



OF ROCKS & FIG LEAVES

by Ron Benson

Flannery O’Conner creates the memorable character Hazel Motes in her novel, *Wise Blood*. As a boy, Haze follows his dad to the dark corners of a carnival, sneaks into a tent for “adults only” and sees what he knows he should not see. He is wracked with guilt and makes an attempt to do something about it:

“The next day he took his shoes out into the woods. He didn’t wear them except for revivals and in the winter. He took them out of the box and filled the bottoms of them with stones and small rocks and then he put them on. He laced them up tight and walked in them through the woods for what he knew to be a mile, until he came to a creek, and then he sat down and took them off and eased his feet in the wet sand. He thought, that ought to satisfy Him. Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign. After a while he drew his feet out of the sand and let them dry, and then he put the shoes on again with the rocks still in them, and he walked a half-mile back before he took them off.”

Hazel Motes, being a human being like me, knows by instinct that he had crossed the line. He attempts what he thinks should be adequate payment for his wrong. In the end, it doesn’t seem to be enough.

We are all like Hazel Motes. Guilt is in our spiritual DNA. The absence of guilt in any person is unnatural; it is normal to sense when we’ve done wrong. And like any human, we intuitively know that some penalty should be paid. We believe we need to do something to take care of the debt that guilt leaves in our hearts. I call this the *Fig Leaf Dilemma*, and it stands in blatant rebellion against grace.

Grace is God’s unearned, undeserved goodness alive in me. Grace achieved by my own merit or morality is not grace at all; to earn grace is to void it. That’s the dilemma.

Legalism doesn’t do anything to take care of our sin. *But that’s not what our hearts tell us.* Our hearts tell us that we can pay for sin by

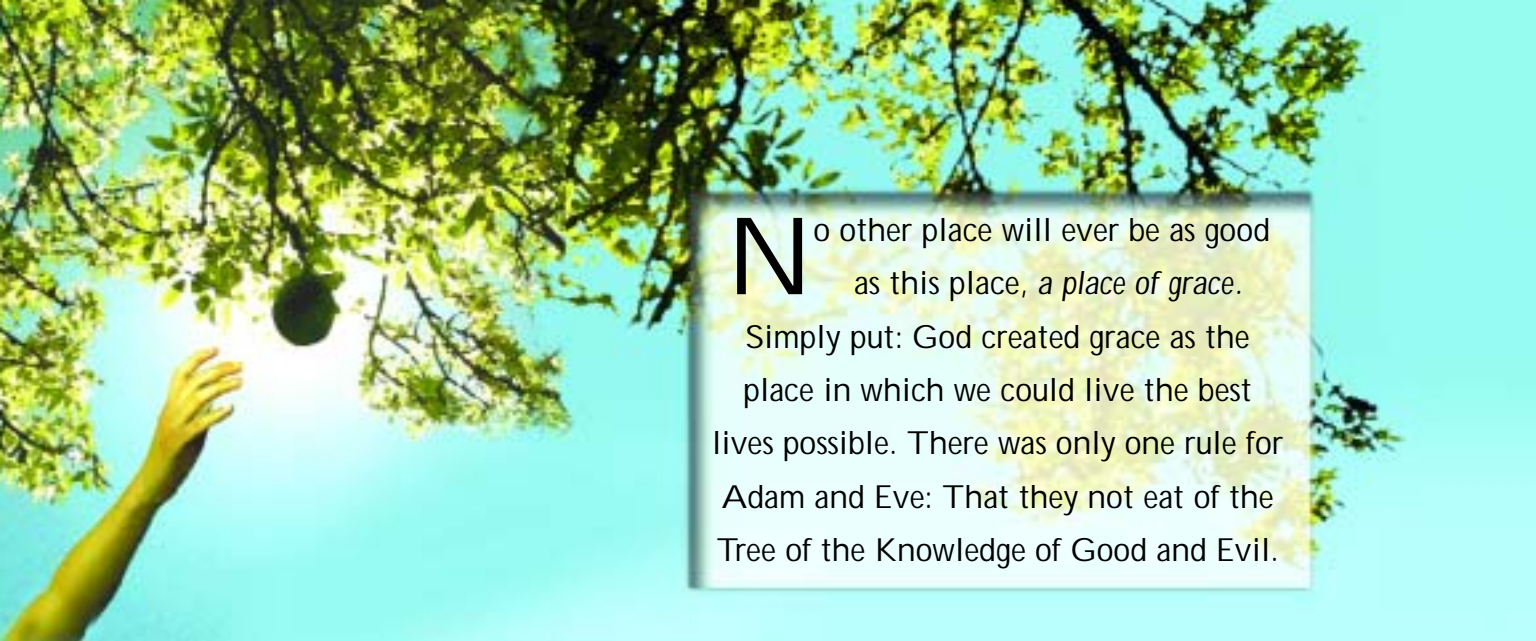
making up for it, working off the debt.

We can balance out our bad side with our good side, and, as long as the good side wins, *even by an edge*, it will be enough to get us to heaven and into good standing with God. Carry enough painful rocks in your tight-tied, stiff shoes for long enough, and God should be satisfied.

Where did we get this? Where did this sense of guilt come from? Where do we get the gnawing need for repayment?

The Garden of Grace

God didn’t make the Garden of Eden a strict, repressive place to live. According to Genesis, he gave the first inhabitants a great deal of freedom and authority over his cre-



No other place will ever be as good as this place, *a place of grace*. Simply put: God created grace as the place in which we could live the best lives possible. There was only one rule for Adam and Eve: That they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

ation. He created them with minds and wills so they could make decisions and manage his work.

He planted Adam and Eve in the location of grace. Here is a place, a garden named “Delight,” intricately designed and maintained just for you. All you need and want to make your life full and productive will be supplied. Best of all, intimacy with your Creator comes with the location because he’s decided here is where he will walk and talk with you all the time. Did you earn this place? No. How could you? You’ve just been created.

Grace is the environment, the habitat provided by God in the Garden of Eden. It is the place in which he intends for mankind to live, and it is the perfect abode for us. No other place will ever be as good as this place, *a place of grace*. Simply put: God created grace as the place in which we could live the best lives possible.

There was only one rule for Adam and Eve: That they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Presumably, God did not think it was a good idea that humans have the knowledge that the fruit of this tree would inflict.

Enter Satan, the serpentine tempter. Satan wants for Adam and Eve to live anywhere else but “Grace Land.”

It is grace that Satan attacks in his question: “Did God really say

you couldn’t eat any of the fruit here?”

Is God gracious? Or is he selfish and mean? Does he care about you and your happiness, or does he want to squelch it with rules and regulations? Can you trust him?

Eve contemplated the temptation, weighed the benefits against the risk and decided to eat. She shared the fruit with Adam. Immediately, something changed. In that one, fateful instant, the nature of every man and woman born throughout the history of the world was altered. Humans would never be like Adam and Eve again.

Falling Out of Grace

The Genesis author describes what happened:

- The eyes of both of them were opened.
- They realized they were naked.
- They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.
- They hid.

This is the moment we call “The Fall.” Adam and Eve sinned; they broke the one and only prohibition and brought sin into the world. From then on mankind shared a “sin nature.”

What is a sin nature? Boiled down, the sin nature means that we are all broken and all guilty. Because we are broken, we carry a weakness and propensity to sin. We are prone to it, conformed to it, weak against it. We bear the sin

nature because Adam and Eve chose to disobey.

Through the sin of Adam and Eve we inherit the sin nature. Through their eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we inherit a good/evil economy.

What did this new knowledge give them?

1. A recognition of right and wrong. (*The eyes of both of them were opened.*)
2. A realization of guilt. (*They realized they were naked.*)
3. A need to fix the problem for themselves. (*They sewed fig leaves together.*)
4. A fear that prompted them to hide from God. (*They hid from the Lord.*)

We’ve been caught in the trap ever since—the *Fig Leaf Dilemma*. It’s legalism. It’s that inward pressure, produced by the economy of good and evil inherited from Adam and Eve, calling out for us to pay our sin-debt on our own.

The Knowledge From the Tree

Adam and Eve *knew* they had sinned—gone against God’s plans for them. They also *knew* they should do something about their guilt problem. They *knew* that some covering was in order. So they picked fig leaves and put them in all the most strategic places to hide their shame. But Adam and Eve also *knew* the leaves *really* didn’t take care of things, so they hid.

Armed with the knowledge from the tree, humanity takes on the obligation to pay for our own sin. I face the dilemma when I try to obey a bunch of rules and regulations in order to be considered a good player on God's team.

My friend, Marty, faces the dilemma when she tries to deal with guilt feelings by following the obsessive demands of religious zealots. She heard on Christian radio once that refined sugar was "of the devil," so she ransacked her kitchen, tossing out offending food in order to avoid God's judgment.

Carl faces the dilemma when he questions why God is causing such havoc in his life. He's lost his job, his child died, his wife left him. His friends say God is trying to get him to acknowledge some sin. But Carl has combed through his life, confessing all, over and over, and still feels oppressive guilt.

This is the mess we find ourselves in. When we sin, we know that something is wrong and needs to be repaired. But because of our brokenness and the status of our hearts before God, we *don't have the capacity to fix the problem*. We don't have what it takes to make things right. We are impotent, in the end, to pay our own debt. We know it because we *know* good from evil; we have an ingrown calculator for the good/evil economy. We *know* we need help; the fig leaves of good works aren't enough.

Toward the end of her story, Flannery O'Connor describes Hazel Motes' ongoing endeavor to pay his debt. The landlady finds a secret:

"Some time later she discovered why he limped. She was cleaning his room and happened to knock over his extra pair of shoes. She picked them up and looked into them as if she thought she might find something hidden there. The bottoms of them were lined with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone.... *Who's he doing this for?* she asked herself. *What's*

he getting out of doing it? Every now and then she would have an intimation of something hidden near her but out of her reach. 'Mr. Motes,' she said that day, when he was in her kitchen eating his din-



More than fig leaves were necessary. What they had done by taking initiative to handle their shame was insufficient. Adam and Eve, and the rest of humanity after them, had to learn that their efforts to handle their sin for themselves would never, ever be enough.

ner, 'what do you walk on rocks for?'

'To pay,' he said in a harsh voice."

Drop the Fig Leaves

Hazel Motes fights the *Fig Leaf Dilemma* throughout his life, without ever understanding the futility of the truth: Fig leaves never cover. Legalism doesn't work. We can't fix the problem.

Back in the Garden, God looks for the guilty party, his treasured but soiled friends. In love, God seeks out the ashamed.

He knows Adam and Eve need to come clean. He knows they need to confront their sin and their subsequent game of cover-up. He asks, "Where are you?" not because he needs to know, but because they need to admit and confess. Adam and Eve, and you and I, must eventually come to confess sin. But not only that, we must come to the end of ourselves and recognize our

feeble attempts to remedy the problem, admit we are helpless and accept what God offers. We have to drop the fig leaves.

Genesis 3:21 says, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." This is no small matter. Adam and Eve stood before God already clothed. They had made coverings, sewed fig leaves, *for themselves*. But it wasn't sufficient.

What they had done, by way of disobedience, was an offense to the holy character of Almighty God, their Heavenly Father. *More than fig leaves were necessary*.

What they had done by taking initiative to handle their shame was insufficient. Adam and Eve, and the rest of humanity after them, had to learn that their efforts to handle their sin *for themselves* would never, ever be enough.

In essence, God says, "Let me do it for you. You'll have to trust me on this. What I provide for your shame will be enough, my grace is sufficient."

Take the rocks out of your shoes— you've got to do this God's way.

God's way is through the sacrificial death of Jesus, the son God loved. God's way is prefigured in Genesis by the taking of life in order to cover sin. God's way is that Jesus gives his life to provide permanent covering for all of our sin.

In love, God still hunts us down, still seeks out the ashamed, the afraid, the guilty. His holy presence still embarrasses us, still allows us to sense our nakedness when we come to him. His desire is that we eventually be restored to Eden's grace. He still offers the cure: "My grace is sufficient." □

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