

Genesis 3:1–13 — The Serpent Was More Subtle

Yea Hath God Said, Adding and Taking Away, Adam's Deliberate Sin, Sin in the Flesh, and What the Fall Acquired

Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:1–19

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”

“And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

The Serpent's Craftiness: A Good Creature Put to Evil Service

The serpent was crafty — and God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good. The craftiness of the serpent was a good thing as God made it. The enemy knew what creature to use. Two animals spoke in Scripture: the serpent here, giving a bad message, and Balaam's donkey, giving a good one. God can use a dumb animal to rebuke the madness of a prophet's way. The craftiness of the serpent, used rightly, answers to what the Lord commended in Matthew 10:16 — be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. A serpent crossing a meadow leaves no trace; it enters at one end and exits at the other without the waving of grass or the bending of a branch betraying its path. That is wisdom for a Christian in this world — to pass through without leaving a wake of self-exhibition behind. The creature was very good; its craftiness was very good. The enemy employed it for his own ends.

The enemy also demonstrates his craft in the name he uses for God. Throughout chapter 2, the name has been Jehovah Elohim: the God of relationship and creation together. The serpent says: yea, hath God — Elohim — said. He drops Jehovah entirely. He wants the relationship forgotten. He addresses the woman as if there were only a Creator, a supreme power, above her — not one who stands in a personal, covenant relationship with her. And she takes his ground: when she replies, she says God — Elohim — has said. She does not say Jehovah Elohim has said this. She has unconsciously adopted the enemy's language and thereby his framing. That is the first trap. And it runs from beginning to end in the chapter: Jehovah Elohim disappears from the conversation until verse 8, when they hear the voice of Jehovah Elohim walking in the garden. The relationship, and its claims, returns.

Yea, Hath God Said: The Pattern of the Question

The first word the serpent speaks — yea in the King James; is it even so in J.N. Darby's translation — is itself an act of craft. Yea: agreement, common ground, a feigned sharing of perspective before the sting. It is the technique of the tempter: begin where the other person is, appear to be on the same side, and then introduce the corrosive question. The opposite of is it even so is verily, verily — the words the Lord Jesus used more than any other person in Scripture. He did not come with questions designed to undermine faith. He came with certainties designed to address the conscience: verily, verily I say unto you. Every instance of that phrase in John's Gospel brings something to bear on the conscience and the soul.

The question itself — hath God said ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? — is a deliberate distortion. God had said: of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat. God's word was an open-handed provision of abundance with one single exception. The serpent's phrasing suggests the opposite emphasis: God has restricted you from every tree except a few. The tone is entirely different. One

hears generosity with a single boundary; the other hears restriction with a grudging concession. That reframing is calculated to stir up discontent — the suggestion that God has withheld something good, that he knows it is good, and that is precisely why he will not let you have it.

Adding and Taking Away: What Eve Did to the Word

When Eve replied, she committed two errors that together show the enemy had already made progress. First, she omitted the word freely. God had said freely eat. Eve said we may eat. One word gone. The word freely is not a decoration; it expresses the open-handed generosity of God, the superabundance of his provision. When freely disappears from the mind, the impression forms that God is withholding something. That impression is what the enemy had been working to create.

Second, she added to God's word: neither shall ye touch it. God had not said that. They could have touched the fruit; the prohibition was eating it. By adding the restriction about touching, Eve made God's command stricter than it was, which then paradoxically made it easier to soften. If God had said something harsher than he actually said, perhaps the whole thing was an overstatement and the leniency lay in finding the true mean between his command and the serpent's denial. Proverbs 30:6 warns: add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee and thou be found a liar. To add to the word of God is as serious as to take from it. The serpent had placed the hook; Eve had taken the bait.

The woman did not call her husband. She answered on her own. Had she said, wait, I will call my husband — as a woman did years later who answered a false teacher at her door and called her husband instead of engaging him herself — the story might have been different. But she engaged alone and on the enemy's ground.

The Tree Central in Her Mind: What Took God's Place

God said, according to verse 9 of the previous chapter, that the tree of life was in the midst of the garden. It was Eve who said the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in the midst of the garden. Either it was in the midst also (the text does not specify), or — more significantly — it had become central in her mind. The enemy had moved it there. What God put at the centre of the garden was the tree of life, which is Christ. What the enemy placed at the centre of Eve's attention was the tree of responsibility, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Step by step the focus was drawn away from life toward responsibility, from Christ toward self, from trust toward analysis.

The three avenues by which the temptation completed itself answer to the pattern that runs throughout Scripture. The woman saw that the tree was good for food — the lust of the flesh. That it was pleasant to the eyes — the lust of the eyes. That it was desired to make one wise — the pride of life. First John 2:16 names these as the three things that are in the world and not of the Father. The Lord Jesus was tempted along these same three lines in the wilderness (Luke 4). Solomon declined along them in Ecclesiastes. These are not isolated temptations but the permanent pattern of how the enemy approaches fallen and even innocent man.

Adam's Sin: Deliberate, Not Deceived

The crucial distinction between Adam and Eve in the fall is stated plainly in 1 Timothy 2:14: Adam was not deceived; the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression. Eve was beguiled by the serpent; Adam was not. Adam ate with open eyes. He knew what he was doing. And Romans 5 attributes the entrance of sin into the world to one man: by one man sin entered into the world. It was the fall of the head that brought down the whole creation over which the head had dominion.

Why did Adam eat? The common suggestion — that he did not want to be separated from Eve — may not capture the full weight of it. The same temptation that moved Satan to want to be as God, knowing good and evil, may have moved Adam too. Satan had been cast out for wanting to set himself above God; now he was dangling before the head of the new creation the same aspiration: you will be as God. Adam had been given dominion over the earth. Perhaps he wanted more. God can only be honoured when the creature takes the place the Creator has given him; no creature ever gained by grasping what was not his to take. Adam sinned with his eyes open. He was the responsible head, and with his fall the whole order fell with him.

What the Fall Acquired: Sin in the Flesh, a Bad Conscience, and the Age of Conscience

What Adam and Eve acquired in the fall was not what they had bargained for. They gained three things, all negative. First, they gained sin in the flesh — what Romans 8:3 designates as sin in the flesh: the old nature, the indwelling principle of evil that now sat in the soul and exercised control over the will. Before the fall Adam did not have sin in the flesh. He fell from innocence — ignorance of good and evil — into a state in which his will was morally bound by this new resident principle.

Second, they gained the knowledge of good and evil — but without the power to do the good. The serpent told them they would know as God knows. That part was true. But God knows good and evil in a state of holiness, so that he repulses the evil and cleaves to the good; his knowledge is inseparable from his power over it. Man got the knowledge without the power: he now knows the evil, prefers it, and is governed by it. That is the sting the serpent did not mention.

Third, they got a conscience — and a bad one. They heard the voice of Jehovah Elohim and hid. Their first instinct was concealment, because their newly

acquired conscience told them they were naked, guilty, and without standing before the one who had given them life. The age of conscience — from the fall to the flood — is the period during which God left man to his newfound knowledge and his bad conscience, to see what man would make of being left to himself. Genesis 4 and 5 show the answer: the line of Cain went in one direction; the godly line in another; and by the time of Noah, the earth was filled with violence and every imagination of man's heart was only evil continually. Government had to come in to restrain what conscience alone could not.

The Lord Jesus, by contrast, had humanity in a holy state (Luke 1:35). He had the knowledge of good and evil but absolute power over the evil — not because he suppressed it by will, but because there was no sinful nature within him. The manhood he took was not connected with the sin of Adam; it was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and was holy from the first moment. He could not sin, not only because of his divine person but because of the holiness of the humanity he took. That is the profound difference between the first Adam and the last.

Where art thou? I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.