

# A Lenten Story of Personal Transformation

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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**My well-constructed theological world came crashing down around me during the spring of 1990.** I had entered a Presbyterian seminary the previous fall and had already endured what I perceived to be constant attacks on my faith by what I was being taught and from what I was required to read. Not unlike most seminary students, I began to experience the chipping away of what had taken me a lifetime to come to believe about God, Jesus, and biblical interpretation. By that spring semester I already considered transferring to a seminary outside of my life-long Presbyterian heritage. For you see, my conservative evangelical theological perspective was more in line with something like the Assembly of God.

That's actually quite remarkable, because I had not been raised in an overly-conservative religious family. While it's true that mom and dad took my two brothers and sister and me to church every Sunday from birth through high school, and while it's true that a prayer of grace was always said by one of us four kids before the dinner meal; and while it's true that when we were young we always had a bedtime prayer with mom, there was never any overt God-talk in our family, no Bible-quoting instructions on how to be good boys and girls. But then again, I didn't really need much of that anyway.

For some reason, probably even before much conscious thought was involved, I had determined that my life strategy would be to follow all the rules, or as dad used to say when I'd get close to the line, "be one of the good guys." I was. Years later, I learned that that was as much of a personality trait and temperament type as it was parental guidance. After all, my older brother and I couldn't have been more different.

Perhaps it also had something to do with being a middle child, and having moved every few years while growing up. As some of you may remember me telling you upon my arrival here at College Hill three years ago, I had lived in 9 towns in 6 different states before I graduated high school. So maybe it was partially due to a need to fit in, and the need to constantly find new friends, that I got involved with a group of fellow high school choir buddies when I lived in South Dakota. They happened to be part of the youth culture in the early 1970s that came to be called the "Jesus Freak" movement. I started attending morning prayer meetings with them in a high school library conference room before classes began.

Upon reflection many years later in seminary, I came to realize that it was primarily peer pressure from my fundamentalist friends that I needed to pray the prayer that they claimed was required to actually become a Christian – that Jesus enter into

my heart and become my Lord and Savior. I was led to believe that a lifetime of going to church up to that point really didn't count, that I hadn't really been a Christian all along – even though I couldn't ever recall a time in my life when I didn't believe in God and Jesus.

So like my friends, I started carrying around a Bible along with me at school, along with all my other textbooks. I also remember wearing a pin that stated, "Guess Who's Coming?" When people asked me about it, I could tell them about Jesus.

All this new-found religiosity scared the dickens out of my parents, and they finally intervened and put their foot down when I wanted to go with my Christian friends to an evening prayer and Bible meeting at a place called "Soul's Release." I think they thought it was a cult. In some regards, certain elements of fundamentalism are cult-like.

Quite remarkably, I carried around in my head a fairly orthodox-to-the-point-of fundamentalist approach to biblical interpretation and theological doctrine all through my college years, my early career as a petroleum geologist, and the desperate few years after I lost that career in the 1986.

My home church, The Woodlands Community Presbyterian Church, located about 30 miles north of downtown Houston, though not nearly as conservative as I was, was very supportive and deeply appreciative of the volunteer time I had spent working with the junior high youth, and the time I spent on the Session after being ordained as a Presbyterian elder in 1987.

I still credit my faith for helping me through the devastating after-effects of the oil-industry nosedive in the mid-1980s, which for me including the loss of not only my entire life savings and investments, but also my car and even the home that I had purchased 4 years earlier.

Without a penny to my name, almost literally, my home church raised the necessary funds to help me get to seminary. It was them I was thinking about the most when in only my second semester of seminary I crashed head-on into what many call "the wall of faith." How could I switch to a non-Presbyterian seminary after my home church made it possible for me to attend seminary in the first place?

**With all that as background, you may be wondering what it was that caused this catastrophic faith crisis that rattled the very foundation of all that I believed?** It came in my *Theology II* class that I was reading a suggested textbook entitled, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, by William Hordern. It was kind of like *Cliff Notes* of the great theological thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including a distillation of the work of greats like Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the section about Karl Barth and neo-orthodoxy, the author reflected upon **Barth's interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, and the effects of their wanting to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil** – the passage that is the assigned lectionary Old Testament reading for this First Sunday of Lent.

It was upon deep reflection of just 3 paragraphs that set my theological world into a tailspin. I'd like to read those to you this morning, and then tell you why they had the life-changing transformation that they did upon my life, setting me on an entirely different trajectory theologically. The language in this old book, first written in the 1950s, is hopelessly mired in male-dominated language and imagery. That, of course, didn't bother me at that time. While I find it abhorrent today, I will read what it was that I read back in the spring of 1990. I encourage you to stick with me through this, and if possible to hear it through the basically fundamentalist mindset that I brought to this reading.

Christ came as a Jew and identified himself with his people and their sin. In assuming flesh, Christ was open to the same temptations as man, but he did not commit sin, thus revealing that sin is not of man's essence. Christ's life thus becomes a judgment of our lives. When we see true manhood in Christ we see that our self-centered lives are a distortion of our true nature. In Christ we see that our sin is that we have wanted to judge ourselves. **Adam and Eve fell because they wanted to know good and evil as God knows it. To know good and evil as God knows it is to be the one who created the distinction between what is good and evil.** Each nation, class, and individual sets its own standards and mores and finds itself good. But **when Christ came he revealed that we are under the judgment of God, not of ourselves.**

If all that Christ did was to pass judgment upon us we would be more hopeless than before. But Christ also reveals that God is free to decide how his judgment shall fall, and it falls upon himself as Christ rather than upon man. And, **insofar as God passes judgment upon himself, he frees us from the need to judge ourselves.** This is freedom because when man sets himself up as his own judge, he becomes vulnerable to the judgment of his neighbors. He is haunted by the need to have others think well of him. Sinful man is a strange mixture. At one moment he declares his own virtue with unseemly self-righteousness but at the next moment he looks around anxiously to see if others share his good opinion of himself...[But when the Christian] is judged by Christ, he is judged by the one who speaks a word of forgiveness and promises new life...

**Barth does not accept either Anselm's concept that Christ's death was a satisfaction of God's wrath or the idea that Christ was punished in our place. Such views are unbiblical because they imply that something happened to change God's mind about man.** The whole point of Christ's Incarnation is that God would not forsake man; God's love would not allow sin to remain because man, by his sin, was destroying himself. God opened a new way for man to find peace. **Christ, through his perfect repentance, did what man needed to do. He placed himself under the judgment so that man would be freed from judgment.**

Now, I'm not asking that you agree with or accept anything I just read. **My purpose, instead, is simply to reveal that a life-altering transformation is possible (and that God meets us wherever we are theologically) when we take the time to do the hard work of reflecting upon what it is that we believe.** That, in turn, can allow us the opportunity to be challenged to think in new and different ways. This is what lies at the very heart of progressive Christianity. That, my friends, is also part of the very purpose of the season of Lent. For me, the entire process of going to seminary was like being stuck in Lent for four years.

Here, now, is how that passage transformed my life. From my basically fundamentalist perspective at that time, I had tried to live my life by knowing the difference between what was good and what was evil. What this particular passage

from this book did for me was to force me to realize that **I was guilty of the very sin of Adam and Eve – the original sin of wanting to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The effect of that sin on my life was to set me up as judge and jury, becoming not only judgmental but also condemning – and especially of myself.** I was the one haunted by the need to have others think well of me; one moment declaring my own virtue with unseemly self-righteousness, but at the next moment looking around anxiously to see if others shared my good opinion of myself. In other words, **I was being crushed under my own misguided need to judge.**

The entire grade for that Theology II class was to write a paper on what had affected us the most during the semester. I entitled my paper, "From Absolute to Reformed: A Major Transformation." I got an "A" – and I still have a copy of it if any of you want to read it. By the time my class graduated seminary just over 3 years later, I was known at the seminary as the "poster child" for theological pendulum swings. Perhaps I still am.

Now I must confess that I still have the tendency to turn certain theological beliefs into absolutes, only this time from a progressive perspective instead of an orthodox one. Therefore, **I continue to realize that I need to be reminded to step away from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil and let God be God, because I don't do a very good job of that. Perhaps you don't either.**

So may we all come to recognize the need to reflect upon our preconceived theological beliefs about God, Jesus, and biblical interpretation. And during this Season of Lent, and beyond, **may we all experience freedom from judgment.**

Happy Lent.

Amen.

Resource:

William E. Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, Revised and Expanded Edition*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968. Originally published in 1955.