

The Dynamics of Man's Fall

The creational structure of the first chapter of Genesis establishes man as the pinnacle and focal point of God's creation. He is introduced as the *last* of the material creation and is brought forth in a separate, *unique* act of creation.

- Man's emergence as the capstone of God's work of creation coincides with his function as sole vice-regent under the ultimate kingship of the Creator. After all the other creatures had been assigned their proper realms of dominion, man is introduced and is made ruler over all the works of God's hands.
- Furthermore, his unique status is attested by his distinction in the creation account. For all the other creatures that inhabit the earth are introduced in broad groups: the vegetation in its countless varieties is presented in a single creative episode (1:11-12), as also are all birds and sea creatures, (1:20-21), and the myriad species of land animals (1:24-25). Only man is afforded his own place in God's creative fiat. Specifically, the reason for Adam being isolated in the creation sequence is that he alone was created in the image and likeness of God (1:26-27). He is not unique simply as a separate species or *kind*, but as the only created being that bears the divine qualities of his Creator.

And as *intended function* determines *design*, so Adam's nature as image-bearer anticipated his role within the created order. It was seen previously that the reason for his being made in the image of God was not specifically dominion, but *communion*. That is, man was created as "person from Person" in order to be able to interact as "person to Person." God made man in His own image and likeness because his intended place in the creation was to be that of a *son*; a personal, rational, spiritual being perfectly suited for comprehensive and delightful intimacy with his Creator and divine Father.

For this reason the second chapter of Genesis finds God taking His image-bearer and placing him in the garden He has made for him. The Garden of Eden represented the place in which Adam's communion with God was to be localized; it was the habitation of God as well as Adam, making it a garden-*sanctuary*. The intimate communion for which the man was created was secured by settling him in the place of that communion.

- 1) In this intimate union with his God man found *life*; for as God Himself is life, so life for the creature is found in union with Him. This life to be enjoyed by Adam and Eve is represented in Genesis by the *tree of life*. That the tree is introduced as standing in the very center of the garden draws attention to it as being central to man's communion with God (2:8-9).

The significance of this imagery is that man's intimacy with God - and therefore his own self-fulfillment as image-bearer - is biblically inseparable from the core principle called "life."

Stated another way, man as image-bearer was created for the express purpose of communing with God. As a result, he can only realize his true identity and find true fulfillment as he stands in that communion. In the Genesis account this communion is represented by the Garden of Eden that is both man's habitation and the Garden of God. And standing at the garden's center is the tree of life, which imagery indicates that *life* is the principle that characterizes man's existence when it is ordered according to God's design.

As such the tree of life is seen to represent *eschatological* life. That is, as it symbolizes the principle of existence that preeminently characterizes God Himself (John 5:26), so also it characterizes His image-bearers when they exist in the perfection of their own created nature and purpose. *It is a sacramental symbol that speaks of the principle of existence that is innate to God and is the destiny of man according to God's eternal purpose.* For this reason the symbolism of the tree of life recurs in the Scripture in connection with the *sanctuary* theme (the habitation of God) and man's abiding presence in it (communion with God) (Revelation 2:7; 22:1-5, 14-19; cf. also Ezekiel 47:1-12).

Given this symbolism and its biblical use, scholars have debated as to whether Adam and Eve had the right to eat from the tree of life from the beginning, or whether its "fruit" was reserved for the future when man's union with God would be sealed forever. It is notable that God gave no prohibition concerning eating from it (2:16-17), but at the same time His pronouncement following the Fall can be construed as indicating that Adam and Eve had not yet partaken of it (3:22). One thing is certain: having ruined their relationship with their Creator and Father, they were cut off from His life, and this reality is reflected in their being expelled from the garden-sanctuary and its tree of life. Kline summarizes:

"No mere endless existence was signified by this arboreal sign of the promised blessing of the covenant. Unending existence is a feature of the curse as well as of the blessing sanction. One thinks of how the fate of the wicked raised up to endless life in the lake of fire is called the second death (Rev. 20:13-15; 21:8). Eternal life properly so called, the life signified by the tree of life, is life as confirmed and ultimately perfected in man's glory-likeness to God, life in the fellowship of God's Presence. Access to the tree of life and its fruit is only in the holy place where the Glory-Spirit dwells; to be driven from there is to be placed under judgment of death." (Meredith Kline, Kingdom Prologue)

Adorning this principle of *life* as communion with God is the principle of *innocence* as expressed by the symbolism of *nakedness* (2:25). The issue is not the absence of clothing, but the absence of the need for concealment. Because Adam and Eve had no memory of any greed, lust, pride, or any form of selfishness or selfish concern whatsoever, they had no shame. *They were truly innocent, with nothing to hide from one another or God.* Such open transparency is inconceivable in the world we know; a world in which the inner thoughts, attitudes, lusts, and schemes of men are cloistered as their own shameful secrets.

- 2) Parallel to the sacramental tree of life the text introduces a second important “tree,” namely the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (2:9b). Its presentation, together with the warning concerning it, introduces a sense of foreboding that the perfection of a creation that was “very good” was soon to be shattered. Most importantly, its symbolic relevance, God’s command regarding it, and Adam’s and Eve’s interaction with it provide the crucial textual material for understanding the dynamics of sin and man’s plunge into it.

In examining this tree and its significance in the fall of man several observations are crucial to make:

- a) The first and most obvious observation is that the tree is set out as the point of man’s obedience and, therefore, his continued righteousness (symbolized by his nakedness). Adam and Eve, like the rest of the creation, were “very good” in God’s estimation. They were perfectly formed and suited to their created purpose, so that as image-bearers they were characterized by unblemished righteousness in the likeness of their Creator. The obligation set before them was simple and straightforward: *“From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die”* (2:16-17).

The point is this: as God is absolutely righteous in His person and ways, so man’s communion with Him depends upon his possessing the same qualities. Thus the stipulation of true holiness is always at the heart of every covenant structure by which God establishes and sustains communion with men. So it was with Adam and Eve; their continuance in the *life* that is intimate fellowship with God in His sanctuary depended upon their continuance in perfect conformity to His nature and will.

- b) The second thing to observe is that this probation or “test” of obedience was not merely arbitrary. Many have insisted that the particular issue implicated in the commandment was irrelevant; *the only concern in this test was whether Adam and Eve would obey God*. While such a sterile view acknowledges that the obligation of obedience does not, as a matter of principle, depend upon the nature of the specific demand imposed, it entirely misses the point of this context.

For the conclusion that the matter of concern in the commandment was irrelevant proceeds upon the presupposition that it only provides the *venue* for the entrance of sin. In other words, the *fact* of sin’s emergence is the only concern of the Genesis account; the particular vehicle for its entrance is entirely immaterial. This contention notwithstanding, the particular issue at hand is preeminently important in that it is intended by God to provide to the reader fundamental insight into the **nature of sin**. By implication, then, it also provides the definition of *human righteousness*.

Adam and Eve were introduced as having been created in God's image and likeness, and the text revealed that the purpose for their being image-bearers was communion with their Creator. Yet their fellowship depended upon their continuance in their created righteousness, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented a challenge to that continuance. Disobeying God's command would bring the forfeiture of righteousness, but the *nature* and *dynamics* of this particular act of disobedience are crucial for they give definition to man's created perfection and therefore, also serve to reveal the nature of sin.

- c) The way in which this tree speaks to the meaning of righteousness is discovered by considering the tree's symbolic meaning. Eating of the tree would bring the knowledge of good and evil, *and the implication is that Adam and Eve neither possessed this knowledge nor were they to obtain it.* What this means is that this particular knowledge - whatever it represents - was contrary to the perfection of man as image-bearer, and therefore, would somehow negatively affect his communion with God.

The basis of this negative result cannot be simply the obtainment of the knowledge of good and evil as some have proposed. For if such knowledge fractures communion with God, then God is alienated from Himself, for He expressly states that *He* knows good and evil (3:22). In fact, this reality is the heart of the temptation: Adam and Eve were enticed to eat of the tree by the promise that, by so doing, they would become more like God (3:5). Therefore, the issue is not the knowledge of good and evil per se, *but what it represents for man and how it is that he obtained it.*

The knowledge of good and evil first and foremost pertains to the matter of *authority* and *prerogative*. That is, the possession of this knowledge implies the right to make moral and ethical judgments concerning good and evil and act accordingly. In this way it is peculiarly the property of God Himself. Nevertheless, man, as the image of God, was created with the *innate* capacity to make such judgments, but his own judgment concerning good and evil - in order to be consistent with himself as image-bearer - must necessarily be God's judgment concerning them. *Man's* mind is to be *God's* mind. He does not have the prerogative to judge and act independently of God.

Secondly, man's obtainment of the knowledge of good and evil comes only through the *experience* of evil. God knows evil as One untouched by it; man learns of evil by personally experiencing it. Therefore, man can never know good and evil in the same way God does. The profound irony is that what appeared to man to be the vehicle to make him more God-like actually served the opposite end; it perverted the divine likeness in which he had been made and plunged him from the height of his own perfection.

Thus the tree and its accessible presence in the Garden symbolize the capacity and opportunity for man as image-bearer to take to himself moral/ethical authority and prerogative and thereby establish his autonomy from God. The temptation was not merely an invitation to break a rule, arbitrary or otherwise; it was to experience enlightenment in the obtainment of a knowledge peculiar to God. Whether Adam and Eve consciously understood its implication, the temptation was an invitation to revolt against God's lordship; to cast Him off His throne (Psalm 2:1-3).

d) A fourth important consideration is the meaning of the *death* associated with eating of the tree (2:17). *Life* has been defined as man's existence in perfect communion with God and, therefore, perfect conformity to his own nature; it is the exercise of an authentically human existence. So *death* must be understood as its opposite, which is to say it is man's alienation from God and so also his alienation from *himself*. When man ceases to be who he is, in the truest sense *he dies*. This issue will be addressed in greater depth in the subsequent section pertaining to the consequences of the Fall. It is sufficient here to make the following observations:

- Death as a spiritual principle does not refer to the end of material or even spiritual existence. The reality of hell testifies that those who are dead and partake in the "second death" exist forever.
- But neither is death the destruction of the divine image in man. Though this is a fairly widespread conclusion among Christians, it is biblically unsupportable. Given man's created nature as image-bearer, he cannot lose the divine image without ceasing to be the creature *man*. While some may insist that this is precisely the case, the Scripture indicates otherwise (Genesis 9:1-6; James 3:8-10).
- Finally, because it does not destroy God's image in him, this "death" cannot be understood as the cessation of all spiritual energy, insight, aptitude, or appetite. In Reformed circles, particularly, this is a common misconception, and is associated with a doctrine of depravity that finds men incapable of all interest in, understanding of, and effort toward spiritual things.

e) The next matter to be considered is the interaction of the serpent with the woman. It is noteworthy that the serpent is introduced as being "*more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made*" (3:1). This adjective has the positive sense of *wise* or *discerning*, but negatively refers to *guile* or *craftiness*. Whether the serpent is viewed as the embodiment of Satan or simply a creature that represents him, he is presented with rational faculties above the other creatures. What is notable is that his *God-given* capacities were used for evil rather than for good; *given a perfect creation, evil is, at its core, the misuse of good things*.

The text's brief introduction of the serpent provides the framework for appraising his interaction with Eve, which takes the form of a clever and manipulative line of questioning. His fundamental goal was to draw Eve into a discussion of God's character that would ultimately lead her to participate with him in casting it in a bad light.

- His questions had as their first intention to initiate **doubt** in her mind by calling God's word into question: "*Did God really say...*" (3:1b). The result of his question was that, for the first time, a human mind was put in the position of scrutinizing and passing judgment on God's word. And having once occurred, this was to be humanity's legacy in its interaction with God.

- He also sought to raise **suspicion** in Eve's mind regarding God's intentions toward Adam and her (3:4-5). His contention to her was that God's withholding of the tree from them was an act of petty jealousy and pride. He would not permit them to eat of it because He knew that when they did their eyes would be opened and they would be like Him.

In this way he portrayed God not only as jealous and prideful, but also as *deceitful* and *tyrannical*. God's deceit was evident in His lie; thus the serpent's response, "*You will not surely die.*" God had fabricated a lie rather than admit to them His true, self-serving motive for withholding knowledge from them. Likewise, God's despotic purpose was attested in His keeping their eyes shut so that, in their ignorance and lack of sophistication, they would be constrained to be subject to His authority and understanding.

In the end Eve was to believe that there would be no judgment arising from her disobedience; indeed, God's command was contrary to her well-being, and therefore unrighteous. The serpent's message was clear: *God has issued an idle threat because He wants to keep you in your place. In order to maintain His own position of superiority He is restraining you from being fulfilled and realizing your true potential.*

At its foundation the serpent's temptation was the offer of sophistication in the place of innocence. With this new knowledge Adam and Eve would realize a quantum leap in their own enlightenment and escape the constraints of their present, narrow ignorance. This promise had a diabolical shrewdness to it: inasmuch as they had had no experience of moral or ethical imperfection, and therefore no consciousness of it, their awareness would indeed expand to include the knowledge of good and evil. *The serpent promised a moral consciousness like God's and he was telling the truth; what he didn't tell them was that this consciousness was to come at the expense of their becoming evil themselves.*

If innocence is life lived in conscious, absolute devotion and communion with God, then the evil of sophistication is the same devotion to self; it is *self as God*. The result is pride, lust, greed, hatred, lying, stealing, etc., all resulting from a *consuming consciousness of and concern for ourselves*.

Thus Paul's contention in Romans: the essence of man's sin is his worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. He identifies this worship with the adoration of images made in the likeness of *mortal man* and the other creatures *over which he exercises dominion*. As such, man's idolatry is nothing but self-worship. It is merely the spiritual outworking of his desire for control; the desire that all things, people, circumstances, and even God, should serve his perceived best interests.

"Deification is a fantasy difficult to repress and a temptation hard to reject."

"The proposal held before man of being God's equal was one with the satanic desire to be God's rival and thus of crowning the impulse of rebellion with the overthrow of God himself and becoming the possessor of all things. Throughout history Satan has continued to tempt man to imagine that he has it within his power to seize for himself the lordship over God's vineyard." (Philip Hughes, The True Image)

- f) As Eve considered the tree in the light of the serpent's temptation she observed that its fruit was *good* for food - appealing to her physical appetite; it was *delightful* to the eye - aesthetically attractive; and it was *desirable* for gaining wisdom - intellectually alluring. He had caused her to view the tree from an entirely new perspective - *the perspective of self* - with the result that she now saw in it the means of self-fulfillment through personal transformation. God's prerogative in determining what was good (ref. 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31) had been usurped in a silent, inward shift in Eve's thinking; from that moment forward she would determine what was good for her, *and her determination would be based upon the governing principle of self interest*. Thus she ate.

"So simple the act, so hard the undoing. God himself will taste poverty and death before 'take and eat' become verbs of salvation."

- g) Finally, she took of the fruit and gave it to Adam (3:6b). Whereas Eve had been beguiled, the man acted in willful disobedience. The directive not to eat had been given by God to *Adam*, and as her head he had directed the woman. Yet now there was a reversal in their roles as Adam submitted to Eve's leadership in taking the fruit from her hand and eating. God's perfect order had been perverted with disastrous consequences, and the result was to be the cementing of this role reversal in the forthcoming curse. What had seemed so natural was to torment them all their days.