

Genesis 3:1-7, 15, 24; Revelation 22:1-2¹
Temptation, Fall, Salvation

Introduction

Genesis 1 tells us that when God finished with creation, He declared it “very good”. On that day there was no crime, no poverty, no sickness, and no death. There were no broken homes, no drug pushers, and no murderers. What God created was pure and pristine in its beauty. The whole earth was such a place of peace and harmony that even human beings could live together with wild animals. In short, the world as it came from the hand of God was paradise on earth.

Obviously something has gone wrong with that same world because all those things that were not there then are found in abundance today. What happened to peace and harmony? Now we have bombs powerful enough to kill hundreds of thousands of people at any one time. What happened to the earthly paradise God created? The Bible answers that question with this one word—“sin”. Sin has entered the world and nothing has been right ever since.

The Bible does not tell us everything we might like to know about sin. For example, we are not clearly told where sin came from in the beginning. The serpent suddenly shows up in Genesis 3 with no introduction at all. He’s simply there in the garden.

As we approach our text today, it’s useful to keep two things in mind.

- First, this is true and not fake history; not myth or legend. It is the true account of the first temptation and the first human sin.
- Second, this account also warns us about how the devil still tempts us today.

With that in mind, let’s first examine carefully the workings of the temptation in Eden.

I. The temptation came subtly and unexpectedly (Gen 3:1a).

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.

There are some things we know and some things we don’t know about this account. We know that the serpent is the devil identified in Revelation 12:9. But how did the devil gain entry into the garden? How could a serpent talk? My answer is: “I don’t know for sure. The Bible simply doesn’t give us enough information to answer these questions with certainty.” So I take it that these are not matters of utmost importance, or else God would have told us.

¹ 1984 NIV

I think it's clear that Eve had no idea what was about to happen. But why then should she be concerned? She's quite literally in paradise. She wasn't expecting to encounter a talking serpent, or to be tempted to sin. She wasn't looking for the serpent, but the serpent was definitely looking for her.

The serpent was truly cunning in his approach. Temptation generally comes when we least expect it. After all, if temptation gives us a warning call, we'd be much better prepared. And the fact that the serpent showed up in the garden leads me to this caution: when everything is going well in your life, beware! You may be a prime target for satanic attack. When everything is going well, keep your guard! You are likely to be attacked because when the good times roll, our guard is down and we become prime targets for the evil one.

And temptations can come in very insidious forms, even like an innocent conversation.

II. The temptation began with a conversation of controversy (Gen 3:1b-3).

He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,

but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

The serpent's question is this: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" That's a cunning move. After all, Eve seemingly was not present when God spoke to Adam. She had to rely on her husband's explanation. The question itself plays on the word "really". One translation puts it this way: "Really? Did God really say ...". The question boils down to this: how well did Eve know the Word of God? As we shall see, she knew it quite well, but not well enough. She had a general idea of what God said but was hazy of the details. And the serpent took advantage of that.

In her response, Eve made two mistakes.

- First, she added to the prohibition. God had forbidden them to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But Eve added the phrase, "you must not touch it".
- Second, she downplayed the judgment for disobedience. God had said, "You will certainly die." But Eve said, "You will die." Again, this is a subtle yet significant shift of emphasis.

Eve had to get her information from Adam, and that means either Adam incorrectly relayed what God had said, or Eve misunderstood it, or she changed it on her own.

Here's how Eve got into trouble:

- First, she was hazy about the truth of God's Word.
- Second, she shouldn't have been discussing God's Word with the serpent in the first place. Those who think they are an equal match for the devil will soon find out they were sadly mistaken.

So we learn from this that when we are tempted, don't stop to talk it over with the evil one; don't negotiate with him. Talk it over with God.

Our best defence against temptation will always be an accurate knowledge of the Word. Read it! Know it! Understand it! Memorize it! Quote it when the devil knocks at our door.

A temptation entertained often sows unhealthy doubt in the mind and wrong desire in the heart.

III. The temptation instilled unhealthy doubt and desire (Gen 3:4-6a).

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.

"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

At this point, the serpent openly denied what God had said. In the Hebrew, the expression literally reads like this—"Not, you shall surely die." The serpent took the very phrase God used and put the word "not" in front of it. He's not only smarter than us, he knows God's Word through and through. He just doesn't believe it and is bent on disobeying it.

The devil in the garden denied God's judgment. God said, "You will certainly die." The devil said, "You will not certainly die." Why did he deny God's judgment? The answer is simple: if he can convince you that you can get away with sin, sooner or later you're going to do it. And if you think that no one will know, no one will notice, no one will ever call you to account for your actions, you'll eventually give in. If there are no consequences for sin, there is no reason not to indulge in it.

Then the serpent questioned God's goodness. He implied that God was holding back something good from Eve—"You will be like God". What an incentive that is. Why not? Who wouldn't want to "be like God"? The serpent's words were designed to cause Eve to feel deprived and short-changed by God.

Satan promises liberation through rebellion. Thus, every temptation is a lie wrapped in a promise of freedom. Satan is the father of lies, and Eve fell right into his lies.

- She listened when she shouldn't have listened.
- She talked when she shouldn't have talked.
- She thought about what the devil said when she should have ignored it.

Her response reveals how clever the devil is. He trapped her at three different levels.

- The fleshly level—the fruit was good to eat. That's the lust of the flesh.
- The visual level—the fruit looked beautiful to her. That's the lust of the eyes.
- The spiritual level—eating the fruit would make her “like God, knowing good and evil”. That's the spiritual covetousness in mere human beings.

If we don't want to get trapped, don't start to fondle forbidden fruit; don't spend time thinking about how nice it would be, or how good it would feel, or how much we deserve it.

We play this game in so many ways even today:

- “I know God says sexual infidelity is wrong, but I really do love him/her and God surely wants me to be happy.”
- “I know God says cheating is wrong, but everyone else does it in some ways. So why can't I?”

On and on we go, offering one rationalization after another. Be forewarned—when you start to say, “I know God says this ... BUT ...,” temptation is already knocking at your door.

There are several crucial lessons here:

- When we doubt God's goodness, sin won't seem so sinful.
- Satan wants you to feel deprived by God.
- We can always justify disobedience if we try hard enough.

Truly, there is nothing new under the sun. What the serpent did to Eve, he still does so today because this strategy still works. And the sad thing is that every temptation will lead us to some result that hurts us and displeases God.

IV. The temptation resulted in disaster (Gen 6b-7).

She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Eve had by now joined the serpent's team. By giving the fruit to Adam, she was doing the serpent's dirty work for him—she was dragging her husband down with her. That's what happens when we yield to temptation. We never fall alone—others are affected in some ways by our rebellion and disobedience, especially people close to us. They can end up as fellow perpetrators or as victims of our rebellion and disobedience.

By the way, where was Adam when all this was going on? The text says he was “with her”. That sounds like he was standing right by her side while she was talking to the serpent. Maybe he was enjoying the intellectual sparring that took place between the serpent and his wife. If Adam had been a true spiritual leader and sensing how the serpent was tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, he should have taken the initiative to rebuke the serpent and stop his wife. The world would have been a better place if he had taken leadership.

Eve was tricked by the devil. Perhaps he came to her because he knew he could appeal to her emotions. But Adam was not deceived. He had heard the original command from God and he knew it was wrong to eat the fruit. He wasn't tricked at all. He was God's line of defence but he didn't hold up. Some may think that the first human sin in Eden was when Eve took the first bite of the forbidden fruit. But I believe the first human sin in Eden was when Adam failed to exercise his God-given leadership to stop Eve from biting the forbidden fruit. Even worse, he joined the party and took the second bite! Yes, Adam didn't play his part as leader of the first human pair in Eden. That's why Romans 5:12 says that sin entered through Adam. He should have known better; he should have exercised leadership to protect God's “very good” creation in Eden. But he didn't. And the rest is history.

Eve truly thought that she would gain enlightenment. But when her eyes were opened, she suddenly knew she was naked. And Adam's eyes were also opened and he too knew he was naked. Innocence was gone forever. Now the full impact of their disobedience began to hit home. Now they were ashamed to see each other naked. Quickly they made a hasty covering of fig leaves for themselves. But sinners can never adequately cover up their own sin.

We see here the loss of Paradise Eden. But praise to God—we also capture a glimpse of the light of hope for humanity.

V. There's a glimpse of the light of God's salvation after the Fall (Gen 3:15, 24; Rev 22:1-2).

God said to the serpent in Gen 3:15 – “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Gen 3:15 has long been called the “First Gospel” in the Bible because it is the first prediction of the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the first readers of Genesis would not have fully understood it this way, this verse predicts an ultimate showdown between Satan and Jesus. At the cross, Satan would “strike his heel”—a prophecy fulfilled literally when the nails were driven through Jesus' feet at the cross. But Jesus would crush the head of Satan (symbolizing a fatal blow) by rising from the dead on the third day. Satan's defeat was predicted from the beginning.

As we come to the closing verses of Genesis 3, it's worth noting that this is about the last scene related to the Garden of Eden. Though it will be referred to a few more times in the Old Testament, Eden simply vanishes from the biblical story. When we get to the end of Gen 3, the door to this earthly paradise has been slammed shut. Innocence is gone and the blessed days in Eden are just a distant memory.

Gen 3:24 – “After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Here, we find Adam and Eve had been cast out of Eden. They were never to return. The flaming sword flashed in all directions to remind them that the way back was blocked to them from that day onwards. The door was closed and they could never return on their own.

As a result, humanity is now separated from God because of sin. All appears hopeless and lost until we consider one important fact. As the curtain lowers for the final time on Eden, our last view is that of the cherubim and the flaming sword guarding the entrance ... but somewhere in the distance, the Tree of Life still stands!

Notice this—the tree is guarded but it is NOT chopped down! The whole truth of salvation hangs on that point. If God had destroyed the Tree of Life, none of humanity would be saved ever since the first human pair was cast out of Eden.

Rev 22:1-2 - “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

The “tree of life” reappears in the last book and last chapter of the Bible! And where are the cherubim guarding it? They are gone. Where is the flaming sword? It is nowhere in sight. Aha! Now the Lord has opened the way back to the Tree of Life. It is now opened to all nations—not only for viewing (like tourists visiting our Gardens by the Bay), but most importantly, for healing.

How has this happened? What has made the difference? When Jesus died on the cross, the great veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. That veil—the one with the cherubim behind it—the veil that constantly reminded the Jews that they could not come into God's presence on their own, was torn in two. The message is clear as crystal—through Jesus Christ, the way to God is now open to all humanity. It is not a picture of paradise lost, but paradise again.

That's why the Tree of Life appears at the end of the Bible; at the end of the history of this fallen world. Christ has opened the door to heaven, and through Him and by Him and in Him, anyone who wants to can come into paradise again. It is not a picture of sin, but of salvation.

Conclusion

How did Adam and Eve end up so disastrously? It was a series of little steps in the wrong direction.

- Eve should never have listened to the serpent. She should have known God's Word accurately. And she should never have spent time thinking about how wonderful the fruit looked and how much fun it would be to have a bite.
- Adam should have intervened to stop her. But he didn't. She ate and he ate. She ate because she was deceived; he ate because he was deliberate. That's why God called out his name first after the Fall—"Adam! Adam! Where are you?" God made him first answerable to Him though Adam did not take the first bite. He failed to hold and guard his line of defence.

All these small missteps added up to one huge catastrophe that still haunts the world today. Beware—we fall into the big hole of sin because we choose to trip ourselves over small pebbles of disobedience.

Indeed, sin often works like that—it gives short-term pleasure, BUT long-term pain. Sin has its delights. It's fun for the moment. But there's an awful price to pay which will affect you and even others. Sin is much like living extravagantly on credit. You can live like a king for a few months, but the bills are going to come due. Then you have to pay up.

How then shall we live?

1. *Affirm the authority of God's Word.* Satan always works to undermine the authority of God's Word. If we take away the authority of the Word, we sail on a sea of moral relativism with no rudder. We must all submit to God's Word, no matter how challenging. Since Satan uses deception and lies, we need to be cautious about any "new" faith belief and practice. E.g. the world proclaims self-esteem and is glutted with books on how to accept and love yourself (even when your life is filled with sin). Yes, the church must exercise grace, but at the same time, be cautious about every form of perversion under the banner of "grace".

2. *Affirm God's goodness and sovereignty as revealed in His Word.* Satan will try, through discouragement or disappointment, to get us to doubt either God's goodness or sovereignty. If we so doubt, then Satan would have gotten us—we would either believe that God is all good but not all powerful, or He is all powerful but not all good. This is only a short step to disbelief and disobedience towards God. We have to hang on by faith to God's goodness and sovereignty in spite of seemingly contradictory and difficult circumstances.
3. *Affirm the reality of God's judgment.* The fact that judgment is not immediate does not mean that it is not certain. The fact that Adam and Eve did not drop dead after eating the fruit did not mean that God's judgment was a bluff. In fact, they did die immediately ... but in a spiritual sense—their fellowship with God was broken, they were eventually banished from Eden, and they henceforth lived life filled with hard labour and pain. Indeed, grace does not eliminate the principle of sowing and reaping, even for Christians.

Summing up:

- We see temptation and Fall in Gen 3. But after the Fall, we read of God's promise of salvation and catch a glimpse of paradise restored in the light of the First Gospel. Thousands of years later, the Lord Jesus Christ (the promised seed of the woman in Gen 3) came to earth to die for us. The evil of that day was not overcome until Jesus Christ died for all of us on the cross. It took His death to reverse the impact of what happened in Eden.
- We learn from this that our God is a God of justice. He takes sin seriously and judges it sternly. But He is also a God of mercy, who in the midst of judgment, closes a door for our own good so that in His time, He might make a way for us to return or go to Him.
- God clothed Adam and Eve in Gen 3:21 just before they were cast out of Eden—this picture goes beyond the need for garments. It is a beautiful illustration of what God would do through Jesus Christ—i.e. to provide salvation for all who stand before Him naked in their sin. And where once the cherubim barred the way into His presence, in Jesus Christ this same door has been thrown wide open into God's presence. Those who believe and receive Jesus Christ into their lives can now come before God not with nakedness in sin, but clothed with righteousness in Christ.

God will and must punish sin, but at the same time, He extends His grace and mercy so that sinners can have a hope of returning or going to Him in Jesus Christ. Amen!