

February 15, 2009 – Falling into frustration

To start this morning, I'd like to show you a video clip... to kind of put us into the emotional context for what I want to talk about today. This clip comes from a British TV show called, "Britain's got talent" - created and produced by the same folks that do American Idol, so you'll probably recognize at least one of the judges. This clip hails from the early part of that show, where contestants are auditioning to get into the actual competition. Please meet a man named Paul Potts.

Video - 3.5 minutes

There you have it... a guy that's selling cell phones in the mall, and was meant to sing like an angel... needless to say, a bit of a disconnect. We're talking this month about the Long Descent, how we can understand the brokenness of our lives and the world – looking at this from the perspective of the fall of humanity, described in Genesis chapter 3. It's there that we read what the Bible has to say about the origin of sin – how sin entered into our life and the world, as well as its consequences and effects.

Andrea dove into this subject head-first last week, when she led us through a look at the alienating nature of sin – something that most of relate to very easily, as part of our fallen, broken human condition. We're going to talk today about an issue that is equally as relate-able to our experience in life... the issue of frustration. That sense that things are not working in the way that they should be. This sense of frustration as a result of sin is one of the most explicitly stated realities in the Bible.

Andrea preached last week on the first 13 verses of Genesis 3, where we find the story of the first humans' fall after being tempted by the serpent. Moving on to verse 14 and beyond, we read God's spoken judgment of Adam and Eve's choice, as well as his dealings with serpent, which is something so much more than just a "talking snake." It is the presence of spiritual evil that is seeking to influence and distort what is true, towards an end that is destructive --- to which and to whom God speaks judgment against as well.... which is where this next section of the Scripture begins.

**14** Then the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all animals, domestic and wild. You will crawl on your belly, groveling in the dust as long as you live.

**15** And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

**16** Then he said to the woman, "I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you."

**17** And to the man he said, "Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. **18** It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. **19** By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."

If you were with us during our previous sermon series about the image of God – one of the things we touched on was God's original intent that humanity would be fruitful – that we would be fruitful and multiply. As I had mentioned, this includes the wonder of procreation, but wasn't limited to that by any means. Instead, there was this overarching mandate towards fruitfulness for humans as a whole. But here in Genesis 3, we see the effects of falling from God's original intentions. As Adam and Eve chose their own path, yielding to the temptations of the serpent – frustration entered the world. They experienced frustration instead of fruitfulness... and if our own personal experience is any indicator, that frustration continues on until today.

Let's look a bit at how we encounter that frustration. In your notes, you'll see that... Humanity's collective fall into sin has resulted in profound personal frustration characterized by: 1. conflict and control in relationships. To the woman, God says "*I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth.*" Supposedly, there was meant to some level of pain in pregnancy and childbirth, but after the fall, I guess it got worse. I'm guessing some of you women would have been interested in having option A available...

As another aside - probably a good point to mention to us guys is this: No matter what kind of pain you've gone through... it's a good idea to avoid comparing whatever that pain is to a woman going through childbirth. Even if you've experienced excruciating physical pain, it doesn't pay to try that argument. One – because I just don't think that argument goes anywhere with the women in our lives. I mean have you ever heard of a woman agreeing with a man when he says that his pain is as bad or worse than childbirth???

But secondly – I don't know that us guys have any clue about the pain of childbirth and how it relates to pain we have. Although – the late Erma Bombeck did suggest one way us guys could semi-replicate the pain. She said, “guys if you want to know the pain of childbirth, with both hands grab your lower lip and pull it all the way over your head.” I think I'll trust her on that one...

The other portion of the judgment spoken towards the woman is this, as the NIV puts it: *“Your will desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”* And it's in this portion that both men and women can make terrible blunders. Men can see this as a mandate, rather than a description of judgment. And women can think, “my desire will be for my husband... I'll just throw my arms around him and love him and such.” But that's not what that word means at all. The New Living Translation puts it more accurately, I believe, saying, *“You will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.”* It's about control, about mastery.

In their fallen state, there is this description of the woman desiring to master the man, and the man domineering and ruling over her – neither of which was God's original intent. At the heart of God's creation - the union of the man and the woman, there are now conflict and control issues because of sin's entry into the world and their lives, Gone is that safety and vulnerability that we read about in Genesis 2 – where Adam and Eve were naked, without shame. Gone is that sense of trust and intimacy, as Andrea described last week. Instead there is a wrestling for power, a competition for control.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize how relevant these words are to us today, thousands and thousands of years later.

That said, this is not meant to be where we stay... while we identify with the reality of this experience, we don't have to stay there. You see, Jesus bore this judgment himself on the cross, he took on the judgment that was ours, so that we can have a way out of this downward spiral.

And that can give us tremendous hope. Hope for our marriages that we don't have to repeat the same cycles of conflict and control, that with God's help, we can learn and experience a different way. Hope for walking further into a partnership of relationship that looks and feels different than our struggles with domination and competition.

These dynamics are maybe seen most acutely in the midst of marriage, but of course it's not limited there... We can struggle with the same issues of control and conflict in other relationships, all because our sense of trust and security has been pulled out from underneath us. Jesus' hope extends there as well.

Another key place we see frustration is through a bent towards survivalism and/or a misplaced satisfaction in work. To the man, God says, you're going to have to sweat and toil to produce food. Instead of abounding fruitfulness, it's going to be demanding and hard, and no matter how hard you try, the ground is going to be filled with thorns and thistles. In the fall, there entered a frustration that relates to our desire to produce good things through our work.

That rings so true to many of our experiences of life, doesn't it? The man selling cell phones when he dreams of being something different – something that connects with what he feels he was created for. The frustration and futility of not making ends meet, or of battling through work environments that can sometimes feel toxic.

After the fall, there was a drive that didn't exist before... there was a struggle that Adam and Eve didn't know anything about before the temptation. But now, after their choice, the choice to know good and evil outside of relationship with God – they **NOW** knew the struggle for survival.

Most of us here have been pretty insulated from this struggle of survival. Some have certainly had tastes of it, but if we look at our culture as a whole, even the some of the poorest people in America live like kings compared to the poorest of the poor around the world. One of the things I'm preparing for in my trip to Mexico next week is the inevitable culture shock I'm going to experience. Just the fact that we are bringing shoes to these kids because they don't have them... I don't know about you, but that rattles me a bit.

The truth is, in looking farther back at history, this struggle for survival was a real part of most people's life. But here in America, for most of us, survival isn't the highest goal, but instead something else replaces that, and for us, that something else has often been satisfaction – the on-going push towards more and more, looking to that to be the thing that brings meaning and fulfillment to life. Isn't it interesting in tougher economic times that we're experiencing right now, how we figure out more of what we really need for life?

There is a hole that has been burst in our American dream bubble, so maybe we are experiencing the battle towards survival more than in times past. But either way – whether it is the drive towards survival or the drive towards satisfaction, neither one ultimately works. Certainly, we are meant for more than just survival as our highest goal, and we know that just living to satisfy ourselves doesn't cut it either. That's the nature of frustration after the fall.

Here's a third piece of frustration we find after the fall. There is hostility and unrelenting opposition in the spiritual realm. I pointed to this a few weeks ago, when I mentioned that there is more going on around us than just what we can see and touch and feel. There is a spiritual nature to life that we need to sort through and understand. In thinking about the image of God, we focused on God's wonderful gift to us of creativity – that we have possibilities to see more than what is before us and take up the joy of creating in God and with God things that brings good to the world and glory to God.

But now, there is a new kind of knowledge of the spiritual things – the knowledge of unrelenting opposition in the spiritual realm.

To the serpent, God says, *"I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring."* What is being spoken of here is the unseen, spiritual force behind what the serpent represents in the garden. It's the thing that the apostle Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6, where he says that *"we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."*

We are not just battling control issues in our relationships or frustrations with our work. There is also a real and present reality to the spiritual conflict around your life that includes this sense of frustration. Unfortunately, this battle of spiritual hostility is not something that we can opt out of. We can't just declare ourselves to be conscientious objectors and decide to sit this war out. The war is going on around us, whether we like it or not.

I don't know if you have thought about this so specifically or not, but Satan is not nice. He's not just "kind of" evil... As Jesus puts it, the enemy's goal is to kill, to steal and destroy. There is a reality to the spiritual conflict that we face.....

But that's not the end of the story, is it? Even here in Genesis 3, we see God giving the serpent a direct threat, that his head would be crushed by the woman's offspring – looking forward to Jesus and his mission to destroy the works of the devil as the apostle John points out.

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We could talk all day about the frustrations we can feel in the midst of real life, but let's move on to some solutions – how we do move forward towards something other than these frustrations.

The way out of frustration follows a Christ-led path reversing the way we got into it. In that path, we must no longer live: 1) by our own efforts. We say to ourselves - I'm going to have the marriage I have... by my own efforts – I'm going to have the kind of kids I want... by my own efforts – I'm going to have the career or work that I have... by my own efforts and so on...

Again, isn't that the essence of the sin in the Garden, when Adam and Eve rejected God and His input and His provision in their lives and decided to go their own way? We don't have to look very far to see the impact of that decision and similar decisions we make.

As Dr. Phil would put it... "how's that workin' for ya?" We know that it doesn't really work – we know that our own efforts will eventually run out. We weren't made to live solely on our own efforts. Yes, life requires all that we are – but we were made to be yoked with our creator. We were created to live in relationship to the God who made us – the same God that wants to empower us for all of life.

Again, the journey out of frustration follows a Christ-led path reversing how we got into it. In that path, secondly, we must no longer live in rejection of a higher way. Listen to what Isaiah writes:

*6 Seek the LORD while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. 7 Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the LORD that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously. 8 "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. 9 For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:6-9)*

Just as Adam and Eve had the choice to reject the higher way – God's way - so do we. But we also have an opposite choice – the choice that Isaiah describes here, where we can turn to God for mercy, for he will forgive generously. His thoughts are far beyond what ours are. He knows what is best for our lives. And we do well, if we yield our lives to that path of allowing God, of allowing Jesus to guide and direct our lives.

As an extension – one final point: the way out of frustration follows a Christ-led path where we must no longer live to our own ends. One of the ways that the Bible describes sin is that is it like "missing the mark." That's a fairly technical term, one that might be used for an archer shooting an arrow towards a target. Missing the mark in sin is like shooting an arrow that doesn't hit the intended right target.

I don't know if you've ever seen this cartoon, but there's an old Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown and Snoopy are shooting arrows. Of course Charlie Brown can't hit anything, and then Snoopy shoots an arrow and it lands on the ground – not coming close to anything either... but then Snoopy goes over to where the arrow landed and paints a target on the ground around the arrow.

That makes for a funny cartoon, but doesn't really cut it in life. If we want to hit the intended target, if we want life to the full like Jesus talks about – then we have to shift our aim, don't we? We can't live to our own ends, or solely in our own efforts. We need to re-orient ourselves in Jesus' direction.

Let me finish by reading a passage from John 10 that our friend Jon Marsden read a few weeks ago when he preached.

*Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

Jesus laid down his life, so that we could find life. His mission is completely different from that of the thief - the enemy of our souls only wants to steal and kill and destroy. But Jesus has come so we could find life and have it to the full. He reverses the curses we read about from Genesis 3. We don't have to live under that same level of heavy burden anymore. Instead we can turn to him, and find mercy and find life.

Let's reach out to Him in that way this morning. Prayer.