

A detailed section of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' fresco, focusing on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam is on the left, looking towards the right. Eve is on the right, holding a golden apple. The background is a dense, dark green foliage with several golden apples hanging from a branch. The text 'Original Sin' is overlaid in a white, elegant serif font.

Original Sin

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD **onFIRE**

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Transcript taken from a talk given by
Bishop Robert Barron.

Cover image: Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and
Eve*, first quarter of 17th century, Wikimedia
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The beginning of Lent is a time for a spiritual spring training. When I played sports as a kid, we would always begin with the fundamentals. Even if you had been playing for a while and you were quite good, the coach would still, during spring training for baseball or summertime for football, bring you back to the fundamentals. Jack Nicklaus, at the height of his powers, was the best golfer in the world, but he would still begin every season by flying to see his friend Jack Grout, who was his childhood instructor, and Grout would take the best golfer in the world back through the fundamentals of the grip and stance and alignment and swing. So it is always good for us spiritually to go back to the basics.

Lent is the time when we do that, and that is why the readings during Lent are really good. They are real, archetypal, elemental. The first reading for the first Sunday of Lent has to do with the creation of human beings and the fall from grace in the garden. There is no better place to look for the fundamentals of spirituality than that story.

The first thing we hear is “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). God made us from the clay of the earth. That means that we are embodied

realities. Our bodies indeed come from the molecules and minerals and the stuff of the earth. We, with our scientific perspective, know better than biblical people how embodied we are, how grounded we are in the planet. Carl Sagan said that ultimately we are all “star stuff” because all the basic atoms and molecules and so on were created in the furnace of ancient stars that eventually found their way into the planets and so on. So we are indeed made from the clay of the earth.

Spiritually speaking, it is very important because we do have a problem, but it is not with our bodies. Now, there are a lot of theories like Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Dualism, Puritanism, etc., up and down the centuries that make exactly that claim, and the idea there is to get away from the fallen body: the body, with our emotions, our sexuality, and our passions, is the problem. But that is not biblical. The Bible affirms that God makes us from the clay of the earth, and everything that God makes is good.

So we are made from the clay of the earth, and God has breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. The Hebrew term is *ruach*, meaning “breath” or “wind” or “air.” The Greek term is *pneuma*, hence our pneumatic tires. Latin has it as *spiritus*. God has “breathed” his life into this earthy stuff. There is in us an aspiration to God. Our minds seek not just particular truth but the Truth itself. Our wills seek not just particular goods

but Goodness itself. Our souls will not rest until they come to the Beautiful itself. There is in these bodies of clay something of an aspiration upward toward God.

If Gnosticism and dualism negate the first part of that, secularism negates the second part. What we have on display today is that life is reducible to matter. What I have described as the aspirations upward toward God are reduced to the level of psychological quirks or wish-fulfilling delusions. Secularism denies this breath of God that animates us. The biblical vision in its genius has that both the clay of the earth and the breath of the divine life are in us.

Now for the second great insight from this story. God takes his first human beings and he places them, it says, “in a garden” (2:8), a garden full of delightful things to see and taste and experience. He gives them practically free reign: “Eat of all the trees in the garden save one” (2:16–17). Notice the extraordinary permission. God *wants* his human creatures to flourish in this garden. There is nothing of the ancient mythological idea of the gods and human beings in a rivalrous relationship. The true God who makes everything from nothing cannot be threatened by his creation. He needs nothing from it, demands nothing from it for his own well-being, and therefore God’s delight is that we be fully alive. We are in a garden, not a desert. More to it, all the trees

represent everything that makes life wonderful, and we are given liberty to eat of them. Philosophy and art and science, stimulating conversation, friendship, politics, sexuality: all of it is represented in the trees of the garden, and God says, “Eat of them all.” This is not a god who is trying to limit the human project, but rather the One who says, “Your being alive fully is my glory.” That is the biblical God.

So how about the prohibition? We hear that they are prohibited from eating from one tree, which is a “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” What does that mean? God is the unconditioned good. Therefore, God is, in his own being, the criterion of good and evil. Therefore, the prerogative belongs to God alone to know good and evil. The original sin is arrogating to ourselves the prerogative of determining good and evil, when our wills become the criterion and the measure rather than God.

It is a very subtle point. It is not really so much a particular offense. It is not as though murder or thievery or adultery is the original sin. It is something more subtle and more fundamental than any particular sins. It is the move of arrogating to ourselves the prerogative of determining good and evil. That is the original calamity from which human misery has followed as surely as night follows the day.

Now, if you are tempted to say this is just a lot of abstract theological musing, let me submit to you the famous decision of the US Supreme Court in the matter of *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*. Writing for the majority in that famous case, Justice Kennedy opined as follows: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Frankly, I cannot imagine a clearer expression of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil than that statement, that it belongs to the very nature of liberty, my liberty, to determine the meaning of everything, of my life, of the mystery of the universe. That is arrogating to ourselves the divine prerogative that the Bible identifies as the fundamental problem. And the Supreme Court gives formal legal expression to what is generally taken as the truth of things. How many people, especially young people, would say something like, “Look, right or wrong, that is a matter of my personal decision.” Before you get to any particular sin, any particular offense, that is the fundamental calamity, the fundamental twisting or dysfunction that the Bible identifies as the problem.

It is very interesting that right after the fall, Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and seek to cover themselves. Now, I would not read it primarily as a question of shame, but it rather as an intense and deeply uncomfortable self-consciousness. So if

you think the good is outside of your own will and experience, the good is something that you discern in God and in the world that reflects God's wisdom, then you tend to be non-self-conscious, looking outward. But the minute your will and your freedom become the determining elements in good and evil, then there is this tendency to turn awkwardly and uncomfortably inward. The clothing of Adam and Eve is a sign of their self-consciousness, their self-preoccupation, and that, I think, is on display everywhere in the fallen world.

So the bottom line is that we are all unhappy. We live in a world that has followed from this original fall. If you want to find out, and Lent is a great time to do it, why are we so unhappy and search out the deepest roots of it, there is no better place to look than in this third chapter of the book of Genesis.

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