

NEWTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Mystery of Our Humanity” Part III: Facing Temptation

Genesis 3:1-7

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For the last six weeks as we’ve been looking at the early chapters of Genesis we have seen the wonder of design and creation and all of its unspoiled goodness and beauty – the way the world was meant to be. Yet the world we see around us today is far from that ideal. Something has gone terribly wrong. As time has continued to pass since September 11th and we have had more time to gain perspective on what happened and what we’re thinking about it, I’m beginning to see the longer-term results of the attack on our country

One of the results is fear. The goal of terrorists is to strike terror in people. That has happened to us. We have been and we are being terrorized daily—first with the threat of planes crashing and buildings collapsing and now with the threat of deadly disease invisibly striking without warning. But I’ll tell you what I find a bit peculiar about some of the attitudes that I sense that we have a nation—that somehow we’ll be able to stop this, that somehow we’ll get to the point where we are safe. If we can be strong enough, follow the right steps, spend enough money, take the proper precautions, then somehow we think that we might be safeguarded and immune from harm and terror. Frankly, I’m skeptical. Can we ever be truly safe? As long as there are evil people in the world then there will always be the capacity for terror and the possibility that evil can affect you and me where we are and where we live.

But still we want to know why. We desire to solve that age-old question of the origin of evil. What went wrong with God’s design? Genesis Chapter 3 helps us understand what went wrong. In fact here, in this text, is the ultimate explanation of those baffling questions of why – those why questions that arise after event like the attacks of September 11th. Here also is found the reason for the heartache and pain, all the tragedy and suffering. Here can be discovered the origin of all the wars, atrocities, and inhumanity of our race demonstrated for thousands and thousands of years. Here, also, is the explanation for the fascination with evil, and the power of evil—the strange, powerful allure of sex, wealth, and power—that draws us away from God. Here, also, is found an understanding on the personal level of what each and every one of us goes through on a daily basis as we face temptations and struggle to master our evil desires. Which one of us has not felt the lure of temptation or heard the siren call of sin, or felt the searing pain of guilt? But in all of this we would do well to remember Paul’s words about our enemy—our true enemy is not flesh and blood. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12) Our real enemies are powers and forces that are well beyond our capacity to overcome. So let us look this morning at the age-old story of the origin of evil. As we read it we will observe how our first parents faced temptation and what happened to them. Turn to Genesis Chapter 3: 1-7:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” 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.’” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Father may your Holy Spirit grant us wisdom that you word would be open to teach us, encourage us and strengthen us for the trails and temptations that we must each face. In Jesus’ name.

Let’s first look at the account of the tempter. We’ll examine the tempter’s profile, the tempter’s tactics, and the tempter’s victory (albeit a partial and temporary one). Then we are going to see how we might effectively face temptation.

The tempter’s profile. It is unfortunate that our English Bibles translate this word *serpent*, because it makes us think that there was a talking snake in the garden. The verb form of the Hebrew word *nachash* actually means “to shine.” And the noun form here means “Shining One.” So a better translation would be: “Now the shining one was more subtle—or more cunning—than any of the other living creatures.” That’s an appropriate translation because Paul in the NT calls Satan an angel of light. This one who was in the garden is none other than the ancient serpent, “the ancient serpent called the devil

or Satan.” That’s from Revelation. We get our understanding that he was in fact a serpent because in the New Testament he becomes one who is referred to as the serpent. But where did he come from?

No explanation is given in Genesis as to how he got there. He just appears on the scene. No attempt to explain the origin of evil or the devil is given. Its existence is assumed, and the way it spreads and infects us is described.

The Bible speaks in no uncertain terms of the existence of a real, malign being bent on our destruction and determined to reverse the created order. The Bible, at the same time, does not teach what some other religions do about evil—that equal and opposite powers of good and evil exist co-eternally and vie for power against one another. That is known as dualism. The Bible does not teach dualism.

Rather, the Bible teaches that Satan is a created being. He is not equal with God. Many symbols are used in Scripture to describe him. The serpent becomes an apt symbol because of the way the curse plays out. Peter uses another image in his first letter. He describes our enemy as a lion—perhaps because of the devil’s violent motives and ultimate aim: to hunt, kill, and devour its prey. Here, in Genesis, he is described as cunning and crafty. He never appears with horns, hooves or a pitchfork. If he did, I don’t think anyone would listen to him. Instead the devil always appears in disguise—here as a shining, beautiful creature. He never appears bad, but always good, not a villain, but as a lovely creature with upstanding character and altruistic purpose. Some of the modern portrayals of Satan are perhaps more accurate in this way than Milton’s imagery in *Paradise Lost*. For example, the modern film remake *Bedazzled*, portrays the devil as Elizabeth Hurley, a sultry temptress who convinces Brendan Frazier to sell his soul for seven wishes. In another film, *The Devil’s Advocate*, Al Pacino plays the devil, who this time is a successful lawyer in Manhattan. So the tempter’s profile is always attractive and cunningly disguised.

What about the tempter’s tactics? That’s where I think that we are most helped by our passage today. We know that the shining one was more crafty than any of the creatures that the Lord God had made. His first cunning step is to approach the woman. Remember last week, we talked about some of the differences between men and women. The woman was originally designed for relationship. She naturally functions more capably within relationships than the man does. So the serpent approaches the woman on a relational level and begins to engage her in conversation. He says, “Did God really say you must not eat from any of the trees in the garden?” He raises a question and places a seed of doubt in the mind of the woman. He doesn’t begin by blatantly tempting her to disobey God. He begins with something simple. Isn’t that the way temptation always works? Thankfully the devil’s tactics are as old as the serpent himself. In fact he is not very creative in his tactics at all. He has not changed his strategy in thousands of years, and can help us. He is not very creative.

He tactics in tempting us are similar to those employed by the KGB in recruiting spies during the Cold War. As told by a former FBI agent who wrote about Soviet spies working in Washington, the KGB agents would infiltrate and solicit workers in the FBI and CIA and the military to work for them. The KGB never began by asking these potential spies to steal top secret information. Instead they would start with something simple, something that was in fact public information. They would first ask their recruits to steal a phone book from their office. No big deal. It was something that the American worker would justify because it was public information. But it would still be a thrill and it would put some extra money in their pockets. And it would be enough to hook the American into their scheme and into doing it again. The next time it would be a file. Then it would be something confidential. Finally, they would ask their recruit to steal something very secretive, and they would usually comply. But that would come later. At the beginning it would be nothing more than a telephone directory. No big deal.

So it is with temptation in our lives. I came across a poem a few years ago that talks about the subtle process by which we are drawn into temptation.

*Sow a thought; reap an action.
Sow an action; reap a habit.
Sow a habit; reap a character.
Sow a character; reap a destiny.*

So it is with temptation. The first tactic then, which we see the serpent using, is to sow a seed of doubt in the woman’s mind. We see the subtlety of the serpent who calls into question God’s words, “Did God really say?” And then he says something outlandish knowing full well that the woman will answer, “No, of course not.” Of course God didn’t say we couldn’t eat *anything*. But he calls into question God’s goodness and engages the woman in conversation. In the same the tempter tries to lead us to doubt God’s goodness. He tries to make us believe that God is holding out on us. We, too, can

come to believe—though subtly at first—that God has something good that we want but He won't give to us. Many think of God this way. Some think of God as cosmic killjoy who is just waiting for us to step out of line so he can zap us! Those thoughts about God, though, are placed in our heads by the devil. They do not accord with the way the Bible describes God.

But a seed a doubt is sown in the woman's mind. Once the devil has gotten the woman to doubt God's goodness, he can proceed with his second tactic: a frontal attack: He lies outright. His next lie *denies* God's word, replacing it with a false statement and encouraging a wrong desire within Eve. He says, "You will not surely die." But this is exactly the opposite of what God had told Adam in Chapter 2. He said, "When you eat of it you will surely die." His third tactic is to support the lie with a distorted truth. He says, "God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing the difference between good and evil. (Interestingly, their eyes *are* opened when they eat. Part of what the devil said came true. But this is only the beginning. Death also results. He didn't tell them *that* part, and so it was only a half-truth.) But the result of the devil's tactics was that the woman ate. And so did the man. Their rebellion against God began here. It spread to every one of their offspring down through the generations to us.

We follow the same pattern of temptation whenever we begin to stray and rebel against our Creator. Like a frog that is in a kettle of cold water, swimming about happily: when the kettle is placed on the stove, the water begins to heat up. But the frog never notices because the temperature change is so gradual. But the water gets hotter and hotter. Soon the water is boiling and the frog is cooked.

With Adam and Eve sin had begun to spread, and all of the human race has been infected. You and I are infected. We are caught up in the same cycle of disobedience and rebellion following the same pattern. The pollution of sin has infected us all. And the tempter is still about seeking to destroy us all.

So how do we face temptation? Where did Eve go wrong? Let's look closer to see where she might have caught herself so that we might not make the same mistake. How could she have avoided this? As soon as the devil raised the first question, "Did God really say...?" As soon as she gave into the notion that she couldn't fully trust God, then she was lost. Then the devil told her an outright lie that she believed. The difference is that at that time the woman was innocent. The temptation came from outside. With us the temptation comes from inside. No matter where we go, no matter how many miles we travel, we cannot escape temptation. It will always be with us because it comes from within us. The tempter uses the same tactic that he did with the woman. The tempter uses the same process when he wants you to have an affair with another man's wife or with another woman's husband. He uses the same tactic when he wants you to cheat on an exam, or to cheat on your income taxes, or to engage in some shady business deal, or tell a lie in your relationship with another.

Though we are all infected, we are not helpless. God has given us a number of lines of defense on which we can rely when we face temptation. The first line of defense is to know the truth. As I was shared with the children, when we know God's word, we can identify the lies of the enemy. For Eve, this line of defense began to break down when the serpent got her to change her focus towards God's word. She began to see God's prohibition, the command, in negative terms. Remember that God's command about the trees of the garden had been primarily positive—a permission. He said, "Look at this garden, there are thousands of trees and fruits. It is all yours. Take. Eat. Enjoy. It is good. I've done this for you."

Now through the serpent's subtly, Eve's perspective narrows. She begins to focus on the prohibition of the tree in the middle of the garden. Are you being tempted now to do wrong? Are you being tempted to make a decision that will lead you down the wrong path? How will you know whether it is God or the devil who is speaking to you?

You can ask yourself these questions: Do I feel cheated deprived or limited right now? Do I feel as though God is somehow holding out on me—that I am not being given all that I ought to have, that my rights are being violated, that I am being cheated of something that life should give me? If that's how you feel then you are listening to the tempter. Remember that is his first approach—to make you doubt God's goodness.

Then ask yourself if what you want contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture. If the Bible teaches that what you are seeking is wrong, even though all those around you—your friends and the current culture—say it is right, then you are listening to the tempter.

Beware also of adding to the Word of God. We see something very interesting going on here. When the serpent challenges the woman and says, "Did God really say...?" Eve's response is surprising. "We may eat from the trees in the garden, but God did say 'You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden and you must not touch it or you will die.'" But God did not say that. What *was* in the middle of the garden after all? Was there *a* tree in the middle of

the garden. Look again at Chapter 2. There were actually *two* trees in the middle of the garden. And based upon the language construct which is a permission, the centerpiece of the garden, and the middle of the garden is the tree of life. The tree to which God wanted to lead His people so that they might gain life. The Hebrew then literally goes on to say, “and incidentally, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is there also.” And God did not want them to eat from this tree. Isn’t it interesting that Eve has forgotten that there are *two* trees in the middle of the garden. Or perhaps she didn’t know... She goes on, “And we must not touch that tree, or we will die.” But God didn’t say that either. He only told Adam not to eat it.

One has to wonder where she came up with all of that. There are only two possibilities. Either she invented these corollaries on her own, *or* it was Adam who communicated these things to her. I’m inclined to think it is the latter. I believe this is the first instance in the Bible of legalism. Do you know what legalism is? Simply put, legalism is a hedge we build around the law. We construct a hedge—in our own strength—to keep us from disobeying the law. The Pharisees did this whenever they added to God’s law. For example, the Jewish Scribes created scores of regulations around the Sabbath law. The commandment was simple enough: “Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.” But they were so afraid that they might break the Sabbath that they made many, many other laws. Dozens of regulations in the *Mishna* describe how many steps can be taken on the Sabbath, how much weight may be lifted, what can and cannot be done, and so on. These human-made Sabbath regulations served as a hedge around the actual Sabbath command, keeping people far away from ever braking the core command. I wonder if Adam, receiving the original command from God, was worried that Eve might eat from the tree. And so when he told her about God’s command, he reinforced it just a bit: “Eve, don’t go anywhere near the middle of the garden. It’s really dangerous there. There’s this tree that will kill you if you touch it. If you even so much as brush the leaves with your arm—you will die.” Could Adam have added to God’s words out of fear that Eve might disobey? This is conjecture, but it is an interesting scenario. The point is, whenever we add to God’s word we place ourselves in jeopardy. We give the devil a foothold. If we do not know God’s actual word, the devil can more easily twist it and confuse us. To Eve, he said, “You surely won’t die.” And it did seem a bit ridiculous that to *touch* the tree would cause her to die. And legalism is a dangerous thing too.

The first line of defense is to know the truth. The second line of defense in facing temptation is to look for the escape route. There is wonderful promise that we have in the Scripture that we will say as our affirmation of faith. It’s a promise from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:13):

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

What a marvelous promise! God will provide us with a route of escape from *every* temptation! He always gives us a way out. Sometimes that way out is a physical exit from the situation. In fact, more often than not, that is the easiest way to avoid temptation. Don’t put yourself in a place where you will be tempted. Once the serpent had put it into Eve’s mind, a doubt about God’s goodness, a lie about what God said, and a half-truth to confuse her, he could leave her alone. Why? Because she was there, in front of the tree. Standing there, looking at the fruit, she was sunk. The Bible tells us she saw that the fruit was pleasing to the eye and good for food and profitable to make her wise. Once that thought process began in her mind, and as long as she was right there with the fruit staring her in the face, it was just a matter of time until she gave in. And so she ate. And so it is for us when ever we face temptation. Sometimes we have to get out of that place. We have to flee. Just as Joseph fled from Potiphar’s wife. He physically ran out of there as fast as he could.

Sometimes we can resist the devil. James 4:7 says, “**Resist the devil and he will flee from you.**” We see Jesus resisting the devil in the wilderness. How did He do it? He did it by using the Word of God! He knew God’s word. He knew the Truth. The first line of defense. He stood by God’s truth and eventually after three rounds, the devil fled. But sometimes we are not strong enough to make him flee. So the best offense is a good defense—and we must flee the situation ourselves. Or better yet, if we don’t put ourselves in compromising places in the first place, we can avoid much temptation altogether.

The third line of defense is to stay in community. The breakdown of the third line of defense was Adam’s fault. I believe Adam abdicated his responsibility. Have you heard the story that tells where men’s Adam’s apple came from? The story goes that Eve was alone when the serpent gave her the fruit and she took it and ate it. Then she went and found Adam and handed him a piece of fruit and said, “Adam, try this kind, this is a great one.” So Adam took the fruit took a big bite. “Yumm,” he said. “This is delicious. I’ve never tried this kind before. Where did you get it?” Pointing, Eve said, “It’s from that tree!” And he said, “Guuuulp,” and choked on the apple. It lodged in his throat and has been stuck there ever since. That could never be a true story, because actually Adam was right there all along. Look at what it says, “She ate

and then she gave it to her husband *who was with her*. And he ate it.” I want to know what Adam was doing this whole time. He was standing right there. He knew God’s command.

It was Adam who, I believe, abdicated his responsibility. He could have reminded Eve what God’s word really said. He could have stopped her from eating it. Even if he didn’t stop her, he could have refused to eat it himself. Notice that it was only after *Adam* ate the fruit that both of their eyes were opened.

God put Adam and Eve together to help one another. Together they could have resisted the temptation and they could have resisted contamination by sin. But Adam did not take his part seriously. That is something for us to take hold of. We need each other. None of us can stand against temptation alone. None of us can resist evil as an island by ourselves. But together, we can help one another. We can encourage each other. We can remind each other of what God’s word says. We can challenge each other when we see our brother or our sister struggling with temptation. We need each other. We need to be in community.

What happens when we do not resist? What happens if all three lines of defense are broken through? Thankfully, God has given an answer to the problem of evil. Isaiah 64:6 says, “**All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.**” But God has not left us alone to wallow in the pollution of our sin. God has not left us without an answer. He has made a way for us to be clean once again before Him. “**Come now, let us reason together,**” says the Lord. “**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**” (Isaiah 1:18) God’s reasoning with us was to send His Son Jesus Christ as the answer to the great pollutant of sin that has infected us all. His death on the cross was the perfect and adequate answer to deal with the rebellion of the whole world and with our own rebellion toward God. Paul says in Romans 5:15, “**But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!**” That is a beautiful promise. God says that the gift from one man—Jesus Christ—is more powerful than what was done by the one man—Adam—in the garden that infected us all. It is always easier to destroy than to create, to do evil than to do good. It took just a few minutes to destroy the World Trade Center towers. It didn’t require much finesse or skill. Not much creative mastery. But it will take months—perhaps years to rebuild those towers. It didn’t take much to take that first bite of fruit in the garden that seemed so tempting. That wasn’t a great act. It was a tragic act, but not a great act. But the great act belonged to Jesus on the cross. What Jesus did was so much greater and more powerful than the evil act that began it all. Christ’s righteous act in providing a way for all of us to be cleansed—that act was truly great. That act took place as He hung on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins. Jesus Christ is the answer for the evil we see in this broken world. He is the answer to the evil and rebellion in each one of our hearts. His power is so much greater than the evil we see around us. And his power is available to all of us, even as we face each and every temptation that assails us.

Lord, we ask you to cleanse us from evil. We cannot do it ourselves. We need your cleansing and forgiveness provided through Christ’s death on the cross. Help us and strengthen us by your Holy Spirit to resist the evil one and win our struggle against temptation. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.