

The Fall

You may not realize this, but you felt the result of Adam and Eve's sin today. In fact, you can't go five minutes without encountering the effects of the fall. Every aspect of God's creation has been in some way tainted or distorted by sin. Everywhere we look we see pain, rebellion, brokenness, hopelessness, despair. Even in our own hearts, we see the influence of sin. We are in a battle, and we feel it every day. No matter how badly we want to honor God, sin screams at us from all sides, begging us to rebel against God and pursue our own desires. We struggle with temptations, and we have a hard time making sense of the things we see happening around us. Every one of us has a profound sense that the world is not now as it was intended to be. How did we get to this point? The first two chapters of Genesis describe a wonderful existence, but the next chapter takes a dark turn. Genesis 3 describes Adam and Eve's tragic failure—their fall into sin—and the devastating impact this has had on our world.

The Story Takes a Sudden Turn

The initial chapters of Genesis paint a picture of earth as a paradise. This is the world as God intended it to be. Everything is good; there is no sin, sorrow, pain, or death. Humanity lives in perfect fellowship with God, each other, and with the creation. But turn the page from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3 and the story takes a turn for the worse. We refer to this tragic part of the story as “the fall,” and it has affected each of us to the core of our being. As Adam and Eve joyfully cared for God's creation, the serpent (whom we later learn is Satan—see Rev. 12:9) entered the scene. In a seemingly innocent manner, he asked Eve a simple question: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (v. 1). God had given Adam and Eve every tree in the garden as food, and only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was off limits. But as we might expect, this was the only tree that Satan wanted Eve to think about. He wanted her to feel that God was depriving her of something. He told her that eating the forbidden fruit would open her eyes so that she would be like God. He promised her good things.

Of course, life in the Garden of Eden was full of good things enjoyed through the grace and presence of God. But Satan began to promise goodness apart from God. With this simple twist, the world that God created to be “very good” changed dramatically.

Q1 Read Genesis 3. Based on the first three chapters of Genesis, why was it such a big deal for Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

Pay attention to a key observation from this story: Satan is subtle. He does not show up dressed in a red cape with a pitchfork saying, “I am Satan, and I am here to destroy you. Follow me.” Instead, he comes to us in ways that we would not expect and offers us things that seem good. This is what he did in the garden, and he does it to us today. He deceives people by making false promises. He takes what is evil and makes it appear beautiful. He takes truth and twists it.

It is also important to notice that Satan enters the biblical scene as part of God's creation. This means that he is not all powerful. He is only alive because God gives him life. He is a deadly deceiver, but his power is infinitely less than God's power. So we shouldn't be terrified of Satan's power, but we do need to be wary of his lies and manipulation.

In the case of Adam and Eve, Satan cleverly avoided asking them to reject God outright. Instead, he offered them the knowledge of good and evil. He gave them an opportunity to be in charge, to decide for themselves the difference between good and evil. God made people to be dependent on Him (that's not a bad thing, by the way!), but from this moment on, every sin has involved men and women claiming the right to govern themselves. Sin is always a declaration of autonomy. God had given Adam and Eve specific words to follow, but they failed to view the word of God as the supreme authority. They allowed someone else's words to carry weight. They treated God's word as a lesser authority, putting their own desires above His. Whenever we disobey His commands, we are rejecting His authority and asserting our own. We basically say, "God, You may be the author of my life, but You're not the authority in my life. I choose what I do, not You. I'm in control here, not You."

Q2 Analyze the sin in your life in light of the rebellion of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Do you see the same tendency toward independence and rebellion in your actions? How so?

The World Became a Different Place

From this point on, the biblical story is saturated with the effects of the fall. Suddenly people find themselves separated from God, those around them, and the creation. Whereas Adam and Eve once enjoyed perfect fellowship with God, they now hid from Him in shame and were sent as exiles out of the paradise that had been their home. They once enjoyed a perfect relationship with each other, but now their relationship was filled with shame, distrust, and blame. Adam and Eve once happily cared for the creation, but now they would experience pain in childbearing, the curse upon the ground, and the promise of toil in the work they had once enjoyed. The effects of the fall are also known as "the curse." In response to the sin of the first human beings, God cursed (1) the serpent, (2) Eve, (3) Adam, and (4) the rest of creation. The serpent was cursed to crawl around on his belly and, along with his offspring, to live in enmity against the offspring of the woman. Eve was cursed through pain in childbearing and strife with her spouse. Adam was cursed with pain and frustration in working the ground. And on Adam's account, the rest of the creation was cursed to produce thorns and thistles, or as Paul later stated it, the creation was "subjected to futility" and was placed in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:20–21). Of course the greatest consequence was death—spiritual death immediately, and physical death eventually. Many Christians have heard the story of the fall so many times they have become anesthetized to just how tragic this event was. We don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in the garden, but they literally lived in Paradise. They inhabited a perfect world where everything and everyone did exactly what God designed them to do. They actually experienced a perfect human relationship! They enjoyed relationship with God—to the point that they would walk with Him through the garden! We are so far from this reality that it is entirely unimaginable. But then they lost it. The action itself might appear harmless (how much harm can a piece of fruit cause?), but the outward act represented something far more sinister. The first sin was rebellion, idolatry, treason, and pride, all rolled into a single bite. Both Adam and Eve made a conscious choice to rebel against their Creator and live on their own terms. And we imitate their decision every time we choose our desires over God's.

Q3 Think back to the world of Genesis 2. Spend a few minutes imagining what our world would look like without sin, if everything had stayed the way God intended it to be. Make some notes below.

Q4 Now consider the ways that sin has affected our world. How is our experience of the world shaped by the fall? Be specific and describe how it affects you today.

From Cain to Babel

As we keep turning pages from Genesis 3, we see the effects of sin continuing to play themselves out. First we see Cain kill Abel. When his brother's sacrifice pleased God and his own did not, Cain acted in jealous passion and committed the first murder. As if this wasn't bad enough, we immediately find Lamech writing the first poem recorded in the Bible in order to brag about being more vengeful than Cain. Clearly a trend has begun in the wrong direction. In fact, sin and rebellion spread so quickly that before we get very far into the story, God felt the need to destroy the whole world. It's a stark reminder of the devastation that so quickly comes upon us when we live independently of God. Genesis 6 opens with a disturbing analysis: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). The creature whom God crafted into His image to be His representative on the earth had now become so twisted that his mind and will were described as "only evil continually."

Next, God punished them for their rebellion. He sent a flood that destroyed every person on the face of the earth with the exception of Noah and his family. God's purpose for the human race would start over through Noah and his descendants. You would think that the horror of the flood would cause Noah's descendants to live in obedience, but soon after the flood we find humanity joined together in rebellion against God. This time people gathered together at Babel to build a tower to the heavens. Their purpose was to unite themselves in this great project and make a name for themselves. Once again, God looked down on humanity's declaration of autonomy and destroyed the fruit of their rebellion. This time He confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth. As we come to the end of Genesis 11, humanity's ability to accurately represent God on earth—to live as His image bearers—is in serious question.

Q5 Think about the current state of the world. In what ways is humanity still caught in the rebellion that led to the flood and the tower of Babel?

Q6 In what ways are you involved in this rebellion?

The Story Continues in Spite of Sin

Thankfully, the biblical story does not end with Genesis 11! We need to understand that the Bible could have stopped at Genesis 11, and God would have been completely fair and loving to end the human race right there. But in His perfect wisdom, God kept the story in motion. Now the stage was set for God's plan of redemption. God gave humanity a responsibility, but they completely failed, and now they needed someone to redeem them.

Even in these early stages of the story, we see snapshots of God's willingness to rescue and redeem. Immediately after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, we read God's promise in Genesis 3:15 that there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. God says, "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This imagery is a picture of a forthcoming battle between Christ and the serpent, and we are guaranteed that the serpent will be crushed. When we arrive in the New Testament, we find Paul encouraging Christians in Rome by promising that, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20). We receive even more hope when God makes a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18, 9:9). A covenant is a promise from God, an agreement between God and His people that He will bless them in accordance with certain terms. As the story unfolds, we see God establishing a people through covenants. These covenants play a major role in how God relates to His people. With Noah, the covenant was about saving a people for Himself. Amid all of the people who would justly experience His judgment, God made a covenant with Noah. He called out a people by His grace and promised to preserve His creation. The plan will continue to unfold as we continue in the biblical story, but Genesis 1–11 lays the groundwork and orients us to what is coming.

Q7 As you think back over Genesis 1–3 (and even the events we discussed from chapters 4–11), briefly describe how these chapters lay the groundwork for what is to come in the biblical story.

Q8 How should our understanding of the first chapters of the Bible affect the way we view ourselves and the world around us?