

The Serpent and the Sin - Rev. Andrew Coghill

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[0 : 00] Now, the chapter that we read this evening is concerned with arguably the most tragic event in the history of mankind, namely the fall.

! We are not told and we have no way of knowing how long had elapsed between the completed work of creation and the fall of mankind.

For all we know, it might have been a considerable length of time and it might be comforting to think that our first parents held out against temptation for a bit longer than is traditionally supposed.

The main reason, not perhaps the only reason, but the main reason I would suggest for thinking that the fall happened sooner rather than later, is that we have no scriptural record of any previous temptations that were successfully resisted.

Now, of course, one might take a journalist's attitude to such resistance and say that, well, if they didn't give in, then there's no story. There's nothing to record. You know, why would you bother to write it down?

[1 : 11] You know, it's just unending bliss and innocence until the serpent ruins it all. Now, the only problem with that is that the Bible is not written by journalists, but rather, as Peter tells us in 2 Peter 1, verse 21, in the authorised version, holy men of God, spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

And if a temptation successfully resisted was not a story worth telling, then we would have to ask why Matthew and Mark and Luke all made a point of telling us about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, who, of course, did not give in to sin.

But this is the first recorded instance of any temptation within the garden, and the heartbreakingly embarrassing conclusion seems to be that our first parents, sinless as they were, fell at pretty much the first hurdle.

So although we cannot know exactly how long had elapsed since the first creation week, it is unlikely to be all that long. Probably only a matter of days of that.

Now, right away at verse 1, we have a question which perplexes some people, although it shouldn't because the answer is very simple. But I would like us this evening to look at that question and its implications.

[2 : 40] The question which perplexes people is usually in two parts. Where did the serpent come from? And how did something so evil get into God's perfect paradise?

But these things are only perplexing if we try to go beyond Scripture for our answers. But if we stick to the safety and clarity of what God reveals in His Word, then it is not at all complicated.

Where did the serpent come from? Well, God made the serpent. God made everything. We can see that if we turn back to chapter 1, verse 24, where we read, And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds, livestock and creeping things, and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.

And it was so. So, why would God make something evil? The answer is, of course, He didn't. The following verse, And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds, and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind.

And God saw that it was good. God made it, and God made it good. God made everything. And God made everything good.

[4:12] Therefore, by definition, God made the serpent, and God made the serpent good. What we read at chapter 1, verse 31, God saw everything that he had made.

And behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. The Bible does not say that the serpent was evil.

simply that it was, quote, more crafty than any other beast of the field the Lord God had made. Cunning, clever, yes, but not evil.

Jesus himself tells his disciples, Matthew 10, verse 15, that they must be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.

Wise as serpents. So clearly, serpents had a reputation, even in Jesus' day, for being wily and cunning and wise and clever. But if the serpent isn't evil, why does it put temptation in the way of the woman?

[5:22] It is permitted to do so because temptation is not sin. I'll say that again.

Temptation is not sin. Jesus was sinless, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4, 15. And even if we allow that an angel called Satan or Lucifer, or however we describe him, used the serpent and spoke through it to the woman, that does not make either the serpent or even the angel at this stage, three little words, very important words, at this stage to be evil.

To tempt, to test, to place obstacles in the ways of those who are, to all intents and purposes, simply following God's instructions, is not of itself evidence of evil.

God may have any number of reasons why he might allow such testing to take place, one of which might well be to examine and test the faithfulness of those engaged in work that he had himself approved.

[6:42] We have, if you think about it, the strange case in Exodus chapter 4, verses 24 to 26, where the Lord himself appears to threaten the life of Moses and to test his obedience in the sacrament of circumcision, even though Moses was embarked on the journey to Egypt in obedience to God's call.

In Numbers 22, the angel of the Lord, with his sword drawn in his hand, blocks the way of Balaam as he journeys to meet Balak, the son of Zippor, the king of Moab.

Even though God had said to him, Numbers 22 at verse 20, if the men have come to call you, rise, go with them, but only do what I tell you.

In neither case do we assume evil on the Lord's part or that of his angel. So even if an angel spoke through the serpent here, whoever that angel might have been, to do so does not make the angel either fallen or evil, or at least not yet.

To tempt, to test, to place obstacles in the way of those who are to all intents and purposes following God's instructions is not of itself evidence of evil because temptation is not sin.

[8 :10] Now the traditional view of Satan in relation to God is that he was created as an angel, Lucifer, meaning light bearer, one of the most glorious angels in God's creation who subsequently rebelled against God, desiring for himself the worship and glory which belonged to God alone, and that for this he was cast out of heaven into hell, determined thereafter to ruin God's good work of creation and drag down to hell with him as many as possible of those precious human beings who were made in the image of God.

For example, we read in Isaiah 14, verses 12 to 15 here, How you are fallen from heaven, O day star, son of dawn!

How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high.

I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the most high. But you are brought down to Sheol, or hell, to the far reaches of the pit.

In Luke 10, we read verses 17 to 19 when the 72 returned with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name. He, that is Jesus, said to them, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

[9 :41] Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. And in Revelation, we read then at chapter 12, verses 7 to 9.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

So far, so scriptural. Where the traditional view deviates from scripture is that this conflict between God and Lucifer is presumed, presumed, to have occurred in some kind of pre-creation eternity, which would mean that heaven and hell already existed before creation proper, by which means the devil was already in place, poised, and ready to strike via the serpent at the woman.

That is supposedly the explanation for what happened in the garden. The only problem with that traditional viewpoint is that the timescale, the idea of some pre-creation eternity in which this conflict takes place, has not one shred of scriptural support.

[11 :24] It is a theory, and as such is pure speculation. What is definitely scriptural is that God created everything.

We know that. Chapter 1, verse 1 in Genesis, you know, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God made everything. Likewise, we saw how God saw all that He had made and it was good.

Exodus 20, verse 11 says, For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them. Heaven, earth, land, sea, everything.

In other words, everything that God made, whether in heaven or in earth, He made in that six-day period. There is no pre-creation warfare in eternity with good angels and bad angels before the work of creation because angels are themselves created beings.

Now, I realize that the version we have in front of us, the English standard version, says that He makes His messengers winds, His ministers a flaming fire.

[12 :41] But the word for wind is very similar. Wind and spirit are very similar in Hebrew and in Greek they're identical. And the word messenger literally is the word angel.

Angel means literally messenger. So the way the authorized version has it, who maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire. Perhaps illustrates it slightly more clearly, but the point is not whether we're talking winds or messengers or angels or spirits.

The point is He makes them. He maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire. Whenever it is done, God made them.

These messengers, these angels, these spirits, they are created beings, created spirits. And if they are created in the heavenly realms, they are by definition created in that six-day period.

Not before in some vast pre-creation eternity, but within that six-day period. When God created the heaven and the earth, He made everything in it.

[13:47] Every angel, every spirit, those who would be true to Him and those who would ultimately turn against Him. But what about all those verses you just read, you know, about Satan falling from heaven?

Surely that proves it. Well, let's look again at Isaiah 14, verse 12. How are you fallen from heaven? O day, star, son of dawn, how are you cut down to the ground who laid the nations low?

And so on. The ground, the earth, already exists. If it's pre-creation, where does the ground come from? God created the heavens and the earth in that creation week.

It already exists by the time of this prophecy that references Lucifer or day, star of the dawn falling to the earth. Likewise, we read in Revelation, in chapter 12, again, going back to this verse 7, war in the heavenly realms.

And Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back, and the great dragon was thrown down. That ancient serpent was called the devil and Satan, deceiver of the whole world.

[14:49] The world was already created. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. The earth already exists. Therefore, creation has already happened.

The earth exists. The heavens exist. The sea exists. Everything that God has made exists. The earth is already in place, and creation has already happened, because the earth is already formed to which the devil is cast down.

Okay, you might say, so Satan rebelled against God. He sinned against God at some point between creation and the fall of man. But when? You know, we've no record of it anywhere before the fall of man.

It is pure speculation. On the scriptural evidence, I would suggest to you that Satan had still not fallen, was not able to fall until after mankind himself fell.

But how was he able to use the serpent? He was able because temptation is not sin. Sin is defined in the larger catechism.

[16:08] Chapter 24, question 24, what is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of any law of God given as a rule to the reasonable creature. And we have no scriptural record of any such laws of God given to the angels, only to man.

The angels, if angels did actually eat and drink, we don't think they do, but if angels did it, the angels might eat whatever tree they liked. They might have whatever they wanted from the garden. And they might do as they pleased because they could not sin as yet for the simple reason that sin did not exist.

I'll say that again. Sin did not exist. Sin did not exist until God's law was broken. And the law can only be broken by one to whom the law is given.

Whatever may have been the thoughts or desires or ambitions of Satan, you might say, oh, well, if the thoughts or ambitions were there, then that's sin in itself. He had no opportunity for sin.

For, as Paul wrote to Romans chapter 5, verse 13, for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

[17 : 25] Sin is not counted where there is no law. It is, if we can use a worldly example, it is like a lecherous, adulterous man washed up on a desert island with only his wife.

He may be desperate to commit adultery, but he physically cannot because there is no one to commit adultery with. His circumstances compel fidelity, even against his will, even against his choice.

And so Satan's will may have been rebelliously ambitious, but he has no outlet for that darkness until and unless such a thing as sin enters the universe, which it can only do by means of man.

Which means that at the outset of this chapter, the serpent is still good. And the angel who may or may not have used the serpent to speak to the woman is as yet a good angel, a holy angel, whoever he may be, for sin does not exist.

Not yet. Not until man sins. Here then is the terrifying truth.

[18 : 43] It is man who unleashes Satan. All the evil that follows throughout the history of the world, all the cruelties and oppression, all the sadism and brutality, the paganism and suffering and killing, all the works of evil from the prince of this world, that is down to us, to our first parents in particular, but us too.

We gave him that power. But now that he has it, we are helpless to take it back. It's like somebody, let's say, who, they're not a drug addict because there are no drugs.

It's somewhere where they live. But somebody then brings in the drugs and they become addicted to it. They may have the agitation that wants or actively seeks that particular intoxication, but until there is the supply, they cannot do it.

Now, whatever may be Satan's sort of disharmony or dis-ease in himself as an angel, he has no outlet until such a thing as sin, rebellion against God, enters into the world and says, I'll have some of that.

Yes, this is what I want to do. I want to be that. I want to be a God in my own eyes. I want to rebel. But there was no outlet for it until man sent.

[20 : 03] Man unleashed Satan. All the evil that follows is down to us. We gave him that power. And now that he has it, we cannot take it back.

If we are to be free from Satan's power now, then it can only be by a power greater than us and greater than him.

It will need God. Nothing and no one has the power to overcome the prince of this world, the prince of the power of the air, as Ephesians calls him.

Nobody is strong enough except God, which is why those like, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, devout and sincere and good living as they undoubtedly are, cannot offer a gospel of deliverance from sin, of forgiveness and peace with God, because for them the price is not paid for them, because Christ Jesus is not God.

He is to them a perfect man, a perfect sacrifice, the Son of God even, but not God the Son. It is not God for them upon the cross, giving of himself for sinners, nor is he God for the Muslim, who sees him only as a prophet, who was too holy to have been really crucified.

[21:35] The consistent hallmark of all false religion, including that which might style itself as Christian or as a church, the consistent hallmark of all false religion is to diminish Christ from his Godhead and to encourage people to trust in something or someone else for their salvation.

But except Christ be God, we have no victory. There is no sacrifice sufficient for the sins of all his people.

We, mankind, have unleashed Satan by our sin, and our old self is utterly powerless to bind him.

But our old self is powerless. We read, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. In 2 Corinthians 5, 17, Christ alone has power to bind Satan, to keep him back from your heart, to give you the focus, the weapons, the armor to resist him.

[22:53] And with his lies and his false hopes and counterfeit promises, Christ alone is able to deliver you. It is not that the Christian will never be attacked by Satan.

If he puts his trust in Christ, oh, that's good, I put my trust in Christ, I'm free from the devil's attacks now. Oh, no, you're not. Rather, he'll hone in on you like a beacon. He will focus upon you.

Nothing he wants more than to destroy the Lord's people. He will attack you. He or she, the Christian, will be the target for Satan's malice.

These battles with Apollyon leave us wounded. Yes, scarred, weakened. But they are evidence that we live. I'll say that again.

These battles that we have with the evil one, they leave us wounded and scarred and weakened, but they are evidence that we live. For a corpse cannot fight.

[23:51] And a dead man feels no pain. Satan had no power until our first parents gave him it. And now if we are in Christ, Satan has none still, but what we give him.

James 4, 7 tells us, he puts it this way, Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

In 1 Corinthians 10, verse 13, we read, You don't have to give in to the devil.

You don't have to surrender to him. You don't have to give in to the devil. You don't have to surrender to him.

It is not a foregone conclusion. In Christ Jesus, you do have the power to fight back. Not in your own strength. You don't have it. I don't have it.

[24:55] But in Christ Jesus, you do have it. To overcome, to gain the victory. Once, it was an easy victory for Satan. That easy, lazy, active indulgence in the garden.

Now, it is a battle. Now, we have the victory despite many a wound. The victory of Christ upon the cross.

Sin is paid for. Blood has been shed. Redemption has been secured. For all who trust and believe and follow.

You are not dead. That is why sin still hurts and wounds and damages you. Because yet you live. And you live for a purpose.

Not to be fuel and faggots for the fires of hell. But to be saints in glory. That is the purpose for which mankind is designed. Man's chief end is what?

[25:57] To glorify God. And to enjoy Him forever. How few of mankind ever enter into that purpose.

Or fulfill it. That chief end. But that is what we are designed for. That is the purpose for which God has created humanity.

That is our purpose. To be saints in glory. Follow then where the prince of glory leads. Even if it be to a cross and an open grave.

Hebrews 10.23 tells us, Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. For he who promised is faithful. You can't change what our first parents did in the past.

But you can choose to enter into a better future for yourself. With Christ. It is a battle.

[26 : 59] It will always be a battle while we remain in this fallen world. So you can't run away from it. And you can't dodge it. And you can't evade it. So we have to face it.

Strap on the armor of God. Lift up the shield of faith. Wet and sharpen the sword of the Spirit. Which is the word of God. Look up.

Go forward. Fight. Back. Let us pray. Gracious and beloved Lord, we pray thee to help us now to fight back against the evil one.

To know, Lord, that we win the victory not in our own strength. For we have seen in our former lives how feeble and how broken our unconverted selves are.

We have seen, O Lord, the weakness and frailty of our own feeble strength. We have seen the ease with which the devil danced upon our lives and how he wrought his mischief and damage upon us.

[28 : 03] But now, in Christ Jesus, we have this opportunity, Lord, for newness of life. To be remade in the image that thou wouldest have us to be.

To reflect something of the glory and beauty and wonder of Christ Jesus as the representative of mankind as it was meant to be.

Male and female made in the image of God. Designed for that purpose. For that chief end. To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Lord, we know we don't have this in ourselves or any false man-made religion. We have it only in Christ. So equip us, Lord, with the armor of God.

Strap it onto us. Defend us. Guide us. Train us up in the use of that weapon of the sword of the Spirit. That like Jesus in the wilderness, when he was tempted, he quoted that sword of the Spirit.

[29 : 03] It is written. It is written. It is written. And the devil had no power over him. So, Lord, let thy word speak unto us. Let us imbibe it.

Let us, O Lord, drink in that truth. Let it be our meat and drink day by day. Let it nourish our souls and strengthen our hearts. Until we get to that place where we don't need Bibles anymore.

Because the word is written in our heart. And the word made flesh is there before our eyes. So, Lord, grant us thy great grace this night. Bless thy word and bless us each one as we give ourselves afresh unto thee.

Part us in thy mercy and watch over us till we meet again. For we ask it all in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. We close our worship this evening singing to the Lord's praise in Sing Psalms number 61.

Sing Psalms number 61, of which we'll sing the verses marked 4 to 8. That is the last five stanzas. Oh, let me dwell within your tent forever there to live.

[30 : 12] Oh, for the shelter of your wings, the refuge which they give. For you have heard my vows, O God. And you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name continually. And so on to the end.

Then will I ever bless your name with songs of joy and praise. And will fulfill my holy vows with care throughout my days. It's on page 79 of the Blue Books.

Sing Psalms number 61, verses 4 to 8. These last five stanzas to God's praise. O let me dwell within your tent forever there to live.

O for the shelter of your wings, the refuge which they give.

For you have heard my vows, O God. And you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

[31 : 44] Continue with your name. Lord, established with our ten May he forever sent us King And through the whole process Upon your love, the faithfulness

At his protecting grace Then will I ever bless your name With songs of joy and grace And will fulfill my holy birth Be cared throughout my days Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ The love of God our Heavenly Father And the communion of God the Holy Ghost Rest upon you And remain with you each one this night And forevermore Amen Thank you