

A.B. Simpson:

The inspired account of man's first disobedience and its bitter fruits, is but too real and literal; but back of the simple narrative there lies much deep spiritual symbolism and significance, vividly illustrating not only the dark shadows of sin and misery, but also the whole contrasted light and glory of grace and redemption.

SECTION I -- The Serpent, or Temptation

While, of course, we believe that there was a literal serpent employed as the instrument in temptation, yet the whole language of the Bible unfolds with clear and emphatic fullness, a mightier personality back of the ostensible agent to whom this name is applied in many subsequent allusions. The New Testament writers invariably speak of Satan under this figure, and the closing scenes of the Apocalypse unveil the vision of his final judgment and destruction.

THE LITERAL SERPENT.

That Satan should come to our first parents in this disguise should not surprise us, and does not seem to have startled Eve herself. Not knowing yet all the properties and qualities of even the natural creation, she may have supposed that there was nothing extraordinary in the serpent addressing her. Never having been tempted before, she could not be supposed to have been on her guard against temptation. For us the lesson is obvious and solemn that temptation will not assail us usually in its naked repulsiveness, and in the undisguised form of its satanic force, but through some unexpected second cause, and always through that which we will be least liable to suspect. The traditional idea that the devil came to our Lord with cloven foot and demoniac form is contrary to the very idea of temptation; such a creature would scarcely mislead or persuade. An old Scotchman, looking at such a picture of the temptation, smiled sarcastically at the figure of the fiend, and drily answered, "Yon devil would never tempt me." Let us therefore be looking for the insidious approaches of evil, not in startling apparitions, nor extraordinary manifestations, but in the simplest concerns and most commonplace occurrences and objects of our every day lives, and ever remember that the price of safety is eternal vigilance.

THE REAL TEMPTER.

We need not say that this was the devil; Isaiah calls him "Leviathan, the piercing serpent, even leviathan, that serpent, and the dragon that is in the sea." Paul calls him the serpent that deceived Eve through subtlety, and John calls him that old serpent, the dragon which is the Devil and Satan.

The literal serpent is probably the most perfect type of his spiritual qualities. Of his history we understand enough to know that he was originally one of the most intelligent and brilliant of created beings -- "the anointed cherub, perfect in his ways until iniquity was found in him -- and whose heart was lifted up because of his beauty -- and he corrupted his wisdom by reason of his brightness -- and had walked up and down in the midst of the stones and fire upon the holy mountain of God." He is the embodiment of knowledge without purity; of wisdom devoid of principle; and the most brilliant qualities of intellect coupled with motives the most selfish, malignant and desperately wicked. Like the serpent, his chief resource is guile; his wiles are more to be dreaded than his direct assaults. It is evident from this record that his career of wickedness and ruin had already long ago begun. He had dragged down with him in his desperate course the angels who kept not their first estate, and now he had come to wreck the purity and happiness of the fair new world that had just sprung from the Creator's hand. Why God should allow, even for a season, such an influence to touch his creation, is one of the mysteries of the divine government, which is practically the same as the question of temptation in our lives day by day. This is probably a sufficient reason -- that good must be tested before it can be rewarded, and that all character and righteousness must be devil-proof before it can be finally approved and recompensed.

THE METHOD OF THE TEMPTATION.

His first word to Eve is an unqualified "Yea;" a complete assent to all that he was about to question and deny; an absolute and utterly deceiving disguise intended to throw her off her guard by taking sides with her, in order that, from her own standpoint, he might bring her to his. Thus he ever approaches us. He always prefers to fight his battle from our side of the field. He would much rather work from a Christian pulpit than from infidel press or even a theatrical stage. His very first utterance is an unblushing lie, and from that day whenever he has said

“yes,” he has always meant “no.” Our Savior calls him a liar and the father of lies. The true way to understand and checkmate him is always to read him by contraries, and treat his promises as curses, and his terrific threats as the pledges of divine blessing.

His second word is a question. It has been said that the interrogation punctuation is simply the figure of a crooked serpent -- so that has ever been his favorite weapon. Not directly does he assail our faith, but adroitly insinuates the finest shades of inquiry; and then when he has lodged it, like the adhesive film of a spider's web, he proceeds, with exquisite skill and celerity, to weave around it the meshes of his fatal snare. His questions are always directed against the Word of God, "Hath God said?" is still his favorite shaft, and it is never so effectual as when proceeded and winged by the old "Yea" of the garden. The atheistic "God hath not said" of Voltaire or Paine is not half so dangerous as the finely insinuating skepticism of his chosen instrument in the religious pulpit and press. Our day is flooded with its arrows of false and fatal liberalism. Soon comes the next stage: "Ye shall not surely die." The spirit of skepticism in regard to the inspiration of the Scripture is always followed by the loosening of the sanctions of divine government, and the denial of retribution. The wide spread and pernicious teachings of such multitudes of so-called consecrated voices in denial of future punishment, and the attempt to establish a system of easy indulgence and boundless probation for the impenitent and obstinate are but the voices of Eden repeated in multiplied echoes in these last times, when the ages meet before the end, and the prototypes of the past are receiving their last and highest fulfillment.

Let us observe that Satan's promise to Eve: "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" was not altogether false. The devil does not always lie, else his falsehoods would not be credited. His statements have enough of truth in them to float them; his drugs enough sweetness to make them palatable; his promises enough credibility in them to inveigle us into his snare. His victims do, indeed, become as gods, even as he himself had become, by renouncing the authority of God, and becoming the master of his own will and the lord of his own life. But this is the very curse of our fallen state, and one from which we can only be saved by the death of self and the resurrection life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we turn from this scene, what a sad and solemn picture is this first temptation -- an Eden of delight; the rich inheritance of every blessing; the very hour of uttermost love on the part of heaven; and yet the hour of peril; the hour and power of darkness; the chosen hour of our temper and destroyer; an hour which sufficed to wreck a world and overshadow a whole eternity. It is to our Eden that the serpent comes in the moment of our most apparent security. Let us "watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation."

SECTION II -- The Tree of Knowledge, or the First Sin.

That this was a literal tree is implied in the narrative; the name applied to it may have been given because of some property in it to stimulate and impart a forbidden wisdom, but more probably because through eating it and thus entering into a condition of sin, man in his own experience obtained the secret of knowledge of evil and the difference between good and evil. It suggests the important lesson that Satan's chief assaults upon us are directed against our understanding, and that we are in chief danger of falling through our intellect. The symbolical tree of evil is a tree of knowledge; the symbol of good is the tree of life. The devil's promise to us is superior wisdom; the Lord's gift to us is eternal life. The boasted wisdom of the world is foolishness with God; the chief obstacle to simple faith is the spirit of human reasoning and our over-confidence in our own thoughts and judgments. Therefore if any man will be taught of God, "he must first become a fool that he may be wise."

Rowland Hill used to say that the greatest need of many men was to amputate their bodies just above their shirt collars. Before we can be truly taught and led of the Spirit we must first be beheaded and then re-headed in Christ. Without Christ the tree of knowledge is a curse. The process of divine knowledge is life first, "and the life was the light of men." The knowledge of evil is especially to be dreaded. Innocency consists largely in ignorance of evil, and the sooner we come to realize it, the more surely will we renounce this forbidden fruit and reach the scriptural idea, "wise concerning that which is good, simple concerning evil." The process of sin and temptation in the mind of Eve in connection with the forbidden tree is as instructive as on the side of the tempter. First we see it as it touches her lower nature and excites her physical appetites. She saw that the tree was "good for food." This is "the lust of the flesh" which John mentions as the first stage of sinful desire. Next she sees that it is "pleasant to the eyes;" this is the aesthetic stage, the contact of temptation with the psychical nature, representing the solicitations that approach our tastes, sensibilities, and intellect and emotional nature. And finally it reaches her more spiritual sensibilities appears as a tree to "be desired to make one wise," representing the spiritual temptations with which the adversary still assails our higher nature, and with which John closes the trinity of evil desire, namely: "The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." All these three stages of temptation we see in the conflict in the wilderness, in the life of Christ Himself, in which he so gloriously conquered where Eve had fallen, and left for us the secret and pledge of

victory.

The most solemn lesson that comes to us from this emblem of sin is the fact that in itself the act of Eve was one of comparatively trifling importance. There was nothing in the inherent quality of the sin that appeared to make it frightful. That eating of one simple fruit could bring very serious consequences, naturally must have seemed improbable. Had it been an act of great profanity, bloody crime, or incendiary violence we would have been prepared for some disastrous consequences; but for a thing so trifling as the taste of a single apple to be the pivot of a world's destiny is indeed startling. But here lies the very essence of moral principle and the fine line which separates right and wrong as wide as the poles, namely: that right is right, and wrong is wrong in no degree because of the circumstances or the consequences, but absolutely because of the principle; and the less important the circumstances are, the more is the principle really emphasized. When we do a thing or refrain from doing it because of adverse results that will follow, we are acting from some other motive; but when it is so unimportant in itself as to be disentangled from all other issues, and the act is performed simply because of the command itself, then it is manifestly a more perfect act of absolute obedience. The great tests of obedience therefore often lie in very little things. If we can disobey God in what seems a trifle, we exhibit the spirit of disobedience pure and simple, and when we obey him in the minutest trifle which we may not even understand, and whose consequences we cannot be capable of reasoning out, our obedience is most perfect and pleasing to Him. Therefore we find that Saul lost his kingdom through one little act of disobedience, and the old prophet of Israel lost his life by simply going home to sleep in the house of his friend contrary to the divine command; while on the other hand, Abraham's covenant was established through an act of rigid obedience to a command that seemed incomprehensible. Eve wrecked the world by one little disobedience, and the issues of our lives likewise are ever turning on pivots as fine as the jewels around which the delicate wheels of our watches revolve. The root of sin in this sad picture is doubt, the tree is disobedience, and the fruit is death.

SECTION III -- The Fig Leaves

The first effect of sin is shame, a sense of nakedness, a strange consciousness which makes even that which was innocent and pure, repulsive and wrong. When we disobey God even the holiest things of life and nature are defiled. The guilty pair at once discover that they have the knowledge of evil, and their sense of shame and nakedness implies far more than mere physical consciousness for it is the beginning of an evil conscience, and the gnawing of that self-reproach which constitutes the curse of sin. The instinct which seeks a covering for their persons in the fig leaves of the garden is a symbol of the vain attempts of man's guilt in every age to find some covering for its shame and from its penalty. This may stand for the excuses and attempts at palliation with which the soul first seeks to avoid the issue and cover its guilt. This we see in the miserable pretexts and mutual recriminations of Adam and Eve in this chapter. Then the fig leaves may stand also for man's self-righteousness, represented in the next chapter by the offering of Cain, and in subsequent ages by the ceremonies and external services of earth's false religions, which can never cover the nakedness of the sinful heart or satisfy God's demands upon our perfect love and purity. Perhaps more than anything else these coverings represent the innumerable devices of mankind to settle the question of sin and satisfy the guilty conscience -- through sacrifices, self-inflicted tortures and all the cruel and abominable rites of heathen idolatry. All these are but filthy rags from which the hand of inexorable justice will strip the trembling, sinner, and expose his naked guilt to the piercing eye and impartial judgment of God. Sinner, how have you covered your naked soul, and satisfied your guilty conscience? There is but one robe that can hide your sin and cover your nakedness -- the seamless garment of Christ's righteousness.

SECTION IV -- The Promised Seed

The first word of judgment in this dark hour is pronounced upon the serpent in the hearing of the two trembling sinful ones, and it is a word for them of strange and, perhaps, at the time, incomprehensible mercy. "Her seed shall bruise thy head." This is the first promise of redemption. The marvelous thing about it to us is the calm and infinite resources of divine grace which had already prepared this wonderful remedy, and, without one expression of impatience or perplexity, proceeds to unfold the purposes of salvation which is to undo the wreck of this awful hour. Had we been suddenly called to face such an issue, and found our kindest purposes thus blasted by the wickedness of our enemy and the faithlessness of our friends, we should have been overwhelmed with disappointment and indignation. But God is ready even for this issue. Ages before He had prepared His plan, "the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world;" and, reserving the judgment of the transgressors until He has first provided the remedy, He begins to unroll the scroll of redeeming promise which, at the last, reaches its fulfillment in the Cross of Calvary and the consummation of redemption. Marvelous riches of grace which loved us, even when we were dead in sins, "that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us by Christ Jesus!" The language of this promise through all the veil of the symbol and figure glows with the very love and effulgence of the gospel. The

very term "seed" suggests the figure which the Master applied to Himself as the great natural type of life through death. He is the true seed of all spiritual life planted like the corn of wheat in the soil to die, but springing forth to bear much fruit in His spiritual offspring. The seed of the woman is the revealing of the mystery on the incarnation and the babe of the virgin, and contains a gentle hint for the comfort of poor Eve that her part in the fall should yet be counteracted by her glorious ministry in the plan of redemption. The bruising of the serpent's head, and the enmity which God proclaimed from this hour between the serpent and the seed was the breach of the unholy alliance which Satan had tried to form with the new race, and the gracious pledge that the battle of human redemption henceforth was not between man and Satan, but between Christ and the adversary, and should end in the triumph of redemption and the defeat and destruction of the evil one. But one dark and sad coloring blends with all this glory and victory, and that is the picture of a suffering Savior. "Thou shalt bruise His heel," is a vision of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the bleeding and dying of Satan's conqueror.

"He sank beneath our bitter woes,
To raise us to His throne;
There's not a gift His love bestows,
But cost His heart a groan."
SECTION V -- The Coats of Skins

"Unto Adam and his wife also did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them." Back of this simple statement there lies a whole world of spiritual suggestiveness. Why should the skins of animals be taken for their covering when so many simpler robes might have been provided, without the cost even of animal life and suffering? Why should death so soon follow, especially upon the unoffending creatures around them? The next chapter introduces the picture of sacrifice, and we see the bleeding, dying lamb atoning on the altar -- the divinely appointed victim for Abel's sin. When was this rite inaugurated? Why not at this moment when the plan of salvation had just been revealed, and the suffering Redeemer promised? What more proper than that our trembling parents should have been taught in the strange mystery of suffering and death on the part of the bleeding lamb which they were called to sacrifice, the meaning of the death they had incurred, and the sacrificial death of Him who was to save them from its eternal bitterness. And then, as its blood was sprinkled on the altar, and its flesh consumed in the symbolical fire, how perfectly it would have expressed the justifying righteousness of the coming Savior, to take its skin and robe them with its covering instead of the fig leaves of their own self-righteousness.

A shepherd once illustrated this thought with singular beauty. One of his sheep had just lost her lamb, and he tried to induce her to take the care of another lamb, but in vain. Then he flayed the dead lamb, and covered the living one with its skin. At once the mother's attitude changed; instead of rebuffing she welcomed the little nursling, and with the most demonstrative affection gave it the place of her own. So in Christ's robe, and united with His life and righteousness, we are accepted in the beloved and stand in the same relation to our heavenly Father as His own dear Son. Dear friend, have you known the blessedness of the man whose transgression is thus forgiven, and learned to sing:

"Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness,
Thy beauty is my glorious dress."
SECTION VI -- The Cherubim

The last and sublimest symbol of this scene was the figure which God placed at the gate of Eden under the name of cherubim and the flaming sword to keep or guard the way of the tree of life. We are enabled to discover much of the spiritual meaning of these strange figures from their places in subsequent pictures and revelations. They reappear in the Tabernacle as the complement and crown of the mercy-seat before the ark, and were beaten out of the same piece of gold, implying certainly that they must have the same significance. This imperatively points to the person and work of Jesus Christ, of which the mercy-seat and ark were the most perfect symbols. We find them again in the visions of Ezekiel connected with the gracious presence of God as He reveals His purposes to save Israel, and then subsequently withdraws His presence from the sanctuary until His plan of judgment has been fulfilled. And, finally, we meet this symbol in the book of Revelation as the four living creatures connected with the throne and the Lamb, and singing the song of redemption unto Him that redeemed us out of every kindred, tribe and nation. There they seem not only to represent the person of Christ, but more especially His redeemed people.

Without dwelling in detail upon the argument for this opinion, it is sufficient for the purposes of this volume to assume that they stand as divine symbols -- first, of the person and attributes of the Lord Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer and Head; and secondly, as the representatives and types of His redeemed people -- on the glorious

principle, so divinely true, that as He is, so are we also, and that the glory, which belongs to Him, He has given to us, and we shall share. Therefore the symbol -- which, in the tabernacle and in the garden, personifies Christ more especially and in the Apocalypse of John represents rather Christ's people; having passed in the great process of redemption into fulfillment in the glory and salvation of His followers, who at length share His preeminence and throne -- is the type of redeemed humanity: firstly, in the person of its glorious Head, and, finally, in His ransomed and glorified people.

With this in view the details of the symbol become most instructive and beautiful. They comprised and combined a figure with outstretched wings and four faces. The first represented a man, and so stands for the perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ and His people, and the human qualities of affection and intelligence thus symbolized. The second face was that of a lion, signifying the lordship and kingliness of Christ and His people. The third, the face of an ox, expressed the two ideas of strength and sacrifice, which were so gloriously exemplified in His might and suffering, and into which we must also enter in the fullness of His fellowship. The fourth was the face of an eagle, sublimely suggesting keenness of vision and loftiness of flight, and the exalted place of glory and blessing to which both Christ and His followers rise in the consummation of the plan of grace. All this is so true that the early fathers used these four symbols as the signs of the four gospels. Matthew representing the lion; Mark, the ox; Luke, the man, and John, the soaring eagle -- God's fourfold picture of His Son. One by one we, too, are following in sublime procession and entering into the spirit of the new man, and the Son of Man, the kingliness of His Sonship, the strength and patience of His crucified and risen life, and the intimacy and exaltation of His ascension and heavenly fellowship; and by and by we shall stand with Him in all the glory of His mediatorial throne, and shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of our Father. This was the ideal of redeemed humanity which God placed as a group of heavenly statuary, as a pledge of our future destiny, as the goal of our highest aspirations, at the very threshold of man's lost inheritance, and in the very hour of man's deepest fall and darkest gloom. So ever, when things seem the saddest and even our fears have almost overwhelmed us, the same unconquerable love meets our helplessness, lifts up our sinking weakness, and points our languishing eye forward and upward to the prize set before us, and purchased for us by the glorious Captain of our salvation. Let us rise to meet His marvelous love. Let us realize these infinite and eternal possibilities. Let us claim these divine resources and promises, and, from the gates of Paradise lost, begin the pathway which leads by the way of the cherubim to the closing pictures of Revelation, and the open gates of Paradise restored.