

2. The Fall Genesis 3

It's going so well, isn't it? The universe is created by a loving and gracious God who knits everything together perfectly. He makes men and women in his own image, he places them in a perfect garden within a majestic world, he gives them jobs, responsibilities, an unhindered relationship with him and the great command, "go forth and multiply"!

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, it doesn't take long for us to nervously say, "Houston – we have a problem" because by the time we get to chapter 3 of Genesis sin breaks that perfect creation and those perfect relationships apart. And although it might make uncomfortable reading, or perhaps you find it a little far fetched we cannot ignore the events of Genesis 3 because, as we look at the big picture of Scripture, they set the stage for everything else that is to follow in the Bible.

You see, chapters 1 and 2 have revealed to us the original plan God has for his creation; how we were created to love and be loved by him, unhindered by anything else and because nothing can or will frustrate God's plan, that is clearly the pattern to which God will return us. However, chapter 3 reveals why it isn't like that now and why it is that God needs to take action.

Now, let's hit one issue head on; Genesis 3: naked people, fruit tree of incredible power and a talking snake – sounds more like something out of Harry Potter rather than a sensible logical record of how good people turned bad, so can we take this account seriously?

Well, yes, I believe we can. Some people here may believe that this is a literal account of what happened and they may well be right.

But if you are not one of those people, perhaps it might help you to know that I personally would go down the line of saying that there is much here that is true and literal but there is also a good sprinkling of the symbolic in these verses as well.

Remember how when we looked at these chapters a couple of years ago we acknowledged that the Creation story at the beginning of Genesis is not a scientific journal, nor is it a historical document as we would think of it.

This writing is from the Ancient Near East and it is written according to rules and guidelines that we no longer use, but which are none the less completely valid – what makes us think that in Western Europe 2011 we have all the answers and our way is better than anyone else?

So, whilst as John Stott points out on our newsletter, “the message of the Bible is exactly the same for all men in all places and at all times.” Uncovering that truth is really aided when we read it as it was written not as we would want it to be written.

So instead of saying, “It’s not very scientifically satisfying”, or “it doesn’t strike me as the sort of historical document I’m used to” we need to see that the Bible is not a stuffy text book which would only interest a handful of people in one specialist area, rather it is God’s living Word addressed to all mankind through which God’s Holy Spirit speaks to us powerfully today.

And the beginning of Genesis speaks powerfully about who God is – THE God and how he relates to humanity and his creation and that is presented as a contrast to the ideas that the pagan nations around God’s people at the time had of their god’s and one of the methods Genesis employs is symbolism.

So, perhaps it shouldn't surprise us when we encounter a serpent who speaks. The important element of the story is that it tells us why we as human beings are separated from God and how God responds as a result.

You see Adam and Eve, the first man and first woman are human beings as human beings are supposed to be, but what makes them perfect is not anything they do, it is that they have been created "very good" by God and that they have remained in their relationship with God – faithful, trusting, honouring, loving and worshipful. What makes them imperfect, what constitutes sin is when all that is thrown into question and abandoned.

Now, if you remember two years ago we saw that the Biblical creation account strongly contrasts with the Mesopotamian creation myth "The Epic of Gilgamesh". Do we see any connections here? Well, the Epic of Gilgamesh tells how Gilgamesh himself finds a plant which allows him to avoid death. Unfortunately, whilst he is swimming across a pond a snake comes along and swallows up the plant and Gilgamesh is deprived of immortality – what a shame.

Now, what the Mesopotamians saw as an unfortunate accident, Genesis tells us comes about because of deliberate disobedience. Turn to Genesis 3 with me and let's see the parallels and the differences.

Here is the snake again and to the Old Testament people of God the snake would have represented the most unclean animal – remember all the Old Testament laws about unclean animals? Well the snake pretty much ticks all the boxes – if you wanted an archetypal unclean animal, something which perfectly represented being far away from God and God's approval, then the snake is it.

However, unlike in the Epic of Gilgamesh where the snake gets lucky, in Genesis 3 the snake gets crafty. The snake comes to the woman and asks her, “Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?”

Well, that’s nonsense, the answer is no, in chapter 2 verses 16 -17 God says to the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Now the woman makes two mistakes, first she should say to the serpent, “Look, I wasn’t there, you should ask my husband because God spoke to him, or better still, ask God.” But instead she engages the serpent in conversation. Everything here screams “walk away” – the unclean wily talking snake casting doubt on what God says, but the woman just goes along with it.

And so she makes the second mistake – look at her answer in verses 2 and 3, “The woman said to the serpent, We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

She adds to what God said – God only said “don’t eat” she makes God’s rules out to be much more restrictive and so it is easier for the snake to say, “Go ahead, you’ll be OK, touch it, you won’t die, so why should eating it do you any harm?”

So the woman looks and thinks, “Well, it all looks good, it didn’t hurt me when I touched it and it gives knowledge, why should I believe what God says?” And the man, what does he do? Does he take a lead, does he stop her, does he correct her and explain what it is that God really said? No, he copies her, he is as guilty as she is, in fact I would argue more so because (ironically) he had the knowledge to act differently and does nothing.

The impact is immediate – before they had been naked and unashamed, instantly everything changes and they try to clothe themselves and aware of their undress and their rebellion against God because they are now making up the rules of good and evil. And so, verse 8, they try to hide from him.

But the psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.” (Psalm 139)

There is no hiding from God and so the rebellion of humanity is revealed. And the next few verses of Genesis 3 are a pretty sad affair aren't they? Because they are making up the rules for good and evil the man blames the woman and the woman blames the serpent – “It's not my fault!” it's never our fault is it?

But look what has happened, in fact let me show you what has happened with a clip from the big movie of the moment, Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush in “The King's Speech”, just to say, apologies for a little of the language.

Show movie clip

Lionel Logue has sat on St. Edward's chair – but its more than a chair, it is a throne and a throne can only be sat on by a King (or Queen). Lionel has no right to sit there, his actions are provocative and he trivialises everything that Bertie knows is important. Bertie claims the divine right as king to be heard but Lionel isn't listening.

Now in the movie Lionel is deliberately trying to provoke Bertie to help him with his public speaking and Bertie's anger over Lionel's behaviour can seem to us disproportionate. But I wanted to show you that clip to illustrate the impact of sin – by disobeying God we are saying that we know better than him, that we don't want him ruling our lives, that we can do it better and so we sit on the throne of God with no right to be there. Our sin is provocative and it trivialises the authority, holiness and righteousness of the one true sovereign God.

Our sin rightly deserves God's judgement and wrath.

Well, God does judge our sin, his blessing is removed from humanity. In verse 16 the woman learns that childbirth is to become a trial and if you don't believe that's true, just watch "One born every minute" on Monday evenings Channel 4 at the moment – 60 minutes of women in labour – the bad and the ugly, there's not much of the good until its all over!

And the woman will desire her husband, but gone is the loving headship of the man, instead he will rule over her and just look back over the millennia to see how men have abused women to prove that. Even today, in our "enlightened" culture women often earn much less than men do in the same job.

Meanwhile things aren't going to be great for men either, once we were gardeners for God and commissioned to be stewards of the earth under his sovereignty, well the commission still stands, but we are cast out of the garden and the land will be wild and rebellious for us, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food..." and then here is the really bad news, "...until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Just as in the Epic of Gilgamesh eternal life has been lost, or rather, here in Genesis, in contrast; eternal life has been forfeited as a result of humanity's blatant disobedience – Gilgamesh was unfortunate, but the Bible reveals that in truth humanity was foolish, greedy and rebellious towards God and the price which is paid is the loss of eternal life; because of sin, death has come.

So it is that Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”. God created us with free will; human beings are not mindless robots made to worship him on demand, but free will means that we all have behaved like Adam and Eve, we have all listened to that deceptive voice which has said, “Wouldn't things be better if you did it your way?” and it has sounded good to us so we have sat on the throne of our lives without any divine right and so because all have sinned death has continued unabated.

The thing is, God also pronounced a curse on the serpent, the serpent who many see as representing Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The theologians call this the Protoevangelion, or the first Gospel. In other words, right here in Genesis chapter 3 God announces what his plan is, Satan will strike at the Son of Man (as we see at the cross), but Jesus, the offspring of Adam will crush Satan. Death reigned through sinful humanity until one who was sinless broke its power – Jesus the risen Lord of life.

And so Paul continues in Romans chapter 5, “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

So what we have in the fall is humanity, not acting in ignorance, or being unlucky, instead with all the blessings of life with God, people chose to go their own way and reject the sovereignty of God and so, as Vaughan Roberts from St. Ebbs in Oxford puts it, “The punishment fits the crime. Human beings turn away from God in rebellion and he turns away from them in judgement.”

And yet right here, as it all goes wrong, we see God’s promise that he will not reject us, that he will not abandon us to alienation and death, but that Satan will be crushed and the curse on sinful humanity replaced by God’s blessing.

As Paul tells the Colossians in chapter 15 verse 22, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” And that is the discovery that the Bible takes us on.

This morning we need to recognise the importance of sin – our sin. It has shattered this good creation. All of us are sinners, all of us are as guilty as Adam and Eve. Sin is there in our DNA, no one needs to teach us; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But thanks be to God, right here in Genesis 3 he announces the rescue plan that will destroy sin and death and return humanity to the relationship God made us to have with him. Let’s be conscious of the consequences of sin this week, but let’s also be thankful to God for not abandoning us to them. Amen.