

People Fall into Sin at Work

From the Theology of Work Project

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we see work in its ideal form, under the perfect conditions of the Garden of Eden. All this changes in Genesis 3.

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. 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." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:1-6)

The serpent represents anti-god. God's adversary is malevolent and wiser than human beings. He is shrewd as he draws attention to Adam and Eve's vulnerability. And he distorts God's command. He maneuvers Eve into what looks like a sincere theological discussion, but distorts it by emphasizing God's prohibition, instead of God's provision of the rest of the fruit trees in the garden. In essence, God's adversary wants God's word to sound harsh and restrictive.

The serpent's plan succeeds, and first Eve, then Adam, eats the fruit of the forbidden tree. They break the limits God had set for them, in a vain attempt to become "like God" in some way beyond what they already possessed as God's image-bearers. Having already experienced the goodness of God's creation, Eve and Adam choose to become "wise" in the ways of evil. Their decision to eat the fruit is a choice that favors their own pragmatic, aesthetic, and sensual tastes over God's word. In that moment, "good" is no longer rooted in what God says enhances life but in what people think is desirable to elevate life. In short, they turn what is good into evil.

By choosing to disobey God, they break the relationships inherent in their own being. First, the relationship between man and woman, which had started as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," in Genesis 2:23, is driven apart as Adam and Eve hide from each other under the cover of fig leaves. Next to go is their relationship with God, as they no longer talk

with him in the evening breeze but hide themselves from his presence. Adam further breaks the relationship between himself and Eve by blaming her for his decision to eat the fruit and getting in a dig at God at the same time. “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12). Eve likewise breaks humanity's relationship with the creatures of the earth by blaming the serpent for her own decision.

Adam's and Eve's decisions that day had disastrous results that stretch all the way to the modern workplace. God speaks judgment against their sin and declares consequences that result in difficult toil. The serpent will have to crawl on its belly all of its days. The woman will face hard labor in delivering children, and also feel conflict over her desire for the man. The man will have to toil to wrest a living from the soil, and it will produce “thorns and thistles” at the expense of the desired grain. All in all, human beings will still do the work they were created to do, and God will still provide for their needs. But work will become more difficult, unpleasant, and open to failure and unintended consequences.

It is important to note that when work became toil, it was not the beginning of work. Some people see the curse as the origin of work, but Adam and Eve had already worked the garden. Work is not inherently a curse, but the curse affects work. In fact, work becomes more important as a result of the Fall because more work is required now to yield the

necessary results. Furthermore, the source materials from which Adam and Eve sprang in God's pleasure now become sources of subjugation. Adam, made from dirt, will now struggle to till the soil until his body returns to dirt at his death. Eve, made from a rib in Adam's side, will now be subject to Adam's domination, rather than taking her place beside him.

Domination of one person over another in marriage and work was not part of God's original plan, but sinful people made it a new way of relating when they broke the relationships that God had given them.

Two forms of evil confront us daily. The first is natural evil, the physical conditions on earth that are hostile to the life God intends for us. Floods and droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, excessive heat and cold, disease, vermin, and the like cause harm that was absent from the garden. The second is moral evil, when people act with wills that are hostile to God's intentions. By acting in evil ways, we mar the creation and distance ourselves from God, and we mar the relationships we have with other people.

We live in a fallen, broken world and we cannot expect life without toil. We were made for work, but in this life that work is stained by all that was broken that day in the Garden of Eden. This too is often the result of failing to respect the limits God sets for our relationships, whether personal, corporate, or social. The Fall created alienation between people and God, among people, and between people and the earth that was to

support them. Suspicion of one another replaced trust and love. In the generations that followed, alienation nourished jealousy, rage, even murder. All workplaces today reflect that alienation between workers—to greater or lesser extent—making our work even more toilsome and less productive.

Nonetheless, God continues to provide for us, even as he provided for Adam and Eve, sewing clothes for them when they lack the skill themselves. Outside of the garden, the work of Genesis 1 and 2 continues. There is still ground to be tilled and phenomena of nature to be studied, described, and named. Men and women must still be fruitful, must still multiply, must still govern. But now, a second layer of work must also be accomplished—the work of healing, repairing, and restoring the things that go wrong and the evils that are committed. To put it in a contemporary context, the work of farmers, scientists, midwives, parents, leaders, and everyone in creative enterprises is still needed. But so is the work of exterminators, doctors, funeral directors, corrections officers, forensic auditors, and everyone in professions that restrain evil, forestall disaster, repair damage, and restore health. In truth, everyone's work is a mixture of creation and repair, encouragement and frustration, success and failure, joy and sorrow.

Roughly speaking, there is twice as much work to do now than there was in the garden. Work today is not less important to God's plan, but more.