

# ILLUSTRATING EVIL – THE EFFECT OF THE FALL AS SEEN IN GENESIS 4-11<sup>1</sup>

**Revd Victor James Johnson**

The account of the Fall in Gen 3 is one of the most-tragic events in Bible (and world) history. With Adam's fall into sin came the loss of the perfect relationship, which mankind had with the Creator. The fruits of sin have been displayed in every human life since, with the exception of the incarnate Son of God.

The spread of sin, and its effects, can be clearly seen in the early chapters of Genesis. Amid the spread of sin, we see also the spread of God's grace, as He works within the fallen world to buy back sinners. Sin is a problem, which has no human answer. It blinds the man, hardens his heart, and brings death. It is only through the action of God that sin can be dealt with. Ultimately, this comes only in the work of Jesus Christ. Gen 1-11 contains the first shadows and promise of the gospel of salvation.

## **I. Prolegomemon – the Theme of Genesis 1-11**

David Clines, in his book *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, outlines a number of themes in Gen 1 to 11. Quoting von Rad, he refers to the motif of sin-divine, speech-mitigation-punishment as a recurring cycle in these chapters.<sup>2</sup> He gives five cycles of this motif, namely, the Fall, Cain and Abel, the sons of God, the Flood, and Babel. By his analysis, each one of these cycles has, in turn, the elements of an act of sin, a divine speech of judgment, God mitigating the judgment, and an act of punishment.<sup>3</sup> In my own assessment, however, I believe it is more fitting to see the "sons of God" incident in Gen 6:1-4 as part of the Flood.

---

<sup>1</sup> There was no footnote number 1 in the original text. –Revising ed.

<sup>2</sup> David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOT Supp 10, Sheffield UK: Sheffield University Press, 1978, pp. 61-64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., table p. 63.

Clines also draws attention to another possible theme in Gen 1-11, again, as proposed by von Rad, namely the “spread of sin- spread of grace” theme. This motif is directly relevant to the study before us. Clines outlines it as follows: within these chapters, there is an increase in sinful action, and an increasingly-severe punishment. From Eden to Cain, Lamech, the sons of God, the Flood generation, there is “an ever-growing avalanche of sin, a continually-widening chasm between man and God”. It progresses from disobedience, to murder, to indiscriminate killing, to titanic lust, to total corruption, and uncontrolled violence. This “avalanche of sin” is countered by God’s ever-increasing severity of punishment. However, within this, there is also the increase of God’s grace. While Adam and Eve are punished, they are not killed, but are provided with clothes. Cain is not killed, but given a protective mark. Noah and family are preserved from the Flood. Yet there appears no “grace” within the Babel story.<sup>4</sup>

While there is great merit in this proposal, I tend to think that we should regard the judgment pronounced in Eden as the most severe. The weight of that judgment should be seen in the fact that Adam and Eve (and hence all humanity) are eternally cut off from intimate fellowship with God. They die spiritually, and suffer corruption, the effects of sin, and enmity with God and creation. This is the strength of the curses in Gen 3:14-24. I would argue that, theologically, this is a heavier penalty than those, which follow (including physical death). Those judgments, which follow, are really only manifestations of the curses in Gen 3. To see the expulsion from the Garden as a minor punishment is to miss the theological significance of separation from God, and the broken relationship with Him.

The third theme, to which Clines draws attention, is the “Creation-Uncreation-Recreation” theme. This centres around the Flood narrative. This view sees Gen 3-6 as the “undoing of creation”, the Flood itself is only the final stage of this uncreation, which had begun with the Fall. The Flood is the wiping off of this ever-corrupting creation, and the re-creation of a new order.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the sin after the Flood, shows that the spiritual problem of

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

sin cannot be dealt with by a physical solution. The parallels between the watery and void world of Gen 1:1-2 and the Flood are attractive. The commissions to Adam in Gen 1:26-31, and Noah in Gen 9:7-19, also have a similar function in the “first” and “second” creations. There is much to commend this view, however, it cannot be seen as *the* theme of these chapters, as it leaves the ultimate question unanswered of how sin is to be dealt with.

Clines, in his summary, concludes that both the “spread of sin-spread of grace” theme and the “creation-uncreation-recreation” theme have a place in the theme of primeval history. He suggests that these be seen together as a description of the overall theme. This leads him to conclude two overarching principles from these chapters:

1. Man tends to destroy what God has made good. Sin continues to spread, despite punishment and forgiveness.
2. No matter how drastic man’s sin becomes, God’s grace never fails to deliver man from the consequences of sin.<sup>6</sup>

This is a good starting point for our study. These themes display clearly the character of God, depicted in Gen 1-11, and also the effects of sin in men and in the world. It draws our attention to God’s covenantal promise of redemption, and sets the scene and background for the call of Abraham, and the promise of redemption through Israel, and, ultimately, through Christ. The question we are confronted with, after reading Gen 1-11, is, “How can God buy back sinful man into the perfect relationship lost at the Fall?” This question finds its answer in the revelation of redemptive history.

## **II. The Doctrine of the Fall**

The account of the Fall is found in Gen 3. God placed the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. They lived in a special, perfect, eternal relationship with God. They enjoyed perfect intimacy with God and each other. They were, in Goldsworthy’s words, “God’s people, in God’s place,

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

under God's rule".<sup>7</sup> The mark of this intimate relationship is displayed in 2:25 "The man and his wife were both naked, and felt no shame." The rule of God is marked by the single command, "You are free to eat from any tree in the Garden, but you must not eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (2:16-17). This is the test of obedience. All things are permissible, with this one exception. This command is clear and plain, and its consequences clearly stated. This command is the "boundary fence" for right relationship between humans and God.

Sin comes with the temptations of the snake (3:1-7). He comes to the woman, and firstly sows seeds of doubt, "Did God really say . . . ?" (3:1). Then he casts doubts upon the good character of God: "You will not surely die, for God knows when you eat it your eyes will be opened" (3:4), that God is actually holding something back from them unjustly. The final temptation is the desire to be like God (3:4), having complete knowledge like Him.

The sin is not the actual digestion of this fruit, but the wilful disobedience of the direct and explicit command of God. It is the desire to be their own God, to be independent of the Creator's rule, which is the essence of sin. As Dumbrell has expressed it, "Humankind is thus presented in the narrative as the usurper of the divine prerogatives, and snatching at divinity, a situation which the second Adam would reverse" (Phil 2:6).<sup>8</sup>

The first effect of the Fall, and their "eyes being opened", was the great sense of shame at being naked. Their nakedness had been a sign of their innocence. The second consequence was death. The perfect communion with God had been withdrawn and destroyed.<sup>9</sup> This is clearly seen in their hiding from God's presence (3:8-9). The death they suffer is

---

<sup>7</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1981, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, Leicester UK: Apollos IVP, 1988, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Old Testament History of Redemption*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988, p. 23.

firstly spiritual, but the decaying process, which would eventually lead to physical death, began at that time.<sup>10</sup>

In the curses that follow, God curses nature, then woman, then man, the reversal of the created order, but this is the order in which the temptations occur. The curses actually affect the nature of the role of each party within creation. Dumbrell's point is significant here, "This reversal of order suggests that sin represents an attack upon the harmony of the created order, and not merely a moral lapse."<sup>11</sup> The curses are significant, because, in this "fall", harmony with God, and harmony within creation, is lost. This is the total fracturing of God's world. The effects of this are clearly illustrated in the events recorded in Gen 4-11.

One of the first effects of sin is their attempt to hide from God (3:8). All people since that day have tried to hide their sin from God, a totally futile exercise. Cain tried to hide (4:9), the builders of Babel tried to hide their sin in making a great name for themselves (11:4), and there are many other examples throughout scripture. The openness and trust of the relationship has gone, swallowed by guilt, in the presence of a holy God.<sup>12</sup>

In this sin against God's authority, relationships are broken in creation. As Sailhamer comments, "[the] alienation between the man and the woman went far beyond the shame that each now felt . . . the author now recounts the petty attempt on the man's part to cast blame on the woman, and, obliquely, on God".<sup>13</sup> Calvin is even stronger on this sense of Adam's usurping God's authority. Commenting on 3:12, he writes,

The boldness of Adam now more clearly betrays itself; for, so far being subdued, he breaks forth into coarser blasphemy. He had, before, been tacitly expostulating with God, now he begins openly to

---

<sup>10</sup> H. M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1976, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> G. C. Aalders, *Genesis*, vol 1, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1981, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol 2, F. E. Gaebelein, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1990, p. 54.

contend with Him, and triumphs as one who has broken through all barriers.<sup>14</sup>

I believe these comments are justified. Whereas we experience these words of Adam in verse 12 in our daily lives and actions, here Adam, for the first time in eternity, brings such charges against the Almighty. Here is sin. Here is the creature accusing the Creator. We may have grown accustomed to such blame-shifting, but here we have a watershed in relationships. This attitude, which is displayed in 3:12, recurs in relationships throughout Gen 1-11, throughout the rest of the book, and throughout the Bible.

We will now examine these motifs, as they occur in subsequent narratives.

### **III. The Progress of Sin in Genesis 4-11**

#### **a. Cain and Abel**

The difficulties in the relationship between Cain and his brother, Abel, rose out of the context of worship. Both were worshippers of God, and offered sacrifices. Yet their attitudes were different. Cain offered grain or fruit, while Abel offered animals. Abel was accepted, while Cain was not. Was Cain's sacrifice not accepted by God because he offered plant, rather than animal, sacrifices? Morris thinks that this is the case. He postulates that God had revealed how sacrifices were to be made, after the expulsion from Eden. "The entire occurrence can only be really understood in the context of an original revelation by God regarding the necessity of substitutionary sacrifice, as a prerequisite to approaching God."<sup>15</sup> This may be true in a wider Pentateuchal context, but I believe that Cain's fault is more fundamental than in forms and practices. The problem lies in his attitude. Sailhamer comments,

Take notice that the author has omitted any explanation [of why Cain's offering was not accepted]. He is apparently less concerned

---

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, vol 1, J. King, tran., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, reprint 1979, pp. 163-164.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *The Genesis Record*, pp. 136-137.

about Cain's offering than he was with Cain's response to the Lord's rejection of his offering.<sup>16</sup>

I believe the problem lies in his attitude toward God. Notice his reaction to non-acceptance in verse 5, he is angry. Notice the content of God's advice/rebuke in verse 7: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." This suggests an underlying spirit of rebellion. He wants to worship God on his own terms. Cain wants to be "God" of his own life.

The power of this rebellious desire is borne out in his action. In verse 8, he killed his brother. It was not Abel who had not accepted him. Abel had not rebuked him. This is the effect of sin. The light of the righteous Abel shone upon the dark unrepentant heart of Cain. Abel's righteousness showed Cain's offerings to be hypocritical. Rather than repent, and do what is right, Cain preferred to remove the witness, which accused him. Goldsworthy clearly sums up the incident,

Cain refuses God's verdict, in which his offering is rejected, and his brother's accepted. He responds with anger directed at Abel, and kills him. Human conflict is thus shown to be the consequence of broken fellowship with God. There is anger at the grace of God, when shown to another.<sup>17</sup>

Like his parents, when confronted by God, Cain shifts responsibility, (v. 9) first lying, and then denying responsibility for his brother. Once again, the punishment takes the form of curses upon the man's relationship with his fellows and the created world. Cain's sin was anger with God, it bore fruit in destroying his brother, and now results in broken relationships with all people and the creation. Sin is rebellion against God. It is manifest in selfishness, resentment of others, and broken relationships.

---

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, Homebush West NSW: Lancer Books, 1991, p. 137.

## **b. The Cainites**

The line of Cain, as shown in Gen 4:17-26, displays the same tendencies. Cain is indeed preserved by God as He promised (4:15). Yet arrogance rises through the line. Lamech, the fifth generation, saw Cain's protection in a different light. Whereas it was God who would avenge Cain if he were killed, Lamech taunts, "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech 77 times" (vv. 23-24). Lamech will do the avenging, and 11 times more than for Cain! His arrogant, sinful attitude is well stated by Hamilton.

Unlike his ancestor, several generations earlier, who felt the desperate need of divine protection, Lamech feels he is his own security. He can handle any difficulty, or any mistreatment, quite adequately by himself.<sup>18</sup>

This genealogy gives us an account of the start of civilisation. God's grace is present, even with the godless line. We read of technology, arts, music, and violence. Society progresses, but sin is the underlying problem. Relationships are fractured. To summarise, we may use Goldsworthy's words, "By the grace of God, human society continues, but, within it, are the seeds of self-destruction in the breakdown of human relationships."<sup>19</sup>

## **c. The Genealogy of Noah**

Gen 5 looks like a harmless record of the generations from Adam to Noah. What is obvious are the great ages of the antediluvian patriarchs. Yet, there is a structure in this genealogy, which is very significant. Each unit is constructed as follows: "When A had lived X years, he became the father of B. And, after he became the father of B, he lived Y years, and he bore sons and daughters. All the days of A were X+Y years. And he died" (my translation). The significance of this is in the last phrase "and he died". No other biblical genealogy contains this. While our attention is on the long lives, we fail to remember that mankind was created to live forever. While

---

<sup>18</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: chapters 1-17*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, p. 241.

<sup>19</sup> Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, p. 138.

these men may live for nearly a millennium, it is a good deal short of forever. Instead of seeing this genealogy as a record of long life, we should note that it is a litany of death.

The only exception to this pattern is Enoch (5:24), who did not die, but was taken by God. As men multiply, so does sin. Death, the promised penalty, has reigned in all lives. However, in the counter-example of Enoch, we see the saving grace of God to reverse this process. His assumption prefigures the resurrection of Christ, and the defeat of sin and death.

#### **d. The Flood**

Chapter 6 highlights the problem of sin. In 6:1-4, we are introduced to a strange union between “the sons of God” and “the daughters of men”, and groups called “Nephilim” and “Giborim”. Interpretations of this event vary, and it is not necessary to go into it here. Regardless of who are meant by these terms, it is obviously not pleasing to God, for note verse 3, “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit will not contend (LXX “remain with”) with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be 120 years.’ ”

These Giborim, the “mighty men”, and men of renown, who resulted from the union (whether totally human or angelic), seem to imply a rise in human strength, and a desire to claim divine rights, and rule for themselves. Here (implicitly) is the desire of Eden again, to take the place of God. This is the social background to the Flood narrative.

Verse 5 is a telling commentary on the spread of sin, clearly portrayed by the NIV translation: “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (emphasis mine). In Gen 1, “God saw . . . and it was very good.” Now He sees the opposite, a lost, rebellious world.<sup>20</sup> The result is God’s decision to “uncreate the world”, verse 7.

The knowledge of good and evil, so craved by Adam and Eve, has shown itself as an avalanching desire for evil, a desire for self-rule, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Note the comments made by J. H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, p. 80.

disobedience towards God. The corruption is so great, and relationships so damaged, that God must start again. Only Noah is found, who is righteous.

Following this sinful state, comes God's judgment in the Flood. Yet there is still grace, 120 years elapse before the rain (v. 3), and Noah and his family are preserved.

**e. Noah and Ham**

Has the Flood destroyed the problem of sin? The answer is "No!" The answer comes clearly, immediately after the Flood, in 9:20-29. Noah planted a vineyard, drank its wine, and got drunk. He lay naked, and his son Ham acted shamefully towards him (9:20-22). Again, we are confronted with a perplexing account. Little detail is given. What exactly did Ham do to receive such a curse? We cannot say for sure, but, at the very least, it was disrespect towards his father. Aalders comments here:

He [Ham] was amused by what he discovered, and, later, mockingly shares his amusement with his brothers. Ham, by his very attitude, displayed a tendency towards uncouthness, and lack of respect for his father. . . . The disdain and disrespect that Ham showed toward his father was serious enough to warrant his condemnation.<sup>21</sup>

It is true that respect for parents is paramount in the Old Testament. Respect for parents reflects respect for God. At very least, Ham shows that sinful attitude to exalt one's self over the true authority. He boasts in his own wisdom contrasted to his father's folly. It is the rebellious attitude of Eden again. Once again, sin finds its destructive power in human relationships. A simple incident, yet a telling one. As in the progression of generations from Cain to Lamech, so the generations, from Ham through the descendants of Canaan, would see the increase in this rebellion. What was for Ham a carnal jesting, later manifested itself in the abominations of the Canaanites.

---

<sup>21</sup> Aalders, *Genesis*, vol 1, p. 203.

What of Noah's sin? No comment is made regarding him. I think that his folly is clear to all. Here, the one described as righteous and blameless (6:9), is a man of flesh, too. He has the same sinful flaws as his first parents.

**f. Babel**

The tower of Babel gives us the last example of sinful rebellion, and God's judgment, within these chapters. Gen 11:4: "Then they said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens (lit. "with its head in heaven"), so that we may make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'" Several things are important here. The people were united in building their own city. They wanted to make a name for themselves. (Since they are united, they can only refer to giving themselves a big name before God.) Their tower was to reach the very dwelling place of God. They refused to be scattered, as God had commanded (1:28; 9:1).

This endeavour, again, is direct rebellion against God's authority and command. As Wenham comments,

It seems likely that Genesis views it as sacrilege. For the sky is also heaven, the home of God, and this ancient skyscraper may be another human effort to become like God, and have intercourse with Him.<sup>22</sup>

The desire of Adam and Eve to be like God, and equal His authority, is, once again, demonstrated. Yet, one again, the Sovereign God acts. He scatters the rebels. One cannot attain the divine by human efforts.

Dumbrell's comments are apt at this point:

The implication is that the problem, attacked by God, was the problem of the misplaced centre. Human beings regarded themselves as the measure of all things, able to control the course of their world, able to build better worlds! Of course, by such endeavour, the naked meaning of sin is exposed. Such human attempts, then, and since,

---

<sup>22</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1987, p. 239.

which leave God out of consideration, are sin in its baldest, and most-blattant form.<sup>23</sup>

Sin spreads in extent as the population grows, and there are more broken relationships. It spreads in intensity with society. Yet, its nature is still the same as the first sin. It is the usurping of God's authority, and wanting to be our own gods. Mankind is fallen, and only the action of God in history can change this downward spiral.

The sequel of the Babel incident comes in the calling of Abram. God would gather his descendants to a place, give him a great name, and bring him into fellowship with God. This is God's action in redemption, God reversing the curses of the Fall. For man, it means humble submission to the revelation of God, and obedience to His command. It is repentance, and acceptance of God's rule.

## **Conclusion**

The perfect relationship between God, man, woman, and creation was broken by one act of disobedience. Adam and Eve desired to be like God, and know good and evil. In their disobedience, came the knowledge of good and evil, and a never-ending desire to do evil. Their desire to be like God became a trait for all their descendants. We have a desire to want to be free of God's rule, and be our own gods.

This is clearly seen throughout Gen 4-11. Sin is the marking theme. God acts in judgment and grace. Man, by his own efforts, cannot reach God, nor even independence from God. Sin destroys relationships, and brings sorrow and death, as we see in these chapters.

Only God's action can right this wrong. In Gen 3:15, God foretold of a descendant of the woman, who would crush the snake's head, while He would be bruised. The Son of God came as the fulfilment of this word. He defeated Satan, sin, and death, and has brought those who believe back into a restored relationship with God.

---

<sup>23</sup> Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, p. 23.

## **Bibliography**

### **Reference Works**

- Brown, F., Driver, S. R., and Briggs, C. A., *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Lafayette IN: AP&A, 1979.
- Daane, J., "The Fall", in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edn, G. W. Bromiley, ed., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982.
- Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., and Waltke, B. K., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1980.
- Hughes, P. E., "Fall", in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1980.
- Kohlenberger, John R. III, *The NIV Triglot Old Testament MT-LXX-NIV*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1981.

### **Commentaries**

- Aalders, G. C., *Genesis*, vol 1, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1981.
- , *Genesis*, vol 2, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1981.
- Calvin, John, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, vol 1, J. King, tran., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, reprint 1979.
- Cassuto, U., *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Parts 1 and 2, Jerusalem Isr: Magnes, 1961.
- Hamilton, Victor P., *The Book of Genesis: chapters 1-17*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983.
- Keil, C. F., and Delitzsch, F., *The Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983.
- Kidner, Derek, *Genesis*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1967.
- Morris, H. M., *The Genesis Record*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1976.
- Sailhamer, J. H., *Genesis*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol 2, F. E. Gaebelin, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1990.
- Sarna, N. M., *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, New York NY: Schocken, 1970.
- Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 1-15*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1987.

Westermann, Claus, *Genesis*, 3 vols, Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1974.

### **Other Books**

Clines, David J. A., *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOT Supp 10, Sheffield UK: Sheffield University Press, 1978.

Delitzsch, F., *Old Testament History of Redemption*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988.

Dumbrell, William J., *Covenant and Creation*, Homebush West NSW: Lancer Books, 1984.

———, *The Faith of Israel*, Leicester UK: Apollos IVP, 1988.

Goldsworthy, Graeme, *Gospel and Kingdom*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1981.

———, *According to Plan*, Homebush West NSW: Lancer Books, 1991.

Harman, A. M., *Approaching the Old Testament*, Reservoir: Aust Press, 1990.

Kaiser, W. J., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1978.

Payne, J. B., *The Theology of the Older Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1962.

Strom, M., *Days are Coming*, Sydney NSW: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.