

Text: Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-24 (DHT)

And YHWH Elohim commanded the man, saying, “You may eat of every tree of the garden, but you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.”

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Now the serpent was more shrewd than any beast of the field that YHWH Elohim had made. He said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You may not eat of every tree of the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden. But of the fruit of the tree there in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You may neither eat it nor shall you touch it, otherwise you will die.’” And the serpent said to the woman, “You will surely not die, for God knows that on the day that you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was pleasant to the eyes and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave to her husband with her, and he ate. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves coverings.

And they heard the sound of YHWH Elohim walking to and fro in the garden in the breeze of the day, and Adam hid himself and his wife from the presence of YHWH Elohim among the trees of the garden. And YHWH Elohim called to Adam and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.” And he asked, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you should not eat?” And the man said, “The woman that you gave to be with me—she gave me of the tree, and I ate.” And YHWH Elohim said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

And YHWH Elohim said to the serpent, “Because you have done this: You are cursed more than any livestock and more than every beast of the field. On your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. And I will put hostility between you and the woman; between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

He said to the woman, “I will greatly multiply your labor pains; in pain you shall bring forth children; for your desire shall be for your husband, and yet he will rule over you. And he said to Adam, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ the ground is cursed for your sake;

in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. It shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you and you shall eat the herb of the field. You shall eat bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

And Adam called the name of his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living. And YHWH Elohim made for Adam and his wife tunics of skins, and clothed them. And YHWH Elohim said, “Behold! The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” Now, at risk he puts out his hand and takes also of the tree of life, eats, and lives forever, YHWH Elohim therefore sent him out of the Garden of Eden to *abad* (serve) the ground from which he had been taken. He drove out the man and permanently-rested to the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the whirling sword of fire to *shamar* (guard) the way to the tree of life.

Introduction

This fall season, we are looking at the opening eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis, which provides for us a prologue to the entire rest of the Bible. Genesis 1-11 was pieced together by an unknown, master anthologist from Israel’s history for the purpose of preparing us to understand the worldview of Scripture. At the start of this series, I shared that one of the ways we can know the Bible is one unfolding story is because it has an easily recognizable and traceable plot.¹ Genesis 3 is one of the most fundamental chapters in the entire Bible, critical to understanding the *whole* story. Genesis 3 is Act 2 of the drama of Scripture, when rebellion entered God’s kingdom; a rebellion that has since polluted all of humanity.

The Command

In Genesis 2:16-17, God gave the law the Adam; not to Adam and Eve, but to Adam. God first expressed his own act of grace in giving an abundance of food before issuing the command to Adam. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

This brief encounter of God’s first law sets us up for how the Law is presented in the rest of the Bible. The Ten Commandments is not just a list of “do not’s.” “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Therefore you shall have no other gods before me...” Obedience to the Ten Commandments did not get someone access

¹ See my message, “There and Back Again.”

into the family of God; obedience was the response of the person already part of the family of God. There is the controversy of faith and works between Paul and James. Of course, this is a false dichotomy. We are saved by grace through faith and that faith, if authentic, compels us to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:8-10; Rom. 3:28; Jas. 2:24).

Legalism states that one must change their behavior before they can be redeemed. In Israel’s exodus from Egypt, in the remnant’s exodus from Babylon, and in true Israel’s exodus from the dominion of darkness, God’s plan is for his redemption to be the basis for any change in his people’s behavior. A person must belong *before* they can behave; redemption *precedes* transformation. Getting this order wrong will lead either to legalism or to a complete disregard for the Law. Doing good works cannot and will not save you; however, doing good works *is* the response of someone who has *already* been saved. Obedience to the law is a response to grace.

This is how God and Adam’s encounter went in Genesis 2. “You may *freely* eat of *every* tree of the garden, but you shall not eat from [the one tree,] the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” The juxtaposition between abundance and restriction cannot be exaggerated enough. God has just made this massive temple-garden, filled it with all sorts of fruit-bearing trees and has given every single one to his priests to eat, with but one exception. The gift is abundance *par excellence*; the restriction is as diminutive as possible. And God tells Adam why this one tree is restricted: it will kill him.

A few years ago I heard about a socio-psychological study about playgrounds and children. When a teacher led her young students to an open playground nearly all of the children would play with one another as close to the middle of the play structure as possible; few would venture out and those who did frequently made note of the location of their teacher. However, when a teacher led her young students to a playground with a fence around it a significant amount of those children played with one another without touching the play structure at all; they explored the area surrounding the play structure within the boundaries of the fence, and many of the children interviewed afterward forgot their teacher was even there. The study concluded that playgrounds with fenced boundaries receive more play activity per square-inch and foster more creativity in children than open playgrounds. This is one of the purposes of the Law throughout the Bible, but particularly in Genesis 2-3. What the serpent and the world see as restrictive, God sees as protective for fostering *greater* enjoyment.

The Serpent’s Twisting

“You may *freely* eat of *every* tree of the garden, but you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” This becomes the apex to the serpent’s conversation with the woman at the beginning of Genesis 3. “Now the serpent was more shrewd than any beast of the field that the LORD God had made.” The serpent enters the scene as a highly exalted creature, more shrewd, more cunning than any other creature. And this serpent quotes the first phrase of God’s gift with one exception. He switches the word “freely” to “not.” The serpent asked, “Has God indeed said, ‘You may *not* eat of every tree of the garden?’” God in fact said “You may *freely* eat of every tree of the garden.”

The woman does not say “yes” or “no,” but corrects the serpent. The serpent asked, “Has God indeed said, ‘You may not...’” and the woman replied, “We may...” however, in her correction, she leaves out part of the command. She says, “We may eat” not “We may *freely* eat,” and then she says “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden” instead of “We may freely eat of *every* tree of the garden.” The serpent’s subtlety caused her to downplay God’s gift.

Then the woman followed up her correction by repeating the prohibition in God’s first law. In this instance, she says something more than what God first uttered in chapter two. God said, “But you shall not eat from the tree...for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” The woman said, “But of...the tree... ‘You may neither eat it nor shall you touch it, otherwise you will die.’” In her articulation of the Law of God, she removed the severity of the command from “you will *surely* die” to “you will die.” Additionally, instead of “you shall not eat,” she said, “you may neither eat nor shall you touch it.” A huge portion of my master’s thesis is about this little clause; about her addition of touch and how it relates to the food laws in Lev. 11 and Deut. 14 specific to dietary cleanness among priests.² But that’s for another day!

The serpent’s question quotes God’s law *nearly* perfectly. The subtleties lost as a result of the serpent switching just one word head us on a downward spiral leading to outright rebellion. By switching just *one* word and stating it in the form of a question, the serpent has guided the woman to a vulnerable position. It is in this vulnerable position that the serpent strikes. This time the serpent does not ask a question but makes a statement. And whereas the woman removed the severity of the threat of death from “you will surely die” to “you will die,”

² Contrary to these other subtle changes, I argue in my thesis that her addition of “do not touch,” is an addition that conveys her priestly status, relying upon Lev. 11 and Deut. 14, as well as a biblical-theological trajectory.

the serpent has retrieved it to reverse it. God said, “You will surely die,” the serpent said, “You will surely *not* die.” Again, the serpent has made one little adjustment with big significance.

God said that this penalty would happen “on the day that you eat of it.” But after crouching at the door to pounce at the woman, the serpent is now in the clear to give more than one word of difference and it gives the woman an alternative narrative that brings into question the totality of God’s goodness. God said, “For on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” The serpent said, “You will surely *not* die, for God knows that on the day that you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent defines the likeness of God with the knowledge of good and evil. She and her husband were made in the likeness of God, and yet here is the knowledge of good and evil, which is what the serpent defines as the likeness of God. Not only has the serpent caused the woman to downplay God’s gift, he has also caused the woman to question the protective nature of God’s restriction; that God is withholding from her something essential to who she is as a person. And so the serpent tempts her with misdirected virtue, using only slight deviations from God’s word, and she saw the tree was desirable for obtaining wisdom, she took the fruit, she ate the fruit, she gave some to her husband who was silently standing there the entire time, and then he ate also.

Verse 7 begins with striking parallels to the serpent’s assertion: “The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew...” The serpent said their eyes would be open and they would know good and evil. Instead, their eyes were opened and they knew their shame due to knowledge of their nakedness. God returned and the Creator spoke with his creatures in a way that began and ended with the man.

The Promise of Death

But something interesting happened. What did God say would happen on the day that they eat from the tree? “For on the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” Adam went on to live 930 years. There is an apparent discrepancy here that has spurred a mountain of theories through the millennia. The two most prominent in our present age I think are wrong. The first has its roots in the Apocrypha. In *Jubilees* 4, Adam’s death is described as 70 years shy of 1,000, for the stated purpose of affirming God’s prohibition that the “day” he ate of it he would die because after all 1,000 years on earth is like a day to God. This is the view that interprets the prohibition literally but the penalty figuratively. The second is more recent and simply concludes

that the serpent was right. This has even been argued by many well-respected conservative evangelical scholars. They reach this conclusion first because what the serpent said would happen on the day they ate from the tree actually happened: their eyes were opened and they knew... without any mention of the differences between what the serpent said they would know and the actual knowing that resulted. And second, what God said would happen on the day they ate apparently did not happen for 930 years.

So, what actually happened on the day they ate of the forbidden tree? Verse 23—“The LORD God therefore *sent him out* of the Garden...” Verse 24—“God *drove out the man*” and setup the cherubim to guard the door into the Garden. Adam and his wife were exiled from the Garden into Eden. In the HB, thematically speaking, exile *is* death; return from exile *is* resurrection. We get these images in Jeremiah and Ezekiel in particular. When Adam and his wife violated God’s one law, the stated punishment was death that very day, yet they do not *physically* die for many centuries. However, in his punishment *after* the violation, in verse 19, God *also* tells Adam he will return to the dust, which in the HB is an idiom for *physical* death. There would be no reason to introduce physical death as a punishment if physical death is what was originally threatened in the law. Even though both spiritual death and physical death are rooted in Adam disobedience to God’s law, they are nonetheless differentiated in Genesis 2-3. So while all humanity experiences *both* spiritual and physical death, it was *spiritual* death originally threatened in the law, and it is spiritual death in the form of exile or alienation from God’s presence that is clearly worse than physical death.³

We need to allow the Bible to define death on its own terms rather than superimpose on it our definitions of what death is and what death is not. God said on the day they eat they would die. They ate, and that day they were exiled. The HB speaks of exile from God’s presence as spiritual death. Thus, I think the right interpretation of this is to see a correlation between God’s promise of death on the day they eat and the result of exile on the day they ate. The exile of Adam and his wife provides a helpful framework for the other exiles in the story. The exile of Cain to the outer world in Genesis 4 as a result of the egregious crime of murdering an image-bearer of God leads us to Babylon, out of which Abraham is called with a promise of hope to live in a good land. When Israel lives essentially in exile in Egypt, they do so with the promise of life in a good land following their redemption. When Israel is exiled from that land as a result of sin

³ See Cain’s response to exile in Gen. 4, for example.

and they have to live in Babylon, they do so with the promise of return to a good land. And in 1 Peter 1, the apostle calls all of us exiles who live with the promise of the Gospel and the hope that we too will one day live in a good land, a land Revelation describes as a New Eden.

The Promise of Life

Like Abraham coming out of Babylon, like Israel coming out of Egypt, like Israel coming out of Babylon, and like disciples of Jesus today coming out of the dominion of darkness, Adam and his wife were exiled out of the Garden with a promise. “The LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this: Cursed are you more than any livestock and more than every beast of the field. On your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. And enmity I will put between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. You will bruise his heel, but he will bruise your head’” (Gen. 3:14-15).

Whereas the serpent in verse one is exalted higher than all other beasts of the field, in response to his devouring deception he is brought down lower than all other beasts of the field. God will put hostility between the serpent and his minions and the woman and one of her descendants. But then the promise steps away from the woman to key in on this descendant of hers. The hostility between the serpent and the descendant of the woman will be physical. The serpent will bruise her descendant’s foot, but with that same foot her descendant will crush the serpent’s head.

This promise became integral to God’s plan of redemption from here on out. In 1 Tim. 2:12-15, Paul writes about headship in marriage in relation to prayer, and in the form of rabbinic *midrash* he writes the basis for his words as being rooted in Eden: “I do not permit a wife to teach or usurp authority from her husband... For Adam was formed first, then [the woman]. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed. But she will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness.” Paul’s *midrash* on the Eden story begins with creation, moves to rebellion, and finishes with the hope; the hope that she, the woman of Eden, will be saved through childbearing.⁴ How will she be saved through childbearing? Paul is not making a second way to be saved but is rather referring to the promise that one of her descendants will crush the head of the serpent, and that they, Adam and his wife,

⁴ Interpreting this conclusion as a *Midrash* is very debated, as is all of 1 Tim. 2:8-15. For more on this passage, see my message, “Against the ‘Great’ Artemis of the Ephesians.”

must continue in faith. Paul’s commentary is helpful to establish the monumental nature of this promise. For the descendant of the woman to crush the head of the serpent means salvation for those who have faith in the promise of God.

God moves on from cursing the serpent to punishing Adam, concluding with that idiom for physical death: “for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” And immediately after being punished, verse 20 says Adam gave his wife a name. Now if you recall from Genesis 2, it was not good for Adam to be alone; there was no suitable helper corresponding to him, and so God first paraded before him all the animals *in order to see what the man would call them*. Adam gave names to the creatures, which solidified that they were not suitable helpers to him. And then God brought before him the woman he constructed out of his side and he calls her woman because she was, at last, a suitable helper for him. Fast forward, and God has just cursed the serpent and the ground and punished Adam and his wife for their rebellion, and the first thing Adam does is give his wife a name.⁵ God’s last words to him were that he would physically die, but Adam was fixated on the promise of life through one of the descendants of his wife. And so Adam calls her name Eve, because she would be the mother of life. Adam makes a confession of faith in God’s promise of life through her; God’s promise of salvation through the Seed of Eve.

Tracing the Seed to the Gospel

And so the question of Scripture becomes, “Who is the Seed of Eve who crushes the head of the serpent and brings salvation to those who have faith?”

Eve gives birth to a boy named Cain. But instead of crushing the head of the serpent, Cain was enticed by the serpent’s minions to murder Abel. The quest for the seed goes on.

From the line of their next son Seth, we encounter a man named Noah who received grace from God and was saved from the global flood along with his family. But instead of crushing the head of the serpent, Noah was enticed by the serpent’s minions and his nakedness was shamefully exposed in his own garden. The quest for the seed goes on.

Then we meet a man named Abraham who obeys God by leaving Babylon for a good land, to whom God promises will have more descendants than he can count. And so, the quest for the one seed goes on.

⁵ While subtle, Gen. 3 uses the word “curse” *only* against the serpent and the ground. I try to reflect this by distinguishing between two curses and two punishments.

We encounter a man named Moses who is used by God to destroy the serpent-like Pharaoh, but while leading Israel to the good land promised to Abraham, Moses was enticed by the serpent’s minions to disobey God and was thus prevented from entering the good land. At the end of his life he prophesied that a prophet like him but greater than him would come. The quest for the greater seed goes on.

The story leads us to David, king of Israel, a man after God’s own heart. Surely, this king will be the victorious savior for God’s people. But instead of crushing the head of the serpent, David is enticed by the serpent’s minions to pursue violent bloodshed and war, and is prevented from building God’s house of prayer for the nations. The quest for the seed goes on.

One by one we read of David’s royal sons. One by one they take over. One by one, with few exceptions, they make things worse than their father before, propagating idolatry and blatant disobedience to the commands of God. The quest for the royal seed goes on.

Centuries go by and still no savior from the line of David, Abraham, and Eve who successfully crushes the head of the serpent. But then, a man named Jesus entered the scene, introduced by Matthew and Luke as a direct descendant of David, Abraham, and Eve. This Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the serpent, and he was tempted in the same way Eve was tempted: the serpent appeals to Jesus’ virtue and even quotes scripture to enhance his temptation. Unlike Adam and Eve, though, Jesus stands firm against these temptations by quoting Scripture back to the serpent exactly as it appears in the HB, and in ways that fit the original context. This Jesus went to the cross, suffering immensely for our sins; sins he did not commit. Jesus erased the certificate of debt that stood against us with all of its legal demands, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. He publicly disarmed, disgraced, and destroyed the serpent and his minions, triumphing over them through the cross (Col. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8). And God revealed his power by raising Jesus from the dead and sitting him at his right hand in the heavens, far above the serpent and his minions (Eph. 1:20-21). God’s resurrection power was revealed that all who therefore call on the name of Jesus and believe in his resurrection would be forgiven of their sins, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and given the promise that they too will be raised to life to live forever with God in the good land in the age to come (Rom. 4:25; 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Eph. 1:14). The quest for the seed has no need to continue.

Jesus is the seed of Eve. And although the serpent and his minions physically struck Jesus, their crucifixion of him backfired as it was through his very death that Jesus crushed the

head of the serpent, rescuing from the darkness all people from any and every nation who have faith in him (1 Pet. 2:9). Those who have faith in Christ are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), because in Christ there is a new humanity. Whereas all people are born of Adam, all who have faith are born again of Christ.

Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death entered the world through sin, in this way death spread to all people because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23; 5:12). In other words, because of the rebellion of Adam in eating of the tree from which God commanded him not to eat, his rebellion polluted all humanity that followed him. From Cain onward, all humanity has been born with this polluted, sinful nature destined for death. Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in precisely the same way as Adam; for Adam was merely a shadow of the true and better Adam who would come to save hell-bound man (Rom. 5:14).⁶

But the gift of Christ is not like the sin of Adam. For Adam’s sin brought death and judgment, but the grace of Christ overflows even more abundantly, for those who receive the grace will reign with him. For just as through one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so also through the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous, resulting in eternal life (Rom. 5:19, 21). In other words, the obedience of Christ was demonstrated by his pouring out of himself to death to pay for our sins. When we shift from under the headship of Adam to the headship of Christ, the obedience of Christ is transferred to all who have faith. God made Christ who knew no sin become our sin so that we who know no righteousness would become his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21-modified).

If this morning you do not count yourself to be a disciple of Jesus, I invite you to consider the sins in your life and the penalty the Bible says those sins deserve. I invite you to reflect on Paul’s words from Romans 5 where he writes that the proof of God’s love is that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have been justified through his blood, all the more will we be saved from wrath. For if, while we were separated from God, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, then all the more, having already been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Rom. 5:8-1). Put your faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ so that you can be free from the promise of death and receive the promise of life.

Let’s pray.

⁶ Language borrowed from the hymn “Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery” by Matt Boswell and Matt Papa.