

The Consequences of Sin (Part 2)

Genesis 3:16-19

¹⁶ To the woman he said,

"I will greatly increase your pains in
childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."

¹⁷ To Adam he said, "Because you listened to
your wife and ate from the tree about which I
commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.

God's Righteous Judgment against Sin - Part 2 (3:16-19)

As with the consequences for the serpent (3:14-15), the implications of this judgment are far-reaching. The impact goes far beyond the two people in the garden.

Consequences for the Woman (3:16)

As a wife, the woman was created to be a *helper* and *companion*. As a mother, she was to be a source of *life*. Before sin entered the world, both of these relationships would have been joyful and fulfilling. Now they would become difficult, frustrating, and characterized by the word "pain." Both relationships would be marred by her sin.

What would the consequences be, as far as bearing children was concerned (v. 16a)? _____

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- The word "childbearing," in the first part of this verse, can also mean conception. Since conception itself is not painful, it may symbolically refer to the *entire process* of raising children, from start to finish. If so, the indication would be that the whole "mothering process" would be characterized by frustration and sorrow. [Think about it: How often is a mother frustrated by disobedient children! If sin had never occurred, children would naturally *want* to obey - and would do so with joy! It is only by the grace of God (which restrains our tendency to sin) that there is *any* joy in raising children!]
 - Some believe that this passage implies an increased frequency in childbearing, perhaps to compensate for the fact that death is now a factor.
 - The physical pain of childbirth would not have existed, if sin had not entered the world. The process of bringing life into the world would have been a joyful event. But the act that once brought life and joy now brings sorrow, trouble and death - and the very process of childbirth reflects this sorrow and pain.
 - Today, when a child is born, he is already *spiritually* dead. Throughout life, the child will endure sorrow and frustration, and will eventually die *physically*. In the end, there is the danger of an *eternal* death.
 - By nature, we are born corrupt and dead in sin. We do not deserve times of joy and happiness. We do not deserve the offer of eternal *life*. For these, we have only God to thank.
 - The word translated as "pain" is the same word that is used in v. 17, to describe the painful toil that the man would experience. It can also include emotional pain - which is often more distressing than the physical pain that accompanies it.

What would be the consequences, as far as the woman's relationship to her husband was concerned (v. 16b)?

This passage indicates that the relationship between the man and the woman is now fractured. Yet the specific details, as described here, are difficult to understand. Interpretations vary, but it may simply refer to an increased insecurity and a greater need to rely on her husband, in a difficult and troubled world.

- A wife relying on her husband may be difficult to understand, in some parts of Western society, where - compared to people in the rest of the world - men and women both have lives of relative ease and security. (We may want to believe that this is not so, but very few of us would trade what we have, for the conditions that *most* people in the world experience every day of their lives.)

Dealing with a Difficult Passage (3:16b)

The word "desire" is difficult to understand. The Hebrew word occurs only three times. The two other passages where it is found are listed below. What do these passages say?

Genesis 4:7 - _____

- The last part of this verse also contains the same word "rule," that is found in 3:16b. (Some translations may use "master," "overpower," etc.)

Song of Solomon 7:10 - _____

- Song of Solomon was written many centuries later, so it is possible that the meaning of the word might have changed slightly (something that can happen in *any* language). In contrast, both Genesis passages are found in the *same* historical account of the early years of human history (an account which extends from 2:4 to 4:26).

To make things more complicated, there is no verb to indicate whether it is *future* tense (perhaps indicating some type of desire that would be common among women of all generations), or *past* tense (referring to Eve's desire to get Adam to join her in sin).

What are some of the interpretations of the word "desire"?

The following three views illustrate the wide range of interpretations that exist:

- A desire *for* a husband - either a response to the increased insecurity that exists in a difficult and troubled world (the husband would be a leader and protector); or an increased desire for his companionship.
- A sexual desire - perhaps an increased desire to have *children*. (Note that the concept of "sexual" can include much more than just the *physical* aspect of sexuality.)
- A desire to control, or to usurp her husband's authority - either referring to Eve's *past* act of giving the fruit to Adam (and all the things she may have done to influence his decision), or to an *ongoing tendency* among women.

How should we respond to this passage?

We may be confused by the varying interpretations that result from the uncertainties mentioned above. Yet, there are some things we *can* know. This Genesis statement is found within the context of judgment for the *woman's* sin. Because of what she did - which included sin against her husband - the relationship between the husband and wife (to some degree, men and women in general) would be influenced. Most likely, this passage has some type of focus on one of these issues: insecurity, submission, conflict, or some combination of the three.

We now live in a world that is fractured by sin. When we look at things around us (conditions, circumstances, broken relationships, etc.), we see many things that wouldn't have existed in a perfect (sinless) world. Some of these things exist because sin is *present* in the world; others because sin must be *judged*. All of these things are now part of life, and one of them - even if we don't know which one - is referred to in this passage.

Perhaps the most important thing for us to realize is this: The statement is not a command! If it were a command, and we misunderstood it, we might be in danger of responding incorrectly. But since it is just a statement of *fact* (the uncontrollable "way it will be"), a wrong interpretation of the passage doesn't change how we are to live. It will not lead us into a wrong response.

- If it involves an *unavoidable* consequence of sin, there is nothing we *can* do or *should* do. (We can't change it.)
- If it involves something that *can* be influenced by our actions, we should turn to the rest of Scripture to find out how to respond. There are no commands in this verse, but there are *many* commands found elsewhere in Scripture. If we pay attention to such commands, they will show us how to interact with others. They will guide us in the way we should live.
- Either way, this passage cannot be used as a *justification* of wrong actions (by *either* gender).

What about the word "rule"?

Depending on our interpretation of the word "desire," the word "rule" could work *with* the desire, or *against* it. This passage may be referring to the fact that, under normal conditions, the woman will have a greater reliance on her husband (in a world that is now cruel and filled with trouble), than if she hadn't sinned. It may also be part of the *consequences* she must experience, because of her sin against Adam: Since she ruled over him, in trying to get her to join in the sin, he will now be given the *responsibility* to rule over her.

- In the New Testament, we are told that the wife must *submit* to the husband's rule, and the husband must *cherish and love* his wife. Verses such as these are *commands* - unlike this verse in Genesis. When each obeys these commands, and fulfils his obligations to the other in the way God requires, there will be harmony, and each will benefit from the relationship. When *either* fails to do so, there will only be conflict and increased trouble.

What can we learn from this passage?

This verse illustrates how to deal with difficult passages. Sometimes there *are* legitimate questions about the interpretation of a passage in Scripture - genuine questions about the meanings of words or of textual variations. Yet this *never* occurs in a passage that would cause a serious problem for knowing how we should live. Because of this fact, we do not need to be over-concerned about reaching the "right" viewpoint in such a passage. Nor do we need to condemn someone who reaches a different viewpoint. It will be sufficient for us to reach some basic conclusions, based on what we *can* know with certainty, and leave it at that.

Finally, we can praise God for the way he protects the *message* of his Word. Though there *are* verses that we do not fully understand (such as this one), God has protected what we *need* to know - passages intended show us how to live, define our perspective of right and wrong, and lead us to salvation. What we *need* to know is clear enough, that when a person claims it *can't* be understood, it's usually because he doesn't *want* to accept what it says.

Consequences for the Man (3:17-19)

As an "image bearer" of God, the man was created to work with creation and to develop it in meaningful ways that reflected the glory of God. His task - which originally would have brought joy and fulfillment - would now bring sorrow and frustration. It would be characterized by the word "pain," and in the end, all his efforts would come to nothing. Ultimately, his own body would be returned to the dust from which he came.

- The woman would experience some of these consequences, but since the man was given the *primary* responsibility to work with the land, the statement is directed toward him.

In order for Adam to sin, he had to make a decision. He was faced with two alternatives. Who did he choose to listen to (v. 17a)? _____

- As used in v. 17a, the word "listen" may have the connotation of "obeying" or "submitting" to Eve, when she attempted to get him to join her in sin. She didn't "innocently" hand a piece of fruit to him, but did everything she could to tempt him, to get him to join her. He was faced with a dilemma: Should he follow his *wife* - who was a *part* of him (see chapter 2) - or *God*, who made him?
- Afterwards, Adam may have had resentment for the dilemma his wife put him in (perhaps suggested in v. 12, by his statement that the temptation came through the *woman* who God put there). But in this passage, God places the blame where it belongs. No matter what Eve may have done to tempt him, Adam had to make the final choice of what he would do. Eve didn't *force* him to sin.
- This passage does *not* mean that it is *always* wrong to listen to one's wife, or that she *never* has anything good to say!

Why was the ground cursed? Who's fault was it (v. 17b)? _____

- Sin has consequences that go beyond the immediate participants. *Never* forget this fact!
- Just as the curse on creation was the consequence of the sinful actions of a man (Adam), so also the restored blessings on creation - Romans 8:19-21 - will be the consequence of the righteous actions of a man (Jesus Christ).

What was one of the ways the ground would be cursed (v. 18a)? _____

- This concept of "thorns and thistles" is probably symbolic of *all* the negative consequences that occurred to creation, other than those specific consequences already mentioned.

How would this curse on the land effect the man (v. 17c, 19a, etc.)? _____

- The immediate focus is on the man's work as a food-provider. However, the curse effects *all* things in the world, so it influences every work-like activity we may be involved in. This verse is the starting point for all the hard and strenuous labor that is often a part of "work" today. This is the reason for all the frustration, when things don't go the way we expected. Before sin changed things, work would have been a joyful blessing, with *none* of the negative side-effects that we see today.
- Though often painful and difficult, work is still good and necessary. It must be done in a way that honors God and benefits other people. A person who is too lazy to work, or who does it in a poor manner, is sinning against both God and people.

How long would they experience this curse (v. 17c, 19b, etc.)? _____

What would be the final end, after a life of painful toil (v. 19b)? _____

- After a life of painful toil, we lose it all. This *fact* is the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. *We cannot* get lasting meaning out of such a life - even when that life contains moments of joy and happiness! Ultimately, we must get our meaning from *God*, the "reference point" that goes far beyond our short "life under the sun."
- God created us from the dust. Yet it was not his intention for us to return to dust. That was *our* doing.
- The focus in this passage is on *physical* death, for *spiritual* death had already occurred (when they ate the fruit). *Spiritual* death, our separation (alienation) from God was already a fact. *Physical* death, the separation of our body from our spirit, would take longer to occur.
- Sickness is a part of the long-term process of death. Don't be surprised when you get sick... it's only part of the curse that we brought upon ourselves (and upon other living creatures).
- Through Jesus Christ, our *spiritual* alienation from God can be removed; we can pass from death to life. Those who experience this restoration to *spiritual* life will also someday experience restoration to a *physical* life that can no longer experience death.