

SESSION 30: JUDGMENT, PART FOUR

Genesis 3:17-19

June 9, 2024

Patterns in Scripture can often be fascinating. In the judgment passage in Chapter Three, Yahweh God inflicts a direct curse (*arur*) upon the serpent—“Cursed are you...”

Read Genesis 3:14-15.

He does not use that word when addressing the woman. Oh, to be sure, He does curse her, but God does not invoke that specific word.

Read Genesis 3:16.

As for the man, Yahweh does not curse him specifically, but curses the *ground* instead—“Cursed is the ground because of you...”

Read Genesis 3:17-19. 📖

One more comparison: For the woman Yahweh God curses her domestic, family life, while for the man he curses his work environment; in a broad sense, of course, we could say that God curses both their respective work environments. Eve will give birth and take care of the children and home, so God curses the components of that work. Adam will work the land to provide for his family, so God curses the land to make Adam’s work more arduous. And central to all of the above is the relationship between the two; that will be cursed as well (v16b).

Finally, there is one important similarity between the curses for the man and the woman: they will both be inflicted with the same kind of “pain.” In v16 Yahweh said, “I will greatly multiply your pain and conception...” and in v17, to the man Yahweh said, “In pain you will eat of it...” Same word for both: *itstebhon*.

In all the component parts of God's judgment of Adam (vv17-19), which do you think would have been the worst for the man to hear? What part of that was Adam's worst news? I would contend, “Till you return to the ground.” There is a reference to ultimate death—which did not exist for Adam prior to the Fall. More on this later.

Now, we understand that the man, as corporate head, takes the responsibility for the Fall, even though it was initiated by the woman. This is why the apostle Paul can write to the Corinthians, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

But what precisely did he do to merit this judgment?

Read Genesis 3:6.

There are quite a few men in God’s word for whom I have respect—for example, Joseph (Mary’s husband); King David; Joseph, son of Jacob; Barnabas; Nathan, who had the courage to tell King David, “You are the man!”—but Adam is not included. We haven’t the merest hint that he objected to what his wife had done, or was even reluctant to participate himself. The woman breaks the cardinal rule of her Maker, offers the fruit to her husband, and his response is, *Oh, uh-OK*—“and he ate.”

v17

Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; In pain you will eat of it All the days of your life. ☞

It is always worthwhile in God’s word to note repetition. What word is repeated in v17?

- and have **eaten** from the tree
- ‘You shall not **eat** from it’
- In pain you will **eat** of it

What was Adam’s sin? He ate forbidden fruit from the hand of the woman. What will be his job, his work, in the ensuing years? Producing the food that will sustain them. So what will God curse? The ground from which that food will come. The judgment against the man—the price he will pay for his sin—will be that his work will be made all the more difficult.

There is a certain part of spring planting that represents for me the truth of this verse, especially “In pain you will eat of it.” Linda’s garden is on a bit of a slope, not an extreme slope at all—that is, until you have to till it. Wrestling that heavy tiller back and forth and around that garden, especially uphill, is just about the most back-breaking, exhausting work I have to do outside—and that includes felling trees and working them up for firewood! All for a few fresh veggies and flowers.

In pain you will eat of it...

Turn back to Chapter One, where God describes the role of man and woman in this new world. In vv26-28 God gives man dominion over all living things. Then in v29 God gives man his food.

Then God said, “Behold, I have given to you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has the fruit of the tree yielding seed; it shall be food for you;

We may have a picture in our mind that before the Fall man just wandered about the garden and lazily plucked his food from the plants and trees whenever he was hungry. But from the beginning man was given work to do; look at Chapter Two, v15.

Then Yahweh God took the man and set him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

In fact, the word translated “cultivate” in the LSB and NASB (*obda*, oh-VAD) means to “work,” and is so translated in the ESV and NIVs. The easiest way to understand the meaning of this phrase in v17 is to replace “of” with “from”: “In pain you will eat [from] it.” That is, what was once relatively easy work, will now be hard. It will be a painful process to plant, cultivate, and harvest your food from the soil—because now the soil is cursed. It will no longer cooperate so willingly. We hear the result of this in one of Job’s laments.

Read Job 7:1-2.

Verses 18-19 expand on this predicament in which the man now finds himself, adding some details.

v18

**“Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
And you will eat the plants of the field;**

Ask any gardener, “What grows the easiest and fastest in any garden?” and they will immediately answer, “Weeds.” It is typically more work to get rid of what you *don’t* want to grow, than it is to grow what you want.

It was in Chapter Two, verse 5, that we first encountered the reference in the second part of this verse.

Read Genesis 2:5.

In Chapter Two this wording—“of the field”—differentiated between non-cultivated (i.e., wild) plants and cultivated (crops planted and tended by man). Thus God waited until man was there before He created the plants that would require regular attention.

So in v18 of Chapter Three we see that the reference is to plants Adam will plant and manage himself—these will be his food. And because of the introduction of weeds, he will have to work harder for it than before. ➡

Yet God’s grace is still in evidence. The ground will be cursed; thorns and thistles will make cultivation and harvesting more difficult; pain and sorrow will be a necessary component—yet, there *will* be food; they *will* survive: “you will eat of it,” “you will eat the plants of the field,” “You will eat bread.”

Martin Luther adds an intriguing thought. He pictures these judgments upon the earth that will vex man’s labor hereafter as just the mere beginnings, the seedlings of corruption, which will grow and spread and intensify as man’s rebellion against God does the same.

Here Yahweh God introduces “pain” and “thorns and thistles”; He makes no mention of agricultural disease, invading pests, drought and flood, tornadoes and straight-line winds that flatten crops—all so familiar to us today throughout the world. Luther posits that “as the sins of men increased, the punishments of those sins increased also; and that all such punishments and evils were added to the original curse of the earth.”

Today there is a segment of the population that blames man for every climatic variance, every period of sustained drought, every flood that wipes out small villages, every fierce winter. Perhaps they are more correct than they know. It *may be* man’s fault—but not as they think. It’s not our use of oil, our belching smokestacks, or our consumption of beef; it’s not flatulent cattle, or our use of gas stoves, or diesel trucks—but our *sin*. It is this world’s rejection of God and His ways that have compounded and intensified His curse upon the earth.

For the anxious longing of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:19–21)

This may also be an unofficial foreshadowing of the expulsion which is about to descend on the ill-fated pair. Verse 23: “therefore Yahweh God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.”

Ironically, it may be the very scolds preaching the doctrine of “man-made climate change” who are most responsible for the periodic calamities, as they are many times the ones who refuse to bow in submission to a holy God.

v19

**“By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.”**

We have seen God’s grace woven throughout this passage; now we see the most troublesome, stern judgment of all. But in its first two lines the verse continues along the same line as the previous two verses: what will be new labors of agriculture.

“By the sweat of your face You will eat bread...”

From time immemorial (which is the period of our text) bread in its various forms—which includes beer—has been the staple diet of peasants and royalty alike. This implies that the toil from the cultivation and harvesting of the grain will be so constant that the man will still have sweat pouring down his face when he comes in for supper. Whether that be the implication or not, this reiterates the end of v17: “In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” The man’s daily work is now going to be much harder than before.

*Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.”*

I have spoken about how the Fall and resulting Curses changed everything in Creation. And here we have the most dramatic change of all, and it is fitting that it comprises God’s final words of judgment on the serpent, woman, and man.

I do not believe I have ever found a “proof-text” in God’s word that states unequivocally that *Man was created immortal, but the Fall made him mortal*. We reach that conclusion, instead, by pasting together various clues scattered about in the text.

My personal opinion is that absent the Fall, the individuals of Mankind would have met a fate similar to that of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). That is, at some point in each one's life he or she would be translated from the earth into the presence of God for eternity. We will never know for sure.

Let me close with a couple of quotations from scholars wiser than I.

JFB: Man became mortal; although he did not die the moment he ate the forbidden fruit, his body underwent a change, and that would lead to dissolution; the union subsisting between his soul and God having already been dissolved, he had become liable to all the miseries of this life and to the pains of hell for ever. What a mournful chapter this is in the history of man! It gives the only true account of the origin of all the physical and moral evils that are in the world; upholds the moral character of God; shows that man, made upright, fell from not being able to resist a slight temptation; and becoming guilty and miserable, plunged all his posterity into the same abyss (Romans 5:12). How astonishing the grace which at that moment gave promise of a Savior and conferred on her who had the disgrace of introducing sin the future honor of introducing that Deliverer (1Timothy 2:15).

K&D: Formed out of the dust, he shall return to dust again. This was the fulfilment of the threat, "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," which began to take effect immediately after the breach of the divine command; for not only did man then become mortal, but he also actually came under the power of death, received into his nature the germ of death, the maturity of which produced its eventual dissolution into dust. The reason why the life of the man did not come to an end immediately after the eating of the forbidden fruit was...that the mercy and long-suffering of God afforded space for repentance, and so controlled and ordered the sin of men and the punishment of sin, as to render them subservient to the accomplishment of His original purpose and the glorification of His name.

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A Worsening Curse

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