

“God’s Command: Choose Life”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

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The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 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."

(Chapter 3) Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 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.'" "You will not surely 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." 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. 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.

It is impossible to hear the familiar story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent and not have an opinion about what is going on. If we were to ask 100 people to list the top five stories from the Old Testament, we could guess 99 out of 100 would mention this story.

This story seems to make it into the Sunday School curriculum at just about every age level. (I was recently reminded of this phenomenon by my teenage son, complaining about his new Science textbook, saying “mom, it’s the same material year after year after year, only in more detail”). The same could be said of this story of Adam, Eve, and the Snake. We’ve all heard the story, ever since we were little enough to gaze up at the flannelboard in Sunday School. It’s dramatic, it’s easy to picture, and it appeals to both children and adults. Hard to think of a more perfect Bible story.

For the kids, there's the tropical garden, the sneaky snake, the luscious fruit. And there's plenty to interest the adults: temptation, lies, blame, and yes, even nudity. It's a great story, but what does it really mean?

More has been written about this than almost any other part of the Old Testament¹. Lots of ideas swirl around in our heads, many of which have little to do with scripture. Let's first take a look at what the Bible does not say².

Right off the bat we have to set one thing straight. There is no "apple". What happens to Adam and Eve has often been referred to as "The Fall". But Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann says, in so many words, "nothing could be further from the truth".³ This story is not a description of people turning to evil. The word "evil" never appears in the story, except to describe the forbidden tree. Even the serpent is not described as "evil", though many interpreters have said the Snake represents evil personified, or Satan. Go home and carefully read the entire third chapter of Genesis. You won't find those words---Satan, sin, fall, or even those ideas.

This story has been given a prominence in Scripture that is out of proportion. It is hard to say why this is so. It may be the story is itself so compelling. It has captured the imaginations of the faithful for so long--- it stands out. But the truth is, Genesis 3 is not referred to anywhere else in the Old Testament. This is significant because so often scripture quotes other scripture. Paul makes reference to it a couple of times in his letters, but that's it. It is not a central text reflecting a central doctrine. In fact, as scriptural texts go, it's rather marginal⁴.

Eating the forbidden fruit has been called "the first sin". Yet there is no "sin" or "guilt" vocabulary used in the story. Rather, the story focuses on the "shame" that results from breaking God's command. Likewise, this is not an explanation about the "origin of death". Since Adam and Eve were from the beginning created as sexual beings, made out of the very earth itself, it is likely that, from the beginning, they were created mortal.

¹ Lyn M. Bechtel, "Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4B-3.24", in A Feminist Companion to Genesis, Athalya Brenner, Editor, p 77.

² I am indebted to the article by Lyn M. Bechtel and to Walter Brueggemann's fine commentary on Genesis in Interpretation for the idea of looking at what Genesis 3 does NOT say.

³ Brueggemann, Interpretation, Genesis, p. 41. The actual quote is "nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself".

⁴ Ibid.

And finally I cannot leave a discussion of what Genesis 3 **is not** without failing to mention it is not a story of the woman as temptress. It is not a scriptural argument to blame women for all the difficult things in life. Though it has been misused in this way for centuries, this is simply not what it says.

Now, I have really pulled the rug out from underneath you! No fall, no sin, no devil, no blaming women. What is left?

Let's go back to the text. God puts the man in the garden and God commands something. God puts many trees in the garden. Two trees are given names. There is the mysterious and forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I am going to refer to it as the Tree of Knowledge. And there is the Tree of Life. Both these trees were placed in the middle of the garden.

Now God gives a command to the man and woman. God draws a fence around the Tree of Knowledge. It is not a suggestion! It is not a recommendation! It is a crystal clear prohibition! It is easy to miss this in the English translation, but the way the Hebrew works is this. There are two ways for saying "not" in Hebrew. One is a simple "not". The other is an "absolutely positively never ever not". It is the latter type of "not" the writer uses here. The other detail in the Hebrew is in the grammar. When a writer wants to emphasize, really emphasize something, the word is repeated (in a different grammatical form) twice in a row. We see this in two places in the command. You shall not eat (really not eat) and if you do, you will die (really die).

There must be something very special and very dangerous about this Tree of Knowledge. Something clearly beyond what Eve and Adam can fathom. After all, she says it looks good to eat, and it's a good thing to have more knowledge (isn't it?), so it must be good. She doesn't get it. Neither, of course, does Adam. They are out of their league, but they haven't a clue.

And here is where we get to the crux of the story. God has commanded them, not to tempt them, not to test them, *but to protect them!* This is important because if we believe this is a story about God testing us, it reflects a very different image of who God is. A God who tests us is very different from a God who protects us. The story is about broken trust. The story is at heart about God's care for humans, and the human failure to trust in that care. The stakes are high. Not trusting God leads to death.

Here's the command: "But from the tree of the knowledge and good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you

shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). What is so bad about knowing good and evil? More knowledge is a good thing, right? After all, we have to learn the difference between right and wrong.

One translator says God’s command may be read as “you may not partake in the *deciding of what is permissible and what is prohibited.*” We humans are not the ultimate authority! We don’t get to decide what is good and what is evil. God knows if humans try to meddle with this deep truth, death will result. And God does not wish death for the humans. God desires they choose life. The pair is warned for their own welfare that only God is Lord of Creation.⁵ Reminds me of that old margarine ad: “Don’t fool with Mother Nature”. Messing with the way the world is fundamentally ordered leads to death.

Earlier on in Chapter 2 we are told, “In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9b). Now that Tree of Life, that sounds like a good thing. This tree is NOT forbidden. God sets things up in the garden so the humans can eat from **any tree**, and that includes the tree of Life (at least until after the humans disobey). God wants the humans to choose life, in all its abundance. It is there for the taking. Like ripe fruit, ready to be plucked.

This Tree of Life intrigues me. There is nothing like it; it is beyond imagining. The Tree of Life makes an appearance 13 times in scripture, mostly here and in Proverbs, where it is Wisdom personified. Wisdom, is “a **tree of life** to those who embrace her. . .” (Prov 3:18) The Tree of Life is also shown to be the fruit of the righteous (Prov 11:30) a longing fulfilled (Prov 13:12), and a tongue that brings healing (Prov 15:4). The Tree of Life disappears in scripture until the very end of the Bible, in Revelation. But when we see it again, it is glorious!

“On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”. God knows we need that.

Here we are, at the beginning of Lent, a long way from the Garden. Lent is a time when we give up things: we fast, we pray, we do good works. Lent is often thought of as a gloomy time of self-renunciation. A time of lots of “no’s”. But our scripture today, while clearly having some important “no’s” in it, leaves us with this truth. God desires life for us. God wishes us to eat deeply of the Tree of Life. God has always desired this for humanity. God commands we choose life, so that we and our descendants may live (Deut 30:19).

⁵ Biblica: The Bible Atlas, A Social and Historical Journey Through the Lands of the Bible. 94-95

To choose life, on God's terms, we must obey. We trust in the Lord of all Life. Failure to trust God with our lives leads to death. The garden was created for God's delight, and we are turned loose in it, to our delight, if we will but choose life. We must yield the inclination to claim that which is not ours to claim, to leave the knowledge of deciding good and evil to God and God alone.

In closing, I share with you part of a poem by John Leax that captures both God's extravagant gift and our own temptation to claim that which is not ours. Leax writes of walking in the woods, in a glorious garden which he understands has been given to him. Leax addresses our Creator.

*With every turn I find extravagance---
The unending revelation of your joy's abundance.
What other end should I imagine for goldenrod and buttercup,
For bloodroot, trillium, and phlox,
For jack-in-the-pulpit. . .
For loosestrife and forget-me-not?
I am confounded.*

*What harmony within yourself led you to make your pleasure and
my needs one? What awful purpose then led you to place your
pleasure in my keeping?*

*What discord now tempts me to seize what you have made
and call it mine?*

*With these words affirming my delight, I yield my inclination to
name my own what can only be yours⁶.*

Choose life, and lead a holy Lent, filled with trust and obedience, overflowing with the grace of the Creator's abundance.

⁶ John Leax, *My Delight*, in Out Walking: Reflections on Our Place in the Natural World, p. 81-82.