

The Fall of Man

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What is sin? It is a question that we cannot ignore. From false answers to it have come untold disaster to mankind and to the church, and in the right answer to it is to be found the beginning of the pathway of salvation.

How shall we obtain the answer to that momentous question? I think we can make a very good beginning by just examining the Biblical account of the way in which sin entered into the world. That account is given in the Book of Genesis in a very wonderful manner. The language is very simple; the story is told almost in words of one syllable. Yet how profound is the insight which it affords into the depths of the human soul!

"And the Lord God," says the Bible, "commanded the man, saying, 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 of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). It has been observed that no reason is said to have been given to Adam to tell him why he should not eat of that tree, and it has been said that that fact is perhaps significant. Eating of the tree was not in itself obviously wrong; the command not to eat of it was not reinforced by any instinct in man's nature. It appeared therefore all the more clearly as a sheer test of obedience. Would man obey God's commands knowing simply that they were God's commands, knowing that because He gave them they had some quite sufficient reason and were holy and just and good? How clearly and simply that is brought out in the narrative in the Book of Genesis!

An equal simplicity and an equal profundity characterize the following narrative — the narrative of the temptation and the fall. Adam and Eve were in the garden. The serpent said to the woman, "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (Genesis 3:1)

I think we can detect even there the beginnings of the temptation. The woman is asked to eye the things that God has forbidden as though they were desirable things. It is hinted that the commands are hard commands; it is hinted that possibly they might even have involved the prohibition to eat of any of the trees of the garden.

Perhaps an attempt is made to cast doubt upon the very fact of the command. "Hath God said?" says the tempter. The woman is asked to envisage God's command as a barrier which it would be desirable to surmount. Is there no loophole? Has God really commanded this and that? Did He really mean to prohibit the eating of the trees of the garden?

The woman's reply states the fact — certainly in the main. God's command did not prohibit the eating of all the trees in the garden, but only of one tree. "And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die" (Genesis 3:2-3).

Then at last there comes a direct attack upon the truthfulness of God. "Thou shalt surely die," said God: "Ye shall not surely die," said the tempter. At last the battle is directly joined. God, said the tempter, has lied, and He has lied for the purpose of keeping something good from man. "Ye shall not surely die," said the tempter: "for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4-5).

At that point the question arises in our minds what the element of truth was in those words of the tempter. Those words were a lie, but the truly devilish lies are those that contain an element of truth, or, rather, they are those lies that twist the truth so that the resulting lie looks as though it itself were true.

Certainly it was true that by eating the forbidden fruit Adam attained a knowledge that he did not possess before. That seems to be indicated in verse 22 of the same chapter of the Book of Genesis, where we read: "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). Yes, it does seem to have been true that when he ate of the forbidden fruit man came to know something that he had not known before.

He had not known sin before; now he knew it. He had known only good before; now he knew good and evil. But what a curse that new knowledge was, and what an immense loss of knowledge as well as loss of everything else that new knowledge brought in its train! He now knew good and evil; but, alas, he knew good now only in memory, so far as his own experience was concerned; and the evil that he knew he knew to his eternal loss. Innocence, in other words, was gone.

What would have been the advance which resistance to that first temptation would have brought to Adam and Eve? It would have meant that the possibility of sinning would have been over. The probation would successfully have been sustained; man would have entered into a blessedness from which all jeopardy would have been removed.

The advance which a successful resistance to the temptation would have brought would also have been an advance in knowledge. That tree was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Well, there is perhaps a real sense in which it would have been to man a tree of the knowledge of good and evil even if he had not eaten of the fruit of it. If he had resisted the temptation to eat of the fruit of that tree, he would have come to know evil in addition to the knowledge that he already had of good. He would not have known it because he had fallen into it in his own life, but he would have known it because in his resistance to it he would have known it because in his resistance to it he would have put it sharply in contrast with good and would deliberately have rejected it. A state of innocence, in other words, where good was practiced without any conflict with evil, would have given place to a state of assured goodness which evil would have been shown to have no power to disturb.

Such was the blessed state into which God was asking man to come. It was a state which included what I think we can call a knowledge of good and evil. Certainly it was a state in which the difference between good and evil would have been clearly discerned. There was a right way and a wrong way of seeking to attain discernment. The right way was the way of resistance to evil; the wrong way was the way of yielding to it.

The ancient lie is put into men's hearts again and again and again that the only way to attain a state higher than innocence is to have experience of sin in order to see what sin is like. Sowing wild oats is thought to be rather a good way of transcending childish innocence and of attaining strong and mature manhood.

Do you know how that lie can best be shown to be the lie that it is? Well, my friends, I think it is by the example of Jesus Christ. Do you despise innocence? Do you think that it is weak and childish not to have personal experience of evil? Do you think that if you do not obtain such experience of evil you must forever be a child?

If you have any such feeling, I just bid you contemplate Jesus of Nazareth. Does He make upon you any impression of immaturity or childishness? Was He lacking in some experience that is necessary to the highest manhood? Can you patronize Him as though He were but a child, whereas you with your boasted experience of evil are a full-grown man?

If that is the way you think of Jesus, even unbelievers, if they are at all thoughtful, will correct you. No, Jesus makes upon all thoughtful persons the impression of complete maturity and tremendous strength. With unblinking eyes He contemplates the evil of the human heart. "He knew what was in man" (John 2:25), says the Gospel according to John. Yet He never had those experiences of sin which fools think to be necessary if innocence is to be transcended and the highest manhood to be attained. From His spotless purity and His all-conquering strength, that ancient lie that experience of evil is necessary if man is to attain the

highest good recoils naked and ashamed.

That was the lie that the tempter brought to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Man was told to seek discernment in Satan's way and not in God's. Had man resisted the temptation what heights of knowledge and strength would have been his! But he yielded, and what was the result? He sought to attain knowledge, and lost the knowledge of good; he sought to attain power, and lost his own soul; he sought to become as God, and when God came to him in the garden he hid himself in shameful fear.

It is a sad story indeed. But it is the beginning and not the end of the Bible. The first chapters of the Bible tell us of the sin of man. The guilt of that sin has rested upon every single one of us, its guilt and its terrible results; but that is not the last word of the Bible. The Bible tells us not only of man's sin; it also tells us of something greater still; it tells us of the grace of the offended God.

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