

The Fall

Few stories so captivate us as the story of the Fall of Man in the Book of Genesis. Of all the wonderful stories in the Old Testament, and there are many wondrous stories indeed, everyone pauses when they read the story of the Fall. The story of the Fall is *our* story, as true today as it was when it was first told. As with all of the stories that we have read thus far, however, the story of the Fall requires some careful study.

There are essentially two questions which concern us in regard to the Fall. The first concerns the “what” of the Fall, i.e., what indeed was this first sin. The second concerns the ramifications of this sin and how the entire scope of salvation history stems from this first act. To begin to fully understand the import of this first sin in the scope of salvation history, we have to take the long view, biblically speaking. We must stand on the outside of the gates of paradise with our eyes looking upon the empty tomb of the Gospels and beyond it to Eden. More on that in a bit, but now let us turn to the first sin.

To understand what the first sin was, we have to learn a little bit about Jewish concepts of knowledge and wisdom, as the first prohibition concerned that all-important tree of the knowledge of good and bad ([Genesis 2:16-17](#)). For the ancient Israelites, knowledge was not based upon the scientific method, upon experimentation or the weighing of evidence and educated guesses. For the Jews, true knowledge began in only one place:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” [Proverbs 1:7](#)

Although various translators opt for “awe” instead of “fear” or “wisdom” instead of “knowledge,” what is unmistakable about the Jewish concept of knowledge or wisdom is that it begins with a proper attitude, a proper relationship to the Almighty. Awe and a tremendous respect for the Creator are your starting points.

To put it simply, if the Creator and Lord of the Universe stated that one must do this and not do that, following those dictates are the true test of whether one is knowledgeable or wise. For the Jews, this colors the first sin. Only one thing was prohibited to Man and Woman in the garden - everything else was theirs. The Lord God told them to avoid this one, and only one thing.

Let's take a very quick look at the end of the interchange between the Woman and the snake. After the Woman recounts for the snake the prohibition the Lord mandated concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and bad the serpent responds:

“You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some of it to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Genesis 3:4-6

The key to this passage lies in what was going on in the mind of the Woman. Although God told her what was good and what was evil, what was to be enjoyed and what was to be avoided (God had given her Divine wisdom), she ignored this wisdom of God and decided to trust her own decision-making process. In *her own* estimation she decided that the fruit was good, disregarding God who had already told her that it was to be avoided. In this first sin we see Pride in its purest most unadulterated form, namely the placing of our will over the Divine will. To paraphrase the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, it is here that the first Man and Woman turned to God and said not, “Thy will be done”, but “My will be done.” It is here that we see for the first time human wisdom superseding the Wisdom of God. When confronted with true knowledge, true wisdom given from God, the first Man and the first Woman opted to make that first fatal step away from God.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Augustine

*The conclusion is that the devil would not have begun by an open and obvious sin to tempt man into doing something that God had forbidden, had not man already begun to seek satisfaction in himself and consequently to take pleasure in the words, “you shall be as gods.” The promise of these words, however, would much more truly have to pass if, by obedience, Adam and Eve had kept close to the ultimate and true source of their being and had not, by pride, imagined that they were themselves the source of their being... Whoever seeks to be more than he is becomes less. Whenever he aspires to be self-sufficing, he retreats from the One who is truly sufficient for him. **City of God 14.13***

Original Sin

As I noted earlier, we can only fully understand the import of this first sin, the Original Sin, by looking at the mystery of Christ.¹ We cannot, however, summarize and expand upon the entire teaching of the Church in regard to Original Sin based solely upon the first thirteen verses of the third chapter of the Book of Genesis. Nevertheless, it is important to see the beginning of the story of the Redemption of the world. Without this first sin there would have been no need of Redemption, no need of the Resurrection and Salvation.

From the Exultet, Hymn of Praise at Easter Vigil

*O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer! Most blessed of all nights, chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead! **Missale Romanum, 1970***

¹ CCC 388.

The need for salvation history begins with this story. Christ, as the source of grace, offers salvation to all mankind, a salvation that is intimately connected to this first sin.

Because we all share in the sin of our first parents, we all require salvation. The Church teaches that Baptism erases this Original Sin and turns us back toward God.² Although the sin is erased, the consequences of this Original Sin on our natures as human beings remains and is passed on. The Church recognizes that the transmission of the stain of this Original Sin from our first parents to all humanity is a mystery³ (understanding how this is passed from generation to generation is exceedingly complicated).

What we do know from the teaching of the Church is that this Original Sin, even after it has been washed away with our Baptism, has left us with the *tendency* to sin; there is something in our very nature that will continue to draw us to evil which draws us to choose sin. This inclination to sin is called ‘concupiscence’ (our subjugation to the pleasures of the senses, covetousness for earthly goods and self-assertion, contrary to reason).⁴ In short, we are drawn to do what we want as opposed to what God wants and it has been this way from the very beginning. Sin, disobeying God, putting ourselves before our Creator, is something that is woven into the very fabric of humanity.

The Magisterium and Genesis

We come face to face with sin which is a perversion of human freedom and the profound cause of death because it involves detachment from God, the source of life. And then sin in its turn becomes the occasion and the effect of interference in us and our work by a dark, hostile agent, the Devil. Evil is not merely an absence of something but an active force, a living, spiritual being that is perverted and that perverts others. It is a terrible reality, mysterious and frightening.

Address of Pope Paul VI to a General Audience, 15 November 1972

The Effects of the Fall in Genesis

The entire story, the entire plot of the Book of Genesis, as well as the rest of Sacred Scripture flows from this first sin. Indeed, the turning away from God and God repeatedly trying to get mankind back on the righteous path is *the* story in Scripture. In the Book of Genesis, however, we get a very clear portrait of how the created order has been changed because of this first sin. Unfortunately, the description of paradise that we were privileged to read in the first three chapters of Genesis, the created order that God had intended for us, is gone. After this first sin, we are left with the created order that we have imposed upon ourselves via this first act of disobedience. It is not pretty. From this first sin flows the pain that accompanies childbirth (Genesis 3:16), the toil that accompanies the tilling of the soil (Genesis 3:17-18) and most importantly death (Genesis 3:19).

In addition to all of the harsh aspects of human existence that are now thrust upon mankind by the first sin, we also received banishment from the presence of God (Genesis 3:23-24). These last two, death and separation from God, will persist in the human condition until the miracle of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ repairs this breach, defeating death and allowing us the opportunity to one day live in His presence yet again.

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² CCC 405

³ CCC 404.

⁴ CCC, 377.