

Homiletics Analysis: Genesis 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Genesis 3 narrates the catastrophic fall of humanity from the condition God created and declared “very good.” The chapter moves in four distinct phases: the serpent’s temptation and Eve’s capitulation (vv. 1–6), the immediate consequences experienced by Adam and Eve in the aftermath of the act (vv. 7–13), God’s formal pronouncements of judgment on the serpent, the woman, and the man (vv. 14–19), and the closing movements of naming, clothing, and expulsion (vv. 20–24). The argument is not merely narrative — it is etiological and theological. It accounts for the origin of shame, broken relationship with God, distorted human relationships, pain in labor and childbirth, the curse on the ground, and the universal human experience of mortality. It does all of this while simultaneously introducing the first word of hope in all of Scripture — the *protevangelium* of verse 15 — and depicting God as the one who clothes those He is judging. The chapter does not leave the reader with only the fall; it introduces, even within the verdict, the seed of the gospel.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through Genesis 3 is to confront every reader with a true account of their own condition — not as a distant past event, but as the event that defines their present existence — and simultaneously to locate the only legitimate hope for that condition in the sovereign, grace-initiating activity of God Himself. The passage does not merely explain why the world is broken; it diagnoses *why the reader is broken*, indicts the pattern of self-sovereign reasoning that every person inherits and repeats, and then — without removing the weight of the judgment — points to a coming deliverer who will do what Adam failed to do. God is seeking to strip the reader of every alternative explanation for the human condition and to bind them, in their shame and brokenness, to the only promise that answers it.

Subject Sentence: The fall of humanity in Adam — and the first promise of its reversal.

Primary Claim: The ruin that defines every human life entered through a single act of self-sovereign unbelief, and God’s response was not abandonment but the first word of a gospel He will spend the rest of Scripture fulfilling.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Historical-Literal Debate

The most foundational interpretive question in Genesis 3 is whether the chapter is historical narrative or theological myth — whether Adam and Eve are literal first human beings or archetypal figures in a story designed to explain universal human experience without asserting historical fact. Liberal and neo-orthodox readings (following Bultmann, Barth’s more nuanced position, and much of contemporary critical scholarship) tend toward the latter: the story is “true” in the sense that it accurately captures what humanity is like, but not in the sense that it records a datable event involving literal individuals.

This reading must be **refuted** on exegetical and canonical grounds. The grammar and genre of Genesis 1–3 present themselves as sequential narrative continuous with what follows in Genesis 4–5 (where Adam and Eve appear as the parents of named individuals who populate a genealogical table). Paul’s argument in Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 treats Adam as a historical individual whose one act had universal consequence — a claim that collapses entirely if Adam is symbolic. The parallelism between “the one man Adam” and “the one man Christ” in Paul’s argument requires both to be equally historical. The Reformed tradition rightly insists: the historicity of the fall is not a peripheral doctrinal concern but the load-bearing foundation for the doctrine of original sin, the necessity of atonement, and the logic of Christ as the second Adam. The “mythological truth” reading preserves neither.

The Scope of the Serpent’s Identity

The text identifies the serpent as “more crafty than any other beast of the field” but does not explicitly identify it with Satan. Some interpreters (certain strands of Jewish exegesis and some evangelical readings) argue the serpent should be taken simply as a literal crafty animal, with no reference to a supernatural adversarial being. This reading should be **qualified**. The text itself does not name Satan — but the broader canonical witness (Revelation 12:9; 20:2; John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:3) explicitly identifies “the ancient serpent” with the devil. The Reformed reading holds both: the serpent is a real animal being used as the vehicle of a supernatural adversary, and the canonical identification is the correct completion of what Genesis 3 leaves implicit. Preaching the passage without the canonical identification leaves the adversary unnamed; preaching Satan without the text’s own restraint over-reads the passage’s own claims.

The Protevangelium (v. 15) — Promise or Merely Enmity?

Verse 15 is among the most debated verses in the Old Testament. The Reformed tradition has consistently read it as the *protevangelium* — the first gospel promise — identifying “the seed of the woman” as ultimately referring to Christ, whose heel would be bruised at the cross and who would crush the serpent’s head in his resurrection and final victory. Critical and some Jewish readings argue this is simply a statement about the ongoing

enmity between humans and snakes, with no messianic import. Dispensational readings often affirm the messianic reference but qualify the details differently.

The *protevangelium* reading should be **affirmed** on canonical and literary grounds. The collective/individual ambiguity of “seed” (*zera*) is deliberate and productive — it refers simultaneously to humanity’s ongoing conflict with the adversary and to a singular coming one who will achieve what no ordinary human can. Galatians 3:16 provides Paul’s own interpretive precedent for reading collective “seed” language as ultimately pointing to a specific singular referent. The literary artistry of the passage — God speaking into a scene of total ruin to announce the enemy’s defeat — requires a more-than-naturalistic referent. This is not imported allegory; it is the text’s own forward movement, taken seriously.

Roman Catholic Mariological Reading

The Vulgate’s translation of “she will crush” (*ipsa conteret*) rather than “he will crush” has historically supported a Mariological application in which Mary is the woman of verse 15 crushing the serpent. This reading must be **refuted** on textual and canonical grounds. The Hebrew has a masculine pronoun (הוא, *hu*) — “he will crush.” The antecedent is “the seed of the woman,” pointing to a coming deliverer, not to the woman herself. The Mariological reading requires both a textual emendation and a canonical re-routing that the text does not support. The woman of verse 15 is Eve as the mother of all living; the seed is the one who will come from her line.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 5:12–19** — Paul’s explicit “one man’s trespass / one man’s act of righteousness” argument directly grounds the doctrine of original sin in the historical fall, and establishes the Adam-Christ typology that Genesis 3:15 first adumbrates. This is the New Testament’s own theological unpacking of Genesis 3.
- **1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49** — “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” Paul’s second Adam Christology requires Genesis 3 to be historically grounded and typologically freighted. Christ’s resurrection is the answer to exactly what Genesis 3 inaugurated.
- **John 8:44** — Jesus identifies the devil as “a murderer from the beginning” and “the father of lies,” canonically completing the serpent’s identity in Genesis 3 and confirming that the temptation narrative involves a supernatural adversarial agent, not merely a crafty animal.
- **Revelation 12:9; 20:2, 10** — The “ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan” is bound and cast down — the direct completion of Genesis 3:15’s promise. Revelation’s imagery is explicitly retrospective: the crushing of the serpent’s head promised in Genesis is fulfilled in the apocalyptic defeat of the dragon.

- **Hebrews 2:14–15** — Christ “partook of flesh and blood that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” This is the *protevangelium* in its New Testament fulfillment: the seed of the woman, fully incarnate, crushes the adversary through the very act (death) that appeared to crush him.

Aim: To confront the reader honestly with the origin and depth of their broken condition, and to bind their only hope to the God who spoke the first gospel word before the dust had settled on the fall.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	The serpent is introduced as the most crafty creature; he questions God’s word: “Did God actually say...?”	The attack begins at the level of God’s word — not overt denial but subtle distortion.
3:2–3	Eve recounts the prohibition, slightly misquoting it (adding “neither shall you touch it”)	Whether expansion or misremembering, the distortion of God’s word has already begun before the act.
3:4–5	The serpent flatly contradicts God (“You will not surely die”) and impugns God’s motive (God is withholding to protect His advantage)	The full logic of every temptation: God cannot be trusted; self-determination is better.
3:6	Eve sees, desires, takes, and gives to Adam; he eats	Three-beat movement: saw / took / ate. Adam is present and passive — his silence is as condemning as the act.
3:7	Their eyes are opened; they know they are naked; they make fig-leaf coverings	The “knowledge” gained is shame, not godlikeness. The cover-up is immediate — and self-manufactured.
3:8	They hear God walking in the garden and hide	The relational rupture is instantaneous. The presence of God, once the ground of security, has

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:9–10	God calls: “Where are you?” Adam responds: “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid”	become the source of terror. God’s question is not informational — it is relational and judicial. Fear and shame are the first fruits of the fall.
3:11–13	God’s interrogation: “Have you eaten of the tree?” Adam blames Eve (and God); Eve blames the serpent	Evasion, deflection, and accusation — the relational distortion is already fully in operation.
3:14–15	God curses the serpent; announces enmity between the serpent’s seed and the woman’s seed; the woman’s seed will crush the serpent’s head	The <i>protevangelium</i> : judgment on the adversary; first promise of ultimate reversal.
3:16	Judgment on the woman: pain in childbearing multiplied; desire for husband, but he will rule over her	The distortion of the creation order in marriage — ruling replaces loving headship; desire curdles toward conflict.
3:17–19	Judgment on the man: ground is cursed because of him; painful toil; “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”; “you are dust, and to dust you shall return”	The creation mandate (work the ground) now includes friction, frustration, and ultimate futility. Mortality is stated plainly.
3:20	Adam names his wife Eve (“mother of all living”)	A statement of faith — naming her “life” even after the sentence of death. Some interpreters read this as the first act of post-fall faith.
3:21	God makes garments of skins for Adam and Eve and clothes them	God replaces the fig leaves with something adequate — requiring the death of an animal to do so. The first blood shed in Scripture.
3:22–24	God expels them from the garden to prevent access to the tree of life; cherubim and	Expulsion is both judgment and mercy — preventing the permanent sealing of their

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	a flaming sword guard the way back	condition. The way to the tree of life is now closed — until Revelation 22.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–6	The Temptation and the Fall: Self-Sovereign Unbelief
2	3:7–13	The Aftermath: Shame, Hiding, and Accusation
3	3:14–19	The Verdict: Judgment Pronounced on Serpent, Woman, and Man
4	3:20–24	The Response: Naming, Clothing, and Expulsion

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The fall of humanity in Adam — and the first promise of its reversal.

Primary Claim: The ruin that defines every human life entered through a single act of self-sovereign unbelief, and God’s response was not abandonment but the first word of a gospel He will spend the rest of Scripture fulfilling.

Applications

1. (Mind/Belief) The serpent’s strategy has not changed — it still begins by calling God’s word into question, not by denying it outright but by introducing the possibility that it might be misunderstood, exaggerated, or motivated by self-interest. Examine where you have allowed that same subtle re-framing to take root: the places where “Did God actually say?” has softened a clear command into a negotiable suggestion, or recast a plain prohibition as a limitation on your flourishing. Obedience to God’s word is the front line of spiritual warfare, and it is lost or won in the moment of questioning before the moment of action.

2. (Affections/Worship) The fall is not primarily the story of two people eating forbidden fruit — it is the story of two people deciding that God could not be trusted and that their own judgment was sufficient to navigate without Him. That distrust is the posture every human being inherits and rehearses. Sit with the question: in what specific area of your life right now are you functionally living as though God’s arrangement is deficient — as though

His provision, His timing, His word, or His design is withholding something you genuinely need? The root of every sin is a failure of worship: the conviction that something other than God is more satisfying, more reliable, or more true. Repentance at this level is not behavioral adjustment — it is returning the throne.

3. (Will/Behavior) Adam was present with Eve at the temptation and said nothing (v. 6 — “she also gave some to her husband who was with her”). His sin was not only the eating — it was the abdication. He had been given responsibility to guard the garden (2:15) and to hold fast to God’s command, and he did neither. Consider the specific responsibilities God has assigned you — in your home, your relationships, your community — where your default response to encroaching compromise has been silence, passivity, or the path of least conflict. Passive failure is still failure. Step into the responsibility you have been given.

4. (Mind/Belief) Verse 15 is the first gospel word in Scripture, and it is spoken by God, not requested by Adam and Eve. They hid; He sought. They covered themselves; He clothed them. They had no leverage, no appeal, no bargaining position — and the first word of hope came entirely from God’s own initiative. This is the structure of every subsequent act of grace in Scripture. Do not approach God as though your confession, your effort, or your remorse creates the conditions for His mercy. The mercy preceded the request. Your condition is already known; the promise has already been spoken. Come out of hiding.

5. (Affections/Worship) God’s clothing of Adam and Eve in verse 21 — replacing their self-manufactured fig leaves with garments He made, requiring the death of an animal — is the first foreshadowing of substitutionary atonement in Scripture. Their covering was inadequate; His was sufficient. The pattern runs from here to the Passover lamb, to Isaiah 53’s suffering servant, to the cross. What God began in the garden — covering human shame at the cost of blood — He completed at Calvary. Let the texture of that grace produce gratitude rather than familiarity: you are clothed not in what you made but in what He provided at cost to Himself.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Genesis 3 establishes the theological categories without which the rest of Scripture is incoherent. It is the origin point of sin, death, shame, broken relationship with God, distorted human relationships, and the cursing of the created order — all flowing from a single act of self-sovereign unbelief by humanity’s federal head. It also establishes the character of God as the one who initiates pursuit of the fallen (“Where are you?”), who pronounces judgment without abandoning, and who provides covering at cost to Himself before the covenant of grace is formally announced. The chapter teaches that the human condition is not a matter of environmental disadvantage or educational deficit but of deep moral ruin rooted in the fall — a ruin that is universal precisely because it occurred in the one man who represented all. Every subsequent biblical category — covenant, sacrifice, law, priesthood, prophecy, and gospel — is intelligible only as God’s answer to what Genesis 3 inaugurated.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Genesis 3 is the exegetical foundation of the Reformed doctrine of original sin and total depravity — not as an inherited guilt only, but as a comprehensive corruption of human nature that distorts the mind’s reasoning (v. 4–5, the credibility of the lie), the affections’ desires (v. 6, “she saw that the tree was to be desired”), and the will’s choices (v. 6, “she took and ate”). The federal headship of Adam — the basis of Paul’s argument in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 — is established here: all humanity was present in Adam representatively, and all humanity fell with him. The Reformed insistence on grace alone is structurally grounded here as well: there is no movement of repentance or faith from Adam and Eve before God speaks in verse 9, no condition met before God promises in verse 15, and no act of merit before God clothes in verse 21. The first gospel movement is entirely unilateral — from God toward the fallen, not from the fallen toward God. This is not incidental to the Reformed understanding of grace; it is its origin point in the text of Scripture.

Main Takeaway

You are not broken because of your circumstances, your upbringing, or your choices in isolation — you are broken because you share a nature with the man who, in the garden, decided that God’s word was negotiable and God’s provision insufficient. That is your inheritance. But the same God who pronounced the verdict also spoke the first promise before Adam and Eve had taken a single step toward repentance. The gospel did not begin at Bethlehem — it began in the ruins of Eden, from the mouth of God, while the dust was still settling. Stop explaining your condition away, and receive the covering He has been providing ever since.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing the serpent’s temptation without diagnosing the root.** It is possible to preach Genesis 3 as a lesson in resisting temptation — “Eve should have trusted God and walked away” — without ever exposing the underlying epistemology of the fall: that every human being has inherited the conviction that God’s word is questionable and God’s provision is insufficient. Behavioral exhortation without idol-diagnosis produces guilt without gospel. The application must go below the act to the belief-system that generated it.
- **Treating the fall as distant history rather than present diagnosis.** Genesis 3 is not a story about ancient people who made a mistake long ago. It is the account of the event that constitutes the present condition of every person in the room. Preach it in

the present tense. The shame of verse 7, the hiding of verse 8, and the blame-shifting of verses 12–13 are not ancient behaviors — they are the reader’s own reflexes on display. The text functions as a mirror; preach it as one.

- **Preaching the judgment without the protevangelium.** Some expository treatments of Genesis 3 linger on the mechanics of the curse and the weight of the verdict without giving adequate weight to verse 15. This leaves the congregation under law without gospel — accurate but crushing. Verse 15 is not a footnote to the judgment; it is the theological center of the chapter. The God who curses is the same God who promises, and He makes the promise within the verdict, not after it. Preach the *protevangelium* with full canonical weight — this is the first word of the storyline that ends at the cross.
- **Under-preaching Adam’s silence.** Verse 6 states plainly that Adam was “with her” — he was not absent, misinformed, or deceived after the fact in the same way Eve was (cf. 1 Timothy 2:14). His failure was active abdication: he was present, responsible, and silent. The federal headship implications of this are enormous for the doctrine of original sin, and the pastoral application (particularly for men with responsibilities of spiritual leadership and protection) is direct and convicting. Collapsing Adam’s sin into Eve’s sin, or treating his role as secondary, misreads the text and loses the doctrine.
- **The fig-leaf application treated as sufficient covering.** Verse 7’s fig leaves and verse 21’s God-provided garments must not be leveled into the same category. The entire point of the contrast is that human self-coverage is inadequate — it is cosmetic management of shame rather than its removal. Preach the distinction: every strategy humans use to manage their own shame (performance, reputation, religious effort, moral self-improvement) is fig-leaf work. God’s provision — at cost to Himself, foreshadowing the sacrifice — is the only covering that holds. This is not incidental application; it is one of the chapter’s own main movements.
- **Skipping the expulsion as pure judgment.** Genesis 3:22–24 is commonly read as unrelieved punishment — banishment from God’s presence as the final word. But the Reformed reading recognizes a merciful dimension: expulsion from Eden prevents access to the tree of life, which would have permanently sealed humanity in their fallen condition (v. 22). The exile is not God slamming the door on humanity — it is God foreclosing the possibility of a permanent, irreversible condition, keeping open the possibility of restoration. This mercy-in-judgment motif runs throughout redemptive history (cf. the exile of Israel as painful but not final). Preach the expulsion in full — neither softening the judgment nor ignoring the mercy within it.