

Original Blessing
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Genesis 4: 1-15; Matthew 22: 37-40

Genesis 4:1-15: Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced[a] a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." [b] And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! [c] Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

Matthew 22:37-40: When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Every summer we take a group of high school youth to spend a week in partnership with youth from the Presbytery of Honduras. This year was no different and we had a wonderful week serving, playing, and connecting with one another. However, like any kind of traveling, by our last day together most people are looking forward to being home again. This year we had a particularly early last morning, rising at 3:30am to make a long drive from the southern part of the country to catch a flight in Tegucigalpa at noon. A group of mostly teenagers riding on a packed bus through some bumpy roads and terrain that early in the morning is not the most comfortable ride, but we were making some pretty good time. That is until we hit 2 hours of standstill traffic a mere 4 miles from the airport.

The first 15 minutes weren't bad. Most people were still sleeping. But after the driver stopped the bus engine to conserve gas for the 6th time in 30 minutes within only about 100 feet of forward progress, our collective anxiety began to rise. We were miserable. You could sense the anxiety and misery transferring between us. As one person's anxiety would rise, so would the person who just woke up. Then the person who had been quietly occupying themselves with music through their headphones took them out and begins to feed off the anxiety of those of us who had been worrying since the moment we stopped. We already knew we were in for a long day of driving, flying and sitting, but getting stuck that close to our gate of departure seemed like a cruel joke that just added to the misery

of such a long arduous day. Considering the antonyms for misery are pleasure and contentment, it seems like a fitting word to describe our situation at that very moment - feeling distress both in body and in mind.

Everyone has different ways that they cope with their own anxiety, stress or misery. Some may take their troubles and eat a half-gallon of ice cream. Others may find other outlets such as lifting weights or taking it out on a punching bag. Some may take to writing or journaling. Of course there are some healthy and not so healthy ways that people deal with misery. My own tend to be listening to music – particularly Manchester Orchestra, Kendrick Lamar or Bob Dylan – or going for a long run where my mind can just drift as I run through the beautiful scenery of the trails near my house. My not so healthy coping usually revolves around eating – so much so that Jess’s (my wife) nickname for me is “The Serial Snacker.”

Eating is probably one of the more common coping mechanisms. Over the last few years Snickers has run some ads which usually include a cranky celebrity being given a Snickers bar to quell their discontentment, revealing that they are actually just an average Joe who was extremely “hangry”. My favorite has to be where Willem Dafoe is dressed up in the classic Marilyn Monroe dress, complaining about the shot they’re trying to capture with the wind blowing up her dress. He snaps saying, “This is a disaster! Who’s idea was it to put a girl in heels on a subway grate?” The director calmly hands him a Snickers saying that it will help with his crankiness. Next thing you know, there’s Marilyn Monroe happy and smiling as they film the iconic scene. What can cure a case of the miserable “hangries”? Some candy of course.

We have many cures for these miserable moments. But is that all that misery is? – small fleeting moments that come and go? The crafters of the Heidelberg Catechism took this word, this idea, and ran with it. In fact they ran with it so far that they took a large and pretty important theological idea such as sin, and defined it with the word “misery.” The second question they dive into is what we must know to live and die in the joyful comfort of communion with God. The answer is to know “how great my sin and misery are,” the means by which “I’m set free” from these and how we should express our gratitude for this liberation (Q&A 2).

Usually we think of sin we might think more of disobedience, hurting others, or serving idols. Sin certainly is all of those things, but the framers of the catechism are more interested in how sin makes us miserable. It’s crafters define it as our separation from communion with God and our neighbor, tearing us from the very way of life on which all the law and the prophets hang (Q&A 5).

One of the greatest literary illustrations of this misery in the presence of profound glory is found in C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*. The illustration is essentially a bus that is taking people to the place where heaven meets earth – a place where new creation has been fully realized. When the bus driver pulls up to its destination, before people even begin to exit the bus, the comments and complaints begin to roll in. They complain about how the sun is too bright or the grass is too sharp. The people begin to spread out further and further from each other. They can’t focus for a second at the wonder and beauty of what is around them. They can’t focus for a second on living side by side with their fellow passengers. They are utterly miserable.

You can sense the way the different characters are feeding off of each other’s anxiety and misery. The way Lewis illustrates the connectivity of their misery is similar to the way Scripture focuses less on individual sin and speaks of “Sin”, with a capital S. As a whole it speaks of how sin permeates the collective or communal existence of humanity. Sin is so serious because it breaks us from what we were created to be in the first place. Our calling and purpose as creatures who bear the imago Dei is that of blessing to one another and the world.

Theologian Danielle Shroyer notes that Western, specifically American, Christianity has had quite an obsession with original sin (an idea developed by church fathers like Tertullian and Augustine) – so much so that we have forgotten our identity as image bearers of the divine. We have emphasized original sin over our original blessing as image bearers. Shroyer suggests that if we want to understand the misery of Sin that it is not the story of Adam and Eve being sent out of the garden. It is the story of Cain and Abel that really illustrates this misery¹. In fact, this is the first time one of the Hebrew words for sin is used in the Bible.

God enters the scene first by favoring Abel's offering over Cain's for no apparent reason. Maybe we can sympathize with Cain's discontentment and anger over something that seems to be so unfair. We've probably all found ourselves in experiences where no logical, fair, or reasonable answer is given to us. We can all empathize with that. However, if we are honest, maybe we're also guilty of seeking to be favored, first, or on top over our identity and contentment as beloved image bearers. Maybe we've made idols out of our success, ratings, and rankings. In his own obsession with being favored, God offers Cain a word of caution that "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you" (Gen 4:7). When Cain fails to master it he sinks into his misery and quickly his relationships begin to break down, beginning with the deception and murder of his very own flesh and blood. When God asks Cain where Abel is, he responds "What am I, my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9), rejecting his connectedness and responsibility to his very own brother. He also blatantly lies to God about what happened. We see the misery of sin in full force, presenting itself in violence, isolation, deception, and broken relationship with God and neighbor. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann notes that from "hopelessness, resignation, inertia, melancholy [or misery]...arises the tristesse and frustration which fill all living things with the seed of sweet decay."² Such sweet decay not only spans from neighbor to neighbor, but across generations as well.

In 2015 a study was conducted on the DNA of children of Holocaust survivors.³ A Holocaust survivor's body responded to the stress of trauma and starvation by changing the enzymes and proteins that are produced in the body. These changes were passed down to their children. The result was that the children of these survivors are more susceptible to anxiety and PTSD. And so it is that one dictator's misery can not only destroy a generation but mar that generations children and grandchildren. We are far more connected than we know. We see this connection in the way abuse is passed on from generation to generation. We see how conflicts like war can scar soldiers, leaving them with deep psychological scars that affect not only them but their closest loved ones. While we may not see it yet, it's quite clear that the way we care about the planet today affects the poor across the globe and will affect the future of children and grandchildren.

When we deny our connectedness with our neighbor and God, things begin to breakdown. Jesus spends his entire ministry awakening people to this reality. He reminds people that their greatest calling is to love God with everything they are and that we can't do that without loving our neighbor as ourselves. We can try and parse out particulars of loving neighbor and loving God, but in the end it's pretty clear that Jesus has blurred those lines.

So what are we to do with all this? What is our response to such a claim made about our misery in the Heidelberg Catechism? What comfort can we find? Well one small respite is that the section on misery is the shortest one of the entire catechism. Thank goodness we are not bashed over the head with this. The crafters of this document did not seem intent on dwelling too long on this. While it might be easy to call out sin and flaws in human beings (which we are wont to do) they dig deeper to our identity as blessed imago Dei bearers, despite how smothered that image may be. They remind us of our original blessing before our original sin – that sin does not get the last word or the first word.

We can find comfort in the fact that no matter how much we may have forgotten our true identity, God has not. In our forgetfulness we have a tendency to break one another down, to isolate ourselves from

one another (especially when the “other” is seemingly different from us in every way). We trade joy and wonder for fear, we forsake God’s definition of good and evil for our own renditions. We need saving from ourselves insofar as we choose the latter of those actions. Given that we have tendencies to break communion with God and neighbor, it’s remarkable that God still chooses humanity to be a blessing to one another and the world. We are not tossed aside as useless or unloved.

Let me be candid for one moment: whenever phrases like “terribly angry” and words like “wrath” are used to describe God in the catechism – or anytime for that matter – I cringe. That has always sat a little uneasy with me, not because I actually believe that God is wrathful demanding payment like a pitiful dictator. In fact, it’s probably because I’ve seen and heard too many abuses of these terms to describe who God is. But I remember expressing my discomfort with this idea to a professor in college. He pointed out to me that the opposite of love is not wrath, hate or terrible anger. The opposite of love is apathy, because while love is what binds things together, apathy severs all relational ties. It gives into the hopelessness, inertia, and resignation that Moltmann described. Praise God that God is not the One of apathy. This is the God who cares enough to be terribly angry and frustrated with the ways in which we harm ourselves and others; the God who cares enough to become enraged at injustice and evil; the one who laments that we’ve come to believe we are anything other than the beloved image we were created to bear in this world. This is the God who is with us, who sticks with us; the one who has been so faithful to the point of standing in solidarity with us in the flesh. Someone who is faithful in restoring our communion through life, death, and resurrection. Sound familiar?

We have a tendency to get so lost in our sin, misery, and shame that we lose the ability to believe that God could be so forgiving or loving. How could God be so faithful to us with everything we’ve done or left undone? When that is internalized it manifests in our own failure to be forgiving, loving, and reconciling with our neighbor. But in Jesus we have a mediator who reveals the full meaning of relational fidelity. While we are prone to wander, Jesus is uniquely faithful to us and God, mending the beloved community which sin has broken; lifting us out of our misery; and re-affirming our call to be unique expressions of self-giving love that reflect the image in which we are created.

Amen.

¹ Shroyer, Danielle, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place*, 113.

² Moltmann, Jurgen, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 251-4.

³ “Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation,” *Biological Psychiatry* (2015).