

“THE FIRST TEMPTATION AND OUR TEMPTATIONS”

In Genesis 1-2, we see the goodness of God’s creation. We see God creating man in his own image and placing him in Eden to worship, serve and live in fellowship with him. We see God creating the woman to be a cherished helpmate to the man, so that man and woman might be perfect complements to one another in the marriage relationship. We see God giving mankind dominion over all the earth and commissioning him to fill and subdue it, extending the blessings of Eden to every corner of the creation. In Genesis 1 and 2, everything is as it should be.

In Genesis 3, we are given the explanation for why our experience is so very unlike what we see in the account of the pre-fallen world. The reason why the world is not the way it should be is because of sin. Theologian J.I. Packer defines sin as “lack of conformity to the law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence.” [*Concise Theology*, 82] Genesis 3 tells us about the entrance of sin into the world. And the sin committed by our first parents affects us all because of the representative role that was held by Adam in the covenant of works. You will recall that we spoke of that covenant when we studied Genesis 2:16-17, where the Lord told the man that he was free to eat of any tree in the garden with the exception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, warning him that on the day he ate of it, he would surely die. Genesis 3 tells us how Adam and Eve came to break the covenant of works, bringing God’s wrath and curse upon all humanity. As we read in the letters of the apostle Paul: “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to

all men because all sinned” [Rom. 5:12]; “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3:23]; and “you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” [Eph. 2:1-2]. Our sin alienates us from God and places us under his just judgment, making us subject to death and eternal separation from God in hell. In our sin, we are “children of wrath” [Eph 2:3].

Our text tells us that the downfall of humanity was instigated by the serpent. Obviously, this serpent was not just an ordinary snake. How many snakes do you know who have the ability to talk? This serpent was the mouthpiece of the devil. In some mysterious way, the Lord permitted Satan, a fallen angel, to take possession of the serpent and to use it for his diabolical purposes.

This raises the question of why God allowed the fall to take place. Why did he create man so that he would be able to choose to disobey? For that matter, why did he create Satan so that he would be able to disobey? There is no getting around such questions. We cannot deny the fact that God allowed sin to enter the world. We can, and we must, say that God is not the author of sin; but we cannot say that God did not ordain the fall. For his own reasons, in accordance with his most holy will, God did in fact will that the fall should take place. Calvin writes,

“It offends the ears of some, when it is said, God willed the fall; but what else, I pray is the permission of Him, who has the power of preventing, and in whose hand the whole matter is placed, but His will? I wish that

men would rather suffer themselves to be judged by God, than that, with profane temerity, they should pass judgment upon him; but this is the arrogance of the flesh to subject God to its own test.” [*Commentary upon the Book of Genesis*, 144]

It pleased God to ordain the fall, though he himself remained free from the stain of sin. Fallen angels and fallen humanity bear the guilt for our sin, but we would not be able to sin had the Lord not permitted it to be so. Why? We do not know, except to say that God’s ultimate purpose in everything is to bring glory to his name. And that is precisely what he has done in working out his great plan of redemption. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1: “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.”

For the rest of our time tonight, I want us to consider the account of Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve, and I want to reflect upon what this teaches us about the nature of the temptations that we face.

Satan begins by asking Eve, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” Notice what is going on here. Satan tempts Eve to make God’s command subject to her own judgment. You can almost hear the emphasis in the question: “Did God *actually* say...” How often do we hear people talk this way about God’s Word? They say, ‘You don’t actually believe that, do you?’ And how often are we ourselves tempted to think in this way? At many times and in many ways, our sinful hearts suggest

that obedience to God's Word is impractical. We are tempted to think that we are wiser than God.

Satan's attack also twisted God's Word. He says that God had restricted Adam and Eve from eating from any of the trees in the garden, making God out to be more restrictive than he really is. And in doing so, he tempted Eve to question the reasonableness of God's command. He was saying, 'You aren't going to listen to God when he is so prohibitive, are you? He is such a killjoy.' Again, how often do we find ourselves confronted by the very same temptation. We too are tempted to question whether God is reasonable in what he requires of us in his Word.

Eve's response to Satan's question shows us that she is in trouble. There are at least two indications that she is beginning to give in to Satan's line of reasoning. Did you notice the name that Satan used to refer to God? He simply calls him "God," and Eve follows suit. This is significant, because all throughout chapter 2, and even in verse 1 of this chapter, God is referred to by the dual name "the LORD God." In the Hebrew, the name "LORD" is the covenant name by which God reveals himself to his people. It is the personal name of God. "God," on the other hand, is the more general name for God as Creator and Ruler. It is a more impersonal name for God. In chapter 2, where God's covenant relationship with mankind is set forth, God is always referred to by the two names together, eleven times in all. But here in chapter 3, Satan has caused Eve to downplay the fact that God is not only her Creator and Ruler, but he is also the God with whom she enjoys free and open fellowship in Eden. She is being diverted from thinking

about her relationship with God. Here is an important lesson for us. One of the most important things for us to do in resisting temptation is to remember our relationship with God and to keep our focus on the grace and mercy which makes that relationship possible. It is far easier to sin against a distant deity than it is to defy the God who graciously draws us into intimate communion with himself.

Eve is also in trouble because, while she corrects Satan's exaggeration, she adds one of her own. She says that God forbade them not only from eating from the fruit of the tree, but from touching it as well. But God never said anything about not touching the tree. Eve has added to God's law. She has made him out to be more strict than he really is, which indicates that she is already beginning to buy into Satan's cunning line of reasoning.

Satan sees his opportunity and he seizes it. Now he directly contradicts God's word, saying, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Now at first glance, there seems to be a sense in which Satan was correct. Adam and Eve did not die immediately after eating the fruit of the tree. But here we must remember that God's threat of death in 2:17 encompassed more than the punishment of physical death. Adam and Eve did eventually face physical death, as do all of us, but they began to experience death the moment they sinned. In its most fundamental sense, death is separation from God, the one who is the source of all life. This is why those who believe in Christ can be said to already be partaking of the gift of eternal life. Even though we still have bodies

that are subject to sin and death, we have been united to Christ by faith and we are already enjoying the benefit of being in his life-giving presence.

When Satan tells Eve that she will not die, he is tempting her to disbelieve the threat of divine judgment. This is a tactic that he continues to employ to this day. Man is always under the delusion that he can get away with his sin. Peter wrote about this in his second letter, when he spoke of scoffers who ridicule the idea that Christ is going to come again to judge the world. Many people in our world today hear the word “hell” and they think it is a big joke. And even Christians fall into this trap, deluding ourselves into thinking that we can go on sinning because God will forgive us anyway. But the Bible tells us that sin inevitably leads to death. If you live according to the flesh, says Paul to the Christians at Rome, you will die.

Satan also calls God’s motives into question, accusing him of being jealous and of trying to keep human beings from attaining their full potential. This is the meaning of the statement, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Here is the essence of sin: it is the desire to be like God; the desire to usurp God’s rightful place as Lord and set our own rules. Sin is nothing less than cosmic treason. This is why its punishment is death.

Eve took the bait. The tree looked appetizing and beautiful, and she craved the wisdom that it could give her. She knowingly broke the law of God. And we do the same thing. We do it every time we allow our desires to take precedence over what God has revealed in his Word. That is what Eve did. She wanted the fruit, so she took it and

ate it, knowing that God had explicitly told her not to do so. And then she gave some to Adam, who was with her. Notice how this indicates a failure on Adam's part in his office as head over the woman. He allowed the serpent's conversation with Eve to continue on to the point when it was too late. Instead of leading his wife to reject the enticements of the devil, Adam followed her lead and ran headlong to his doom.

Notice also how the text tells us that Adam and Eve got what Satan said they would get: their eyes were opened. But the knowledge that they received was not a blessing, but a curse. Their eyes were opened to see their nakedness. Sin does not lead to enlightenment, but to shame.

Sin is what is wrong with all of us. The thing that we all need to be saved from is sin and all of its dreadful consequences. We need the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ to wash away the guilt and stain of our sin. But there is more to this than a transaction made at a single moment in time. Even after we have embraced Christ by faith, we still need to be delivered, day by day and hour by hour, from the temptation to sin. Our fundamental problem, for all of our days, is that of sin. Listen to these words from the great Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte:

“Do you ask honestly and in earnest, ‘What must I do to be saved from this far country, this hell-upon-earth into which I have fallen?’ O man! You are very easily answered. Your case is very easily treated...you are simply a great sinner...You must not expect to be flattered and fondled,

and sympathized and condoled with, as if there was some deep and awful mystery about you. Oh no! there is nothing mysterious or awful about you. You are a quite commonplace, everyday, vulgar transgressor. There are plenty like you...Do you not know what it is in you, and about you, that lands you in such nakedness and famine and shame and pain and death? You know quite well. It is sin. It is nothing but sin. It is the sins and the faults of your heart and your life...Believe the worst about yourself. Fix on the constantly sinful state of your own heart, and on the secret springs of sinful thought and feeling within you...Fight every day against no one else but yourself; and against nothing else but every secret motion of pride, and anger, and malice, and love of evil, and dislike of good. Every blow you deal to these deadly things of which your heart is full is another safe and sure step back to God.” [*Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, 287-8]

Sin is your great enemy, and you are called to fight temptations to sin with all of your strength. But you must also remember that you do not have the strength in yourself to fight it. As Paul writes, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” [Rom. 8:13] Sin can only be put to death by relying upon the Spirit of God to apply the sin-killing power of the cross to our hearts on a moment by moment basis. In the words of the great pastor-theologian

John Owen, “[N]one shall ever be delivered from perplexing temptations unto the glory of God and their spiritual advantage, but by the acting and exercising of faith on Christ Jesus, and the sufficiency of his grace for our deliverance.” [*The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded*, 90] You will have to do battle against temptation for as long as you continue living in this life. But your Lord and Savior promises that he will enable you to overcome temptation, if you will keep on looking to him in faith. For he has said, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” [Jas. 4:7]