

One day last week Jayne called me at my office and said, “I just vacuumed under the dining room table. You won’t believe the crumbs and mess that’s been under the table where we eat our meals!” I answered, “Of course, I would! You know that I’m just not good at noticing crumbs and messes!” One of our former U.S. presidents once quipped: “*Status Quo*, you know, is Latin for the mess we’re in.” Genesis 3 is all about the mess we’re in, the mess we humans have made not just of ourselves but of nearly everything we touch. **This leads some of us to ask where this mess and evil in the world came from.** If you wonder “**What’s wrong with us?**” Genesis 3 has something to say to you. Does the Scripture today tells us where evil originated? Sadly, no. In Scripture the closest we get to an explanation for the ‘**source of evil**’ is what might be call an *approximate* answer. So, let’s explore that approximate answer.

As we come to Genesis 3 all is well—or so it seems. The end of chapter 2 left Adam and Eve at peace with God, themselves, and the natural world over which they were given stewardship. They were free to eat any fruit in the garden—with one exception. In chapter 3 we see how they handled this test and what lessons we can learn from their experience. Genesis 1:31 says, “*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*” God did not create anything evil. It was all *very good*—even the human creatures that he made.

Suddenly, when chapter 3 opens, there is this “crafty” **serpent**. And he clearly is evil. He is calling God’s word into question. He interrogates the woman in verse 1: “*Did God really say, ‘You must not eat of any tree in the garden?’*” He’s devious, deceitful, destructive. What God actually said in Genesis 2:17 is, “*You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die.*” But the serpent says in verse 4: “*You will not surely die...For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” Jesus says of the devil in John 8:44 that he is both a liar and murderer: “*He was a murderer from*

the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Who is this serpent? The most complete answer from Scripture is given in Revelation 12:9: *“The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”* So, the serpent in the garden is the devil (meaning *slanderer*) and Satan (meaning *accuser*) and the deceiver of the whole world. Jesus calls him *“the evil one”* in Matthew 13:19 and *“the prince of this world”* in John 12:31. The Pharisees call him *“Beelzebub, the prince of demons”* in Matthew 12:24. Paul calls him *“the god of this age”* in 2 Corinthians 4:4 and *“the ruler of the kingdom of the air”* in Ephesians 2:2.

That’s the creature who we meet in Genesis 3. He is already evil, already a deceiver, already a murderer when he appears in the Garden of God. In a verse not part of our reading, God pronounces judgment on the serpent: *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel”* (v. 15). This is a reason why the eternal Son of God had to become human, because God said it was *the offspring* of the woman who will crush the serpent’s head. *“He will crush your head.”* Who is *“he”*? The answer is: **the woman’s offspring.** Whose head is *“your head”*? The answer is: **the serpent’s head.** The Bible doesn’t really tell us *from where* sin originates, but it guarantees that *God will take care of it.*

What we know is that sin first manifests itself in one of God’s creatures. But even this story doesn’t explicitly tell us *how* sin infects this creature in the first place. In Genesis 2 we meet the Creator and two more creatures. One is eternal and uncreated—the Creator of heaven and earth. Since the Bible repeatedly insists that *God cannot be the source of evil*, sin must originate in something or someone God created. In Genesis 2:7 we read about the first of these creatures, *“the man,”* who God turned from dust into a *“living being”* by the power of God’s creative breath. We don’t learn his name, *Adam*, meaning the man, until

verse 20. We only know from 2:15 “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*”

The Garden is a part of God’s good creation that is functionally “good.” Eden functions in the way God created it to be, aesthetically pleasing and with plenty of good things to eat for our first parents. The “creational mandate” as 2:15 is sometimes called, is connected to God’s warning in 2:17 not to eat from the “*tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*” Maybe the first temptation that the first humans faced was not so much about *disobeying* God’s “rules” as much as about not *caring for* the creation God lovingly made. Of course! This part of the story does indeed show us how sin and its consequences entered creation: **Through the serpent!** And no matter who we deduce he is, he is part of God’s good creation. So, it seems even the serpent was originally “good,” meaning he *originally* fulfilled God’s good purpose for him. While this doesn’t explain *how* or even *who* or *what* turned the serpent against the Creator, Genesis 3 implies that he surrendered his “goodness.” Then the serpent invites Adam’s wife, Eve, to disobey God by eating from the ONE TREE God has forbidden them to eat from. Basically, the serpent tempts her to surrender *her goodness* and forfeit her original place and purpose in God’s good creation, as the serpent did.

It seems all the serpent wants to do is to have a theological discussion with Eve. Spending too much time having theological discussions might be a warning to us. Besides, no one bothers to ask God a question; instead, they talk *about* God. The serpent asks our first mother, “*Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?*” **He’s not just talkative, he’s devious.** The question he asks Eve is the very opposite of what the Lord said to Adam!

Yet Eve’s memory is still sharp enough to clarify what God said. Nonetheless, the crafty serpent has already planted in the woman’s mind a question about God. Her *reflexive obedience* now becomes *reflective obedience*. Let me think: “*Did God really say such and such?*” So that becomes a kind of filter through which Eve sifts all future decisions. The serpent manages to **poke a hole** in the **trust** with which God created Adam and Eve. The **hole in that trust** only

seems to grow with the serpent's first assertion about God's relationship to Eve: "*You will certainly not die*" if you eat from that tree, he insists. It's as if the deceitful creature says, "*No, you'll really live.*" Hey, Eve! God is jealously guarding his "turf" by preventing you from eating from that tree. He knows that eating from it will make you *just like him*. You'll become God's equal!

While we don't know where the serpent came up with these words, we do know that verses 4 and 5 of chapter 3 show evil's hideous face. He peddles disobedience as something *smart and healthy*. The serpent seems to recognize that those God creates *in his image* desire to be not *just like God*, but also *to be God*. If you have any doubts about that, stop and ask yourself the last time you had this thought: "**If I were God, I wouldn't do that. Instead, I'd do this.**" Things spiral quickly downward when the woman gives the fruit of the tree to her husband. Genesis 3 tells us more about the conversation with Eve and the serpent than it does about Adam and Eve's disobedience. **Yet we know it leaves both humans so miserable that they can't hide from each other or from God fast enough.** Embarrassment and fear replace trust and obedience. Soon enough, alienation and murder will worm their way into God's creation. This chapter is about **what it means to be human and our natural tendency to make gods out of ourselves, leading to rebellion against God.**

The Odyssey, Homer's famous work, recounts the mythical voyage of Odysseus and his men. Irresistible women called Sirens sang beautiful songs to lure sailors onto the reefs and jagged rocks. Odysseus knew about the Sirens, so as his ship approached the island, he plugged the ears of his crew with wax to keep them from hearing their deadly music. Adam and Eve did not have ears plugged with wax, so *when the serpent sang his sweet song of temptation*, they were lured to their death, and ours. **But thanks be to God, when the tempter confronts the Second Adam the Lord Jesus in the wilderness, the outcome is entirely different.** The Second Adam **succeeds** where the first Adam fails. Praise the name of the Lord! And in the wilderness, when he was tempted by the devil, he began the work of bringing all humanity back to the Garden from which our first parents were banished. **Praise God! Hallelujah! Amen.**