

Thorns and Thistles

Did they suddenly appear or were they already there? Are they a consequence of the fall of mankind into sin? Were they created and given by God as an element of his judgment on mankind after the Fall? Or were they pre-existent and given a specific role or function after the Fall?

These are reasonable questions. We say that for two reasons. One, this is the first time thorns and thistles are mentioned specifically in Scripture. And two, they are linked directly with the punishment handed down to Adam after his act of defiant disobedience.

These are also questions we may find ourselves asked. How, then, are we to answer them? Are we to say with some that thorns and thistles did not exist prior to God's judgment on mankind? Or are we, with others, to provide another explanation?

Textual Considerations

Let us begin with some textual observations.

(1) That which God creates is described as 'very good' (*Genesis 1.31 cf. vv10, 12, 18, 21 & 25*). The implication is that amongst the "vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its own kind" (*Genesis 1.11*) there was nothing adverse and nothing to cause hard toil.

(2) The syntax of verses 17 - 19 seems to imply that the appearance of thorns and thistles was not part of the original design. The four key elements of the narrative are:

- you listened and ate;
- because you did so the ground is cursed;
- you shall experience pain, thorns and thistles, and sweat; and,
- you shall return to dust.

There is a logical progression and it can be inferred that just as pain and toil were not experienced in Eden nor were thorns and thistles.

(3) The Curse is an example of performative speech (or creative words). Another is to be found in Numbers where we read of God's dealings with Balaam (chapters 22 -24). He could not alter the blessing God pronounced. The Word

of God effectively called into existence things that did not previously exist.

Theological Considerations

Let us now turn to some theological observations.

Reymond, in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith (pp446-449)*, says the curse of the environment (described in *Genesis 3.17-18*) is the fourth of the seven effects of the Fall. The others are: (1) Adam and Eve lost their moral innocence and original righteousness; (2) mankind's reflection of the image of God was fractured and distorted; (3) fellowship between God and mankind was broken; (5) Adam and Eve were condemned and punished; (6) Adam's sin was imputed to all mankind; and (7) mankind's greatest and immediate need was and is divine grace.

John Murray, by contrast, highlights five immediate effects, four of which he terms 'revolutions' (*Collected Writings, Vol 2, p70ff*). The cursing of the ground (*Genesis 3.17*) and the subjection of the created order to futility (*Romans 8.20*) he terms 'cosmic revolution'. This he lists as the third effect of the Fall. The productivity of the environment is now impaired by thorns and thistles. As a result Adam and his successors now eat of the fruit of the created order through toil and sweat.

Transformational Considerations

We now turn to the hope of transformation.

This is spoken of in *Genesis 3.15*. There, before God's judgment on Eve (*vv16*) and Adam (*vv17-19*) is pronounced, the hope of reversal is voiced. Satan, who utilised a serpent, shall be defeated. It was of that promise that mankind was made aware. The serpent was the external instrument used in the deception. Hence judgment is pronounced upon it (*Genesis 3.14f*). But, as Calvin reminds us, "there is no doubt that" it is "intended to express in that way the fact that we must wage mortal war against the devil". That is the "intent" and "natural meaning" of the passage (*Sermons on Genesis 1 - 11, p287*).

Thus from the judgment on the serpent we are to learn "to do our utmost to engage the battle boldly with our heads raised, not that we must

not always be humble, but whatever happens, we can with full confidence struggle valiantly against all of Satan's assaults in the knowledge we will overcome" (*idem*, p291).

Along with the promise of victory we are also given the hope of restoration and renewal. The apostle Paul informs us that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8.19). In personifying creation in this way he conveys the fact that the day is moving when its bondage to frustration or futility shall cease.

As Murray says there are "three considerations mentioned." Creation's subjection is:

- (1) "to vanity";
- (2) "not of its own will"; and
- (3) "in hope".

The One who has judicially imposed this threefold subjection is "none other than God, not Satan, nor man" (*Romans 1-8*, p303). When will this hope of freedom be realised? The Apostle Peter indicates it will be when this present order is purged by fire (*2 Peter 3.11-13*).

"Closely linked with this conflagration there is going to be a *rejuvenation*. The fire will not destroy the universe. It will still be the same heavens and earth, but gloriously renewed, and in that sense a *new heaven and earth* (*2 Peter 3.13*; *Revelation 21.1-5*)" (*Hendriksen, Romans 1-8*, p269).

Hendriksen also reminds us this transformation will include *harmonisation*. "At present Nature can be described as being 'red in tooth and claw.' Peace and harmony are lacking. Various organisms seem to be working at cross purposes: they choke each other to death. But then there will be accord and harmony everywhere. There will be variation, to be sure, but a most delightful blending of sight and sound, of life and purpose, so that the total effect will be unity and harmony" (*ibid*).

Thus we shall see fulfilled the final fulfilment of the promise given in Isaiah 11.6-9:

- 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
- 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Questions

Our brief survey raises important issues. We summarise them as follows:

- 1 If the lion and the lamb co-existed in Eden in perfect harmony is it not possible that wheat (say) and weeds (thorns and thistles) did as well?
- 2 Must it be that pre-existing thorns and thistles were not given the punitive role they at present have when God judged Adam?
- 3 Are we right to assume that physical death did not exist in anyway in Eden? If it did not, how can we be sure?
- 4 In Eden did the rose have thorns?
- 5 Is a thorn or thistle intrinsically bad?
- 6 What does Paul mean when he asserts that creation is in "bondage to corruption" (*Romans 8.21*)? Is the emphasis on the existence of death or on its "subjection to vanity"?

Conclusion

There are, no doubt, other questions that arise. Notwithstanding, both our survey and the questions posed highlight a fact of supreme importance. The written Word of God is given to be mankind's ultimate guide in all matters of faith and conduct. Hence, although some drive a wedge between science and the Bible, we do not.

We do not see the Bible as having nothing to say to scientists. On the contrary we believe it provides them with the essential framework they need to understand what they study. It authoritatively informs us that God is the Creator and sustainer of all.

Furthermore we discover within it that the present order of things, as a result of mankind's sin, is subjected to frustration and decay. Thorns and thistles play a vital role. They are at present a punitive instrument used by God to impress upon us that we are by nature rebellious. In a word, they point us to our need of Jesus Christ in whom alone there is the hope and provision of regeneration. It is in him that all things shall be made new (*Revelation 21.5*).

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