

Reflections on Temptation: Genesis Chapter 3

The instruction that God gave Adam was as simple as sunlight. No tricks. Yet it was crucial to the good continuance of life, the blessed relationship of the Creator to the created.

“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.”

Obedience was essential to the preservation of life. As simple as sunlight.

But temptation beclouds things, making simplicity seem subtle and suspicious after all. The goodness of God can be drawn in a few strokes. But the sin of the children takes longer to tell since we (like Eve) do more than remove ourselves a world away from God; we must also excuse the removal and deceive ourselves in the process.

Well, its too horrible immediately to recognize the consequence of sinning: *Die! You shall die*. Sin begins the tragic descent of the individual and of the race—yea, of the entire creation—from life to death. Thus the deception. We *think* we've chosen life when in fact we have initiated a cosmic suicide.

But you and I can gaze with an accurate eye. (I'm speaking to my child as well as to the greater family within which she is sister to you all.) This is what the first death, our Primal Dying, looks like, over and over again:

—*One Alone*: What makes us vulnerable to the lies of Temptation? Certainly not our gender. Eve was not deceived because she was female, but rather because she was not taking advantage of the wholeness that God had given her, the fullness of life. She met the Tempter alone. She had only one perspective on the conversation that followed. She lacked the mirror that Adam was; he might have revealed the changes taking place in her. She lacked the talents that Adam had, which, with hers, would have made a whole community against deceit.

So the Tempter meets us one at a time, when we think the "I" is stronger or more important than the "We." So the Tempter encourages within us the elevation of the Self. ("I'm worth it"; and "I deserve a break--") So sin begins with the individual who is questioning the value of her relationships.

—*Doubt*: Trust is the soul of every healthy relationship. But in this case, where God requires complete obedience from those who don't have complete knowledge, trust is an utter necessity. We trust in his word. We *believe* that God alone should possess "the knowledge of good and evil," that he will choose the good for us and by his command protect us from evil.

—*Trust*: we are content in ignorance. We are at peace with the limitation.

Temptation, therefore, seeks first to crack trust with doubt. Specifically, it goes after the *Word of God*: "Did God say " says Temptation, asking analysis of the words themselves since such objectification exchanges the life of warm relationship for cold, intellectual scrutiny. "Did God (really?) say, "You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?"

Clearly, God did not say that.

Is it wrong for Eve to stick up for God, then? Is it wrong for any of us to confront temptation with the facts? Isn't it *right* thus to argue on God's behalf?

Tell you what: it's dangerous! It accepts the premise that God's Word ought to be scrutinized for truth. It gives as much authority in this matter to our intelligence as to God's simple and holy authority.

—*A Personal Equality*: When the Tempter confronted Jesus with exactly the same strategy, trying to make the Son of God argue on behalf of the Word of God, Jesus did not argue. Jesus did not stick up for his Father. He didn't take even the first step toward doubt.

Here was the Word: God the Father had said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Straightway Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. When he was hungry the devil said to him: "*If you are the Son of God* [prove it], turn stones to loaves." Now, if Jesus had responded even to "prove" the Word of the Father, then he would have made his own ability equal to that Word, a necessary piece of physical evidence with which to back it up. Trust is weakened.

But Jesus *does* nothing. Instead, Jesus shows marvelous trust in the Word of God by actually quoting from God's words in Scripture, and by choosing a passage that focuses on the Word: No one

lives (lives, he says, touching upon the significance of this primary relationship and the soul of it) "by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

There. That is the response of faith and the gesture of a genuine trust.

But Eve was not (and we are not) always content by such inactivity, by being such a seeming non-entity in the God/us relationship. It would have been enough to do nothing.

But we don't do nothing.

We act as though God *needs* our support. The instant we answer Temptation with words *of our own* to strengthen the Word of God ("We may eat of the fruit of the trees") we have elevated ourselves to a level of some equality with God. And although this is not yet in itself a sin, it is dangerous.

Even as it increases our importance in this Primal Relationship, it focuses our attention a little less on God, a little more on our Self.

—*Self-pity*: And the more important we are, the more confining seem the rules imposed upon us. The equaler *we* are to God, the more equal we wish our circumstances to be.

And the evidence of this new discomfort within God's restrictions is that we exaggerate them. We ourselves (like the Temptor) lie a little about the laws, as though they chafed a little much. We say (piously), "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. But God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Woops! That new phrase is not God's, but purely our own, *Neither shall you touch it*. This is the whine of the child who says unto her father, "You never let me have anything." Never? Well, not never. It just feels like never because self-pity is increasing.

Thus, the sign that (1) Temptation is working, that (2) we are decreasing God's importance as we, increase the Self, and that (3) God's commands are becoming irritants that we might one day have cause to ignore, is this exaggeration of the effect of the law upon us and the implied suspicion regarding the motives of God.

Self-pity reveals in us the question whether God's decisions really are good, whether his Word really is true and altogether loving.

That's doubt.

We haven't yet actually sinned. But the attitude that might justify a sin is taking root.

The difference between the Creator and the created is beginning to receive serious attention and to trouble us, so that we no longer feel exalted by the love of One So Great but rather reduced and restrained by that very Greatness. Greatness, now, is not our goodness, but God's alone, precisely because the Greatness seems to be his alone, withheld from us.

And that is the other side of doubt: suspicion. Even so are we prepared to believe the shining lie.

—*Flat Deception*: "You will not die."

How can we possibly accept a direct contradiction of the Word of God as the truth? Well, the argument offered next speaks to our suspicions and flatters the changes that have taken place within us: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Ah, we want to hear that the Self can receive the authority of the Deity, possessing the knowledge of Good and Evil, deciding apart from God what is good and what is evil—good *for us* and evil *for us*. We want to believe that life is thus in the Self alone. We want to believe the lie. We, therefore, empower the word of the Liar: "You shall not die."

And: "You will be like God."

No longer satisfied merely to be in the image of God, we want to be *like* him. This is exactly the station we imagine for our mighty selves; it accords with our new self-esteem. Freedom! This is perfect freedom, to be complete in the Self, an infinitude like God's. Limitlessness.

—*One Love Exchanged for the Other*: So the attitude becomes an act. So disobedience destroys righteousness, and sin begins and by sin cometh—

"When she saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes [though every other tree was, by God, *pleasant to the sight*], and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate."

Her wisdom was of greater value to her than God's. The love for our Selves, thus, exceeds our love for God. It becomes the supreme, defining love, the source of our significance, the reason of our existence, the fullness of our being: self-sufficiency.

What then? Why, then we have, by choosing this marvelous autonomy for ourselves, severed ourselves from the Source of Life?

With opened eyes, now choosing the Good and the Evil according to our own desires, we have set ourselves against God and against his choices. We divorce our self from God, and with good reason—for his "good" feels to our flesh like an "evil"; but our "good" of personal independence is condemned by God as his and everyone's "evil." So hostility must arise. We severed ourselves from God as from an enemy. This is war, God against gods.

"See," cried Moses, "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil." He was not using figures of speech. "Life" and "death" are not metaphors but matters of fact. And Moses begged the children: "Choose life!"

But we, by choosing autonomy—we have chosen death.

—*Death*: All we have gone astray: we have turned every one to his own way.

When the child decided that freedoms from parental restraint (like walking the street instead of the sidewalk) were a delight to the eyes; when the youth saw that certain words were to be desired for showing one to be cunning and wise; when, therefore, they took and ate, then God was no longer their God. They were each their own gods.

Whenever a human cried, for his sole sake, "I deserve this thing! I have a right to it!" and therefore took it by fraud or by force; whenever a human acted purely from personal desire, according to her notion of the "good," mindless of others and of the will of God; whenever the self thus takes dominance; whenever the attitude is pride and the motive self-centered, then we are Eve. We are severed from God. And we are monstrously deceived, for we are even more limited than we had been before, being bounded now by mortality itself, the sternest of limitations.

—*The Continuing Self-Deception*: But that which began by a lie still needs a lie to support it among us.

Severed from the Source of Life, we were "dead," writes Paul, "in trespasses and sin." This remains our mortal condition, but this, precisely, we spend extraordinary funds of energy trying to deny.

"You will not die," says a tempting Society. You are free! You (it declares in commercials, in pop-psychology, in schoolyards and movies and furious fights for "rights" in this land), you are in charge of your fate, free of restraints in this free country. You can do whatever you want, so long as you hurt no one else. Believe whatever you want. Be whatever you want to be. Anyone who argues otherwise is regressive, repressive, and boorish; no one has the right to impose his morality upon you.

Hey, man, do your own thing!

Feel good about yourself.

"What the mind can conceive and the heart can believe," preaches the wisdom of the world with religious fervor, "the hand can achieve." Anything. You can accomplish anything, if only you put your mind to it.

And you will live forever. At least, you needn't think of death till death is here, and it shan't be here till the last flick of your physical existence. Therefore, act as if you'll live forever and, while you live you will!

Lies, one and two and three. Lies: because no one is unlimited, either (1) morally or (2) conceptually. No one can "do" whatever he wants. And (3) death is here right now. Death is daily present. Daily death crashes our dances and breathes on the backs of our necks—for none is not dying, no, not one.

But to the degree that we crave life, even to that same degree we hunger for the lies; we do ourselves empower them and so deny our death. For if we are the center of the world, then our personal death is the obliteration of the whole world. Who can imagine so hideous an enormity, that things generally should cease to be?

—*Good Grief*: What, then, could undeceive a world so dependent upon deception?

Finally, the *experience* of the truth in spite of all lies. The actual experience of dying persuades the little god that he is finite after all.

But when, before his Corporeal Death (which is the one the world admits as death), does the little god die enough to lose his lie?

When one by one his resources (here, in the "far country" of this world) prove finite and he (like the prodigal severed from the father) runs out of them. In other words, when those relationships that once were gifts from the Great and Good Giver, those relationships necessary for his life one by one break— then the poor man wakes to his dying. Each severed relationship is a little death. And it hurts with an existential ache; for, though the deceived may not yet admit it, each broken relationship is proof of the Primal Dying and prophecy of the Corporeal Dying to be. Lo, we who thought we controlled our personal fates discover that we are powerless in the mills of the universe.

Now comes a choice: No, or yes.

The defiant "No." Either ego resists this truth with all its might; it can suffer the hurt and fight its message, both at once. That is to say, on account of every Secondary Dying we grieve a little, but we may choose to ignore that the ache is "grief."

We are able: we can be sad without seriously seeking the cause in ourselves. Blame others for the sorrow. Sentimentalize the sadness, enjoy it, wallow in self-pity. Or cover the pain by any means: chemical substances, hectic happiness, a hedonistic satisfaction of the physical, vague philosophies, working so hard we cannot think, loving some idol that promises deathlessness.

The *deadly* "Yes." Or else we can allow the ego its dying. Recognize and admit the experience. Confess the cause of it. We can, thus, choose to lose our lives—in order to find them again.

Every Secondary Dying, precisely by the grief that it causes us, is a call to the deeper truth and a means by which we might return to the Lord. That is the goodness of grief—even the goodness of a painful grief: to teach us our need again, and to turn us again to trusting.

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