

The Dilemma

We are walking through God’s Big Story—what we call the Bible. The point of this series is that most people learn about the Bible by digesting little bits and pieces. They grow up in Sunday School hearing Bible stories and lessons, memorizing verse here and there, but usually we jump around so they never put them together.

It’s like trying to watch a short clip of a movie and expect to know what the movie is about. That’s why this summer, we’re starting at the beginning and working through the broad story of the Bible.

Now, Christians say the Bible is our authority. But how can it be our authority if it’s a story? We can understand how laws like the Ten Commandments or the teachings of Jesus can be our authority. How can a story be our authority? But the reason Christians live the way we do (or at least, should live a certain way) isn’t just because God gave us some rules to follow. We do it because God has created us with value and purpose and we want to live out the story he’s placed us in.

Now, today we’ll start to see a theme that runs through the whole story of Scripture. It’s a dilemma that the first humans faced. And it’s a dilemma we all face every day. The dilemma is, “Will I trust the wisdom of God or will I rely on my own wisdom?”

Last week, we learned that humans are made in the “image of God.” For instance, Genesis 1:26, **“God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’**

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

Of course, that begs the question, “What does it mean to be made in the image of God?” Well, last week we said that it partially means each human has unsurpassable worth and dignity. But if you ask most scholars who know Genesis, they will tell you that the “image of God” means that humans have a PURPOSE. Here’s why:

The phrase “image of God” was actually a common concept in the ancient world. In Babylon or Assyria or Egypt, the kings and Pharaohs were said to be the image of God. For instance, we’ve found an inscription from Egypt that said it was from the God Amen-Re and written to Pharaoh Amenhotep III that said, *“You are my beloved son, who came forth from my members, my image, whom I have put on earth. I have given to you to rule the earth in peace.”* And there are many other instances of this kind of thing. The phrase “image of God,” always refers to the king.

So, scholars say that the ancient pagan myths and inscriptions like this were written to legitimate the king as the image of God and to maintain the social structure. Calling the king or Pharaoh the “image of God” gave them divine authority over the people. And, of course, the people are far less likely to rebel against the king if he has divine power. You don’t have a lot of choice.

But the image of God extends further. Ancient Empires were big places and it took a long time to get places. And the king could only be in one place at a time. So, the king would commission statues of

himself to be placed throughout the empire to remind his subjects who was in charge. The people were continually reminded that the king was the image of God.

But, what makes the Genesis story so radical is that it's not just the king who is made in the image of God. Every person to walk the earth is the image of God that reflects God to the rest of creation.

But we're not just made to represent the king, we are called to continue the work of the king. Being made in the image of God is really cool and an awesome privilege, but it's also a huge responsibility. That's why a thread that runs through the whole story of the Bible. As humans, we are made for a *purpose* greater than ourselves. In order to carry out our responsibility to steward the world, we need God's wisdom. That's the backdrop, so let's continue the story there in Genesis, chapter 2.

Verse 9, **"God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."** Skip down to verse 15.

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for when you eat from it, you will surely die.'"

The garden Adam and Eve are placed in is called Eden, which means pleasure, abundance—as you can imagine, paradise. That's why we see over and over in chapter 1, **"God looked at it and saw that it was good."** It was everything they could want.

So, Adam is living in paradise and there are all kinds of fruit trees around, but also two special trees in the middle of the garden—the "Tree of Life" and the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

Now, these two trees are representative. The Tree of Life represents God's *provision*. It was the continual reminder that it was God who gave them everything. He was the one who sustained them. He is the good king who takes care of his image-bearers. And God said they could eat much as they'd like from this tree. Eating from the Tree of Life meant trusting God's goodness and even abundance.

The second tree is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree needs some explanation. I suspect most people believe that the only reason God placed this tree in the garden just to test—you might say, tempt—Adam and Eve. But it's actually more nuanced than that. Like the Tree of Life, this tree is also representative. It represents God's *wisdom*. But even this needs some explanation.

We call it the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." The word "good" just like in chapter one is the Hebrew word, "towb." We translate it as good, and in this case, we tend to think of it only in moral terms. But, just like the word "good" in English, "towb" can mean other things. For instance, when we say a pizza is good, we don't mean it's a moral pizza. When we say someone is a good basketball player, we don't mean just that he doesn't cheat. We mean he's skilled at basketball. "Towb" can also mean pleasant, excellent or everything is the way it was intended.

In the same way, the Hebrew word for evil is the word "ra." But actually, the word evil might not be the best translation here because "evil" carries too much weight. It *can* mean moral evil. But it can also just mean unpleasant or harmful. That's not necessarily evil, but it's bad. In fact, "bad" might be a better translation.

But even more important, the phrase “to know towb and ra” means something specific. That phrase is used in other places in the Bible—like Deuteronomy 1:39. The Israelites are getting ready to enter the land God promised to them, but the spies were afraid because the people in the land were huge and imposing. The ten spies created fear saying the Canaanites would take our children as slaves.

So, God told them they wouldn’t ever get to enter it, but the next generation would. Here’s what it says, **“³⁹And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know towb and ra—they will enter the land.”** So, what we see is that “towb and ra” is what we call wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to do what is good, not just what feels good, which is something that children haven’t yet developed.

So, if that’s the case, then we have to ask, *if towb and ra is another word for wisdom, why would God prohibit people from knowing it?* Well, to know towb and ra” is a Hebrew idiom. An idiom is a phrase that we can’t determine the meaning of just by defining the individual words. For instance, if I say, “Get off my back!” I’m not implying that you’re on my back. It’s an expression that I use to get you to stop nagging me.

The idiom, “know towb and ra” means to believe we can determine good and bad for ourselves without reference to God. It’s to make our own thoughts, will and desires the standard for wisdom. That’s the dilemma this tree presents is, “Do I get to be the king who determines right and wrong, good and bad, or do I leave that to the real King?”

This theme is prominent in the Psalms and Proverbs. The books are part of what we call “wisdom literature” in the Old Testament and they continually point out the difference between our wisdom and God’s wisdom.

For example, Proverbs 3:5-6 says, **“⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”** Or from Proverbs 14:12, **“¹²There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”** Verses like this refer back to the original dilemma.

Chapter three is where the action happens. Adam and Eve are minding their own business, when a serpent shows up and talks to Eve. We usually associate the serpent with Satan, and that’s a reasonable assumption, but the story itself doesn’t tell us it’s Satan. It’s just a serpent.

We pick it up at the end of verse 1. The serpent asks, **“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”** Notice that the serpent is twisting God’s words to get them to doubt God’s provision. God DIDN’T say they couldn’t eat from *any* of the trees—just the one. He’s tempting them to doubt God’s *goodness*. They had all these great trees, but maybe God is keeping the best for himself.

Now, I’m sure you’ve probably experienced this before. God gives us a sense of purpose and has provided us with so many good things. But something inside us isn’t content. So, when something we have is taken away or we can’t have what we want, we question whether God really is good. Other people have more good things than I do. I really want something, but God is keeping it from me. So, I obsess about it and start to doubt God’s goodness. The serpent played on this desire.

Well, Eve passes the first test in verse 2, but she’s also a bit confused in the process, **“The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You**

must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”

Her first misstep comes when she says that they can't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. Well, there were *two* trees in the middle of the garden—the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad. I don't know if she wasn't clear about which tree was prohibited or if she was just being imprecise.

The second point of confusion is that she made God's prohibition more restrictive than God intended. God didn't say if they touch it, they will die. Now, it might be smart to touch it, but God didn't say they would die if they touched it.

So, she says, “If we touch it we will die,” so the serpent presses the issue in verse 4, **“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”**

Here, the serpent does two things. First, he questions God's *truthfulness*. He directly contradicts what God said, “*Oh, come on! Don't be so gullible. You won't die. It's just fruit. What could be wrong with that?*”

The second thing he does is question God's *motives*. “God isn't *protecting* you, he's keeping something from you. God isn't as in control as he leads you to believe. He's lying to you because he knows that when you eat that fruit, you'll be as *powerful* as he is. The fruit won't hurt you, it'll *help* you transcend your limits, so God is threatened by that.”

That was intriguing, so she took a second look and focused her attention on the fruit. And the wheels started to turn. Verse 6 says she saw three things. First, it's good for food. Second, it's a *delight* to the eye. The Hebrew word means she started to crave it. Third, she saw it was good for *gaining* wisdom. In other words, she didn't just desire the *fruit*, she started to covet the wisdom God had and was keeping from her.

Notice the progression. First, there's a practical benefit—it was good for food. And what could be wrong with meeting a need? (Never mind that there were countless other trees that could meet that same need.)

But then she started to *desire* it. It becomes more than just a need, she develops an appetite for it. And she reasons—I desire it, so it must be good. What a great description of the ethos of our society—if I desire it, it must be good. We see this around the area of sex. I desire it and it doesn't seem to hurt anything so it must be good. We see it when it comes accumulating material things. God would want me to have more. We see it when it when we refuse to forgive. It feels good to get back at them. How something makes us feel becomes the standard for right and wrong.

The third step is *rationalization*. Not only do I *want* it, I *deserve* it. And anyone who tries to keep it from me doesn't have my best interest in mind—even God.

Social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, says that while we usually believe humans are rational creatures, it's not really true. Humans are driven by our desires. In fact, he estimates that we make decisions 90% according to our desires (and automatic responses) and only 10% according to our rational faculties.

He uses the image of a rider on an elephant. The elephant is our desires and the rider our conscious thoughts and rational thinking. If you're putting a rider up against an elephant, who do you think will win? Usually, our desires drive us and then we use our minds to rationalize why we did what we did.

Our natural desires and instincts push us toward things like personal comfort, pleasure, wealth, self-protection or personal advancement. That's ultimately what happened with Adam and Eve. When it came down to it, even though they had every reason to trust God's *provision* and *wisdom*, the idea that they could possibly have more was too much to handle, so their focus changed from God's will to their own and they seized the throne for themselves.

So, what happened? Verse 6, **"She took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.**

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

They ate the fruit because they believed it would make things better for them. But what they didn't realize is that focusing on self and making our desires the standard of good doesn't make things better, it makes things worse.

First, it created a rift in their relationship with each other. When Adam and Eve were created, they lived in harmony and had nothing to hide. But after they sinned, they realized they were vulnerable and they covered themselves and hid from God.

Then, when God finds them, they start to blame. Eve blames the serpent. Adam blames both Eve and God in verse 12, **"The woman YOU put here with me made me eat."** In other words, if *you* hadn't made her, none of this would have happened.

And it created a rift between humans and God. Trust was broken. They no longer looked to God for provision and wisdom, but it became everyone for himself.

If you read the rest of our Scriptures for this week, what you'll see is example after example of this same dilemma playing itself out. Cain killed his brother Abel because he acted on his selfish emotion of jealousy. Lamech collected wives and bragged to them about his power because he killed someone who wounded him. In Genesis 6:5, it says, **"every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."**

Even after God starts over with the flood, we get to Genesis 11 and the people of Babel erect a huge building to "make a name for themselves." It wasn't about fulfilling their God-given purpose and responsibility. It was about using their power and creativity to seize the throne.

As we walk through Scripture, we'll see this same pattern playing out over and over—people exchanging their God-given purpose for their own desires. God provides for them and walks with them, but rather than living for God's purpose according to God's wisdom, they trust their own understanding and they turn in on themselves.

But whether we're in the Old or New Testament, whenever it seems hopeless, God comes through offering his grace, provision and wisdom. When Adam and Eve sin, God seeks them out and makes covering for them. And while they paid the price for their lack of trust, God doesn't leave them alone. He continues to offer his provision and wisdom to live up to their calling. But it's more than just a story, way back then. It's also our story.

We all live with the temptation to make our Kingdom, rather than God's Kingdom our priority. Rather than remembering our God-given responsibility to seek the good of others and the world, we turn in on ourselves. Rather than using what we have to serve others, we use others to serve ourselves. And the result is broken relationships and distance from God. There's a price for seizing the throne for ourselves.

But the climax of this story is when God himself takes on human form in the man, Jesus and perfectly lives out the purpose for which God created us. The Apostle Paul calls him the "New Adam" because he lived the life Adam should have lived. And when he did he showed us the way to be truly human and reflect the image of God. In Adam and Eve we see the worst of what we could be, but in Jesus we see what we should be.

But not only did Jesus show us how to be truly human by serving others, rather than himself, he died and took on himself the effects of our sin by dying in our place, so we can start again. But Jesus also rose again to show that he is the true Lord and King. Now today, we can not only see the wisdom of God by looking at Jesus and his life, but we actually receive his power to live and to rule the way God intended. This is God's ultimate provision that God has promised to be with us to help us fulfill our calling.