



Papa's LOVE & *frightful* WARNINGS

Brad Jersak

“Bradley, don’t touch. You’ll burn your little hanny [hand] right off.”

—Irene Jersak

*The Lord God commanded the man,
“...you must not eat from the tree of the
knowledge of good and evil,
for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

—Genesis 2:16

*“If your right hand causes you
to stumble, cut it off.”*

—Jesus Christ

“HOT!” – MOM’S WARNING

I was perhaps 6-years-old. Maybe at Uncle Henry and Auntie Florence’s house. I remember fixating on Auntie’s red-hot stove element. I recall my mother’s dire warning. *“Bradley, don’t touch. You’ll burn your little hanny [hand] right off.”*

I know these memories are vivid visual reconstructions of early childhood emotions rather than video footage of exact events. I know, for example, that the oven was never where I see it in my head. And it’s very likely that Irene Jersak, my beloved mother, said nothing of the sort. But while the facts may fail to find their way through the haze of five decades, the truth is a clear-flowing stream. Here is the truth:

- I knew beyond any doubt that my mom loved me and that I loved her.

- I knew what her warning meant. I knew she meant touching the stove would burn me—and NOT that if I touched the stove, she would burn me.

- Even as a young literalist, I knew that the stove would burn my hand—and NOT that it would burn my hand right off. I was able to intuit the hyperbole.

It is therefore surprising to me how often adults who read Scripture stumble into these common errors:

- We have often imagined that when we disobey a divine warning, God becomes the threat and the source of harm, rather than our own disobedience. We confuse the wages of sin (intrinsic consequences) with the wrath (violent anger) of God.

- Similarly, we have often mistaken God’s dire warnings as personal threats of divine violence for disobeying him rather than the loving care of our divine Parent who only seeks to dissuade us from choices by which we harm ourselves.

- And then, we habitually literalized hyperbole of temporal self-destruction into divinely-sanctioned universal, permanent and even eternal catastrophes. For example, we’ve equated passages announcing the fiery destruction of Jerusalem (which happened repeatedly) with the end of history, the scorching of the universe and the beginning of eternal conscious torment.

How [the hell] did we ever get from “Don’t burn

yourself today!" to "I'll burn you forever!?"

I'd like to blame the hellfire revivalists, men like Jonathan Edwards, who likened listeners to "insects roasting over an open fire" but honestly, these horrid inferences emerged much earlier in the human drama.

"WHERE ARE YOU?" – HIDING FROM MOM

- *God: "Where are you?"*
Adam: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."
—Genesis 3:9-10
- *Eden [my wife], calling our son [age four-ish]: "Dominic!"*
Dominic: "Nothing!"

Back to my memory. Later that day, I committed both a mistake and a sin.

My mistake was in assuming the stove would only burn me when the stove was set to "On" and only while the element was red. My sin was that I presumed to touch it at all after Mom had said "Don't." When I ventured the forbidden touch, it was my first experience with a burn. I had no previous experience with how deep a burn could go, or and that it wouldn't stop burning when I stop touching. This was a new reality to me—I was shocked and terrified.

In addition to the pain, I must have also experienced guilt and shame because my first instinct was *NOT* to cry out or to run to my mother. Instead, I forced myself into silence and ran off to hide. Why would I do that? Had Mom ever given me the impression that when I was

suffering, she was someone I needed to hide from—someone who would harm me further?

And yet we see how this was exactly how Adam and Eve act after eating from the wrong tree. They had ever only known God as the Friend who provided them with Paradise and walked with them as an intimate Companion in the garden.

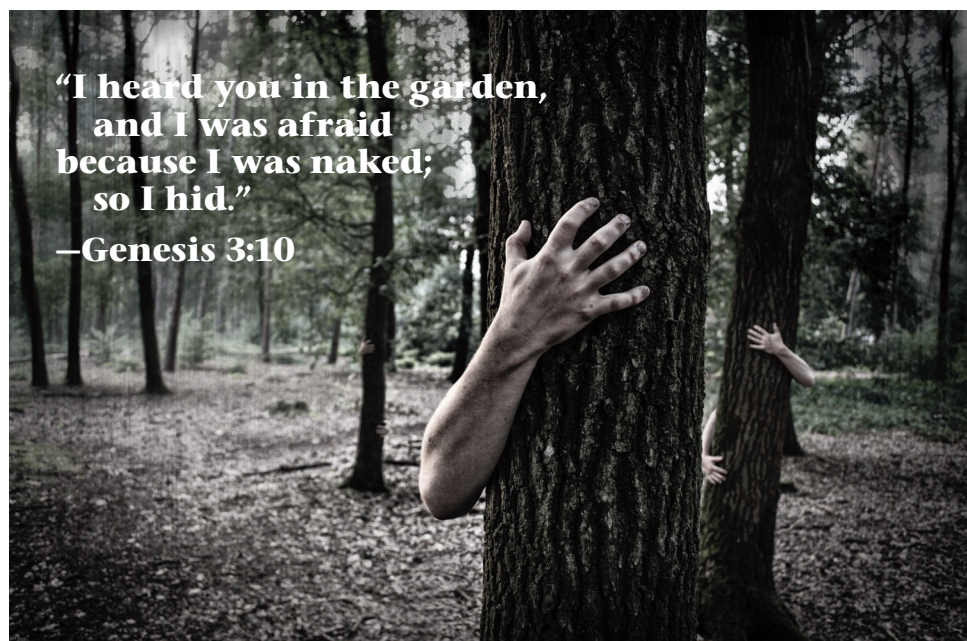
Yet, when they grasped for autonomy and ate the poison of knowledge through self-will, what happened? Their eyes were opened, saw they were naked and felt shame. And from that shame emerged a false image of God. No longer their loving Father, YHWH now assumed the character of someone to fear, to hide from and, no doubt, the source of death.

Had God ever done anything

tainted by their shame and the dust of death (i.e. their *fear*). In their deluded minds, alienated by self-deception, God was now the death-dealer.

"WHILE STILL A LONG WAY OFF..." – THE ABBA (PAPA) JESUS REVEALED

Finally, I came to my senses and ran to my mother. She scooped me up into her arms and quickly took me to the kitchen sink, where she ran cool water over my fingers for a long time. It felt SO good. She then carefully applied a wonderful healing balm that may have come via Auntie Florence's new discovery of a miracle cure—freshly cut Aloe Vera. Then came swathing bandages of clean, bright white gauze and, happily, cuddles from my auntie and



that even remotely warranted such a blasphemous inference? Not at all. They fabricated their new conception and hideous projection of divine punisher from God's loving warning

consolation (not shaming or rebuke) from my mom.

When the prodigal son finally ventured home after being burnt on his own self-centeredness, he did not find what he expected.

He did not need to plead for pity or a servant's quarters. He had disowned his father, but his father never disowned him. He discovered the joy of his father's arms who ran to him while he was still a long way off.

This is the truth of *Abba* that Jesus came to show us. The God we imagined in our guilt and shame was a slanderous misrepresentation, an idol constructed of human fear. The son not only recovered his place in his father's house—his broken image of Dad was also repaired and he was reconciled to his father's welcoming arms. No need to run, no need to hide, no need to fear.

water, aloe gel, clean gauze and a warm embrace ready to give.

EPILOGUE

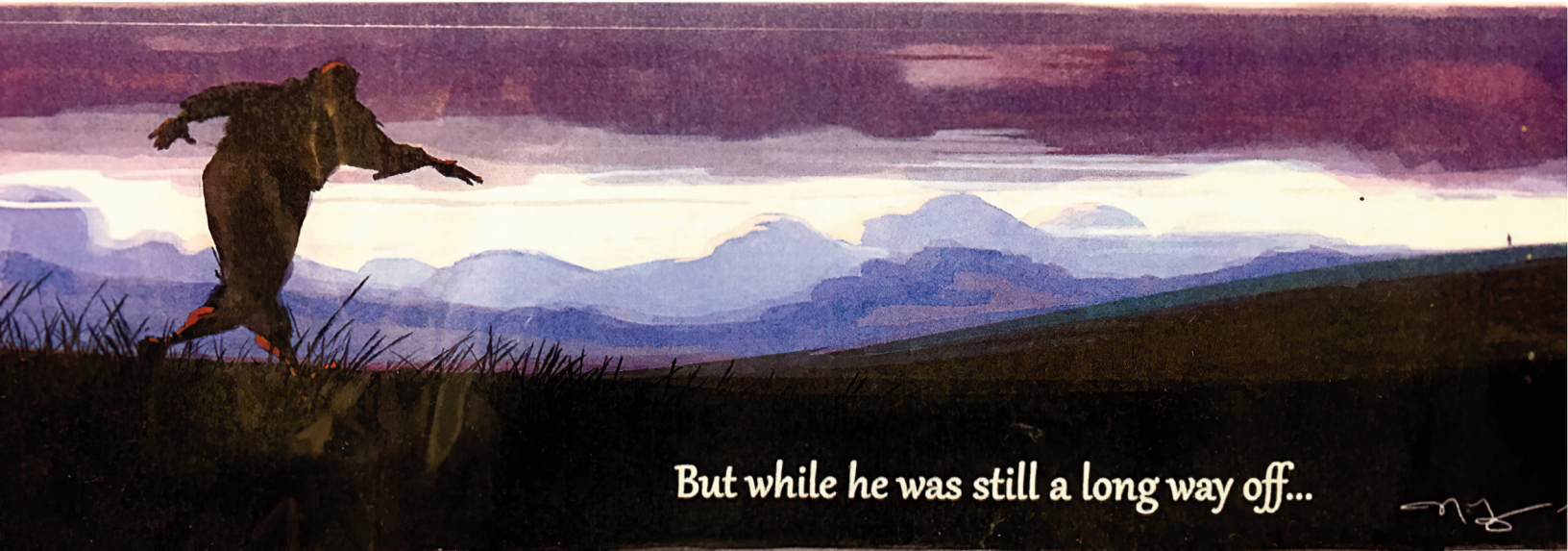
Does it offend us that Jesus issued frightening warnings about the consequences of our rebellion? When we are rushing into destruction, is it enough that he said, "Woe to you! This insanity will be the death of you!"? Do we always have to repeat the error of inferring that parental warnings make him an angry and punitive ogre?

Or do you think he should have said, "Look, it's really no big deal. In the end, you'll find your way back home, I'll forgive your sins and heal your wounds, and

• The warnings are not threats that God will harm you. In love, his dramatic and hyperbolic warnings are not a measure of how angry he will be, but of how dangerous our defiance can be to ourselves and to others.

• The warnings that end in judgment are stern because the judgment intrinsic to our sin can be truly terrible. But even if that's how the warning ends, that's not how the story ends. "Mercy triumphs over judgement." It's just that God's heart for us is not judgement at all. He'd rather we heed the warnings and experience fullness of life now. □

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But while he was still a long way off...

Human compassion for little Adam, little Eve and little Bradley says, "Don't hide from Mom! Run to her as quickly as you can!" And while Jesus' first listeners were scandalized by Jesus' forgiving Father, we know enough to say, "Don't hide from Papa! Run to him as quickly as you can!" And then, even in the first impulse to head home, we find God is already running to us—living

all will be well." Well, he often does hint at exactly that (as in the parable) ... but I will leave you with these principles of interpreting divine warnings:

• The One issuing them is your loving heavenly Father, whose agenda is your protection and restoration. He's not a retributive tyrant king. He's your loving *Abba*.

"Those who look to [the Lord] are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

—Psalm 34:5