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Genesis 3:1-7

Ninth Message

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TRIED AND FOUND WANTING

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Last Wednesday the Congressional Budget Office announced that the 2009 budget deficit would exceed \$1 trillion. The National Debt now exceeds \$10 trillion. These enormous numbers show only too clearly what we all know: our appetite to consume far exceeds our ability or willingness to pay. At every level of society our excessive appetites have landed us in deep trouble. We've supersized ourselves into obesity. Easy credit has persuaded us we can have it all now. Individuals have rung up huge amounts of credit card debt. Households have taken on mortgages beyond their ability to pay. Banks and investment houses have pursued profits through ever-more arcane financial arrangements such as collateralized debt obligations. Governments at every level from local to state to federal struggle to cope with massive deficits. All because we are not content to restrain our appetites in order to live within our means.

When it comes to satisfying our desires there are two ways to pursue contentment: consume more or desire less. Alas, it is much easier to do the former than the latter. The government gives us a helping hand. President Bush gave us a tax rebate last spring, urging us to spend it on consumption. Consumer spending fuels the economy and the jobs of many of you.

Why are our appetites so distorted? Does God want us to have appetites? Or should we simply say, as did the ancient Greeks, "Everything in moderation; nothing in excess"?

Today we return to Genesis 1-11, which we are studying under the title, "Our Story of Origins." We come to chapter 3 where we find the first distortion of human appetite and its terrible consequences that have reverberated throughout human history. Our story of origins which started off so well now takes a terrible fall.

There is so much in this chapter that I'll take five weeks to work through it. Today we'll look at the temptation and fall (vv 1-7). In the following weeks we'll see how Adam and Eve hide from God, refuse to take responsibility for their actions and instead pass the blame (8-13), how God curses the serpent and promises to send someone to defeat the forces of evil (14-15), how he inflicts pain upon the man and the woman (16-19), and how he expels them from paradise (20-24). These are weighty topics. These events happened thousands of years ago, but we still live with their consequences even today.

The setting for the events of chapter 3 was given in chapter 2. The LORD God had formed the man out of the dust of the ground, but he did not intend him to live by scrabbling around in the dust of the ground. Instead the LORD planted a garden in Eden, the land of delight. This garden was his sanctuary on earth. It was an intrusion of heaven onto earth, where God came down to earth. It was here, in his sanctuary, that God put the man. He gave the man a dual task: to work and to take care, to serve and to guard (2:15). Whatever that work or service looked like, it was not for the purpose of producing his food. Instead it was the LORD who provided everything for the man. The Lord had filled the garden with every type of tree, all of them "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:8). He urged the

man to enjoy the bounty of the garden, to satisfy his appetites on the LORD's provision. He had free access to any tree of the garden except one:

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 certainly die." (Gen 2:16-17 TNIV)

God had created the man with appetites, and had provided everything necessary to satisfy those appetites. In simple obedience to God lay man's fulfilment, happiness and true freedom. This was paradise, life with God. Sin, when it happened, occurred within Paradise, the land where God was present and where he provided everything necessary for the satisfaction of human appetites. The first sin did not take place in a wasteland of deprivation. It is not true that if only man had been in a better place he would not have sinned; he was in the best place on earth.

Here, in paradise, he had the freedom to obey or not. He had the ability to not sin or to sin. To assist him in serving, guarding and keeping the commandment, God provided a helper corresponding to him: the woman. Chapter 2 closes with the man and woman in harmony with one another, with God and with all creation. But how quickly everything goes wrong in chapter 3!

The chapter opens with a new character: the serpent.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. (Gen 3:1a)

Though this serpent is described as one of the wild animals made by God it will quickly become apparent that this is more than a mere animal. Some sinister evil power is at work through the serpent. The New Testament is unambiguous about identifying this power with Satan, referring to "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan" (Rev 20:2; cf. 12:9).

But who is Satan and where did he come from? The Bible tells us little about him, much less than you might expect from what others have written about him. Nowhere are we told the origins of Satan. He appears in only three places in the Old Testament. Satan is a Hebrew word meaning accuser. In both Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 the Satan, the Accuser, has access to God's heavenly court where he brings accusations against God's people. God permits Satan to lodge these accusations, but then he rebuts him. This is the Biblical pattern: to show us not where Satan came from but what God is doing about him.

There are two opposite dangers in thinking about Satan: we can belittle him or magnify him. Sophisticated Westerners deny the existence of Satan, dismissing him as the product of superstition. But how then do you explain the presence of evil in the world? Evil must then be blamed on the environment, but Genesis 3 shows that the first sin took place in the very best environment on earth, and we all know that environment has no relationship to morality.

The opposite danger is to magnify Satan, to grant him more power than he really has. Evangelical Christians seem particularly prone to this when they read too many books about demonic warfare. The result is dangerously close to the ancient view of two gods battling it out for supremacy, one good, the other bad. Chaos threatens to overwhelm order, so we have to give God a helping hand. The Bible does not allow this view. Satan is not an equal and opposite power to God. The Bible constantly shows us that God is effortlessly sovereign; this will be abundantly clear here in Genesis 3. Where does evil come from? What is the origin of Satan? We're not told. What we are shown again and again is what God is doing about evil and about Satan.

Why is this evil power presented as working through the serpent? The serpent means little to us today. But in the ancient world it carried a powerful symbolism. These early chapters of Genesis were given to Israel as its story of origins. Israel was surrounded by peoples with very different stories: the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Canaanites. Each of these exalted the serpent in one way or another. The serpent with its ability to shed its skin was a symbol of life and fertility. The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh records its namesake's quest for the Tree of Life; he found it but fell asleep and it was eaten by a snake which thus acquired eternal life. In Egypt, the serpent was a symbol of authority and protection: the cobra head or uraeus worn on the headpiece of the Pharaoh was his symbol of rule, and indicated he was under the protection of the patron goddess of Egypt. In Canaanite mythology the serpent Nahash was one of many powerful supernatural creatures, several of which make appearances in the Bible, including Leviathan the dragon and Tannin the sea monster. But God is effortlessly sovereign over these monsters. In Canaanite temples the snake was a fertility symbol. Genesis 3 is a polemic against all these world-views. What the world saw as good, conveying fertility, power, authority, healing, God sees as evil. Life does not lie in this direction.

Though the serpent here is described as crafty, he is still one of the animals which God has made. Though Satan has power, he is under the sovereignty of God.

Though this serpent is a creature in God's world, he quickly shows that he is opposed to God's purposes. Since he is the manifestation of the adversary, his purpose is to oppose God. He does so by engaging the woman in a conversation about God, talking about him behind his back, as it were.

He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (3:1b)

God really had spoken in the garden, but what he had said was not at all what the serpent said. God had said that the man could freely eat of any tree except one. Furthermore, it was not simply God who had said this; it was the LORD God who had told the man so. The narrator has been consistent and deliberate in using the name "the LORD God" in this account (2:4-3:22). "God" is God's title: he is God, everything else is not. "The LORD," which represents the Hebrew name Yahweh, is his personal name, known by those with whom he is in covenant relationship. It is the LORD God who has made the wild animals; they are under the umbrella of his covenant relationship with all creation. But the serpent refuses to acknowledge him as "LORD God." The serpent refuses to know the LORD, knowledge of whom is the beginning of wisdom. Not content to be himself out of relationship with the LORD, he spreads this lack of knowledge to the woman, as shown by her reply:

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" (3:2-3)

The man has presumably repeated to the woman the instructions that the LORD God had given him. But she makes several changes in what she passes on to the serpent. Three are worth noting. She now sees the LORD God as simply God: she has lost sight of the fact that she is in relationship with him; instead he is now some remote deity. Secondly, she waters down the intensity of the LORD's command. He didn't say simply, "You may eat," but, "You may freely eat": it's an emphatic construction in Hebrew. He didn't say, "You will die," but, "You will surely die"—the same emphatic construction. The LORD was emphatic about both the freedom to eat and the consequences of disobedience. Thirdly, the woman does intensify part of the command, extending it to not touching the tree. But the emphasis is in the wrong place; this makes the LORD's command seem more restrictive than it actually is.

This inability of the woman to respond with the LORD's actual command opens the door for the serpent to close in for the kill:

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "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)

Now the serpent adds the emphasis "certainly die" that was missing from the woman's response, but he does so in a way that directly contradicts God's word. The LORD had said, "You will certainly die"; the serpent says, "You will not certainly die." The serpent's final step is to throw out a lure, just like an angler trying to entice a fish to bite. In front of the woman he dangles the reward that will come from eating the fruit. The reward is great: the woman will find her eyes opened, she will know good and evil, and she will thereby be like God.

What has the serpent done? The serpent, who has no relationship with the LORD God, has distracted the woman from her relationship with the LORD, so that she sees him as simply God. He is now a remote deity who does not have her best interests at heart. It is then but a short step to accept the serpent's argument that God is withholding something from her.

Secondly, the serpent has distracted the woman from the LORD's bountiful provision and focused her attention on the one thing forbidden. God had placed the man and woman in paradise, the best place on earth. Here he had provided them with not just the minimum required for life, but with a great bounty for a full and abundant life. It was all very good: thousands of things were permitted, and only one thing forbidden. Not only were the good things permitted, they were actively encouraged; God wanted the man and the woman to enjoy life. But the serpent focuses the woman's attention on the one thing denied until she loses sight of everything else. She sees her environment not as a land of bounty but as a land of deprivation. Next the serpent persuades the woman that she needs to have this one thing now, that she owes it to herself to take it now to make herself more complete, to achieve her full potential. God is denying her this one thing because he doesn't want her to attain to her full womanhood. Finally, the serpent persuades the woman to evaluate the fruit through her eyes rather than through her ears. Her eye sees that the fruit is good, but her ear is closed to the LORD's declaration that the eating of it is not good. The woman has no need of the knowledge of good and evil. She already knows what is good:

that which God has declared in his word. She has no need of what the serpent dangles in front of her.

Perhaps you recognize some similarity with modern advertising. With our attention distracted from all that we already have, we are told there is one more thing we need, we need it now, and we owe it to ourselves to make us more complete. We deserve it and anyone who might suggest otherwise does not have our best interests at heart. Though a little voice of reason whispers in our ear not to take, our eyes are overwhelmed with the advertising images. We look... and we take.

The methods used by the serpent against the woman are the same as those used by Satan today. He seeks to distract us from the LORD and from the bountiful provision he has given us to enjoy. He focuses our attention on the one thing forbidden. When we understand this anatomy of temptation, then we can plot a course of defense—what the Puritan Thomas Brooks called “precious remedies against Satan’s devices.” We remind ourselves that we are in relationship with the LORD who really does care about us. We remind ourselves of all that he has already provided. We resist the urge to live only in the “now.” We live by faith in God’s word not by our own sight.

The serpent’s work is done. He has penetrated the woman’s defences. Her moral and spiritual collapse is quick and complete:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (3:6)

The woman made a three-fold evaluation of the fruit. On the first two counts, that it was good for food and pleasing to the eye, the LORD God was in full agreement. We were told that all the trees that he caused to sprout in the garden were pleasing to the eye and good for food (2:8). This presumably included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But that didn’t permit the eating of the fruit of this tree. There was nothing in the tree itself to render it inadvisable to eat; it was not a magical tree. The non-permissibility of the tree’s fruit lay in God’s command not in the tree itself. The man and woman were to refrain from eating the fruit not because of the fruit but because of their delight in God and his word.

The woman’s third evaluation, that the fruit of this tree was desirable for gaining wisdom, had no counterpart in God’s evaluation. But by this point, the woman was not interested in the LORD’s evaluation. The serpent had so distracted her from the LORD God that she made her own evaluation. She saw what was good and she took. She forgot what the LORD had declared to be good. She acted in moral autonomy, setting herself up as God. God is able to declare what is good and what is not good; he has the authority to do so because he has made all things. The woman did not have that authority, nor did she have any need for it. Herein is the heart of sin: the woman decided what was right in her eyes, ignoring what God had said was right in his eyes. The LORD wanted her to live by faith in his word; the serpent wanted her to live by sight.

The woman saw that it was good and she took. Every subsequent sin has been but a variation on that theme. Sin is self-centeredness, what Augustine called *incurvatus in se*, a curving in on oneself. Losing sight of the LORD who calls us into relationship with himself, we see him as simply God whom we can hold at a distance while we turn inwards on ourselves to satisfy our own desires.

Where has the man been while the serpent and the woman have been discussing God? He has been absent from the text, but in verse 6 we find that he is with the woman. He has presumably been there all along, but he has been passive and silent. The LORD had commissioned him to guard the garden sanctuary. As soon as he heard the serpent abusing and misusing God’s word he should have stepped in to guard the sanctity of this sanctuary by silencing the serpent. But he was passive, and so he willingly ate when the woman passed the fruit to him.

The final verse shows us the initial consequences of their actions:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (3:7)

The serpent was right: when they ate the fruit their eyes were opened. The serpent had promised that this would give them new knowledge. This knowledge of good and evil would liberate them to be like God. Again, he was right, but only partly so. They did gain new knowledge, but far from liberating this knowledge was terrifying. They now knew good and evil, but this is a knowledge God never intended them to have. They already knew the good: it was what God had declared to be good. In simple faith in God’s declaration lay their freedom, security and enjoyment. Now they knew good and evil not as what God declared to be good but as what they determined to be good. Their perception of everything in the world changed. They had been naked all along and thought nothing of it. Now they knew that they were naked, but this newfound self-knowledge inflicted shame and fear. Rather than walking tall in their liberation they crouched in terror, hiding from one another and from God.

Why did God allow this to happen? What was his purpose? He had created the man and the woman with appetites, and he provided everything necessary for the satisfaction of those appetites. He gave the man a simple command to keep. It was not an onerous command. The keeping of it was heavily stacked in the man’s favor: he was surrounded by abundance which he could enjoy. God commissioned him to serve him. As God’s servant he was to delight in doing God’s word, not because it seemed good in his own determination, but because it was said by God. Delight in God’s word was delight in God himself. Fulfilment came in being God-focused.

God allowed the serpent to approach the woman. He did not intervene with either the woman or the man, though he could clearly have done so. It is usually understood that God had put the man on probation. He was testing him to prove his faithfulness. In English we have different words for what we consider to be two very different concepts: testing and temptation. But both Hebrew and Greek use the same word to cover both activities. Testing and temptation are the opposite sides of the same coin. The issue before the woman was the same: would she heed God’s word? On this God and the serpent were agreed. But they wanted opposite outcomes: the serpent wanted the woman to fail, God wanted her to succeed. We call the serpent’s activity temptation and God’s activity testing.

The man and the woman failed the test, succumbing to the temptation. But God sent a second Adam to undo the work of the first. Immediately after his baptism by the prophet John and the descent of the Spirit which commissioned him to ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by Satan (Matt 4:1-11). But it was God’s Spirit who drove him into the wilderness, for God was testing him. Three times Satan spoke to Jesus, each time

using God's word to offer him something now: he could have food now, protection now, power now. But Satan was misusing God's word. Each time Jesus responded by quoting God's word from Deuteronomy. He refused to be enticed by the present attractions offered by Satan. He refused to put himself at the center of the universe. Instead he lived by faith in God's word; he remained God-focused. Thereby he resisted Satan's temptation and passed God's test. Adam was tried and found wanting. Jesus was tried and found proven. And now God extends to us the victory which Christ has won. He extends to us the possibility of walking in the footsteps of the second Adam not the first Adam.

God has created us with appetites, and he wants to satisfy those appetites. Walking with God and following Christ does not require the suppression of appetites. It is Buddhism that calls for the negation of desire. Walking with God entails the conversion of our appetites from ones driven by sight to ones driven by faith, from ones focused on self to ones focused on God.

Following Christ does not render us immune to temptations. God allows us to face temptations because he is at work testing us. He tests us so that we might grow in our faith, in our reliance upon him, and in our satisfaction in him. Because he wants us to pass he gives us the resources necessary to do so. He has put his Spirit inside us. As the Spirit works within us, renewing us in God's image in Christ, our desires are increasingly weaned away from merely physical appetites and onto an appetite for God. Our self-centeredness is converted into an increasing God-centeredness.

When we fail, as surely we will, we have an intercessor who understands us, even the Lord Jesus Christ:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God wants us to be deeply satisfied. The only way we will be deeply satisfied is to be satisfied in God himself. God is at work through Christ and his Spirit to rescue us from the tragedy of Genesis 3.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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