



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Banned From the Garden
(or, Victimized by God?)

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W. Burney Overton

“What if, after eating of the ‘apple,’ I decided that I had been abandoned and left to die?” This was the question my friend raised with me after having read Genesis 3:22-24. You remember the scripture.

Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:22-24 NRSV)

I, of course, asked my friend what stimulated the question, and that led into a discussion about God’s judgment and condemnation. It seems that, when he was raising the question, he was seeing the decisions and action of God in the Garden of Eden episode as judgment and condemnation.

Clearly, one of the interpretations of the Garden of Eden episodes is that the action of the man and the woman incurred God’s anger to which God responded with judgment and condemnation. The words can support this interpretation. They do say that God sent him forth from the garden – drove him out – and posted a guard so that he could not return. It isn’t too difficult to perceive that God abandoned the man and left him to die – or, at least, left him to fend for himself without any support from God. That feels like abandonment.

Nonetheless, when I consider the story, I have to decide if I believe that this is really what God was doing. Is there, possibly, another interpretation? But first, there is more to the story.

According to the storey, because of what he did, the snake (tempter) was cursed among all animals and wild creatures, relegated to crawling on his belly and eating dust, and with enmity between him and the woman and their off-spring forever. Was this God punishing or abandoning?

Because of what she did, the woman would experience greatly increased pangs in childbearing, desire for her husband, and being under his rule.

Because of what the man did, the ground was cursed, and he was relegated to a life of toil, contending with thorns and thistles in the effort to produce food so that he and his family could eat and survive. His destiny was to return to the ground, for he had been taken from it and would return to it. A rather bleak and toilsome life it would seem. Not much to look forward to, or to hope for.

And the final judgment and punishment (if I choose to interpret in this way) that God decreed against the man and the woman was to drive them out of the garden and set guards so that they could not return.

So I – putting myself in the place of the man – decide that God has done all these things to me. God has abandoned me and left me to die. And all I did was to accept the invitation of the woman to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – eat of the “apple”, that is. What could be so wrong about that? Yes, I know. God said not to. But why not? The tree was beautiful. The fruit looked delicious. The return to me seemed promising. What could possibly be wrong with eating, and, thereby, acquire all knowledge (that being what the knowledge of good and evil means in Hebrew). Why would God punish me so severely for that? Why would God abandon me?

Given my point of view, I interpret that God has done all these things to me. God has consigned me to death. God has abandoned me and left me to die. God has victimized me.

I see it that I am a victim – a victim of God’s power and wrath and punitiveness. It isn’t my fault. God ought not to hold me responsible. There is a perfectly acceptable explanation for what I did. After all, God gave me the woman in the first place, and she persuaded me to eat of the fruit. I’m not accountable, and God shouldn’t hold me accountable. How could God do this to me? It isn’t my fault. I don’t deserve to be treated this way. Why has God victimized me this way?

I see the story of the Garden of Eden – Genesis – the whole Bible, for that matter – shining a spotlight on people so that we can see clearly how we function and why. Only it appears to me that we tend not to allow ourselves to see all that clearly. Instead, we seem to prefer to see ourselves as being victims.

Holding that view, I see it that life victimizes me. If anything bad happens to me, it is always someone else’s fault. I think I am not alone in that view. Who is the little character in the cartoon, *THE FAMILY CIRCUS*? Mother and Daddy are in the cartoon, and three children – and another invisible character whose name is NOT ME. Not me. I didn’t do it. It’s not my fault.

Insofar as I can tell, our whole society appears, in the main, to be a victim society. NOT ME is alive and well and rampant. Not only is it not my fault, but I have a right to receive compensation if I am damaged in any way. Even if I only perceive that I am damaged. And, of course, if, in some way, I seemed to have caused the damage, it wasn’t my fault. NOT ME.

Don’t expect me to take the blame. God made me the way I am. God didn’t intervene and prevent me from doing whatever it was that I did. God put temptation in my way. God didn’t stop other people from abusing and/or misusing me. Somebody else intruded upon my rights. Somebody else got in my way. Somebody else took what was rightfully mine. Somebody else. Somebody else! Somebody else!! And God just let it happen. It is God’s fault for creating as God created. God is all wise and all powerful. When bad things happen to me, or when bad things happen as a result of what I do (or fail to do), God could have – and should have – kept it from happening. God is in charge. It is God’s fault – not mine. Isn’t that how it is?

I am a victim, and it is God’s fault. Just because I ate some fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God has abandoned me and left me to die.

Always, when I see myself as a victim, I focus on assigning blame to something or someone other than myself. I don’t put time, energy, or thought into looking at myself and my contribution to things turning out the way they do. I don’t assess the situation, acknowledge my participation, nor consider my options. Why should I? I’m the victim.

If the man, when he found himself outside the garden of Eden and prevented from going back in, decided that God had abandoned him and left him to die, he had also decided upon the course of his life, and how he would live it. Life, for him, would be marked by anger and bitterness – sweat and tears – hardship upon hardship – toil from dawn to dark – no support – no caring – no love. It wouldn’t be much of a life. The decision would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

God has abandoned me and left me to die. If I believe that to be true, then I live according to that belief. I behave as one who is abandoned. I do not allow myself to have any hope. I expect to come to nothing. As the author of ECCLESIASTES says, “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:2-3) The words, “This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.” also appear a number of times in the writing.

If I believe that God has abandoned me and left me to die, then my life is only vanity and a striving after wind. What is the point? But, victim that I am, I just keep on striving – and blaming – and blaming God – and getting nowhere – and, finally, dying. And there is no point to it all.

Can I interpret the story any other way? I believe that I can. To find out, I need to study the third chapter of Genesis again. Maybe I will find that God has not abandoned me. Maybe God isn’t judging and condemning me after all. Maybe I am not a victim. Maybe there is a different conclusion to which I can come.

However, I can’t come to different conclusions about the passage unless I choose to believe differently about God. If I believe that God is judgmental and punitive, requiring that I obey or else, I will always see myself as a victim and blame God. I will interpret that God was displeased with me for some reason, or that God was just arbitrary and needed a victim – and I was it. But it won’t ever be my fault.

Suppose, therefore, that I take the Bible passages seriously that both state and imply that God is eternally loving, merciful, and forgiving. Suppose that I allow myself to believe that this is the correct picture of God. Suppose I read Genesis 3 from the belief position that God really is loving, merciful and forgiving, and not judgmental, punitive and arbitrary. Suppose I decide that God really cares about me and always seeks my well-being instead of making me a victim. Suppose I see that God has graced me with the gift, responsibility, and task of making decisions and acting on them. Suppose I allow

myself to recognize that God's actions are always on my behalf, and true measures of God's love for me. How does the chapter then read?

Very differently, I discover. Very differently, because I have shifted my point of view. Or, more accurately, I have shifted what I believe. Notice the changes in interpretation that result.

“Don't eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” God said, “For when you do, you will die.” (Gen. 2:17)

God, who loves me, is warning me, not threatening me. God is instructing me so that I can make the choices that are beneficial to me, and not destructive.

In effect, God is saying, “Because I love you so completely, I have created you and given you life, and all the resources you need for that life to be a full, rich and satisfying life. However, for you to have it, you must take responsibility for what you decide and do. You must choose the life you want and, then, heed my instructions. You won't experience it or appreciate it if I am just giving it to you, and you do not participate in getting it.

“Because I love you so completely, I want you to understand that I have given you both the privilege and the necessity of making decisions. Choices always have consequences. The ultimate consequence is that you live, or that you die. Let me say that another way. You can have a full, rich and satisfying life as the result of the choices you make and how you act on them. In life manner, you can have a miserable life because of the choices you make and how you act on them. You make the choices.

“Since, inevitably, you make the choices, you can choose not to heed my instructions. When you do, you choose not to experience the full measure of the life I have given you. Indeed, I the final outcome, you choose not to live.

“Because I love you so completely, I have created you a chooser who is responsible for the outcome of the choices. It is the ultimate measure of my love for you.”

If I believe what I have just written to be true about God, I will never interpret that I am abandoned. Nor will I see myself as being victimized by God's punitive behavior. I will see whatever happens to me as the consequence of my decisions and actions, and those of my fellow human beings.

But what I have written doesn't really answer the question my friend raised with me. You remember he wrote, “What if, after eating of the ‘apple,’ I decided that I had been abandoned and left to die?”

I wrote my friend shortly after I got his note. However, that was long enough ago that I can't find a copy of the letter I wrote to him, and, of course, I don't remember exactly what I suggested to him as an answer to his query.

Whatever my choice of words at the time, I expect I told him that I believe he was free to raise that kind of question, and, indeed, to come to that conclusion about the meaning of God's action. If he did, he would believe that God had abandoned him and left him to die – and he would live his life as if it were true. The hallmark of that life would be anxiety and fear, strongly flavored with anger and cynicism. He would tend to be suspicious and guarded all the time. He would hardly dare to trust any other person, nor allow himself to get very close to another. He might become abusive, or addicted, and, very likely, would behave so badly that he would drive people away from him. Of course, all the time, he would place the blame for his ill fortune on others – ultimately God – and would nurse his misery by doing so.

In the midst of feeling sorry for himself, the one deciding that God had abandoned him and left him to die might decide to try to find ways to save himself. Seemingly, the most logical way would be to build as many credits for one's self as possible. Hence, instead of all the negative outlook on life, the choice might be to live in a very circumspect and benevolent way; build a reputation for doing good; maybe become very active in church and community; do whatever was necessary to get a good name and to deserve the reward of heaven – no matter what God had done. Or, maybe to try to live in such a way as to rewin God's favor, and persuade God to receive him back.

In the process of trying to earn his salvation he might become rigid and judgmental, not only for himself, but for every other person. He might support his own righteousness by condemning the perceived unrighteousness of other people. Even crusade against them.

I think what I am trying to communicate is that I believe that, when I try to make God responsible for my decisions and actions and the outcome of them, I make the decision to experience my life from a position of utter misery, insecurity, and uncertainty. Thank God, I don't have to make such a decision.

I can decide to be responsible for my decisions and actions. I can decide that God is truly loving, and that all God's responses to me are because God really cares about my well being. I can decide that I do not need to be anxious about my salvation. I can devote my time and energies to studying God's instructions that guide me to a rich and fulfilling life. I can be about the business of living that kind of life.

God has not banned me from the Garden. If I am not in the Garden, it is the to-be-expected result of my own decisions and actions. God has given me life. God has saved me. God has not abandoned me. It is up to me to decide whether or not I am a saved child of God, and live accordingly.