

Just something to say here as a preliminary to the discussion of this account of Eve and the Serpent; the people who wrote this story did not have the same understanding of history that we have today. We think of history as true if the facts or details are correct. Back then, probably around 900 BCE, the truth of history was not found in the facts but in what it said about us. To explain this, I'll just say that there is a difference between a genealogy and family stories. Genealogies are full of dates and details. Family stories tell us who we are. There are certain stories that I will tell William about his great-grandparents that have nothing to do with dates and details, and everything to do with who Benson's are in character. Genesis 2 and 3 are not genealogy, they are family story. They don't tell us historical fact. They tell us who we are. This story of Eve and the Serpent isn't so much about how humanity's problem with sin began, though that is part of the intent behind it. Rather, the story describes how we are right now, this very moment.

The person who wrote down Genesis 2 and 3 wants us to know that we humans are created by God and have been placed in this creation with certain responsibilities. The creation is really, really good and we have incredible freedom to explore and tame it. Yet, our Creator has placed a limitation of our freedom. There's the one tree in the middle garden we ought to leave alone because it is the death of us. It is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is not the tree that if we eat of it we will know the difference between right and wrong. Its fruit imparts to us the inability to distinguish between good and evil. Although the fruit looks good, it is evil. As a result, of eating it we become both good and evil. Good looks evil, evil looks good, and the two are mixed up in everything we do indeed every thought that we have. Sometimes, we think we are doing the good only to wind up doing evil. We think it is good to be wealthy and prosperous, that it is good to go out there and work hard and walk away with a big slice of the pie. Unfortunately, for me to be wealthy and prosperous means that me having more of the pie makes it so that several others have to have less. On the other hand, sometimes we have to do what we know is evil hoping that the end result will be good. That's the main rationale behind war and the free market economy. Moreover, if you pay attention while you read the Bible one thing you will begin to notice is that even God has to do evil so that good will result. Furthermore, God is very good at taking the evil that we intentionally do, the evil we have done wanting evil to result and using it to bring about the very good; the crucifixion of Jesus being the best example.

So, the key thing that the writer of Genesis three wants us to know about ourselves as we are the family of God is that at our very hearts we have a confusion of good and evil. The end result of this confusion is that we feel shame instead of the wonder of innocence. We are now afraid of God and want to hide from him even though we don't have to. It is impossible now for us to seek and instead God has to seek us out and confront us as to why we are hiding from. We are simply unable to accept responsibility for the way we are. We will even point at God and say, "If God is a really loving God, why did he put that tree in the garden. We have become desirous to be God or at least to be equal to him. Human relationships are characterized by blame, efforts to control,

and guilt and shame. We are no longer in the garden where we are carrying out our created purpose. Finally, we die. Humanity is a mess of brokenness, futility, shame, and death, in fact the whole Creation is this way because humanity can not distinguish between good and evil.

Having said that there is a deeper question we must ask: What makes us this way. This is where we have to pay careful attention to the conversation between Eve and the Serpent. First, who is this Serpent? Well, traditionally people have said that the Serpent is Satan. Yet, I don't think the writer of Genesis 3 had a very developed understanding of Satan. The being we call Satan doesn't really start to show up in ancient Israelite writings until 500 years later. Genesis 3 was most likely written during the days of King Solomon in the 900's BCE. The big problem they wrote about in their struggle to be faithful to God was idolatry. How do you worship one God when everybody else around you has a bunch of gods? To complicate it even further, when you went to worship those other gods you get to have sex. You see, sex with a temple prostitute got those gods to make you crops grow. Idolatry is the problem the Serpent represents.

Why a serpent? Well, when the Israelites were in Egypt in the land of Goshen, the main Egyptian god over that area was a goddess named Wadjet who was a winged serpent. If you remember the story of the Exodus, you will remember that the greatest temptation they faced along the way was to stop following God and turn back to Egypt and its gods. So, the Serpent represents our inclination to turn away from God and worship other things and even ourselves as gods.

Moving on, the way that our idolatry weasels us into eating the wrong fruit is that it twists the identity of God by challenging God's authority to place limitations on human freedom. Let's take a brief look at how the conversation between Eve and the Serpent unfolds. First, God says to Adam, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. Next, somewhere along the way Adam had tell that to Eve and in so doing he changed it a bit. He probably said to her, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, **nor shall you touch it**, or you shall die." This addition of "nor shall you touch it" is what the Serpent uses to twist Eve's understanding of God.

The Serpent begins his testing of Eve by seeing how much she knows about what God has actually said about things. He says to Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Eve answers, "We can eat from any tree" (not God said we can eat from any tree). "But God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, **nor shall you touch it**, or you shall die." The question the Serpent asks focuses Eve on the rules and starts her to thinking of God as simply being a rule maker. Her understanding of God begins to morph from God being the loving Creator who has given humanity immense freedom in the garden and who in love has warned them of what is a danger to human existence to being simply the rule making God who nonsensically limits human freedoms. Next, the Serpent outright lies and gives a

false reason for why God gave that commandment. “You won’t die. God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (or gods), knowing good and evil.” The serpent reduces God to simply being a jealous, power-mongering rule maker.

With God’s authority and identity undermined Eve is left to her own ability to discern the value of the fruit and to her eyes what God has in essence declared to be evil appears very good. Eve and Adam’s eyes are not opened until they both eat and what they see is their own nakedness. Eating the fruit left them with sense of shame that could not be alleviated.

So far, I’ve said this story tells us that what’s wrong with us people is that we cannot distinguish good from evil. Each of us in our very core is both good and evil. The reason for this is that we are idolatrous. We like to put our faith in things other than the loving God who has created us. In order to persist in idolatry we have to convince ourselves that the God who created us in love in his own image is simply a petty rule maker who wants us to tow the line or else. You know, if you were to go to people who don’t go to church but have grown up in Western Culture and ask them what church-going Christians believe about God. They will say that we believe God is a petty rule making God who demands we be obedient or he will send us to Hell when we die. They believe this because the church particularly in Europe and North America has walked hand in hand with the Serpent and given them this idea. In order for our culture to be so materialistic and consumeristic, imperialistic, so warring, so indulgent; in order for us Western Christians to worship our false gods of money, sex, and power we have needed to understand the God who made us, we have had to convince ourselves that the loving Communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who has made humanity to be a loving communion in his own image is an angry, bearded, old man sitting on a throne in a far away place called heaven watching to see if we can obey those impossible rules he set up for us.

The amazing thing we see in the rest of chapter 3 when God comes looking for Adam and Eve is that God hasn’t changed towards us. It is us who have changed. God doesn’t get us for our idolatry rather in Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit with us and in us he has once and for all covered our shame. Now, we can live in him and with one another in loving community that reflects the image of God. Now we get to eat of the Tree of Life. Too bad we’re not having communion today, because I would push that a bit further. Leave that old image of God behind and the idolatry that comes with it. Follow Jesus Christ and find your new life that’s hidden with him in God. Devote yourselves more fully to living the new humanity, the humanity that’s not driven by self-indulgence, but rather by the love of God. We have one commandment to follow in the way that is living, that we love one another as Christ Jesus has loved us. Amen.