



The Traditional View of the Fall: Suppose You Had to Defend It

It is typical that when a new interpretation is brought forth, people who hold the commonly accepted view ask questions about how the new approach explains certain elements in the biblical account. This is helpful because a truly new idea needs to be tested against Scripture to demonstrate that this interpretation properly handles the text. What is overlooked is that sometimes the widely accepted view has not passed through this same rigor. This can lead to obvious problems with that interpretation being ignored based on the assumption that a view so widely accepted must be correct. It is possible that this has happened with the traditional view of the fall. The following dialogue shows what would happen if someone holding the traditional view had to defend it. The conversation below is fictional but attempts to accurately reflect how the traditional view of the fall is explained.

Questioner: So you believe in the traditional view of the fall. Let's begin by asking some questions about how you interpret Eve's actions in Genesis 3. Why did Eve eat the fruit?

Answer: I could point to almost any commentary or systematic theology textbook to provide this answer. Eve was motivated by a desire to be like God. She was filled with pride and felt that she was being held back by God from what she desired. She may have believed that she would gain independence from God and be able to act as her own authority.

Q: Where in the biblical text do you see evidence that this is Eve's motivation?

A: You have only to look at the temptation to which she succumbed. The serpent's offer appealed to her because he told her she would be like God. Then when she looked at the tree she saw that it was everything she wanted. It was good for food, pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom. Clearly the serpent was offering an alternative to what God had said and she believed the serpent instead of God. She called God a liar and rebelled against his commandment.

Q: That certainly sounds convincing but I do see a couple of problems. It appears that you abbreviated what the serpent said. He did not say simply that Eve would be like God. He said "you will be like God, knowing good and evil". Does the offer to be like God by knowing something God knows in any way suggest that she would be independent from God?

A: Well, yes it does in that she was resentful of God's control and believed that this knowledge would make her great like God.

Q: Where in the biblical text do you see an indication that Eve was resentful?

A: She must have been because she rebelled.

Q: But that is the interpretation you want me to accept. Where does the text say that she was resentful?

A: It doesn't.

Q: Where does the text say that Eve thought she would be great like God or equal to God or independent from God?

A: It does not exactly say that but it is understood from her actions.

Q: So the evidence for your view is not biblical but assumed from your interpretation of Eve's actions?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, we are interested in the biblical evidence for your view. Another problem appears to exist in your statement about Eve looking at the tree. The phrase good for food and pleasing to the eye is used to describe all the trees in the garden in Genesis 2:9. The phrase that does not appear earlier and that makes her consideration different is "desirable for gaining wisdom". Can you offer any examples from Scripture where wisdom is a negative term?

A: No, wisdom is always used in a positive sense, but Eve is looking at the tree to decide whether or not to disobey God.



Q: Does the text say that that is the reason she looked at the tree?

A: No, but what other reason could she have for looking at the tree from which God said she should not eat?

Q: Actually, there are a number other reasons. She may have been considering if what the serpent said could be reconciled with what God had said. After all, she had never been lied to before. She may have been thinking about the possibility that she was in a probationary period and that the step required to move beyond that probation was to eat the fruit. She may have been questioning if she was ready for the next level in her relationship with God. But we can accurately state that there is no biblical text that that says Eve was considering disobeying God when she looked at the tree, is that correct?

A: Yes, but it seems obvious that when one is considering a temptation and then chooses an evil course of action the thought process must have been corrupt because it moved toward rejection of God.

Q: It does seem obvious if you assume that your position is correct in the absence of any biblical textual support. But let me ask you another question, are you not assuming that Eve had evil thoughts and motivations before she ate the fruit?

A: Again, if Eve chose evil, she must have had thoughts consistent with that decision. So it seems safe to assume that she had thoughts of pride, conceit and wanted to displace God from her life.

Q: But wasn't Eve unfallen until she ate the fruit? If she was unfallen, it would seem unlikely that evil would have touched her mind or her heart.

A: Eve was unfallen until she ate the fruit but the decision to sin and the act of sinning are all part of one large process. Eve's thoughts and motivations reflected a gradual movement away from her original created state to a place where the serpent's temptation appealed to her. So the pride and desire to displace God were all part of what led her to choose to disobey God.

Q: But how can this be? The Scot's Creed says, "God has created man, i.e., our first father, Adam, after his own image and likeness, to whom he gave wisdom, lordship, justice, free will, and self-consciousness, so that in the whole nature of man no imperfection could be found". How did Eve move from wisdom and having no imperfection to become proud and resentful of God?

A: We really cannot say since the biblical text does not tell us.

Q: Ok. Well then, how could Eve be sinful and have pride and resentment of God before she ate the fruit? Are these not sinful thoughts and motivations?

A: They are sinful but they are part of the whole act of eating the fruit.

Q: Where is that explained in the biblical text?

A: It isn't.

Q: Aren't you saying that Eve sinned before she ate the fruit? Luther explicitly says "Here a question which is not at all senseless is raised: how it happens that Eve is not yet aware of her sin. Although she has not yet eaten the fruit, she has already sinned against the Word and faith; for she has turned away from the Word to a lie, from faith to unbelief, from God to Satan, and from the worship of God to idolatry." Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis 1-5, Concordia Publishing House, pages 158f. It seems clear that the traditional view requires that Eve sinned before she ate the fruit.

A: Not everyone agrees with Luther on this matter. I can see where it appears that Eve sins before the fall. However, you have to understand, Eve's decision to disobey God makes it necessary that she had evil thoughts for her action in eating the fruit to make any sense. At the same time it is reasonable to think that the evil thoughts and the act of eating the fruit are all part of a greater whole.

Q: If I accept your assumption that Eve must make her choice out of an evil heart I can see where I would accept your interpretation. But it would seem that another interpretation that allowed Eve to be holy until she ate the fruit and that could explain her decision to eat the fruit would be a better choice.

A: True, but there is no such interpretation that takes the Scriptures seriously.

Q: Actually such an interpretation does exist and it seems to have biblical support for its views. In short, the view says Eve was deceived into believing she was allowed to eat the fruit. She wanted to be like God just as Christians today want to be like God. She had no sinful thoughts or motivations until after she ate the fruit. When she ate the fruit she fell and became a sinner.

A: That cannot be true. God clearly told Adam and Eve that the day they ate the fruit they would die. To ignore God's commandment is the very heart of disobedience.



Q: If Eve ignored God's commandment or rejected God's command she must have been evil. But if she was led to believe God's commandment was rescinded or if she was led to believe that she had completed a probationary period, she could have been deceived into doing wrong (eating the fruit) for a good reason. Clearly the biblical text does support the idea that Eve was deceived (Gen 3:13, II Cor 11:3, I Tim 2:14). The question is how she was deceived. In choosing between the options; (1) that she was deceived that she could be independent of God or (2) that she was deceived that God would approve of her action, there is no textual preference offered. The choice then is between one option that says Eve sinned (with pride and resentment toward God) before she ate the fruit and an option that says Eve did not sin until she ate the fruit. Shouldn't we prefer the option that allows Eve to be holy until she eats the fruit?

A: It is not that simple. We cannot think that God would punish Eve so harshly if she did not intend to disobey.

Q: So what you are saying is that sin with good intentions is not as sinful as sin with evil intentions?

A: Well clearly one is not as bad as the other. But if you look at the penalty imposed on Eve, death, work becoming more difficult and frustrating, pain in childbirth and Adam ruling over her, that is awfully harsh if she did not intend to disobey God.

Q: I am sure you are aware of the account in I Kings 13 where the "man of God" was told not to eat or drink while on his mission to Bethel. He was lied to by a prophet and believing that God had changed his command, ate and drank with the prophet. In that passage, in spite of being deceived into disobeying God, the prophet cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah in verses 21f, "This is what the LORD says: 'You have defied the word of the LORD and have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you. You came back and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers.' " The man was deceived so that he disobeyed God, yet his action is described as defying the word of the Lord. Is this not similar to what happened to Eve?

A: Yes, it appears that it could be.

Q: Then the penalty assessed to Eve was not very harsh if intention is no excuse was it?

A: No, I suppose it was not.

Q: But let's go back to the discussion. If Eve had an evil thought, let's say pride, at any time before she ate the fruit, was she fallen?

A: Not necessarily. If she had such a thought as part of a process of deciding to eat the fruit she would have actually fallen when she ate the fruit.

Q: So a person can commit a sin and not be fallen?

A: No. What we are saying is that the process of deciding to eat the fruit could include sinful thoughts and motivations that together with the decision and the eating make up one large action that is the fall.

Q: But don't the sinful thoughts and motivations precede the eating of the fruit?

A: Yes, but they are actually all part of the whole.

Q: Don't we have some difficulty explaining Eve's sins before she ate?

A: Only if you try to break apart the consideration of the sinful act which is not in and of itself sinful. You can be tempted and consider the temptation but not sin.

Q: But that is not what we are talking about. If I am tempted to steal a wallet that is sitting on a table I could be aware of the temptation and not do it. But if I am tempted to disobey God by stealing and while being tempted experience pride that I am so good I will not steal, I may not commit the sin of stealing but I have still committed the sin of pride. The moment I am proud I am a sinner and fallen. I need do nothing else. So what it appears you are suggesting is that Eve can experience pride and resentment toward God before she falls and yet she does not fall and is not a sinner until she completes the act of eating the fruit.

A: As I have said, if you break the process into pieces it can appear that Eve is fallen and a sinner before she eats the fruit. I think the entire process needs to be seen as a whole.

Q: Can you offer any other situation where individual sins are not considered except as part of a whole?

A: I think a good example would be where someone coveted an item and then followed through to steal it. In that case it would basically be one sin made up of two or more pieces.

Q: But is that consistent with Scripture? In the listing of the 10 commandments are not coveting and stealing two distinct sins?

A: Well, yes I suppose they are but you have to recognize that in the previous example the one naturally led to the other and so they were really both parts of one whole.

Q: What if the person coveting had looked and intended to steal the item but as he approached it, someone came along and prevented him from stealing it? Would it still be part of one whole?

A: Well in that case he would only be guilty of coveting.



Q: So the pieces are not inextricably tied together. They are only tied together by desire and opportunity. It would seem that they are actually two pieces, not one, and so could be observed and punished by God individually.

A: Yes, that is true.

Q: Could not the same be true if Eve experienced pride but was denied the opportunity to eat the fruit?

A: That is not what happened.

Q: But if it had happened, would not the sin of pride have been sufficient for her to be a sinner and fallen?

A: Yes.

Q: So, if Eve experienced pride before she ate, she was a sinner before she ate the fruit and so was fallen.

A: That does appear to make some sense.

Q: Another question needs to be asked. What caused Eve to move from where she was created good and was in a satisfying relationship with God to where she resented God and wanted to displace Him?

A: We are not told.

Q: Is there any biblical evidence that this process of movement away from harmony with God to resentment took place?

A: Well, the text does not state it explicitly.

Q: Is it not assumed by those who hold your position?

A: Yes, but it does appear to fit the facts.

Q: Are you telling me a movement away from harmony with God that occurred in Eve's heart without a cause fits the facts?

A: No. I am not saying there was no cause. I am only saying that we do not know the cause.

Q: But if something caused Eve to move toward resentment against God, and if that cause stirred up pride, covetousness and a blasphemous desire to displace God, would not that cause have been the fall?

A: No. This unknown cause simply started the process of moving Eve to where she was when she was tempted and ate the fruit and fell.

Q: So you are saying some cause stirred up pride, covetousness and blasphemy and these attitudes of her heart did not make Eve fall?

A: They were part of what led to her fall.

Q: As I understand the theology of the fall, the distinction between a fallen person and an unfallen person is that the unfallen person has never sinned, not even once. The fallen person has sinned at least once and by that sin has a fallen, sinful nature and so continues sinning from that point on. Is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: But you have assigned some rather significant sins to Eve before she ate the fruit. Would not any one of these sins have made Eve fall?

A: It seems like that is true but I think you have to view these sins as potential sins, sins under consideration, that come to completion when Eve decides to eat the fruit.

Q: So Eve is not actually proud or covetous or blaspheming God. Is she only considering the possibility of being proud, the idea of coveting and the concept of blasphemy?

A: I think that is a good description.

Q: The problem is that the commentaries and systematic theology texts you made reference to earlier, that support your position, do not say this. They say she ate because she was proud and that she ate because she actually wanted independence from God and to displace God.

A: That is true.

Q: There is also another problem. The comparison of Eve in II Corinthians 11:3 with the believers in Corinth seems to assign to her a holiness before she ate. The text says, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." It is clear that the comparison begins with a comparison of Eve being deceived with the Corinthians being deceived.

A: True.

Q: But is it not also true that if Eve was deceived because of the evil that was in her heart the comparison would be very weak because the Corinthians have a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ"?

A: I suppose.

Q: Wouldn't it make sense that Paul intended to compare the Corinthians with Eve in a rather direct way in this passage? The Corinthians are warned against being deceived as Eve was. The comparison additionally suggests that such a deception could draw the Corinthians away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ, just as deception drew Eve away from her sincere and pure devotion to God.

A: It would be a better comparison but that does not mean that Paul viewed Eve as having a devotion to God when she was tempted.



Q: Doesn't it? How is the comparison valid if Eve was deceived to live out the evil in her heart and the Corinthians could be deceived and led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ? Wouldn't we expect that the words "led astray" apply to Eve just as they apply to the Corinthians? Or do you think Eve was deceived but not led astray?

A: Eve was led astray but her thoughts and attitudes made it easier for her to believe the lies of the serpent.

Q: Is that stated anywhere in the biblical text?

A: No.

Q: So it is assumed on your part that Eve was completely unlike the Corinthians who have a sincere and pure devotion to Christ when she was deceived?

A: Yes.

Q: Does that not mean that you are assigning nobler motivations to fallen believers than to an unfallen woman?

A: I suppose it does.

Q: So your view is that fallen believers have better motivations and a more pure thought process than an unfallen person before she falls?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, I suppose that makes the differences in our positions clear. I would think an unfallen woman would be more likely to be described as being devoted to God than any fallen person, even if the fallen person was a devout believer. It is the difference between one who is good by nature and one who is good in a lesser way because he is redeemed. It is the difference between what we would expect of someone who has never sinned and our expectations regarding someone who in spite of being redeemed sins every day.