

## Tell Me The Story: “*Did God say...?*” - week 6

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 3, 2021

*Read Genesis 3:1-7 NRSV*

“**Did God say...?**” This is an apparently innocent question posed by an apparently benign being. It carries the sense of “*Would a good God ever say anything like that? If God really is for you, if God really wants your very best, would he ever say, ‘You shall not’?*”

No part of The Story makes better sense of our story than what we read in Genesis 3:1-7. Here we have revealed for us the fundamental struggle of human existence. Here we learn what we never would have discovered on her own: someone is messing with our minds. An enemy is messing with our minds with regards to the one command God has given humanity.

Let us begin by reviewing what we have learned in previous sermons. From Genesis 1, we discovered what every person alive today needs to hear: the universe is not an accident. It did not “pop” into being out of nothing; someone wanted it to come into being. We also discovered that we humans are not an accident either; someone wanted us to come into being. The living God made us happen.

We’ve learned as well that we humans were made in the image and likeness of God. Nothing else in all of creation

bears this significance. **"Let us make man [humankind] in our image, according to our likeness"** (v. 26). We were brought into being to represent the Creator in and to the rest of creation and to reflect the nature and character of the Creator. When the rest of creation looks at us, it is to see something of who the Creator is and what the Creator is like. What dignity!

From Genesis 2 we discovered what being made in the image of God involves. The living God is a relational God. Indeed, the living God is relationship. To be made in the image of the relational God is to be made for relationship. In this chapter of Genesis, we see the fourfold relational existence for which the relational God has made us: a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with the living God. **"In the beginning"** all four relationships worked, and they worked in harmony.

In our study of Genesis 2, we also learned that the enjoyment of that four fold relational harmony hinges on only one command. After giving the first humans everything they needed to live *"fully human, fully alive,"* God told them, **"From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die"** (vv. 16-17). Last week we discovered that the phrase "knowing good and evil" has a particular meaning. For the first readers of Genesis, **"the knowledge of good and evil"** would have been understood to refer to the kind of

knowledge that makes us think we can live independently of anyone else (see Fuller's, *The Unity of the Bible*, 182). That we can live outside this relational harmony. Indeed, such knowledge is the kiss of death.

Then today, in Genesis 3, the serpent enters the story with his apparently innocent question, "**Did God say...?**"

Let's first consider who says this. Who or what is this serpent? From the rest of the Bible, we learn that the serpent is an enemy of God. The serpent does not like the living God. We are not told why. All we are told is that he experiences the living God as a threat and opposes all that God desires.

From the rest of the Bible, we learn that the serpent in the Garden is the being called Satan or "the devil." The word "Satan" simply means "adversary" or "accuser," especially an adversary or accuser of God. The word "devil" means "slanderer" or "deceiver," especially someone who slanders or speaks deceptively of God. Jesus later calls this being not only a "liar" but "**the father of lies**" (John 8:44; see also 2 For 11:3; Rev 12:9; 20:2).

Now I want to make an important note here. The serpent was created by God, but not to be serpentine. The snake was made by God, but not to be sneaky. God did not create the devil as the devil. God created an angel, a good angel, who exercised freedom in a wrong direction and became evil. Now that he is evil, this creature does

not like the living God or what the living God makes. Satan is the leader or dictator of devils, who are angels who have become enemies to God. But Satan, is not the opposite of God. Satan is not equal to God. As an angel who was created good by God, and has exercised freedom in a wrong direction, he is the opposite of the archangel Michael. God has no opposite! Now that he is evil, this creature does not like the living God or what the living God makes.

In corrupting Adam and Eve's mind, the serpent uses an effective three-step process. It will be helpful for us to observe this process, because he still uses it today. To this process we now turn.

Step one: isolation

In the first step the serpent isolates the woman from the man, from her human community. He knows the by ourselves we are sitting ducks. No human being can stand alone. To be more to the point, none of us can keep believing alone. We need community in order to keep believing. We need fellowship in order to be strong in faith.

The serpent gets Eve by herself, isolated.

Step two: questioning

The serpent then gets her to question God's word. He does not come as a devil with a pitchfork, but rather comes as an interested fellow seeker: "**Did God say...?**" (v. 1, NRSV). This approach is, of course, much more effective than coming with a pitchfork, for it allows him to flatter Eve by suggesting that she can think about reality as well as, or even better than, God.

His motive is hidden behind a mask of harmless, even pious, benevolence.

Step three: twisting

In his insidious third step, the serpent twists God's word. He does it ever so slightly at the beginning, and he does it blatantly by the end of the seemingly pious conversation. The key to understanding this story is that God's enemy twists God's words in a specific direction, wanting us to make a false deduction about God's nature and character.

Listen to the serpent's first speech: "**Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?**" (3:1). Look at what the serpent has done. He leaves out the word "**freely.**" God said, "**From any tree of the garden you may eat freely**" (2:16). The serpent also transfers the prohibition "**you shall not**" from "**the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**" to "**any tree of the garden.**" Here he is twisting God's words.

Satan would try this same tactic with Jesus. He would quote God's word to Jesus, twisting it ever so slightly. But

it would not work, for Jesus would know God's word better than the enemy. Today, the evil one still approaches us with God's word but uses it out of context or altered in some small way.

Later in the conversation the serpent employs a different tactic. He makes a suggestion as to the real reason God prohibited them from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, saying, **"God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"** (v. 5). What he is doing here is raising suspicion about the goodness of God. He is proposing the idea that God might be holding back on something. He is getting Eve to wonder about God's motives.

To paraphrase what the serpent is saying here, *"Eve, God is speaking his 'you shall not' because he really does not want the best for you."* The serpent is raising the possibility that God is stingy. Of course, he is wrong. Did God say *"you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"* No, God did not say this. God said, **"From any tree of the garden you may eat freely"** (2:16) and only prohibited them from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God only prohibited us from trying to live independently of him, which is a good prohibition.

The serpent also uses this tactic with all of God's commands. He sneaks in the suspicion that God speaks prohibitions - "you shall not" – because God really does

not want the best for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Creation and Fall* page 66 says, *“The serpent pretends somehow to know something about the profundity of the true God... The serpent claims to know more about God than man... The serpent knows of a greater, nobler God who does not need such a prohibition.”*

Does the serpent know God better than God? Does the serpent know how God can be God better? No. He’s lying to and deceiving Eve.

Now listen carefully to Eve’s response. Something has gone wrong in her soul. **“From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die’”** (3:2-3). Notice how she misquotes God’s words, revealing the fact that she is now suspicious of God. She leaves out **“any”** and **“freely.”** God said, **“From any tree...you may eat freely.”** Eve leaves out those words of generosity, saying, **“From the fruit of the trees we may eat.”**

Eve also makes slight additions to what God said. She identifies the tree from which they are not to eat as the tree **“in the middle of the garden.”** The prohibited tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, is not in the middle; the Tree of Life is in the middle (2:9). This addition suggests that the prohibition is becoming a problem for Eve. She also says that she and Adam were not to eat the fruit **“or touch it”** (3:3). God never said, *“Do not touch.”* That might be implicit in God’s prohibition against eating

from it, but God never said it. Again, Eve seems to be starting to doubt that God is wholly disposed toward humanity's good.

Notice also that she plays down the severity of the warning. **"Or you will die,"** she says. God had said, **"You will surely die"** (2:17). The slight changing of God's words signifies that Eve is now beginning to question God's character. I detect that the serpent is leading her to think, *"Would a good God really let us die? Would a good God really make a statement like, 'You will surely die'?"*

A final observation is that Eve does not speak of God as God speaks of God. Genesis 2-3 speaks of God as **"the LORD God,"** not just the generic "God." **"The LORD"** in Hebrew (shown with capital letters in English) is *Yahweh*, the name God uses for himself, the name he wants to be called. "Yahweh" is God's personal name, his covenant name: **"I will take you for My people, and I will be your God"** (Exod 6:7); *"All I am is placed at your disposal; all that makes me God I give to you."* Having already left out **"any"** and **"freely,"** then having added **"in the middle"** and **"do not touch,"** Eve's suspicion is now truly revealed in leaving out **"the LORD."** God is now only generic "God," not Yahweh, the good and generous God who makes himself wholly available to humanity.

In his response to Eve, the serpent then abandons any subtlety and reveals his true agenda. **"You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will**

**be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”** (Gen 3:4-5). The serpent calls God a liar, telling Eve that she **“surely will not die.”** To paraphrase, the serpent is saying here, *“Why would a good God ever say you humans will suffer the consequences of disobedience? What is the big deal about one little act? How could such a little act possibly ruin anything, let alone lead to death? How silly, Eve! You surely will not die.”*

According to the serpent, God’s lie stems from the motive of not wanting humans to be like him. To paraphrase further, the serpent says, *“Eve, God does not want you to be like him; he does not want you to be happy as he is. That is why he has spoken this prohibition.”*

It is interesting that the serpent states that Eve can become like God. He is not entirely wrong here. Choosing to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil does lead to independence and, in that sense, becoming like God who is both the independent and intra-dependent one triune God. We humans can be independent of God, but we cannot LIVE independently; only God can. We can never be like God in that way. We cannot live as our own gods and live.

The serpent’s twisting of God’s words has twisted Eve’s thinking. She concludes that God is withholding something she and Adam need. So, as Genesis tells us, she **“took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband and he ate”** (v. 6). And they began to die.

Now this is probably the most memorable moment in the Old Testament. How does this part of the story make sense of our stories?

First, it reveals the nature of temptation. We are not initially tempted to do something overtly evil. We are tempted to doubt the goodness of God. And then, doubting God's goodness, we are tempted to take charge of our own well-being and become the captains of our own destinies.

Consider why we sin? Is it not the fruit of the prior sin of unbelief that God is as good as he says he is? Why do we steal? Because we no longer believe God can or will take care of us, so we think we have to take matters into our own hands. Why do we lie? Because we no longer trust God to take care of us, so we take matters into our own hands.

Every act of sin is therefore an insult to the character of God: *"Sorry God, but this time you cannot be trusted, so I will have to be god right now."*

Through this part of The Story, we also discover the nature of our own nature once we decide God cannot be trusted. In choosing to live independently of God, we do not become independent creatures; we become dependent-on the self. The nature of our nature apart from God is egocentricity. The self is placed at the center, and the self become the master and the source of wisdom and

strength. Of course, our fallen nature is also expressed in evil thoughts and deeds, but it is chiefly expressed in self-preoccupation. This is a terrible captivity. We hate it in ourselves; we hate seeing it in others.

Trying to live independent of God, we sinned into existence a creature that was never intended to exist: a creature centered on itself. This is the source of all our misery. This is cause of war and injustice and poverty and ecological destruction. "I, me, mine, myself" is the creed of humanity apart from Yahweh. It is the driving force of so much of our existence - driving us into a deep quagmire from which we cannot free ourselves.

When the self is at the center, we are not free. We become prisoners to a god who cannot bear the weight of our worship. From this bondage we need a Savior, someone who in sacrificial love lays his self aside, who empties himself of all his rightful privileges and descends into the quagmire to bring us up into the freedom of selfless love.

So the question we face: Can I trust the Creator?

This brings us to the most important way this part of The Story makes sense of our stories. It poses the most critical decision of our lives: can I trust the Creator? It confronts us with the question: who is right, the Creator or the serpent? Is the Creator for me or not? So much of life around us makes it hard to trust. In a fallen world so much

seems to call into question the character of the Creator, and the serpent uses it all to corrupt our minds, to encourage us to conclude that the Creator cannot be trusted. *“See! I told you. You are having a hard time because he is not really for you. He does not want you to be alive and free.”*

The critical decisions every day are: Can I trust the One who made me? Will I trust the One who made me?

This is why the rest of The Story leads us to the feet of Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see who the Creator is. In Jesus we see that the serpent is lying. Philippians 2 says of Jesus, **“Who, being in very nature God...took the very nature of a servant....[and died for us.]”** In Jesus we see that God is totally 100% with us and for us.

So how do we answer the serpent’s question, **“Did God say...?”** How should Eve have answered? Eve should have said, as we today need to say again and again,

*“Yes. God did say, ‘You shall not,’ but not about the trees of the garden. Of any tree of the garden we may freely eat. But if we eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the tree that makes us think we can live independently of God, we shall die. For we were created as dependent creatures, and in that trust I choose to live. I refuse your lie. In Jesus’ name, be gone!”*

That's the truth Eve should have said, but didn't. But there's good news: God's grace outruns our avalanche. We'll see next week that God's grace superabounds! To this day the enemy is doing his best to mess with our minds, but Jesus, whose very name means *Yahweh to the Rescue*, came to rescue us. And Jesus wins! Thank you God!

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book *The Story of All Stories*.)