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¹³ Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.

New Living Translation, 1st Thessalonians 2:13

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

English Standard Version, the Gospel of John, Chapter 12, Verse 46.

¹⁵ The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.

¹⁶ But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—¹⁷ except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

New Living Translation, Genesis 2:15-17.

Every Word of God.

When I was in college I had a friend whose mother was schizophrenic. She drove a station wagon, which she had hand-painted, by brush, in a myriad of colors. In the back seat was a typewriter, and on the back seat, and on the floor of the back

seat, and on the passenger's seat, were the many hundreds of pages of scripture she had written. She was under the impression that God had commissioned her to write a new Bible, a sort of the next Testament, or, as we used to cruelly joke, the *New and Improved Testament*.

Everyone in the dorm knew about my friend's mother because she would call the dorm whenever she needed help. This was in southern California and my friend was going to college an hour or so from where he had grown up. He used to tell me that he dearly wished he had gone to college out of state.

To put it mildly, my friend was very embarrassed about his mother. She had a habit of driving around, stopping to type a few pages, driving some more, then stopping to spread the faith, driving some more, then stopping to type some more, and then driving some more, until she ran out of gas. Then she would call her son at the dorm for him to come rescue her. His mother lived in a tortured mental state - and her behavior tortured her son. It showed in his bearing: he was in a constant state of high, nervous anxiety.

I happened to be the one who took the call one day when she called. This was back in the late seventies and the phone was in the hallway, and whoever was passing by typically answered it. My friend's mother was at a pay phone,

needing someone to come and bring her gas. I, too, was from southern California, and when she told me where she was, I realized that she was in a poor Hispanic neighborhood that had a lot of gang activity.

Worse, when I asked her if there were any other people around, she calmly said yes, that there were some young men there, and that as a matter of fact, they were armed. Interestingly, she seemed oblivious to the immediate danger I thought she was in. Her real concern was simply that she was lost and stranded. She had to get on with God's mission, she told me. How could God allow her car to run out of gas yet again? She was only going to live so long, she said. She had so much more to write and so many more mission journeys to take. You've got to help me, she begged, when I told her that her son wasn't around.

I'm going to get back to my friend's mother.

Let's talk about the Garden of Eden and the casting out from Eden of Adam and Eve. Here's some Genesis background. Among the trees in the Garden of Eden were two special trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Note that this second tree is not the Tree of Good and Evil, but rather the Tree *of the Knowledge of* Good and Evil. God put trees in the Garden in part to supply food for Adam and Eve, but he made one very serious restriction.

This is our third reading today, from Genesis 2:16 to 17, where God gives Adam a warning - *But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—¹⁷ except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."*

We all know that Adam and Eve broke this rule and got tossed out of Eden as a result. Now, immediately after eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they had a revelation. Here is Genesis 3:7 - *At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.* Now, they already knew that they hadn't done any clothes shopping during their tenure in the Garden of Eden; they were naked long before they ate this fruit. But eating the forbidden fruit made them somehow vulnerable to shame.

This naked stuff is of course symbolic. They suddenly knew all about evil and how it differs from good. The point is that they had been poisoned spiritually by gaining knowledge that they weren't yet ready to comprehend. God was to be the judge of when they were ready for that fruit – but had they jumped the gun.

The story gets heightened and the symbolism of it grows. God then told Adam and Eve that they should never eat the fruit of that other special tree, the

Tree of Life – because it would make them live forever. Now, what’s wrong with living forever? Well, you don’t want to live forever in a state of sin – and that’s what would have happened if they had eaten the fruit from the Tree of Life after disobeying God and eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Life outside the Garden was going to be tough. They would have to fend for themselves and ultimately die. Here are some of the things that God said would happen, now that Adam and Eve were no longer innocent, now that they knew about evil:

All your life you will struggle to scratch a living...

By the sweat of your brow

will you have food to eat

until you return to the ground

from which you were made.

For you were made from dust,

and to dust you will return.

They would have to work desperately hard for a living – and then it would be topped off with death. But if they had obeyed God and not eaten the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would have eventually learned

about these things, but only when they were ready, when God had prepared them.

And if they had learned about Good and Evil in the way God intended, they would have eventually been allowed to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and they would have lived forever in comfort and happiness.

But they had rushed off to try and learn things by themselves – and so they were condemned to a hard life followed by a death that they should never have had to experience.

By the way, after Adam and Eve get tossed out, God goes on to guard the Tree of Life by placing a cherubim with a flaming sword near the tree to make sure Adam and Eve didn't sneak back for a taste of its fruit. God, you see, is now protecting Adam and Eve from themselves. He didn't want them to live forever in a state of sin, so they had to be kept from the Tree of Life.

What's this all about? People talk about the fall of Adam and Eve, how they committed a sin and cost all of humanity a shot at living eternally without ever having to suffer. *If they had just trusted God – and that was their true sin, not trusting God to know what is best – they would have lived forever in bliss.*

Is this a literal story? Very few people nowadays think so.

You see, we were meant to become morally autonomous, to be able to control our actions, to do what's right and not do what's wrong. But we are supposed to have a moral autonomy that is under the guidance of God. Adam and Eve tried to strike out on their own. They thought they didn't need God. They thought they could become like God, to know about morality, about good and evil, and do it without God having any authority over them.

The story of Adam and Eve is about a misplaced attempt at taking on the terrible complexities and challenges of life without the help of God.

But why do I bring up the story of Adam and Eve this Sunday? What I really want to talk about is the difference between having a literal versus a non-literal view of the Bible. This is an extremely crucial issue today. Many people have drifted away from their childhood faith, many people have raised their kids outside of the faith, many people reject Christianity outright – because they simply cannot believe the wild tales found in the Bible. I have had agnostic and atheist friends of mine ask me many times if I actually believe all that mythical stuff in the Bible.

I tell them that I do believe it – all of it.

Consider the name Adam. This word, translated from the original Hebrew found in the Bible means “human” or “person”. The name Eve is related to the word “living”. Adam represents humanity and Eve represents the source of all human life.

The story of Adam and Eve is symbolic and I strongly doubt that the original writers of it meant for us to take it literally. The story represents the tendency for humans to do what they know is wrong. And importantly, it tells us that there is a simple answer to our problem: if we want direction in life, if we want to know good from evil, then we need to do the right thing - we need to listen to God.

I’d like to look a little deeper at this issue of a literal versus a non-literal view of Bible stories. Our first Bible passage that we heard today is from a letter that Paul wrote to the folks living in a city called Thessalonica. By the way, scholars break the letters of Paul in the New Testament into two groups, one group consisting of letters that we are pretty certain Paul did indeed personally write, and one group that consists of letters that we’re not so sure he actually wrote. This letter is in the first group.

Now, the city to which Paul was writing, Thessalonica, was at the intersection of two heavily used Roman roads: one that ran east from Rome to

Asia and one that ran from Athens to the Danube River. It was founded in 315 BC as a seaport, and is today a large city in Greece. When Paul wrote this letter, he had visited that city and then left. He often did this. He would build churches in cities and then write letters back to the folks there to offer spiritual support.

In general, in the letter, Paul encourages the people of Thessalonica to continue to live under the guidance of God and to trust that Christ will return – and that we will have life everlasting.

Let's look a little closer at the message of this letter. Our first passage that we read today says:

¹³ Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.

Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, of course, is reminding us that there is indeed something very special about the Bible: it will continue to work within us as long as we believe. Paul is also telling us that the word of God is far more powerful than the words of people.

But what, precisely, are we supposed to believe about the Bible? Is everything in the Bible to be believed in a totally literal fashion?

Well, let's consider our second quote today. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 12, verse 46, Jesus is quoted as saying this: *I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.*

As Christians we believe in God and we struggle to follow the guidance of God. We do this in large part by following the example of Christ. This quote from John reminds us of something very important: because we must live in this world and confront the forces of good and evil, God has sent us someone to guide us toward the light. After God sent Adam and Eve packing, we were not abandoned on Earth. God sent us someone to teach us how to dedicate this life to God.

There might well have been no literal Adam and Eve who were tossed out of the Garden of Eden, but Jesus is a very literal savior.

The issue of symbolism and non-literality in the Bible is of course much broader than the story of Adam and Eve. In fact, from a historical perspective, there is something very interesting about the Book of Genesis as a whole. And it has to do with another reason that some people claim that the Bible couldn't possibly be true or be the word of God. They say it isn't even original.

In a sense, this is true. There is an ancient tale, one that dates back to a couple thousand years B.C., which is perhaps a thousand years before what we know as the Book of Genesis was written. We call it the Epic of Gilgamesh and it was written in Mesopotamia, which was a large area that today contains Iraq, along with parts of Iran, Syria, and Turkey. In this story, there is a Great Flood. There is also a story that is similar to the Garden of Eden story. The similarities between the book of Genesis and more ancient writings have been heavily documented by scholars.

Were parts of Genesis plagiarized from the Epic of Gilgamesh? Hold on.

Writers of this time did not have the same notion of plagiarism that we have today. It's more proper to say that the Book of Genesis may have been influenced by what we would call pre-Israelite pagan mythology. And there was nothing wrong with this sort of literary borrowing back then. There wasn't a commercial author trying to protect his or her copyright. Stories were used to teach, not to make money, at least not for the most part.

When people point out to me that some of the material in the Old Testament is even older than the Old Testament, I tell them that it's not my job to judge the path by which God created the Bible. It's also not my job to decide how

God chose to communicate truth via the Bible. Analogies and metaphors are just fine.

So, what about my friend's mother? Let's get back to her.

When I was on the phone with my friend's schizophrenic mother, and she told me that she had some armed young men around her, I asked her if I could please talk to them. So, one of them got on the phone with me. Now, I had grown up in a largely Hispanic neighborhood, and there had been a lot of gang activity and a lot of weapons. But I had been an A student who never got involved in anything illegal. I was deathly afraid of gang members. You know what that young man said to me? That young man with a gun who was talking to my friend's schizophrenic mother?

He said don't worry about this lady. We'll give her some gas and tell her how to get back on the freeway. Even though she's kind of worked up, we like her. She says that God talks to her all the time and she types it up. What he's told her is in her car, man, all over it. We read some of it and we think it's mostly a bunch of stuff from the Bible kind of rehashed. That's what this armed young man told me. She's got Adam and Eve in there, he said. It's a little different, we think, but it's mostly the same. You want to know why we like her? It's because

of why she says we should believe in God. She says we in East L.A. are equal to everyone else. She says we should believe in God because we are all children of Adam and Eve.

My friend's mother was schizophrenic, but she was a very good woman. She never ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. She was totally innocent. It gave her a very clear vision of just why we should listen to God and use God as our guide in life.

We should believe every word of God because we are all children of Adam and Eve.