

Group Study – The Separation

In Genesis 3, sin is rooted in mistrust. The man and the woman do not trust that God has their interest at heart – that God did not really intend to provide for them or save them from death. Trust is corrupted into fear and doubt, and humanity becomes estranged from God.

What connection do you see between sin and mistrust? Have you ever struggled to believe that God is for you, at work in the world to save and protect you? Has mistrust caused you to hold God at a distance?

How is trust repaired? How has God reached out in kindness to care for you?

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Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast Transcript

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"The Separation"

Genesis 3:1-24

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It's a weird thing to say about one of the most tragic moments in scripture, but I really love Genesis 3. We'd be hard-pressed to find a more concise vignette that so fully captures human nature and the struggle of the human experience. But I also appreciate Genesis 3 because it's scripture's first "elephant in the room." Okay, well ... maybe that expression works better for the story of Noah and the flood. But what I mean to say is that the story of sin's entry into the world includes a detail that baffles just about any conscientious reader, and at the same time it seems to be a detail many feel hesitant to address. The story begins:

Now the serpent was more crafty 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 with a perfectly straight face, the storyteller marshals on through the story. Meanwhile, most of us remain stuck in that first verse, wearing looks of furrowed brows and open mouths. I remember one such occasion in a good-sized Sunday School class at a Baptist church. A young man – he was a highly skilled engineer – blurted into the middle of the discussion: “Is anyone going to say anything about the talking snake?”

There are two common impulses in response to this question. For this passage in particular, we tend to directly equate the serpent with Satan – which seems to disarm the quandary of a talking animal – and then quickly move on, as though the matter were settled. There’s also the temptation to be dismissive of this sort of question – however honest it might be – as if asking it somehow detracts from the higher order of meaning in which Genesis 3 operates.

But part of the snag here is also that the passage itself ignores what is, from our perspective, a perfectly legitimate question. You don’t need to be an engineer to be incredulous over the fact that nobody seems to break character over the appearance of an articulate snake. Can’t we at least witness the woman give a yelp when she hears the serpent strike up a conversation? It’s just one simple example of a difficult challenge when studying the Bible: We can have questions – honest questions – that the text simply does not address.

On one hand, we can acknowledge that the biblical storyteller determines the focus of the story. What the biblical authors tell us, and how they tell it to us, is what the story is about. Genesis 3 is just 24 verses and can’t say **everything** about sin’s entry into the world – and in this way scripture is necessarily selective. Our storyteller focuses on portraying trust in God’s provision as the lifeblood of the divine-human relationship, and the withering death that floods into the world once that trust is forsaken – but we are denied what for all the world seems like an obviously necessary explanation.

At the same time, brushing past the questions we bring to the text in earnest often amounts to a missed opportunity. Dismissed questions don’t really stop bothering us, and we have a way of getting stuck on them, preventing us from progressing with the text and experiencing the fullness it has to offer. Thoughtfully considered, such questions can also lead to much broader conversations about the roles context and genre play in the interpretation of scripture, or even what it means for revelation to work through written word in the first place.

So, let’s consider for a moment the serpent, its identification with Satan, and the interpretive principles at play. In the corresponding lesson for this week, we noted that the connection between the serpent and Satan is not made in Genesis 3 or elsewhere in

the Old Testament. So what connection to Satan do we actually find in the Old Testament?

Our proper name “Satan” does indeed originate from a Hebrew word, *satan*, which, in a generic sense, means “adversary.” The term is used to describe the function of “opposing or accusing another as an adversary.” The verb form occurs just six times in the Old Testament, while the noun appears 27 times. In every case but one, it’s accompanied by the definite article – “the adversary.” This use of the definite article is our first indication that *satan* refers not to the proper name of a particular being, but to a role one plays. This adversarial role is played by both human and supernatural beings, and these adversaries can represent personal, political, military, judicial or even divine opposition. Philistine commanders, for example, apply the term to David in 1 Samuel 29. David himself will use it to describe Abishai as a legal accuser in 2 Samuel 19. On a few occasions, the psalmist will portray enemies as *satans*. Even the angel of the Lord plays the role of *satan* against Balaam and his donkey (another talking animal) in Numbers 22. The accuser role is also applied to supernatural beings in the first two chapters of Job, and Zechariah 3. But there’s nothing to indicate that the references in Numbers, Job and Zechariah are meant to refer to the same supernatural being.

The use of *satan* in the first verse of 1 Chronicles 21 is unique, however, because it appears without the use of a definite article, and it seems to constitute our first and only inkling of a proper name: “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” Without wading into the quagmire of dating biblical books, it’s not surprising to find the Chronicler using *satan* as a proper noun, since he composed his history of Israel much later – long after the books of Samuel and Kings were written.

The sum of all this is that *satan* in the Old Testament normally referred to a function that characters fulfilled. The evolution of the term into a proper name, well, most of that comes after the Old Testament. The personification of Satan will continue to evolve in Jewish literature during the centuries between the testaments, and it’s not until the first-century work, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, that we find our first association between Satan and the serpent. This precursor provides some context for New Testament passages like Revelation 12:9, which refers to the “ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.” It’s not exactly a reservoir of detail, but the connection is unmistakably there.

But having finally found a biblical connection between Satan and the serpent, we are left with a very, very long walk back to Genesis 3. And even then, we arrive to find we have actually solved very little. There’s still nothing in Genesis to indicate that the storyteller’s portrayal of the serpent is inspired by Satan – and there are more than a few historical and literary obstacles getting in the way. Even if we can somehow force

the connection, it narrowly rises above equivocation. There's nothing to hint that any other character sees the serpent, a creature the Lord God had made, as concealing or otherwise harboring some other identity. My engineering friend is still incredulous. And there's still an elephant in the room.

And that's what makes it so utterly mind bending to find highly skilled and experienced biblical interpreters saying things like, "It's perfectly clear that Satan is at work here" in Genesis 3. How can they say a thing like that? What's going on here?

The interpretive principle at work here is called "progressive revelation." To illustrate the concept, imagine that you and your pastor are standing by the side of the road, looking at a billboard a mile away. The pastor says, "Look at the sign. Write down what you see." Then, you walk a half mile closer to the billboard, and again the pastor says, "Look at the sign. Write down what you see." And standing directly beneath the billboard, you are instructed a final time to record your observations. By comparison, all three descriptions would be different according to the circumstances in which they were written. At the same time, all three would tell the truth about the billboard.

Progressive revelation is something like that. If we plot the biblical storytellers on a trajectory from creation to the person of Jesus, they reveal with increasing resolution the character of God. All of them tell the truth about the character of God, but they necessarily do so according to the circumstances in which they write. When you hear expressions like "using scripture to interpret scripture" or when a preacher navigates a difficult passage by looking at related scriptures throughout the Bible – the idea of progressive revelation is at work there as well.

So even if we approach Genesis 3 as a figurative narrative; even if we make sense of the serpent in symbolic terms; even if there's no chance that the Genesis storyteller intended anything like our association with the New Testament's Satan; we can still see the serpent's malevolence and deception and recognize the signature work of the father of lies. So, while tradition has perhaps oversimplified the connection a bit, it's not altogether wrongheaded to consider the man and woman in the garden as Satan's first victims. Making that connection requires not only digging a little deeper here in Genesis 3, but also exploring how the whole biblical metanarrative works together toward a common revelation.