

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
July 12, 2020

**“Eden: Good Guilt”**  
**Genesis 3:7-8**

We’re in week three of this series “Eden,” in which we’re taking a close, close look at Genesis chapter 3, commonly known as The Fall, in which humanity succumbs to temptation and turns from the Lord.

Two weeks ago, we started with the pristine existence of humanity. The man and the woman were in the garden created by God. They were in complete harmony, complete peace, complete communion with creation, with each other, and with God. It was beautiful; it was good. At the very end of chapter two it describes it this way: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed,” and that meant they were completely exposed and vulnerable and yet completely at home, completely at peace. There was however just one prohibition: not to eat the fruit of a certain tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And of course that’s exactly what they do. Tempted by the serpent there, who had planted doubt within them, doubting their trust in God, that God would have their best interest at heart and furthermore lifting up their own sense of pride, the woman takes the fruit and eats it, then gives it to her husband, and he eats it. In doing so they had just broken the one and only boundary God had set. And that’s where we left off. The deed’s been done. So if those first two weeks were the Fall, what happens now is the Fallout. Will you pray with me?

**Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.**

Have you ever walked into a room and can tell right away that it’s completely awkward, that right before you came in, something went down? Sure sometimes you can come into a room and it’s awkwardly quiet, and it’s the kind of awkward and nervous glances that you know they’ve been talking about you—that’s one kind of awkward, but that isn’t it. I’m talking about the kind of awkward shame that a dog feels when you come home and a sofa cushion has been ripped apart with the stuffing all over everywhere. Not that there was ever any doubt who did it, but there he sits, ears pinned back, eyes lowered, tail between legs. The dog had had a ball ripping the cushion apart—not that I know from experience—but then as if cursed with the sudden realization that he had made a huge mistake, he sat, waiting for you to get home. And then there are those first awkward few moments when you walk in the door as you process the scene.

*That*, I believe, is what it would’ve been like if you were a fly on the wall in Eden right after the man and the woman had eaten the fruit. The sofa cushion’s been ripped up. The stuffing’s all out on the floor, and the dog knows what he’s done. Just instead of ears pinned back and tails between legs while sulking over in the corner, Scripture tells us in v. 7, “Then the eyes of both were opened.”

The question is, what did they see? It says their eyes were opened, so what did they see? Judging from how they reacted, it made quite an impact. It tells us right afterward that “they

knew that they were naked,” and I guess there are some things you just can’t unsee. And I have to say, that had to have been some fruit to bring about some kind of Emperor’s New Clothes epiphany that they were completely naked. Imagine having some of that slipped into your morning Cheerios. Sit down to your morning coffee and breakfast, take one spoonful, and then you realize you’ve been sitting at the breakfast table naked. That’s got to be some fruit! It also begs the question what you’re doing eating breakfast without any clothes on, but your home your rules I guess. I digress.

The question comes up, what did they see, and why did it bring about this reaction? And though it might be a bit funny to think that this fruit made them realize they were naked, I think Scripture is telling us more. I think it’s about more than just their not having any clothes on.

Two weeks ago when we started this series, we looked at how things were before all this happened, and the way the text talks about it right at the end of chapter two is that “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” You might remember from two weeks ago that we talked about how their being naked and yet not ashamed was about more than just their being comfortable with their bodies, but more a sign that they were completely known and exposed and vulnerable before God, and yet completely at peace.

Now, however, they know that they were naked, and how do they react? They covered themselves. “They sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”

So if earlier their nakedness and yet being unashamed meant that they were fully known by God and yet completely at peace, what does that say about their nakedness now? Then they were naked and were unashamed. Now, they’re still naked, but they cover themselves. Why?

It means that when their eyes were opened, they saw more than just nakedness. They saw exactly what God—and the serpent too, for that matter—had said they would.

God had told them when he said not to eat from this particular tree that it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, stands to reason that you would then get knowledge of good and evil. That’s exactly what the serpent told them would happen, which we talked about last week. In v. 5, “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

It turns out he was telling the truth. Because when they ate it, their eyes were opened, but instead of saying, “Their eyes were opened, and then they knew good and evil,” the text tells us something more. Their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they covered themselves. It’s as if they were given new lenses to see the world, to see the world through the lens of good and evil. Now that might sound like a good thing, and no doubt it was something that sounded like a good thing to them up to that point.

But be careful what you wish for. Because now it seems that they do indeed know good and evil, just as advertised, but the problem is that they now see the world through that lens, and what do they see first? Themselves. They see themselves; they see themselves fully; they know that they are naked, but instead of as they once were, being completely exposed and yet completely unashamed, now their reaction is to cover themselves. Something has changed.

I offer to you this: what has changed is that they now see the world with knowledge of good and evil, and when they looked at themselves, they knew they were not good.

Then, to compound things, right after that they heard God walking through the garden for an evening stroll, suggesting that this was a somewhat regular occurrence. First, how amazing would it be for that to have been your reality, for God to walk among you, to share in that kind of communion and intimacy with the Lord God Almighty. Pretty incredible, but that’s not what we see here. Instead we only see what’s lost. Whereas before, we can only assume, the man and the

woman might have joined God for his walk through the garden, now what do they do? They hide. Jump into the bushes.

How heartbreaking is that? To have once known that kind of communion with your creator only then to flee from his presence out of fear, out of guilt, out of knowledge that God is good and you are not.

What would that do to you? What affect would that have? For it to dawn on you, all of a sudden like that, that you are not good.

There was a TV show about ten years ago—not a very well-known one—but it was a comedy sketch show called *That Mitchell and Webb Look*—told you it wasn't very well known. Well, in one sketch, it's set in World War II among the German Nazi lines, because that's always hilarious. It's two SS agents talking, and one of them starts going on and on about the next attack they're going to do against the Russian lines, until the other one interrupts and asks, "Have you looked at our caps recently?" The first soldier shakes no. "They've got little skulls on them. Our caps have pictures of little skulls on them." The first soldier says, "No, I don't think I..." The second soldier finally says, "Hans, are we the bad guys?"

Now I know that might be a bit light-hearted about heavy subject matter, but it's that sudden realization that one is not good that's the point. What would that do to you? Probably rock your world, wouldn't it? For some of us, we might resist it, saying something like, "Well that can't be right." For others of us, we might try to justify it, saying something like, "Well when you look at it another way, it actually is good." Those are things that have been said for millennia. But if you came to accept it, what would that do to you? Might make you hide. Might make you run. Might make you feel guilty. At the very least, it would make you look at yourself differently.

And that guilt, my friends, can be very, very good news.

Now what you're thinking right now is, "Preacher, there are way too many preachers and way too many sermons that only talk about how bad we are and that we should feel bad about it. Tell me that isn't what this is." It's not. This is not a sermon about how bad you are and that you should feel bad about it, and that's the end of the story, that you should just feel bad about it. That's not it.

But this text, just these two verses, do serve as a powerful reminder that at the core of existence is the recognition that something is amiss in our condition. Something is missing, something that we can't fulfill. Something's not right. These two verses tell us that when we open our eyes and really look at ourselves honestly, we might want to cover ourselves too. Think about it. If all of a sudden the very worst we have to offer, our worst hours, were on full display, fully exposed for the world to see, would you want to hide? Would you want to cover yourself? I would.

And if that's where the story ended, then this really would be a sermon about how bad we should feel about ourselves.

But the story doesn't end there. And the good news of guilt, if you can call it that, is not that it leaves us in the mire or that it reminds us of how bad we are or that we're resigned to live our lives in shame. When all guilt does is make you feel bad, it's not redemptive, it's not purposeful, and that's not what I'm talking about. But the good news of guilt is that it can plant the seeds of redemption. Leave it to the Lord God Almighty to take the very result of our rebellion and make it something that could be the first step on the path back to him, because it forces us to recognize that we are not the end all be all, that we have much, far too much, that we feel the need to hide and cover, that we are not to seek fulfilment in ourselves, in our broken

selves, and forces us to recognize that we are not the man or the woman that we thought we could be, just as the man and woman in the garden were forced to recognize that they were not.

But there was another man many years later. This man encountered a woman who herself was wallowing in shame, who had been dragged out into the streets by hypocrites seeking to humiliate her for personal gain. Everything for her had been exposed and publicly humiliated, and she was ashamed. But this man stood against those who would accuse her, came to this woman in her guilt. But instead of condemnation, after driving off those who sought to stone her, he met her guilt with grace, saying, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replied. "Then neither do I condemn you. Go now, and sin no more."

And Christ will meet you too. And as your eyes are opened to see yourselves, may your eyes be opened to see him too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**