

## Eden and the Serpent

Let's take a look at the serpent in the garden, who he is and what he represents. We'll also look at the tree of knowledge and mankind's recurring decision. First, let's review the scripture from Genesis, beginning in chapter 2.

**15** The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **16** And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

And now from chapter 3.

### 3

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

**2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, **3** but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

**4** "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. **5** "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

**6** When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

So who is the serpent? Common teaching tells us it is the devil, Satan. But does the scripture say that? If the serpent isn't actually Satan, who is he? After all, he can't be a regular serpent if he's talking. More importantly, nature does not rebel against God. Even rocks will cry out in God's praise if we cease praising Him (Luke 19:40). Therefore, this serpent must not be part of nature.

Some scholars believe the serpent is actually [Ningishzida](#), the Mesopotamian (Sumerian) god of trees, vegetation and the underworld. As the ancient civilization believed tree roots and snakes were similar, Ningishzida was also the god of serpents. If Ningishzida was a prominent god among the neighboring civilizations, it would make sense for him to be the opposing deity in this story.

If this statement is true, that the serpent of the story is a false god, does it necessitate the story is not true? Not at all. As a matter of fact, Paul wrote that the "gods" pagan religions worshipped were actually demons. Let's look at this verse from 1 Corinthians 10 –

**20** No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

This seems to indicate demons regularly interacted with, tempted and misled entire civilizations to follow them instead of following God. Therefore, Ningishzida could have been one of the many demons tempting mankind. But what was he tempting mankind to do?

In this particular story, the serpent is tempting the first humans to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why is this significant? Because in doing so, it establishes an inclination of all humans to prefer to lean on their own understanding instead of God's. The all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe asks us to lean on His understanding, but we insist on believing we know better. We can see examples of this throughout scripture.

In the book of Judges, we see verses like this one from chapter 17 verse 6.

In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

So the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is just the first instance of this dilemma. We face a constant struggle of deciding between doing what we want and what God has instructed us to do. Just as Isaiah 53:6 says,

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;

We can see how Jeroboam quickly swayed from trusting God. He was working under Solomon until a prophet came to him and, speaking for God, told him he would be king of Israel. From 2 Kings 11:

**37** However, as for you, I will take you, and you will rule over all that your heart desires; you will be king over Israel. **38** If you do whatever I command you and walk in obedience to me and do what is right in my eyes by obeying my decrees and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you.

True to God's word, he became king over 10 tribes of Israel. It would seem God is going to sustain his dynasty, but Jeroboam quickly decides he must handle things himself. In 2 Kings 12 we see how he handled his new kingship.

**26** Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. **27** If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam."

**28** After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." **29** One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. **30** And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other.

It seems amazing that someone could hear from God, see the promise come true, and then cease trusting God and trust themselves instead. What could the person be thinking, to see God so clearly, and then turn from Him? Do we not do this in our own lives, though? God has given us the Bible, His holy word. In it, we have a covenant, promises and comforts. Yet, in spite of this, we constantly turn from God. But why? Paul has one answer for us in chapter 7 of Romans:

**7** What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." **8** But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. **9** Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. **10** I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. **11** For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Therefore, it seems we have two sources of evil at work within us. First, the demonic forces (which started with the serpent in Eden) are a constant source of temptation. They frequently use nuggets of truth to make us believe their lies. Once we start down their path of sin, we rationalize our behavior and continue on. Second, we have a sinful nature that, even in the absence of demonic influences, draws us toward sin. It is this nature in us, the desire to do things ourselves instead of following God's instruction, which causes us to fall into sinful lifestyles. These two forces combined in the garden of Eden to cause man to fall for the first time and establish a pattern of not leaning on God at all times.