

God's Pursuit of Affectionate Relationship

The Bible as a whole, with its many books and their different genres, gives us a record of a relationship, the relationship between God and man. As the biblical narrative unfolds, this relationship cycles through periods of prosperity and closeness, then cools and becomes strained. God remains constant throughout, but man tests this relationship by becoming distracted, perverted, and forgetful. Because the Bible is timeless, its narrative typifies how we still relate to God today.

There are two definitions of "relationship" that will be present in this essay. One is the relationship we have *to* God; the other is the relationship we can have *with* God. Our relationship to God is our position relative to his position, as if we were the planets and he the sun of our solar system. Instead of being separated by millions of miles, we are separated from him by our sin.

God wants a relationship *with* us that overcomes this separation. Because this separation is made out of man's sin, this sin needs to be taken away. David and Abraham are two Old Testament characters who enjoyed this kind of relationship with God.^[1] We are told that Abraham was a friend of God,^[2] and that David was a man after God's heart.^[3] These terms express affection; showing us what is possible and what God desires in relationship with man.

God's desire for this kind of relationship begins in Eden. We can see this in how he went looking for Adam and Eve after they sinned, and in his surprise at not finding them. Adam and Eve were no longer fit to reside in Eden, in the place where God walked in the cool of the day. Neither are we fit to reside there. But that doesn't stop God from pursuing a relationship with us. So, while separation from God remains our default relationship, pursuit of relationship with man, is the default state of God.

The awakening of conscience and the loss

of innocence

The sin of Adam and Eve at Eden is not only the origin story of man's fallen state, it is something that happens in the heart of every individual. It plays out in the awakening of our conscience and the loss of our childhood innocence.

When we are very young, we are ignorant of what it means to be human. While our will is evident very early, we ourselves cannot recognize it. We don't view life as the actions we take by virtue of having free will. We also don't connect these actions to consequences, and we lack the ability to take full responsibility for our own actions.

This changes as we mature and develop a conscience. As conscience asserts itself, we begin to suffer consequences for our actions that are entirely internal. We can see this in the actions of Adam and Eve after they eat the forbidden fruit. Their nakedness bothers them, and they try to cover it with leaves, then they try to hide from God himself. They suffered the inner torments of their conscience before they endured the external consequence—banishment from Eden.

The same thing happens to us. When I told a lie, or was mean to a sibling, my conscience afflicted me before any punishment was meted out by my parents. This meant that even if I escaped outright punishment, there was something inside that did not let me go free. The weight of being human settles on our shoulders as we connect our wrongdoing to the inner condemnation of our conscience.

Adam and Eve suffered twinges of their awakened conscience before they were banished from the garden. Our own experience follows the same order. Our conscience asserts itself before we realize our separation from God.

For us, an awakened conscience is what makes it possible to realize that we are separate from God. The subjective but undeniable working of our conscience means our inner reality aligns with the verdict found in Scripture. Our conscience tells us there is something wrong with us; God's Word tells us *what* is wrong with us.

Just as Adam and Eve lost Eden, an awakened conscience signals the loss of childhood innocence. In both cases, what was possessed is only realized once it is lost. Perhaps we recognize the tragedy of the fall because the yearning for paradise that was lost parallels the

nostalgia we have for our own childhoods.

I'll address the proper object of our desire in the conclusion. The point I want to make now is that we are incapable of being drawn to God without this yearning. This yearning depends on the development of conscience. In short, our consciences play a vital role in priming us to respond to God and to enter into the relationship he is pursuing with us.

The constancy of God

The fall of Adam and Eve and its parallel in each of our lives is, from our perspective, marked by dramatic change. But God's perspective remains constant. Because he knows all things, everything remains the same to him. God always knew that Adam and Eve were naked, and he knew that they would eventually find out as well. God knew that Adam and Eve were absolutely dependent on his care in Eden and would continue to depend on him after Eden. God shows his care when he acknowledges their shame and clothes them in animal skins after their banishment from Eden.

Nakedness in the Bible is associated with helplessness. It is symbolic of the problem that man cannot solve for himself, and descriptive of man's default relationship to God. This is the nakedness written of when Jesus tells the lukewarm Laodiceans,

"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."⁽⁴⁾

Before the fall, Adam and Eve were subject to the same illusion as the Laodiceans. They were blind to their nakedness. Only after their eyes were opened did God clothe them. Perhaps then they realized that God was extending his care to them; care which they had always depended on but until now had not seen.

Ezekiel 16 also uses language about nakedness. Here it is in the context of God's romance of Jerusalem. She started out as a naked infant, abandoned in a field, and wallowing in her blood. God provides her with life. Then, when she is of marriageable age, God makes her his bride, dresses her in the best garments, and gives her the best food. After doing all this for his bride, verse 14 reads,

"And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God."

From imagery like this we can see how God wants to provide for those he loves and how helpless we are to provide for ourselves. The best we can do is patch together some leaves like Adam and Eve. But the nakedness that is beyond our power to solve, is outdone by God's commitment to clothe us. These two things will never change, except in how we perceive them. God has seen this all along, but we get to learn it over and over.

The language of affection

God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins, and he figuratively clothed Jerusalem with garments befitting a queen. Jesus, after his rebuke of the Laodiceans, counseled them to buy white garments from him to cover their nakedness—to enter relationship with him and accept his solution to their unsolvable problem.^[5]

Jesus offers us this same solution, and what a solution it is! It extends up to heaven where Jesus is in God's presence on our behalf,^[6] and it reaches all the way back to the beginning of time,^[7] when God set the plan in motion. This means that Eden was not a failure, but a part of the plan. God knew man would fall, because it is a consequence of the free will he created us with—so he made a plan that was a perfect fit for humanity.

God always intended for us to have a place in his family.^[8] Jesus pays for our adoption into the family with his death on the cross. By believing on Christ, we are taken from helpless nakedness to wearing the finest clothes, just like the depiction of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16.

In New Testament terms, this dramatic transformation is illustrated differently. Paul writes that we begin as enemies of God,^[9] and become fellow heirs with Jesus.^[10] We read in Hebrews,

"For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'"^[11]

Jesus's work on the cross is so powerful, so transformative, that he is not ashamed to call us his brethren. Think about it! This is the same Jesus who is *"the radiance of the glory of God and*

the exact imprint of his nature".^[12] His divine attributes—his perfection—made him the only worthy sacrifice for our sin. And because of his sacrifice, God counts us worthy of sonship, as worthy as Jesus himself. Because his son makes us worthy, God can say of us as he did about Jesus, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*^[13]

God's language about his children continues to showcase his desire for a close, loving relationship with us. Old Testament heroes such as Abraham and David filled their place in God's plan. We can do the same by choosing the adoption of sonship. God's affection for us will be as complete as it was for them. And by becoming God's sons and brothers of Jesus, we become part of the heroic tradition of the faith of Abraham.

The answer to our yearning

Jesus Christ is the correct focus of our yearning for Eden. He reverses our banishment by making our hearts a fit dwelling place for God. Our hearts become a sort of Eden, the place on earth where God can dwell with man. While we look forward to a fuller experience with God in the next life, Jesus's work on our behalf gives us much to do in this one.

Jesus expresses his love by paying a massive price so that we can experience the same relationship that he has with his father. This is the message of the gospel; the crescendo that the biblical narrative is building towards. With all the Bible's vivid imagery, nothing is so dramatic as God's solution for sin in the person of his son.

John writes about love, *"We love because he first loved us."*^[14] God's love came first, before we were even able to return it. All the actions that God took to bring us into his family, are expressions of this love. Just like God spared Noah in the ark, we are spared in Christ. God freed Israel from the bondage of Egypt with many miracles; he frees us from the bondage of sin by a greater miracle—Christ's resurrection. These are all acts of love from God to his people.

Anabaptism has always emphasized living a pious life and being an example to those around us. When the Anabaptist vision falters, we seem to retain the emphasis on a pious lifestyle but lose sight of salvation's glory. We know we need to bring forth good works, like our fathers and grandfathers, but we forget why.

But when we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross, when it truly sinks in, then we know

why. In light of what Jesus did for us, the only reasonable question we can ask is, what do I do now? I've received a great salvation, and I am overflowing with joy—what am I supposed to do with it?

And the answer to that question is be obedient to Christ. He loved us and proved it by his actions. We do the same by being obedient to him. It is not the enforced obedience of a taskmaster, but a willing obedience that delights in following Christ's example.

Because Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brethren, we should think of him as an older brother. I have older brothers, and I watched them constantly. If they liked Chevy trucks so did I. If I wanted to learn to shoot a rifle, or throw a football, I wanted to do it like them. With Jesus, we have his example in the gospels and his instructions in the entire Bible.

Obedience is not production or performance driven; it is attentively modeling ourselves after the author of our salvation. Jesus is the only person who truly practiced what he preached, and his example is a perfect one. The Bible tells us that wanting to be just like him is the appropriate response to the gift of salvation. And in the context of this great gift, the Anabaptist teachings of pious living become delightfully fitting.

Fred Wiebe spent fifteen years in the concrete trade, half that as a business owner, and recently changed careers to join the staff of a non-profit organization. He lives in St. Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba (Canada) with his wife Jennice and their four children. Outside of work, Fred splits his time between reading biblical and theological literature to himself and reading great books to his kids. Once his kids are in bed, he works on writing and blogs at <https://www.realfred.blog>

^[1] Psalm 32:2, Galatians 3:6

^[2] 2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23

^[3] 1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22

^[4] Revelation 3:17. All Scripture references given in ESV.

^[5] Revelation 3:18

^[6] Romans 8:34, Hebrews 9:24, 7:25

^[7] Ephesians 1:4-5, Romans 8:29-30, 1 Peter 1:18-21

^[8] Ephesians 1:5

^[9] Romans 5:10, Colossians 1:21

^[10] Romans 8:17

^[11] Ch. 2:11-12

^[12] Hebrews 1:3a

^[13] Matthew 3:17b

^[14] 1 John 4:19