

Genesis 3:16–19 — I Will Greatly Multiply Thy Sorrow

*Sorrow as a Consequence of the Fall, Thy Desire Shall Be to Thy Husband,
Because Thou Hearkened, Cursed Ground, and Dust Thou Art*

Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:16–19; Revelation 21:4

“Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

God’s Announcement to the Serpent: A Brief Review

Before turning to the governmental consequences that fall upon the woman and the man, it is worth recalling the character of verse 15. It was addressed to the serpent, not to Adam. This is important because a whole theological superstructure has been built on the false premise that God made a promise to Adam in that verse, introducing what covenant theologians call the covenant of grace. No such thing is here. Promise in the spiritual sense begins with Abraham. Election, calling, and promise come out in Abraham as a marked turning point in God’s ways. What verse 15 introduces is the second man, the seed of the woman, whose coming God here announces — in the hearing of the fallen pair — to the adversary. That God speaks the victory before he speaks the governmental consequences is itself an indication of the triumph of grace over what sin has wrought.

I Will Greatly Multiply Thy Sorrow: The Origin of Human Suffering

Until this point in Genesis, the word sorrow has not appeared. There was no occasion for it. The garden was a place of provision, beauty, and unhindered fellowship with God. Now sorrow enters the record, and here is its origin. I will greatly multiply thy sorrow. The earth is filled with sorrow — every visitor to a cemetery, every ward of a hospital, every generation that has known war confirms it. This is where it starts. The whole history of human grief traces back to this moment and this cause.

Man complains against God for the sorrow in the world, just as Adam complained against God in the garden: the woman you gave me. But the answer to the complaint is right here in the same chapter. Sorrow in the world came in because of man's sin — not because of God's failure or God's malice. God didn't start the war. Man's self-will, his refusal to submit to his Creator, produced the wreckage that fills human history. Revelation 21:4 reaches to the end of the story: God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying. Sorrow belongs to the former things, and they will pass away. But their origin is in Genesis 3, and the blame rests with man.

Thy Desire Shall Be to Thy Husband, and He Shall Rule Over Thee

This verse has been treated as a hot potato in evangelical commentary. One reading of it is that the desire of the woman toward her husband carries the sense of a desire to control, to vie for authority — just as she had led in the transgression. A parallel passage in chapter 4:7 uses similar language of sin crouching at the door: unto thee shall be his desire and thou shalt rule over him. The parallelism between the two passages suggests that the desire in both cases carries an element of the will asserting itself toward the other.

The he shall rule over thee is a governmental consequence of the fall, not the first introduction of headship. Headship existed before the fall — Adam was created first, named the woman, and bore the responsibility for the fall of the race as federal head. What came in at the fall was something harsher: a rule that has characterized the treatment of women throughout the millennia, and the record of that treatment is one of the darkest chapters in human history. The despicable abuse of women across cultures and centuries is the outworking of this verse, not a reflection of God's original design. J.N. Darby's translation preserves the governmental tone: and to thy husband shall be thy desire. This verse describes what sin introduced into the relationship, not the ideal of headship which Ephesians 5 restores in Christ.

Because Thou Harkened Unto the Voice of Thy Wife

The charge to Adam carries a specific emphasis: because thou hearkened unto the voice of thy wife. This is not a universal injunction against ever listening to one's wife — Scripture gives examples of wise women whose counsel a husband was right to follow. The Shunammite woman whose son had died went to her husband for permission to go to the prophet, and he harkened to her — to very good effect. Abigail's wisdom, which Nabal failed to exercise himself, saved many lives. And God himself told Abraham, concerning Hagar and Ishmael, hearken to the voice of Sarah thy wife. Listening to a wise and godly wife is not condemned here.

What is charged against Adam is something entirely different: he listened to his wife when she handed him the fruit, and he ate. Eve had been deceived — 1 Timothy 2:14 says the woman was deceived but Adam was not — yet Adam followed her into the sin with full knowledge of what he was doing. That deliberate, calculated choice to follow Eve's lead rather than God's explicit command is what is in view. First Timothy 2:14 does not blame Adam to minimize Eve's guilt; it simply highlights that Adam's sin was of a different and

more brazen character. The Mosaic provision of no sacrifice for willful, deliberate sin also bears on this. Adam's sin was of that character.

Cursed Is the Ground, and Thorns and Thistles

The curse extends beyond Adam personally; it falls on the ground — not just the ground of Eden, but the ground, the earth as the sphere of man's labor. The ground is going to resist. It is going to bring forth thorns and thistles. These did not exist before the fall. Their sudden appearance must have involved a change in the genetic order of things — a drastic alteration in the nature of vegetation that God brought about by his word. The biology of thorns and thistles has been observed by some to resemble distorted leaf-like structures, as if something that was once growing in a different form was twisted into an instrument of resistance to man's hand. Whether this is so or not, the theological fact is plain: creation groans and travails, and the ground itself became an adversary to the man set over it.

The crown of thorns the Lord Jesus wore at the crucifixion draws its significance from this verse. He took upon himself the very symbol of the curse of the fall — that which speaks of the earth's resistance to man since the day of Adam's sin — and wore it upon his head. It shows the depths of his humiliation and the depth of the curse he bore on our behalf.

Dust Thou Art: God's Answer to Thou Shalt Be as Gods

The serpent had said: ye shall be as gods. God now has the last word: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. The answer to the serpent's ambition on man's behalf is the plainest possible statement of man's actual condition. You are dust. You are going back to dust. There is no becoming like God in this. And yet there is something beyond the dust, because what is taken from the dust — the living soul, the breath of life that God breathed in — does not return to the dust in

the same sense the body does. The soul is immortal. But the body, which is of the earth, earthy, returns to what it came from.

Furthermore, in verse 23, the man is sent to till the ground from which he was taken. His daily labor becomes a perpetual reminder of his origin. Not so that he might become an atheist, but so that every day of toil in the earth might remind him that Someone had taken him up out of that very earth and given him life. That reminder is a mercy, not a punishment. God always does the best possible thing for man even in his governmental dealings.

In the Sweat of Thy Face: Work, Occupation, and Faithfulness

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread. The pattern of honest labor was established by God as the order for fallen man — not as degradation but as dignity and as discipline. The apostle Paul was a very busy man: he preached, he traveled, he wrote, and he made tents with his own hands so as not to be chargeable to others. He set himself out as an example of this kind of laboring faithfulness. Idle hands make mischief — not just a proverb, but a principle rooted in this verse.

The Lord said, Occupy till I come. We are let go from one kind of occupation at the end of the working week, or at the end of a working life, but we are not let go from the occupation of serving Christ. In being let go, the early disciples went to their own company. That is the pattern. What does a Christian do with the spare time that retirement or leisure provides? The answer of the word of God is not beach-bum indolence but active employment in the things of the Lord. Little is much when God is in it. The one-talent man buried what he had; the faithful ones put what they had to use. The word of commendation — well done, good and faithful servant — speaks to faithfulness in discharge, not to the size of the responsibility.

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying.

(Revelation 21:4)