

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15, 2:23–24

Do not cause your death by the sinful things you do, or let your actions drag you down to destruction. God did not make death, and death gives him no pleasure. For he created all living things that they may continue to exist. There is no destructive poison in them. The palace of Hades is not on earth. For God will always be just. When God created us, he made us immortal; he made our human nature like his own. But through the devil's envy death entered the world, and all his followers die.¹

¹ My translation based on Roger A. Bullard and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on the Wisdom of Solomon*, United Bible Societies' Handbooks (New York: United Bible Societies, 2004), 21-23, 38-40.

Created for Incorruption

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Scripture: Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15, 2:23–24

The Wisdom of Solomon, like the book of Genesis, wants us to know that God's creation was good. It was created for life and even immortality. "God did not make death, and death gives him no pleasure." "There is no destructive poison" inherent in God's creatures. God made us and all creation after his own image.

Of course, it didn't stay that way very long. Things headed south in a hurry. The snake, or Satan in the guise of the snake, tempted Adam and Eve, and the rest is our sordid history, so to speak. But the story begs a question. Where did Satan come from? Heaven was perfect and out of heaven came perfect creation. How did everything so quickly get off the rails?

People have been trying to answer such questions for a very long time. And almost always they have told stories to do so. The ancient Jews were among the most creative and inveterate story tellers there ever were. They told stories, and still do, that embellished and expanded the stories in the Bible to help explain what the Bible left unexplained. And this question of how evil got into God's creation fascinated them to no end.

In one of the stories, after Adam and Eve have been thrown out of the Garden of Eden and are living hard lives, Eve cries out, "Woe unto thee, you devil. Why do you attack us for no cause? What have you to do with us? What have we done to you for you to pursue us with craft, or why do assail us with malice? Have we taken away your glory and caused you to be without honor? Why do you harry us, you enemy (and persecute us) to the death in wickedness and envy?"

With a heavy sigh, the devil spoke: "O Adam! All my hostility, envy, and sorrow is because of you, since it is because of you that I have been expelled from my glory, which I possessed in the heavens in the midst of the angels, and for you was I cast out in the earth."

Adam answered, "What do you tell me? What have I done to you or what is my fault against you? Seeing that you hast received no harm or injury from us, why do you pursue us?"

The devil replied, "Adam, what do you tell me? It is because of you that I have been hurled from that place. When you were formed, I was hurled out of the presence of God and banished from the company of the angels."²

Well, maybe the devil has left out a few of the details. The story told from a more objective vantage goes like this:

After Adam had been endowed with a soul, God invited all the angels to come and pay Adam reverence and homage. Satan, the greatest of the angels in heaven, with twelve wings, instead of six like all the others, refused to pay heed to the behest of God, saying, "You created us angels from the splendor of the Shekinah (heaven, God's dwelling, God's being), and now You command us to cast ourselves down before the creature which You fashioned out of the dust of the ground!" God answered, "Yet this dust of the ground has more wisdom and understanding than you."

² *Vita Adae et Evae* From "The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament" R.H. Charles Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913

Satan demanded a trial of wit with Adam, and God assented to it, saying: "I have created beasts, birds, and reptiles. I shall have them all come before you and before Adam. If you art able to give them names, I shall command Adam to show honor unto you, and you shalt rest next to the Shekinah of My glory. But if not, and Adam calls them by the names I have assigned to them, then you will be subject to Adam, and he shall have a place in My garden, and cultivate it."

Thus spoke God, and He betook Himself to Paradise, Satan following Him. When Adam beheld God, he said to his wife, "O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker."

Now Satan attempted to assign names to the animals. He failed with the first two that presented themselves, the ox and the cow. God led two others before him, the camel and the donkey, with the same result. Then God turned to Adam, and questioned him regarding the names of the same animals, framing His questions in such wise that the first letter of the first word was the same as the first letter of the name of the animal standing before him. Thus Adam divined the proper name, and Satan was forced to acknowledge the superiority of the first man.

Nevertheless Satan broke out in wild outcries that reached the heavens, and he refused to do homage unto Adam as he had been bidden. The host of angels led by him did likewise, in spite of the urgent representations of the angel Michael, who was the first to prostrate himself before Adam in order to show a good example to the other angels. Michael addressed Satan: "Give adoration to the image of God! But if you do not, then the Lord God will break out in wrath against you." Satan replied: "If He breaks out in wrath against me, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will be like the Most High!" At once God flung Satan and his host out of heaven, down to the earth, and from that moment dates the enmity between Satan and human beings.³

Later Satan describes to Adam what happened next with him and his followers.

"And straightway we were overcome with grief, since we had been spoiled of so great glory. And we were grieved when we saw you in such joy and luxury. And with guile I cheated your wife and caused you to be expelled through her (doing) from thy joy and luxury, as I have been driven out of my glory."

When Adam heard the devil say this, he cried out and wept and spoke: "O Lord my God, my life is in your hands. Banish this Adversary far from me, who seeks to destroy my soul, and give me his glory which he himself has lost." And at that moment, the devil vanished before him.⁴

So, Satan wrought human downfall by essentially inventing jealousy or envy. Satan could not tolerate the idea that another of God's creatures was greater than he was. So envious and angry was Satan that he decided to destroy Adam and Eve. And how did he do it? He did it by the very same means as destroyed him.

Satan, in the guise of a serpent, came to Eve.

He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

³ Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 61–63.

⁴ *Vita Adae et Evae*

Satan infected Eve with the same envy and jealousy that were his downfall. “Don’t you want to be like God? Don’t you want to know as much as God? Don’t you want to be as high as God? You’re not going to die if you eat of the tree. You will be like God. God will no longer be above you. Go ahead. Give it a try.” And, of course Eve does.

These stories are very helpful, I think. They may not explain everything. For example, why was Satan susceptible to jealousy in the first place? We don’t know. But what we do learn is that Adam and Eve’s sin, as it were, was caused by something outside them. At their core, as our passage this morning tells us, “There is no destructive poison in them. The palace of Hades is not on earth.” They were susceptible to being infected by envy, which may be the world’s most contagious disease, but they were at their core made for immortality, for incorruption.

In many ways I like this version of things. The stain of our sinfulness is on the surface, not in the heart. In this light Wisdom’s admonition, “Do not cause your death by the sinful things you do, or let your actions drag you down to destruction,” makes sense. We can choose the better way. But, of course, we mostly don’t. Throughout history Adam human beings have much maligned Adam for our failures. In one of the old stories Adam objects and fends for his honor and suggests that the humans who came after him may often be worse than he was.

“Once on a time [Adam] said to God: “I should not like the pious to reproach me and lay the blame for their death upon me....” And God promised to fulfil his wish. Therefore, when a [person] is about to die, God appears to him, and bids him set down in writing all he has done during his life, for, He tells him, “You are dying by reason of thy evil deeds.” The record finished, God orders him to seal it with his seal.... As soon as life is extinct in a [person], he is presented to Adam, whom he accuses of having caused his death. But Adam repudiates the charge: “I committed but one trespass. Is there any among you, and be he the most pious, who has not been guilty of more than one? [And the person must read what he wrote.]”⁵

These old stories give an attractive version of things, but we cannot miss that they give us much responsibility. Wisdom pointedly says that God made creation to thrive, but human jealousy, envy and greed have put God’s earth in peril. God created us with integrity like his own. Satan has infected us with envy and jealousy. But Wisdom wants to say that however much Satan has infected us, we can make choices to resist the infection. But too often we let spite, greed and resentment overcome us. We humans murder and maim God’s people. Some of God’s people starve and live in squalor while others live in extravagance. This is not what God made us for. Nor is it inevitable. God pleads with us: “Do not cause your death by the sinful things you do, or let your actions drag you down to destruction.” And thanks be to God, we do have some choice in the matter. Amen.

⁵ *Legends of the Jews*, 99.