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If Not Escapist Theology – What?

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True to his word, Jo was back in my study within the week. You remember Jo. He is the somebody, everybody, nobody, any-person-you-name person who shows up whenever to engage me in conversation about whatever is on his mind. We talked last week about escapist theology, and now he is back to me.

“I want to know more about this business of being saved,” Jo announced. “And I want to know what it has to do with escaping death.” He was his usual blunt and impatient self.

“Is that what you got from our talk last week?” I asked.

“No,” Jo responded. “That’s not all I got, but I sure didn’t get enough about those subjects.”

“All right, Jo,” I told him. “Salvation and the role of death in it are significant issues. However, I need to think and talk about some other things first – things that lead into the discussion of those issues.”

“If you say so,” Jo said. “So let’s talk about those other issues – whatever they are.”

I hesitated a moment, not quite sure just where to take hold. “Jo,” I finally said, “First, I think I would like you to tell me what you got from our conversation the other day. What do you think I mean by escapist theology, and by another theological point of view?”

Jo snorted. (He’s nothing if not impatient) “I can’t tell you. You tell me.”

“No, Jo,” I responded. “I really need to hear from you. I need to know what you have gotten from our conversation so far. That way I will have a better idea where to start in responding to your questions.”

What I said seemed to make sense to Jo, and he agreed to give it a try. “We talked about two different ways to interpret the Garden of Eden story in the third chapter of Genesis,” he said. “One says God gave a command, and warned them of what would happen if they failed to do what God said. The man and woman disobeyed. God punished them by putting them out of the Garden. That is, they sinned. They fell out of God’s favor. They got punished. They saw themselves as victims. They blamed God for their plight and made God responsible for getting them into it and for getting them out of it – that is, if they repented and tried to obey God.

“The other interpretation,” Jo continued, “says that God instructed the man and the woman about what would happen to them if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said that, if they did so, they would be choosing death over life. They did so and discovered that they were naked – that means vulnerable – and

that, having decided as they did, they were confronted with having to figure out ways to keep from dying, even though God had already given them life.

“As was true in the other interpretation also,” Jo pointed out, “when they couldn’t come up with ways to keep from dying, they denied responsibility for their decisions and actions and blamed God for what was happening to them. In fact God had not punished them, and God didn’t intervene to set aside the consequences that resulted from what they decided and did. God left the responsibility with them.

“You also said,” Jo reminded me, “that their denying responsibility, their blaming God, and God not intervening are the key parts of that interpretation. And you pointed out that God continued to love and care for them, even though they had decided against being in relationship with God.”

“Very good, Jo,” I responded. “Your summary is right on target. As I see it, the first view is the basis for what I call Fall-Redemption Theology. It appears to me that, when the man and the woman could do no better than fig leaves to protect themselves from the possibility of dying; when they tried to hide from God; and when they shifted the blame to God for their plight, they were trying to escape the consequences of their deciding and acting – escapist theology, if you will. They were trying to keep from dying.

“I see the second view as the basis for what I call Grace Theology. In that view, the man and woman remain responsible for their decisions and action, and for the consequences, of which death was the ultimate one. God let it be that way, but God did not withhold God’s love and care, nor abandon them. More importantly, God didn’t give them a way to escape their responsibility for their own decisions and actions by being displeased and angry with them, nor by insisting that they must please God.”

“People still do that, don’t they?” Jo commented.

“Yes, Jo,” I replied. “People still do it that way, and God still offers them – us – the opportunity to decide and to live differently.”

I paused a moment. “Jo, I need to remind myself and you that everything I tell you is how I see it to be. It is how I make sense out of what I see of life, and of what I read in the Bible. I believe that the escapist theology point of view is very evident in Scripture, as well as in the relationships of people today – in all history, for that matter. I see it as a very costly belief system by which to live. Maybe I state it in too strong terms, but I see it consistently destroying us and keeping us from experiencing the fullness of life for which God created us. I see it being death.”

Jo looked at me a long time. “I don’t think I understand what you are saying. Do you mean I am wrong to be worrying about my salvation, and about seeing death as the enemy?”

“Wrong?” I said. “Jo, I can’t tell you if you are right or wrong about anything. I can tell you how I see it to be, and why. It is up to you to decide how you see it to be and why. You see, an important part of my believing is that I can only decide for myself about right and wrong. I can’t decide for you. Since God has created us deciders, I believe each of us must decide for ourselves, and experience the outcome. If God doesn’t take your freedom and your responsibility to decide for yourself away from you, I certainly don’t intend to. That God doesn’t is, for me, a pivotal belief.”

“God doesn’t just expect me to decide,” Jo mused. “God has created me so that deciding is what I do. I have to decide. There is no other way. No one decides for me.”

“That makes sense to me, Jo,” I told him. “No matter how hard I try, I can’t escape from making decisions. There is no such thing as not deciding.”

“That’s why you interpret the Garden of Eden story the way you do, isn’t it?” Jo said.

Jo wasn’t really asking me a question. He was mulling over what he had been saying. Suddenly, his face lit up. “That story isn’t just about the man and the woman in the Garden, is it? It’s your story, too. And mine. It is everybody’s story.”

“Yes, Jo,” I replied. “It is my story, and I see it as a universal story as well. Every one of us, created in God’s image, are in the same spot when it comes to deciding. As I believe it to be true of everyone, I must decide about me, my relationship to God, my relationship to all things in my life. And deciding, I am accountable.

“I can’t escape being accountable. I can try. I can plot and plan and deny. I can finagle and manipulate. I can accuse and blame and excuse myself. I can run away. But – bottom line – I make my decisions. I act on them. I am accountable for them. No matter how hard I try, that is inescapable.”

Jo looked both puzzled and uncomfortable. “You paint a pretty bleak picture,” he said. “Kind of hopeless, in fact.”

“Actually, Jo,” I replied, “when I finally reached the point where I really believed what I have just said, I had an overwhelming sense of relief, freedom, and security. I am a decider. I am responsible for what happens because of my decisions. And I know that I am never out of relationship with God – not by God’s decision. This is true because of the Grace and Love and Wisdom of God.”

“The Grace and Love and Wisdom of God,” Jo echoed. “I don’t see much Grace and Love and Wisdom in what you have been saying. If God cares so much, why doesn’t God just take care of us instead of making us decide and be accountable?”

“Jo, think about it. It isn’t so much that God makes us decide and be accountable as it is that God created us that way.”

“Why?” Jo didn’t mince any words.

“Believe it or not, Jo,” I answered, “because God loves us that much.”

“Loves us that much.” Jo glared at me. “I have to decide, and I can’t escape being responsible, no matter how hard I try. And that’s love? I’m not sure I want to be loved that much.” Clearly, he was pretty agitated.

“I wonder if you would really like to be loved less,” I replied. “Suppose you couldn’t make decisions? Suppose there were no consequences? Suppose I were able to take over your life, make decisions for you, and not allow you to make them? Suppose I decided when and what you could eat, what clothes you could wear, where you could go, what you could do, with whom you could be? Suppose I allowed you to make some decisions – those that I told you were safe for you – but not others? And suppose I told you that I was maintaining control over your life this way, and dictating what you could and couldn’t do, because I love you that much?”

“I get your point,” Jo interrupted. “You would destroy me if you took my life over like that. You wouldn’t be loving me.”

“Neither would God be loving you if God ordered and controlled your life in such a way,” I said. “Either I see myself as a responsible decision maker, or I see myself as one who makes decisions and acts on them, but tries to escape responsibility in any way I can.”

“It was necessary for the man and the woman in the Garden to confront that decision, as it has always been for God’s people, and as it is for you and me. It was the only way God’s children could be truly free. It is the only way that they – we – I – could become who we are created to become. It is the only way that I can really experience what it means to be alive.

“As I see it, the man and the woman decided against that freedom, and tried to excuse themselves from the consequences – especially by blaming something, somebody, or God. Human beings have been doing it ever since. The Bible story is replete with examples.”

“Tell me one of them.” Jo said.

“You mean besides the Garden of Eden story?” I asked.

“Of course I mean another one.” Jo sounded disgusted. “How about trying the story about the great flood?”

“Tell me the story, Jo.” I requested.

Jo looked at me as if he thought I was trying to avoid answering him, but he didn't challenge me.

“The people were very wicked,” Jo said. “The earth was filled with violence, and was corrupt because of it. God was sorry God had made the people because they had become so wicked. So God decided to destroy all the living creature from the earth.”

Jo didn't finish the story. He just looked at me with an awed expression on his face. There was wonder in his voice as he said, “The people decided to do the things that caused violence and corruption among them.” He paused for a long moment. “Then they blamed God for what happened. They decided. They acted on their decisions. But they didn't take responsibility for the consequences. The flood. It was what God did to them. The way the story reads in the Bible, they are the victims.”

“Yes, Jo,” I said. “The plot is much the same in many Bible stories. The people – or the person – sins (that usually means that they disobey God's law, or their interpretation of it). God becomes angry and punishes them. With that view, it is God's fault that they are punished. Very quickly, it seems, people lost sight of the fact that life might be considerably more satisfactory if they (we) gave heed to the instructions of God, and let them guide our decisions and actions. Not because God commanded, but because the instructions make sense. For some reason, they (we) seem to believe that being a victim has more appeal than being the creatures in God's image whom God has equipped to enjoy the full blessings of the life God has given.”

“We aren't sinners in need of redemption?” Jo asked.

“I didn't say that, Jo,” I answered. “Let me try to answer that question in terms of myself. I confront the same basic decision that the man and the woman in the Garden faced. Do I live in relationship with God, or do I go it on my own, not depending on God or anyone else for me to obtain my life? If I assume that, somehow, I have to gain my life, it is easy for me to believe that I must not entrust myself to anyone but myself. Or, to see myself as “a poor sinner” incapable of saving myself, and, therefore, having to trust God – or somebody – for my salvation.”

“That's how I have understood it all my life,” Jo said. “Why should I decide in favor of trusting God? It was God who started the whole mess by kicking the man and the woman out of the Garden. I am a fallen sinner. If I were back there in the Garden, I just might go for the goodies myself.”

“Jo, I think it is time for me to add something else to the point of view we have discussing,” I said. “You want to know why to choose in favor of God?” Let me tell you.

“In the beginning, God created human beings. God breathed into them the breath of life (which is the very Spirit of God) and they became living beings. In other words, God gave the creation in God's image the gift of life, and God taught this creation how to go about having a full and satisfying life. And God knew that these creatures were not

puppets, for, being in God’s image, they were deciders. So God set a choice before them. Choose life (the life God had already given them), or choose death.

“The man and the woman in the Garden chose death. And, it appears ever since, human beings have tended to make the same choice.

“I personalize again. God has given me life, and all that I need to enjoy it. However, before I can enjoy it, I must decide that I have it (life, that is). But I can’t decide that unless I can also decide not to have it. I can tell myself that I don’t have life as a gift of God, and that I must use my resources to figure out how to obtain it. If I make that choice, I start out believing I am dead (sinner, if you will), and I seek life. I also try to deny that I have made the choice. I just believe that I am dead and that I want life. I dismiss my own responsibility for deciding against life, and cry out to God to save me – meaning save me from death. Give me life – which God has already done.”

I paused. “Obviously, Jo, this is not the end of our discussion about escapist theology and what goes in its place. In fact, I think we may have just begun the exploration. Think about what we have been saying. Make note of your own observations and questions. Come back to see me when you are ready. We’ll pick up where we left off today.”