

## “The Catastrophe of All Catastrophes”

Genesis 3:1-13

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The account of the creation of the world and of human beings is now complete. What, we wonder, comes next?

### Text Comment

3:1 The serpent is introduced without comment. Who is this serpent? How is it that he can talk? Is this some fable about a talking snake? But there are reasons to believe that Moses and his contemporaries would have immediately understood that the snake was the mouthpiece for what one commentator calls a “dark power.” This serpent knows what God has told Adam and Eve, he even knows some things that God knows that the man and the woman do not (v.5); he can speak, which, as the Bible is fully aware, animals cannot; he is a subtle tempter, as we shall see, and, as you know, the rest of the Bible identifies the serpent with Satan. [Collins, 171-172] Remember, there were no other humans yet who could put the temptation to Eve. This account is nothing like the mythological world of talking animals that one encounters elsewhere in the ancient world and ever since. To use the serpent was a subtle tactic of the Devil. A mere creature, one over whom Eve was to have dominion “strengthens the appeal to pride but carries no compulsion.” [Kidner] That is, Eve could not argue that she was forced into sin by one greater than herself. The temptation was the more subtle for coming from below, not above.

We have said that the creation narrative of the first two chapters is clearly a polemic against the creation mythologies of the ancient world. Here too we begin with a statement that puts such mythology in its place. In the ancient world the snake was regularly endowed with divine or semi-divine qualities. But here it is simply one of the creatures the Lord God had made. And, as we will read later in chapter 3, it too will stand under his curse for what it contributed to in the life of mankind. [Sarna, 24]

This is not the narrator’s interest here but obviously sin had already entered the universe before Adam and Eve. Suddenly we encounter a tempter; where did he come from? We learn later that some of the angels, of whose creation we have read nothing in this account, rebelled first, but how and why we are told little in the rest of the Bible. The Bible draws a veil over the origin of evil. It remains one of the deepest mysteries of life.

“Did God *actually* say?” In the word “actually” there is a touch of skepticism, even surprise. Next, “you must not eat from any tree” is a wild exaggeration that is designed to place the Lord’s command in a completely unfavorable light. The implication is clear: “How unreasonable for God to restrict you in this way. It is hard to believe God should require something so unjust.” This is a standard technique in argument (a staple of our political discourse, by the way): force the opponent to debate on your terms and place his position in the worse possible light, even if it means misrepresenting that position.

Two other things to note. First, the pronoun “you” is plural. So Adam had obviously communicated to Eve what the Lord had said about eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Second, the serpent left out Yahweh in his reference to God.

He used the name “God” but did not use God’s personal name which has been used up to this point in chapter 2. In other words, he subtly depersonalized Eve’s relationship with God.

- v. 3 The woman corrected the bald lie but not entirely. When she added "must not touch it" it appears she had already welcomed into her heart something of the serpent's attitude; she had begun to magnify God's strictness and appeared open to the suggestion that his demands were unreasonable -- she will have many successors!
- v. 5 After the subtle undermining of confidence in God's Word came the flat contradiction, a lie so big that it created a completely different view of the world and of human life and its purpose. This is the view, of course, that men now have by nature and instinct: Man must be his own interpreter of reality and his own law-giver. The promise of the serpent was that they would be endowed with new powers and become able to make their decisions independently of God. Heady stuff! [Sarna, 25]

The particular promise was that "you surely shall not die." It is exactly this denial that men have willingly entertained ever since: that God will not judge me or condemn me for my conduct, no matter what he has said in his Word and no matter the principle of judgment so deeply fixed in every human heart. Now the snake is really crafty here, because, of course, as we discover, the man and woman did not die, he knows about death for sin because he has suffered it himself and he knows that death does not mean the end of existence. But, as we shall see, they really did die and mankind with them; they died in the really significant sense of the term and in a way that made inevitable their physical death as well.

- v. 6 Made ready and willing by the tempter's question and counter-assertions, the woman needed nothing more than the inviting appearance of the fruit. She saw ... she took ... she ate. There is irony here; she saw *it was good*, a statement that echoes God’s own judgment about his creation. Of course it was good! [Sarna, 25] *That* was hardly the point at issue. Of course sin has its pleasures. But what are its *other consequences and especially its ultimate consequences?*

Note that Adam was with her all the while. He cannot be absolved of the blame for this and the Bible, in fact, places the responsibility squarely on his shoulders, for God had given the command to him, before the woman was created, and it was his responsibility to see that it was obeyed.

- v. 7 In a bitter irony, the serpent's prediction in v. 5 is fulfilled; their eyes were opened, but it was a grotesque mockery of the illumination that he had promised them. Freedom to define one’s own life is exciting in the prospect of discovering new forms of knowledge; to choose for oneself the way to achieve human happiness and fulfillment is immensely attractive, like the fruit on that one tree in the middle of the garden. Only what one achieves always turns out to a distorted, short-lived, and toxic imitation of that true fulfillment humans were made for and long for. Adam and Eve's eyes *were* opened, and they *had* gained new knowledge, but of what? Their nakedness -- which had been a happy thing before -- they now knew as shame and fear. For the first time they had something to hide from God and from one another. Adam and Eve had chosen ethical autonomy for themselves and found it slavery not liberation!

They chose the leaves of the fig tree because the fig tree's leaves are unusually large and strong. [Sarna, 26]

- v. 8 The image of the garden in the cool of the day and God's presence there -- God's "walking" is just a vivid way of speaking of his presence -- (the same word "walking" will be used later of God's presence with his people and, of course, the Christian life is often referred to as a matter of "walking" with God) I say, the image of "walking" suggests the happy fellowship man had before with God in the garden. But now that was gone. Their attempt to hide from God was tantamount to an admission of guilt. [Sarna, 26] The trusting innocence and happiness of their former communion with God had now been replaced by the fear of God's displeasure an instinct that now lives in every single human heart. The first consequence of sin was alienation from God.
- v.9 God asked each in turn what had happened, beginning with the man. The "you" at the end of v. 9 is masculine singular. The order of inquiry indicated the degrees of responsibility.
- v.11 God here models justice. He did not pronounce judgment until he had carefully investigated the matter and had elicited the facts. [Waltke, 92]
- v.13 Each in turn blamed the other and ultimately God for the disaster that had befallen them. Now we see them covering up in another way! The final lines of Book IX of Milton's *Paradise Lost* describe their shattered harmony:

Thus they in mutual accusation spent  
The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,  
And of their vain contest appeared no end. [In Collins, 174]

We have argued that the world is so wonderful and the powers of man so impossibly remarkable that only the infinite, personal God is a sufficient explanation. Only God could have made man with the capacity of thought by which he has come so profoundly to understand his world, with the astounding creativity with which he has remade the world in which he lives, with the irrepressible moral judgment by which he interprets all of life in terms of far higher interests than mere self-preservation, and with the longing for relationship that dominates his life and makes love the supreme human emotion. Only God could have made such beauty and given to man the capacity to see it for what it is, to be moved by it, to love it, and to teach others to love it as well. When Florence first laid her eyes on giraffes walking free on the African savannah, she teared up. And we are to believe that such sensitivity to beauty is an accidental adaptation somehow enhancing survival? Come on! Only God could make human life so high, so fine, so good, and so endlessly open to the future. Only God could make an animal; for that matter, only God could make a bug, remarkable as bugs are. But supremely only God could make a creature as God-like as man!

But the obvious question that would occur to any interested reader of the Bible who had made his way to the end of chapter 2 is: "Why is the world not like this any longer? Why is *my* experience not like this?" [Collins, 175] Why is there so much that is ugly and harmful in the life of the world and especially the life of mankind? Where did the perfect harmony go? We still see the goodness of God's creation -- in nature and in the life of human beings -- but now the goodness shares time with misery and pain and immense amounts of downright evil. And far too often it is the evil that has the upper hand. Whether we are talking about *surd evil*, the term theologians and philosophers use to speak of natural evil -- disease, natural calamities and the like -- or *moral evil* -- the bad things that human beings do to one another -- this world is a place

of woe, of sadness, of death, of constant failure on the part of human beings to realize their dreams and fulfill their longings.

*And it is not as if we don't know better.* We see intelligent human beings acting stupidly, responsible men and women acting irresponsibly, people who love kindness when it is shown to them acting cruelly toward others, people who have received many gifts from others acting selfishly, people who would admit their responsibility to act on behalf of others acting to the detriment of others all the time. Karl Barth was only stating the obvious when he wrote:

“What is the obviously outstanding feature of world history? ... [It] is the all-conquering monotony -- the monotony of the pride in which man has obviously always lived to his own detriment and that of his neighbor, from hoary antiquity and through the ebb and flow of his later progress and recession both as a whole and in detail, the pride in which he still lives...and will most certainly continue to do so till the end of time... History... constantly re-enacts the little scene in the Garden of Eden.” [CD, IV/1, 505-508]

Now the term Christian theologians have long used to describe the event we just read about is “the Fall.” That is not a biblical term but it does accurately describe what happened in Genesis 3: man *fell* from his original moral perfection and happy fellowship with God into the life of sin, rebellion against God, and alienation from him. The rest of the Bible refers to this history to explain the human predicament and man’s need for salvation and reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. Paul does famously in Romans 5, but there are other passages as well, such as Ecclesiastes 7:29:

“God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

Now, to be sure, we are not given a theological explanation of the fall and its consequences here, not even given a definition of it, but the thing in itself is most assuredly here. The theological explanation that would later be given in the Bible is not only a fair conclusion drawn from the evidence, but the only satisfying explanation for what we observe of and encounter ourselves in human life. We might have expected more than these few verses describing the origin of human sin, given the extraordinary importance of an event that, by itself, defines the nature and destiny of man in the world and explains the terrible woe and misery that we find everywhere we look in the experience of human beings.

There is nothing here like a theological explanation of sin and its consequences, such as Paul will give us much later in Romans chapters 1 and 5. But, taken as a whole, there can be no doubt about the power of this account or its meaning and message. Indeed, it is the more powerful for its understatement. As the remainder of chapter three and then the following chapters of Genesis unfold, the results, the devastating consequences of these impossibly stupid acts of Adam and Eve, will fall upon us like hammer blows.

From this point in the narrative spiritual death, human selfishness, stupidity, and cruelty, and, supremely, alienation from God become the defining characteristics of human life and experience. People often viscerally object to the doctrine of “original sin,” that is, the Bible’s teaching that since the fall all human beings come into the world with an inclination to sin and a spirit of rebellion against God, but as more than one wise man has pointed out, there is no teaching of the Bible easier to prove from the simple observation of life. As the French polymath

and Christian apologist, Blaise Pascal, once put it, original sin may seem at first to be unreasonable, but once the truth is accepted it makes sense of everything else in the human condition. [J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 81]

What is more, we see in the first sins of the human race, the seeds of all the sins that would come from them. Perhaps the most profound description of man in sin, of man's sinful propensity and condition, was furnished by the great Augustine long ago. He described the nature of human life with the Latin phrase: *homo incurvatus in se*. It means: "man curved in on himself." And that is what we see here in Genesis 3. First the woman and then the man curving in on themselves, curving away from God, then curving away from one another each to curve toward oneself.

"It would seem that the tree [of the knowledge of good and evil] bore this name because the issue was whether Adam would let God tell him what was good and bad for him or would seek to decide that for himself, in disregard of what God had said. By eating from this tree Adam would, in effect, be claiming that he could know and decide what was good and evil for him without any reference to God." [Packer, 80]

"Man curved in on himself." And clearly here, under the influence of the tempter, Eve came to want what *she* wanted and so she took it. And it has continued ever since, men making up their own minds about what they would do without reference to God, consulting themselves or one another while denying the right of their maker to order their lives, seeking their life apart from him, even in defiance of his will. And, of course, as Paul reminds us, the Lord punished that rebellion by giving man what they sought: a life apart from him.

But men and women were not created to seek their own life in indifference to God and his will and when they do so the result is not human flourishing but debacle everywhere we look. As human beings seek their own lives without regard to God they inevitably do so without regard to one another as well. The first thing the man and the woman do after their rebellion against God is to blame the other, to throw one another under the bus, to whine and complain against the outcome of their own choices, and fearfully seek refuge from the consequences of their acts by hiding from the truth. No abject apology here; no tearful acceptance of responsibility; no *mea culpa*. Tell me, if you can, that the picture drawn for us in these early verses of Genesis 3 is not an almost perfect description of human life as we know it.

Of course, there is much that is beautiful about the world and about human life. God made it beautiful and made human beings in his own splendid image. Even the remnants of that former world and former life are spectacular.

The English Puritan, John Howe, described human life this way.

"The stately ruins of this living temple still bear this doleful inscription over their portal: "Here God Once Dwelt." Enough still appears of the admirable form and structure of the soul of man to show that the divine presence did sometimes reside in it; more than enough of vicious deformity to proclaim that he is now retired and gone. The altar is overturned and the candlestick is broken; and in place of the sacred incense, with its clouds of rich perfumes, there is a poisonous and hellish vapour continuously rising up... You come...into the ruined palace of some great prince... the decayed state in all

respects of this temple too plainly show that the Great Inhabitant is gone.” [Cited in Whyte, *With Mercy and with Judgment*, 24-25]

But it is not only in general that we find the nature of human life in sin delineated in the account of man’s first sin. We find in the two temptations with which the serpent beguiled Eve and Adam the same primary temptations to which men and women succumb still today, in defiance of all the accumulated evidence that they are nothing but two bald-face lies. These are the two arguments by which the Devil has separated man from the will of God ever since: 1) You won’t die; you will not suffer for disobeying God; and 2) his commands are unreasonable; you should not have to obey them. [John Bunyan, *The Holy War, Works*, vol. 3, 259] How easily do human beings still today swallow both lies hook, line, and sinker!

How sure we continue to be, as human beings, that it is in the assertion of ourselves over against God that we will find our way to a richer, fuller, even longer lasting human life. [cf. Sarna, 25] How certain we still seem to be that I myself am the center of the universe, no matter that we know full well that everyone else is thinking the same thing! Woman doing what Eve did; Man doing what Adam did is today the story of human life as much as it was that day in the Garden. You cannot open a newspaper or listen to some political or intellectual or technological mover and shaker, for that matter you can’t listen to children playing, without hearing the overtones of the serpent in the garden.

As a result, there are two ways of looking at life and only two. One that sees human life as we know it to be natural, to be what it has always been and will be; the other is to see human life today as a pale shadow of what it once was, a collapse from an original ideal, a perversion of what it was made to be and indeed was for a few shining moments.

Now we know perfectly well that this account of the early history of mankind, his creation as a sinless, pure, and perfectly happy person and his fall, by rebellion and disobedience, into a life of sin and death, is no longer for Western Civilization the authoritative account of the origin of mankind and the explanation of human life. Great poets in our time are not bending their genius, as John Milton did, to retell the tale of *Paradise Lost*.

This account of human life has been replaced in many minds and in the collective mind of the culture’s elite with the alternative account of the origin of man and the life of mankind furnished by the theory of evolution. According to that theory Man is what he is as a result of a long, mindless process of development. He has not *descended* from a pure and pristine original state but has *ascended* from a lower order of development.

Quite apart from the fact that we do not accept the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution as a credible account of the origin of life, much less of human life, we do not hesitate to say that we find far more credible not only the Bible's account of the creation of the world and of mankind, but as well its account of the fall.

And I am not only speaking of the fact that mankind is sinful through and through. It is true that, with a kind of touching naiveté, modern psychology and sociology has attempted to argue that man is basically good, and in this the social sciences have been joined by a large number of politicians, preachers, and educators. But this sentimental thinking about man is accepted by almost no significant thinker and is more an illustration of the fall than an argument against it.

The actual behavior of human beings from their birth to their death is one magnificent demonstration that man is fallen into sin and that the tendency of his heart is corrupt, even if that corruption appears often in what Hannah Arendt famously described as the banality of evil. People's hearts find it perfectly natural to be selfish, even heartless and cruel, and give expression to that tendency countless little ways as well as the more grotesque forms of human hatefulness.

Here is Joseph Conrad the American novelist, no Christian, writing to Bertrand Russell the English philosopher, likewise no Christian, in 1922:

I have never been able to find in any man's book or any man's talk anything convincing enough to stand up for a moment against my deep-seated sense of fatality governing this man-inhabited world.... The only remedy for ... us is the change of hearts. But looking at the history of the last 2,000 years there is not much reason to expect that thing, even if man has taken to flying.... Man doesn't fly like an eagle, he flies like a beetle. [Johnson, *Modern Times*, 12-13]

The fall of man into sin as reported in the Bible, in fact, in a way that evolution does not and cannot, explains the life that we actually see in the world and accounts for human beings as we know them to be: both wonderful and terrible, both knowing good and doing evil, both gifted beyond belief and somehow, at the same time, inclined to use their gifts in the worst possible ways. Only a perfect creation and a real fall can explain the two things that human beings must know: how man can be so supremely wonderful and so impossibly pathetic at the same time! The Bible's own explanation is the only one that actually meets the need: a perfect creation followed by the fall into sin.

Now what is so important about the fall as an explanation of the human condition is this: if there were once such a good and happy human life, because God himself made human life that way, then there is hope that such might be human life again. *If not, we have nothing to look forward to but more of the same!*

And that prospect of a return to the Garden, of a recovery of the original life of man is precisely the hope that is set before us in the Bible. The grand narrative of Holy Scripture revolves around these four historical events: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Without the fall, creation is diminished to some form of the origin of human life in which certain instincts have been inherited from lower orders: e.g. attachment to an individual or social territory, mechanisms of defense and aggression, the individual and collective urge to maintain oneself, such instincts as you find in the animal kingdom [Berkhof, *Study of the Faith*, 206]. No; that is not man. He is far too magnificent for that and far too evil. What the fall teaches us is this:

You have never had it. All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it -- tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest -- if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself -- you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say 'Here at last is the thing I was made for.' [C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 196]

You were made for something better, higher, purer, happier. Human life should not be what it is. That's not wishful thinking, that's a statement of fact. And there is a way back to that better life because God never intended that this should be the life that human beings live. He sent his son, we read in the Gospel of John, that we might have life and have it to the full; that very life that Adam squandered long ago.