

## Sin and Shame

### *In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 5*

Genesis 3:1-8

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My office window overlooks our church's back parking lot. Recently on a Saturday afternoon, as I was looking out, I noticed a wedding party leaving the church. The bridesmaids and groomsmen were joyfully getting into a limo, and soon the bride and groom followed. Joy was in the air. About the same time, in another part of the world, tanks were rolling towards the city of Kyiv, Ukraine—war was in the air.

Life unfolds amid this confusing, even heart-breaking paradox: weddings, but also wars; brotherhood, but also enmity; health, but also sickness; life, but also death. Or as Christian teaching puts it: creation, but also fall. We are studying Genesis 1-11, asking what our beginnings tell us about our present—who we are, what we're for, why the world is as it is. Thus far, we've been in Genesis 1-2, and the vistas have been breathtaking: the birth of the cosmos, planet, and people. The last verse of chapter 2 captures well the peace and beauty of this new home: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (2:25). No pain. No fear. No shame. The reader of Genesis is on tiptoe; what will happen next?

Nothing prepares us for the serpent. In the first verse of Genesis 3, he slithers into Eden, lying in the grass at Adam and Eve's feet. From this moment onward, being human becomes a story, not only of glory and joy but of contending with evil and sin. During his turn from atheism to Christianity, Nobel Prize winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recounts a revelation he had while lying in a Soviet death camp: "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart."<sup>1</sup>

Unlike any other account of human origins that I'm aware of, the Bible offers a stunning and sobering explanation for why human beings—despite all their grandeur—are wayward and wicked, and why we can't live up to our own enlightened standards of love and justice. Some truths are better understood through experience than dictionary definitions. Such is the case with what the Bible calls evil and sin. Genesis introduces these realities by inviting us to experience them as Adam and Eve do. The initial experience unfolds from Genesis 3:1-8 and has three movements we're meant to enter into: (1) The

Serpent We Face; (2) The Art of Deception; (3) The Shame We Can't Hide. Here is the beginning of what went wrong for us.

## I. The Serpent We Face

### *Who is This Serpent?*

Chapter three opens, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made” (3:1a). We are given no background or introduction for this creature. An interesting detail we are given is that the serpent is “crafty,” or “cunning”—suggesting a talent for evasion and deception on the way to getting what he wants. Slick and shady, yes, but effective. We are also told the serpent is one of the creatures “the Lord God made.” In other words, even as we meet sin and evil, Genesis wants us to know that they do not exist outside of God’s sovereignty or ultimate rule.

We can say more about the serpent if we consider more of Scripture. The book of Revelation sheds light on both the identity and fall of this being:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. **And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world**—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Revelation 12:7-9).

The serpent is Satan. And apparently, he fell from grace during a great conflict in heaven among a group of angels before the creation of humankind. “War arose in heaven,” Revelation says, and some angels turned against God. Jude and Peter, in respective passages, speak of “angels who did not stay within their own position of authority,” “sinned,” and were “cast into darkness by God” (see Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4). The Bible doesn’t give much detail about all this. The Bible instead focuses on the human aspect of the story, how sin entered *us*. However, the Bible does want us to know that the serpent who appears in Genesis 3 is Satan, and, as Jesus underscores, is a murderer and liar. Also looking back to Genesis 3, we read in John 8:

The devil ... was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

The arrival of the serpent in Eden is the beginning of all of our problems. We need to grasp what this means for us. People have long wrestled with why the world is so broken. Especially hard to understand is the waywardness, selfishness, and hatred exhibited by human beings. *Why are we this way?* Explanations range from genetics to social conditions. We have a “selfish gene,” Richard Dawkins explains.<sup>2</sup> We’re genetically hardwired to compete with each other for survival. Others suggest that, like a character in the novel *Crime and Punishment*, “If society itself is normally set up ... we will at once organize the whole of mankind and instantly make it righteous and sinless.”<sup>3</sup> Our genes and our social conditions have their role in bending us. But they are not what the Bible says broke us.<sup>4</sup>

With the serpent entering Eden, the Bible tells us we are contending with a power greater than us and outside of us. Behind our problems lurks *the* problem: the evil one. History will be riddled with poor decision-making, selfish acts, social contagion, and bad community planning. But make no mistake, says Genesis 3 and later Saint Paul:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

*What does this mean for how we handle brokenness and problems in our own lives?* It does not mean we throw our hands up and do nothing. Nor does it mean we reduce every bump and bruise to the devil. The presence of the serpent tells us, however, that we must not forget that truly putting things to right—in our own lives and in our world—will require reckoning with evil. And it tells us there is a battle going on behind the battles we see going on.

I recently read an article from a pastor in Ukraine, Benjamin Morrison, who’s trying to lead in a terrifying situation. In the article, I was struck by his ability to both see the immediate problem at hand, but also to perceive the ultimate problem and battle lurking behind. He writes:

The Enemy and those tyrants who serve him would love to sow fear, panic, and despair. But he is also the father of lies ([John 8:44](#)).... In this case, the lie is that someone other than Christ is King. The depraved mind of man would like to believe and have others believe that he can control fates, lives, nations, and so on. But there is only one who controls the flow of history....

But that's not always easy to remember when bombs are exploding. The noise of the lie can get loud—so the truth needs to go deeper. [Our church] called an impromptu evening for worship and prayer for Ukraine. It was a sweet time stirring one another up and singing.... There is only one true King—and the little tyrants of the world will ultimately only play into his great victory. His promises are sure, his victory inevitable.<sup>5</sup>

What Morrison is doing is orienting his church to the deeper battle—the battle between faith in God and the lies of Satan. In the midst of human war, there is a war going on for the souls of the Ukrainian and Russian people. There are Ukrainians and Russians—and others—who will defy the Evil one and put their trust in God in the middle of this war. This is not to minimize the physical battle, but it's to see the deeper war going on.

When you are dealing with difficult situations in your life, remember that there is often more going on than meets the eye. The decisive battle is *always* between faith and apostasy. As we will see in the next verses, Satan is not ultimately after our material well-being; he is after our relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

To be human is to face the serpent; we need the help of God to contend with him. That's what the presence of the serpent means. Next, let's consider his tactics.

## II. The Art of Deception

The serpent is “cunning” and proves so in his conversation with Eve, which is laced with deception. To begin, Satan comes disguised. To Adam and Eve's eyes, the serpent is just another creature—one Adam has recently named (Genesis 2:20). Satan doesn't appear with horns and a pitchfork, but, as Paul says, “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). The serpent appears as an ally, concerned for Adam and Eve's freedom and well-being. Satan then proceeds with a subtle but deviant distortion of God's Word and undermining of God's character.

## Undermines God's Word

He starts with God's Word: "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (3:1b) The question seems innocent, but it is barbed. It's a blatant inversion of God's lavish statement. Satan takes God's words, "you may eat of every tree" (2:17), and misquotes them as their antithesis, "Did God say 'You shall *not eat of any tree*...." In doing so, he begins the process of drawing Eve's attention away from the many things God's lavishly provided, to the single thing He's forbidden. Eve corrects the serpent, but in her reply, we see a shift occurring. Whereas God's statement was marked with superlatives, "you may surely eat of every tree," Eve dulls it by removing them: "we may eat ... of the trees."

Satan seeks to draw attention away from the 99% of trees God has offered us to the single tree He has not granted us. Surely, we all can relate to this. There is an array of provisions God has given us. But there is one tree—one place, one area, one request—where we have not gotten what we want. And it is here that temptation attacks—the temptation to doubt, to break God's command, to grumble. But this tree, this one place, is so often the place where God wants to meet us. It is obedience here that opens the door to fellowship with Him; it is at this door of faithfulness, so to speak, that God stands and knocks. And it is at this one tree that Satan so often attacks.

## Undermines God's Character

As Eve fills out God's command, the serpent will turn next to undermine God's character. Eve explains,

We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."  
(3:2-3).

The Serpent responds,

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (3:4-5)

We previously saw that this tree represents wisdom. The prohibition against taking from it symbolizes that God, not man, is the source and arbiter of right and wrong. To take from it is to claim God's place as the source of truth. It is a creature rebelling against their very design, and therefore, it's deadly. But the serpent knows that the death to come is complex. Though there is an immediate spiritual death, the serpent knows taking the fruit only triggers a slow process of physical death. So, in a sense, and the short-term, the serpent's words *seem* true. But they are a deadly lie. In just two chapters Adam, this being made in the image of the eternal God, will drop dead (5:5).

We must recognize what the serpent is doing. He's driving a wedge between the heart of man and the goodness of God. He's suggesting that God is a liar and threatened by the progress of human beings. God wants to keep us ignorant and dumb; God is against us. Experiencing for the first-time doubt about God, Eve now turns to the allure of the forbidden tree:

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (3:6).

The deceiving and tempting took some time—as these things do. But the action is swift. In a single motion, Adam and Eve declare independence from the source of life, and in doing so embark upon the path of death.

*What does the drama of the first sin teach us?* Among many things, it teaches us that sin often begins with deception. There is an evil in the world that hates God and is opposed to everything God loves. This evil uses deception to distort God's word and undermine God's character.

*How might the serpent be deceiving you? What short-term pleasures of sin has he sold you on? How might the serpent be deceiving God's people today?*

One way I see Satan deceiving today is through a subtle, but crafty, undermining of the trustworthiness of Scripture and long-held Christian doctrine. The tactic, as all deceptive tactics, uses something partially true to create a devastating lie. The tactic works like this: due to human bias and prejudice, the Bible can be, and has been, misinterpreted and even used to hurt people. This is true. This can, and does, happen. And it is horrible, and Christians need to be alert to it. But this fact is then worked into a

giant lie. The lie goes like this: because there are biased interpretations of the Bible, and all people can be biased, then we cannot trust any interpretations of the Bible. But there is a logical error hidden here.

Humans are limited, and therefore can never have exhaustive knowledge about something. But this does not mean that humans can't have *any* knowledge about things. We don't have exhaustive or perfect knowledge of the universe, mathematics, or medicine. And you don't have exhaustive knowledge about your spouse, kids, or self. And it's possible to bring bias into your understanding of any area. But that doesn't mean we can't trust anything we know about the universe, math, medicine, or our loved ones. Beware of this subtle but damning lie that the snake is sowing; because some readings of the Bible have been, and can be, distorted by human bias, does not mean we can't know anything about the Bible with certainty.

There is a core of Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation that's passed through more cultures and more examination than any body of knowledge I'm aware of. It is clear, it is able to be shown as reasonably deriving from the text and its original author's intent, and it is *true*. Avoid interpretations of Scripture that can be clearly proved false, but don't let the serpent deceive you into thinking that the core and long-held teachings of Christianity are not clear and trustworthy.

### **III. The Shame We Can't Hide**

The scene concludes by highlighting the first *felt* consequence of sin: shame. Prior to any judgement from God, the first couple experiences shame and hides.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:7-8).

In the weeks ahead we'll have more to say about the consequences of sin, but here we point out this: To be human is to crave and require evaluation. "*Look at me,*" cry little children to their parents; "*See me,*" says the selfie and social media post. We need both to be seen and to be seen as desirable. But when we sin an ugliness sets in, and we suddenly cannot bear to be looked at—not fully. You can see

part of me, but you cannot see all of me. We feel shame about what we've done and shame about who we are.

Shame is a complex emotion. Genesis 3 tells us that the root of human shame is not embarrassment before others, but sin against God. That's what triggers Adam and Eve's shame. And our efforts to clothe ourselves—to cover our shame and look desirable to others—do not heal our shame. We have to take our shame to God. Only He can remove the ugliness and cover us again with glory. Adam and Eve make for themselves pathetic fig leaves (3:7). But before God cast them out of the garden—another consequence of sin—He does something tender and gracious: “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (3:21).

God wants to cover our shame. And in Christ, He does. Jesus pays the penalty of our sin on the Cross. Then, in newness of life with Him, we no longer stand naked and ashamed, but are robed in righteousness and honor—we are seen, and we are declared good (see Matthew 25:23).

There is a powerful scene towards the end of the book of Revelation where God's reign has been fully established and the evil one, the serpent, destroyed. God's people are presented to God's son as a bride to a groom. And as an undoing of Genesis 3, they are truly clothed<sup>7</sup>:

Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure (Revelation 19:7-8).

Here is the final and full healing of the shame of Adam and Eve, and all their ancestors—us included. Once we break trust with God and decide to go our own way, we are like children without a parent, people without a home, vulnerable creatures without the clothing of honor and love. But Christ dies for our sin and takes upon Himself our shame.<sup>8</sup> And in their place, He clothes us with His very own righteousness. With the serpent under His foot, Jesus invites the redeemed sons and daughters of Adam back into the His glorious light.



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## Endnotes

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 312.
2. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30<sup>th</sup> anniv. Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66; cited in Strachan, *Reenchanting*, 52.
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. By Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classic, 1992), 256.
4. The Bible doesn't offer a philosophical explanation for evil; it simply asserts it. Scripture no more needs to offer us a logical explanation for the presence of evil than a man falling off a building needs a philosophical explanation for the presence of gravity. It's simply there. Of far more importance is learning how to deal with it.
5. Benjamin Morrison, "Woken Up by Bombs: A Church Planter in Ukraine Prays and Perseveres" *The Gospel Coalition*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-planter-ukraine/>. Accessed March 5, 2022.
6. This is precisely what we see in the book of Job. Satan attacks Job's material and physical well-being for the purpose, ultimately, of attacking his faith in God.
7. The passage in Revelation 19:7-8 echoes Isaiah 61:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."
8. Here are two passages highlighting the shame Jesus bore for us: "I did not my face from shame and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6), and, Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2).