



Lessons About Sin from the Garden of Eden

Introduction

I always thought the story about the Garden of Eden and the downfall of mankind was pretty straightforward:

- The devil tempted Eve
- Eve ate the forbidden fruit
- Eve tempted her husband Adam
- Adam ate the forbidden fruit
- God got mad and punished them by kicking them out of paradise
- Now the rest of us have to suffer

Through the years, I've come to some new perspectives and understandings. This article is a summary of those insights and the lessons I've learned from looking at the fall in a deeper way.

Prelude to the fall

Genesis chapter 2 prepares us for the fall by providing some important information about God and mankind.

God is a loving God and cares for us. God "made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). The food tasted good and it was pleasing to the eyes. God offers us more than mere existence. He also took care of all mankind's needs. Adam and Eve enjoyed life. They took in the wonder of every living thing in the garden. This what is what God also desires for us.

God wants a personal relationship. Peeking ahead to Genesis chapter 3, God's relationship with Adam and Eve was a personal one. The LORD God was "walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day" (verse 8) and "called to the man" (verse 9). God didn't just create people, sit on his throne in heaven, and watch the world go by. God regularly walked in the garden to spend quality time with his children. When his children hid their faces from him, he called out to them. God still wants a personal relationship with his children and actively seeks us. God is always near and calling to us.

God wants us to have eternal life. God placed "the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9). The tree of life, mentioned first, was likely the most important tree God made for mankind and there were no restrictions on eating of its fruit.

God cares for our well-being as a loving parent. God did not impose a myriad of rules, as he did later with the Jewish nation after the fall of mankind. He had one rule. Of the tree of knowledge (of good and evil) God said, "you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die (Genesis 2:17). Let the reader note that Scripture does not quote God as saying mankind would die simply by touching it. This will become an important point later.

Parents seldom make rules for the purpose of creating a reason to punish their children. The parent who tells a child not to play in the street is looking out for the child's well-being, not a reason to punish them. Children are innocent and cannot foresee all possible consequences of their actions. Adam and Eve had no idea of the consequences of eating from that tree. God knew! His words were much less a command and restriction; but more of a loving warning of pending danger.

I sometimes wondered why God created that deadly tree in the first place. He surely didn't set mankind up to fall. I now believe it was part of his eternal love. The greatest gift God gave to mankind was free will. The angels had one opportunity to choose God or choose Satan. Mankind can choose daily. If Adam and Eve were not given the chance to choose God and follow him, they would have merely been indentured slaves rather than children. We, too, can wake up every morning and, with our free will, choose to follow God or not.



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Adam and Eve had the innocence of children. “The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). This is a curious verse; one of which I often wondered, “what’s the point of this verse being in Scripture anyway?” One day, it came to me...a toddler experiences no shame in running into the living room while totally naked in full view of mom, dad, siblings, or neighbors. This is innocence. This is not having any knowledge there is something to be ashamed about. This is what the verse tells us. Without any knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve didn’t feel shame or jealousy or anger or any other vice experienced by a world which judges everything in terms of good and evil.

Adam and Eve could have continued to have all their physical, mental and emotional needs met simply by keeping their innocence and trusting God. It reminds of the words of Jesus, “Unless you become like little children...” (Matthew 18:13).

The players

The serpent. Genesis 3:1 describes the serpent as crafty. The Hebrew word in this text literally means “cunning” (as in a bad sense). The serpent was so cunning that it was able to carry on a casual conversation with Eve and she never knew it was a set up. Imagine the scene...

“Hey Eve, how’s it going today? I was just sitting here wondering...did God say you shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?” The question sounded innocent enough. Not many hearers would think to themselves, “This is a trap.” Eve didn’t, and she walked right in to take the bait.

Eve handed the serpent it’s next opportunity to lead her astray when she responded, “It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die’” (Genesis 3:3). We return to Genesis 2:17 and our note that God never said Eve couldn’t touch the fruit. Misquoting God was her second mistake.

The devil is known for being a great liar. But a worse deception than outright lies is twisting the truth or telling a half-truth. This was the serpent’s next cunning ploy. When Eve remarked that God said they couldn’t even touch the fruit, the serpent technically was not lying when it said “You certainly will not die!” When Eve then held the fruit in her hand and didn’t die, this half-truth led to her final downfall.

“God knows well...” The serpent told one final truth in its plot to tempt Eve. “When you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods” (Genesis 3:5). All this was true. However, the serpent left out the fine detail of how having their eyes opened would be a bad thing and lead to destruction. Temptation always focuses on our personal benefit and never informs us what can possibly go wrong.

From there, the serpent just “let nature take its course”. We have no indication from Scripture the serpent started saying “Touch it! Touch it!” The trap was set and this was now all on Eve. With her own free will, she had to choose to follow God and his way or go her own way.

Eve. Can anyone blame Eve for answering a simple question? Remember her childlike innocence? Children have no reservation talking to strangers. If the serpent was “cunning”, maybe the best word to describe Eve was “naïve”. The word “naïve” means showing lack of experience or knowledge. Naivety is marked by the belief that all people are good and their intentions are good. Eve wasn’t concerned or aware of the imminent dangers of carrying on this conversation.

Eve had an obvious way out of this temptation...her husband. It never really sank in to me for years, but in fact Adam was right there with Eve the whole time (Genesis 3:6). Why didn’t Eve ask Adam for help? Did she think she knew the right answer? Or did pride hinder her from seeking help and appearing weak. Imagine the next scene...



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Eve gazes at the fruit. The fruit was beautiful to behold. Eve fantasized how tasty the forbidden fruit would be. She tentatively and fearfully extends her hand closer and closer to the fruit. Her hand gets close, but she quickly pulls it back. She glances over at Adam. Maybe she has a moment of doubt and wonders if she should involve him. Finally, the tip of a finger touches the fruit and she doesn't die. What a relief! She thinks...God must have been trying to keep the tastiest fruit for himself. That first bite is going to be delicious! This is going to be great!

Of all the trees in the garden, this truly was the tastiest Eve ever had. She just had to share this wonderful experience with her husband, who she loved. So, she offered some to him.

Adam. Men, at times, truly can be jerks. I can say this because I am a man. Adam failed on so many levels, it's hard to count. But let's point out a few.

When God gave Adam instructions about the tree (Genesis 2:16-17), Eve didn't exist. Eve didn't come onto the scene until verse 22. I imagine that it was Adam's responsibility to inform his wife and protect her concerning the tree. It was the one and only rule God had at the time.

Communicating is not always easy. When there are miscommunications, it's always difficult to determine who missed the boat. Over the years, both my wife and I have been on the receiving end of "But I told you..." and "That's not what you said." Eve might have misunderstood or forgotten Adam's exact message. Adam might not have made the message crystal clear. We don't have those details. One thing is for certain. Adam had the responsibility to make sure Eve received and understood the message. Her failure in this test indicates Adam could have done a better job communicating.

There is another possibility that came to me one day. What if Adam exaggerated God's words to make absolutely sure Eve never ate from the tree. I can almost imagine Adam telling Eve, "Honey, listen carefully, God said don't eat of the fruit from that tree...and don't even touch it!!!" I have to confess that I've exaggerated a story now and then to make sure I got my point across. If Adam happened to approach the message in this manner, then his zeal to keep Eve out of trouble put Eve right in harm's way.

But the worst thing Adam did was stand there with his mouth shut, watching the entire proceedings while the serpent tempted Eve. Men never change. It reminds me of a funny discourse I had one day with my wife. We were standing at the back of our yard and my wife says, "See that plant there? I've read they are edible." My response, "Well, go ahead and eat it and if you are still alive next week, I'll have some too." I was, of course joking. But Adam wasn't. Imagine this scene...

Eve and the serpent are conversing. Adam is standing there watching and listening. When Eve misquotes God about touching the fruit did Adam come to her rescue? Noooooooo! As Eve began reaching for the fruit, did Adam call out and stop her? Noooooooo! I can almost imagine Adam standing there and complacently watching, curious as to what might happen next to his wife. When Eve didn't "die" he was happy to join the party, despite knowing God's command not to eat of it.

When Adam started feeling guilty about what happened, he ducked all responsibility for his actions. "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). Adam had the same free choice as Eve, yet blamed her for handing him the fruit. To further claim his innocence, Adam made things worse by blaming God. The "woman who you put here with me" is an indication Adam was deflecting blame in all directions. The inference being, things would have been just fine if God never created woman in the first place.

The rest, as they say, is history.



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Lessons about temptation and sin

Here are some of the important lessons I learned from the fall of mankind. With additional reading of this great story and some meditation, you might be able to come up with more on your own. Or even a personal revelation from the Holy Spirit.

Temptation is not always obvious. Eve had no clue she was being tempted, neither did Adam. We read, “Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8). I wish it were that easy. I wish the danger of temptation was as obvious as a ravenous lion standing ten feet from me. I wouldn’t be entertaining it. Sometimes temptation is hidden in a meek, mild bunny (anyone who has watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* knows what I mean). Temptation may come from the innocent words of a friend, coworker or even religious person. We must always be on guard.

Sin is more than disobedience to God. I have a new way of thinking about the sin of Adam and Eve. It’s been said their sin was disobedience. Yes, they disobeyed God; but in reading the story I don’t see a purposeful intent to disobey God. I’ve also heard some say their sin was pride, wanting to be equal to God. This certainly was a part of the equation. Personally, though, I think the root of their problem was not trusting in God. They needed to trust that God knew what was best for them and trust that his commands were out of love for them. Had they completely trusted God and followed his word (staying innocent), they would have never considered disobeying his command in the first place. The Church agrees, “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command” (Catechism 397).

Avoid sin by knowing the word of God. “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The entire debacle occurred in the first place because Eve misquoted, or misunderstood, God’s word. God’s entire word must be consumed like a good steak and fine wine. And we need all of it, not part of it. Each Christian must learn the truth of God’s word; and not just from well-meaning Christians or false teachers who try to deceive. We need to learn God’s word as he gives it and not interpret it how we want it. If we know God’s word, trust God’s word and follow God’s word we will never fall.

Avoid sin by not going it alone. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). Adam and Eve were not united during that fateful event. Had Adam and Eve combined forces against temptation we would all be living in paradise right now. Eve should have sought the help of Adam. Pride has no place in the spiritual life. Adam should have galloped in like a knight in shining armor to save his wife. Selfishness and sloth also have no place in the spiritual life. Predators always seek to separate the weak and infirm from the pack. No Christian is strong enough to go it alone. Stay in community. Stay in the Church. Husbands and wives, stick together in Christ at all times.

Don’t let obsessive love lead you to sin. One of the saddest statements I’ve ever heard in my life, and this is true, is “If my spouse didn’t go to heaven when he/she died, I don’t want to go there either.” It’s not likely Adam ate the fruit just to experience death like his wife. On the other hand, Adam knew God’s command yet followed his wife’s lead into sin and death anyway. God should always be in our sights. God should always be our first love. And God should always be the choice we make with our free will.

We don’t understand all the consequences of sin. Adam and Eve didn’t understand death. Maybe when they ate the fruit they thought, “Hey, look at us! We are still alive!” They didn’t mortally die when they ate the fruit. Theirs was a spiritual death which they could not comprehend at the time. Their death was a newfound fear of God which overrode their personal relationship, making them hide from him. Their ultimate death was separation from



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the beatitude of God's presence, being cast out of the garden. It's easy to focus on the pleasure and benefits of sin. It's difficult, and sometimes impossible, to understand the true consequences of sin until it's too late.

Conclusion

So many stories in Scripture have a richer and deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. Our loving Father is always leading us to the truth in his word. Jesus, who is the word, is always teaching us the way of life and transforming our hearts. The Holy Spirit, who is the transforming power of God, is always leading us back to the truth, which is the Father. And when we finally get back to the Father, we will once again know peace and true love.