

Genesis 3:1–15

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?’” 2 And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” 11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12 The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because 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. 15 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.”

As we come to Genesis 3, all is well, it seems. Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” God did not create anything evil. It was all very good.

Then suddenly when chapter three opens, there is this serpent. And he is clearly evil. He is calling God’s word into question. Verse 1: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”

He is devious and deceitful and destructive. God had said in Genesis 2:17, "The day that you eat of [this tree] you shall surely die." But the serpent says in verse 4: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Therefore, Jesus says of him in John 8:44 that he is both a liar and murderer. "He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Satan, That Ancient Serpent

Who is this serpent? The fullest answer is given in Revelation 12:9: "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him." So the serpent in the garden is the devil (which means slanderer), and Satan (which means accuser), and the deceiver of the whole world. Jesus calls him "the evil one" (Matthew 13:19) and "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The Pharisees call him "Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (Matthew 12:24). Paul calls him "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4) and "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2).

That's the one we meet in Genesis 3. He is already evil, already a deceiver, already a murderer when he appears in the garden of God. In verse 15, God speaks to the serpent and pronounces judgment on him: "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." Notice that at first it looks like the warfare will be between two offsprings: "between your offspring and her offspring." But in the next words something different is said: "He shall bruise your head." Who is "he"? Answer: the woman's offspring. Who is "your" ("he shall bruise your head")? Answer: the serpent himself, not his offspring.

The Crushing of Satan at the Cross

The day is coming, God says, when you (not just your offspring) will be defeated and removed from the earth. The offspring of this woman will crush you (see Romans 16:20 and Hebrews 2:14). That decisive blow was struck by the perfect offspring of the woman, Jesus Christ, when he died on the cross. This is one of the reasons

why the eternal Son of God had to become a man—because it was the offspring of the woman who would crush Satan.

Colossians 2:14–15 describes what God did for those who trust his Son, when he died on the cross: “[The record of debt that stood against us] he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” When Christ died for our sins, Satan was disarmed and defeated. The one eternally destructive weapon that he had was stripped from his hand—namely, his accusation before God that we are guilty and should perish with him. When Christ died that accusation was nullified. All those who entrust themselves to Christ will never perish. Satan cannot separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:37–39).

The Insurrection of Satan

The question that cries out for an answer is: Where did Satan come from? And why does God tolerate his murderous activity? In Genesis he just appears. Between the perfection described in Genesis 1:31 (“behold, it was very good”) and the appearance of evil in Genesis 3, something happened. The good creation was corrupted. The little book of Jude and 2 Peter in the New Testament give us clues as to what happened. Jude 1:6 says, “The angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.” And 2 Peter 2:4 says, “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.”

It appears then that once there was a host of holy angels. And some of them, including Satan, “sinned,” or as Jude 1:6 says, “did not stay within their own position of authority.” In other words, the sin was a kind of insurrection. A desire for more power and more authority than they were appointed by God and under God. So Satan originates as a created angel who, with other angels, rebel against God, reject him as their all-satisfying king and joy, and set out on a course of self-exaltation and presumed self-determination. They do not want to be subordinate. They do not want to be sent by God to serve others (Hebrews 1:14). They want to have authority over themselves and exalt themselves above God.

The Origin of Satan’s Sin

So we ask now again: Why? How could this happen? There is not an easy answer. In fact, the ultimate biblical answer creates more questions. So it seems that in this age, while we “know in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12), some people find help in saying that the angels had free will and God could not exert enough influence to keep them adoring him. But I don’t find that idea helpful. It simply doesn’t answer the question: Why would a perfectly holy angel in God’s infinitely beautiful presence use his free will to suddenly hate God?

A Failed Approach

This idea that God was helpless to prevent this rebellion, and that it is owing to the innate self-determining wills of sinless angels, is not a solution to the problem. It doesn’t account for why perfectly holy beings would use their wills to despise what they were created adoring. And it doesn’t fit with what the rest of what the Bible says about God’s rule over the devil.

The Biblical Approach

My approach to answering the question of how to think about the origin of Satan’s sin is to read the whole Bible with the question: How does God relate to Satan’s will? Is God helpless before the will of evil powers? Is there a power outside himself that limits his rule over them? Or is God presented throughout the Bible as having the right and the power to restrain Satan anytime he pleases? And if so why doesn’t he just destroy him?

So when I read the Bible, here is what I find. Just the tip of the iceberg of God’s authority and power.

God’s Sovereign Sway over Satan

1. Though Satan is called “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31), Daniel 4:17 says, “The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom he wishes.” And Psalm 33:10 says, “The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.” Yes, Satan is the “ruler of this world” but the ultimate one—God—holds final sway.

2. Though unclean spirits are everywhere doing deceptive and murderous things, Jesus Christ has all authority over them, and

Mark 1:27 says, "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." When Christ commands the devil, the devil obeys.

3. Satan is a roaring lion, prowling and seeking to devour. Peter says, "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world" (1 Peter 5:8–9). In other words, "suffering" is the way Satan is trying to devour the saints. But Peter says in 1 Peter 3:17, "It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong." If God should will it so. This suffering, these jaws of the prowling lion, are opened and closed only according to God's will.

4. Yes, Satan is a murderer from the beginning, Jesus said (John 8:44). But has he taken the gift of life out of the hand of the Giver? No. Deuteronomy 32:39 says, "See now that I, I am he, and there is no god besides me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, and there is no one who can deliver from my hand." And James says in James 4:15, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." Not if Satan wills, we will live and do this or that. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And his name is blessed (Job 1:21).

5. When Satan aims to destroy Job and prove that God is not his treasure, he must get permission from God before he attacks his possessions with destruction and before he attacks his body with sickness. In Job 1:12, God says, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." You have my permission to attack, but you will not go beyond the bounds that I set.

6. Satan is the great tempter. He wants us to sin. Luke tells us that Satan was behind Peter's three denials. He tempted him to deny Jesus. But could he do that without God's permission? Listen to what Jesus says to Simon Peter in Luke 22:31–32: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

Satan could not do what he wished with Peter without God's permission. And when he had it, just like with Job, God had set him a boundary: "You will not destroy Peter. You will only make him

stumble tonight.” Which is why Jesus says, “When you have turned again [not if you turn] strengthen your brothers.” Jesus, not Satan, has the upper hand here. And Satan is allowed to go so far and no farther.

7. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers.” But is this power to blind people an ultimate power? Can God overcome it and resist and nullify it? Yes, he can. Two verses later Paul says, “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” In other words, the blinding effect of Satan gives way to God’s light when he says, “Let there be light.”
God Governs Satan’s Every Move

So now back to the question about the origin of Satan’s sinfulness. Is God helpless before the will of his own angels? Is there a power outside himself that limits his rule over them? My conclusion is that from cover to cover the Bible presents God as governing Satan and his demons. He has the right and power to restrain them any time he pleases.

I conclude, therefore, that God permitted Satan’s fall, not because he was helpless to stop it, but because he had a purpose for it. Since God is never taken off guard, his permissions are always purposeful. If he chooses to permit something, he does so for a reason—an infinitely wise reason. How the sin arises in Satan’s heart, we do not know. God has not told us. What we do know is that God is sovereign over Satan, and therefore Satan’s will does not move without God’s permission. And therefore every move of Satan is part of God’s overall purpose and plan. And this is true in such a way that God never sins. God is infinitely holy, and God is infinitely mighty. Satan is evil, and Satan is under the all-governing wisdom of God.

Why Not Wipe Out Satan?

Why, then, does God not simply wipe Satan out? He has the right and power to do this. And Revelation 20:10 says he is going to do it some day. Why didn’t he cast him into the Lake of Fire the day after he rebelled? Why let him rampage through humanity for centuries?

The ultimate answer, as we saw last week, is that “all things were created through Christ and for Christ” (Colossians 1:16). The Son of God, Jesus Christ, will be more highly honored in the end because he defeats Satan through longsuffering, patience, humility, servanthood, suffering, and death, rather than through raw power. And the more highly honored the Son is, the greater the joy of those who love him.

For the Fullness of Christ’s Glory

The glory of Christ reaches its apex in the obedient sacrifice of the cross where Jesus triumphed over the devil (Colossians 2:15). Jesus said, “Now [in my final hour] is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (John 13:31). Paul said, “We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). Jesus said to Paul about Satan’s thorn in Paul’s side, “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Satan, and all his pain, serves in the end to magnify the power and wisdom and love and grace and mercy and patience and wrath of Jesus Christ. We would not know him in the fullness of his glory if he had not defeated Satan in the way he did.

How to Relate to Evil

So I close with the urgent and practical question: How then should we relate to evil? How should we think and feel and act about Satanic evil—the death of little Zach at the attack of a pit bull? The deaths of three more miners trying to save their buddies? Five hundred dead in the Peru earthquake? The evil you confront in your own lives? Here is my summary answer. Eight things to do with evil. Four things never to do.

1. Expect evil. “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

2. Endure evil. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7; cf. Mark 13:13).

3. Give thanks for the refining effect of evil that comes against you. “Give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Romans 5:3–5).

4. Hate evil. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Romans 12:9).

5. Pray for escape from evil. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13).
6. Expose evil. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Ephesians 5:11).
7. Overcome evil with good. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).
8. Resist evil. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

But, on the other hand:

1. Never despair that this evil world is out of God’s control. “[He] works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11).
2. Never give in to the sense that because of random evil life is absurd and meaningless. “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Romans 11:33, 36).
3. Never yield to the thought that God sins, or is ever unjust or unrighteous in the way he governs the universe. “The Lord is righteous in all his ways.” (Psalm 145:17).
4. Never doubt that God is totally for you in Christ. If you trust him with your life, you are in Christ. Never doubt that all the evil that befalls you—even if it takes your life—is God’s loving, purifying, saving, fatherly discipline. It is not an expression of his punishment in wrath. That fell on Jesus Christ our substitute. “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:6).

When we renounce the designs of the devil and trust the power and wisdom and goodness of God through Christ, we fulfill God’s purpose in letting Satan live. We glorify the infinitely superior worth of Jesus.

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