

SNAKE EYES

by Steve Zeisler

In this series we've been studying the opening chapters of Genesis. All stories of origins have the same problem. We don't really know what it was like. Because we are so familiar with what is, our imaginations fail us when we try to picture something coming into being that never existed before. We also cannot imagine human life as described in Genesis 1-2 real moral purity in which nothing is tainted by sin and sorrow. We can't imagine spiritual integrity in which there is no pride in our spirits that cuts us off from God. We can't imagine nakedness without shame. And so we read, wonder, and learn, but we are gazing at the unfamiliar.

Beginning in chapter 3, however, we have come to territory that we don't have to work hard to imagine. What is it like to fall victim to temptation? What is it like to be deceived by the deceiver and find ourselves making sinful choices that we horribly regret later? This is familiar to all of us. But here, too, we have a great deal that we can learn.

I am convinced that one of the most compelling apologetics for the Christian faith in the Bible is its vision of human tragedy. The Bible is absolutely resolute in telling us of our problem, of our capacity to hope, our longing for what is right, and our repeated efforts that fall short of it. When Christians tell the truth of what it means to be sinners who need a Savior, they will find a resonating response in everybody they talk to. Hearers may not believe, but everybody knows what it's like to be in need. Everybody knows, if they are honest, that there is something wrong with them that requires fixing.

I make the same mistakes over and over again. Why is that? I know something is a bad idea, and yet there is always some clever rationalization that crops up to persuade me to do it again. I make plans to get over my procrastination problem. I'm going to have a solid quiet time with the Lord daily. And I'm going to be disciplined about the way I approach my work and do things in order. I'm going to take this diet seriously and that exercise plan seriously. But whatever it is, I find myself discovering some way to not do what I intend to do. I decide that I will be ruthless with thoughts of lust, resentment, or anger. Yet my ruthlessness fades quickly and those thoughts gain a foothold. I noticed the other day in a bookstore how easy it is for me to buy books I know I will never read. I like to consider myself an educated man with a thirst for knowledge, but I own many more books than I will ever read. Why do I do the same foolish thing over and over?

Why does history repeat itself from generation to generation? Why do prejudices keep recurring? Why do dormant hatreds erupt and old rationalizations come back with new accents? Why is man-made religion a story of the same cycle over and over again? Some guru speaking up in every generation claims to know things that are exactly the same things that the guru of the previous generation claimed to know, and yet they are hailed as new and brilliant. Adultery, racism, violence, self-promotion—all of these recur in a new garb time after time. Why?

The text we're going to read now in Genesis 3:1-7 answers these questions.

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

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you

eat of 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. 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.

We're going to look at the results of this choice in the next message. The main focus of our attention here will be the process of temptation. What logic, what persuasions, does the deceiver offer that suggest that we should not listen to God, that we should make choices that are ruinous? Hopefully, having learned these things, we will find ourselves in a position to believe God and trust him to make us different.

Two Things We Don't Need To Know

Before we look at the discussion between the serpent and the woman, let me note two questions that are conspicuously unanswered in this account. The first is where the serpent came from. The text has declared that God made everything and it was good. The man and woman loved each other, and they loved God. The stars, the moon, the sun, and the earth were where they ought to be. The animals all had their names. Then out of nowhere appears a figure who is crafty, deceitful, and antagonistic toward God, and death-dealing toward people. Where he came from is one question.

The second is why the man didn't speak up. Why doesn't the Bible tell us what he was thinking or not thinking? Sin blighted the race because of the man's decision. The woman ate and gave some to her husband. When the man took the forbidden fruit and ate it, then their eyes were opened, and the results of sin engaged. It was his fault. The woman was deceived when she made her choice. The man knew what he was doing; thus he was the responsible person. It was Adam who cast the race into sin. And so we might wonder why the Bible doesn't tell us more about what he was thinking.

Returning to the first of these questions, the Bible seems to tell us about the origin of Satan elsewhere. There are references in Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14, and some discussion in Revelation and other places that probably suggest something of the devil's origins. However, these references are veiled and difficult to be sure of.

I am convinced that the Scriptures want us to know about the certain end of Satan. They tell us of his destruction and judgment. Jesus won the war at the cross, and sin will not have the victory. But the more we know about the beginning, on the other hand, the more fascinated we are likely to be, and that fascination will do us no good. To know the mind of the evil one when he became what he is, to see the self-glorification that he grasped for, to imagine the kind of arrogance that it would take for an angel perfectly made, as Ezekiel apparently says, to choose to rebel against his Creator, is to be drawn into it. Our fascination with it would destroy us. So the Scriptures are mostly silent. Jesus made a succinct, definitive statement about the devil that is about all we need to be clear about: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The devil is a murderer and a liar in essence. And what we can be sure of is that he will not win.

We are not told of Adam's thinking for roughly the same reason. The New Testament is clear that the woman made her choice with a degree of ignorance. She cooperated with the deception and has some culpability, but when it finally came to her rebelling against God, she had been tricked. But the New Testament is clear that Adam knew exactly what he was doing. He was the one whom God had told not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Eve had apparently heard it from Adam.) Adam had seen God work for a longer period of time; Adam had named the animals over a period of months, perhaps years. Adam had been provided a partner by God. Adam had more reason to be certain that his heavenly Father meant only good to him, that he could be completely trusted. And yet without being deceived, knowing on some level what he was doing and without any predisposition to sin; he chose to make himself like God. Once again, that choice is so awful, so heartbreaking, that were we to know more about it, it might ruin us further.

To illustrate, when I was studying this I found myself thinking, "You know, if I had been there, I would have

done better. If I had experienced God in the way Adam did, I would have refused the offer of forbidden fruit." And then I realized that my heroic self-conception was itself a version of sinful pride. It does us no good to know how someone who was not deceived could have made the awful choice that Adam made. Trying to imagine rebellion of that sort only fuels our pride and makes us more vulnerable to deception-based sinful choices.

What the Bible does tell us, however, is about the second Adam, Jesus. We have a great amount of detail about Jesus' story. He was the second perfect man born on this planet. He too was given every opportunity to trust God or to trust himself. He too was tempted, but without sin. He too heads a race of human children. He is the one of whom we should gaze in fascination. He is the one from whom we should learn. The second Adam is the head of a race that is going to know life forever. The first Adam doesn't deserve our attention, but the second one does.

The Logic Of Temptation

Let's talk now about the argument of the tempter. What does the devil say? This is an historic account, yet most of the art that fuels our imaginations at this point is useless. We've all seen the pictures of a snake and a woman strategically placed behind a fern, with the snake arching his eyebrow at her. The devil, a created being, took some bodily form. It was beautiful, I'm quite sure. This is the same one who is called the dragon in Revelation 12. He is a very powerful, dramatic, compelling sort of figure.

It is hard to imagine a proper picture of the scene in which this conversation that took place. But it is important to know that this is history, and the serpent's words are what are significant for us to study.

Judging What God Says

The first thing the serpent says is at the heart of the whole problem. He sets Eve on a course that will destroy her, not by making a statement, but by asking a question: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

What Eve should do is refuse to answer the question, because it implies that we have the right to pass judgment on what God said. The question is wrong. She should say, "You have no business to ask that. You're a creature and I'm a creature, and what God says rules all of us. We have no business deciding whether it seems reasonable."

Note that this question is not asking, "What did God say?" That is a legitimate question. There are certainly many in this world who don't know what God has said. In the words of the old gospel song,

*"I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;*

*I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own holy Word." (1)*

This is also not the question, "What did God *actually* say?" Many of us are not only uninformed, we're misinformed. We've been given versions of God's statements that are not true. I remember hearing when I was a very young Christian that all real Christians spoke in tongues. I was very confused. I didn't speak in tongues; and I wanted to be a real Christian. I finally ended up asking someone, "Did God really say this?" The answer was no. The Bible doesn't say that if you're a real Christian you'll speak in tongues.

The serpent's question says in effect, "What do you think about what God said? Don't you think he's being a little unreasonable?" The invitation to the woman is to decide herself whether what God said has the value it ought to have. In a moment, the process of evaluating the one she should be obeying has begun, and that's the problem. The minute she begins to decide that her opinion of God's word is worth anything, she is in trouble.

There are actually a lot of things that God has said that I wouldn't say. I'm not uninformed or misinformed, I

know exactly what he said, but I don't like it. The Sermon on the Mount is filled with those things. "Blessed are you when people persecute you...Rejoice and be glad." I wouldn't have said that. I'd be nice to my friends if I were God. Why would he say such a thing?

Or the declaration that sinning in your mind is as morally corruptible as sinning in your actions; to think angry thoughts is to be guilty of murder. Well, that seems a little excessive to me!

And remember Jesus' story about the workers who were sent into the field. A number of them went out and worked eleven hours. It was a long, hot, sweaty day. They knocked themselves out serving their master. Yet they received the same wage as a man who worked only one hour. That seems enormously unfair. It's not something I would say.

Yet God's declarations are clear and they are truer and better than anything we think. The process of temptation begins with the invitation for us to trust our evaluation rather than humbly receiving God's word.

Finding God Unreasonable

The second thing the devil says that advances this woman on toward trouble is essentially to suggest that God is too demanding and restrictive. "Did God say you shouldn't touch *any* tree? It seems he's awfully big on restrictions. You've got all these beautiful trees, but you're not to touch any of them."

And the woman begins to try to answer that accurately. She says, "No, God didn't say that." But even so she is caught up with the possibility that maybe God is unreasonable. And her answer is, "God said, 'Don't eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor touch it, lest you die.'" Yet God didn't say not to touch it. He just said not to eat from it. And in what she is saying, the psychology is, "These restrictions seem overdone. God ought to ease up." In her insistence that they can't touch it-or by implication look at it or even go near it-she's adding to the prohibition. And she's doing so because she doesn't like the prohibition.

That is the classic response for those of us who find ourselves tempted and failing. Not only do we trust our judgment, which we ought not, but we begin to give far too much weight to the things that are difficult. The few things that God has forbidden us to do loom larger and larger in our minds. The weight becomes heavier and heavier, and all we can think about is what is difficult in discipleship. We lose any sense of gratitude, freedom, or joy.

God has forbidden all of us to gain wealth illegally. He has forbidden all of us to gain standing by telling lies, to enhance our reputation by pretense. Rationalizations occur easily. "Well, all the other people where I work would lie in order to make a sale, and they're always schmoozing with the boss. They take credit for work they don't do. And I am stuck with an honesty problem. My career is being retarded because I have no right to dishonest gain. Everyone is moving ahead but me, and God's word is to frustrating. Why would a few small lies matter?"

What God has forbidden us, a reputation that's dishonest and riches that we haven't earned, seems more and more onerous and difficult. It fills the horizon and we can't think of anything else. And yet what has God offered us? He has offered us the chance to look in the mirror every day and see a person he loves. He has offered us self-respect whether anybody else is willing to give it to us. He has offered us his own commendation as his beloved child. He has offered us inclusion in a family of people who are redeemed and will put their arm around us when we need it. He has offered us a reputation and spiritual riches and other things that are worth far more than the promotion that we've been denied because we won't tell a lie. We forget what we have. All of the other trees in the garden seem to fall out of existence. The only thing we see is what we may not have. We should rather turn away from that tree and see all that God has provided.

Forgetting The Consequence-Death

Then finally is the serpent's outright lie: "You won't die. Nothing bad will happen. Sin is fun. God is really holding out on you. He knows you can be just like him. He knows that disobedience produces only pleasure and expansion. You become part of the knowing elite. Part of what he says is true. Sin is fun...for awhile.

Very few acts of disobedience lead to immediate physical death. You may get away with things. Nobody will know. The notion that sinful choices can be made without consequences seems to be accurate.

But death in the Scriptures is a profound concept that extends beyond short-term appearances. Death is essentially estrangement from God. Romans 5:14 talks about the reign of death, the command of death. In Ephesians 2:1-2 we're told, "...You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live...." You can have a life that is dead, in which what you are accomplishing is death, ending in worthlessness and sorrow. If you are estranged from God, you have lost everything. If the Life-Giver himself is no longer your intimate, you can spend eternity apart from God and spend eternity experiencing death.

The persuasion continues today. It looks like the short-term consequences are not so bad and may even be very good. Yet what an awful thing to "be like God, knowing good and evil"-to know evil because we are evil; to be like God because we are his rival, not his friend. To have lost him and gained anything else is a tragedy.

Fascination With The Forbidden

Now let's turn to the interior of this process. If this is the argument of the tempter, what is happening inside the woman? We're going to consider a couple of verses from James that talk about the temptation process in order to imagine the inside of this first deceived one. James says in 1:14-15, "...But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." There are three stages to this: enticement, sin, and death. That's really what happens to the woman in Genesis 3. It says in verse 6 that she finds the fruit beautiful and nourishing. It would taste good and feel good and have a positive physical effect. In her soul (her mind and her emotions) it is tantalizingly beautiful, sparkling, delightful to look at and think about. And finally, it will make her like God. It will make her wise. She desires it to enhance her proud spirit. She is fascinated on every level with this forbidden fruit.

And what happens to us, it seems to me, is that when we are enticed by something that is wrong, the longer we gaze at it and enjoy it, and the longer the thoughts stay in our minds and we play with them, the more likely we are to act without even knowing it. It is this fascination that leads to the woman's making a choice almost without realizing it.

How many times have you and I been in situations in which we allow sinful thinking of all kinds-relationships that are bad for us, desires that are bad for us-to remain fascinating and enticing, when we don't judge our thinking, when we allow the "movie" to go on and on in our mind? Then all of a sudden the opportunity to act on it comes, and we act and then we marvel, "How did I do that? How did I end up here? I never intended to make that choice. I wasn't planning to do anything. I was just enjoying the fascination." The fascination leads to a choice that happens in a moment.

There was a story in the paper recently about an African-American judge in San Jose named James Ware, who was in line to be promoted to a high federal position soon. He was raised in Birmingham during the Civil Rights era. There was another man named James Ware who was also raised in Birmingham at the same time, who had a 13 year old brother who was killed by racists.

The judge in San Jose at some point in his life heard the story of the other James Ware and of the boy who was killed. He says he began to tell himself the other man's account, putting himself in the other man's shoes. The judge is passionate about civil rights and concerned for justice. He is stirred by the plight the disadvantaged. He hates violence and wants to do good for the community. And if he had been the other James Ware, and had seen his brother killed, that experience would have fired him to a life of zeal and contribution to society. And so he made himself the hero of the story. Then he got up to give a speech one time, and suddenly he blurted it out. I wonder if he even realized what he was doing. And his audience loved it! The next time around he told the same story again, with the same result. People said, "This is the kind of man we need as a judge-someone who has suffered, someone who cares."

And so he almost forgot it was a lie. He would tell the story without even thinking. Then the sin gave birth to its offspring, death, and he was publicly humiliated. The whole house of cards came down. Who knows

where it will lead. He will certainly will be refused the advancement he wanted. If he continues as a judge, and those in his court stand before him and are asked, "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" you wonder if they will respond, "Yes-to the extent that the judge does." The psychology of temptation and sin leading to death works the same way in your heart and mine.

OBEDIENCE AND GRATITUDE

What applications should we make from all this? I'm going to suggest two that I am newly determined about in my own life. One is to go back to the original question of the serpent, "Has God really said....?" which leads us to judge the word of God. I want to be listening to the word of God, believing what I read, obeying what I believe, and finding the Bible newly fascinating again. I aim to step back from every inclination I have to want to change the things that I know God says because they are difficult or embarrassing or in any way a struggle for me. If the Lord has said it and if I am very clear on what he says, then I want to love it, believe it, and obey it rather than judge it. The tempter's first question is our first challenge. To what extent do we pick and choose among the things that God has said.

The other application that I want to make for myself is one of gratitude. That is the antidote to being fascinated with sin, the tunnel vision in which the only thing you can see is what God forbade you and God's seemingly excessive enthusiasm for saying no to things. To deliberately say thank you for what we do have, to actively look at all the other trees in the garden, all the possibilities, all the reasons for hope, all of the gifts that God has given, all of the places that he has touched us with blessing, is the surest way to break the power of the tempter.

I'm no good at fending off temptation. I've lived long enough and failed at it often enough to be aware that even knowing the process, being able to say, "I know how the devil tempts" isn't sufficient. My capacity for self-deception is too great.

But what does work is a growing appreciation for the second Adam, seeing Christ, knowing how much he loves me, being specifically grateful for forgiveness and a shame-free existence, knowing that he is committed to me, that his body and blood are sufficient for me. To find my gaze more filled with the person of Christ mutes the voice of the tempter. When I'm listening intently to his voice, I don't hear the other voices as loudly as I used to.

"For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. And the law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:19-21, NASB.)

NOTES

1. *I Love to Tell the Story* , text by A. Catherine Hankey.

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