

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on that first sin... Part 2

*The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"*

*But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.* (Genesis 3:2-6, NRSV)

This is the second installment of some thoughts about the story of the first or "original sin" in the Bible. A serpent starts a conversation with Eve about the rule God has laid out, about this tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17).

Did the serpent lie? It seems that the serpent told the truth. For one thing, we know that Adam and Eve lived for many years and had many children. Adam, at least, did die, but not until he was 930 years old (Genesis 5:5). So if the assumption was that upon eating the fruit, they would die immediately or soon, the serpent appears to be right. If he meant that they would never die, that was a lie, but for almost a thousand years it would look like the serpent told the truth and God lied. For another thing, when he said that she will be like God, God Himself says that "the man has become like us, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22).

What we can say is that the serpent framed what he said to question *not* what God really said, but whether God could be believed. He challenged God's original statement "in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:17)

So what is God's side to this? God could have meant that when they ate of the fruit that they would be destined to eventually die. That's what I and probably most of us have assumed. But it's also possible that God meant that they would die soon, but then He chose to heal them from the poison. It's not stated in the story, but in other Bible stories we do have God changing His mind (Genesis 6:6-7; Exodus 32:14; Jonah 3:10), which is His prerogative. And God certainly could have destroyed Adam and Eve at whatever moment He chose, but instead chose punishments that would span over years (Genesis 3:16-19) and also provided them with more suitable clothes (Genesis 3:21).

Now while we can easily blame the serpent (that's what Eve does in Genesis 3:13), notice what Eve thinks in the next verse. She assumes from the serpent's words that the fruit would make her wise; that might have been the serpent's intention but just knowing that there is evil in the world does not lead to wisdom. Later authors in the Bible will write that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). In any case, this is only one of three points in Eve's thinking. She notes that the tree is good for food and a delight to the eyes. That is the way that some, or maybe most, of the trees in the garden are described in Genesis 2:9. So it is understandable that Eve would assume this about the forbidden tree as well. And her belief that it would give her wisdom is also understandable given that she may have never had conflicting information before.

This three-part reasoning of Eve is mentioned later in the New Testament, in the first letter of John:

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.* (1 John 2:15-16, NKJV)

The lust of the flesh – good for food, the lust of the eyes – delight to the eyes, and the pride of life – desired to make one wise; this describe well the scope of sin in our lives. But in this case, it's not any of these three that are the sin – it is what she forgets. God is missing from her deliberation. For that matter, Adam is not considered either. At that moment it is just her and the fruit – nothing else matters. This is where sin creeps in.

I have come to understand “sin” as the breaking or fracturing of a relationship. We can sin against other people (Matthew 5:23-24; 6:14-15; 18:15a, 21b; Luke 11:4a; 17:3b-4a), and we can say that Eve sinned against Adam when she did not consider his well-being as she took and shared the fruit. But she also sinned against God by not considering Him and His command in her decision. If that sounds strange to you, consider that Paul writes that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23b).

Was the sin when Eve ate the fruit, or when she decided to eat it? Or, we could ask, what if she intended to eat the fruit, but it got knocked away, or she fell off the ladder trying to get it – would she have still sinned? I have heard people argue both points, but Jesus says:

*“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;”* (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* (Matthew 5:27-28, NRSV)

*“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”* (Matthew 15:18-19, NRSV)

I don't believe that Jesus means that the thought is just as bad as the action. Committing murder or adultery causes much more damage than just thinking about it. But when we linger on those thoughts, we are already shutting out God from our consciousness. Is it any wonder that Isaiah writes:

*See, the LORD'S hand is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.* (Isaiah 59:1-2, NRSV)

So what comes from this misguided decision? We'll look at that next time.

Yours in Christ,

