



The Origin of Bad

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Genesis 3:1-12

January 10, 2021

It has been a sad week for American democracy. Mob rule broke out in our city. Who could have ever imagined—the Capitol, this enduring symbol of our democracy, under siege? The last time our Capitol was attacked was during the War of 1812.

Order has now been restored. Tighter security measures are now in place. Yet, deep divisions linger.

I am circumspect about using this platform to address partisan politics. I will, however say this much. Incivility is a corrosive that could bring our democracy down. When George Washington left office, he warned about the inherent dangers of political parties. Those of you who have influence in our two-party system, you must insist that we stop the madness. Treating each other with dignity and respect is a keystone both to American democracy and to our faith. Liberals and conservatives exist in every nation-state throughout history. If authority and power are not shared among rival perspectives, we will pay a heavy price.

I spoke about the image of God in people last Sunday. It was the first of nine sermons on *What Matters Most* as I conclude my ministry at Vienna Presbyterian. It was all good news last Sunday. Every person is created in God's image, the basis of our respect for people. Today, we need to talk about the bad news. Something goes horribly wrong in paradise. God's image, in John Calvin's words, becomes "frightfully deformed." *The Origin of Bad*, I titled it.

You may think you know this Adam and Eve story. Some of you write it off as fable. Some question how it squares with science. Others find it problematic that Eve is formed from Adam's rib. I'm asking you to put aside

everything you know about this story and let it speak to you on its own terms.

We pick up the action in Genesis 3. The appearance of the serpent in this story is rather abrupt. This is no ordinary snake. It's a talking snake. Eve doesn't register surprise at a talking snake. Perhaps in the Garden of Eden animals and people talk with each other. This serpent is not positively established until John identifies Satan in the book of Revelation as "that ancient serpent" (Revelation 12:9; 20:2).

The serpent says to the woman (she's not called Eve until later in the story), "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1) We're not told why the serpent approaches Eve rather than Adam. Some might deduce she is more vulnerable. Others would counter that she's the one in charge.

The serpent's question is intended to plant seeds of doubt in her head. "Did God *really* say?" The serpent ignores God's provision of trees in the garden for food. He exploits God's lone restriction of eating fruit from the forbidden tree. Maybe God is being too restrictive here. If God really loves you, would he limit you this way?

The woman tells 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'" (Genesis 3:2-3).

There are two things to mention here. First, there's no mention of an apple. "Fruit" is all the narrator tells us. Second, in Eve's zeal to correct the serpent, she goes a little overboard. God never says anything about touching the

fruit; only eating it. While it may seem like an innocent embellishment, it paves the way for the serpent's next move.

“You will not die,” the serpent insists. Can't you picture his feigned expression of surprise? “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). This serpent is not only crafty; he is brazen. He has the audacity to call God's goodness into question. How can God be good if he's holding something back from you?

The allure of a tree that could make her wise proves too tempting. Within a span of eight Hebrew words in verse 6, they take the fall. “She took...and ate. She gave...he ate.” Adam's passivity in this story is stunning. He's standing right next to her yet doesn't say a word. He goes along with everything she and the serpent discuss. If her sin is the sin of initiation, his is the sin of acquiescence.

The serpent promises their eyes will be opened. They are opened all right. Instead of knowing good and evil, what they see is their nakedness. This is hardly the kind of knowledge they were expecting. They sew fig leaves together as a sort of apron. Fig trees produce the largest leaves in Palestine. They provide, shall we say the most coverage.

Adam and Eve hear the sound of God walking in the garden. What does God walking in the garden sound like? I really want to know. Eating forbidden fruit causes them to hide from God. Imagine, trying to hide from God? Hey, people do it all the time. Our first parents are now afraid of God. They have never been afraid before. Everything is

different now. No more walking with God. Only shame and mistrust.

“Adam, where are you?” God calls out. God has been asking this where-are-you question since the beginning of time. Adam answers, “I heard you walking in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid” (Genesis 3:10).

“Who told you that you were naked?” God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:11).

Adam’s response is classic, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12). He casts the blame on her. He goes so far as to tell God it’s His fault for giving her to him. When the spotlight shines on Eve, she shifts the blame onto the serpent. Yep! Everybody blames someone else!

Why does God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden if He doesn’t want them to eat from it? The tree is there to remind us that we are creatures. God created us with limits. You can eat from any tree in the garden, save one. This one is off limits. So, what do they do? They eat the forbidden fruit.

We call this story, in church circles “the fall.” *Fall* is a term dating back to the third century A.D. It’s a word used to describe all the fallout from this story. Within a span of three chapters, we witness the rise and fall of Adam and Eve. This story reminds me of Humpty Dumpty who had such a great fall that no one could put him back together again. No one can put them back together again. No one, except God.

So what difference does this story make in my life?
Three applications come to mind.

First, this story teaches us about the nature of evil. Evil does not usually appear hideous and monstrous. It appears seductive and alluring. Evil disguises itself to look attractive and appealing. The forbidden fruit looks positively delicious.

Would any of us be attracted to evil if we realized its hideous nature? No, of course not. We are not tempted by obvious evil. The devil exploits God's good gifts--money, wine, sex, food, and humor (to name a few) to take us out.

Second, this story teaches us about human nature. Everybody plays the blame game in this story. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. And I'm quite certain, if given half the chance, the serpent would have found someone to blame also. The psychological word for this blaming is called "externalizing." We refuse to accept personal responsibility for our shortcomings. We push our blame out onto other people.

It is so tempting to claim the high ground and slander our opponents. We recognize evil more readily in other people than we do in ourselves.

Scripture knows no division between saint and sinner. We are all sinners. Paul writes in Romans, "There is no one righteous. No, not one" (Romans 3:10). "No one" means *everyone*. There is something wrong in us that we cannot fix ourselves. All of us are broken, each in our own way.

The London Times asked a number of writers at the turn of the 20th century to contribute essays on the topic, “What’s Wrong with the World?” G. K. Chesterton submitted the most succinct reply. In answer to the question, “What’s Wrong with the World?” he simply wrote, “I am,” and signed his name. What’s wrong with the world? I am. Stop blaming other people and take responsibility for your sins and shortcomings.

Third, this story teaches us about God’s nature. Let me correct a mistaken impression people have of this story. Some of you regard the primary takeaway from this story is that God levies judgment on people. Is there punishment on their transgressions? Absolutely! Eve experiences pain in childbirth just as Adam experiences agony in working the soil. Yet there is so much grace in this story.

Grace in providing clothes for them: They experience shame and guilt in their nakedness before God. It is such a tender gesture on God’s part to provide clothes for them. God covers them with garments of mercy.

Grace in not killing them: God does not impose the penalty of death on these errant humans. Sure, the curses are heavy, but they are not fatal. Adam and Eve go on living.

Grace in promising one to come who will crush the head of this tempting serpent: Near the end of this Garden of Eden story in Genesis 3:15 is a veiled promise of a coming Messiah who will strike back against this tempter. I will talk more next Sunday about God’s grace in Jesus Christ who will crush the head of our evil foe.

What matters most: Human nature is flawed. There is something wrong in us that we cannot fix ourselves. Yet, grace originates in the heart of God. We don't have to make excuses. We can trust God's forgiveness.