

Genesis 3:14-24

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In this series, we are looking at Genesis 1–11 in hopes of understanding some of its main themes, since just about every significant aspect of the Bible's storyline can be traced back to the events found in this section of Scripture. These things are deeply significant because the storyline of the Bible is the storyline of the entire world.

In Genesis 1–2 we saw that at the center of God's creative work were two people who were privileged both to live in God's beautiful and abundant world, and to live in relationship with God and as his images. Their main tasks were to fill the creation with others who bore God's likeness, and to manage God's creation on his behalf and for his glory.

Sadly, in Genesis 3 the story changes drastically with the introduction of sin and evil into the plot. After the temptation by the serpent, who was host to Satan, the woman and the man both willfully rejected God's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result of their rebellion, they experienced immediate spiritual death in their separation and alienation from God, and subsequent physical death as the process of decay and disintegration worked within them from that point forward.

Beyond those realities, the consequences of sin went even further, extending to every aspect of their life. They came to know personal dis-integration as they experienced things like shame and fear and the desire to run and hide both from God and from one another. Their relationships with each other were also distorted and strained as they experienced things like distrust, and begin to blame one another for their own sin and misery.

In Genesis 3:14-24, we see even further implications of their sin as we look at God's holy and just response to fallen humanity — a response that has tragic and lasting implications for the man, the woman and the serpent. And yet, as terrible as the consequences are, there are also, right alongside these things, obvious examples of God's mercy and grace. And so, while God must and does respond to their sin, his response clearly shows that he has not written off his creation. He has a plan. He knows where this story is going.

The first thing we see in these verses is that because God is holy and just and good, he must respond to evil and to human sinfulness. He cannot overlook it; he

cannot simply pretend that it is not there, or that it is not of any great significance. He must respond to it — and respond to it he does.

In Genesis 3:14, after confronting the man and the woman about their sin, and after giving them a chance to come forward and to come clean on what they had done, God began to respond, one by one, to the various parties involved in this little fiasco, starting with the serpent.

Now, in looking at this approach, it is interesting — although not all that crucial — to note the pattern of events here. In Genesis 2 man is created first, then the woman, and then the serpent appears on the scene at the opening of chapter 3. In Genesis 3:1-7, this order is reversed, with the serpent going to the woman, and the woman going to the man. In Genesis 3:8-13, the order reverts to the original order: first God confronts the man, then the woman, who points to the serpent. Finally, in the Genesis 3:14-24, God picks up with the serpent, goes to the woman, and in the end is all the way back to the man.

So, for some time now we have been moving from one character to the next and on to the next, only to turn around and go back the other way — repeatedly. So, having left off in Genesis 3:13 with the woman's statement that it was the serpent who had deceived her, God starts his pronouncements and outlines the consequences of all of their actions first by taking aim at the serpent.

In Genesis 3:14 God says to the serpent, "cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field." At this point please note that he is cursing the creature, the snake itself, not Satan. In Genesis 3:1 this creature is described as "more crafty than any other beast of the field," and seems to hold a high and exalted position. But as a result of the curse, he is no longer to be regarded in that way. Instead, his prescribed form of movement — crawling on the ground, dragging himself through the dirt and dust — will now be a symbol of his degraded position.

As Kidner explains, the statements in Genesis 3:14 about the serpent's crawling on his belly and "eating dust" are not prescribing a new form of movement for the serpent, as if before all this happened he had gotten around in some other way, such as by walking or hopping or something. Rather, these statements indicate that from now on there will be a new perspective from which the serpent's previously existing form of locomotion will be viewed. Before the Fall there was no such thing as "lowliness" and "humiliation," etc. However, after the introduction of sin, and with the pronouncement of this curse, the movement and position of the serpent are now to be regarded as symbolic of his actual, cursed position in the created order. As we will see later on, this is the same sort of thing that happens with the rainbow in the story of Noah and the Flood. God takes a previously existing reality from his creation and invests it with a new and changed significance.

Now, you may wonder why God punishes the serpent, since it is really Satan who is using the serpent to achieve his own ends. In anticipation of that sort of question, Calvin writes,

If it seems to anyone absurd that the punishment of another's fraud should be exacted from a brute animal, the solution is at hand; that, since it had been created for the benefit of man in the first place, there was nothing improper in its being accursed from the moment that it was employed for his destruction.

In short, and as Paul argues in the book of Romans, just as the potter has the right to shape and use vessels for whatever his purposes may be, so does the Creator have the right to designate his various creatures to their various uses within his greater plans and purposes. And even though we cannot fully reconcile these things in our own minds, that doesn't mean it is wrong. But it does say something to us about how evil sin must be, and how little we understand it, if even creatures who are mere pawns in its designs must endure the curse of God as a consequence. There must be a whole lot more to evil, and to holiness, than we understand.

So, God responds to all that has transpired first by addressing and pronouncing this curse upon the serpent (Gen. 3:14). Then, beginning in Genesis 3:15, God says some things that, at first, seem like they could also be talking about the serpent, but that actually refer beyond the serpent itself to someone else.

Now, in saying all that and in looking at this verse, it needs to be said that there is here both justice and mercy, which we will come back to in a moment. But for right now, notice how this verse shows some of the ways in which God's justice is being brought to bear on this situation, even if the implications of what God says here are not fully appreciated by the man or the woman right away.

For instance, we see where God says that he will put "enmity" between the serpent and the woman. Now enmity is simply war. It is a word that refers to fighting, tension, hardship, wrestling. Now, again, you could look at this simply at the level of the physical serpent and the woman, and see in this the fact that God is making sure that the woman will never again be deceived in this sort of way by creating a permanent dislike and disgust between her and the serpent. And there may be an element of that here. However, I think there is more being said here than just that, and we will come to all that in a moment. But notice that this verse is promising that there is going to be enmity, hardship, struggle, fighting. And that means there is a guaranteed minimum amount of unpleasantness in the immediate future.

Even further, not only is there the guarantee of enmity between the woman and — at least — the serpent, but there is also the assurance that there will be enmity and strife between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. Now, the question is: Who is referred to here?

Well, the offspring of the woman, in the context of the passage — and as we'll see more clearly in a few minutes — are those physical descendants who, like her, will be at enmity with the serpent. The offspring of the serpent are those who, while also being physically descended of the woman, will nevertheless not be at war with the serpent but will be at peace with him. Now, there is more to be seen here that we will come back to, but for now notice that there will be conflict and struggle within the familial descendants of the man and the woman.

And of course, we see this happen straight away in Genesis 4, don't we? In Genesis 4 we will see the story of Adam and Eve's first two children, Cain and Abel, two brothers born of the same mother who are at war with one another. Why? In the New Testament John sums it up rather nicely in 1 John 3:12 when he says, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother."

John describes Cain as being "of" the evil one. What's he talking about? The very thing that is assured in Genesis 3:15: there is going to be ongoing, lasting conflict between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. There is going to be strife between people — even people who belong to the same family. We see it straight away between Cain and Abel, and we will also see it pop up in other places in Genesis 1–11, as the outworking of sin continues.

Well, after addressing the serpent, God continues moving up the sequence of events in reverse order, now addressing the woman for her part in all that has happened. The judgments visited upon her grow out of her roles as a co-image bearer and as a helper to her husband. Her sin involved, in various ways, her rejection of God's purposes for her, and as a result the curse under which she now must live affects her precisely in the area of her roles.

First, in her role as the one who would physically carry and bear children into the world, the woman is told that her pain will be multiplied in childbearing, and that "in pain" she will bring forth children. Now what does all this mean?

Well, for starters, the text doesn't mean that before the Fall child-bearing would only have been mildly painful, but that it became deeply painful. Rather, Moses indicated that before the Fall child-bearing would not have been painful at all, but that in response to sin it had become exceedingly painful on a number of levels and in a variety of ways. The language here is one of heaviness and burden, and it includes not only physical burden and suffering but mental and emotional burden as well.

In other words, in her role as a mother, the woman will now experience both physical and emotional or mental hardship. Physically, she will experience pain as her pregnancy progresses, and during the act of delivering the baby into the world, and even after it is all over. Mentally and emotionally she will experience the anxiety and worry that every mother experiences about bringing a child into this fallen world, knowing the depravity of her own heart and of the world. She will experience the trauma of not knowing how things will turn out. Will the child survive the birth process? Will she

herself survive? If the child survives, the woman will worry and wonder whether, in the end, the child will show himself/herself to be the offspring of the serpent or the offspring of the woman. And so, as the passage says, the pain in childbearing is “multiplied,” that is, it is experienced at a number of levels.

Second, not only is her role as the child-bearer affected by her sin, but so too is her role as a partner and helper to her husband. The woman is told that her desire will be for her husband, and that he will rule over her. Now, the desire referred to here is not sexual desire or anything like that. Rather, the intent here is to say that the woman’s desire will be to lead and take charge of her husband. Indeed, as Genesis 3:1-7 shows, she has already successfully pulled this off at least once.

Now, this reading of Genesis 3:16 — that it is talking about the woman’s desire to rule over her husband — is supported by God’s words to Cain in Genesis 4:7: “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.”

That last phrase (“Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it”) is an almost identical construction in the original language to the one found in Genesis 3:16. And in chapter 4, it is quite clear that the point God is making to Cain is that sin’s desire is to master him, but Cain cannot allow that to happen. Instead, he must master sin and rule over it.

And so, in like fashion, the woman’s desire will be to rule over her husband, but although this will be her desire, she will be frustrated in the pursuit of it and, ultimately, will not succeed. In the end her husband will rule over her, and the “rule” suggested here is not necessarily a benevolent one.

In other words, sin has introduced a distortion into the man and woman’s relationship, and a desire to overturn the God-created order of things. The potential for abuse and sin in this situation operates, as a result, in both directions. The woman’s temptation and sin will be seen in those times and places where she wants to usurp her husband’s headship and overthrow any notions of roles within relationships. Conversely, when the man sins, he will use his position and authority in a cruel, abusive, and unloving manner. The reality of this distortion is what lies in the background of New Testament texts like Ephesians 5, which encourages Christian men and women to live in ways that reverse the descriptions given in Genesis 3:16 and the consequences of the Fall upon husband-wife relationships. In Ephesians, Paul has this very passage in mind as he seeks to see Christian men and women living out God-ordained patterns of relationship without the distortions of sin.

Well, moving on from the woman, God finally comes to the man and, as he does with the woman, addresses him for the part that he has played in all that has gone on. God’s opening statement to the man (“because you have listened to the voice of your wife”) may allude to a reversal of the God-ordained pattern of male headship.

Further, like the woman, the man's sin, in part at least, was also a rejection of the role and place that God had given him. You see, even though the man and the woman are now fallen and in a world of hurt, the original creation mandate is still valid. They are still to be about the business of multiplying God's images and managing God's creation on his behalf. However, just as we have seen with the woman and her specific roles, the fulfilling of this creation mandate will now only come amidst hardship, pain, suffering and resistance. In terms of Adam's agricultural tasks, the passage makes it very clear that although the ground will still produce food for him, he will have to fight it every step of the way to get it to do so.

And so, every time the man eats, he will be reminded of his sin of eating when he shouldn't have and what he shouldn't have. He will be reminded that there was a time when getting food was easy, when he was in a garden, and the fruit was abundant, hanging off of the trees. Now he must work and sweat and fight weeds and thorns and thistles, and without any guarantee that his efforts will yield anything worthwhile. To be sure, his work was still a good thing, it was still a necessary thing, but it was also the thing that would resist his efforts for the rest of his life.

Well, those are some of what are typically called the "curses" and divine pronouncements made to the man, the woman, and the serpent. As we have seen, these came as a response to what they had done, simply because they had conspired against a holy and just God who cannot simply let these things go. Rather, he must respond to angelic as well as human sinfulness, especially as it distorts the perfect world that Genesis 1–2 depicted so well.

But God's just judgment is not all that we see in these verses. As was said in the introduction, we have here not only the clear illustration of God's justice and holiness, but we see also his great mercy and grace in a number of different ways. We see here, alongside everything else, the reality that God does love his creation and does not choose to punish his creatures as their sins deserve.

First of all, notice that Genesis 3:15 says that God puts enmity (i.e., war or conflict) between the woman and the serpent/Satan. It doesn't simply say that they came into conflict. It says that these two parties were now going to be at war because God was going to see to it that they were at war.

Now, the question is: Why does God have to put enmity between the serpent and the woman? And the answer is because it isn't currently there. And it isn't currently there because in their fallen state, the man and the woman are now enemies of God and in league with the serpent. In their fallen state they are not responsive to the things of God but are, instead, totally responsive to sin and Satan, which have mastered them.

In short, God has to put enmity between the serpent and the woman because until he does they will remain colleagues, partners in crime, co-revolutionaries, at peace with one another. And as long as that is the case, God's restoration of his creation cannot go ahead. So, God takes the necessary steps to address the woman's spiritual

condition, to render her, once again, responsive to God and, consequently, at war with the serpent/Satan.

And so, the “putting of enmity” here is an illustration of the grace of God toward his fallen creatures. It is a decision not to leave them forever at the mercy of their own sin and consequences, although God would have been completely justified in doing so. As such, the ongoing existence of struggle between them, while hard in itself, is also an ongoing sign of God’s mercy. It shows that his people, if they we are experiencing that war, are personally in possession of that mercy. Let me say that again: the woman’s internal struggle with the serpent, and the external struggle between her offspring and his, are both signs that God’s mercy is active.

Thinking about this, one writer says,

Sometimes we look at our ... struggle against sin as a mark that we are lost. That’s what Satan would like us to think. But the very warfare between sin and the flesh which is in us is a mark that we are alive spiritually.

When we see ourselves wrestling against sin within and God’s opponents without, it is evidence that we have within us this God-given, built in conflict, which is a good thing.

But there is a downside here as well. Again, as this one writer puts it,

If we can be at peace with sin in our lives, if we can resent the faithful preaching of repentance, if we can resent when the Bible begins to encroach upon our freedoms to do what we want, if we can be satisfied with living out of accord with the revealed will of the Lord, then that is a sign, the most serious sign, not only of soul-sickness, but of spiritual death.

A further evidence of God’s mercy, in these verses, can be found at the end of Genesis 3:15. God assures the serpent/Satan that there will be individual and corporate warfare through the woman and her offspring, but it seems that this warfare will become focused at some future point between two particular persons in one particular struggle. This is because the pronouns shift quite suddenly from talking about groups of people (“offspring”) to talking about particular individual offspring: “he” and “you.”

Now, some scholars take it that this indicates that all along the references in Genesis 3:15 have been to two particular people, namely Christ and Satan. Others see it as a kind of both/and situation, with both the offspring of the woman and the serpent at war, which ultimately becomes focused in one ultimate conflict. According to Paul, we this verse indicates God’s ultimate plan and purpose to bring about the defeat of the serpent and the undoing of all that Satan has done, through his Son Jesus Christ and the people Jesus’ redeems.

While a number of things could be looked at in this regard, two passages are particularly worth mentioning. First, there is 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. This passage talks about Christ's work, particularly his resurrection, in very loaded language. Christ's enemies are put "under his feet," and the "last enemy to be destroyed is death." Paul is clearly leaning on Genesis 3 and is implying that the "heel" that has come down on the "head" of Satan, and that has itself been struck down in the process, belongs to Jesus.

Second, there is Romans 16:20. There Paul wrote, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." Again, this is a clear reference to Genesis 3:15, but this time it is the Christians who crush Satan as they carry out their Gospel ministry, preaching about the finished work of Christ.

An even further indicator of God's merciful provision for his people can be found in Genesis 3:21, where it says that "the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them." Immediately after their sin, in their shame attempted to deal with their shame, the man and woman had made their own garments, which proved inadequate when God showed up. Here we see God taking steps to deal with their new circumstances as victims of their own stupidity. As one commentator puts it,

The covering of fig leaves was an attempt to cover themselves. The skins were accepting the covering of another. The first covering was man-made, the second was God-made. They needed salvation from without — God needed to do for them what they could not do for themselves.

And notice here how the thing that God needed to do involved the shedding of innocent animal blood. Their sin required that sort of response and remedy in the immediate circumstances - and later on their entire sacrificial system would recall this initial response and blood requirement. Indeed, it is deeply significant that Israel's "Day of Atonement," which was all about the high priest's sacrifice on behalf of the people, can be translated quite literally as "the Day of Covering."

And that day is then superseded, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, by an even greater "day" and an even greater "priest," and by a superior "sacrifice." In short, it is superseded by a better covering in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, even in God's banishing Adam and Eve from the garden we see the mercy of God. By banishing humanity from the garden, God guards them from further tragedy, preventing them from eating from the tree of life so that they do not forever fix themselves in their unsatisfactory condition (Gen. 3:22). God quite literally kicks them out of the garden. But again, this is mercy. God knows that they have forfeited paradise; they can no longer live there under the conditions that God set. And so the way into the garden is blocked.

But all is not lost. There is another "way" back in. In the Book of Revelation, we discover that when everything is over and done, there will be a New Jerusalem. And in

the midst of that city there will be a garden, and in that garden will be the tree of life — the tree that Adam and Eve are now being protected from. In the end we will have come full circle, returning to the garden and the tree of life — and we will freely eat from it.

And what is the way back into that garden/city? Where is the door, the gate that is not blocked? That way is in and through Jesus. He himself is “the way” back to fellowship with the Father.