dear friend,

is nothing but the wrath of God against sin. And there is nothing more vital for us all to realize than that. Do you want life? Do you want happiness and peace and joy? Do you want to know that you can have an endless life that nothing can touch or destroy? Are these the blessings you are seeking? Very well, I say to you that you will never have them until you have passed God and his wrath against sin. He is there facing you, at the only way of entrance, and the blessings you seek are behind him. You have to get past the sword of God's wrath.

The final tragedy, the final folly of man in sin, is that throughout the centuries he has been trying to find life in his own strength. He has looked to learning. He has looked to ability. He has looked to morality. He has looked to a thousand and one things. And he has always failed. Why? Because these cannot deal with the sword. They cannot get past God.

"Well," says someone, "do you just want to condemn us and tell us all that we're hopeless and lost? Is the message of Christianity that individually and as a world we are doomed? Are you saying there is no way to life and peace and joy and all of which I stand in need?"

Thank God, that is not my message. I want to tell you that there is a way into that garden. There is only one way, but there is that one. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us about it:

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, *by a new and living way*, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh . . . Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience. (10:19-20, 22)

What does this mean? There is only one way to obtain these blessings, and it is a way that has discovered the method of somehow or other standing in the presence of the glory of God without being consumed. That is absolutely essential. There is no entry into that garden, into that paradise where the blessings of God are still

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to be found, unless somehow we can stand before the glory of God and not shrivel into nothing. And it is possible.

There is one, and only one, who can stand in the presence of God and look into his face of glory. He is the Son of God, who is God himself, who shares the same glory but who, blessed be his name, came down into this world and took human nature upon himself, who was made flesh and dwelt among us. He came outside into the wilderness; he came out himself. He need not have come. He was not driven out as man was. He came out voluntarily. He asked if he might come out, and the Father sent him. And he came to us in the wilderness and took our nature upon himself. He identified himself with us. He came as man, and now he stands as man, the God-man, and looks into the face of God. No one else could. Every saint in the Old Testament failed. No one can ever look into the face of God and live. No human being can see God and live. But here is one who can because he is God as well as man.

"Ah, yes," you say, "that's all right. But what about the sword?"

Well, my dear friend, this is the most marvelous thing of all. The Son of God advanced against the flaming sword, and it smote him, and it killed him. It broke his body, and in breaking his body it broke itself. Now the way is opened into the paradise of God, to the tree of life, to salvation and all its indescribable blessings. Did you notice how this is expressed in Hebrews: "By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh [his body]" (10:20)? He advanced, I say, on the sword, and he said, "Smite me." And in smiting him, it smashed itself.

Through the broken body and the shed blood of the Son of God, you and I can enter into that paradise from which man was expelled. And we can take of the tree of life and eat abundantly of it. In the Communion service, the bread represents his body, and the wine represents his blood. That is why we have the Communion service. It is not mere custom or sham or just a happy picture. There is no way into the paradise of God except through Jesus Christ and him crucified. If he had not taken that smiting with the sword, there

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would never have been an opening, though he is the Son of God. It was not enough for the Son of God to come into the world. It was not enough for him to teach us. It was not enough for him to live perfectly and to give us an example. Before we can enter, the sword must do its work. And it has done it. Isaiah, eight hundred years before it actually happened, was shown this by the Holy Spirit: "Yet we did esteem him . . . smitten of God" (Isaiah 53:4). Peter says, "by [his] stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). He took it all upon himself.

So for all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the entrance is no longer blocked. In Christ we can face God; we can have boldness to enter into the holiest of all by the blood of Jesus. Not by myself. No, for I am a vile sinner. But I am in him. I enter by his obedience. He kept the law perfectly, not only for himself, but for all who believe in him.

*The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.*

Augustus Toplady⁶

Do you want life, life that is life indeed, life abundant, life that will take you through death to eternity and glory? Do you want peace, joy, and happiness? My dear friend, give up trying to obtain them in your own strength or in the strength of any human knowledge. They have all failed. There is only one way. It is Jesus Christ and him crucified. You must pass through him and in him into the presence of God who is ever ready to receive all who come to him by Jesus Christ.