

UNIT ONE: THE HUMAN SITUATION

SESSION FOUR: THE DOWNFALL OF HUMANITY AND THE SPREAD OF SIN

Summary of the Fourth Session

Before beginning, I handed out a two-page Creation Review Sheet used in the regular confirmation course.

Humanity's Freedom to Turn Away from God

Because God loves, God created us able to love back. Because we were made to live by the grace of God, which is freely given, we are made to receive it freely, also. To be able to love God back, we must have the capability to refuse to love God. Forced love is not love at all but something else. To be able to receive God's grace freely, we must be able to reject it. Yahweh God made a creature that could rebel and turn away. If we were programmed to obey and unable to do anything else, we would not be the creatures God wanted; we would not be human. If we obeyed out of fear, we would not be free and our obedience would not be real – it would not be from the heart. Then, our responses to God would come from fear, not love. Obedience from fear inevitably breeds resentment and hatred. Even God cannot force love.

Our choice in responding to God is represented in the story of Genesis 2 and 3 by the two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The tree of life represents God's gracious gift of life. We are not immortal, and so human life is a gift which must always be renewed. Life does not reside within us but comes from outside us – from the God who loves us. This tree represents God's grace, the gift of life from which we may freely draw life.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents our other choice. Some biblical scholars regard the knowledge of good and evil as a Semitism – a Hebrew way of saying, “the knowledge of everything,” all knowledge. If that interpretation were correct, the sin in the Garden of Eden would be the Greek sin of *hubris*, which is taking for ourselves what is reserved for the gods. Indeed, an idea similar to that of *hubris* may underlie the legend or saga upon which Genesis 3 is built, but I do not think it interprets the biblical telling of the story correctly. I think there is something more here than just overreaching our rightful limits as human beings. God gave us minds and curiosity to stimulate them.

Interpreters have often understood Eden as a state of innocence; I see it as a state of grace, which is different from innocence. The tempter tries to make it seem God wants to keep the humans

childlike, almost blissfully stupid, but that notion does not fit with the rest of the Old Testament at all. The tempter also tries to make God seem jealous and almost fearful of the humans' potential if their eyes are opened to this forbidden knowledge. I think grace is misinterpreted as innocence, which is then further misinterpreted as naivete.

The Old Testament speaks of a knowledge people must have in order to understand and experience life truly: the knowledge of Yahweh, or knowledge of God. This knowledge is not merely intellectual (knowledge *about* Yahweh God) but relational; it is a knowing that responds to Yahweh our God. It receives life from Yahweh and lives it in trusting response to Yahweh.

I believe the knowledge of good and evil stands in contrast to the knowledge of Yahweh God. The two trees, therefore, represent our acceptance or rejection of God and God's grace. We put off further discussion of the trees and the choices they represent until we had a chance to look at the story.

The Characters and Symbols in Genesis 3

Yahweh God is no longer really the main character in this chapter. The human being and the woman (*ishshah*, his wife) take center stage. She will later be named Eve, which is explained as meaning the "mother of all." So, we have two main characters: one named *the human being*, and the other called *the woman* and, later, named *the mother of all*. The main character is humanity: not just the first two of us, but all of us. We are the *adam* and the *ishshah*; we are Adam and Eve.

We discussed the difference between interpreting this story as literal history of two and just two individuals, the first humans, and understanding it as a parable of the whole human race – all of us. On the lowest level, the latter understanding frees us from such questions as, "Where does Cain (Adam and Eve's son) get his wife?" and, "Of whom is Cain afraid when he complains to God that anyone who comes upon him (after he is driven from the soil) will kill him?" Genesis sees more people around. Cain marries one of them and, later, fears the rest of them. At a higher level, understanding this story as a parable frees us from more serious problems. How could one naive, innocent couple's eating a forbidden piece of fruit one time result in all the horrors and atrocities of history, from child sacrifice to all our wars to the slave ships to the Holocaust to September 11 to the perpetual starvation of millions while others have food to throw away? Would any of us treat our children so? Would we throw them out of the house the first time they disobeyed us? This literalistic interpretation of Genesis 3 seems to make God's grace graceless. If we think Adam and Eve are not us, but just two people in the remote past, we are missing the whole point of the story.

If this story were not in the Bible, upon which the Western literalistic mind has laid incredibly literalistic demands for truth, we would not hesitate to see it for what it is. It is the story of Human Being, his wife, a walking and talking snake, and a magical fruit that promises expanded

life but brings death. Would we take such a story literally? Would we not look for a different and more profound kind of truth in it?

The Garden of Eden itself is a symbol. Eden means “delight.” By the grace of God and within the context of the grace of God, the humans live in a state of delight in life, in each other, and in their God.

The snake is the voice of temptation. Genesis declares the snake the shrewdest or cleverest of all God’s creatures, and the word for shrewd or clever forms a word-play on the word for naked used in the previous sentence (the end of chapter 2). The word play returns when the humans, who thought the fruit would make them shrewd, turn out to be just naked and embarrassed by their nakedness.

Is the snake Satan? No. Many Christian interpreters have thought so, but such an identification belongs to allegory, not parable, and it causes several problems. The concept of Satan as God’s adversary came late in Israel’s history and truly developed in the time between the Old Testament and the New. Even in Job, which itself comes late in Old Testament history, the Satan is still part of the council of God and seems to mean simply the Accuser. Besides, this snake is a creature and an animal God punishes by making it crawl on its belly and “eat dust.” Behind this punishment is surely an *aetiological legend*, which means a legend of the origin of something. The aetiological question would be, “Why do snakes crawl on their bellies and seem to eat dust?” The answer would be that they were cursed by God for some evil they did and made the enemy of humans. Indeed, snakes were the enemies of ancient peoples and a real threat to their children. The worst problem with making the snake into Satan, however, is that it removes responsibility from the humans, making the woman’s excuse much more credible if, after all, she really was seduced, not by temptation to seize something other than the grace of God as her source of life, but by a supernatural Tempter for whom she was no match. No, the snake is not Satan. The snake is the clever one who speaks the voice of temptation. The temptation itself comes from the choice represented by the two trees – from the human capability of rejecting God’s grace and seeking life elsewhere.

The Temptation

First, the temptation calls God into question: “Did God say. . . .” Notice the snake does not call Yahweh by name; it depersonalizes Yahweh, turning God into an object to be questioned and scrutinized (rather than trusted and obeyed in trust).

Interpreters have noticed that the woman adds a prohibition about the tree not found in Genesis 2, where the humans are forbidden to eat the tree’s fruit, but nothing is said about touching or not touching it. Is she becoming a legalist? Is she already adding her own enhancement to the command of God, already interpreting it for herself? Some commentators think so. In many ways, this story could be seen as humanity’s fall *from grace into legalism*.

Next, the snake calls God a liar and a deliberate liar with a sinister motive. No, the woman is told, the humans will not die; rather, God knows (and supposedly fears) that their eyes will be opened as they will become as the *Elohim* are, knowing good and evil. *Elohim* is a plural noun in Hebrew that can mean either God or the council of the divine beings. It can also refer to the divine beings (gods or “the heavenly host”) themselves. Here, it is not clear from the sentence itself whether the tempter is promising the woman she and the man will become as God is or as the divine beings (“gods”) are. The first choice seems to me ridiculous. Only mentally ill people think they can be *the* God, the Creator of the universe. Ordinary people, however, aspire to be as gods to themselves – masters of their own lives and destinies. So, I translate the false promise, “You will be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

It is possible that behind the biblical story lies a legend or saga about an attempt of humans to elevate themselves to divine level. Mythologies have stories of the storming of heaven and the overreaching of mortals. The same type of story probably lies behind the Genesis 11 story of the Tower of Babel (although its meaning is greatly changed in the Bible). In Genesis 3, however, there is no thought that the humans can become like Yahweh (again, notice that the snake avoids naming Yahweh). The idea is for the humans to become more than they are by rejecting the grace of Yahweh God and seizing mastery of their lives for themselves.

The knowledge of good and evil enables us to think we can decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil; we can make our choices, without the grace of God. For this reason, I said earlier that Genesis 3 can be understood as our fall into legalism. Legalists reject God’s grace in favor of knowing for themselves how to judge themselves and other people. They set up codes of good and evil and judge accordingly. They may claim the codes come from God, which to some extent may be true (the Ten Commandments), but when the codes are removed from the context of God’s grace, they no longer belong to God; they belong to the legalists and are used accordingly – to encourage false pride, unnecessary guilt, and judgmentalism.

The sin in Genesis is the humans’ rejection of Yahweh *as their God* and their decision to become *as gods to themselves*. This sin is repeated throughout human history and throughout individual human life. So, we are indeed Adam and Eve, and Genesis 3 is our story.

Is it true? Yes, Genesis 3 is *very true*, much truer than it would be if it were literal. The group discussed this truer understanding of it and agreed it made much more sense when not interpreted literally. The group also noted, however, that a lifetime of conditioning to read it as literal is hard to overcome.

Here’s the hard concept for modern (or postmodern) Westerners – us. We are trained to be literal in our understandings of life. The ancient Israelites were not. They had no concept of our literalism. To them, these stories in Genesis were simply true. They knew they were telling stories, but those stories gave them their sense of their past and their place in the world. For the Israelites, the stories had to be told in terms of Yahweh and adapted to fit Yahweh, the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and made them his own covenant people. So, they retold the stories,

crafting them to fit the truth of Yahweh. For them, no problem. For us, great problem. How can a history be true if it is not literally true? They would not have understood the question and would have thought us quite odd for asking it. We do not think as they thought nor see the world as they saw it. So, we have to analyze the stories and call them parables, which is not quite what they are but it's certainly closer than calling them literal histories of the human race.

One member of the group asked if all the stories in the Bible were “just stories,” with the implication that they were not, which left the real question: How can we tell which are “just stories” that apply to all of us in all times and which tell of actual historical people and events in the specifics of time and place? In other words, if Adam was not a literal individual, was Moses? Did any of the “events” in the Bible actually happen as single events in a specific time and place, or are they all truths about us in general with no single, fixed time and place?

Not all the stories in the Bible are the same kind of literature. Much in the Bible is history and should be read as such, even though it is not the same kind of history people in the West write today. Our history is supposed to be as objective and factual as possible, even though no history actually is objective, and what constitutes a fact is debatable. The history in the Bible makes no pretense to being objective. It is faith's account of what happened, and it is written to encourage faith in its readers. The Bible sees the events through the eyes of faith and tells them with the intention of bringing its audience “into” the event to experience the grace of God and be able to respond in faith. So, for example, the account in Exodus of the night of the final plague (the death of the firstborn sons) is woven together with instructions for celebrating the Passover in all generations of Israel. The night of Israel's historic deliverance from slavery is an event in history, but its presentation in the Bible is by faith for faith; it is written to later generations to bring them into that historic event and make it present for them. So, the Passover Seder begins, “Slaves were we unto Pharaoh in Egypt. . . .” As one of the rabbis put it, each generation of Israel must understand itself as set free by God from bondage. This type of history is much different from our supposedly objective and dispassionate relating of so-called facts. Modern historians realize, of course, they are interpreting past events and movements, and so their presentations of history are not objective, either, but a modern historian is unlikely to tell the story from the perspective of what God did in a past event.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are composed of stories that are not literal at all. We now recognize them as myths, legends, and sagas common in a variety of forms throughout the ancient Near East and even beyond. Genesis re-presents them in terms of Yahweh, the God who liberated Israel from Egypt and made covenant with the people. So, these stories are more like parables than are the tales of David or the accounts of the sins of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Let me put it simply. Was there a David in history? Yes. Did everything in his life happen exactly as the Bible tells it, literally and factually? No. Was there a Great Flood (the story of Noah and the ark)? Probably not, at least not on the magnitude described in Genesis, where the created order itself is undone. Is the story of the Great Flood true? Yes, profoundly so, as we shall see (I hope) in the next session. Literally true? No.

Back to the Story of Temptation and Downfall

The tempter promised the humans an eye-opening experience resulting in their becoming as gods. They do have an eye-opener, and the great new knowledge is their sudden realization that they are naked. The first result of their turning from God is *shame* – they are newly ashamed of themselves and feel the need to hide and cover up. Human life has been very much about hiding and covering up throughout the ages of our history.

Guilt is the bad feeling that I have done something wrong or failed to do something right. Shame is different. Shame is the even worse feeling that I am wrong in myself. I am not as I should be. I am somehow shameful, and so I must hide so no one can see me as I truly am. The humans are no longer at peace with themselves after they have turned from God. No longer are they content to be who they are. Within the grace of God, they could have learned, grown, achieved, and explored. They could have developed their potentials. They did not have to remain as innocents, as children. But they have chosen to seize their potential for themselves, to snatch life away from God. So, now they live in contradiction to themselves, being no longer as they were created to be.

The Other Results of Sin: the Spoiling of All Our Human Relationships

First, the man blames Yahweh for giving him the woman. What a wimp! He had delighted in her and loved her. He had been so grateful to God for her. They had been partners in life, complementing each other as each other's "like but opposite." Now, he rejects her, even though they will stay together. The harmony of love and mutual respect is broken. Nevertheless, they still need each other and will even love each other, but the relationship will not be as God intended it.

The woman will have pain in childbirth, but her desire will still be for her husband, and he will lord it over her. Without true *harmony*, the family adopts *order*. Authority replaces mutual respect. Power enters the relationships of love. The need and desire for each other continue, but now they come with a price. Birth pangs are not the only pain between the generations. Along with the gender gap comes the generational gap. One generation will hurt the other in many ways. Grief becomes a reality of love and of our need for each other. Resentment will infect all relationships in human life.

The woman blames the snake, and their offspring will be hostile to each other. Humans are no longer at home in the natural world nor compatible with its other creatures.

The man is alienated from the soil – the *adam* from the *ad'mah*. Mark Twain called Adam our great benefactor for winning us the "curse" of work. Work is not the curse. Hostility between humanity and nature is the curse and, with it, the frustration of unproductive, unfulfilled toil. Our harmony with creation is gone, and we and creation will both suffer for it.

The humans are driven from the tree of life, but God still cares for them. There will still be grace for us, but we will not live in the pure state of grace. God is not finished with the humans but must deal differently with them now, because they have become as gods to themselves and toward each other.

If the humans were always mortal and lived only by God's gracious gift of life, is death really a result of sin, or is it a natural part of creation? Taken as a whole, the Bible certainly rejects death as God's will for human beings; nonetheless, it would seem that even in the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, human beings were always subject to death and lived only by the grace of God. Indeed, the human is warned not to eat of the fruit of this one tree because, on the day he eats of it, he will die. So, death already exists, at least as a consequence for turning from the grace of God. The consequence of turning to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may be seen more profoundly in light of this statement from a New Testament commentator: "For Paul, death is not simply the cessation of life but, because it came through sin, the negation of life." (Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 567,568.)

Sin Spreads and Deepens: Chapters 4-11.

We discussed briefly the stories which show sin spreading and deepening:

Cain and Abel	Genesis 4:1-16
Lamech	Genesis 4:19-24
The Sons of God and the Daughters of Humanity	Genesis 6:1-4
The Tower of Babel	Genesis 11:1-9

In the story of Cain and Abel, we see sin grow into jealousy which leads to murder which, in turn, leads to revenge as a way of life. Notice how much harder, more callous Cain has become than his parents: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yahweh God marks Cain as a man who will take revenge upon anyone who wrongs him. The descendants of Cain will take seven-fold (extreme) revenge for any wrong done to them.

Lamech, a descendant of Cain, raises the level of revenge and brutality to seventy-seven fold (unlimited). Lamech represents those tribes who made warfare and slaughter into a way of life and were proud of it. See Genesis 4:23,24 where he boasts to his wives of his belligerent exploits. We discussed Jesus as the counter-Lamech. When Peter asks him if he must forgive his brother as many as seven times (extreme), Jesus tells him he must forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven times (unlimited). Jesus sets a movement of forgiveness against the age-old movement of vengeance. Cain and Lamech embody a spirit of revenge as pervasive in the modern world as in the ancient; Jesus embodies a spirit of forgiveness that seeks to mend broken relationships and heal the wounds we inflict upon each other.

Someone in the group remarked that neither way seems to work to stop violence and brutality. So, we discussed forgiveness and what it really is and is not. I suggested that forgiveness had to be more than just excusing or passing off the offense – that it had to deal with the offense and the offender to rectify the situation. Still, the person who made the remark was correct. Forgiveness as a tactic will not work by itself, although revenge is almost guaranteed to escalate hostilities. The Lamechs of the world will walk all over anyone who tries to forgive them. The relationship with God needs to be restored. In relationships based upon God’s grace, forgiveness becomes much more effective. Nonetheless, we are committed by Jesus to showing grace even where none is offered back. It is his way. It is the way of the cross.

The brief and strange story about the sons of God lusting after the daughters of men is, no doubt, based upon an ancient legend or saga about a sexual mixing of gods and humans. Greek and other mythologies have plenty of such stories, and often the hanky panky results in heroes such as Hercules. In Genesis, however, the mighty men (*Nephilim*) are not said to have been born of these unholy unions but only to have been on the earth at the time. The point seems to be that sin corrupted the entire created order – earth and heaven.

The story of the Tower of Babel appears to have its origins in a myth about the storming of heaven, but Genesis reduces it greatly. The great tower is pathetic – made of mud and primitive mortar. It is so tiny Yahweh comes “down” to see it. As one commentator puts it, God is not nearsighted; the story is telling us how small the great work is. Behind this story also lies an aetiological legend about the origins of humanity’s many languages – Why do those other people speak that way? – but in Genesis the message is different. The conclusion seems to be that, as many and great as are the atrocities people commit in our division into races, peoples, and nations, the evil would be even worse if we were united. That’s a rough conclusion, but it shows the depth and power of evil in a world turned away from God’s grace. Divided, we do evil; united, we would do even greater evil.

Now, we are ready to enter history. First, however, we will look at a crisis revealed in the story of the Great Flood so we will be prepared for the way God enters history.