

The Nature of Man: Felled by Pride

The story of the fall comes right at the beginning of the Bible, right after the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. In chapter 3, the beauty and goodness is spoiled by an act of willful disobedience to God's one clearly stated command and in chapter 4 we read about the first two murders and in chapter 6 the world is so evil that God sends a flood to purge it and to, essentially, start over with Noah and his family.

What led to this disaster and how does it influence the events we read and hear about that cause us to fear what's happening in the world today? There are two important factors that corrupted the beauty and goodness that was present at the beginning: the presence of a third party, a tempter; and a fatal flaw in humans called pride. If the tempter could appeal to human pride and use that to draw us away from God and become more self-reliant, more independent, then his mission would be successful. Let's look at the process they went through, described in Genesis 3:

Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the creatures the LORD God had made. "Really?" he asked the woman. "Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?"

"Of course we may eat it," the woman told him. "It's only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die."

"You won't die!" the serpent hissed. "God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil."

The woman was convinced. The fruit looked so fresh and delicious, and it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit; she also gave some to her husband. At that moment, their eyes were opened and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves. (Gen. 3:1-7)

Without the serpent, the man and woman would have left the fruit from that tree alone. They would have not questioned God and His clear instruction to 'not eat' from that tree. But the tempter disrupted their trust. He caused them to doubt the One they had always counted on as trustworthy. "Really? Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit of the garden?" What does that question do? Of course, it's an obvious falsehood. God had only placed one restriction on what fruit they could eat. Of course He hadn't said, "You can't eat anything from the whole garden." But that's the way the tempter came at the woman - by making an absurd accusation that was aimed at undermining confidence in God's goodness.

She corrects him appropriately, "Of course we may eat it. It's only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat of it or even touch it, or we will die." God had warned them that they would die if they ate of this particular fruit, but He hadn't said that they would die if they even touched it - but she goes beyond God's commandment in her fear of punishment.

The tempter pushes hard now: “You won’t die! God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil.” He has already disagreed with God once, and the woman reacted by defending what she believed was true, that they could eat from any tree in the garden except for one. Now he contradicts God’s warning of the consequence of disobedience. God had said that this would lead to death and the tempter says, simply, “No, that’s not going to happen.” Not only does he claim that God is wrong about the consequence, he suggests that God is holding out on them, that He’s keeping important information from them. He suggests that maybe God is protecting His territory of knowing everything, that He’s saving that for Himself by keeping Adam and Eve in the dark.

And Eve falls for it, which is a remarkable failure. Why would someone who has only known the goodness of God, suddenly doubt that goodness and choose a deception over all her previous experience? There are a number of factors that play into this:

1. She hadn’t been lied to before, so she was naive, unprepared for the approach of the serpent.
2. She had never had a reason to doubt God before and was now being presented by one that seemed credible to her. Why would God deny these first humans something that was obviously good to eat and something which would provide them wisdom? She couldn’t answer the question, and so she started to doubt God. My guess is that we’ve all been there. We’ve all heard a question we couldn’t come up with a quick answer for, and doubt crept into our thoughts.
3. She was overconfident in her own ability to figure things out. The serpent says it won’t hurt, he says that it will make me wise, god-like even, and the fruit itself looks good - fresh and delicious. I think I’ll give it a go - surely I won’t die from eating one fruit.
4. She wanted to be like God, to determine her own way in life, to know what He knows and to make her own decisions about what’s good and evil, right and wrong. In that moment, she couldn’t accept that He knew something that she didn’t, that He was wiser than her, and so she made the move of independence from God; she made her own decision.

Those last two factors are an illustration of how pride works in us, how it takes us captive to delusions. We want to know more than we do, and we get tricked into thinking we really do understand what’s best - not just for ourselves, but for everyone else, too. Our desire for knowledge is so great that we are easily deceived by things that seem wise to us, that seem to be a great idea.

Human pride caused the first humans to want something that God had, something that He had warned them against. God had told them to stay away, that this thing they wanted, this knowledge of good and evil, would lead to death, and they wouldn’t believe Him. They were sure that they knew better than God and they trusted the serpent’s lies more than they trusted God, at least on this one point, and so they took the forbidden fruit and ate it.

“At that moment their eyes were opened and they suddenly felt shame at their

nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves.” What they desired was the knowledge that God had. One of the lies they believed was, “You will become just like God.” What they got instead was an awareness that they were naked and that they needed to cover up. God had warned them of the consequences, they chose not to believe Him, and they brought into the world the shame of sin. And shame has to be covered up. Again, that’s part of the package of human pride and sin - we want to cover it up. We don’t want anyone to know that we are sinful because it’s an embarrassment to our pride. That’s why you hear things like, “Well, we all make mistakes” - because no one wants to be singled out for our mistakes and none of us really likes to be held accountable for our sins. So they strung some leaves together and covered themselves so that they would be less aware of their nakedness - and less aware of what caused their shame.

Theologians through the ages have referred to this event as “the Fall”. Humans descend from being daily walking in the garden with their Maker to being daily forced to sweat and toil to make a living from the land. People fall from enjoying being in the presence of God to being estranged, covering up, hiding from His presence. The human race has fallen from being daily surrounded by peace and harmony to being thrown out into the world of competition and fear.

What has been our response?

1. Part of the cover for human pride is that we look for someone to blame for our failure. And who could be more to blame than the person closest to us? When God confronts Adam directly and asks him if he has eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam replies, “Yes, but it was the woman You gave me who brought me the fruit and I ate it.” (3:12) Who is Adam blaming here? Both the woman and God, because He gave her to him! And, of course, the woman blames the trickery of the serpent and so neither takes responsibility for their sin. It’s somebody else’s fault.
2. Another response has been to deny that anything seriously wrong has taken place. “Everybody’s doing that”, or “Nobody got hurt, did they?” When people say things like that, they mean that they don’t have any idea of the consequences of human rebellion against God’s commandments. They might think that no one is getting hurt, but they don’t see the consequences that obedience would have brought, nor all the results of their disobedience and they are certainly not seeing the pain that Jesus went through on the cross as a result of sin.
3. Perhaps the favorite tactic of those who want to justify themselves is to compare their actions to the “much worse” actions of some of the villains of history. “I’ve never done what so-and-so did!” Or someone who’s been in the news for some scandalous behavior - we’re not like that. We treat people better than that, so we’re okay.
4. A fourth response to human failure is to make an excuse. Our family was having a discussion the other day about why, when you are explaining even a simple thing to someone, they feel like they need to defend themselves for doing it wrong in the first place. “I’m not angry with you - I just need you to do this first step before you start on the second step.” “Yeah, well, I’ve been doing it this way because we were short of something and no one had time to go get more and ...” “It’s okay. I’m not mad. Just,

from now on, do step one and then step two.” It’s like there’s a reflex in our brain that says, “Make an excuse” as soon as our actions are challenged in any way!

All of these excuses and justifications come from our pride. We try to defend ourselves because we don’t like to admit failure. We make excuses and blame others because we don’t want to look bad. Our pride causes us to cover things up, to be afraid of being found out, and to make excuses for our actions when we are found out. And it’s our pride that causes us to think we can figure it all out, make decisions that are against God’s commandments and be able to justify it all in the end. We can’t. Let me show you from Scripture, starting with one verse that shows up in three different books of the Bible. In the book of Proverbs, in the letter of James and in the first letter of Peter, we read these words:

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6, 1 Pet. 5:5)

God is opposing people who walk in pride, who are forever defending themselves, justifying their sin, blaming others, making excuses.

So, then, who are the humble who receive grace from Him? The people who don’t justify themselves, who don’t blame others, who simply admit their weakness and failure and take responsibility for their sin. I admire what people do in a 12-step program, because they always start off with admitting their failures in life. “Hi, my name is Dave, and I’m recovering from ...” Nobody goes to those groups who isn’t willing to admit that they have a problem. Nobody stands up and says, “Hi, my name is and I don’t have any struggles or hang-ups in my life right now, but I have lots of advice for all of you here tonight who do.” That doesn’t help anybody, but humbly confessing failure does help; it’s the right place to start.

It seems pretty clear that there is a group that receives grace from God and another group that He resists and, it should also be pretty obvious that we’re better off when we’re part of the grace-receivers. Here’s another verse that echoes a similar theme:

*This is what the high and lofty One says -
He who lives forever, whose name is holy
I live in a high and holy place
But also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit
To revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite* (Is. 57:15)

There is God, living in exalted glory, far above the world we live in with all its deception and rebellion ... but, look, He’s here as well, giving hope and new life to those who are humble, who are sorry for their sin, who need a new start. Where is He in relation to the proud? It doesn’t say, because He apparently bypasses them on His way to bring comfort to the humble few who know their need.

Here’s a favorite verse of mine, found in the prophet Micah, chapter 6, v. 8:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good
And what does the LORD require of you?*

*To act justly and to love mercy
And to walk humbly with your God.*

Do the right thing (act justly) cheerfully, joyfully, forgive people who have wronged you in some way (love mercy), and then walk humbly, walk in an attitude of gratitude and submission - otherwise you won't be walking with God at all. That's how I read that verse.

To sum up the message: pride led to humans' first act of rebellion against God's commands and it still creates a separation between us and God today. Humility opens the door to forgiveness, to reconciliation with God and with others, and to healing and growth in our spiritual life.

The good news is that you can detect when your pride is taking over and you can choose humility. You can resist the temptation to keep things hidden in your life by opening up to one trusted friend who will accept you, pray for you, and hold you accountable for change. So let's make that the first application for this message: find someone with whom you can be real and honest and open and not afraid of judgment or rejection, and build an accountability relationship with that person.

2. A second application is to develop an awareness of how pride works in your thinking, in your emotions, in your actions. For some, pride shows itself in a high degree of self-confidence, irrational self-confidence. For someone else, it produces fear and hiding from others because we don't want anyone to think of us as weak or flawed - even though we know that every person has weaknesses. In someone else, pride shows itself in a lack of interest in listening to what others have to say. In another person, pride leads to feelings of insecurity because we are so concerned about what everyone else is thinking about us -- if they're thinking about us at all. When you see patterns in the way you think and feel and act that you can relate to your pride, choose an alternative. Choose to listen closely to what someone else is saying, not because you're fascinated, but because you believe that they are just as important as you are and they need to be valued just as much as you do. Choose to be vulnerable to people that you trust and respect. Don't believe for a minute that people who are trying to honor Jesus with their lives will reject you because you are open and honest with them.
3. A third application is to examine the process by which you make decisions. Do you pray about the important choices you are making with your life? Do you humbly wait for God to guide you or do you just go ahead in confidence that you know what you're doing? Do you make choices that you believe are not things that God would choose for you? When you face those kinds of choices, remember that Adam and Eve faced that same kind of decision in the Garden - they chose what they wanted at the time and it resulted in disaster. We have the Holy Spirit with us, to strengthen us to stand against temptation. Let's be humble enough to listen for His voice and to follow His leading.

The summary: Human pride is the source of every kind of trouble that we encounter in the world around us - as it was in the beginning, so it continues. The Scripture tells us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand, so that He can lift us up at the right time (1 Pet. 5:6). Our pride is an offense to God, and humility and dependence on Him open the doors to His blessing in our lives. Let's be blessed!