THE FALL AND THE SPREAD OF SIN
Genesis 3-11

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[*You are encouraged to read the biblical text before you read this commentary.*]

CHAPTER 3: The Fall

"Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord had made. The serpent asked the woman, 'Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?'" (v.1)

In this article, we will look at how Adam and Eve allowed themselves to be tricked by Satan into disobeying God and how their original sin led to more and more sin.

Genesis 2 gives us a picture of Adam and Eve at peace with God, with each other, with their environment, and with themselves. In Genesis 3, "all hell breaks loose" and the picture of peace and harmony is replaced with one of conflict and alienation.

We do not need to believe that Genesis is a historical account of *how* sin entered the world. The *Catechism* (309) states: *"The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man."*

The chapter opens with the introduction of the serpent, the "most cunning" or shrewdest of all the creatures that God has made. Adam and Eve will soon find out just how cunning this evil being is. The author of Genesis chose a serpent to symbolize Satan because the people of ancient times attributed extraordinary wisdom to that beast, and because the serpent was a symbol of the coarse fertility rites which were the curse of the pagan world at that time.

The temptation and the sin. This story is considered a masterpiece of psychological insight into the nature of temptation. Commenting on the temptation, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: "The temptation scene has all the characteristics of a universal picture of temptation. This is the way every human being is tempted. The serpent, with an opening question, insinuates that God has some ulterior motive for the command, that God is keeping something from humanity. The woman jumps to God's defense, but the serpent has succeeded in attracting her attention and proceeds with three half-truths: (1) "you will not die"; (2) "your eyes will be opened"; (3) "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (vv 4-5). It is true that when the man and the woman eat, they do not die, yet they become subject to death and will eventually die. It is true that their eyes are opened, but not in the way they anticipated. They are now aware, as they were not before, of a whole new area of human experience—the experience of guilt and shame. They know that they are naked. And finally, they become like God, knowing good and evil, but not in the way they had expected." (p.43)

The core of the sin of the man and the woman was the decision to choose self over God, to satisfy their own desires over obeying God's command.

Consequences. Poor decisions can bring devastating results into our lives. In this story, we note the following five consequences:

- *Loss of inner peace and harmony.* After they have eaten the forbidden fruit, their eyes are opened and they *"realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loin clothes for themselves"* (v.7). What was good (their nakedness and vulnerability) is now experienced as bad.

- *Loss of harmony in their relationship with God.* Verse 8 states: *"When they heard the sound of the Lord moving about in the Garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord among the trees of the Garden."* While sin can never cause God to stop loving us, it does disrupt *our* relationship with him.

- *Loss of harmony between the man and the woman.* When God finds the couple and questions them, the "blame game" begins. The man blames Eve and even tries to blame God: *"The woman whom you put here with me gave me the fruit from the tree…"* (v.12). When the woman is questioned, she answers: *"The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it"* (v.13). So neither of them is willing to take responsibility for their wrongdoing. The woman was given to the man to be his helper and friend. In this situation, she contributes to his downfall which in no way is intended to diminish the man's

responsibility. He has freely chosen to participate in the act of disobedience.

- *The man and the woman are negatively impacted in their respective roles as "tillers of the earth" and "bearer of children"* (vv 16-19). Henceforth, the man will only rule the earth with the "sweat of his brow." The woman will suffer when she gives birth.

- *The earth is wounded*. The Lord said to Adam: *"Cursed be the ground because of you….thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you"* (v.17). In his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to the wound caused to creation by the sin of Adam and Eve: *"We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now…"* (8:22).

The serpent is also punished for his role in seducing the woman. *"On your belly you shall crawl and dirt you shall eat all the days of your life"* (v.14).

Expulsion from the Garden of Eden **(vv 22-24)**. For their sin, the man and the woman are expelled from the Garden of Eden. The disobedience of our first parents set loose in the world a whole new ugly force: Satan, sin, and death often preceded by sickness. Satan's kingdom has now been established on earth.

First glimmer of hope **(Gn 3:15).** Genesis 3 does not end in total darkness. In Gn 3:15, God speaks to the serpent and says: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel"* (v.15). This verse indicates that there is going to be a big battle between the offspring of the serpent and the woman. But ultimately the offspring of the woman will be victorious. The Early Church Fathers saw in this verse a reference to Mary and her offspring, Jesus, who would come to defeat Satan and the powers of darkness (see CCC 411).

Another positive note in Genesis 3 is found in verses 20-21. The woman receives her name "Eve" which means "all the living" for she will become the mother of all the living. In spite of sin and its consequences, life will go on. Also in verse 21, we have God making clothes for the man and his wife before they are sent away—a gesture intended to communicate that God will continue to love humanity despite its rebellion against him.

In Catholic tradition, the sin of Adam and Eve is called *original sin*, a sin that occurred at the beginning of the history of humanity. The phrase "original sin" was coined by St. Augustine in the fifth century—a reality which Paul speaks about in Rom 5:12-21. *By one man's disobedience many (that is all) were made sinners* (v.12). The doctrine of original sin teaches that each of us is born with an inclination towards sin, that our natural powers for relating to God and choosing good have been weakened, and our emotions and passions disordered. We live with a certain resistance to the promptings of the Holy Spirit (CCC 309).

Pause: Most problems in families, workplaces and politics are caused by sinful behaviors such as stubbornness, gossip, pride, greed, the need to be always right, refusal to accept responsibility for wrongdoing. Most relationship problems could be resolved with a good confession and a good dose of repentance. Comment.

The next eight chapters of Genesis focus on the spread of sin in God's creation. The author seeks to impress upon the reader that the forces of Satan have entered the world, leading humanity to rebel against God.

CHAPTER 4:1-16: Cain and Abel

"Sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master." (v.7)

While this story opens with Adam and Eve giving birth to two sons (which may cause us to wonder where they eventually found wives), the narrative presupposes a developed civilization, noting the mention of cultic sacrifices, shepherds, farmers and people who may attempt to kill Cain. Remember the concern of the Genesis author/editor was not how the world was created or how Cain & Abel found wives.

In Genesis 3, we saw how the man and woman revolted against God. In this chapter, we see brother literally killing brother, and the drum roll of sin continues. The story also highlights the age-old conflict between nomadic shepherds (Abel) and settled farmers (Cain), as well as sibling rivalry.

In verses 3-4, the brothers bring offerings to the Lord. The Lord looks with favor on Abel, with no reason given. Some commentators suggest that Cain offered his sacrifice without faith, meaning without any sense of personal relationship with God (Heb 11:4, Jude vv 10-11). Others suggest God is playing favorites and we must accept it. In Exodus 33:19, God says to Moses: *"I will show favors to those whom I will."*

God's blessing is not something that can be earned or even understood, but we do have a responsibility for how we respond when we may feel others are more favored than us. When God favors Abel's sacrifice, Cain deeply resents it and is crestfallen (v.5). Then God visits with Cain and tells him he has a choice. Even though "sin is knocking at his door" trying to bring him down, he can choose to act as God would want him to act: "Cain, you can master it" (v.7), or he can follow his selfish designs. God is calling Cain to be strong and responsible. Like his parents, Cain is faced with a choice to obey God or not, to fight the temptation, to give into a deep-seated resentment or not.

Sadly, Cain chooses not to listen to the Lord. Instead he invites Abel out for a walk in the field and while there, he kills him. It is an act of premeditated murder and an example of the kind of behavior deep resentment can lead to.

The remainder of the narrative (vv 9-16) is akin to a "lawsuit" in which God tries Cain for his life. The narrative has close parallels to the "indictment" of Adam and Eve in Gn 3:8-19. There is an *investigation* (vv 9-10), *a sentence* (vv 11-12) and, finally, *banishment* (v.16). In the exchange, Cain refuses to take any responsibility for his behavior. Sarcastically, he asks: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v.10). Cain is banished, sent off to be a "restless wanderer of the earth" (v.12). In verses 13-14, Cain begs for mercy. The killer fears that he will be killed. In verse 15, God responds*: "Not so, if anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged seven-fold. So the Lord put a mark on Cain lest anyone should kill him on sight"* (v.14). The mark serves a twofold function. On the one hand, it announces Cain's guilt. On the other hand, it assures his protection by God.

Pause: As we look at people's lives, it seems some people are more blessed than others. Do you think God plays favorites? If so, how does that make you feel? What cure do you recommend for sibling rivalry?

***Genealogy of Cain* (4:17-32).** Cain's genealogy, like others in Genesis, is used to tie stories together which originally had no connection. The genealogy of Cain shows that the exiled murderer is blessed with the gift of life and family. Verses 23-24, a primitive song by Lamech, tells of vengeance and the spread of sin.

***Genealogy of Adam* (5:1-32).** This genealogy, linking the first man with the flood, is continued in chapters 10-11, which in turn provide the link between the flood and Abraham. In the genealogies, we notice a general pattern of ages decreasing as time goes on. This is another way of explaining the increase of sin. Life decreasing is a sign of sin increasing. Needless to say, we do not need to believe that people lived for hundreds of years in ancient times. Longevity was a simple way to speak of blessing for those who lived a good life.

***Marriage of the sons of God and the daughters of men* (6:1-4).** These strange verses are intended to show the growing estrangement between God and his creation. In the story, the proper boundaries between the divine and the human are violated. We are not sure about the identity of the "sons of God." Some believe they were fallen angels. But angels do not have bodies. The offspring from the marriage were some sort of giants called Nephilim (v.4).

CHAPTERS 6:5-9:29: The Great Flood

"When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth and his heart was grieved. So the Lord said: 'I will wipe out from the earth the men whom I have created, and not only the men, but also the beasts and the creeping things and the birds of the air, for I am sorry that I made them.' But Noah found favor with the Lord." (6:6-8)

Three introductory notes:

- In the flood story, the Yahwist and Priestly traditions are intertwined, which explains why some parts of the story are told twice, e.g., God decides to destroy humanity (6:7/6:13). The mixture of two traditions also explains small contradictions, e.g., the number of animals taken into the ark (6:19-20, 7:2, 7:15-16).

- Despite the interlacing of two *tradition*s, there is only one message. The world has become so immersed in sin that God has had to start all over again with Noah as the new father of the human race.

- Many commentaries on Genesis compare the biblical flood story to other great flood stories, pointing out similarities and differences. (If interested in exploring this comparison, see *Reading the Old Testament – An Introduction,* pp 126-128.) The flood story is so widespread in ancient literature that it presumes an historical event, an

exceptionally devastating deluge in the Mesopotamian world where civilization begun.

A God filled with grief. Commenting on 6:6, Walter Brueggemann writes: "Verse six shows the deep pathos of God. God is not angered but grieved. He is not enraged but saddened… The evil heart of humankind (v.5) troubles the heart of God."

***Preparations for the Flood* (6:14-7:5).** These verses focus on the instructions for the building of the ark. They also tell us who and what are to be admitted into the ark. God saves some animals because he loves all of his creation. The number seven is mentioned a few times (e.g., Noah is instructed to take with him seven pairs of clean animals, seven pairs of birds, etc.) Seven is a symbolic number in the Bible, often signifying perfection or wholeness. Even though Noah's neighbors may laugh at him as he goes to work each day on his ark, he never strays from his goal. *"Noah carried out all the commands that God gave him"* (6:22). When the preparation work is completed and Noah and his family and animals are all in the Ark, *"the Lord himself shut the door"* (7:16).

***The Flood* (7:10–8:6).** *"…On that day all the fountains of the great abyss burst forth, and the floodgates of the sky were opened. For forty days and forty nights heavy rain poured down on the earth"* (7:11-12). The waters above and the waters below meet. In other words, the world returns to the watery chaos that existed before creation (1:2). Only Noah, his family, and the animals survive (7:23).

***Receding of the waters, Noah's sacrifice and God's promise* (8:6-22).** In 8:6-12, a raven and three doves are sent out of the ark to see what was happening. After the third dove fails to return, Noah knows the flood has ended. In 8:15, God tells Noah to leave the ark.

In 8:20, Noah celebrates the new creation by building an altar and offering sacrifice to God—a fitting response to the blessings he has received.

In 8:21, we have a very human image of God smelling the sweet odor of the sacrifice, a poetic way of saying God was pleased with the sacrifice. The sweet smell prompts the God of compassion to make a covenant never to destroy the earth again because of human sin. In the flood, we see at work a *God of justice*, a God who punishes sin, and yet a *God full of mercy* for his creation. In 8:22, God promises the future of the earth by guaranteeing the perpetual reoccurence of the agricultural seasons essential for growth and fertility.

***Covenant with Noah and all creation* (9:1-17).** Chapter 9 opens with God blessing Noah and his sons, and telling them to *"be fertile and multiply and fill the earth,"* just as he told Adam and Eve (1:28). The command to multiply is part of the blessing and opportunity for man to recover from the devastation of the flood.

In this fresh beginning, God sanctifies human life by declaring unlawful all shedding of innocent blood (vv 5-6). Furthermore, in an apparent gesture of compassion, God permits humans to eat animals in addition to plants (contrast to Gn 1:29 & 9:3).

In 9:8-11, God makes a covenant with Noah, his descendants, and with all creation, vowing: *"Never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to destroy the earth"* (v.11). This new covenant established by God guarantees the future of humankind.

***The rainbow—sign of the covenant* (9:12-17).** God said: *"I will set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between you and me…. This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all mortal creatures that are on the earth"* (vv 14 and 17). Covenants are sealed with a "sign." Just as circumcision will be a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, the rainbow is a sign of the covenant with Noah, his descendants and all creation. Scripture scholar Diane Bergant writes: "If the waters of the flood symbolize the return of chaos, the bow in the sky represents victory over those forces. The flood story is much more than an account of a natural disaster; it signifies the battle between cosmic forces of evil and the corresponding forces of good."

***Noah and his sons* (9:10-29).** This primitive story, explaining the origin of the vine and its product (wine), was later taken over to explain an historical situation in Palestine: the domination of the Canaanites (descendants of Noah's son, Ham) by the immigrating Semites (descendants of Shem) who were accompanied by other people from Asia Minor (descendants of Japheth).

Pause: What strikes you most about the flood story? Some interpret big disasters as God's punishment of certain people. What are your thoughts on this?

***Table of Nations* (10:1-32).** The nations of the world are divided among the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. These generally reflect the three major groupings of people in Hebrew world geography. The reason the table of nations is included is to show how God's restored blessing after the flood led to even more fertility and success than was the case before the flood.

CHAPTER 11: The Tower of Babel

"Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered all over the earth." (vv 4-5).

As we come to this story, the whole world spoke the same language, using the same words. While men are migrating in the East, they come upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settle there. They say to one another, *"Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire."* They use bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they say, *"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered all over the world"* (11:1-14).

This event takes place in Babylonia (Shinar) where nomads wandering in the East find a place and establish a settled way of life. Urged by ambition to achieve political security and fearing social separation and diversity, they decide to build a city and tower.

We may wonder why God is so upset with this plan. In verse four of the story, the people say*: "Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky and so make a name for ourselves…"* Biblical scholars interpret this plan as an act of pride, as an attempt to be great *independently* of God. The people think that they can reach heaven without consulting God or following his ways. In addition, their refusal to be scattered all over the universe is interpreted as contrary to the plan of God who wishes diversity for his creation. In verse 5-8, God comes down and blocks their plans to avoid social diversity and to achieve a name for themselves independently of him. In the context of Genesis chapters 4-11, the Babel story is another sin story, an example of how the people continued to sin even after the flood.

Finally, this story is also seen as one of the many *etiological* stories in Genesis, told to explain the origin of something—in this case, the origin of many languages.

Pause: The story of the Tower of Babel is a metaphor for the breakdown in communication between individuals, groups, and political parties. What causes the babel and what might heal it?

***Abraham's genealogy* (11:10-32).** The purpose of this genealogy is to link Abraham with Noah. Abraham is a descendant of Shem (v.10), one of Noah's sons.

Conclusion. This brings us to the end of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It begins with the wonderful story of the creation of the world and tells how all is good and beautiful in the beginning. This happiness is God's plan for humanity. But when men and women decide to use their gift of free will to disobey God, the world becomes a very different place. By the end of chapter 11, it is clear that the human race is in need of salvation and that it cannot save itself. This salvation story begins with the call of Abraham who, with his wife Sara, will become the parents of the Chosen People.