

**THE CURSE OF THE SERPENT AND
THE PROMISE OF MESSIAH
(SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2014)**

Scripture Reading: 10 Words; Gal. 4:1-4

Why did God choose to create?

We might say to show His glory, but I am not sure that this is an answer we directly find in Scripture.

If we ask the question, how does God show His glory in creation, that is certainly a question we can answer.

Why was the Fall part of God's eternal plan?

This is a challenging question that I don't know that Scripture allows us to answer except to say that God shows His goodness, glory, power, and love even through man's rebellion.

What has God done in response to man's rebellion?

This is a rich and important question that we can and must answer.

The two verses from Genesis we consider give the first part of the answer.

What did God do in response to man's rebellion?

First, He pronounced judgment on the serpent and Satan and promised a Savior.

In response to sin and evil God did not remain silent.

The problem of evil is troubling.

But what we can say is that God deals with evil and rebellion much more seriously and powerfully than man could ever.

God deals seriously with evil and rebellion.

Our focus today will be on Genesis 3:14-15.

First, we will give attention to verses 14 and 15.

Second, we will consider some of the history of how this verse has been interpreted.

Third, we will see how verse 15 is such an important verse in pointing to the coming of Jesus Christ.

GENESIS 3:14-15 – GOD DEALS SERIOUSLY WITH EVIL AND REBELLION.

Gen. 3:14 So the LORD God said to the serpent:

“Because you have done this,

You *are* cursed more than all cattle,

And more than every beast of the field;
On your belly you shall go,
And you shall eat dust
All the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel.”

Do the words of verses 14 and 15 speak to both the actual serpent and Satan?

This is what we are to see.

In addressing the serpent, God was ultimately speaking about the judgment that would come to Satan and his kingdom.

Why was the serpent cursed when Satan was ultimately to be blamed?

The serpent was cursed because although it was used by Satan, it still had a part in the deception of Eve.

This responsibility is reflected in the Law.

Animals which kill a human are to be killed.

They are put to death, not because they are knowingly responsible, but because they are to be in subjection to man.¹

Gen 9:5 Surely for your lifeblood I will demand *a reckoning*; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man.

The great preacher Chrysostom commented on the judgment the serpent received, “Just as a loving father when punishing the murderer of his son, might snap in two the sword or dagger with which the murder had been committed.”²

As Satan used the serpent to deceive Adam and Eve, so God would curse the serpent as a picture of the judgment that Satan would receive.

The curse of verse 14 has three parts.

¹ Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Pentateuch, p. 99.

² Keil and Delitzsch, p. 99

You are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field.

On your belly you shall go,

And you shall eat dust all the days of your life.

How is it that the serpent was cursed more than all cattle and more than every beast of the field?

There are several ways of understanding this curse.

First, forever the snake would be especially associated with the work of Satan.

All of creation suffered as a result of the fall, but forever the serpent would be a picture of Satan.

And since Satan would bear the greatest of all curses and judgments, so likewise would the snake.

We see this association and judgment throughout Scripture.

Gen. 49:17 “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, A viper by the path, That bites the horse’s heels So that its rider shall fall backward.”

Luke 10:19 Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Second, the curse on the serpent also has reference to the breaking of the serpent’s power.

No longer would Satan be able to use the serpent in such a way as to deceive men and women.

And although Satan would still retain power, his power would eventually be entirely broken and crushed as verse 15 notes.

Third, this greatest of curses is then further explained in the remainder of verse 14 and in verse 15.

The second part of the curse, “on your belly you shall go” is also difficult to understand.

Does this mean that snakes at one time walked or were able to move in a different way?

While some commentators feel that this means that snakes when first created were able to walk or move differently, this is not necessarily the case.

John Calvin wrote,

“There will, however be no absurdity in supposing, that the serpent was again consigned to that former condition, to which he was already naturally subject. For thus he, who had exalted himself against the image of God, was to be thrust back into his proper rank.”

Leviticus 11:42 “Whatever crawls on its belly, whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet among all creeping things that creep on the earth—these you shall not eat, for they are an abomination.”

The serpent and other creatures associated with crawling on the belly would be a picture of judgment and humiliation and therefore an abomination to God’s people in terms of eating them.

The third part of the curse follows from the second part, “And you shall eat dust all the days of your life.”

Snakes, of course, do not get their nutrition by eating actual dust.

Snakes are carnivores and eat frogs, mice, insects, and other creatures.

But snakes, except for tree snakes and water snakes, do spend all their days crawling through the dust, eating animals who also spend their time in the dust.

Micah 7:17 speaks of the shame that would come upon the nations.

Micah 7:17 They shall lick the dust like a serpent; They shall crawl from their holes like snakes of the earth. They shall be afraid of the LORD our God, And shall fear because of You.

All three parts of the curse on the serpent also appropriately apply to Satan.

Satan was the chief of the angels, but for his rebellion against God he was kicked out of heaven and made as it were to eat the dust of the earth.

There will never be any restoration for Satan or change in his cursed position.

With verse 15, I think we are to see a greater focus now on the judgment that would befall Satan rather than understanding verse 15 as speaking just to the dislike of man and snakes.

In the Hebrew, the first word of verse 15 is the word **enmity**.

God in His judgment but also His great mercy would place **enmity, hatred, hostility** between Satan and the woman, and between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman.

It is a two-fold enmity.

It is easy to overlook this important part of verse 15.

This judgment on Satan is part of the blessing given to God’s people.

Throughout Scripture God’s people are called to hate evil and stand against evildoers.

In response, Satan seeks to subvert God’s people through persecution and by seeking to ensnare God’s people into a love for sin and the idols of the world.

1John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. **17** And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Keep in mind that Satan fights through both persecution and temptation.

Observe also from verse 15 that the same word translated as **bruise** is used for both the actions of Satan and the seed of the woman.

The verb bruise used here is not a common verb found only 2 other times outside of this verse.

But even though the same verb is used, the outcome of the action is not identical.

Would you rather be poked in your side or have your eye poked?

The bruising of the head is much more serious than the bruising of one's heel.

This is an important observation.

The actions of Satan are not equal in effect as the actions of God and the seed of the woman.

No, there is victory for the seed of the woman in that the serpent receives a crushing blow to the head while only being able to deliver an injury to the heel.

The word seed is the other key word in verse 15 and throughout Scripture.

We will observe this later, but how should we understand its usage here?

Bruce Waltke, who is unfortunately not showing himself to be very orthodox on key matters in Genesis, nonetheless has written helpfully on this verse in his Genesis commentary.

The word seed can refer to an **immediate descendant** as we see in Genesis 4:25 and 15:3.

It can also refer to a **distant offspring** or a **large group** of descendants.

Waltke writes,

“Here and throughout Scripture, all three senses are developed and merged. In this Genesis text we can infer both the single and collective senses. Since the woman's seed struggles against the serpent's seed, we infer that it has a collective sense. **But since only the head of the serpent is represented as crushed, we expect an individual to deliver the fatal blow and to be struck uniquely on his heel.**³

There are differences of opinion among believing commentators on how to best understand seed.

But I think it is best to understand the bruising of the serpent's head is accomplished by one person.

³ Bruce Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis*, 94.

He shall bruise your head.

John Collins writes,

We are within our rights to say that this text envisions an individual who will engage the serpent in combat and defeat him, thus bringing benefits to mankind. That is, he is a champion. We are further entitled to say that he will be a human (an offspring of the woman), but one with power extraordinary enough to win.⁴

God deals seriously with evil and rebellion.

From the very beginning of the entrance to sin, God promised that evil would be judged and salvation would be provided.

CONTROVERSY AND HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Very early in the history of the Christian Church, Genesis 3:15 was seen as the first promise of Christ.

This view can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr (around AD 160) and Irenaeus (AD 180).

Irenaeus in his work *Against Heresies*, written around AD 180 wrote:

He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampled upon his head, as thou canst perceive in Genesis that God said to the serpent, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; He shall be on the watch for thy head, and thou on the watch for His heel.” For from that time, He who should be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam, was preached as keeping watch for the head of the serpent.⁵

From Irenaeus we have the first usage of the term, first gospel, *protoevangelium*.⁶

Unfortunately in the Latin Vulgate there was a serious mistranslation that was introduced.

The Vulgate translation reads, “She shall bruise your head.”

This led to some attributing the action of the bruising of the serpent’s head to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.⁷

⁴ Collins, 157.

⁵ Taken from Philip Schaff, *AntiNicene Fathers, Against Heresies*, 5.21.1.

⁶ <http://biblescripture.net/First.html>

⁷ John Calvin correctly pointed out this grievous error in his commentary.

Catholic scholarship not surprisingly has viewed Mary as being part of this verse in one way or another.

Many modern commentators see in Genesis 3:15 what is called an etiology, an explanation for why something is the way it is.

Genesis 3:15 is simply an explanation for why humans don't like snakes.

Claus Westermann, in 1994, wrote that "the explanation of 3:15 as a promise has been abandoned almost without exception."⁸

Other scholars have claimed the arguments of Westermann a crushing rebuttal of all other positions.⁹

But the arguments of liberal scholarship in the end do not do justice to the testimony of Scripture.

I believe it is perfectly reasonable to see that from the beginning of Scripture we have a promise of the coming Messiah.

Genesis 3:15 is not the fullness of the river but it is the location of the headwaters.¹⁰

Let us give attention to the weaving of that river.

GENESIS 3:15 AND THE THEME OF SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:44 Then He said to them, "These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the **Law of Moses** and *the Prophets* and *the Psalms* [more than just the book of Psalms but the entire third division of the OT] concerning Me." **45** And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

Consider the flow of the river with headwaters in Genesis 3:15.

Adam and Eve had a number of sons and daughters but three of them are named – Cain, Abel, and Seth.

And what do we see in the account of Cain and Abel related to Genesis 3:15?

Do we not rightfully see the theme of enmity and then with the coming of Seth the importance of the idea of seed?

Gen. 4:25 And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, "For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed."

⁸ Westermann, 260.

⁹ James Barr as cited by Collins, 157.

¹⁰ Collins, 157.

Seed is a very important term in Genesis, occurring some 59 times, and another 170 times in the rest of Scripture.

In Gen. 4 and 5 we also have contrasting genealogies presenting the seed of the serpent and the seed of Adam and Eve through Seth.

In Genesis 9:9, “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants [seed] after you.”

Turning to the story of Abraham we read in Genesis 12:7,

Gen. 12:7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants (seed - KJV) I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

After Abraham in faith was willing to offer up his seed, Isaac, in sacrifice, the Angel of the Lord blessed Abraham declaring:

Gen. 22:17 blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. **18** In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

Further development of the hope of a coming Messiah is found at the end of Genesis in chapter 49.

One scholar suggests that it is in the poetic sections, the songs of the Pentateuch, that we see the central focus of the Pentateuch.¹¹

One of those of songs or poems is found in Genesis 49.

Listen to verses 10 and 11 spoken about Judah.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him *shall be* the obedience of the people. Binding his donkey to the vine, And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, He washed his garments in wine, And his clothes in the blood of grapes.

We see in this portion further development in the promise of the coming Messiah. He would come from the line of Judah.

Let’s jump ahead to the time of David.

What is the central passage of the entire OT?

We have noted before that it is found in 2 Sam. 7.

¹¹ John Sailhamer, “The Messiah And The Hebrew Bible.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 1 (March 2001): 19.

And in this passage we find connection again with Gen. 3:15. Listen to just a portion of this great chapter from verse 12.

2Sam. 7:12 “When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

In this great chapter we find that the Messiah would come specifically from the line of David.

Let me also mention one of the classic passages in the Psalms which links to 2 Sam. 7, Gen. 3, and also Genesis 22, the great promise given to Abraham that we noted earlier.

Psalm 72 is the end of the second book of the Psalms, so it is the climax of the Davidic psalms.

9 Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, And His enemies will lick the dust.

Here we have a reference with Gen. 3:14.

17 His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And *men* shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed. **This verse links to Gen. 22:18.**

Tracing this central theme of all Scripture is an important defense against all the liberal scholarship which attacks the unity of Scripture.

CONCLUSION:

God deals seriously with evil and rebellion.

Romans 8:1-8

Closing Hymn – 377

BENEDICTION – HEBREWS 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

