

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on that first sin... Part 1

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

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.'"
(Genesis 3:1-3, NRSV)

I have often found myself going back to the story of the first or "original sin" in the Bible. Though there has been and will probably always be endless debate about the historical accuracy about this story, it is still a tremendous example (if not the best) of the nature of sin and obedience. But perhaps what catches my attention most is how many people miss key details of the story, and even I find myself asking new questions every time I read it.

First, a little of the backstory on this. We read in Genesis 1:1-2:3 an account of the creation of the world in seven days. On the sixth day God created male and female (Genesis 1:27). Beginning with Genesis 2:4, we have a kind of re-telling of the story (some argue that it is a totally different story, but that is not important for us here) that goes into more detail about the human part of creation. It says that God created a garden, and in this garden two special trees:

Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
(Genesis 2:9, NRSV)

And God placed the man (at this point there was only a man) into this garden with instructions:

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."
(Genesis 2:16-17, NRSV)

Notice that while God created many trees, including the tree of life, the only tree that God mentions to the man (Adam) is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The story never claims to cover everything that God said to Adam. It is suggested in the story itself that God may have had multiple conversations with Adam, at least to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). So it is possible that God repeated the command about the tree multiple times, and might have also mentioned the tree of life. But there is reason to believe God did not mention this other tree. We'll get to that later in the story.

Notice also that the tree that is mentioned is called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You might have heard it called "the tree of knowledge." This might mean the same thing, but maybe not. "Tree of knowledge" has an inviting sound to us, as we crave knowledge. But Adam is already gaining knowledge; he is discovering plants and animals and is naming them. So having "the knowledge of good and evil" could just mean for us that we also discover evil. Maybe the tree is, in essence (or even literally) a poison tree, and by eating from it there is the threat of pain, sickness, and death. Even today there are fruits that can do this to us. And I haven't even started to talk about the heartache and guilt of disobeying God in eating it.

And notice also that when God gives Adam the instructions, Eve is not yet present; she first appears in Genesis 2:21-22. So did God warn just Adam or both of them of the dangerous tree? We can't say for sure. God likely had many conversations with Adam and with Eve. God might have repeated the instructions about the trees many times, and with slightly different details, or Eve might have only heard about it from Adam.

But now this brings us to the serpent, mentioned at the beginning of the article. He asks the question, "*Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?*" (Genesis 3:1).

This brings up a key issue today. It has become alarmingly common among church circles to say that if anyone asks a question like "Did God say..." or "Did God really say..." that you should avoid them, because they are only trying to shake your faith. It is true that the serpent had in mind deception when asking the question. And it is also possible that a person asking you such a question is also trying to raise doubts or confusion. But this question itself is not a bad question. In fact, the question is a good and important question.

The rabbis of the Biblical times would have understood this as an important question. Learning God's will for us and sorting that out from our own will is essential for every Christian. When I was a child, a parent might have said to me, "Finish your chore, and then you can go out and play." I know, nobody goes out to play anymore, they get on their phone or their game console now. But when I was younger, I heard commands like this all the time. If the parent was also a good teacher, they would double-check to make sure you understood the instruction. So they might say, "Did I say, you won't ever get to go out and play?" or maybe even something more playful, like "Did I say, going out and playing is worse than broccoli-flavored candy?" To which, the child would answer something like, "No! you said that when I finish my chore, I can go out and play." They repeated it back to you, so you have eliminated possible confusion. The question could be asked for good or bad motives, but the question itself is good.

Now you will notice that Eve's answer *might* reveal that something is already off; as far as we know, God never said that they should not *touch* the tree (Genesis 3:1; and 2:17). The pastor of my childhood put all the blame for this on Eve. He said she added to God's command. However, notice that Eve was not there when Adam was told this. So maybe Eve added it, but maybe Adam added it. And it is still possible that God told them this at another time that didn't get written down. But if it was the case that the command had been added to, that may have been a signal to the serpent that one or both of these people were vulnerable to confuse what God said. In that case, the question, "Did God say..." becomes an even more important test of whether we are carefully listening.

A major turning point in my life was late in my school years when I thought back of how I had encountered God as an early teen, and I asked myself again, "Did God say..." and I realized I had saddled myself with ideas that God did not say. That is a major story for another day, but it leads me to hope and pray for each of you that you never stop asking the question.

There is a bit more to this story in Genesis 3, but I'll pick it up next month.

Yours in Christ,

