

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

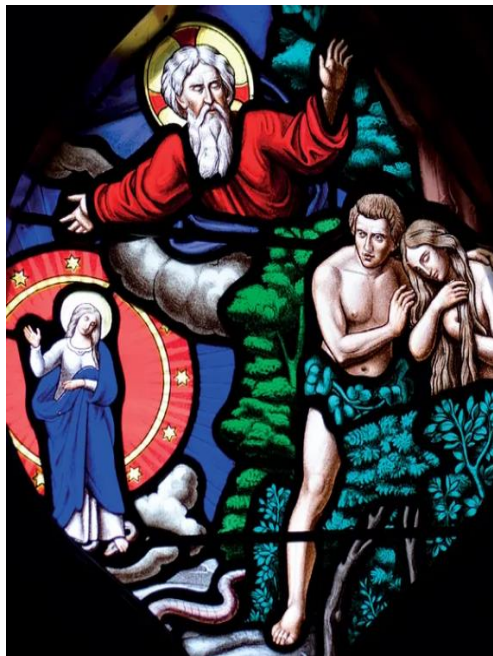
The Fall of Man

God had made all things, and He pronounced it “very good.” And yet, something very tragic took place that would shake and alter the very foundations of what God had set forth. That event is called by various titles: Original Sin, the Sin of Adam, The Fall of Man, and so forth. The story begins in the third chapter of Genesis:

Now the serpent was more cunning than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen 3:1-7)

Two things surprise us right away. Why was there a serpent in the garden of paradise and, why was there a tree from which they should not eat? Both questions have a similar answer: They are there because of human freedom. When God made Adam and Eve He made them, and later us, to be His children, not His slaves. We were not

like the animals who live by instinct, nor the plants which simply vegetate. No, we have rational souls, and the glory of our person is that we unite two orders of creation, the spiritual and the physical. We are called to love God as His sons and daughters. But love requires freedom and thus, real alternatives must be available to us.



Why This Tree?

The “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” stood near the middle of the Garden of Eden and God had said that Adam and Eve should not partake of its fruit (see Gen 2:17). This tree stands as a kind of image of our freedom. Its name also speaks to a deeper meaning. God did not want them to “know” evil. To “know” in the Bible is usually deeper than mere intellectual knowing. It refers to deep, intimate, personal experience of the thing or person known. Hence God was saying He did not want Adam and Eve to experience evil for themselves, it would surely bring them sorrow,

suffering and ultimate death. Rather, God invited them to let Him tell them what was good or evil and live in faith, trusting that what He told them was true and for their good. As such, they were free to trust Him and live in paradise, or to mistrust Him, refuse any limits and decide for themselves what is good or evil, even at the cost of suffering and eventual death. Alas they chose to reject God’s offer and gave way to colossal pride, mistrust and ingratitude. Satan exploited this and drew them away from the true paradise with lies of a greater glory that would come to them outside the protection of faith and trust in God. We have been miserable ever since. Though God must give us freedom so we can love, Adam and Eve abused this freedom and sought their own glory and happiness apart from God. They trusted Satan more than God. The catechism gives this cogent summary of their sin:

Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in His goodness. (# 397)

What the Devil?

But what of the serpent? Why was he in this garden of paradise? It is no less than Satan himself. Satan was a fallen angel, now referred to as a demon. He is the prince of all the demons who fell with him from the heavenly ranks of angels when they too abused their freedom and defied God. The text says that he takes up the form of a serpent since it was the most cunning of all the animals God had made. Today we think of serpents as snakes,

but it is not clear that this is what the serpent looked like to Adam and Eve. Only later does God cause the serpent to slither on the ground and have the form of a snake. This may explain why Eve does not seem startled that a “serpent” is talking to her.

The Devil’s Deceit

Note however the nature of the devil’s appeal. First, he tries to cast doubt on what God had taught by saying, “Did God *really* say...?” Then he makes God seem unreasonable by exaggerating and misrepresenting God’s command. He misquotes God as saying, “You shall not eat of ANY tree...” Many tempters today do the same things. But Eve, to her credit did not fall for that and corrected Satan. Next, Satan simply lies and says, “Surely you will not die...” Now he appeals to her pride and casts a doubt: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God! This struck a note and Eve began to think that even forbidden knowledge was a good thing and gosh, that fruit sure did look good and tasty...what could go wrong?”

Whither Adam?

And where was Adam during all this? The text says he was right there with her. Notice he said nothing while the devil carried on with his wife. He had been told by God to guard the garden, (see Gen 2:15-17) and, by extension to guard his wife. But he’s down on the job. This is why the Scriptures call Original Sin the “Sin of Adam.” He was the head of that household and told to guard the garden, his wife and their hearts. He failed, as do many of us.

After this, things fall apart rapidly. Adam and Eve lose their innocence and their righteousness, experiencing it as a nakedness they think they can cover with mere leaves. The story continues:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called. “Adam, where are you!?”

Surely God knows all that has happened and where Adam is. But He has not given up His love. Hear the almost plaintive cry, “Adam, where are you?” As if to say, “Adam where is your heart, where is Eve?” He calls to them, He does not merely apprehend them. God’s concern and love are not exhausted. Then Adam steps forth, saying: *I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” God said, “Who told you that you were naked?”*

Here too the question is rich in meaning. It is as if to say, “Who told you to be afraid of me? Who told you, you were no good or inadequate, or ugly, or an embarrassment? I did not tell you these things. “Ah,” said the Lord, “You have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Yes, this is where your suffering and deadly self-reproach comes from. I tried to prevent this by warning you. Now suffering and death have found you.

Pointed Fingers

But Adam in classic form cannot face his guilt and says, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Yes, here is the classic finger-pointing in all directions but self. Adam, who moments ago delighted in Eve as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, now distances himself from her, blaming her for his own failure to guard the garden and assist her in the moment of temptation. Eve blames

the serpent as if she did not have an intellect and free will along with the clear instruction of God to stay away from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Consequences

It falls now to God to explain the consequences of what they have chosen. But first He punishes the devil:

Because you have done this, cursed are you...on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall crush your head, while you strike at his heel.”

Here is the first good news! God will limit Satan’s power and points to forward Mary and Jesus saying that “the Woman” shall one day bring forth a savior who will crush Satan’s power.

Adam, for his part is told that his sin has also harmed all creation, God says, “Cursed be the ground because of you.” Paradise is no more and this world, though still beautiful, will exhibit hostility in its extremes. Welcome to “Paradise Lost.”

Eve for her part will see many tensions introduced into family life: A Husband who at times is authoritarian, but whom she needs and loves. And bringing forth her children will cause her pain and grief.

Alas, so much has been lost! A beautiful creation set forth by God is now disfigured by man. But the greatest story ever told is a story of the enduring Love, God’s love which does not end. This is tenderly depicted at the end. *And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.* (Gen 3:21).

For now, paradise is gone. But that’s not how the story ends. We are in for a rocky ride. But God goes with us!