

Tragic Fall

Genesis 3: 1-7

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One of the pleasures of being a Christian is that we've got great stories. We've got stories like no one has ever told before or since. Dialogue. Depth. Action. Richness. Poignancy. Insight. Passion. These early chapters of Genesis address the foundational questions of life on multiple levels. They're told with a simplicity a child can understand. But they contain a complexity the greatest theologian can never exhaust.

Genesis gives us provocative and powerful understanding of why we're here. The Creator made us, expressly and intentionally, to live in his image. We're here to love and glorify the Creator as we work, subdue, tend and keep the creation. We're here to multiply this image through our relationships of love. The world is the theatre of God's glory and we human beings have a leading role in that drama of worship. Every person is of infinite worth and unique giftedness. No one has ever had a higher view of what a person is than those whose source is Genesis. We are meant for a gloriously joyful existence in love.

But we know something went wrong. The world does not work in harmony with the vision. We can see more of what we can be than we can actually live out. What happened? Our story today from Genesis 3 indicates that at the heart of the story of humanity is a *fall*. We fell away from the original blessing. We lost the intended joy.

Genesis 3 abruptly introduces a new character into the Garden of Eden. "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made." This is a loaded sentence. We've got to note three things right away.

1) **The serpent was created.** He was not some eternal principle of evil or darkness, like the yin is to the yang in Chinese philosophy. The serpent was part of the world created out of nothing by the LORD God. Now, we're not told how there came to be a talking serpent. Perhaps a corrupted spirit

masqueraded in the form of a snake. We definitely get the sense that something bigger than a reptile is at work. We're meant to understand, though, that even if he's Satan, he remains a created being.

2) **The serpent is crafty.** As soon as we meet the serpent, warning lights are flashing. He is cunning. We are meant to expect that his words will mean more than they seem. His suggestions will hold danger.

3) **The serpent's presence is a mystery.** There is no reason given for why a serpent which became a talking tempter should be allowed into the peace and innocence of the Garden. It's just the way it is. Ultimately, it is part of the Creator's plan to allow his image bearers to be tempted. Why it had to be this way is part of the secret things that belong to God. The introduction of the serpent happens without explanation.

So the serpent said to the woman, "Did God actually say 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" Crafty indeed. Do you think the serpent was actually seeking clarification because he didn't quite hear what the LORD had said to Adam? No, he was introducing doubt under the guise of an innocent question. He suggests that God's character is the exact opposite of the truth. "Is God the God of total restriction? Can you imagine the Creator of all this abundant beauty making it in order torture you with prohibitions? By the way, are you truly sure about what God said? Is it possible it's not as clear as you thought?"

To her credit, the woman remembers correctly and stands up for the truth of how the LORD God set up the world. This is not a world of restriction but a world of wide permission. We may eat, we are free to eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die." Every one but this one is for us. Our freedom of choice is 99% wide open and only 1% restricted, so that we do not die.

At this point, the woman seems to sense no lack in her life from the LORD's commands. I suspect in a world where there was no death, she did not know what it would mean to eat the fruit and die, but to this point, she trusted that God had her best interest in mind. There was no lack of provision or variety. The serpent's question was rebuffed. But perhaps it opened a crack in her thoughts.

So the serpent got bolder. Defiant even. In direct contradiction to what the LORD God had said, the serpent declared, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil.” Once again, we need to break down this sentence to see all the poison in it.

1) **You will not surely die.** In one way, the serpent was telling the truth. When they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve did not drop dead on the spot. In that sense, the serpent was right. So his half-truth carried conviction. Of course, from that moment, death would enter creation. Decay would begin. And even worse, humanity would die spiritually. From that moment of disobedience we would be cut off from the intimate relating with our Creator for which we were made.

2) The serpent suggested to the woman that he had **superior knowledge**. “For God knows.” The serpent suggests that he knows more about God than she knows. That there’s more to know about God and that maybe God is holding out on the man and woman. There is some secret knowledge not revealed, and only by disobeying what you do know can you find out this secret.

3) God knows that when you eat of it **your eyes will be opened**. Another half-truth. At the end of Genesis 2 we read that the man and the woman were both naked, but not ashamed. They had no secrets between them. Nothing to hide. Total openness. They could see each other. They could see all the way through. When they ate the fruit, their eyes were opened in a new way. They realized they were naked. They felt shame. Not because their skin suits were shameful. But in their disobedience, they lost their innocence. They incurred guilt. They ruptured the relationship between themselves and God, between themselves and one another. Their eyes were opened to their shame even as their eyes closed to the full, uninterrupted knowing they once enjoyed.

4) The serpent asserted that if she ate the fruit, the woman would **be like God**, knowing good from evil. The irony here, of course, is that the man and woman were already like God. Expressly created in his image. In a unique relationship to him. Eating the fruit would actually make her *less* like God.

But the cunning in the serpent's half-truths had its effect. She began to wonder if perhaps she had been misinformed. Was God holding out on her? Was there something good she wasn't getting? Something needed she couldn't have? Perhaps the God who had given them the paradise of Eden didn't really know best. Maybe the LORD didn't really want their happiness. Was this fruit really so terrible?

Previously, they had just avoided the tree. There was so much else to do. But now she looked closely at the tree. Is this what I need? She saw "that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise." Good nutrition. Beautiful. Wise-making. What's not to like? Surely this was the healthy, artistic, smart choice. Centuries later, John would write of "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life" (I John 2: 16). The triple lure. Pleasure, vanity, pride. We fall for it every time.

So she took of the fruit and ate. The world cracked. God's heart broke. The serpent laughed. Our souls died. Even worse, she also gave some to her husband. And here is the line that simply chills me, "She also gave some to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate. What?! Adam was there the whole time? He watched all this unfold? His job was to serve and keep the creation. His wife would be at the top of that list. Passivity in the face of the serpent's tempting is horrifying. When good men go silent in the face of evil, disaster follows.

There you have it. What happened to the world? We chose against our God. We decided maybe we know better what makes for a good life than the Creator does. We took our freedom and determined that we would like to sit on the throne. *We wanted not just to be like God, but to be God ourselves.* A good creation fell from innocence and peace even as we reached for glory and autonomy. Everything we do now is laced with this choice for self-interest over God-interest.

In Romans 1, Paul said it this way, "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." A simple rehearsal of all God had given them would have saved Adam and Eve from thinking God was holding out on them. A moment of trust would have prevented disaster. Trying to be wise, though, Paul says we became futile in our thinking. Our

foolish hearts were darkened. Our eyes closed to the reality of God and his will for us.

No other faith has such a high view of each man and woman as uniquely created in the image of God. No other faith has such a dire view of the choices our first parents made and we continue to repeat. Wanting to be God ourselves, we trade away our great and glorious God for shiny lies, again and again.

Now if there were no solution, we probably could not stand to present such an honest view of the human situation. It takes a lot of courage to admit the truth. For the truth offends our pride. It exposes our naked shame. Self-delusion seems more palatable in the moment. But Christian faith sails straight into the truth about our idol-making, autonomy-seeking hearts so that we can realize the greatness of our savior.

We sinned beyond hope of any help in heaven or earth. But God determined to make our salvation, not our just punishment, to be his ultimate glory. Once in a prayer George Herbert expressed it this way, “When we had sinned beyond help in heaven or earth, then you said, ‘Lo, I come!’” When we were lost as lost can be, God said, “Hang on, I’m coming to find you and bring you home. I’m going to remake the whole thing. I’m going to come as the new Adam. Jesus will be the new start of the human race. I’m going to re-work human nature from the inside out.”

The accounts of Jesus’ being tempted in the wilderness form a crucial part of our salvation.

- Our first parents fell away from God in the lush, growing Garden of Eden. Jesus went out into the barren wilderness to enact faithfulness.
- Our first parents had their fill of ripe fruit from countless trees and they seized the one forbidden fruit. Jesus fasted forty days and nights, and in the midst of such raging hunger he declined to turn stones into bread. He would not shortcut the process of being truly human in reliance on his Father.
- Our first parents shipwrecked their humanity while still in the harbor of Eden. They ran aground grasping at a greater rule over the world that had already been given to them. Jesus sailed faithfully through the stormy seas of the world’s distractions, brokenness and evil. He declined the throne of the kingdom of the world which Satan offered

him. Jesus trusted his Father to bring in the Kingdom of God through his sacrifice on the cross.

When we had sinned beyond any help in heaven or earth, our God said, “Lo, I come!” He came to the fallen world. He came as one of us, subject to temptation and weakness. He made his way in faithfulness, even unto death. And so Jesus fulfilled his role as the new Adam. He remade human nature. He has secured the future when the Garden city will come to be and all those joined to him will flourish in a city where God will once again dwell directly among his people.

The story of temptation and fall in Eden explains so much. It tells us why there is something wrong with everything. It tells us why we feel in our bones that it’s not the way it’s supposed to be. The world is askew, and that begins inside me.

Only the people with a mighty Savior could dare to tell the truth about the depth of our sin and lostness. When we had sinned beyond help in heaven and earth, he said, “Lo, I come!” Jesus is God come to us as a man, to live out the faithfulness required of us which we could not give. Joined to him, we get remade. We get in on the life of the new Adam. We join the adventure of preparing the world for the new heavens and the new earth, where Eden is restored even beyond its original glory. Thanks be to God for the man Jesus who trusted the Word of God, even unto death, and so restored a lost race to life.