

THE CURSE ON THE SERPENT (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 3:14-15

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not what it appeared to be. Instead of being the door into Paradise, it actually became the door leading out of Paradise, and into misery. The serpent led Eve, with Adam passively following, to believe that there would be no negative repercussions for their one little act of defiance. Of course Satan didn't refer to it as defiance, but as enlightenment. But the serpent, Adam and Eve were all in for a rude awakening. They had not anticipated the curse that was about to fall on their heads. They never dreamed that a judicial penalty would be rendered against them for violating the terms of the covenant.

In Genesis 3:9-19, we find this chiasmic structure: man-woman-*serpent*-woman-man. Chiasm is a literary device that stresses the center portion. This puts the emphasis on the curse on the serpent. Chiasm says, "This is crucial; don't overlook it." And as we will see, there's a reason why Martin Luther said, "This text (vs. 15 especially) embraces and comprehends within itself everything noble and glorious that is to be found anywhere in the Scripture."

God interrogated Adam, and then He interrogated Eve, but no question is directed to the serpent. This is because the serpent is not offered an opportunity to repent. He is simply cursed and condemned without hope or the possibility of redemption.

The curse that fell upon the serpent can be divided into two parts. First, the animal is cursed. "The LORD said to the serpent, 'Be-cause you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life'" (vs. 14). The animal Satan used is cursed, although it's not held morally responsible for its actions. In other words, this animal will not stand before its Creator at the final judgment. This animal was merely a passive instrument manipulated by the evil one; nevertheless God still curses it for its involvement. I believe the lesson here is that "the devil made me do it" is never an acceptable excuse, even for amoral animals, much less morally responsible human beings.

I can still remember a well-known televangelist, who indulged in gross immorality, trying to explain away his behavior, because he was temporarily under the control of the devil. That doesn't fly. "Satan entered into Judas" (Lk. 22:3), and then he betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver. This didn't mean he wasn't liable for his actions (Lk. 22:22). Consider also Peter. After Jesus told him about how he would go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised, Peter pulls Him aside and rebukes Him. "But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" (Matt. 16:23). We're not told that Satan "entered" Peter, but it is clear that Peter is being used by Satan, and it is no excuse for his behavior.

Due to the serpent's role in the fall, this animal is cursed. God says, "on your belly you shall go." As we said earlier, Isaiah 14:29 refers to a "*flying* fiery serpent." Whether this animal was a snake or a dragon, it will no longer soar through the air, now it will slither on the ground, along with other detestable creatures. The LORD told the Israelites, "Whatsoever crawls on its belly...you shall not eat, for they are detestable" (Lev. 11:42).

As if crawling on his belly wasn't bad enough, God also says, "and dust you shall eat all the days of your life." "Eating dust" ever since has been a symbol of defeat and subjection. In relation to the restoration of Israel, God says in Isaiah 49:23, "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."

Likewise, in Micah 7:15-17, we read, "As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show them marvelous things. The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds; they shall turn in dread to the LORD our God, and they shall be in fear of you." And, speaking of the coming Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, Psalm 72:8-9 says, "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May desert tribes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust!" Again, eating or licking dust is a symbol of defeat and shame, and this is the curse brought on the serpent.

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The second part of the curse fell on the devil himself, who was behind the animal. God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). We know that Satan was behind the serpent, because of Revelation 12:9, which says, “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan.” It’s common for Satan to be addressed through animals or people. For instance, Ezekiel raises a lamentation over the king of Tyre, but it’s clear that Satan is in view in this lamentation: “You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God... You were an anointed guardian cherub” (Eze. 28:12-13, 14; see also Isa. 14:12-15). We could break down this curse into three parts.

First, we have the introduction of enmity. God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring” (Gen. 3:15a). Now there already was enmity in the world, but the enmity was between man and God. Adam and Eve were at odds with God; Satan had recently become their new ally.

When Satan fell he took a third of the angels with him (Rev. 12:4). Now he has captured man, and all of his offspring will belong to him as well. So he thought...until God in His sovereignty steps in and puts enmity between Satan and Eve. Satan, I’m sure, had not anticipated this. God didn’t step in when the angels sided with him, so why is He intruding this time? Because He will redeem mankind, something He doesn’t do for angels.

God says to the devil, “You are not going to have the woman.” So he curses him and makes the woman his enemy. John MacArthur notes, “You have here the first indication of an altered nature...So if there is going to be enmity between the woman and the serpent, the woman and Satan, it is going to come as a result of the change of their hearts... [God] is going to provide the forgiveness necessary and the transformation that changes them from lovers of Satan, as it were, and enemies of God, to lovers of God and haters of Satan.”

MacArthur goes on to say that here we have the “great doctrine of regeneration, new birth, transformation, conversion; doctrines of forgiveness, expressions of grace, the wonderful truth of election is even found here in this statement. Amazingly, the gospel, with all of its saving purposes, finds its entrance into the Bible in a curse on Satan. The gospel is first given not in a promise to man, but in a judgment on Satan” (<http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/90-242.htm>). This is why Genesis 3:15 is called the Proto-Gospel, the first gospel.

The second part of the curse on Satan is the perpetual enmity between the offspring of Satan and the offspring of Eve. No, Satan doesn’t procreate. His offspring are humans who follow him instead of God; Eve’s offspring are those who follow God and not Satan. This enmity between the offspring of each will be seen in the very next chapter, where Cain hates Abel and kills him. 1 John 3:12 provides us with a commentary on Genesis 4: “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.” So God places enmity between Eve and Satan, as well as between her offspring and his offspring. And this enmity continues down to our day, and it will continue until Christ subdues all His enemies.

Finally, and paradoxically, in this curse we have the promise of Satan’s ultimate demise. “[H]e shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15b). God doesn’t say, “I shall bruise your head.” Nor does He say, “*We* shall bruise your head.” He says, “*He* shall bruise your head.” “He” is one of the Eve’s offspring; one of her descendants. Martin Luther pointed out “that God never told the devil who ‘He’ would be. And so, the devil had lived in dread of every woman’s son who was a believer, especially those in the covenant line, because he never knew who ‘He’ would be” (Ibid). Obviously, we know, and now Satan does too, that “He” is Jesus Christ, who bruised Satan’s head at the cross, while Jesus only suffered a bruise on the heel. And we should note that “He was bruised for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5, KJV). As the hymn says, “Twas I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree; I crucified the Christ of God; I joined the mockery.” Satan was involved in the death of Christ, and we were involved, but so was God. “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him” (vs. 10, KJV). Putting this all together: Satan unwittingly fulfilled God’s plan to crucify Christ for our salvation, and his own defeat.

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