

The Tragedy That Necessitated Redemption and the Forgiveness of Sins

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In recent weeks, we have looked at two stories in the early chapters of Luke's Gospel, one of a man and the other of a woman, both of whom hear Jesus say to them, "Your sins are forgiven you." The man is a quadriplegic and the woman is a prostitute, two very different equally desperate people. Jesus' word of sins forgiven could not have been more comforting or liberating to these two individuals, because both of them were the victims of a religious system that had marked them as "condemned outcasts." The Judaism of Jesus' day had left these two without hope and without God in their world. The corrupt religion of the Jews by the coming of Jesus had created only two categories of people—the first was the small but proud and powerful religious elite who flattered one another with their self-achieved righteousness, and the other was the much larger group of the poor oppressed masses who were adjudged as miserable failures in producing their own righteousness and thus were the religious outcasts of first century Judaism.

This large and condemned second category consisted of all those who were deemed "sinners" because they were members of despised trades, such as tax collectors, herdsman, shepherds, tanners, and peddlers (the ancient version of the traveling salesman). This class also included the physically deformed—the lame, the deaf, the blind—and the incurably diseased, such as lepers. Finally, there were women, especially women who because of tragic or unfortunate turns of events in their lives were circumstantially left to fend for themselves and were forced into lives of prostitution. All of these were viewed as no better than condemned, pagan Gentiles, and therefore were excluded from making sacrifice or entering the presence of the Lord at the temple. They were viewed as mere rabble, the rejected left-overs of a system that had abandoned all such "sinners" as unredeemable.

Jesus' good news of the forgiveness of sins could not have been a more timely word for a more desperate people than these religious outcasts of Judaism. The message of hope and forgiveness, hidden as the foundational promise of the New Covenant uttered through the prophet Jeremiah, had now come alive in the preaching of Jesus by whom this New Covenant was being inaugurated in Israel's history! The grand story of redemption from sin had come to its critical turning point. The kingdom of God with its hope of the forgiveness of sin was being publicly proclaimed in Israel!

This morning I want to take us back to the story of the original man and woman at the dawn of human history. We meet them first in a beautiful garden, but shockingly, very soon they are cast out of that beautiful garden for their tragic disobedience to **the one and only act** forbidden by their Creator. This man and woman fell in an act of rebellion that carried a death sentence that would permanently mar their offspring and the trajectory of human history. God's stern warning had been attached to the prohibition of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. And in their disobedient eating, they triggered the irreversible judgment pronounced in the words, "you shall surely die!"

Nothing is said in that moment about the possibility of being forgiven for their willful disobedience. The hope of forgiveness and reconciliation to the Creator is in fact the rest of the Bible's unfolding story of redemption. It will only be consummated when in the fullness of time God sends His Son to secure a full redemption from sin. So while forgiveness and the restoration of relationship with God is a clear necessity from the moment that sin enters the realm of humanity, its hope is only finally realized in the appearance of the heaven-sent Son of Glory whose redemptive work will secure the salvation of a vast company called God's ekklesia, the worldwide called out community of the forgiven.

The story of the great tragedy that opens human history is told in the opening verses of Genesis 3. It follows the story begun in Genesis 1-2, where man is created in the image of God and given rule over the earth, the sea, and the skies which God had populated with their various orders of creation. Then in a crowning moment of God's creative handiwork, He fashions from flesh and bone taken from Adam's body a perfect companion, and the final celebratory moment of God's creative handiwork comes in the gift of the woman to be the man's perfect companion. But then as Genesis 3 begins we are introduced to God's adversary whose has only one intention, and that is to lead our first parents into disobedient transgression of the single prohibition that God had given them in Eden. Genesis 3 opens,

Now the serpent was more crafty (cunning) than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.

The word in the opening sentence variously translated "cunning" or "crafty" or "subtle" surprisingly is a word used in the OT to describe either a virtue or a vice. As a vice, it describes the cunning and artifice of someone whose intent is to deceive and snare in a wicked scheme. But in most of its OT occurrences it is actually a virtue, and it is usually given the translation of "prudent" or "sensible." This is the way it is used exclusively in Proverbs. 8 of its 11 OT occurrences are in Proverbs where it describes ***the prudent man who has the wisdom, discernment and good judgment that is necessary to outwit and circumvent the traps and snares of evil men as he walks through life.***

Here in Genesis 3 the term describes this unique quality that God placed in the serpent from its creation. All the animals had a degree of cunning and shrewdness built into their instincts as survival mechanisms, but the serpent was given an extraordinary measure of this quality. He is explicitly stated to be God's handiwork while being described with this word meaning **shrewd, subtle, or wise**. Christ Himself will recall this characteristic of the serpent when he later speaks of being wise as a serpent in Matthew 10:16.

This was a quality that Adam perceived in the serpent when he named it, and so it was well-known. It was no obscure fact stated at the opening of Genesis 3, and if Satan didn't know it previously, he listened well when Adam named the animals. So in this context, Satan exploits this unique quality in the serpent, and he hides a supernatural craftiness, an evil cunning, behind the natural subtlety of the serpent. The text continues,

And he said to the woman

We must stop here! This is the most puzzling component of this text. We are abruptly introduced to a talking snake. This is one of the main reasons that liberal critics relegate this story to the realm of fanciful myth and not real history! Now we know that Satan is actually the voice behind the serpent, but what is perhaps even more puzzling here is that a talking snake doesn't seem to bother Eve. She doesn't seem to register any response of amazement, shock, or fear! Instead, we simply read matter-of-factly that a snake suddenly starts talking to the woman, poses a question, and she returns the conversation! What is happening here?

What complicates this picture even more is what we can say about the faculty of speech so far in Genesis, which is, that only God and man have it! The faculty of speech is not a native capacity to any of the beasts of the field. Language was a gift to man to aid him in bringing the earth under his dominion. We observe this in Adam's naming of the animals. Man thinks and speaks, and in his speaking he is giving evidence that he was a unique creature made in the image of God. Speech is easily seen as an aspect of the image of God in man. Genesis 1:26 thus emphasizes not what the image is, but how it functions, what

its results are. And in a word, the gift of language functions as a tool, equipping humanity with the power to subdue and take dominion over the created order

The first recorded use of speech is an illustration of the functioning of that image. Adam names the animals. He categorizes and classifies the animals in expression of his dominion over them. Man brings the animals under the sphere of his divinely-appointed sovereignty over creation by naming them. This ability to speak and to catalog and classify physical creation is nowhere attributed to the animals, because it belongs exclusively to the man and the woman as an aspect of the image of God imparted to enable them to rule the created order

But here, this serpent is forming and uttering words, and that immediately suggests that something is wrong and is not functioning the way God had designed. Commentators have puzzled over ways to explain this phenomenon, and particularly why Eve so easily and unhesitatingly enters into conversation with this talking serpent. So for a moment I want to join the conjecture of the commentators. I want to suggest what I think is going on in this text. *But let me begin with a disclaimer! What I am about to suggest is not specifically stated in the text, and as far as I know, it is not found anywhere in print.* No commentator to my knowledge has ever suggested what I am about to tell you. And for this reason, I make my suggestion cautiously and humbly. I first interacted around this suggestion some fifty years ago when I had occasion to meet and discuss this passage with a university mathematics professor who was also a keen student of Scripture, and I confess his suggestion makes great sense to me. But at best it is only an implication from the language of Genesis 3, so I must hang onto it somewhat loosely. *On the other hand, however, I do think that what I am about to suggest provides an explanation of this text that satisfies its details better than anything I have read.* I am personally convinced that there is a suggestion in the text that points toward what I am about to propose.

Picture with me this fateful day in the garden. Eve is walking through the garden enjoying its beauty and rich diversity, and she approaches the tree that, unlike every other tree in the garden, carries a prohibition from the Lord God, who had said you shall not eat the fruit of this tree! And the penalty was that in the very day you eat of you will surely die! *It was as if the fruit of this tree was a deadly poison and meant instant death.*

Adam was likely the one who conveyed this prohibition to his wife, and he may even have added the words that she should not even touch this tree! *But as she draws near the tree, something catches her attention.* ***A well-planned, premeditated scene arranged by a subtle adversary begins to unfold.*** There is a serpent winding its way through the branches of this tree! She stops for a moment to watch the serpent as it coils through the forbidden tree of knowledge. *Then something astounding happens.* She observes this serpent do the forbidden! He starts to eat the fruit of this tree, and without any apparent consequence. He does not immediately die! The woman is mesmerized by this whole event. *Then something even more astounding happens.* Not only has this serpent not shown any ill-effects of eating the fruit of this tree, but amazingly he then starts talking to her! Eve is so fascinated and drawn into this unusual spectacle that before she realizes it, she is returning conversation with this serpent, and the rest is the tragic story of the fall of the first Adam and his bride.

This understanding of what lies behind the dialogue between the serpent and the woman creates the possibility of a much clearer explanation of verse 6. When the deceptive dialogue with the serpent is finished and Eve is left alone with her thoughts, the text says,

When the woman saw that...

These opening words of vs. 6 then extend their reach over three propositions that follow.

1 The tree was good for food

How would Eve know this? Prior to this encounter with the serpent, the only thing Eve could possibly believe about this tree was that God was protecting the man and woman from instant death, because the fruit of this tree was a deadly poison! **Why would she believe any different on the mere basis of a contradictory word!** There would need to be more evidence than just a contrary word from a talking snake strange as that might be! I submit there was more evidence! Eve's whole perception of this tree has changed, because she has just seen with her own eyes. This serpent ate and did not die! Satan had created a totally misleading picture, a completely false appearance. It created a scene that allowed the deceived conclusion that the fruit of this tree wasn't poison after all! And so, coupled with the serpent's reasoning with her she construes that this tree is actually, like all the other trees in the garden, good for food! But there's more...

2. The fruit was a delight to the eye

Not only was it not deadly, but it was also one of the most delightfully attractive fruits in all the garden. Even its appearance would bring joy to its eating! But there's one thing more, and this is the best thing of all...

3. It was desirable to make one wise.

If a serpent, a creation lower than man, a creature under man's dominion, could eat this fruit and suddenly come into the possession of an intelligence and wisdom equal to that of man, if the serpent suddenly finds that he has the ability to speak and reason with her what would eating this fruit do for her and her husband! The serpent must be right. We will become like God Himself!

Conclusion: What I am suggesting here is that Eve acted on empirical evidence! The whole experience of seeing and hearing led her to believe that there was a cause-effect link between eating the fruit and talking and great wisdom. This was Eve's deception (1 Tim 2:14). There was, in fact, no such cause-effect. It was all a manipulation of appearances. Eve later says in her confession to the Lord God that the serpent deceived her and she ate! ***The components of deceit are usually false statements tied to false appearances, which is exactly what Satan does in the garden—lying statements were mixed with lying appearances that Eve witnesses with her eyes.***

This makes the rapid collapse of Eve's defenses against disobedience much easier to explain. I contend that the brief words reported in the exchange between the serpent and the woman would hardly be convincing enough by themselves to lead her to do the forbidden act of eating the fruit. It seems as though something else is needed to push her over the edge. ***And the deceptive drama that Satan staged for her to see coupled with the deceptive dialogue that follows would make her vulnerable to the lies that she heard. It put her in a place where she would reason that not only are there no disadvantages to eating the fruit, there are very real advantages to eating it.***

Satan proves to be a master of artifice and deceit. We should be instructed from this! Even in Eden appearances could be made to deceive. And if Eve in innocence could not walk by sight, how much less may we whose eyes have been blinded by sin! How much more are we to be warned by the deceitfulness of Satan's devices and admonished to walk singularly by faith in God's Word, whatever the sight of our eyes and the appearances of our situation may suggest!

Now with this deceptive scene presented to Eve's eyes, let's look at the accompanying dialogue that reinforces the deception. The serpent now in three progressive steps draws Eve into the disobedient eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Step 1: Satan turns God's command into a question for debate and discussion.

The divine Word is now assailed by the slander of Satan! The word of God has spoken the world into existence, has created the man in His own image, has prepared a world for man's dominion, has furnished a beautiful garden for his dwelling and delight, and has fashioned a perfectly suited companion to be with him. **Now Satan is attempting to smuggle doubt into the good intentions of the Creator by giving this prohibiting word.** He reduces God's word from a command to a question for discussion. If God's word can be reduced to debate, the assumption is smuggled in that it is subject to our judgment. We suddenly are given the position and right to sit in judgment over the intention, the value, and the truthfulness of God's word. Note how Satan creates this posture toward God's word in the question closing vs. 1

"Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

Every part of this question serves a purpose in deceiving and ensnaring Eve in doubt of God's word. The **opening word of the serpent's question** in the Hebrew text is the word "indeed," a compounded Hebrew particle, *aph-ki*, used 19x in the OT When it is used to introduce a question, it expresses surprise, amazement or shock at what follows. So this Hebrew particle gives us a clue respecting the tone in Satan's voice as he speaks: "Did God **actually** say...?" "Is it **really** true that God has said. .?" This opening particle sets the tone in Satan's question. There is **surprise in the serpent's voice. He wants to disturb the woman with a question that she obviously had not considered.** The woman, after all, apparently never actually heard the divine utterance of the prohibition since it was given to the man before she was created. The word of God for her apparently was just hearsay through her husband. Adam had repeated it to her but she never heard it directly. The serpent is suggesting to Eve, "I'm surprised that you had not thought to ask this question!"

Why does the serpent start with this kind of inquiry? If he has just eaten of this tree without any apparent consequence, his opening question would be designed to plant doubt concerning the prohibition in the light of what she had just seen! So he asks, "Has God said you shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"

The tempter's question is cunningly worded, so that it focuses on the prohibition attached to one tree in the garden. Satan wants the woman to focus on the restriction God had imposed in the light of what she has just seen. Satan's "has God said" tests Eve's confidence in her husband regarding the divine word he had been given just before she was created from Adam's side (2:16-17). Furthermore, she clearly includes herself in the prohibition by changing the singular in God's word to Adam into the plural in her reply in vs. 2-3.

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You (pl.) shall not eat it, nor shall you (pl.) touch it, lest you (pl.) die.'"

The only thing we should note is that Eve adds to God's word with the words, "nor shall you touch it." Whether Adam actually said these words to her or Eve only read them into the forceful and emphatic way Adam repeated the divine command to her she in any case makes this strong affirmation that this tree is totally off limits! For whatever reason, Eve's version of the word of God is harsher and more restrictive than God's original word. Then Satan moves the conversation to the next level. Each level is designed to keep Eve off balance.

Step 2: Satan now boldly contradicts God's word. His opening question about the meaning of God's prohibition now turns into a bold contradiction of it!

His declaration is emphatic: ***"You most certainly will not die!"*** He mimics the exact words of God in 2:17 but then negates them! God had said, "You most certainly will die!" Now Satan says, "You most certainly will NOT die!" ***His emphatic negation of the divine word is not just a shouting contest with God! If the serpent had eaten the fruit, he is presenting himself as the evidence that you will not die!*** He puts himself on display as Exhibit A in the case against God's threatened punishment. The serpent says, "Look at me! Have I died? I'm here talking to you. I haven't died. You see, it's just not true! You most certainly will not die!" If this explanation of what happened in the garden is correct, then we learn something about Satan's challenges to God's word. ***When Satan contradicts God's word, he will have already created a realm of lying appearances that makes the doubt and rejection of God's word seem reasonable!***

So now in the face of clear *prima facie* evidence that eating the fruit does not result in death, it raises the question, "Well, then, why would God lie?" Satan anticipates that question and answers it before Eve can ask it.

Step 3: Joined to the contradiction of God's word, Satan must immediately malign God's motives in giving the prohibition. ***You cannot flatly reject God's word and deny its veracity without also undermining God's goodness and trustworthiness.*** So Satan must immediately undermine the character and motives of God.

He says that God imposed that prohibition because eating the fruit of this tree is the key to becoming like God, and God doesn't want to share the glory and elevated position that automatically accompanies eating this fruit.

How ironic! The deceiver accuses God of deception! He says in effect, "It is not really true that the fruit is bad for you, but because God is jealous and protective of His own position, He made this prohibition. The penalty attached to God's prohibition is a fantasy. It isn't real! It is only intended to frighten you away from the tree because of the great advantage that will come to you from eating of its fruit!"

Verse 4 is an out-and-out lie. "You shall NOT surely die!" It fashions God's word into its opposite. But verse 5 is the truth, at least in a formal sense (cf. 3:22).

For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

The words are true, but Satan uses the truth to support a flagrant lie! He manipulates the truth to reinforce a lie. ***Any truth that Satan speaks always destroys the truth, and makes it serve the interests of his lies.*** He is expert at creating confusion around God's word by using it to convince that something is good, when in fact it leads straight into sin. *He is the great manipulator of Scripture and will use it, in ways opposite to what God intended, to seduce, deceive, and lead into sin. This is why we must be taught of the Spirit! The Bible is, in one sense, the most dangerous book ever written! It is a book that requires deep humility and supernatural enlightenment to be read rightly.*

Then the act of disobedience and the rationalization preceding it are recorded in verse 6.

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 desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

With the confusion of what she had seen and heard effectively lodging doubt in Eve's heart, she meditates on the tree in what **1 John 2:16** will later describe as the avenues by which all humanity is tempted to sin—the lust of the flesh (good for food), the lust of the eye (a delight to the eyes), and the pride of life (desirable to make one wise).

She took and ate, and then gave to her husband and he ate. It is clear from the way this event unfolds that Satan was attempting to subvert the whole divine order of government established in creation. ***He wants to rule the woman through the serpent, and then to rule the man through the woman. His intent was to tempt Eve away from Adam that she might then tempt Adam away from God.*** This whole subversive strategy of Satan, what Paul will later call “the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6:11), is revealed in this first encounter with him in Scripture so that we might learn his wicked ploys against us.

None of this subversive strategy, however relieved Adam of his greater culpability in the sin that unfolded as the man and woman stood before the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden. Eve was thoroughly deceived by a carefully-choreographed set of false appearances that reinforced the lies of the serpent and resulted in the snare of disobedience closing in around her, and moving her to take the forbidden fruit and eat of it. Adam knew that eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge would be an act of defiant disobedience against God. He saw what was happening, but he did nothing to intercept his bride and rescue her from the lie she was being sold. As a result, Adam becomes the one, according to Paul, through whom sin entered into the world. His sin truly fit the category of defiant disobedience unlike the woman's sin which was the result of being seduced and drawn into complete deception.

Adam's sin cursed human history with a reign of death. **All our spiritual poverty** results from Adam's transgression, and its relief will require the Son of Glory to empty Himself of heaven's splendor **All our misery** is traceable to Adam's rebellion, and for this disobedience the Last Adam will be known as the Man of sorrows. **All our sicknesses** stem from the contagion in Adam's sin and their remedy will require the blood of the Great Physician! ***Death passes upon all men because of this one transgression, and it will require the death of the spotless Lamb of God to reverse it! It will take the perfect obedience of the Last Adam to reset the trajectory of history around the life, joy, and peace of a redeemed humanity walking in the joy of their salvation and anchored in the full forgiveness of sins and the gift of the righteousness won by the victory of the Last Adam.***

