

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART II, SECTION II

THE FALL AND FIRST PROMISE OF REDEMPTION

I. Genesis chapter 3 then describes the Fall, which is both a specific event and an allegory of all sin.

A. Having described creation as good, the book of Genesis must now answer the question of how evil came into the world. Chapter 3, building on the themes of the garden and the trees in chapter 2, addresses this question.

B. God has given only one command, that of not eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. That term "knowledge of good and evil" would have several meanings. It could mean knowledge of all things, that is, the full space between good and evil. It could also mean an experiential knowledge of the good. Or it could mean trying to take on the ability to name good and evil and thus control them. In any case, the tree serves as a test.

C. The scene begins with a complementarity between man and woman in harmony, with Adam organizing the animals and welcoming Eve from God, and Eve helping Adam to love. As the scene develops, Adam falls largely by omission; for he fails to uphold his masculine role of protecting Eve and upholding God's commandment. Eve falters mostly by commission; for she tries to take control of the situation, forgetting to call upon either God or Adam, and she falls for the serpent's trick of leaving the greater good for the love of lesser things.

1. In general, men tend more to want to protect the status quo, or at least fix problems. Thus, the temptation for Adam is more towards not doing anything, not rocking the boat by challenging the serpent or Eve. Women tend to want to improve people and things. Thus, the temptation is more for Eve to listen to the serpent and see if she cannot improve on their lot.

2. In this context, we can understand St. Paul's advice to married couples, which emphasizes obedience more for the woman (for women, like Eve, tend to want to be involved in people's lives more) and love more for the man (for men, like Adam, tend to have more trouble showing love, and can think of themselves as just if they simply do not harm others.)

II. The Bible describes the temptation and Fall in very brief, but very profound, order.

A. serpent shows up as the cleverest of all animals. Adam and Eve are innocent, but are clearly not forced into sin; they receive a temptation and choose how to respond.

1. There is often a debate about whether the human author meant the serpent to be a natural creature, or Satan. The Books of Wisdom and Revelation clearly present this serpent as Satan. See Wis. 2:24; Rev. 12:9. Some commentators argue, however, that there was no concept of Satan that early on in Jewish thought. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the early Jews did not draw a clear distinction between earthly and spiritual beings, and would not have seen any point in asking whether the serpent was an animal or an angel. The passage clearly presents him as more than a normal animal, for he can speak and apparently stand up straight (for the punishment of crawling is doled out later.)

2. The word here nachash could also mean a dragon. And as described in Revelation 12, the serpent is a dragon and thus potentially terrible and threatening, which partially explains why Adam does not challenge him. But he is also seductive and persuasive; he would probably rather use deception, but would likely have resorted to threats in the end. He is described as the cleverest of the animals, but not necessarily more clever than Adam and Eve.

3. The serpent also had two very different meanings in pagan literature. On the one hand, as Dr. Leon Kaas points out the serpent was often a symbol of human wisdom (in the positive direction) or slyness, in the negative. But they could also be symbols of unrestrained appetite. See The Beginning of Wisdom 81-82. On the other hand, as Pope Benedict said, it was also a symbol used in pagan fertility cults, to which the Jews were often attracted. See In the Beginning 65-66.

B. Adam and Eve's nakedness is symbolic of their innocence and openness to each other. Jewish commentary portrayed them as clothed with the light of glory. The Book of Revelation picks up on this imagery in describing the "woman clothed with the sun," which can be seen as an image of Mary or the Church. See Rev. 12:1.

1. If they were clothed with the light of glory, the loss of that glory would explain why after the Fall they realize they were

naked.

2. There is a play on words here. The serpent is described with the Hebrew term *aram*, which means subtle, clever, or crafty. Adam and Eve are described with the Hebrew term *arom*, which means nakedness. This notion reflects innocence and a reflection of their natural glory.

C. The serpent tempts Eve and then Adam in a way that is typical of all temptation.

1. First, the serpent distorts God's commandment, asking whether God forbade eating the fruit of any of the trees, which suggests that God did not want Adam and Eve to enjoy anything. It is classic of tempters to misconstrue God's commandments making them seem more difficult than they are.

- The serpent refers to God simply as *Elohim*, not *Yahweh*, as the text does. *Yahweh* is the sacred name of God, so sacred to ancient Jews that only the high priest would pronounce it once a year, could not be pronounced by the serpent.

2. Second, Eve (and the silent or absent Adam) do not turn to God in prayer at this time of temptation, but instead rely on their own power. Spurred on by a natural desire to correct the error, Eve engages in a dialogue the serpent.

- Even here, she makes three mistakes. Most obviously, she gets the command a little confused by saying God forbade even touching the fruit on penalty of death; He had forbidden only eating it. Second, more subtly and more importantly, she forgets about the Tree of Life when she says that God prohibited eating from the tree in the middle of the garden. For there were two trees there, one forbidden and one life-giving. Even more subtly and more importantly, she only thinks about the prohibitions, not God's generosity in providing all of the other trees, including the Tree of Life. While not falling for the full error, she subtly and unconsciously buys into the focus on prohibitions, not gifts.

3. Third, the serpent maligns God's intentions, saying the God really just wanted to keep Adam and Eve ignorant and less than they could be. He does not present one bit of evidence for this contention, and in fact it does not make any sense, for God could have just as easily not put the tree there in the first place. But tempters rarely use clear reasoning.

4. Fourth, the serpent appeals to her pride, which is the root of all evils; he awakens in Adam and Eve a desire to be like God in deciding what is good and what is evil.

- After eating the fruit, they do in one sense become like God, knowing good and evil, as God Himself affirms in verse 22. However, the progress is not in keeping with God's plans and thus comes at a terrible price. It is the essence of pride, the queen of the vices, to desire and grasp at an excellence one is not meant to have and to be independent of God. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, question 162, article 1, 8.

- The serpent thus mixes true and false together to make the temptation more deceptive. A flatly false statement is often easy to detect, while an admixture of truth and falsity can be more tempting.

5. Fifth, the fruit of the tree appeals to Eve in three classic ways: it is good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. There is an appeal to sensual desire, the attractiveness of worldly beauty, and intellectual vanity. Sense pleasure, false beauty, and vanity are ever sources of temptation.

6. There is probably also a subtle threat. For, when the serpent says that they will not die if they eat of the fruit of the tree, there may well be an implication that he will be sure they die if they do not. God would have presumably protected them, and the Tree of Life seems to be a guarantee of that protection. But they neglect to turn to him.

- The serpent does not make this threat directly, probably because doing so would have forced Adam, as a matter of honor, to oppose him. Rather, by subtly introducing the threat, he probably gets Adam to believe that he can intervene later.

7. Once Eve falls, Adam simply goes with the flow. His sin comes from a lack of courage. First, he fails to help Eve by confronting the serpent. Second, he fails to instruct Eve, simply letting her make a choice in ignorance. And third, once she falls, he refusing to try to get her to repent, instead going along with her.

8. Eve's failure is the failure of prayer. She engages the serpent in conversation and lets her curiosity tempt her. Adam's sin is more bluntly a matter of cowardice. He fails to instruct and defend Eve; he fails to take on the serpent, very possibly out of a fear of death; and he fails to resist when she tempts him.

D. After the fall, Adam and Eve are then ashamed to be with God. It is systematic of the devil to persuade a person that a sin is minor or even acceptable before the fact, but then after the sin, to use a sense of shame to keep the person from turning back to God.

1. Now the light of glory is gone and the nakedness of Adam and Eve is revealed. They thus make a foolish effort to hide from God. As Jesus will say later, those who do evil deeds seek darkness as cover. See John 3:19-21.

2. It is clear that Adam and Eve had been used to conversing with God on friendly terms; those terms are now gone because of their sin.

- They do receive a knowledge of good and evil, but that knowledge leads to shame.

3. Even after the sin is clear, God gives Adam and Eve the first opportunity to speak, asking them where they are and then why they acted the way they did.

a. The question of where they are is not only physical, as they think, but also spiritual. God is calling upon them to reflect upon where they are with Him.

b. Adam and Eve do not try to argue that their actions are right, for in the presence of God, this argument is no longer tenable. In a similar way, actions that seem acceptable when one is ignoring God become clearly wrong in His presence. Rather, recognizing the evil of their actions, they make excuses. These excuses are not actual lies, but they are rather irrelevant and evade the real issue, their free choice to sin.

- Adam blames both Eve for tempting him and God for creating Eve, not recognizing his own fault. Eve seems to think that the fact that she was tempted is an excuse.

III. God then describes the consequences of sin, but also a note of hope. These statements of God could be considered a punishment inflicted by God, or simply the natural result of sin.

A. God first punishes the serpent in two ways, by making him crawl on the ground and eat dirt and by the promise that his head will be crushed by the woman or her offspring.

1. The punishment of crawling on the ground, on one level, represents the literal meaning that snakes, a symbol of the devil, crawl, rather than walk, as perhaps ancestors of snakes did, and certainly as mythical dragons would. At a deeper level, the devil's abilities are limited precisely because of man's reduced ability to access the spiritual realms; his main attack will now have to be concentrated at a lower level.

2. The punishment of war between the serpent and the woman and his offspring and hers implies defeat for the serpent, for he can strike only at the heel, while the woman and her offspring strike at his head. We can now see the fulfillment of this punishment in the devil's ability to kill Jesus Christ in the physical body, but His final triumph over the devil. As the Vatican II Council said, "The earliest documents, as they are read in the church and are understood in the light of further and full revelation, bring the figure of a woman, mother of the Redeemer, in a gradually clearer light. Considered in this light, she is already prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of a victory over the serpent which was given to our first parents after the Fall." Lumen Gentium 55; see Rev. 12.

3. It is noteworthy that the punishment of the serpent, and the implication of final victory over him, is placed before the punishment of Adam and Eve. God's saving power is greater than the punishment that comes from His justice.

B. God describes to the woman two related results of the sin, pain in childbirth (representing the difficulty of raising children generally) and pain in relations with men. The focus is on a conflict between people, the difficulty in loving others. Obviously men also suffer from strained relationships, but the desire for relationships is greater for women, and thus this punishment falls more on women than on men.

C. God punishes Adam in three related ways: (1) work will be more toilsome; (2) the earth will no longer obey him; and (3) he will die. Once again, women also suffer from these things. However, because of men's greater desire for accomplishment in making things, frustration in work and weakness leading to death is generally more difficult to take.

1. Earth itself suffers because of man's misdeeds. See Rom. 8:19-23. Sin has consequences in all of creation.

- If Eve would become subject to Adam from whom she was taken, Adam will become subject to the earth, from which he was taken.

2. The renewal under Christ would both restore human relations and creation itself, so that the effects of original sin are beginning to be reversed. See, e.g., Rom. 8:19-23; Col. 1:19-20.

D. Soon after the punishments, however, things begin to turn around.

1. First, Adam and Eve seemingly reconcile, with Adam now naming Eve, whose name means mother. She receives this title even before giving birth; Adam is beginning to see her in a new light, and looks for children to make up for at least part of what is lost by sin.

2. God also provides for Adam and Eve by providing them garments and settling them in the East.

3. Even the punishment of taking away the Tree of Life is presented in the context of limiting the potential evil people can do.

a. In taking away the Tree of Life, God once again refers to Himself as "We," which could be an early hint of the Trinity.

b. God says that the man and woman have become like gods (elohim) in knowledge, but not in love. There has been an increase in power without an increase in holiness, leading to a very dangerous situation that death must limit.

- c. One might reasonably ask why Adam and Eve did not eat from this tree at the beginning. One likely reason is that they did not know of its properties or the need for it; this knowledge would only be available if they passed the test regarding the Tree of Knowledge. Another possibility is that, when tested, they procrastinated, not taking advantage of God's gifts when available.

 - d. The image of a tree of life will appear again in the Book of Proverbs, which describes wisdom and virtue as trees of life in a metaphorical sense. See Prov. 3:18, 11:30. The Book of Revelation presents again the tree of life, both as a reward God has reserved for the victor and as a part of the heavenly Jerusalem. See Rev. 2:7, 22:2, 14. Christian thought presents the Cross as the new tree of life.

 - e. Here, the Bible presents angels (a cherubim) for the first time, guarding the garden of Eden.
4. It appears that Adam and Eve also reconciled with God, for after the birth of their first son, they give thanks to Him. It is generally thought in Christian tradition that Adam and Eve died in God's grace.