

## **Eve's Capitulation To The Persuasion Of The Serpent**

It's likely that one of the very first stories in the Bible you ever learnt, or remember learning, is the story of the Garden of Eden. What is also very likely is that you were charmed and delighted by it. From time to time since then you have possibly wished that the world could go back to the simplicity and innocence which is depicted there. A life so uncluttered by material possessions and when people lived so close to God and in such harmony with each other. But what is also likely is that you came to question whether things in fact were ever like that; and whether the Garden of Eden, as such, ever existed. After all, as we became more questioning, we probably wanted to know whether there could have been such things as the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. (What are these?) And you will have wanted to know how the serpent - the one who beguiled Eve - could have spoken to her. If we think about it, it is a bit far fetched.

Continuing this series of talks on the Bible, and in particular, on some of the very best known stories in the earliest chapters of the Book of Genesis, we are going to be talking today about the Garden of Eden and about "the Fall" of man, which is so graphically pictured there. If you have read either of the two previous talks on this subject you will know that we do not see it as critical, or important, to defend or argue the literal, factual, accuracy of these stories; to maintain that things must have taken place exactly as they are said to have done. The Bible, and as Swedenborg wrote of it, is essentially a parable, or a series of parables. We have these earthly stories, such as this story of the Garden of Eden, and within them there is a deeper, spiritual meaning, which relates directly to life as you and I know and experience today.

However before we go into this there are two quite important issues, which, one way or another, come at us in connection with the story of the Garden of Eden. You will often find people - and you may be one of them - who wonder why things had to go wrong. On the simple premise that God created the world and created mankind. The question is asked as to why He created man with the capacity, so to speak, to 'spoil' it all. Couldn't God have done it differently?

The other issue concerns 'original sin'. The idea goes back to time immemorial that the sin which Adam committed was inherited by all people since then. It was insisted

that we are 'born in sin' and have an entirely 'sinful' nature. In fact, this has been the cornerstone of orthodox Christian teaching about human nature.

To take up the first point, about whether creation could have been carried out differently, or whether man could have been created differently, so as to avoid evil and disharmony. The possibility of man turning from God and 'spoiling' the work of creation, was always there and always had to be there. God did not create a race of robots. He created human beings who, necessarily have free will. And that free will involves the freedom to do good or to do evil. God obviously must have foreseen the possibility that man would use his free will to invite the presence of evil into the world. But there was no other way human life could have been created.

The second point which was mentioned was this matter of 'original sin'. Being Adam's descendents, as is supposed, we have inherited his sin of disobedience. We are evil through and through. But are we? Swedenborg challenged the teaching about original sin and spoke of human nature in altogether different terms. In fact, he wrote we are neither good nor evil, but become good or evil as the result of countless choices we make in our adulthood, between opposing courses of action which present themselves to us. To be sure, wrote Swedenborg, we inherit from our parents, grandparents, and ancestors, inclinations to evils of every kind. But the Lord also ensures the presence of other factors in our lives, through which our free will is preserved, and within the context of which our adult choices will be made.

Since, as Swedenborg wrote, the story of the Garden of Eden is to be regarded as a parable, having within it a deeper meaning, what is that meaning? What is the Lord saying to us here? How does the story apply to our lives today?

The garden of Eden was dominated by two trees, one of which, at least at the beginning, was in the centre of the Garden and was called the Tree of life. The other which was on the outskirts was called the Tree of knowledge of good and evil. Moreover, there seems to have been just one rule and this was that Adam and Eve were not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

It is important to realise those two trees are symbols of two opposing principles. The Tree of life is the symbol of our trust in God. The Tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the symbol of our trust in ourselves. So long as the Tree of life was at the

centre of the Garden of Eden all was well. And so it is with us. So long as our trust in God and our willingness to obey and follow His teaching is at the very heart or centre of our lives, all is well.

However, once we turn to the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as Eve and Adam did, things fall apart and there are consequences we regret. Once we reject what the Lord teaches and start trusting in our own standards of behaviour, things change and we no longer have the 'oneness' with God and other people which was there previously.

It was the serpent who urged Eve to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil and who was, of course, the trouble maker. The serpent is the selfish, sensuous, "I'm going to please myself", side of our natures. The serpent speaks to us in the thoughts that come to us urging us to live for ourselves and to take from life whatever we can get from it. It's the serpent, or that particular side of our nature, which urges us to forget what God says and teaches and to take things into our own hands.

A missionary tells the story of an African in South Africa who was mistakenly paid too much change by a white storekeeper. Poverty stricken as he was, this additional money represented a small fortune and he was almost paralysed as the serpent in him urged him to forget what God had said about theft and to take the money and leave. His dilemma caught the attention of other Africans in the shop who, in their own language, cried out to him to do the same. "Don't be a fool" they said. "Take the money and have a good time with it". Eat of The Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With sweat pouring from his forehead he spoke up in English to the store keeper and told him about the mistake. In his case the serpent did not succeed.

The sad thing is that in many cases it does. In the same situation all the other Africans present in the shop would it seems, have walked out with the money. And perhaps we would have done. In any case, it's easy to see the point. It's the serpent which urges us to quick and selfish satisfaction. It's the serpent which urges us to abandon what we know of God's laws and teachings and to trust in our own. It's all very subtle, of course. A dozen reasons come to us why we should. "Other people do it". "They wouldn't miss it". "They can afford it anyway".

Eve and Adam, or what is meant, or represented, by Eve and Adam, are present in every one of us. The serpent comes to us appealing, first of all, to our ego, our pride, our honour, and the perception we have of ourselves. These are 'Eve' in us. And it is our ego, or our pride which, once captivated and taken in, like Eve was, turns around and persuades our understanding, to endorse the behaviour it has set its heart on.

It's incredible really that we are so willing to give up so much to satisfy some passing craving. But we do. The Lord urges on us mercy and forgiveness, for example. But no, we don't want to know about that and at the prompting of the serpent, we resort to what we have told ourselves is the answer to the problem. And nothing but a great deal of sadness and unhappiness follows. The Lord gives us plainlispoken rules as to how to live our lives. But we refuse to trust Him. We want to 'sample' something else. What end does this lead to, but sadness and unhappiness, often monumental sadness and unhappiness.

The implication in the story is that God dispenses punishment, but in fact this is not so. Our behaviour, good or evil, invites its own consequences. It's the way it goes. And those consequences are by no means, necessarily obvious, surface ones. Many people can, apparently, be into a life of evil and disorder, and at the same time prosper in a worldly way. What we can't see, however, is the consequence of their actions and approach to life are having on them within.

In this regard it is worthwhile reflecting for a moment on the following teaching given in Swedenborg's theological writings - "With him who does good from the heart, good inflows from heaven on every side into the heart and soul of him who does it. With him (on the other hand) who from the heart does evil to another, evil inflows from hell on every side into the heart of him who does it." (*Arcana Caelestia* 9049). Like we've seen, those consequences don't necessarily appear on the surface of a person's life. But they are nevertheless there. No one has visited them on us, though. It is we who invite them.

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