

# God's Judgment on His Blessing: How Genesis 1:28 Informs the Punishments on Adam and Eve

**Mitchell Chase**

*Ph.D. Candidate, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Preaching Pastor, Kosmosdale Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky*

## Introduction

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their punishments brought disruption to manhood and womanhood. These punishments, recorded in Gen 3:16–19, were not randomly chosen but instead reflect and affect the blessing God declared in 1:28.<sup>1</sup>

This article will demonstrate that the creation commission in Gen 1:28 is the necessary backdrop to understand the nature of the judgments meted out to the man and woman after the Fall. When the first couple disobeyed, God did not rescind his blessing. He did not nullify the mandate to multiply and have dominion, but his punishments ensured that the mandate would manifest in pain, frustration, and difficulty.

After Gen 3:16–19 God's blessing now also bears his judgment.

## The Creation Commission

In the creation account of Gen 1:1–2:3 there are two statements of God's blessing. On the fifth day he blesses animals (1:22), and on the sixth day he blesses his image-bearers (1:28). The latter blessing is the most important one because God's commission (or mandate) is stated clearly for the first couple and helps explain what functioning as God's image-bearers will involve: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds

of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."<sup>2</sup>

There are multiple actions commended in that blessing, and they can be divided into two large ideas. The verbs *be fruitful*, *multiply*, and *fill* denote population by procreation, and the verbs *subdue* and *have dominion* express the rule to be exercised by the image-bearers over what God has made. The creation commission, then, is twofold: have offspring and have dominion.<sup>3</sup>

With the pre-Fall mandate of Gen 1:28 now before us, we are ready to look at the judgments.

## The Context of the Judgments

The disobedient couple hears the sound of God's presence in the garden, and with it comes the sound of judgment. Hidden among the trees from his presence, they have previously clothed themselves in shame with coverings, and when confronted by God they pass responsibility onto someone else (Gen 3:7–8, 12–13).

When the punishments begin, God first addresses the other character in the scene, the serpent that deceived Eve and remained in the garden to watch this travesty unfold. The pericope of God's judgments, therefore, includes the curse on and promised defeat of Satan (Gen 3:14–15). God next speaks to the woman (3:16) and last to the man (3:17).

The order of punishments is significant because the final one is the longest and is reserved for Adam. God created him first (Gen 2:7) as the representative head of the human race (cf. Rom 5:12ff.), who was to work and guard the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15). Only Adam heard God issue the prohibition about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17), and though he evidently conveyed God's command to Eve (cf. 3:3), he failed to act righteously when the decisive moment of eating occurred, for he was there with her and joined in the disobedience (3:6).

The punishments of Gen 3:14–19 are introduced in the same order as the characters appear in 3:1–6. First the crafty serpent appears (3:1), then the woman engages in the conversation it initiates (3:1–5), and finally the man takes the fruit his wife gives to him (3:6).

Although the judgments begin with the serpent (Gen 3:14–15), the following sections will address only God's words to the man and woman (3:16–19).

### **Echoes of Genesis 1:28 in 3:16**

To the woman God said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16).

This verse divides into two judgments that affect two important areas of womanhood: being a mother and being a wife. As Sailhamer put it, "What was to be the woman's source of blessing—to be a marriage partner and have children—is now tainted by the curse."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Pain in Childbearing***

First, God's judgment affects childbearing. The opening line of Gen 3:16 speaks about pain in that experience, and the next line is a parallel saying the same thing. But what about the promise to *multiply* pain? In our English translations it might seem that childbearing would have had pain prior to the Fall but will now be intensified. After all, you can't multiply what doesn't exist in some form, right?

But any implication about pre-Fall pain in childbearing is grammatically unwarranted. The

verb רבה means to have great pain and makes no comment about previous pain.<sup>5</sup> The second and parallel line ("in pain you shall bring forth children") restates the point clearly. A natural reading of the narrative in context implies that pain is introduced after her disobedience, not something present in a more microcosmic way beforehand.

Echoes of Gen 1:28 are discernible already. There the couple receives the command to have offspring, and in 3:16 the woman learns she will still bring forth children. In fact, she could have concluded as much from hearing the previous judgment on the serpent, words that promised enmity between its offspring and *hers* (3:15). The garden sin, therefore, did not nullify the creation commission to have offspring.<sup>6</sup> In 1:28 God told his two image-bearers to be fruitful and multiply (also רבה), and now he multiplies the woman's pain in childbirth. God's blessing bears his judgment.

It is easy to list examples of the pain associated with bearing children. A common theme in Genesis is barrenness, and that condition persists in many women today. Add to that the tragedies of miscarriages, stillbirths, and even the occasional death of the mother during delivery, and we can see that childbearing can be full of pain indeed.

The experience of pregnancy and degree of difficulty vary from woman to woman, but it remains true that those nine months are no small and simple endeavor. The timeframe of labor itself consists of climaxing pain. When Paul was thinking of a comparison for the groans of creation, he spoke of "the pains of childbirth" (Rom 8:22), and that analogy is apt as it states a truth universally recognized.

There is pain in childbearing, and no one can circumvent that punishment. Every child came into this world outside the garden, so not even Eve experienced what pre-Fall childbirth would have been like. Every woman who has borne a child did so through this judgment in Gen 3:16. In the fullness of time the virgin Mary herself gave birth to the promised Seed through the pain divinely decreed on the first mother (3:15; Luke 2:7; Gal 4:4).

### ***Domination in Marriage***

Second, God's judgment affects the marriage

relationship. In the second half of Gen 3:16, Eve learns that her “desire” will be for her husband, and he will rule over her. The “desire” here is not sexual because intercourse was indispensable for procreation before the Fall. The context of this verse is one of punishment, so the desire in view is bad. What kind of desire, then, is this?

The reader of Genesis is helped in the next chapter where the words “desire” and “rule” appear again in tandem. God tells Cain that sin’s “desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Gen 4:7). The desire is a ruling one, a dominating one. Most likely, then, in 3:16 the desire of the woman toward her husband is a desire to overcome him. The author intended 3:16 and 4:7 to be read together because the latter clarifies the former.<sup>7</sup>

Genesis 1:28 informs this aspect of the judgment on the woman. God told her and Adam to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures. The woman, as an image-bearer like Adam (1:27), was to rule over what God made, but the objects of her dominion did not include her husband. God’s words in 3:16, therefore, indicate a distortion in the created design for marriage. The covenant couple, once naked and not ashamed (2:25), now face marital difficulty.

Earlier in Genesis 3 the woman had failed to rule over the serpent that in turn overcame her (3:4–6). When that creature successfully exercised dominion over an image-bearer, it was subverting God’s good and wise design. The woman *should* have ruled over the creature, and now, as part of God’s punishment on her disobedience, she will desire to rule over someone she *shouldn’t*. When wives want to usurp their husbands and rule over male headship, that desire is the outworking of God’s words to Eve and, by extension, to all women.

The final words of God to the woman in Gen 3:16 refer to her husband: “and he shall rule over you.” This phrase could be interpreted in two plausible ways, one that views this rule as bad and the other that views this rule as good. Wenham admits it is more difficult here to grasp the authorial intent.<sup>8</sup>

If the “rule” is negative (like the woman’s “desire”), then surely an authoritarian kind of rule is meant.<sup>9</sup> In that case, both actions in Gen 3:16 would

be a misuse of dominion aimed at an image-bearer: she will want to usurp his headship, and he will try to dominate her—a two-way street with two dead ends. “The two who once reigned as one attempt to rule each other.”<sup>10</sup> Such authoritarian rule by the man contradicts true biblical headship comprised of sacrificial service and humble leadership. The husband must not be a dictator who rules his spouse.

But if the “rule” is positive, then the husband’s action (“he shall rule over you”) is the proper response to her insubordination. The meaning would not denote domination but would be another way of saying that the man is to act as the head and leader of the human family. Despite her desire for domination, he should hold fast his God-given authority as a husband. His role is not one that subjugates the woman at all. Before the Fall she was God’s answer to the search of a “helper fit for” the man (Gen 2:20). God made her from the man and brought her to him (2:21–22), and the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23a). After the judgments God administered, Adam named her Eve (4:20), an act that reinforced his headship.

Another reason the “rule” in Gen 3:16 may be positive is the connection in 4:7 with the terms “desire” and “rule”: the former was bad; the latter was good.<sup>11</sup> When God warned Cain about sin’s “desire” to rule him, he told Cain, “but you must rule over it.” That kind of “rule” is a good thing, a response to dominion that shouldn’t be exercised. Collins contends, “If we apply this to 3:16, we conclude that God describes a condition of human marriages that is all too familiar, namely, competition for control. The proper remedy is a return to the creational pattern of the man’s leadership—loving, not dominating.”<sup>12</sup>

If a good “rule” in Gen 3:16 is meant, then it is in response to the wife attempting to rule over her husband. Adam’s responsive “rule” would then be the righteous exercise of and adherence to his God-given role and responsibility as the husband. The woman may desire it, but he must not abdicate it. His rule, like that of the sun and the moon (1:18), upholds God’s good and wise design, keeping everything in proper orbit.

### Echoes of Genesis 1:28 in 3:17–19

To the man God said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:17–19).

Adam’s sentence is the fullest of the judgments, probably because he bore the greatest responsibility in heeding his wife’s advice instead of obeying God’s prior instructions.<sup>13</sup>

In God’s words to Adam we will see the promises of toilsome labor and eventual death.

#### *Toilsome Work*

After God made Adam from the ground (Gen 2:7), he put him in the garden to work it and keep it (2:15). In addition to Adam’s responsibilities there was a prohibition: every tree in the garden was for food except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16–17).

In the judgments God pronounced, he reminded Adam that he substituted the voice of his wife for the divine command (Gen 3:17), thus “cursed is the ground because of you.” Adam’s responsibility to work was not rescinded, but the environment would be different, and the conditions would make the work toilsome. God sent Adam out of the garden to work the ground (3:23), and it would bring forth thorns and thistles (3:18a). Unlike the garden, the conditions outside Eden would not be the fruitful abundance he had once known. He would eat the plants of the field (3:18b), but he would eat them *in pain* (3:17). Since his offense involved eating, his punishment relates to eating as well.<sup>14</sup>

The aspect of pain is a link to the woman’s punishment. She would experience pain in childbearing, and he would experience pain in working the ground. Labor pains, then, are pronounced on both the man and woman in their respective responsibilities.

How does Gen 1:28 inform God’s words to

Adam and the curse on the ground? The ground is part of the realm the image-bearers were to rule. God blessed them and said to “subdue” the earth (1:28).<sup>15</sup> He explained that every seed-yielding plant was theirs for food (1:29). Adam, therefore, was to work the ground because such work was an exercise of dominion, and working the ground would yield food for sustenance. But now, after 3:17–19, the land resists man’s rule, evident by the thorns and thistles (3:18). Eating comes only after pain and toil and sweat (3:17b, 19a).

Generations later, Lamech held out hope that God would deliver his people from the pain associated with Adam’s disobedience (Gen 5:29). Without ever possessing a copy of Genesis, the generations between Adam and Lamech apparently passed down knowledge of God’s judgment on Adam. Lamech’s hope wasn’t that work would cease but that God would grant relief from its toilsome nature. “By disrupting the man’s relationship with the ground God ensured that humanity was not able to enjoy, like their creator, rest from labour.”<sup>16</sup>

We can contemplate the depth (even the desperation) of Lamech’s hope when we consider that he lived 777 years (Gen 5:31). More so, Adam lived 930 years (5:5). Their toilsome labor didn’t last for mere decades but for *centuries*. Adam (and the rest of those in the genealogy of Genesis 5) must have felt sometimes like their sweat would never stop, like their bodies would never drop.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes expresses the vanity of wearisome work: “What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity” (Eccl 2:22–23). When God judged the blessing of labor, the words Adam heard extended to us all.

#### *Death in the Dust*

God told Adam that toilsome work would persist “all the days of your life” (Gen 3:17b). This confirms Adam’s mortal existence and prepares for the promise of its end. No matter how long we labor, the inevitable outcome is articulated in

God's last words to him: "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (3:19b).

In one sense, death is a mercy because labor in a fallen world finally ceases. On the other hand, physical death is part of the promise in Gen 2:17 ("you shall surely die"). Death is judgment, and no amount of work, no degree of toil, can deliver us from the dust that awaits our return.

God's closing words of punishment are ironic when we recall the creation commission in Gen 1:28. Adam was to subdue the ground, but at the end of his mortal life the ground would overcome him. The dust is given dominion over the image-bearers.

No statement about death is spoken to Eve, but Adam acting as her (and our) representative ensures that her life will end in dust as well. Interestingly, Adam returns to the dust from which God made him, but Eve does not return to where she came from—Adam's side (cf. Gen 2:21–22). How would such a return even be possible? At death Adam's origin became his earthly destiny and that of all other image-bearers as well.

### Implications for Readers of Genesis

When Moses recorded the Torah for the Israelites, the punishments outlined in Gen 3:16–19 would be significant for understanding the frustrations experienced in the realms of childbearing, marriage, and work. This pericope in Scripture explains why difficulty and pain characterize the lives of subsequent generations, and it tells us why we die.

The readers of Genesis would see not only the punishments God pronounced, they would see how Gen 3:16–19 related to the blessing in 1:28. It would be clear that God did not undo his blessing when Adam and Eve sinned. Even after the flood destroyed all life on earth except those in the ark, God blessed Noah and his sons and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1).

But between the blessing's appearances in Gen 1:28 and 9:1, we see a scene in the garden and hear God's judgment on his blessing. The blessing is not dissolved, but it faces serious disruption. To the degree that God's blessing is realized, it will be in a broken world full of broken people.

### Conclusion

A theology of manhood and womanhood begins in Genesis. God blessed his image-bearers in Gen 1:28 and judged them in 3:16–19. In order to understand the nature of those judgments we must discern the echoes of the creation commission.<sup>17</sup> God's blessing now bears his judgment, which means our God-given roles and responsibilities are lived out in a post-Fall world, and they will not be fully manifested untainted by sin. "Adam's descendants...fail. Failure would continue until there arose a 'last Adam' who finally fulfilled the commission on behalf of humanity."<sup>18</sup>

Through the pains of childbirth the promised seed of the woman came into the world, he was steadfast in the ways the first Adam stumbled; he died with a crown of thorns on his head as a picture of the curse, and his resurrection proved that dust would not have dominion over him. He received the name above every name, and he possesses universal authority and rule. The restoration of all things has begun, and that is good news for manhood and womanhood.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Greg Beale highlights the importance of Gen 1:28 when he says it "has more intertextual connections with the rest of Genesis and the remaining OT books than any other text in Gen. 1–11, and this is an initial pointer to it being the most formal thread from that initial section of Genesis being developed elsewhere in the OT" (*A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the New Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 58).

<sup>2</sup>According to Beale, "This functional aspect is likely the focus of what it means that Adam and Eve were created in God's image. Such a functional view of the image is suggested by images of gods in the ancient Near East, which neither represented the actual form of the god nor indicated primarily the attributes of the god (though this sometimes was included) but rather were the place through which the god manifested his presence and conveyed his blessings" (*ibid.*, 30).

<sup>3</sup>Victor Hamilton summarizes the verbs like this: "God gives two assignments to the male and the female: procreation and dominion" (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* [New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 139).

<sup>4</sup>John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 92.

<sup>5</sup>C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 159 n 36.

<sup>6</sup>T. D. Alexander notes that Gen 3:16 affects the blessing in 1:28, but he says the "pronouncement reverses in part God's blessing that human beings should be fruitful and increase in number" (*From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 117). The

word “reverse” may give the wrong idea, however, since 6:1 records the multiplication of people and 9:1 reiterates the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. The blessing does not appear to be reversed, but it must now manifest in a broken world through broken people. Disruption rather than reversal appears to be the point.

<sup>7</sup>Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 93.

<sup>8</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 81.

<sup>9</sup>Viewing the “rule” in Genesis as negative seems to be the standard interpretation of commentators. Examples are Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 93; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 81; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 201–02.

<sup>10</sup>Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 202.

<sup>11</sup>Collins points out that “rule over” does not in itself have the negative connotations of “dominate,” and that if “dominate” is the meaning, then it must be demonstrated from the context in which the word appears (*Genesis 1–4*, 159). Collins thinks the standard interpretation among commentators should be rejected in this case.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 160. Of Gen 4:7 Collins writes, “The ‘ruling’ is not a punishment but the necessary remedy” (160). When the words “desire” and “rule” in 4:7 are used to illuminate the use of “desire” and “rule” in 3:16, the parallel would seem to suggest that “rule” in 3:16 is the remedy and not an abuse of authority.

<sup>13</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 82.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>15</sup>Victor Hamilton suggests that “subdue” designates settlement and agriculture and is a semantic parallel to “till and keep the land” in 2:5, 15 (*The Book of Genesis*, 140).

<sup>16</sup>Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 117.

<sup>17</sup>For an argument showing how the blessing of Abraham answers point-by-point the curses pronounced in Gen 3:14–19, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 80–82; *idem*, “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007): 253–73.

<sup>18</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 46.