

“What Went Wrong”

Genesis 3:14-24

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We have read of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and we have seen already some unhappy changes in them. Happy communion with God has become a guilty fear. Love between them has become selfish recrimination. But God has not yet spoken. We read earlier his warning that disobeying God’s command would lead to death and now we gather that death has occurred and that a feature of it is personal alienation from God and others. But God himself has not yet spoken. We wait to hear what their rebellion will mean for them and for their descendants. Remember, from the beginning they were viewed as the head of a race: God told them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” The verses we are about to read describe what has long been called in Christian theology: “the Curse.” Perhaps a better term would be “the Judgment,” because what is clear is that God is visiting punishment upon their sin.

Text Comment

- v.14 Remember, we have already said that it would be obvious to any Israelite reader in the 15th century B.C. that the serpent was the incarnation of a dark power whom the Bible would later identify as Satan. They knew, of course, that snakes did not eat dust. The statement about going about on one’s belly and eating dust employs familiar ancient near eastern metaphors for humiliation and defeat. Indeed the statement reflects and probably pans ancient near eastern iconography that shows the serpent as originally walking erect. [Sarna, 27]
- v.15 It is interesting and important that it is not the serpent’s offspring who will be bruised but the serpent himself. The offspring of the woman will do the bruising, but that very serpent will be the one who is bruised. This serves as another indication that we are not really talking about snakes here. The offspring of the serpent, we may fairly say, then, are not all future snakes, but those men and women who are seduced by him as Adam and Eve were. The Bible will have a lot more to say about the seductions of the evil one and the people who are undone by those seductions. [Collins, 156]
- The first mention of any solution to the problem caused by the serpent’s seduction of mankind comes in a negative form. The serpent, God’s enemy and man’s, will have a human adversary who will defeat him after some suffering of his own. Bruising the head is far worse than bruising the heel! At the very beginning of the story we know that good and evil are not in conflict in some eternal dualism and that evil will not finally triumph. God remains in complete control. Satan has had a great victory, but he will suffer a great defeat. [Waltke, 94]
- v.16 The use of the word “multiply” in v. 16 plays on the use of another form of the same verb in 1:28. She was to multiply offspring; but because of sin God will multiply her pain in bearing offspring. [Collins, 153n] Think of “pain” not simply as the physical discomfort of childbirth but of all the suffering and sorrow that a woman endures because she is a mother. Intense pain in childbearing, by the way, is unique to human females among the mammals. [Sarna, 28]

The woman suffers frustration in her fundamental relationships, those with her husband and her children. In other words, as Gerhard von Rad put it in his commentary on Genesis: "The woman's punishment struck at the deepest root of her being as wife and mother, the man's strikes at the innermost nerve of his life: his work, his activity, and provision for sustenance." [pp. 93-94]

We have recently considered the interpretation of the second statement in v. 16, so I won't take the time to make the argument again. What it means is that the woman "desires" her husband in the same sense that sin desires Cain in 4:7, the only other place where that term in that idiom appears in the O.T, that is, she desires her way, desires to control. But try as she might, for any number of reasons, she will fail to gain that control and so she will live in frustration. The relationship between husband and wife has become a "competition for control." [Collins, 160] Male leadership was the creation norm, but the suggestion is that it will become domineering and will be a source of sadness rather than fulfillment in a woman's life.

- v. 17 The man is addressed not only as the male person but as the representative human being and so things are said to him that apply equally to the woman.
- v. 19 Work itself is not the punishment, for, before the fall, in 2:15 man was placed in the garden to do work there. It is the hardship and frustration that now attends our work that is the judgment upon sin. Man's dominion over the earth has now been severely compromised and complicated. The same word, "pain," is used to describe the man's punishment that was used to describe the woman's.

The punishment, as always in the Bible, fits the crime. Adam *ate* what he was forbidden to eat. Now we read five times from v. 17 to v. 19 that "eating" is going to prove problematic. [Waltke, 94]

Now, looking back over these verses from v. 14 we notice several things. First, the biblical narrative is sparing in the information it provides. How precisely was the natural world altered by sin? We are not told. I've already said that we are not intended to suppose that snakes moved in some other way until sin entered the world and only then slithered on their bellies. Those are figures of speech. I have myself long imagined that as soon as God pronounced the curse on the ground in v. 17, okra, eggplant, and beets began springing up from the soil! But we are not told in what ways the ground itself actually changed. We are told that man would find working the ground toilsome. Jack Collins points out [164] that we are not in fact told that the ground never produced thorns or thistles before, a feature of the rose bush, after all, and the national flower of Scotland! The "pain" in woman's childbirth suggests some natural changes, but, frankly, we are left in the dark as to in what ways the natural world itself was altered by human sin.

Indeed, though many have taken 2:17 to mean that there was no death of any kind before the fall, the text does not say this. No human death was contemplated before the fall but we are certainly not told, nor is it implied, that flora and fauna would have lived forever prior to the entrance of sin. Plants certainly "died" when they were eaten. There is nothing here, including the statement in 1:30, that requires us to believe that fish, birds,

and land animals that are carnivorous now would have been herbivores then. The text is simply not answering those sorts of questions. The *change* the text is concerned to stress is the change in the life of the man and the woman, not that of the natural world itself, though no doubt there were some such changes. God visited judgment on man and in doing so visited judgment on the earth because it is man's home. The earth is the source of much of man's blessing, but it is also the cause of much of his misery.

- v. 20 Eve sounds like the Hebrew word for "life." The LXX translators rendered the word "Zoe," the Greek word for life. Again we have demythologizing at work here. In ancient near eastern mythology, "mother of all living" is the description of a goddess. Here it is the description of a human being. There is much to be said in favor of the interpretation that for Adam to call his wife "Eve" at this point in the history, with the death sentence having been pronounced but no children yet present or on the way, was an act of faith on his part, even faith in the promise that victory over the serpent would come through the offspring of the woman. [Waltke, 95] *The Scots Confession* of 1560 makes a point of asserting that Adam and Eve were saved; that the benefits of Christ's atonement were applied to them ahead of time, as would be the case for all believers in the ancient epoch. Martin Luther even calls Adam and Eve "Christians." [Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, I, 213-215]
- v. 21 It is, I think, overly subtle to find here a reference to atonement. It was necessary to kill the animal to get the skin, there is nothing here suggesting that the animal was killed as a sacrifice. But certainly God is acting in mercy toward them. He replaces their rather pathetic effort to cover themselves with something more substantial. God has not abandoned man on account of his sin!
- v. 22 Knowing good and evil first hand, in experience, and now especially experiencing the bitterness of evil, God feared that man he might wish to make a mad dash for the tree of life in the center of the garden. Not that he could have snatched life for himself out from under God's nose. The point seems rather to be that such an act would confirm man forever in his fallen state. So God prevented him from doing so by guarding the entrance to the garden and making man to exit the garden. Such an act of defiant disobedience and rebellion against God would have been that kind of disobedience from which there is no return. So God prevented him from doing what his misery might incline him to try -- an act of disobedience and rebellion against God from which there would be no return. The last thing fallen people need is immortality! [Waltke, 96]

Notice once again the plural pronoun "us," as in 1:26.

- v. 23 In 2:5-15 we were introduced to the Garden of Eden as man's perfect home, an environment that God had created especially for him and in which his life might come to complete fulfillment where he might enjoy close and happy fellowship with God. Now, because of sin, he is banished from that garden and forbidden to return to it.

- v. 24 The entrance to the garden was from the east. Remember when this was written the tabernacle was under construction and the tabernacle and the temple – other places that represented God’s most immediate presence -- also were entered from the east.

"drove out" is a strong image. The cherubim, a rank of angels, are introduced without comment, the first reference to angels in the narrative. The name would have been familiar to Moses’ audience. They appear elsewhere in the Bible as guardians of the throne of God.

The narrative of the fall comes to its close with the account of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden, an account loaded with potent symbols that the rest of the Bible employs in such a way as to indicate the terrible and hugely important meaning of these final verses of Genesis 3. We have here, in other words, not simply a telling of what happened, but an interpretation of human life and history from that point to this.

As we had reason to point out during the reading of the text that the account of the curse or the divine judgment on man’s sin, like the creation account before it, is a remarkably compressed narrative. Think of all the consequences of the fall that might have been mentioned but were not. Nothing is said of sickness or its suffering; of war and the tragedies that accompany it. Similarly nothing is said of crime though we will see sickness, war, and crime soon enough in the Genesis narrative. Nothing is said of the corruption that will overtake the relationships that human beings sustain with one another outside of the home, of the oppression of human beings by other human beings. Death is mentioned but nothing is said of the fear of death that the Bible says is a large part of the bondage of man in sin.

Of course this account of fallen human life was not intended to account for every circumstance and situation or the particulars of the life of every single human being. There are unmarried men and women, women who never have children, men who never have to work, and some men whose work is the happiest and easiest part of their lives, and so on. Marriage and enterprise can and often have risen above the description of frustration and discontent we find in vv. 16-19. Moses’ contemporaries knew that. What we have here is a general description of human life in sin. The particulars will vary but the fundamental problems remain the same. What we have been given is an account of the consequences that we should regard as the foundation of human woe, or at least the most illustrative of the pain, sorrow, frustration, discontent, and disappointment that human sin has visited upon the life of human beings.

One of the most fascinating and instructive books I have read over the years is Bernard Lewis’ *What Went Wrong?* published in 2002. I love books that teach me important things I never knew before and that book taught me a great deal I had never known before. Lewis, longtime professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton, if you remember, was, until his retirement from public life, our chief authority on all things having to do with Islam and the Near East. After 9/11 his face was on the television news over and over and over again because people thought they could get an accurate answer to important questions from this man. Thoroughly conversant with the three great languages of that part of the world -- Arabic, Turkish, and Persian -- which few western scholars are, his work bristles with the true insight of a genuine expert. We throw that term “expert” around nowadays, but Bernard Lewis was an *expert* on the history and the *culture* of the

near eastern Islamic world. The subtitle of the book, *The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, gives the gist of Lewis' riveting narrative of Islam's decline. At one point the supreme power in the world and without question the most sophisticated civilization, poised to conquer Europe as it had so much of Africa, Russia, and India, the great Islamic civilization that had lasted a thousand years simply collapsed into cultural, political, and military irrelevance. Lewis explains why today we find the Middle East a collection of politically and economically inept states with populations of low morale, whose collective output to the rest of the world -- we are talking about some large countries here; Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and so on -- whose collective output to the rest of the world, apart from fossil fuel, is the same as Finland's. Much of the deep anger and frustration that now animates Muslim life has its roots in this profound reversal of fortune. *What Went Wrong?*

Well, the fortunes of this one once-great empire may be of great interest to the world today, but they should not concern us as much as the fortunes of the entire human race. "What went wrong?" is, however, the question that hardly anyone asks nowadays. What went wrong with the entire human race? Where do we find the origin of our poor, if not so often horrible fortunes? We are concerned to fix things. We are always hard at work attempting to fix our human problems, but we rarely stop to ask why we have those problems in the first place. We have long attempted to conquer disease, but, for all the genuine progress that has been made, we not only still face the ravages of illness -- even in new forms such as the Ebola virus now so much in the news -- but we die at about the same age healthy people have always died. So we have people hard at work on overcoming the physical processes that lead invariably to death at or usually well before people reach the century mark. I read an article recently about some of these folk who, with a touching naiveté, really believe that they have either already found the fountain of youth or that we are on the cusp of that discovery. Few serious researchers are nearly so optimistic.

We have other problems most people think are more immediate, so we are also hard at work to combat climate change and air pollution. But we are stymied not least because we can't agree as to what should be done or whether anything can be done without causing greater problems of another kind. I remember reading an article detailing the sometimes severe unintended consequences of virtually every decision regarding wildlife management that has ever been made by those in charge of Yellowstone National Park. In seeking to solve one problem human beings are past masters at creating new ones.

But it is not simply natural problems that concern us and darken our life in the world. We are hard at work seeking to end discrimination, poverty, hunger, injustice, crime, war and every other form of man's inhumanity toward man. Again, however, still today we have wars everywhere, crimes of all kinds, starvation in the midst of plenty, pervasive political, social, and religious conflict and disharmony. No one can honestly look at our modern world, in fact no one does, and think that we are on the cusp of some golden era of human flourishing. We have all the same problems and as many of them as have previous generations of human beings. Indeed, we've created some problems that previous generations of human beings never dreamed of. We're only the second generation in human history that has had to worry about a nuclear catastrophe.

If some populations have conquered hunger, they are very likely to have succumbed to other ravages, drug addiction for example, or the pain of the heart. We have had psychology now for nearly a century and a half in the western world, a discipline that proposes to make human beings happy, but there is no evidence that we are any happier than any previous generation of human beings. If we don't have one problem, we suffer from another. We never seem to get to the bottom of anything.

Put a cow in clover and it is content and will remain content. Place a man in a material paradise and he will remain content only for a short time. Then comes that strange thing we call boredom or restlessness, the longing for something else, something more. Like the stellar radiation that is measured now by powerful telescopes, the radiation that is the echo of the origin of those stars in the far distant past, so this longing, this restlessness, this wanting something more that we can't seem to find is the echo of man's brief stay in the garden, of the life he was made for and built for and which, for one brief shining moment, the life he actually lived in this world.

What went wrong, indeed? The Bible's answer is not only the most serious and the most profound answer to the question -- an answer that meets the real challenge of the question -- *but, and this is the really important point, the only answer that gives the human race any real hope.* The Bible's answer to the question "What went wrong?" is that on account of human sin, on account of the disobedience of our first parents, this world and especially the life of human beings in this world *stands under God's judgment.* The reason things are as hard as they are, the reason for the perpetual frustration of human life, the reason why we can never seem to rise above our problems or escape our destructive tendencies, the reason why we all must die, *is because we are being punished!* We are being prevented from laying hold of the life that is worthy to be called life by someone far stronger than we are.

The human race will never achieve its deepest longings, never fulfill its dreams, never realize its potential, never escape its moral and spiritual and physical bondage, *because God won't let it.* The history of mankind is the history of men trying to get back into the Garden, to find the Tree of Life and eat its fruit, but God has closed the entrance to the Garden and set guards before it and mere human beings will never make a way through. What is clear from the images employed in our text is that we are to see the Garden of Eden as a kind of archetypical sanctuary, a place where God's presence dwelt in all its life-giving power. Man's banishment from the Garden, therefore, was banishment *from that divine presence* and all of the blessedness of life that went with it. *That is man's ultimate problem: his estrangement from God.* And as we will be reminded throughout the rest of the Bible that estrangement was God's entirely just punishment for man's sin and disobedience.

Cherubim were posted to guard the entrance of the garden, to keep man out. It is not that man is going to find the way back to the garden and peace with God a difficult thing, requiring the daring, strength, and perseverance you find in the heroes of myths and fairy tales. No, man's situation is not that the way back is difficult; he *cannot* get back because God will not let him. The fact that the Lord placed guards at the entrance to the Garden suggests clearly that he expected man to attempt to find his way to life by himself, by his own effort. And, of course, that is the story of human history, futile as the effort has been and continues to be. The punishment is

just. God had told Adam and Eve what would happen if they disobeyed and the promised punishment was the punishment they suffered.

But take careful note. God had been blasphemed by his creatures, but he didn't respond in kind. He wasn't hateful. He didn't destroy them on the spot. In fact, he treated them with dignity by imposing on them the promised consequences of the choices they had made. He didn't patronize them. But, still more, he promised eventual rescue through the seed of the woman, he gave them hope of recovery from the calamity they had brought upon themselves, and he dealt kindly with their immediate need by providing clothing to cover their nakedness. He cursed the ground from which they would draw their food, but he didn't render it sterile or unproductive. They would still have food to eat and a life to live. God executed judgment as his character required him to do, but he tempered that judgment with mercy.

Later, you may remember, cherubim were worked into the design of the great curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the tabernacle -- the Most Holy Place being the place where the glory of God was represented as most immediately and powerfully present. Further, cherubim in gold hovered over the Ark of the Covenant itself which was placed in the Most Holy Place both in the tabernacle and later in the Temple that Solomon built. Remember no one could go into the Most Holy Place, past the cherubim on the curtain, except the High Priest, and he only once a year and with the blood of the Day of Atonement sacrifice. These are extraordinarily powerful symbols of man, separated from God because of his sin and impurity, unable now to come into God's presence, unless by means that God himself devises, means by which man's sin and guilt is overcome.

When we come to the New Testament and the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins, the same powerful symbols are employed to explain what happened and with what result. We read in Matthew 27:51 that, when Jesus died, when the debt of our sins had been finally paid, the curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. I suspect one cherubim was on one side of the torn curtain and the other cherubim was on the other side. The way through the cherubim was opened. The way back to the presence of God, to the Garden if you will, had been restored.

In the most important way, Adam and Eve did return to the Garden in their own lifetimes because of what the offspring of the woman would someday accomplish on their behalf. The first human beings disobeyed and ruined life for all their descendants, but they were also recovered by the grace of God to prove to their offspring that there *was* in fact a way back to the Garden for any and every human being. But as God blocked the way back, it is only God who can open the way again, and this is what he has done through Jesus Christ, who crushed Satan's head by his victory on the cross.

Every man, religious or otherwise, unless God's grace should change him, is like John Bunyan's Mr. Loth-to-stoop, who through some powerful pages of Bunyan's second great allegory of salvation, *The Holy War*, is engaged in an effort to beat down God's unalterable terms of salvation, to have his way back into the garden on his own terms, his own reduced and much easier terms that require no real stooping on his part, no acknowledgement of his terrible guilt and need, no repentance from his sin-riddled life, no surrender of sovereignty to the Lord Christ. [Whyte, BC, iii, p. 109] But because God is blocking the way back in judgment of our sins, only God can open the way. And that is what he has done through Jesus Christ, his Son.

And what is more wonderful still, in Christ, we don't just get back to the Garden; in Christ we get more than Adam and Eve had in that wonderful place where they walked with God. We get an *indefectible* life of joy, a life that can never be lost. Or, as Isaac Watts said of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who opened the way for us through the barrier guarded by the cherubim:

In him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their parents lost.