

Genesis 3:12-24

Lesson 7

In this section, the core of creation, which is relationship, is disfigured and not only that but the nature of that disfigurement is demonstrated, as there is the shifting of blame, innuendo, and accusations. This was at the core of God's creation and now it is marred and mutilated.

12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

The man shifts blame, he even tries to pull God into the fray by indicating that He gave the woman to the man. This response is all too human trying to justify, or at least spread the blame around. Adam points to the circumstances that God created and seems to be trying to say this is the fate you left me with in life.¹ Some have even gone as far as to say that the couple demonstrates their "allegiance to Satan" by distorting the truth and passing the

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1 in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 77.

blame.² Another aspect of this account is that not only does the man betray the woman, but also commits another act of betrayal by trying to blame God. This event has served to drive the couple apart from each other and from their God.³

13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

God then turns to the woman who blames the serpent for tricking her. In this verse the relationship that humanity once had with the animal world is now distorted and changed.⁴ Though certainly there is the literal application to the account given here there is also a sense that this same scenario continues to be repeated day in and day out.

**14 The LORD God said to the serpent,
“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,**

² Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 93.

³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, Revised ed. (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 91-92.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 78.

and dust you shall eat

all the days of your life.

Human beings and, even perhaps animals, have nullified the right to make decisions concerning human welfare independently of God. They have demonstrated defiance against Him and have lost their innocence before God. God now metes out punishment to each of those who have transgressed His order. In each of the cases, the judgment is of a twofold nature: it affects aspects of the life of each of the entities and it regulates a basic relationship. The serpent has his locomotion affected and his relationship with humanity. The woman is sentenced to pain in childbearing and her relationship with her husband is defined. The man is subjected to an arduous life and his relationship with the ground, from which he came is made to be disagreeable.⁵

It should be understood that there is a great deal of symbolism contained, especially in this section. It is true that the curse against the serpent represents a physical

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 27.

reality of the enmity between humanity and snakes, but the serpent also represents the embodiment of evil. This representation conveys the idea that evil sits in wait for humanity, with stealth and cunning, and strikes when it is least expected. The snake more than any other zoological species embodies uncanny qualities of stealth and danger. The door has been opened to the dark power of evil and it will now pursue its agenda of destroying relationship between individual members of humanity and especially between God and humanity.⁶

The pathway to the dark powers of evil now have been opened and will remain open as part of the penalty being meted out here. The struggle that began here is a completely hopeless struggle. Wherever man and serpent (evil) meet death will follow. Both humanity and serpent (evil) will end in ruin and each will be a part of ruining the other.⁷

God actually formally curses the serpent, something that

⁶ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, pp. 92-93.

⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, pp. 92-93.

will not happen with either the woman or the man. This level of harshness stands in stark contrast to the extremely merciful manner in which God deals with humanity. It should be noted however, that even in this curse there appears to be mercy as the punishment could have been much tougher even for the serpent.

**15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”**

In this section it is perhaps the object of the author to explain the natural revulsion between humans and snakes, but it may be more than this. It may be that this curse is intended to carry a polemic against paganism which regarded the serpent as a fertility symbol (Canaan), or as a protective emblem (Egypt).⁸

Some have seen verse 15 as the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. This verse appears to heavily influence the *Protoevangelium of James (Gospel of James)* that likely dates

⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 25.

to around A. D. 145, though some seek to date it about 25 years earlier. This document is of some importance because this provides a link for Catholicism with the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary and much regarding that doctrine.

In Romans 16:20⁹ there may be an allusion to this verse by Paul.¹⁰ Whether the early church saw Genesis 3:15 as the first prophecy of the Messiah is debated, but this concept clearly had an affect on much within Jewish eschatology and may have indirectly been a part of much of the hope regarding the coming of the Messiah and the defeat of the forces of evil (*Jubilees* 5:6; 10:7, 11; 23:29; *1 Enoch* 10:4, 11-12; 13:1-2; etc.; *2 Enoch* 7:1; *Testament of Moses* 10:1; *1QS* 3:18; 4:18-23; *1QM* 17:5-6; 18:1; Revelation 20:10).

Later Christian commentators, beginning with Justin (*ca.* A. D. 160) and Irenaeus (*ca.* 180 A. D.), regarded 3:15 as the first Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. In this verse the view was that a single seed of woman (Jesus) would

⁹ Romans 16:20 **The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Vol 38_B, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series, (Dallas TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), p. 905.

come and crush the head of evil (Satan).¹¹

16 To the woman he said,

**“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”**

This verse, just like the preceding verse links to 1:28 “Be fertile and increase.” Here a change is recorded as this directive will be fulfilled with the accompaniment of pain and suffering. Sarna indicates that “intense” pain during childbearing is unique to the human species and generally unknown to other female mammals.¹²

The next phrase is very difficult to interpret: **Your urge will be to your husband, but he shall rule over you.**

Female subordination is not to be a judgment on her sin.

The woman was made for man to be his helper and is twice named by the man (2:23; 3:20), which indicates his authority over her from the beginning. That being the case,

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 81.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 27-28.

it is usually argued here that “rule” here represents harsh exploitive subjugation, which has so often characterized the lot of women in all sorts of societies.¹³

Susan Foh has argued that a woman’s “urge” is not a craving for her man whatever he demands, but an urge for independence, indeed a desire to dominate her husband. Such an interpretation of “urge” is necessary in the very closely parallel passage in 4:7¹⁴. The urge for Cain is to sin, but he must master it. Here in 3:16 then, the meaning would be her desire for independence contrasted with an injunction for the man to master her. Given the rarity of the term “urge” certainty is impossible.¹⁵

**17 And to the man he said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’**

¹³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 81.

¹⁴ **If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.**” ESV

¹⁵ Susan Foh, *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 [1974/75] pp. 376-383. Waltke also comes to this same conclusion. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 94 and Wenham discusses it and does not disagree with it. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 81-82.

cursed is the ground because of you;

in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

The longest address in this section is reserved for the man, since he is the one who bears the greatest culpability in this incident. It was the man who received the prohibition directly from God and he must bear primary responsibility for his actions. As before, the punishment is related to the offense. The sin of eating forbidden food now complicates the acquisition and production of foods. The man himself is not cursed but the ground is cursed because of him. The element from which he was created now turns against him. His state of pristine harmony with nature is disturbed by his transgression.¹⁶

The man listened to the voice of his wife, which means he obeyed her and not God. It is because of this obedience to her rather than to God that the ground is cursed. In this set of verses “eating” is mentioned five times. The actual offense was eating the forbidden fruit. In “pain” he will eat, notice the very similar wording here as to what will happen

¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 28.

to the woman in childbirth. The phrase “all the days of your life” hints at a limited lifespan here: man is mortal.¹⁷

**18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.**

Weeds sprout up and rob the soil of its productivity for the production of food. Here man is once again viewed as a vegetarian and agriculture is taken as the earliest occupation of man after sin.¹⁸ Before this time he likely was more of a gatherer.

**19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”**

Work itself is not a punishment for sin. Man was placed in the Garden from the beginning to work (2:15). The punishment here is the hardship and frustration that

¹⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 82.

¹⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 28.

went along with the work. It appears that work is not productive in the same way and there is an element of frustration in this lack of success. Just as the punishment struck at the heart of of the woman's function; her being a wife and mother; the man's punishment strikes at the core of his existence. He was to live a life characterized by his work and now that work has changed from the worshipful activity it was before to something required for survival.¹⁹

It is interesting that the power and glory that the man and woman sought by eating the fruit is now rewarded with the opposite, powerlessness and futility as they are destined to return to the ground from which they were taken. It should be noted that this mortality is not to be viewed as a curse; it delivers mortals from eternal consignment to living in the cursed earth.²⁰

²⁰ The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

These next verses interrupt the flow of the narrative,

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 82-83.

²⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 95.

which comes to its conclusion in verses 22-24. Previously Adam had given her a generic name and now he gives her a very specific name. This naming is both positive and affirming of his wife. He names her “life thing” or “life personified.” Among some Jewish commentators there is some indication that there may be some word play taking place here with Aramaic (*Genesis Rabba* 20:11; 22:2) that gives the meaning of “serpent” for this name. If this is the case Adam is not simply being positive and kind here but expressing his extreme displeasure and even anger with Eve. She is also described as “mother of all the living” which is a name that is paralleled in Near Eastern mythology as an appellation for the mother goddess. Here it is demythologized and naturalized to express a biblical view of her and her role within the human race.²¹

²¹ And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Despite the fact that this section indicates punishment and alienation from God this verse indicates in particular

²¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 29.

parental care and tenderness for His creation. Since the state of nakedness now evokes shame, God restores human dignity by providing clothing.²² It is an interesting side note that in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan for Genesis (the early Aramaic translation of Genesis) the skin used to make these garments is the sloughed off skin of the serpent.²³

²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—

Man having already broken the direct command of God is now in need of an altered human existence. Just as man sought by his own hand to change the condition in which God created him there now would be temptation to change, by artificial means, his mortality. Rather than seeking to restore relationship with God and provide harmony between divine will and human will the man would likely seek to augment his mortal life by partaking of

²² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 29.

²³ Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, in *The Aramaic Bible series*, Vol. 1B (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 28.

the tree of life.²⁴

It is of note that this verse indicates, at least in a partial way, that the words of the serpent were correct. They know “good and evil” like the heavenly beings or like God. The context does not make clear which is meant here.

²³ therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

Mankind is ejected from the Garden to farm the land from which he was taken.

²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.²⁵

Humanity is driven from the temple garden to the east and the Cherubim, who must have been familiar to the Israelites, as they are given no description, are placed to guard the way back into the garden. There were at least two, as the term is plural and not the singular term which

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 30.

²⁵ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ge 3:12–4:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

would be *cherub*. Separately the flaming sword protected the way back to the Garden, it is not in the hands of the Cherubim. This also may have been familiar to the Israelites as no description is given of it either.

Synopsis

In this section clear demonstration of the brokenness created by the acts of disobedience to God's command are made very apparent. In a judicial fashion God questions both the man and the woman regarding their rebellion against His command. In the first round of this questioning Adam seeks to shift blame from himself to the woman and even to God for giving him the woman. His joy and ecstasy upon being presented with the woman has now turned to innuendo and accusation.

The woman also seeks to shift blame to the serpent and then after this very brief recital of the accusations God passes sentence. First, upon the serpent and then upon the woman, but the sentence for the woman is tempered with what many consider to be a divine promise of the Messiah.

Finally, the sentence comes to Adam and God even gives as part of the reason for the sentence that he listened to his wife rather than to God. His sentence too seems very merciful, especially in light of the proclamation that death would come. The fact that death did not come once again serves to demonstrate to the children of Israel wandering in the desert the nature of this incredibly merciful God.

The man then once again demonstrates his dominion over his wife by naming her, in what is likely a very complementary fashion and once again the author takes an opportunity to demonstrate that this God is different than the gods of the nations. This God created the “mother of the living.” There is also a demonstration of the mercy of God as he supplies the man and the woman with clothing to cover their shame.

In a very insider conversation God discloses that indeed humanity now knows “good from evil” in the way that God does and as a protective measure humanity is excluded from the garden in order to allow hope. Hope that they would not forever remain in this state of

broken relationship with their creator and with each other.

Death will come as a blessing by comparison to the prospect of eternal alienation from Him and from the rest of humanity.