

Men and Women: the loss of innocence

Genesis 2–3

1. The Christian Advantage

Human beings in every time and place and language have sought to explain the world as we experience it. It has been the quest of wise men and poets in almost every civilisation. That quest has not always been successful, of course. The explanations too often fail to convince because they do not do justice to the whole picture. They don't tell the whole story. On the one hand, utopian visions of humanity based on a one-sided view of human nature seem so remote. You can talk blithely about the universal brotherhood of man and fatherhood of God, insisting that we are all basically good, until you come face to face with atrocities such as the crusades, the holocaust, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Optimistic views of humanity and its potential are very often left defenceless against the realities of life, the horror of what we can and have done to each other. On the other hand, unremittingly dark explanations of human history and everyday existence don't do justice to the beauty, gentleness and heroism which surfaces all around us. If it is only all about—and has always only been all about—the survival of the fittest, a matter of the strongest gene wins, if life is really just 'nature's way of keeping meat fresh',¹ how do we account for extraordinary self-sacrifice, the kindness of the Good Samaritan, the beauty of music, art or architecture? For all the lows of the average human life, there are some extraordinary highs as well. How do you explain the paradox of good and evil in the world? How do you explain why our hopes can be dashed one minute and unexpectedly surpassed the next?

If we tighten the focus just a little and concentrate on the way men and women relate to one another all around us, how do we account for the reality of conflict and relationship breakdown alongside evidence of life-long fidelity and genuine partnership, whether it be between friends, family or husbands and wives? Hopeless romantic that I am, I used to love walking through some of

¹ A line from S. Moffatt, 'The Doctor Dances', Episode 10, Series One of *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2006).

the parks in England reading the inscriptions on the park benches. Sometimes it *is* a matter of ‘til death us do part’. But sometimes the fairytale has barely begun before it is over. Some of us can testify to immensely rewarding relationships and to the joy of a deep unity that enables us to face whatever life throws our way. But too many of us know first-hand the reality of abusive relationships or simply a day to day struggle for dominance and control. And it’s not exactly an either/or is it? Every relationship, and especially every relationship between a man and a woman, experiences varying degrees of joy and disappointment. We have our good patches and our not so good patches. Sometimes we communicate well and at other times it really does seem as if women are from Venus and men are from Mars. How did we get from Genesis 1, with its account of men and women together as the image of God on earth, to this?

More focussed still, why have the debates about women’s ministry over the last few decades involved such heartache for many and why is it so hard to work out just what to do on the other side of them? How do we account for lingering chauvinism on the part of some men and aggressive self-assertion on the part of some women? Why are some men so afraid to lead and some women so eager to do so? The battle of the sexes, which played itself out in the community generally in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues to play itself out in many of the mainstream Christian denominations today, needs its own explanation. Why is something so good — men and women working together for the glory of Christ — often so hard? But once again that’s not the whole story, is it? Amidst the struggles and disappointments there have been examples of partnership in ministry between men and women that have been extraordinarily effective.

The crucial advantage that Christians have as we raise such questions is the Bible. Once again it’s worth remembering that a good God who wants good things for his children has given them his word. When the psalmist sang of the nourishing beauty of God’s Law, how it ‘revives the soul’ (Ps. 19:7), it was not just the Ten Commandments or the case law of Exodus and Leviticus that he had in mind. The Torah, the instruction of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, included passages such as Genesis 1–3. The record of God’s creative activity and of his involvement with Abraham and his family — these things were worth celebrating too. Why? Well amongst other reasons, the Torah provided a cogent explanation of the world which is strikingly realistic and yet hopeful. The horrors

of human life and experience are not glossed over but neither are they the final word. This is an account that makes sense of the world we live in — all of it — without falling into the uncertainty of a cosmic struggle between equally ultimate forces of good and evil. What we are given in Scripture is the picture of a good creation distorted by the introduction of evil and yet standing under the promise that the Creator himself is committed to rescuing it, at great cost and in extraordinary mercy. And on the other side of the cross and resurrection of the Christ the depth and intensity of that promise is all the more evident. It is this utter realism we need to keep in mind as we return to the book of Genesis.

As we move from Genesis 1 into Genesis 2, we encounter a second narrative of the creation of the first man and woman. It's not a rival account. I don't think we need to go down the road of different sources stitched together to form the book of Genesis. Rather, having been given the bird's eye view of the whole creative activity of God in Genesis 1, we are allowed to see in more detail and 'from the ground' as it were, the climactic action which we only really heard of in summary form in Genesis 1. It's not unlike the parallel accounts of Israel's history in the Books of Kings and The Books of Chronicles, or the parallel accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry in the four Gospels, or at least between the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke on the one hand, and the Gospel of John on the other. Such parallel accounts each bring their own emphasis, and together they enable us to see more than we would have seen with only one of them. In this case, the brief mention of the man and the woman as the climax of creation in Genesis 1, is filled out in some detail in the parallel account in Genesis 2. But whereas Genesis 1 shone the spotlight on the relation of the man and the woman to God, Genesis 2 concentrates more on the relationship of the man to the woman.

2. Close up on the creation of the man

The creation of the man is recounted in verse 7: 'then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living creature'. It is here we first learn of the deep unity between the man and 'the dust of the ground'. We know from Genesis 1 that he has a unique and highly significant relationship to God the Creator. But now we learn that the same earth that brought forth living creatures in 1:24 — 'the beasts of the earth' — is

critical to his composition. He is not made from some ethereal heavenly substance. He is not an outsider, as it were, imposed upon the creation as its ruler but having no natural connection to it. No, it is the normal, gritty, dirty stuff, as physical and material and creaturely as it gets, from which he is made. In this way the strong connection of the man to the rest of creation is stressed. We are meant to see that, distinct as the man may be from the animal creation as a result of God's intention and his commission, the man cannot be separated from other living creatures. He arises out of the dust at the command of God. The apostle Paul will remember this when he draws a contrast between the first Adam and the Last Adam in 1 Corinthians 15. The first Adam is a man of dust; the Last Adam is the man from heaven.

Yet dust is not a sufficient explanation for human life. It is only when God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life that the man becomes a living creature. Apart from breath he is just another piece of clay but once he breathes he is alive. And yet the breath of life is not remarkable in itself. It does not distinguish him from the rest of the animal creation. He shares this with the creatures too, as is evident in Genesis 1:30. What is different is that this creature receives the breath of life directly from God: God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life'. It is not the breath but the means of receiving the breath that is special. Here the same intimacy of relation which in Genesis 1 provided the backdrop to the expression 'image of God' is in the foreground again. Of the same stuff as the rest of creation, with the same breath of life as the other living creatures, but uniquely related to the God who gives that breath. There is what you might call a 'dual contingency' to human life: who we are is linked both to the God who made us and the creation of which we are a part. In varied degrees we are dependent both on God and on our environment.

What follows is the remarkable record of God's extravagant provision for this unique creature he has made. God planted a garden in the East and there provided in the fullest way imaginable. The trees in the Garden meet almost every need the man could possibly have. Some plants growing there at God's command were pleasing in appearance. It mattered to God that his creature could delight in the beauty of the creation. There was a place for aesthetics even in the Garden of Eden! And other plants provided the necessary nutrition — they were good for food. Not just edible, but good to eat, satisfying, nutritious, life sustaining. And then there was the tree of life, the tree of

promise. The tree which represented in some special way life forever with God. It would soon disappear from the Bible story until it returns at the centre of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 22. Finally, there is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree that affords an opportunity to trust God, an opportunity to obey him — but more of that, much more of that, in a minute. For the provision of God does not stop with the trees. There are rivers flowing out of the Garden, not only watering the Garden but a source of blessing beyond its borders.

We shouldn't make too much of the fact that all this was provided before the creation of the woman. In time she would share these blessings alongside the man. But there is a sense in which one aspect of the ruling of creation is designated before she arrives on the scene. In verse 15 the man is placed in the garden 'to work it and keep it', perhaps better 'to till it and to guard it'. He is to work. The garden is not just a place of rest but a place of work as well. Work is not simply a product of the Fall as if prior to the Fall man didn't need to anything except eat the fruit, enjoy the scenery and contemplate eternal life. Work is much more integral to human life than that. It was there in the beginning and we might anticipate that it will be there in the end.

3. Life as it was meant to be in the Garden

What was life meant to be like in the Garden? Yes, there was work and undoubtedly there was rest as well. It was life lived in the presence of God's extravagant provision. Beauty to enjoy, food to enjoy, the promise of life to enjoy. But the verses in the middle of Genesis 2 remind us of something more basic than work or rest, something that, in a sense stands over them both.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, '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.' (vv. 16–17)

We know that this command will be critical as the story of the first man and woman unfolds. We will need to return to it in a few moments. However, it is worth pausing for a moment to notice what the existence of the command, rather than its content, has to say about life in the Garden. Life in the Garden was meant to be lived in the light of God's word. God's word has been critical from the beginning. Nothing came into being without it. God spoke and it was so. So too God had blessed

the living creatures and the man and woman in Genesis 1. God's creative word and his word of blessing gives shape to all life in these chapters. But now we hear a word of instruction, a word of command. And this word too shapes life in the Garden. The man, and later the man and the woman, are expected to demonstrate their trust in God by taking his word seriously. The good God who has made everything good has given this command and so it too is good. Knowing that and believing that lies at the heart of how this command functions in the Garden of Eden. Trusting God will demonstrate itself in obeying this command. Honouring the relationship God himself established with the man by personally breathing into his nostrils the breath of life will mean taking this word seriously. Certainly God took this word seriously. The consequences he attached to a breach of this word made that clear: 'in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'. If Adam is going to live out his responsibilities as the image of God in the world, it will involve hearing God's word, believing God's word and acting accordingly. And behind and underneath all of that will be the recognition that God's word is good because God is good.

Life in the Garden is directed by the word of God. It is word-shaped. That is not just a later phenomenon, after God had spoken to Abraham or Moses, or David, the Prophets, or the apostle Paul. It is like that right from the beginning.

4. Enter the woman

In a sense all of that is preliminary in Genesis 2: the man created from the dust of the earth and receiving from God himself the breath of life; the extravagant provision in the Garden, demonstrating the goodness of God and his determination to do good to Adam; the word of God spoken in the Garden, determining the shape of life, calling for trust in God's goodness and the obedience that springs from that trust. But as Genesis 2 continues to unfold we hear words which should make us sit up and take notice. We now arrive at the focal point of the narrative. One thing and one thing only is not good in the Garden: Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone' (v. 18).

Startling as those words appear after the repeated refrain ‘God saw it was good’, ‘God saw it was good’, ‘And behold it was very good’ in Genesis 1, it is not as if they caught God by surprise. It is not as if God left something out and has only now remembered it. These words are spoken for our benefit not for God’s. We who read this are being taken on a journey. Travelling with Adam through the next few moments we are being led to see the tremendous importance of the relationship God is about to provide for the man. Prolonging that journey by taking us through the naming of the beasts of the field and the birds and the livestock makes the point even more urgently. If we didn’t know the story so well we’d feel, I think, the suspense that is built into it. Every avenue is tried, every means of dealing with the problem is pursued, in order to show just how different the man really is from the rest of the creation. Perhaps there is just a hint that the man himself needs to learn this lesson just as much as those who have read Genesis down through the centuries. Perhaps he didn’t recognise his need as God did. After all it was God, not Adam, who remarked in verse 18 that all is not good in the Garden. And God signals his intention from the beginning: ‘I will make him a helper fit for him’ (v. 18). But nothing else seems fit for him.

Two things should be noted quickly as we pass on to the creation of the woman. It is in this interim, as God brings to the man examples of all the creatures with which he shares the breath of life, that the man begins to exercise the dominion God had given him. All the way through Genesis 1 God had named each thing he created. ‘God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night’ (1:5). ‘God called the expanse Heaven’ (1:8). He called the dry land Earth (1:10). But now God brings beasts of the field and birds of the heavens to the man ‘to see what *he* would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.’ (2:19) In that context it is impossible to miss the point that at God’s initiative the man has taken up the authority God has given him. So even if we didn’t know that in the ancient world ‘to give a name to something is to assert authority over it’,² we should recognise what Adam was doing. And that, of course, will be important later on.

The second thing is the problem some have with the word ‘helper’. Some have struggled with what they see as the demeaning suggestion that the end of this search will be a ‘helper’ for the man. They suggest that a ‘helper’ is too easily seen as an inferior, someone lesser in status and importance

² G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 68.

than the one they are there to help. But this need not be the case at all. In fact, elsewhere in Scripture God is spoken of as a helper. 'God is my helper', says Psalm 54:4, 'the Lord is the upholder of my life'. The same word is used. And yet there is not the slightest suggestion that the Lord is inferior to the psalmist. To help someone need not imply that the helper is somehow inferior in status; simply that the one being helped cannot do what is required 'alone'. Helping is a matter of function not of status or dignity. And it is interesting that when a helper is sought in Genesis 2 the point is stressed that this must be a helper 'fit for him', 'suitable for him', 'matching him'.

It is at this point, of course that God creates the perfect helper, one genuinely 'matching' the man he has created. The details of the story are meant to make clear the most intimate connection between the man and the woman. She is not just made of similar stuff but of the same stuff. She is not in the slightest degree less human than he is. She is, to use a word the Bible never uses in this connection, 'his equal'. She is not his duplicate; she is not identical to him. And yet she is plainly not less than him either.

Adam recognised that right away. He burst out into the first human poem (as far as we can tell — after all, what was the use of poetry before there was someone to recite it to?). 'Bone of my bone' he exclaims. 'Flesh of my flesh'. It is the Hebrew formula for kinship. Today we speak of blood relatives. In Ancient Hebrew you would speak of flesh and bone relationships. Adam recognises that God has brought to him someone who is a genuine complement to him, someone who completes him. With this one there can be no talk of superior or inferior. She is every bit as human as he is. As Genesis 1 made clear, she is every bit the image of God as he is.

Yet recognising that, and Adam undoubtedly does recognise that, he sees no contradiction in what he does next. He takes the lead and names her. Equal in nature and yet ordered in their relationship, with Adam taking the lead and his new wife (she is given that 'title' in verse 25) rejoicing in his care of her. Order and equality are not antithetical in the end, especially when both are the gift of God.

Genesis 1 stressed the unity of the man and the woman as together the image of God. Genesis 2 says nothing that would counter that, but begins to unfold how that unity was established and is

maintained. That unity is not the same as identity nor is it a matter of complete interchangeability, The man was created first and then the woman (a simple chronological fact that carries its own significance). At the same time, the woman was created from the man, and so is in every respect his equal in being. The dignity of human life is as much hers as his. She is the image of God just as he is. Bone of my bone; flesh of my flesh. And yet the woman is created as a helper for the man, made to complement him not just duplicate him. He exercises leadership in their relationship in the very same poem in which he rejoices at their sameness. And all of this is the good provision of the sovereign, wise and benevolent God. God said he would make a helper to match the man. And with the creation of the woman, formed from the rib of the man, he has.

5. Challenging God's goodness: the essence of sin

What follows in Genesis 3 is the great tragedy of universal history. No other single act — except one — would have such widespread consequences. There is an absurdity to what happens in Genesis 3. And a perversity. God had provided so richly for the man and the woman he created. Pleasure, nourishment, fellowship, access to the tree of life — all of this was theirs. They could delight in their surroundings, delight in each other, delight in God's presence with them and the word he had given them. They were surrounded by evidence that God was *for them*, that he was indeed powerful and wise and loving. And yet course of just six verses they cast it all aside.

I don't think we're meant to linger too much on the serpent. He receives no other explanation than his creatureliness and cunning. By the very fact that he is a creature he is designated as one over whom Adam had dominion. Adam and Eve were meant to stake their claim over the serpent, as over every other part of the creation, in God's name. But other than that we know nothing and, as I say, I don't think we're meant to be interested in more.

What happens in the Garden is an assault upon life as God had created it to be. Not only is the order of humanity and animals inverted but the shape of human life, human life as God intended it, is overturned. The man and the woman were created to live in the light of God's word. His word of blessing and his word of command. Taking God seriously would show itself in the way they took

God's word seriously. But now, step by step, the word of God is set aside. First, doubt is cast over the word, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" It's a question that has been used to undermine faith again and again through the centuries. Can you really be certain of what God has said? Surely you can't be that dogmatic? Show a little humility. Are you so sure you have access to the mind of God? Aren't you fooling yourself and simply lording it over others? It sounds like far too many denominational leaders around the world — or like the sceptics society.

When the seed of doubt has been sown, and it is met with the some doubt in the woman's heart as well — she makes God's word sound harsh and unreasonable as she answers the serpent — the serpent turns up the heat. I don't really know why the serpent got past 'Hello'. The moment she was addressed by a serpent Eve should have known something was wrong. But she entertained his doubts and then heard his challenge: 'You will not surely die' (Gen. 3:4). There is no judgement. It's all a bluff. There are no consequences.

And then the coup de grace. The serpent questions God's motives. God's intention for good is maligned and the suggestion is made that God is holding out on them. He knows that eating of this tree will grant them independence from him. They won't be dependent on him to learn good and evil any more, they'll be able to decide for themselves. And God, being threatened by creatures as wise and powerful as they, God has kept the truth from them. The word of God, intended to shape and direct life in the good garden God had provided for these two, was recast as a brake on their development, a hindrance, and worse still, a weapon being used against them. A familiar strategy? It should be. It's been used so often since then. It's a strategy still in evidence today.

But what is important to realise is that this assault on God's word, this determination to decide matters for themselves without recourse to God's word, is ultimately an assault upon God. It challenges his goodness just as it challenges his wisdom and his sovereign power. God doesn't want to act for your good, he doesn't know how to act for your good, he is not able to act for your good. Here you see the essence of sin in this grasp at autonomy, at life without God, the same God who gives the breath of life and sustains it.

The order which God created was overturned. The serpent led the woman and then the woman led her husband. The woman was deceived — she will say as much in a few verses time. However, the man was not deceived. He betrays God in two ways at once: he abdicates his responsibility to lead his wife and passively follows her into sin and he does what he knows God has forbidden him to do. Did you notice in verse six the simple words ‘who was with her’? He was there but he would not take the lead and challenge the serpent. Instead he abdicated his responsibility and followed the lead of his wife. But on top of all that, trust in God and in his goodness is abandoned for the pathetic illusion that they could do better for themselves than God had done for them. It’s both pathetic and absurd. It cannot succeed and it will not succeed. And in the midst of this sin, the one created to be Adam’s match, his helper, has entangled him in disobedience and death.

6. The relational consequences of the Fall

The consequences follow swiftly. Having made the earth-shattering discovery that they were naked they tried to remedy the situation by sewing fig leaves together. The first casualty of the Fall is their unashamed innocence before each other. They had not needed to hide from each other prior to this because they had nothing to fear from one another. But now shame and fear enter their relationship and poison it from the inside. A temporary fix is attempted — perhaps they hoped they could one day regain what they had lost. But it is hopeless. The relationship which had brought such joy at the end of Genesis 2, is already under strain before they’ve finished eating.

When they are, soon after, confronted by God, the charade continues. Their attempt to bluff God simply reveals their guilt. ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ And then the recriminations begin. ‘She gave me, oh and hang on a minute, you gave her to me!’ ‘The serpent deceived me, I’m not to blame.’ The harmony and goodness of the creation — pronounced very good by God back in 1:31 — has already unravelled. Refusing to listen to God’s word meant listening to other words and those words poisoned the good that they enjoyed. It began the moment they turned aside from the word that God had given them.

The consequences which God imposes as judgement unsurprisingly go to the heart of the matter. The overturned order is reinstated but at every point now with strain and difficulty. The serpent will resume his place as the one who is ruled, but with a new enmity between his seed and the seed of the woman that will only end in his own destruction. The woman will play her part in exercising dominion but it will not be without pain and suffering. And her relationship with her husband will be marred by resistance to his leadership and a power struggle in which neither side is innocent. Finally God addressed the man whose tilling and guarding will now be hard labour, dominion will not be given easily and it will end in death, when the man of dust returns to the dust.

And yet at every point judgement is laced with mercy. The promised seed of the woman will be victorious in the midst of suffering. Children will be born despite the pain in childbirth. Death will ensure that the distortions they have brought upon themselves, their descendants and the world will not last forever. And at the end of the chapter it is God who clothes them, with more effective and costly clothing than they could ever have thought of securing for themselves. He is still God. He is still their God. He is still sovereign and wise and benevolent. They must leave the Garden; but God has not left them.

7. Realism with hope

Here then is the explanation for the world as it is. God's good creation in one sense never ceasing to be good. God still reigns. His purposes have not been thwarted. He still is wise and he still intends good for his people. That's why goodness, generosity, heroism and self-sacrifice break through from time to time — because of his continuing generosity. And yet the impact of that grasp at autonomy — repeated by each of us in our own ways as their heirs — continues to show itself. The apostle Paul would write of how the whole creation itself groans as in childbirth as it waits for its redemption.

It is no surprise that this groaning should arise most keenly in the sphere of human relationships. The harmony of human relationships was the first casualty of the Fall and while such relationships are still very good, they are now not without strain and suffering and disappointment. It's the

experience of all Adam and Eve's descendants, even those who now know the great mercy of God in Jesus Christ. In our sinfulness we all still fight against God's good purposes and think we have a better way.

In the end, our only real hope of life which does not succumb to the chaos of the Fall is to see in the gospel the definitive proof of God's power, wisdom and love. Because at the cross we see what God is really like, how determined he is to rescue us, to bear the cost and make us his own, we can trust him. And we can trust his word is a good word that nourishes life rather than hinders it. So as we search God's word for guidance in how to live together as men and women, as men and women together in ministry, we can come with confidence and anticipation that what God has to say will be liberating and nourishing and good — at every point, but perhaps especially where it stands in stark contrast to other words, rival words which promise much but deliver only heartache in the end.

Complementarian ministry, working together for the glory of Christ, celebrating our differences — it will be hard because of human sin, but it will be good because it is God's design.