

The First Prophecy (Part Three)

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Genesis, the Bible's book of origins or beginnings, reveals the basic answers to many of mankind's most pressing questions: Who and what is God? How did life begin? What is man? What is his destiny? Why are sin and evil so prevalent? How can humanity transcend its base nature?

As we saw in the first part of this series, Genesis 3:14-15 also addresses the topics of Satan's part in humanity's sinfulness, the Devil's future humiliating punishment, and God's promise of a Savior and His church. In the curse on the serpent, God lays bare His plan to redeem mankind and preaches the fundamentals of the gospel to our first parents.

Part Two explained Genesis 3:16, the curse on Eve, showing the origin of women's difficulties in childbearing and the battle of the sexes. Twentieth-century women feel the effects of this curse daily, not only in birth pangs, but also in their struggle for "equality" and "freedom." The apostle Paul shows, however, that the curse can be mitigated only through godly submission in Christ. In effect, we must return to performing God's original intent when He created mankind male and female (Genesis 1:27).

Genesis 3:17-19, God's judgment on Adam, covers men's leadership difficulties, his never-ending struggles to survive and his "dust in the wind" mortality. All these came upon mankind, and males in particular, as a result of being cut off from contact with God, symbolized by the tree of life. The "human condition" is a long step below the idyllic conditions God made available to humanity in the Garden!

Preamble to a Curse

A unique aspect of God's curse on Adam is the preamble recorded in verse 17:

Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat of it". . . .

Neither of the other two curses contains such a lengthy reason for God's pronouncement.

Why God does this probably lies in the fact that Adam was not deceived when he sinned (I Timothy 2:14). God saw the need to explain to him why he was being cursed so that Adam would not repeat the grievous error again. Events had deteriorated much too far already, and this preamble is an attempt to shore up the damage by pinpointing to Adam the cause of the problem.

God's reason for Adam's curse comes in two parts: 1) He obeyed Eve, and 2) he disobeyed God. He sinned by *doing* something he should not have done, as well as by *not doing* what he should have done! Like most sins, his was an act of commission *and* omission.

God first exposes Adam's abdication of his leadership role in the marriage. Though Ephesians 5:21 says to "[submit] to one another in the fear of God," Adam yielded to his wife in an area he knew God had specifically commanded them to do otherwise. He should have led, not followed.

Genesis 3 provides no explanation for why Adam followed her lead; verse 6 tersely says, "She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate." It suggests he weakly acquiesced to do her bidding with a "whatever you say, dear" attitude. He chose to appease her rather than correct her.

Then God reminds him that he had directly disobeyed His very clear command: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). God's words in Genesis 3:17 cut straight to the heart of the matter. However Adam had justified to himself that he could eat the forbidden fruit, he had still committed sin in God's eyes.

As the wording suggests, the two reasons go together; it is an Old Testament pre-statement of Peter's words to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29: "We ought to obey God rather than men." God's commands take precedence over any words, acts or persuasions to the contrary—even if they are delivered by a beautiful, naked woman offering to feed us fruit!

Proof in the Eating

After the preamble, God gets to the meat of the curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Some commentators make a great deal out of the fact that God addresses this curse to *adam* rather than to "the man" (*ish* in Hebrew), seeing this as proof that this curse was to fall on all mankind. This semantic argument means very little in the end, since both *ish*, the man named Adam, and *adam*, mankind, received the effects of the curse, just as both Eve and all other women have suffered from her curse.

English-speaking peoples have a saying that "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." God, of course, understood this, and thus His curse on Adam centers on eating. In fact, eating is a major theme of the first three chapters of Genesis (see 1:29-30; 2:9, 15-17; 3:1-6, 11-13).

Eating, however, stands for more than simply nourishing the body; it is one small part of mankind's daily struggle to survive his hostile environment, planet earth. The Garden of Eden was a place where man's work "to tend and keep" what God had made was pleasurable, fulfilling and probably not overly strenuous. The earth worked with the man to produce his needs for food, clothing, shelter and whatever other need he might have.

Once God pronounced his curse, though, the ground—from which comes all material wealth and produce—turned uncooperative. Instead of man and nature united in productive labor, the situation became man versus nature, a competition for dominance. Now, man would have to use all his physical and mental powers to subdue the earth.

The earth would yield its fruit only after a man forced it through hard labor in plowing, planting, watering, cultivating and reaping. Animals from insects to deer to wolves, fearful of man, would

become pests and destroy his crops, herds, possessions and even his life on occasion. Materials for building homes, crafting tools, making clothing and manufacturing items would be gathered only by raping the land of minerals, metals, wood and stone.

The earth would protest through natural processes like earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides, wildfires, erosion and infertility. Denuded of trees, the land would become a desert. The weather would turn foul, sending too much or too little rain. Windstorms like hurricanes and tornadoes would devastate vast stretches of territory. The sun would beat down mercilessly or withhold its heat for long stretches.

Such was the situation Adam and Eve faced after God drove them from the Garden of Eden. For six thousand years all their descendants have struggled to survive the harsh conditions of life separated from God and in competition with nature. Surely it has affected their eating, but it has also had an impact on every other endeavor of mankind—from breaking horses for riding to blasting satellites into orbit. Men accomplish nothing except by the toil of hard work and overcoming the obstacles the environment places in their way.

For Man's Sake

In God's curse, one three-word phrase makes all the difference: "for your sake." Modern translations render this phrase (*be'abûr*) "because of you" or "on your account," attempting to show that the ground's curse came as a result of Adam's sin. However, God had already given the reasons for the curse earlier in the verse, so why need He repeat it?

"For your sake," while including the idea of "because of you," brings out another nuance that the modern renderings leave out. Since man would be cut off from God and His Holy Spirit, the ground would be cursed for man's sake, that is, for his benefit, advantage or good. As with all acts of God, the perfect standard of goodness, the curse on Adam would do mankind "good in the end" (Deuteronomy 8:16), although its initial manifestations would entail hardship, toil and privation.

How can such a curse—with such long-lasting and harsh consequences—be good? Paul comments on this in Romans 8:19-22:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

The apostle says here that God pronounced the curse on the creation "in hope" of "the revealing of the sons of God," which would release it "from the bondage of corruption." God designed the curse on Adam to enhance man's chance to enter His Family! God would rather have done it another way—through His guidance in the Garden of Eden—but since Adam and Eve chose rebellion, He designed Adam's curse to reach the same end by a different means: hard toil, struggle and eventual death!

The Work Ethic

Over the past several hundred years, the idea of a "work ethic" has captured the imagination of philosophers, theologians and ordinary men and women. The fundamental principle in any ethic of

labor is that hard work teaches certain virtues and enables people to advance beyond the circumstances of their birth. If a young street urchin desires, he can—through hard work and integrity—climb from welfare to well-paid. The "rags to riches" motif grew from this ethic of work.

In His curse on Adam, God tells the man that his entire existence—"all the days of your life"—would be filled with labor. He would have to work for every morsel of food that would pass between his lips or those of his family. He would have to wage war on the natural processes of nature, such as weather, weeds, insects, fungi, and disease, to reap a crop, and he would never be assured of success. He would sweat in work, and he would sweat in worry.

All of this fighting, as one would expect, would take its toll on him. The constant pressure to provide for his own would drive him to work harder, longer hours. He would be constantly exposed to the fickle elements, which would sap his vigor. All this work would age him prematurely, and one day in the midst of his labors, he would simply die and return to the dust that he had been fighting all his life.

But amidst this struggle would come something of eternal consequence. Notice the words of Solomon:

For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work grievous; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:22-24)

Solomon, knowing the human condition was a result of God's purpose, reveals that men can receive something good from his toilsome lot. Verse 26 lists three virtues we can derive from our labors: "For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God."

A person who combines his work with a relationship with God will receive growth in character! On the other hand, a sinner, cut off from God, must endure the drudgery of the struggle, and the rewards of his work would eventually benefit the righteous, not himself!

Later, Solomon repeats his observation in chapter 3:

What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. . . . I know there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. (verses 9-10, 12-13)

This seems to verify that God's curse on Adam is in the end a gift from Him! Why is this curse really a blessing? We find the answer in verse 11:

He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time [or, *God times everything beautifully*]. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end."

The curse, if properly used, can lead a man to merge his life with God's "work" or purpose, which leads to "eternity" or eternal life! Man, apart from God, has no idea what God is doing, but one with a relationship with Him will have it revealed to him—and he can then use this knowledge to "work out" his salvation (Philippians 2:12)! He can direct his labor along eternal lines.

Dust to Dust

The last part of God's curse on Adam involves the brevity of physical life. To this point, death had been mentioned only as a threatened punishment for sin (Genesis 2:17), so it must be assumed that, as long as Adam and Eve remained sinless, they would not die. Paul writes in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

God designed His wording of Adam's punishment to link mankind with the earth: He was created out of it, and when he died, he would return to it. His sin had removed him from the environs of the heavenly and forced him to dwell, labor and die in the earthly. Yet even this has a silver lining:

And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man. (I Corinthians 15:45-49)

The benefit of a physical body is that it can die! This may sound strange, but it is exactly this fact that makes man able to become immortal sons of God! Men can die and be resurrected, following the pattern set by Christ, receiving eternal life and the rewards of His Kingdom. It is our righteous living in the flesh through the grace of God that qualifies us for this glorious potential.

On the flip side, our physical nature also makes it possible for God to rid the universe of anyone unwilling to submit to Him. Unlike angels, men can be completely consumed in the Lake of Fire—totally destroyed for all eternity and unable to defile the holiness of God's Kingdom. Though God desires "all [to] come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9) and "all men to be saved" (I Timothy 2:4), He has this option should it be needed. Revelation 19:20 shows that it will indeed.

Curses—or Blessings?

The Bible's first prophecy contains three major curses, one each upon Satan, women and men. Or does it? The answer depends on one's perspective and time reference.

Certainly, the curse on Satan seems a mixed bag! Men have either been subject to his deceptions or fiercely waging war with him for six thousand years. Yet it is the struggle of the fight that prepares our character to inherit eternal life. We live in hope and faith that God will see the curse through to its end, the total humiliation and imprisonment of the Adversary.

To a woman in labor or to a man sweating out in a field under the sun, God's pronouncements surely feel like curses. Yet, maybe only moments later, the satisfaction and joy in seeing a healthy baby or a job well done can make it all seem worthwhile. We feel grateful that God has given us such blessings.

If nothing else, this should make us think about the "curses" and "blessings" in our lives. Could something terrible turn out for the best? Could seeing "our ship come in" prove our ruin? There is much more to God's gifts and judgments than meets the eye:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)