

Genesis 3:1–6 — Facts and Questions

2 Corinthians 11:1–20 / Genesis 3:1–24

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A Template for Understanding Deception

This Sunday, our passage is 2 Corinthians 11:1–20. In that passage, Paul reaches back into the Old Testament to describe what is happening in the New Testament church. The image he lands on is the serpent in the garden.

Here is what Paul says:

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:3–4)

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Corinthians 11:13–15)

For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. (2 Corinthians 11:20)

Paul's argument can be stated plainly. The church planted in Corinth was pure — like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But into that church came false apostles disguised in righteousness, just as the serpent clothed himself in light — light being knowledge and truth, which is precisely how he deceives. These false apostles have deceived the Corinthians about Jesus, about the Spirit, and about the Gospel, just as the serpent deceived Eve and Adam. And the consequences follow: bondage, shame, guilt, fear — the same consequences that fell upon Adam and Eve, and upon the serpent himself.

Paul is using Scripture to interpret what is happening in history, what is happening in the lives of the people he loves. That is 2 Corinthians 11, and we will explore it together on Sunday.

But tonight, since Paul is using Genesis 3 as a template for understanding what is happening in Corinth, I want to look at Genesis 3 itself. So let's open our Bibles and begin.

How to Study a Passage: Facts, Questions, Answers, Research

Before we work through the text, let me share something about how I study. When I prepare a passage — for Sunday or for a Wednesday night like this — I move through four stages. First, I state the facts: what is actually being said in the passage, not my ideas or impressions, but what is clearly and plainly there. Second, I ask questions — as many as the text raises for me. Third, I try to answer those questions myself, before going anywhere else. And fourth, I do research: commentaries, historical background, other Scripture passages, whatever can shed additional light. We'll use that framework tonight as we work through Genesis 3:1–6.

The Serpent Appears (Genesis 3:1)

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'?" (Genesis 3:1)

Facts. Let's start with what is simply, plainly true in this verse. There is a talking, crafty serpent in the garden. He is described as the most cunning of all the beasts of the field. The Lord God made him. He approaches the woman and asks her a question about what God has permitted and what God has forbidden. And the question itself is framed as a distortion — God never said they could not eat from *any* tree — which means from the very first word, the serpent's intent is to deceive.

Questions. Now the questions, and I have quite a few. Why is there a talking serpent in the garden at all? Who, exactly, is this serpent? Why does he seek to deceive Eve, and what is he after? What is the purpose of his opening question — what is he trying to accomplish by asking it? And what does the presence of this creature in the garden tell us about God? What does it tell us about humanity?

There is one more question worth sitting with, and it requires a small exercise in historical imagination: how would this story have sounded to its first hearers — the Israelites, newly delivered from Egypt, receiving the covenant at Sinai?

My own answers. Let me take a run at these before we turn to research.

Why is there a talking serpent in the garden? My answer is that God put him there — and his presence is not a surprise to God. Theologically, I believe Adam and Eve were made, from the first moment of life, to trust and depend upon God. The tree of life is there for that reason. And the serpent is there for the same reason. If Adam and Eve had trusted God fully, would the serpent have been an issue? No. He would have been simply another creature under their dominion. From the very beginning, we were made to trust God, and the garden is the place where that trust is tested.

Who is this serpent? If we are reading the Bible for the very first time, we do not yet know. But as we study the whole of Scripture, we will discover that this serpent is Satan. We'll come to the research on that shortly.

Why does the serpent seek to deceive Eve? The text does not tell us directly, but reading from the beginning of Genesis opens up some possibilities worth considering. Who was created first — the serpent or Adam? The serpent was. Who was given charge over creation? Adam was. And who was found to be a suitable helper for Adam — was it the serpent? The text is pointed about this: *“But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him”* (Genesis 2:20). So God creates woman out of Adam — the last and crowning act of all his creative work.

Now, imagine for a moment that you are the serpent. You were created before Adam and Eve. You are the most cunning and intelligent creature yet to exist. And yet along comes another created being, to whom authority has been given and who is elevated above you. Adam is even given the authority to name you — you are a serpent, a *nephesh*, a creature. And despite all your intelligence, you are not a suitable companion for him. Then God creates from Adam another creator entirely — woman.

One possible answer, then, is that this serpent, full of pride and envy, feeling displaced and overlooked, attacks the very thing he perceives has taken what he believed was rightfully his — woman, and through her, man. But I think Scripture gives us something more than wounded pride. Satan is in active rebellion against God, and in that rebellion he seeks to harm what God loves. It is not only envy. There is also something like spite.

What is the serpent's intention with his opening question? *“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?”* This is a knowingly wrong question. God said nothing of the sort. What the serpent is doing is directing Eve's attention to the one prohibition rather than to the overwhelming generosity — *all* of the trees. It is a bit like being on a diet and having someone walk up and say, “So you can't eat anything good?” You know there is plenty of food available, but now all you can think about is the ice cream you cannot have. The serpent pushes Eve to focus on the single thing God said no to, rather than on the vast abundance God said yes to.

What does this talking serpent in the garden tell us about God? It tells us that God is not afraid of what is in the garden. It tells us that God calls us to trust him. And it tells us — looking

forward — that before the beginning of time, God already had a plan of redemption in place. The serpent in the garden did not catch God off guard.

What does it tell us about humanity? That we were made to trust God. And that humanity, according to Genesis 1:26–27, has been given dominion over the creature that will now seek to undo them.

Research: the Egyptian background. Before we turn to identifying the serpent from other Scriptures, I want to spend a moment on that question about the first hearers, because it has been on my mind as I’ve been preparing for an upcoming trip to Egypt.

When we do Bible study in Israel, it is in many ways straightforward — you are standing in the places where Jesus walked. Egypt is different. For the Pentateuch — the first five books of the covenant — the antithetical backdrop is Egypt. That is the world the Israelites came out of. So it is worth asking: how does this story, this serpent in the garden, land in the ears of people who have just left Egypt behind?

In Egypt, serpents carried enormous symbolic weight. There was the protective royal cobra — the *uraeus* worn on Pharaoh’s brow, said to spit fire against his enemies, an emblem of divine kingship. There were the primordial serpent-goddesses of the Ogdoad, beings from which certain high gods were said to have emerged. And then there was Apophis — also called Apep — the great chaos-serpent, the Egyptian figure of darkness and destruction, who attacked the sun-god Ra’s barge every night as it sailed through the underworld, seeking to swallow the sun and prevent the dawn. Unlike the other deities, Apophis was not worshipped but feared. No god, in the Egyptian imagination, could truly and finally defeat him.

I want to be careful not to press this too hard. But here is the point: in the ancient world outside of Scripture, there is this haunting, recurring story of a serpent-demon that cannot be permanently defeated — a bringer of chaos and darkness, an eater of souls, a threat to the ordered world. And then, on the very first pages of Scripture, a different story begins to take shape. A God who is not threatened by the serpent. A God who will, in the end, put a final end to him. For Israelites emerging from Egypt, those opening words — *the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made* — would have carried a charge that we, reading two thousand years later, can barely imagine.

Research: who is this serpent? The rest of Scripture is not ambiguous.

And 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. (Revelation 12:9)

“You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God... You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God... You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you.” (Ezekiel 28:12–15)

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!... You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high... I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.” (Isaiah 14:12–15)

Taken together, these passages give us a portrait. The serpent was a created being — invested with wisdom and beauty, given a specific guardian role within God’s creation, blameless from the day he was made. But he wanted what he could not have. He wanted to be like God — to be God. And since God created only man and woman in his own image, and placed them in authority over the created order, the serpent found himself below the very creatures he despised. He is cursed, thrown into the dust, and he seeks to harm what God loves. This creature is Satan.

Eve Responds (Genesis 3:2–3)

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 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.’” (Genesis 3:2–3)

Facts. Eve responds to the serpent rather than refusing to engage him. She knows God’s word — both the permission and the prohibition. She uses the word *we*, which raises an interesting question about whether Adam is standing right beside her. And she does not repeat God’s instruction exactly. Compare what God actually said:

“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16–17)

God said *you shall surely die* — a strong, doubled construction in the Hebrew. Eve says *lest you die* — softer, more tentative. She also adds something God never said: *neither shall you touch it*. And she does not name the tree as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; she simply says “the tree that is in the midst of the garden.” Whether these changes are significant or incidental, we cannot say for certain. But they are there.

It is also worth noting that the entire conversation, from the serpent's first word to Eve's reply, centers on one thing: what God has said.

Questions. Why does Eve engage the serpent at all, rather than seeking Adam or calling on the Lord? Does she know the command deeply, or does she merely know *about* it — and is that difference already showing in how she quotes it? Does her softening of God's warning weaken the certainty of the prohibition in her own mind? Does she fully understand what death means? Where is Adam during this conversation? And has the serpent already accomplished his first goal — shifting Eve's attention from God's generosity to God's single restriction?

We will hold those questions and let the next verses sharpen them.

The Serpent Presses Further (Genesis 3:4–5)

But the serpent said to the woman, “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.” (Genesis 3:4–5)

Facts. Something has shifted. In verse 1, the serpent questioned what God said. Now, in verses 4–5, he moves from questioning God's word to attacking God's character. He directly contradicts God's warning — *you will not surely die* — which is a flat-out lie. Then he tells Eve that God is withholding something good from her, that eating the fruit will open her eyes. He implies that God cannot be trusted, that his prohibition is self-serving. He claims the result of eating will be that they become “like God, knowing good and evil.” And notice: the serpent never denies that eating is prohibited. He disputes the consequence and reframes the reason. The conversation has moved entirely from what God commanded to what Eve stands to gain.

Questions. Why does the serpent openly contradict God's word rather than continuing to work indirectly? Why does he attack God's character rather than simply encouraging disobedience — what does he understand about how deception works? Why does he mix truth with lies, since it is true that their eyes will be opened? Why doesn't Eve reject the claim that God is lying? What is more tempting to her: the promise of becoming like God, or the suggestion that God is withholding something she deserves? At what point does Eve actually begin to sin — in believing the serpent, or in eating the fruit? And what does it mean, exactly, to “be like God, knowing good and evil”?

Notice the progression across these first five verses. In verse 1, the serpent questions God's word: “*Did God actually say...?*” In verses 2–3, Eve repeats God's word, though not precisely. In verse 4, the serpent denies God's word outright: “*You will not surely die.*” The movement is deliberate — from questioning, to subtly reshaping, to outright contradiction. This is not a

random sequence. It is a pattern, and it becomes a recurring biblical model for how deception operates.

The Fall (Genesis 3:6)

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. (Genesis 3:6)

Facts. Before this moment, the woman had never really *looked* at the tree — not like this. Now she sees it as good for food, as a delight to the eyes, as something to be desired for the wisdom it offers. She takes. She eats. She gives some to her husband, who is with her. He eats — without recorded protest, without question, without resistance of any kind. Both the man and the woman disobey God’s word, and the narrative holds them both accountable in the same verse.

Questions. Has the tree actually changed, or is Eve simply naming qualities it always had — now filtered through the serpent’s framing? Is the sequence here — *she saw, she took, she ate, she gave* — a deliberate description of how sin moves from perception to action? Why is there no recorded hesitation, no internal conflict, no further exchange with God? Does the silence itself tell us something about how quickly deception moves to action once belief has already shifted?

And what about Adam? The prohibition was given directly to him (Genesis 2:16–17). He was arguably more responsible than the woman for knowing it and guarding it. Is his silence here — his passive eating — as theologically significant as her initiative? The text seems to think so.

One more question worth sitting with: where does the Fall actually occur? Does it happen in verse 6, when she eats? Or was it already happening in verse 3, when she misquoted God’s word? Or in verses 4–5, when she entertained the serpent’s claim about God’s character without rejecting it? Where does “the Fall” begin?

What We Have Found Tonight

When most people think about Genesis 3, they think this story is about a piece of fruit.

It is not.

It is about trust.

The serpent never begins by saying, “Disobey God.” He begins by asking, “*Did God actually say...?*” Then, “*You will not surely die.*” Then, “*God knows — God is holding something back from you.*” Notice the progression. First he questions God’s word. Then he questions God’s character. Finally, he invites Eve to trust herself instead of trusting God.

That is the first temptation. It is a temptation to stop believing that God is good. It is a temptation to believe that God cannot be trusted. It is a temptation to believe that I know better than God.

Eating the fruit is simply the outward expression of an inward unbelief. The real fall happened long before Eve reached out her hand. She first reached the place where she believed the serpent’s story about God more than God’s own word.

And isn’t that exactly what Paul says is happening in Corinth?

Paul is not worried primarily about false teachers. He is worried about what those false teachers are causing the church to *believe*. Another Jesus. Another Spirit. Another Gospel. In other words — another story about God. Because every false teaching ultimately says the same thing the serpent said: *God isn’t telling you the truth. God isn’t enough. Jesus isn’t enough. There is something more.* More knowledge. More spirituality. More experiences. More secret wisdom. More righteousness. More rules. More freedom. Whatever the false gospel happens to promise.

But every false gospel begins exactly where Genesis 3 begins — with suspicion toward God and his word.

And because this is what was happening in that early church in Corinth, I believe it is something we all struggle with. The temptations of our hearts are no different. *God is withholding something good from me. When I obey God, I’m missing out. My happiness would increase if I ignored his commands. I know what God says, but...* Those are not merely our own thoughts. Those are echoes of Genesis 3.

The temptation has never changed. Satan rarely begins by attacking morality. He attacks theology. He attacks what you believe about God. Because if he can change what you believe about God, your behavior will eventually follow. Every sin begins somewhere with unbelief.

The Good News

But Genesis 3 is not the end of the story.

The serpent won that battle. He did not win the war. In the very same chapter, God promised that one day the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus entered the very world where Adam had failed. Where Eve believed the lie, Jesus believed the Father. And there was even a kind of reenactment of this temptation — Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness, twisting Scripture, questioning God's provision. And every time, Jesus answered: "*It is written.*" Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. And in doing so, he proves to us that God is good, and that God can be trusted.

Paul's deepest concern in 2 Corinthians 11 is not bad behavior. It is bad belief. And he is right to be concerned, because bad belief always becomes bad behavior. Always. The fruit comes from the root.

But here is the other side of that truth: good belief produces good fruit.

When you genuinely believe that God is good — that he is not withholding, not deceiving, not threatened by your questions — something changes. Obedience stops feeling like restriction and starts feeling like trust. The commands of God are no longer a cage. They are a path. A path walked by someone who loves you completely and knows exactly where it leads.

This is what the serpent never wanted you to see. He needed you to believe that God's word costs you something. Because the moment you believe that God's word *gives* you something — the moment you look at the cross and understand that God held nothing back — the serpent's whole argument collapses.

The Christian life is not an argument about fruit. It is a declaration about God.

He is good. He can be trusted. Jesus proved it. And that changes everything.

For reference, the full text of Genesis 3:7–24:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 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. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." 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."

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. 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." To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:7–24)