

THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL: “DID GOD REALLY SAY?”

(Gen 3:1-13)

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 06.30.2002

True or False? — “Everything in the Bible is true.” — False. Let’s try one more. — “Everything in the Bible has been truthfully recorded.” — True. Everything in the Bible is not true because not every character in it always speaks truth. But when a character tells a lie, the Bible truthfully records the falsehood.

Three times in Scripture the Devil speaks, and as strange as this may sound, I want us to listen to the voice of the Devil and to hear what he has to say. We find his speech first in the third chapter of Genesis, then when we come to the Book of Job, and finally in the Gospels where he is tempting Jesus. In Genesis, the Devil is slandering God to man. In Job, he is slandering man to God. In the Gospels, he is facing the God-man in the wilderness. Today’s lesson will focus on the first of these three episodes. I ask you to open your Bibles to the beginning—Genesis chapter three.¹ Let’s start reading at the last verse of chapter two.

^{2:25} . . . although Adam and his wife were both naked, neither of them felt any shame.

^{3:1} Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the creatures the LORD God had made. “Really?” he asked the woman. “Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?”

²“Of course we may eat it,” the woman told him. ³“It’s only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die.”

⁴“You won’t die!” the serpent hissed. ⁵“God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil.”

⁶The woman was convinced. The fruit looked so fresh and delicious, and it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. Then he ate it, too. ⁷At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves.

⁸Toward evening they heard the LORD God walking about in the garden, so they hid themselves among the trees. ⁹The LORD God called to Adam, “Where are you?”

¹⁰He replied, “I heard you, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.”

¹¹“Who told you that you were naked?” the LORD God asked. “Have you eaten the fruit I commanded you not to eat?”

¹²“Yes,” admitted Adam, “but it was the woman you gave me who brought me the fruit, and I ate it.”

¹³Then the LORD God asked the woman, “How could you do such a thing?”

“The serpent tricked me,” she replied. “That’s why I ate it” (Gen 2:25-3:13, NLT).

The “original sin” of Adam and Eve was not very original. The Devil, the father of lies,² is the original sinner and he seduces humans to follow suit.

Do not be fooled and do not be naïve: the Devil is a crafty character. There is a wordplay in the Hebrew text on the terms “naked” and “shrewd.” Adam and Eve were עָרוֹם (*‘ārôm*; plural, עֲרוּמִים *‘ārūmmîm*) and the serpent was עָרִיב (*‘arûm*). In English, I would say it this way: the serpent’s shrewdness leads to the loss of nudeness. Because the serpent is sinfully shrewd, Adam and Eve are no longer shamelessly nude.

What did this shrewd serpent say? *First, he questioned the goodness of God.* “Did God really say?”—Did He put a limitation on you? Is He withholding something from you? “Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?” No, God said nothing of the kind. What He did say was, “You may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:16-17). God’s permission emphasizes freedom. And yes, it is a freedom within boundaries; for where there are no boundaries, there is no free choice—there is only chaos. But the devilish serpent, the clever critter that he is, twists God’s words so as to deny that Adam and Eve are free. How can God be good when He does not allow His creatures to enjoy any of the fruit of the garden? God is not good. He wants you to think that you have everything you need when in fact there is so much more that you could have! Eve’s reply to the Devil’s lie is a half-truth/half-lie of her own. Concerning the tree at the center of the garden, she responds, “God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die.” God had not said, “You must touch it.” Oh how human! . . . to exaggerate the commands of God, then complain because they are not fair, and finally choose to do as we want, having

been duped into believing that such a choice makes us free. The starting point of sin and suffering was the suggestion that God was not good.

Second, the Devil denied the severity of God. Did God say that you would die if you ate of the forbidden fruit? “You will not die!” No, instead of dying, you will be like God. You will know everything, both good and evil. Listen to what the slime-bag serpent is saying. He is declaring that the wages of sin is *not* death. That is a lie and he knows it! How do I know that the Devil knew he was lying? Because if there was no penalty for sin, then the Devil would not be the Devil and Hell would not be his home. The Devil is who he is and lives where he lives as a result of his rebellion against God. He, of all creatures, knows that you cannot defy God and get away with it. We all die because we have believed the Devil’s lie. The wages of sin is death: always has been and always will be. If it ever changes you will know it: all the funeral homes will go out of business.

Third, the Devil slandered the motive of God. God knows, Adam and Eve, that when you eat of the tree in the center of the garden your eyes will be opened and you will be just like God Himself. God does not want that to happen, and so He is selfishly keeping you in your place and shutting you out of His place. God, in order to stay on top, must keep you under His thumb; therefore, He mandates laws to maintain His control.

There you have it. The first occasion on which we hear the voice of the Devil, he is questioning the goodness of God, denying the severity of God, and slandering the motive of God. God is not good; He will not do what He threatens; and He is afraid of you. Therefore, He is unreasonably restrictive and He uses scare tactics to keep you from fully realizing yourself. That is the voice of the Devil.

As many of you know, I teach the Book of Genesis at Rochester College. I point out to my students that “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is a constant reminder of image status. Adam and Eve are images, but God is the creator. As creator, God is the ultimate authority to whom those made in His image are responsible. The tree also represents moral autonomy. By eating from it, Adam and Eve declare their moral independence from God and choose to decide right and wrong for themselves. One of my students apparently misunderstood the word “autonomy.” On the final exam they wrote that “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” represented “moral optometry.” I

scribbled a note saying something to the effect that “although the correct term is moral autonomy, moral optometry is also correct; after all, ‘their eyes were opened.’”

Adam and Eve listened to the shrewd serpent, they ate of the forbidden fruit, and their eyes were opened. The slithering snake was right about that: their eyes were opened. And what did they see? They saw shame. And so they strung some fig leaves together hoping to cover their shame. They could not look upon themselves and they could not bear to be bare: they could not bear to be looked upon. Now that their eyes were open, they did not want to see and they did not want to be seen. How pathetic. And then they hid because they were afraid. They were afraid because they knew that God was good and they were not. They were afraid because they knew that the good God meant what He had said. They were afraid because they realized that rather than being like God they were like the satanic serpent. In the midst of paradise, in the place where the loving Creator took evening walks, Adam and Eve huddled in fear. How pathetic. They had become something never made by God: a species that “had sinned itself into existence.”³

Into a world of no-fear and all-joy slithered a shrewd serpent. And this cunning creature exploited the most subtle and sophisticated anxiety known to the human species. *This is the fear that, no matter how well endowed I am with all manner of personal and environmental good, it is not enough. Someone else has it better, or is better, and that uneasiness gnaws at us like an aching tooth.*⁴

And what of the promise “to be like God”? Does this not describe our desire to master our own existence?⁵ We humans, we want to make a name for ourselves; we want to establish a place for ourselves; and, if it were possible, we want to live forever. Grasping for this promise reveals our most basic fears: the fear of death, the fear of being a nobody, and the fear of having nothing. “You can have it all!” proclaims the forked-tongue serpent. *And the insufferable irony is that the Devil offered this to two human beings who already had it all but who were deceived into believing that what they already had was not enough.* Because Adam and Eve listened to the voice of the Devil, they were diminished as humans, driven from their home, and they died.

And so it is today. In our attempt to master our own existence, we defy the Master of our existence, and in so doing, we are less, we have less, and we fear more. What a

shame. Yes, what a shame. There are no fig leaves large enough nor trees big enough to hide us from the Master of our existence.

I don't know about you, but I know that I do not want to spend my life hiding in shame and fear. I want to be free and fearless. I want to find the joy that comes in being content with what I have knowing that it is enough. And I want to live forever. I want the God who made me to be the Master of my existence. I want to listen to the voice of God. And the Devil . . . I want him to go to Hell . . . and stay there. The Devil does not scare me in Hell. He scares me when he shrewdly shows himself on earth and tempts me to strive for what I could already have if I would accept it as a gift from God.

You and I face the same choice today that confronted Adam and Eve at the beginning of human history. *We* can say to God, “Your will be done” or *God* can say to us, “Your will be done.” Whose will, will it be?

¹This series of four lessons follows the format of G. Campbell Morgan, *The Voice of the Devil* (Baker). Helpful for its historical perspective is Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Cornell University Press, 1988).

²John 8:44.

³C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962), 83.

⁴Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 28.

⁵Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Augsburg, 1984), 248.