

A Reflection on the Story of The Fall of Man (Genesis 3:1-24, Revised Standard Version)

The Hebrew and Christian understanding is that heaven was closed to all souls because of the sin of our first parents. Heaven would be opened only when the one perfect sacrifice was offered by the Messiah. In the meantime, the souls of all the departed went to the abode of the dead (Hebrew: *Sheol*; Greek: *Hades*). In this reflection we will look at the events which caused this closure and their effects.

^{3:1} Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made.

Some commentators hold that the word "subtle" in Hebrew shares the same root as "naked." The play on words alluded to is *erumin* (naked) and *arum* (subtle). This play on words, if intended, is secondary to the story itself. The serpent is a creature made by God. Tradition has it that Satan was a fallen angel, probably a *seraph* (seraphim), the highest choir of angels. Seraphs are described in Isaiah 6:2 as winged. They are described as fiery serpents in Numbers 21:6. Satan is described in Revelation 12 as a dragon, a serpent with wings. One who has his wings folded, or has lost them, looks like a snake.

He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"

The serpent's question is a distortion of the divine command - it makes it sound like an unwarranted restriction that deserves a reply if conversation is to be maintained.

² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

The woman corrects the serpent's distortion, but adds a distortion of her own. The command given the man by God was simply "not to eat of the tree" (Genesis 2:17). Hebrew legend has it that the man had forbidden the woman to touch the tree because of his zeal to guard her against the transgressing of the Divine command. This original sin begins with some distortion of the truth on the part of both Satan and mankind.

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.

Satan refers to a physical death rather than a spiritual one.

⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

You will have a knowledge of both good and evil. Up until this point only good has been experienced.

⁶ So 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, and he ate.

She didn't have to hunt him down, he was right alongside her. Genesis 2:15 tells us that God commanded the man to "till and keep" the garden. The Hebrew word *shammur* translated as "keep" can also be translated as "guard" (keep safe). If the man is to guard, there must be something to guard against. The man is standing alongside the woman and fails to keep her safe.

It was not the woman who committed the first sin, but the man who failed in his duty to guard her. "Therefore as sin came into the world **through one man** and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned-" (Romans 5:12, emphasis added). What should the man have done? He should have taken the serpent to task, done battle with it to defend his family; a battle which may well have cost the man his physical life. How do we know this? Because this is exactly what Jesus, the second Adam, did. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13).

⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Their nakedness becomes an occasion for shame; something which was impossible before the sin. Since they were at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, this tree must have been a fig - a tree which is used later in the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of Israel and Jerusalem. Hebrew legend also tells us that the fig was the forbidden fruit itself.

⁸ 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. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

Isn't God omnipotent? Doesn't He know everything? Yes, of course He does - what He is doing is telling the man that He knows that something is wrong and He is inviting the man to tell Him about it. He is not asking for a physical location, he is asking the man "Where are you in your relationship with Me?" He is inviting the man to take this opportunity to repent of his sin and obtain Divine forgiveness. It is always God who issues the invitation to confess our sins with a little nudge of the conscience. God knows all our sins as soon as we commit them but wants us to verbally confess them so that we are sure that we know what they are. We must name them and claim them.

¹⁰ And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid,

The King James Version says "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid." What was the sound they heard? Psalm 29:3-9 describes the "voice" of the Lord: *"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forests bare; and in his temple all cry, Glory!"* What they have heard is not the rustle of leaves and the gentle snapping of twigs underfoot, they have heard a great and thunderous roar!

because I was naked; and I hid myself."

The man has realized that he was lacking something; not just clothing, they had sewed fig leaves together to solve that problem. He is missing God's grace.

¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked?"

Since there are only the two humans there, God is pointing out that it is his conscience which has pointed out the consequences of the man's sin. When God, in His mercy, gave the man a free will, He also gave him a conscience. The desire to do what is right is imprinted upon the soul. A free will without a conscience would result in total anarchy.

Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

God now points out what the result of sin was - he has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and has the knowledge that he has done evil. He had thought that by eating of the tree he would be able to decide for himself what was good and what was evil, but sin is absolute - it is not relative to the situation and/or the participant.

¹² The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

The man, instead of acknowledging his sinfulness, that he has disobeyed God, tries to shift the blame to the woman and in doing so blames God Himself: If God hadn't given him the woman, this never would have happened. Why does God approach the man first? After all, the woman was the first to eat. Before God made the woman, He had put the man in the garden to till and guard it. He then commanded the man not to eat of the tree. The man has failed in his duty to keep the serpent from influencing his wife and himself. They had only one commandment to obey: "Do not eat of the tree."

¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."

Not having gotten an admission of sinfulness from the man, God turns to the woman. Asking her to look at the cause of what they have done. The command not to eat had been given to the man before the woman was created. The man had instructed the woman, but she did not heed his direction but chose instead to listen to the serpent. She has chosen the serpent over her husband - a form of adultery. Remember that the Bible is all about covenant (family) relationships. She ate with the serpent rather than with her husband; she had communion with the serpent. Both she and the man have rejected God as the Father of their family by disobeying His command and eating what was forbidden with the serpent.

¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent,

God does not question the serpent or give it an opportunity to offer a defense. Evil is rejected outright.

"Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals;

The devil will not have influence over any of God's creation except man. The only occasion of demonic possession of an animal is in Matthew 8:32 (Mark 5:13 and Luke 8:33 are parallel texts) and the swine commit suicide rather than be possessed.

upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.

There are two images projected here: first, eating dust is a sign of submission (licking the dust off one's boots); and second, since the man was formed "from the dust" (Genesis 2:7), Satan will continue to attack man. Both images are appropriate as the evil one does continue to attack man but has no power over him unless it is given to him by the one he attacks.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed;

Have all women, or men for that matter, had total separation/rejection between them and Satan? Obviously not, but the woman was sinless until this event. There has been sparring between the devil and mankind ever since. Total enmity would occur when another sinless woman came

along; a mother whose own Son would refer to her as "woman" as a recognition of her sinless nature.

he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

The masculine form in the Hebrew is not necessarily a direct reference to Christ, although He did emerge victorious in His battles with Satan, it is a reference to all the descendants of this first couple, all humanity. All humanity must ward off the temptations of Satan every day.

¹⁶ To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

When a covenant is violated, there are curses called down upon the violator. In this case, the woman is given a curse: Childbearing, a gift unique to the woman's nature, will be done in pain yet her desire for her husband will be strong, despite the painful consequences; and her position in the domestic and social order will be less than the man's. In Genesis 1:28, God commissions the man and the woman to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" but because of their failure to obey the terms of their covenant with God, the pain of being fruitful (childbirth) will be a constant reminder as they fulfill this commission. Likewise, the woman, who was given to the man to be his helpmate (Genesis 2:18) is given the task, not of leading the battle, but supporting her mate in his efforts to fulfill God's destiny for them.

¹⁷ And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

Unlike the serpent or the woman, the man is not cursed directly. Instead, he is cursed through the earth. No longer will the earth yield its fruits abundantly and freely. Man must labor for everything he receives (the man is fruitful not only in producing offspring, but also by producing goods to fulfill the needs of his family). The name Adam refers to his origins as he was made from the dust (Hebrew: *ādāmāh*) of the earth.

¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

Thorns and thistles are a characteristic of wild uncultivated land, thorns are also used to describe the wicked. Man must battle what appears to be useless obstacles and bear the painful result as he strives to be fruitful.

¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

No longer is everything provided for the man, he must now work for everything he needs to sustain his life and that of his family.

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

In Genesis 2:23 the man had named her "Woman" (out of the womb of man, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone) and he now changes her name to "Eve" (mother of all the living). Names in Holy Scripture are important because they describe the characteristics and destiny of the bearer. A name change indicates a change in destiny and this is the first name change recorded.

²¹ And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

Even though they have disobeyed and incurred the curses of the covenant they have with God, God doesn't abandon them but instead provides for their basic necessities like the loving Father that He is.

²² Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil;

Angels have been present since creation and Satan, a fallen angel, by his own doing rejected God. Man has become like God in that he has also experienced rejection, albeit a rejection of his own making, and now knows what evil is as well as good. Evil is not relative so that man can determine what is evil for him and what isn't, but man is able to recognize evil as well as good.

and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever"--

Genesis 2:9 tells us that there were two trees in the center of the garden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which they were forbidden to eat, and the tree of life. If the man and the woman were created immortal and sinless, what use did they have for a tree of life? God knew that they would be tempted, he had given them a free will. When they were tempted to disobey, they could eat of the tree of life and receive the graces to resist the temptation. The tree of life was a forerunner of the sacraments.

²³ therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Like a sacrament, the tree of life was always effective and therefore Adam and Eve, who have not shown any contrition for their act of disobedience, are prevented from availing themselves of the graces available through it (they are excommunicated). Heaven was closed to mankind because of the rejection of our first parents and remained closed until the coming of the Messiah who offered the one perfect sacrifice. The tree of life is not mentioned again in Holy Scripture (except in Proverbs where wisdom, a desire fulfilled, a gentle tongue, and a fruit of the righteous are likened to it) until the book of Revelation where we find that those who are in heaven are allowed to eat from it (Revelation 22:14).

Final Reflection:

As you can see, mankind bears the stain of original sin because our first parents, although given every opportunity to humble themselves and confess their sin, chose instead to be prideful and reject the grace which had been offered. Mankind's first opportunity to go to confession was rejected. God, in his questioning, has pointed out that we must be specific and name our sins, claim them as our own, and to look at the causes for them so that we can amend our ways and avoid these sins in the future. It is not enough that we quietly approach God and ask for His forgiveness for our unspecified sins, we must confess them in the manner which Jesus has told us to do it: We must "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). And who are the "one another"? James 5:14-15 tells us who they are: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders (the presbyters, from which we get the word "priest") of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Sin is a sickness, not of the body but of the soul. The "one" is the sick person, and the "another" is the priest. We can be reconciled with God if we will humble ourselves and confess our sins to the only one on earth who can forgive them because they have a Divine commission to do so, a priest.

Why a priest and not God Himself? Again, because this is the way Jesus says to do it: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you' And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"(John 20:21-23). Jesus' mission on this earth was to bring about reconciliation between God and man; a mission which only initiated, not completed, during His brief time on earth. He offered the Perfect Sacrifice which opened heaven so that we can approach God and have our sins forgiven, but He has also established that we must approach through one who He has ordained to act as His ambassador. When someone appears before a priest to confess his or her sins, there are three people in the confessional: the penitent, the priest, and Jesus. It is Jesus who does the forgiving and/or retaining, through His ambassador. If we truly believe in Jesus, we will do whatever He tells us to do; no matter how embarrassing or humiliating it may be personally to us. After all, if we hadn't committed the sin, we wouldn't have any reason to be embarrassed or humiliated; we have brought it upon ourselves.

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