

Genesis 3:1-13

Order turned upside-down

Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a beautiful garden. It was perfect, filled with fruit trees and rivers and all sorts of abundant provision. Its name was 'Delight'. In this garden there was a man and a woman. Life was perfect; they had all they could ever want and they lived in joyful harmony and peace. No blot or imperfection marred their paradise. Then, one day, into the garden arrived a snake . . .

And we all know what happened next. In fact, there was a time not so long ago when almost every person living in this country, even very young children, knew this story and knew something of what it meant.

And this is very significant. As I said last week, the opening chapters of Genesis are all about a worldview: the big picture, the big overarching explanation of why things are just the way they are. In chapter 3 the big question being addressed is probably the most commonly asked and the most painfully felt question that is raised by the human race: why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Why is there sorrow and death and loss? Why do good people die young? Why is this world, which is so beautiful and full of astonishing wonders, also a place of such hardship and anguish? If there is a God, why is there evil?

These are deep philosophical questions. They are the stuff of complex theology. Many books have been written about these issues with long words that I'll never understand.

But God, in his brilliance and wisdom, has given us not a theological or philosophical tome, but a story: a true story which can help us to make sense of our world and even explain it to our children.

Genesis chapters 2 and 3 comprise one carefully crafted story which is about many things, including the purpose of marriage and sex – please come back this evening! – but the big question is the question of sin. It is carefully constructed in seven scenes, arranged in such a way as to make clear that the central truth in this story, the big idea, is an explanation of sin and its terrible consequences.

Today's section gives us three scenes, and this is what they tell us:

The first scene is the conversation between the snake and the woman, from which we will see that sin comes when we doubt God's goodness. The second scene is the act of taking the fruit, from which we will see that the essence of sin is a rebellion against God. The third scene concerns the actions which immediately follow, from which we will see that the consequences of sin are a turning of delightful order into miserable disorder and chaos.

So, first:

Sin comes when we doubt God's word and his goodness

"Did God really say?" That's where it all begins: did God really say? And the important point is that this is not simply a doubting of God's words, his command, but a doubting of his motives.

We need to imagine the snake sidling up to Eve and entering into conversation, with carefully studied casualness, "Well! I hear that God has said that you must not eat from the trees. How very interesting. I just thought I'd mention it." He is too subtle – as the text says – to tackle God head on. He just sows a poisonous thought – "I hear that God has said . . ." and leaves Eve to ask the unspoken question as to what God's motives might be. And as soon as she is foolish enough to enter into negotiation – "God did say . . ." – he tightens the noose.

Last week I came across William Tyndale's original translation of verse 4, made all the way back in 1530, which reads 'Then said the serpent unto the woman, "Tush! Ye shall not die."' Brilliant! That word 'tush' perfectly captures the sense: the slightly impatient and pitying rolling of the eyes that says, 'If you believe that you'll believe anything.'

No – says the serpent – the real reason is quite different. Shall I tell you? Shall I tell you the real reason God has forbidden that tree? Do you want to know his real motives? He knows that if you do eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become like him, knowing good and evil . . . and that's the last thing God wants!

Eve, don't be so naïve, the serpent implies. Don't think that God's commands are worth keeping because he wants the best for you. Not at all. He doesn't know or want what's best for you, so . . . well, you draw the conclusions.

So do you see the point? Eve does not simply doubt God's word; she doubts his goodness.

To feel the force of this we need to understand this: I have already pointed out that the Garden of Eden is a place of perfect abundance and provision and goodness. But in addition we need to see the

goodness of God's command. When God says, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," he is speaking for our good. This may be less plain to us.

This command is good because it is given to preserve the proper relationship between the creator and his creature, and only when that relationship is in place can creation work properly. When it does work – as it does before the Fall – the result is a life of perfect fellowship. There is fellowship between mankind and the animals, as each is brought to Adam for naming and ruling. There is beautiful open fellowship between the man and the woman, brilliantly captured in that simple phrase that ends chapter 2: The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. And there is open and easy fellowship with God, who walks in the garden in the cool of the day. Isn't that one of the loveliest phrases in the Bible? God walking in his creation in full view of his creatures. It's bliss, paradise, perfect unalloyed happiness. The very name 'Eden' means 'delight', and that says it all.

And the point I want to emphasise is this: the command not to eat the forbidden fruit is given in order to preserve this paradise. It is for their good. All God's commands are good.

But along comes the snake and says, "You can do better than this!"

We need to feel the scandal! You can do better than this. The outrage of such a notion. Do you see that Adam and Eve are doing something much worse than simply doubting God's word? They are doubting his goodness.

And so do we. Don't we all ask, "Did God really say?" or "Why did God say?" Does he really know what will make me happiest? Did God really say, Be content with your pay? Did God really say, Don't want what the neighbours have got? Did God really say, Be celibate if you're not married? Does God really say that wives should submit to their husbands, or that children must obey their parents? Did God really say that his elect are chosen from before the creation of the world? Above all, did he really say 'You will die'? Does a loving God really judge those who don't want him? Wouldn't I be happier if I reinterpreted that bit and made up my own religion?

Sin comes when we doubt God's word, which is to doubt his goodness. And the next step . . . let's move to the next scene.

Sin is an act of revolution – a usurping of God's authority

As I said earlier, Genesis chapters 2 and 3 is a story carefully constructed in seven scenes. The three we're looking at today are actually numbers 3, 4 and 5. As is common in Old Testament writing, scene 1 balances scene 7, scene 2 balances scene 6, scene 3 balances scene 5 – and that leaves scene 4 as the central act in the drama. Here is the heart of the story.

And what do we find in scene 4? When we arrive at this scene we find that all other players, including God and the snake, have disappeared from the picture and we are left with the man and the woman alone, in the very middle of the garden, standing before the forbidden tree, seeing the good fruit, desiring it for wisdom, and then committing the act of taking and eating.

And that is sin.

But what, exactly, is going on? Clearly they are disobeying a command, but it is not any old command; it is not an arbitrary order just for the sake of having one. It is this command; it is this particular tree that is forbidden. Let's read again the key verses, and notice the four references to knowing good and evil and the two references to becoming like God.

In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the *knowledge of good and evil*. (2:9)

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the *knowledge of good and evil*, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (2:16-17)

"God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like God, knowing good and evil*." (3:5)

And the LORD God said, "The man has now become *like one of us, knowing good and evil*." (3:22)

What is this knowledge of good and evil? And in what sense does Adam become like God?

We might imagine that knowing good and evil means understanding right and wrong, having moral discernment. But Adam and Eve already had that; they knew it was wrong to disobey the command before they ate the fruit.

No: if you look elsewhere in the Old Testament you discover that the one who knows good and evil is the king: discerning good and evil is what enables him to govern and rule his people. It is what makes him a lawmaker. That is why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is God's preserve alone: God is one who decides what is good and what is evil, who makes the rules. So Adam is doing

something much bigger than breaking a law; he is making the law, and therefore he is putting himself above God, deciding for himself what is right and what is wrong. He's doing a Frank Sinatra: I'll do it my way.

God's way – the way that works perfectly – was that he remained king, with Adam under him, with Eve as his helper, ruling the animals. Adam's way was to turn this on its head, as an animal seduced Eve and she drew in her husband alongside and together they decided to put themselves above God. Truly, Adam is the man who would be king. It is in this sense that he will become 'like God'.

Do you see why I say that sin is an act of revolution? Sin is not just doing wrong things, though it includes that. It is much deeper. It is telling God that we don't want him because we know better. It is to take his place and put ourselves in charge. It is to echo the words of Swinburne, "Glory to Man in the highest, for man is the master of things!"

But he isn't. God is. So what happens when we try to take God's place? What are the fruits of sin? Our third scene:

Sin turns delightful order into miserable chaos

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

It is a terrible half-truth. What actually happens? Verse 7:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Yes their eyes are opened, and in a twisted sense they do become like God. But their eyes are opened to shame and disgrace. What could be more pathetic than trying to sew a loincloth for yourself out of fig leaves? And so we come immediately to what is, for me, the saddest verse in all Scripture, verse 8:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

They hid from God. Can you imagine a more poignant picture of the tragedy of sin?

What has happened is this: because sin is an act of revolution against God, everything gets turned on its head; the whole beautiful fellowship of the garden is turned upside-down and ruined. So:

Instead of trusting God's promises they doubt his word.

Instead of ruling the animals they allow themselves to be ruled by a snake.

Instead of gratefully receiving God's abundance they take the one thing he has forbidden.

Instead of living with unembarrassed nakedness they resort to shameful cover-up.

Instead of walking openly with God they try to hide from him.

Instead of delighting in one another they accuse and blame each other.

Fellowship with God gives way to banishment from him; life gives way to death.

The delight that is Eden, the easy and ordered fellowship between man and creation, man and woman, man and God, is torn asunder and reduced to miserable chaos.

The whole creation has been affected. The fundamental order of God as creator and man as creature has been turned on its head and creation begins to unravel. Sin, in fact, is uncreation. In Paul's words from Romans, creation itself is now in bondage to decay.

That is what sin does. That is why the world is the way it is. That is why your life and mine is the way it is. Sin has turned delight into misery.

Now we know, wonderfully, that that is not the end of the story. The Bible does not end with Genesis chapter 3. Chapter 4 follows. Abraham will come . . . and Moses and David and in the fullness of time Jesus. And when Jesus comes, the words 'take and eat' will no longer be words of rebellion but will become words of salvation.

But we need to stay a little longer with this uncomfortable and tragic story and hear its warning for us: don't be taken in by sin.

Don't be taken in by sin

A pastor carried out an exercise with a group in which they look at advertisements and what they promised. Here is what one set of advertisements promised: power, peace, status, revival, a different dimension, paradise, values, a happy family life, performance, freedom, spirituality, comfort, enlightenment, friendship, the breath of life, reconciliation, identity, life, escape, balance, therapy, a future, insight. And the products being advertised? A brand of tea, a mobile phone, a holiday destination, footwear, and so on.

It only takes a second's thought to expose the absurdity of those claims. But let me say this: I am so easily taken in by such claims. And we are all so easily fooled and taken in by the claims of sin. In Paul's striking phrase: sin deceived me. It did, and it does. And my purpose today has been to try to unmask sin and show it up for the lie and deception that it really is. It promises true contentment – the fruit was 'good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom' – but it delivers misery: shredded fig leaves and shameful creeping behind tree trunks.

It was just like that for King David with Bathsheba. Like Eve, he saw, he desired, and he took what was forbidden. And like Eve, shame and untold misery was the result.

Wasn't the sexual revolution of the 60s just such a broken promise? Did God really say that we should wait for marriage? No! that I should restrict myself to one partner? No! that I should restrict myself to the opposite sex, that I should remain faithful till death? No! God knows that if you break free from those outmoded restrictions your eyes will be opened and you will be happy. And what we're left with is a dysfunctional and broken generation desperately scratching around for fig leaves in an attempt to cover up the damage.

And it's no different with the spending revolution of today. Did God really say, Do not covet. Surely God knows that if only you could have x, then you will be truly happy. Buy this latest gadget-laden dishwasher and you will have meaning, purpose, status, the admiration of all your friends, and untold sexual prowess. The lies go on and we still believe them. Let's expose sin for what it really is: a rejection of God's word and a decision to go it alone because we don't really believe he is good.

The happiest people I know are those who believe that what is written in our Bible is what God says, and what God says he says for our good, and therefore they live by those promises. Sin says, I can do better. Did God really say? Does this old book really know what's best for us? Let's expose sin for what it really is; unmask the lie; reject it, and be happy.