

CHILDISH INCLINATIONS AND EVIL CONSEQUENCES

A Devotional Meditation on Bereisheet (In the Beginning)

Genesis 1:1-6:8; Isaiah 42:5-43:10;
Luke 10:18-20; John 14:16-17, 26-27, 16:5-15; Ephesians 2:1-10; Philippians 4:10-14

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October 22, 2022

Children tend to take actions without considering the consequences. As toddlers, they have no way to control themselves because they haven't had time to learn the right choices and how to make them. When they get older, they still need help learning about consequences so they can begin to make better choices.

Sometimes consequences come immediately, and sometimes they play out over time. That's what happened when our oldest daughter cut her favorite doll's hair. She had just had her own hair cut, and in her ten-year-old mind it made sense to cut her doll's hair so they could be twins. What she didn't consider was that the doll's hair would never grow back, and she would never again be able to brush and braid it. Knowing that we might not appreciate what she had done to a very expensive doll, she made sure the doll was wearing a bonnet every time we saw her. We didn't learn of her handiwork until years later, but by then the consequences had already played out.



Girl with doll. Photo by Julie Corsi, December 24, 2008, [via Flickr](#).

Are these childish inclinations evil, or simply short-sighted and self-centered? A Christian answer says we all are inclined to sin because our first ancestors disobeyed God and sinned. That helps me understand why our Creator had to go to such great lengths to redeem this broken world, but it doesn't help me understand why my children act at one moment like angels, and an instant later like devils.

Even the youngest child, like every adult, has some ulterior motive rooted in self-serving desire. Is it possible for any human to overcome that selfish desire and make good choices routinely? We say we can do all things in Christ, that in Him we are saved by grace through faith, and from Him we receive the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. Do these truths of scripture truly help us live righteously? If not, then perhaps they have become excuses to outsource to God the responsibility He has given us to live by His standards of righteousness.

This is where the Jewish concept of *nefesh habehamit*, the animal soul, is helpful. The animal soul is the source of our most basic, passionate drives. Those drives are neither good nor evil, but simply neutral parts of our created beings that can be turned either

way.¹ I see that play out with my dog: she acts on her basic instincts, which are self-serving, but not inherently good or bad. It's my responsibility to help her choose "good" ways to respond to situations. Her responsibility is to learn and respond appropriately.

We humans have the same responsibility, although the stakes are higher because we hold a higher position in creation. We have the capacity to understand, and to appropriate for ourselves things our Creator never intended for us. That's where we arrive at the Jewish concepts of *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*: the inclinations to evil or good. *Yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, comes close to the Christian concept of original sin and the natural depravity of humankind. It is the intrinsic evil within us that must be destroyed, overcome, or ignored lest it capture the animal soul and bend it toward evil. We do that by feeding the *yetzer hatov*, and thereby training our passionate natures to do good.

We humans would be satisfied to let our self-serving passions dictate the courses of our lives. That's why we need our Creator to shepherd us. We see that in the very first pages of the Bible. God makes the universe, then sets the world in its place under the heavens, and populates it with plants, fish, birds, and animals. Then He makes human beings in male and female forms to be His regents over this beautiful world. Like the animals, they have natural inclinations they follow to keep themselves alive. That's why they search for food, and for companionship in one another. Unlike the animals, they have responsibility to master those inclinations so they can maintain the world as a reflection of the Creator's heart.

This is where God begins His instructions. It starts simply: eat this to survive, but don't eat that. If you do, it will kill you. Everything proceeds well enough until Satan shows up. He's not God's rival in the true sense; if he were, he would be challenging the Creator directly. Satan lost that contest before the beginning of the world. What we are living out are the consequences of his loss. We are both the agents and the prize. If Satan can entice enough of us to feed our evil inclinations and starve our good inclinations, then the Creator may have no choice but to destroy us all, or leave us in Satan's hands.

That's why the serpent enticed Eve. Her decision to eat of the forbidden tree may not have been inherently evil, but it produced evil. She perceived something incomplete in herself. Her physical need for food and her desire to help her husband meet that shared need was the avenue for the serpent's argument that she was incomplete without knowledge of good and evil. It wasn't enough to rely on the Creator's instructions; it was necessary, or so she believed, to determine these things for herself. Perhaps she wanted to help God, or perhaps she saw a flaw in His handiwork that needed to be fixed. Her motives may even have been pure, but her disobedient actions resulted in sin that her husband very quickly repeated.

Eve and Adam suffered the consequences of their sin through exile from the beautiful place God had made, and from His Presence. Thereafter, they wanted to do right and help their children do the same. God's promise to set things right served as motivation for them, just as it does for us, but their efforts to help their children make good choices only partly succeeded. If Adam and Eve sinned in childish ignorance seeking an illusive

¹ Malkie Janowski, "Is there a difference between the 'evil inclination' and the 'animal soul'?" Chabad.org, accessed October 20, 2022, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/924915/jewish/Evil-Inclination-vs-Animal-Soul.htm.

greater good, their son Cain sinned because he embraced the evil inclination to be master of his own destiny. The consequences of his parents' disobedience had little effect on his decision to grasp at equality with God by removing Abel, his brother and rival. That happened even after the Creator advised him to get control of himself and do right. Yet his decision was to establish his own standard of right and wrong so he could justify the taking of an innocent life.

That's how bad things had become in two generations, and it only got worse. A thousand years and millions of human choices revealed an inexorable trend toward the *yetzer hara*, leading the Creator to a sad conclusion:

Then *ADONAI* saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time. So *ADONAI* regretted that He made humankind on the earth, and His heart was deeply pained. So *ADONAI* said, "I will wipe out humankind, whom I have created, from the face of the ground, from humankind to livestock, crawling things and the flying creatures of the sky, because I regret that I made them."

Genesis 6:5-7 TLV

Only one family remained true. That's why Noah found grace in God's eyes, and why the world was saved through him. The tragedy is that only eight humans out of millions passed through the waters to the new earth that emerged under the heavens.

How many of those millions lived out their lives wondering when God would fix their problems, only to learn that He was waiting for them to take responsibility for their own healing and obey His instructions? Were they inherently evil, or were they the victims of hearts perpetually inclined toward evil? The question is academic, for them and for us. In the days of Noah, our Creator expected His offspring to consider the consequences of their actions. Is He unreasonable to expect the same of His children in these latter days of Noah?