

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 11

Genesis 3 – The Fall

Genesis 3

1. Its Place in History

1. is: "Its place in history." Genesis 3 is a key chapter; certainly in the Bible and certainly in all human history. It's the tragic turning point in history because with the fall into sin, sin enters into the created world and distorts all of creation. I think the thing that we often forget but we need to remember is that sin is unnatural and it's abnormal. We are so accustomed to it. We don't know any other reality than reality that's been affected by sin. But from Genesis 3 we learn that sin does not belong in the world natively. So then I think that Genesis 3 gives us the answer to the mystery of this strange combination of a wonderful, beautiful universe, in so many ways. And yet, at the same time, there is so much sin, misery, suffering and death that resides in it. Why is that? Genesis 3 explains why. Man has become estranged from God, from himself, and from other people and from nature because of sin. It's the fall which has produced all these results.

2. The Details of the Fall

a. The Nature of the Test

2. is: "The details of the fall." You notice on your outline there are six sub-points there: a. to f. a. is: "The nature of the test." It was basically a simple test: will man obey God or not? In other words, will man follow God or his own inclination? God has said, "That tree you shall not eat from and the day that you eat you will die." That was Genesis 2:17. Would man follow that command or his own inclination? It seems to me that's the issue. The taking of the fruit is then in itself incidental in a sense. It is important only because it demonstrates man's choice to follow his own inclination and to disobey God.

Now that goes along with what we discussed earlier in connection with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this volume, *Our Reasonable Faith*, which is on your bibliography, third of the way down, page nine. Herman Bavinck 1956 page 218. This is a partial translation of one of the volumes of Bavinck's four volume *Reformed*

Dogmatics. It's not the whole volume but it's a partial translation of one of those volumes, entitled *Our Reasonable Faith*. On page 218 he says, "This proscriptive command is usually given the name of a probationary command. Hence, too, it has, in a certain sense, an arbitrary content. Adam and Eve could find no reason why, just now, the eating of this one particular tree was forbidden. In other words, they had to keep the command not because they fathomed it in its reasonable content and understood it, but solely because God had said it. On the basis of his authority, prompted by sheer obedience, out of a pure regard to their duty. That is why, further, the tree whose fruit they might eat was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the tree which would demonstrate whether man should arbitrarily and self-sufficiently want to determine what was good and what's evil. Or whether he would, in this matter, permit himself to be holy, led by the command which God had given concerning it and keep to that." I think he's correct in that sense. That they were to obey simply because God said it. When they broke that they showed that they were setting themselves up as their own authority rather than submitting to God's authority. So that was the nature of the test.

b. The Serpent

b. is: "The serpent." We must remember that in the fall it's not just Adam and Eve that are involved, there's also a third party, you might say, there's the serpent. John Murray in some class lecture notes that are unpublished, terms the serpent "the instrument of the temptation." And you read in Genesis 3:1 right to start off, "Now the serpent's more subtle than any beast in the field which Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, 'Yea has God said.'" Genesis 3:1 has caused a lot of discussion. You have a talking serpent, and it's often made fun of. Is this allegorical, or is it actual historic fact? Was there really a serpent that spoke? I read to you earlier about the Garden of Eden from this book by John Gibson, The Daily Study Bible series on Genesis. I think there's an entry here on page 9 on page 121, he discusses the serpent as much as he did with the Garden of Eden, which, as you recall, he took simply as parabolic. He does the same thing with the serpent. He says, "Where in all this does the serpent fit in? All we're

told about him, before he begins to speak, is that he is more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. This is, of course, fantasy.”

“But it is not as we have surely learned by this time to be denigrated because of that. Animals only speak in fables but fables contain much wisdom. They are usually comments on the quirks and foibles of human nature. Foxes and wolves and lions and hens, which inhabit them represent character types or traits that we can easily recognize in ourselves and other people, cunning, rashness, boastfulness, gullibility and so on. Here is a typical Jewish one, from the medieval period entitled ‘On the advantage of being a scholar.’ I’ve chosen it not because it is a funny like many other fables, but because it is perhaps not all that far away in what it says from some of what this commentary’s been saying.”

Here’s the story which is kind of humorous admittedly. “A fox looked up into a tree and saw a crow sitting on the topmost branch. The crow looked mighty good to him for he was hungry. He tried every way to get him down, but the wise old crow only leered contemptuously down at him. ‘Foolish crow!’ the fox said, banteringly. ‘Believe me, you have no reason to be afraid of me. Don’t you know that the birds and the beasts will never have to fight again? Haven’t you heard the Messiah is coming? If you were a Talmud scholar like me, you’d surely know that the Prophet Isaiah has said that when the messiah comes, ‘the lion shall lie down with the lamb and the fox with the crow, and there shall be peace forevermore.’ And as he stood there speaking sweetly, the baying of hounds was heard. The fox began to tremble with fright. ‘Foolish fox!’ croaked the crow pleasantly from the tree. ‘You have no reason to be afraid, since you’re a Talmud scholar and know what the Prophet Isaiah has said.’ ‘True, I know what the Prophet Isaiah said,’ cried the fox as he slunk off into the bushes, ‘but the trouble is the dogs don’t.’”

We smile and nod when we hear such a fable, but, he says and here’s where he gets back to Genesis 3, “why shouldn’t the Hebrews of biblical times have had their fables too, and smiled and nodded when the serpent came on the scene in this story? It’s not that this story is a mere fable but it is at this juncture making use of the technique of a fable. It is not unlike Aesop’s fables. So how do we take Genesis 3, is this a historical

fact? I think in the rest of Scripture again you compare Scripture with Scripture you read 2 Cor. 11:3. “I fear lest by any means as the serpent beguiled Eve through his craftiness, so your mind should be corrupted from the simplest views in Christ.” It seems quite clear that Paul appeals to this as something that actually happened. 1 Timothy 2 is another passage. 1 Timothy 2:13, where “Adam was first born then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing as they continue in faith and God’s holiness.” Now it doesn’t mention the serpent but does speak of Eve’s being deceived by the serpent. It’s an allusion back to Genesis 3.

Now, the question also can be asked: was this only a serpent? And I think we can legitimately conclude there’s more than just the snake involved here. John Murray and those notes that I referred to earlier says that he was displaying an intelligence at least comparable to men and probably superior to men. Therefore we are justified in concluding that there was present here an intelligence comparable to or even higher than man. Again, the rest of Scripture seems to make it clear that there is more than simply a snake that’s involved. In John 8:44 it’s not the snake but Satan who is said to be the father of lies. In Romans 16:20 you get an allusion back to Genesis 3:15. You read Romans 16:20, “The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.” Go back to Genesis 3:15 where the curse comes on the serpent and on Satan. You read, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.” And the “he” there is identified and it’s speaking of Satan in Romans 16:20. In Revelation 20:2 you read, “and he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent who is the devil and Satan and bound him a thousand years.” So again I think the rest of Scripture suggests that here was a serpent who was speaking but there was a higher power involved who utilized the serpent to speak through him.

I think here is the same sort of situation as you have in Numbers where God used Balaam’s ass to speak his message. And so talking animals admittedly are not something that probably any of us have ever encountered. I think in Genesis 3 and in the book of Numbers you have illustrations of where God used Balaam’s ass, and Satan used the

serpent.

Well, I'd say that the next phrase, maybe was Satan in the form of the serpent, I wouldn't argue with that, but it says the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field. It seems to categorize the serpent with the other animals as beasts of the field.

What is Satan?--a spiritual being, presumably a fallen angel. It seems that angels at times could take on human-like forms, possibly Satan could do something like that too, being a spiritual being. If he did take on the form of a snake, it does seem that you are talking about a snake because you go down to verse 14, "Because you have done this you are cursed above all cattle, above every beast of the field, on your belly you shall go". It really seems like you are talking about the animal. I think "eat dust" may well be figurative, snakes don't do that, but it seems to me it is figurative of this lovely characteristic of snakes to crawl around in the dirt, eat dust in that sense. It does seem though, to compare him with the other animals, so I'm inclined to think there was an animal there who was used by Satan.

I would think in a pre-fall situation, I don't know you can draw much conclusion from that by looking at serpents today because obviously the serpent was modified, apparently even in form by the curse. "You are cursed above all cattle, on your belly you shall go." What's that mean? I don't know if there was some sort of physical change made and perhaps even beyond that another characteristic for the animal. Apparently the serpent was something that stood out among the other animals, so that maybe even Adam wasn't all that surprised when it came and spoke to him. It was more subtle than any beast of the field. The term "subtle" is the Hebrew word *'arum* it's used in both a favorable and unfavorable sense if you look it up elsewhere. In other words, it can be used in the sense of prudent, wise, shrewd or it can be used in the negative sense of crafty. There is some debate on which is to be preferred here. Some will suggest when it says the serpent is "more subtle than any beast of the field," the idea is that it was a very intelligent creature in a positive sense. It is used for example in Proverbs 12:16 "A fool's wrath is presently known, but a prudent man covers shame." A "prudent man," it's the same word as "subtle" there in Genesis 3:1.

Alright, we've got to stop here. That was John Murray's statement concluding that there was more than simply an animal here, and Satan was involved in speaking through the animal because the intelligence is represented. It's not just an animal, there's more than an animal. Just one final comment: I think probably in spite of this use of the word where in the sense of prudent we are talking about that we are probably still better to take the crafty sort of idea because in 2 Corinthians 11:3 it seems quite clear that's the way Paul took it. But in any case, this animal seems to have been an animal that was characterized in some way that it stood out among the other animals. Ok we'll stop at this point and we have our exam tomorrow. We'll pick up here on Tuesday next week.

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