Genesis 3:16: God's Words to Eve after the Transgression

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf · May 2021 · revised in October 2026

The 3:16 verses in the Bible pack a punch. Not only John 3:16, but also this one from the first book of Moses. There are other striking 3:16 verses as well – which is of course a coincidence, since the chapters were only divided and numbered later, in the 13th century, and the verses only in the 16th century.

What interests us is what the words spoken to Eve – after she had eaten the forbidden fruit and had also given it to Adam – ***mean and what they do not mean***. Whether that matters will become clear by the end of my text. Here are some translations of this verse:

> *To the woman he said: I will greatly increase the toil of your pregnancy, in pain you shall bear children; and your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you. (Elberfelder CSV, German Bible translation)*
>
> *And to the woman he said: I will cause you much toil when you become pregnant; with hardship you shall bear children. And your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall be your lord. (Luther 2017)*

From these words I always concluded and interpreted, perhaps just as you did: God punishes Eve for her transgression by making childbirth exceedingly difficult and painful. And: in turning toward her husband she meets someone who rules over her. If you follow the literal sense of Luther ("he shall be your lord"), then this rule is a hierarchical order willed by God: the man is the head, the woman a helper.

In this word a kind of course is set: How do we look at the woman and at the scope, the motives, and the guilt of her deed? Translation plays a role here (as so often) that should not be underestimated.

In these two translations, ***toil and pregnancy*** are two nouns that are linked or related to each other. But if you read this verse in the Einheitsübersetzung or the Zürcher Bibel (German Bible translations), something important stands out:

> *To the woman he said: Much toil I prepare for you **and** often you will become pregnant. In pain you give birth to children. You have desire for your husband and he will rule over you. (Einheitsübersetzung)*
>
> *To the woman he said: I give you many hardships **and** let your pregnancies be numerous, in pain you will give birth to children. You will desire your husband, and he will rule over you. (Zürcher Bibel)*

In the last two translations, toil and pregnancy have nothing directly to do with each other. So ***two things*** are increased: toil and pregnancy.

Clearly and literally it says, as someone who reads Hebrew confirmed to me: "… greatly will I increase your toils AND your pregnancy …".

A free rendering puts it like this: I will double and multiply your drudgery and your pregnancies; with trouble and hardship you will give birth to children, yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.

I was made aware of this feature, which in my opinion is important, by a book by Bruce Fleming[1], who renders this verse as follows:

> ***I will surely multiply (1) your toilsome work in the field and (2) your conception.***

Then God instructs the woman about what has happened to her and to them, now that they are mortal and fallen.

> ***With effort you will give birth to children***
>
> ***Your [loving] desire [is] toward your husband***
>
> ***But he [rebelliously rules over himself and] will rule over you.***

Why is this distinction in the first part of verse 16 important? Because it gives the words to Eve a completely different tone and, even more importantly, a different content. ***First of all, it is extremely important to note that in this address of God no curse whatsoever comes upon Eve. Quite the opposite!*** First she is told that she will have much toil and effort with regard to farming, which includes keeping livestock and other manual work needed to sustain life. The word toil occurs in this form only three times and always means the toilsome work in the field. This is how Adam hears it (Genesis 3:17): The ground is cursed because of you: "In ***toil*** you shall eat of it all the days of your life." And this is how Lamech later says it about his son Noah (Genesis 5:29): "This one will comfort us concerning our work and the ***toil*** of our hands because of the ground that the LORD has cursed."

Adam simply took the fruit from Eve in full knowledge of the prohibition and ate. But God's curse does not strike Adam. The curse strikes the ground. ***Grace in Eden once again.*** The consequences are toil in producing food. Existence becomes a struggle for survival, unlike in Eden. And because Eve lives on the same ground, and they set out together as a married couple to master life, the same toil comes upon her as upon Adam. The reason is not Eve, but Adam, for it is because of his deed that the ground is cursed.

But now, in the second part of the first sentence, comes the good news, the gospel. The pregnancies will be multiplied!

Despite the transgression, Eve may fulfill the creation mandate: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth! Despite the transgression, life will go on. There will be many descendants. Even more important, one of these descendants will crush the serpent's head. The serpent was the first to hear these words, which God addresses to it:

> *[Genesis 3:15] And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will crush your head, and you will crush his heel.*

These words are called the first gospel or protevangelium. ***But they are addressed to the devil, and for him this is certainly not good news.*** But then the serpent has to listen as God makes sure and guarantees that there will be descendants, that there will be the seed of the woman. Good news for Eve, as it is for Adam and for us, who are allowed to listen in on what is said in the garden.

In this way the words to Eve take on a completely different meaning – a positive and hopeful one.

Giving birth to children will be toilsome for Eve, just as farming will be for Adam. After the Fall, life has become different. When Eve heard these words, she had not yet given birth to a child. The serpent and Adam hear words of curse and punishment, a before and a negative after. Not Eve! God does not

change the woman's body when he speaks to her in Eden. But some translations sound as if God somehow changes the woman and turns giving birth into something bad.

Giving birth to children is a risky process when medical resources are not available as they are today in many parts of the world. But God stands by women. He is their helper and savior (1 Timothy 2:15).

In a figurative saying Jesus told his disciples – and we may assume that he is the same one who spoke with Eve in the garden:

> *[John 16:21] A woman giving birth goes through hardship (or: distress), because her hour has come; but when she has given birth to the child, she no longer thinks of the anguish (or: pain), because of the joy that a human being has been born into the world.*

In vv. 16–19 the writer comes to terms with the hardships of human existence, especially with the creative aspect of life: reproduction and the production of food. The former ease is now mixed with toil: the good (offspring, food) comes with the bad (toil).

Relationship Crash

How was the relationship between the two meant to be? "In two meaningful Hebrew words, ***ezer kenegdo***, God describes how the two are intended for each other. They are created for each other, only hours apart. As soon as they are together, they are to be a fruitful and contented couple who are at home together in the Garden of Eden. … An ***ezer kenegdo*** is someone who is an equal, a counterpart, one who works together with another, as they help each other by sharing their strengths. … This word creates a picture of two persons who face each other. It can be translated as 'vis-à-vis', 'obviously opposite', 'corresponding to', or 'equal'."[2]

This purpose of God is now no longer fulfilled. Both are now struck by toil and, in the end, by death. The relationship between the two is no longer the same either. Eve turns toward the father of her children; she entrusts herself to him; she wants to be at his side. But the male sex, the physically stronger one, takes over the leadership role without any divine mandate. It places itself above the woman, exploits her, and oppresses her. World history has confirmed this millions of times – apart, of course, as always, from the exceptions that have existed again and again and everywhere, and still do.

How Had Eve Behaved?

She had been deceived, tricked by the liar and murderer. When God then spoke to her, she pointed to the one who bore the greatest guilt: the serpent.

> *[Genesis 3:13] And the LORD God said to the woman: What is this you have done! And the woman said:* ***The serpent deceived me, and I ate.***

Eve distances herself from the serpent and accuses it. The great transgression, with which Eve set off an avalanche, came about through deception. And she admits that she ate. Her attitude is far better than Adam's. The degree of her transgression cannot be compared with his.

"God asked the woman, as described in Genesis 3:13: 'What have you done?' ***She answered God without excuses. She answered God without reproaches. She spoke in an entirely different way from the man.*** She was no longer deceived. Perhaps everything became clear to her when she heard God questioning the man. In any case, she now saw what had happened. In her new wisdom she

recognized the evil and said: 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.' With this answer she exposed the evil serpent as the source of her deception. And she confessed the evil she did while she was being deceived – 'and I ate.' Had she, too, committed more evil, as the man had just done? No. Did she blame the man who was with her? No. Did she blame God? No. Nevertheless, what the Bible tells us about her is not the way she is often portrayed. And this false portrayal of her has been around for a long time."[3]

In Eden each of them took a bite. But their degrees of disobedience were different. What went on in the heart of each was not the same.

Adam reacts downright defiantly, worse still, accusingly:

> *[Genesis 3:12] And the man said:* ***The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.***

Adam first shifts the blame onto Eve. And onto God. It is practically an accusation against God, as if the Creator himself were to blame. With this he stands closer to the serpent than to God. Eve stands closer to God than Adam. So in these moments Eve is also given the more important role: She will have a seed (not Adam) who will reverse everything and will be the reason for a new and better Eden. A place where there will no longer be a tempter.

The Deceiver

After his attack, the serpent cannot escape. God speaks with the serpent and says to it: You know that you are in trouble! I heard what the woman just said. And her words were true. You lied to her and deceived her, and she has just exposed your deeds. I confirm her and you as opponents. You will strike her offspring's heel. But her offspring will destroy you. Your head.

Satan was a tempter. He deceived both the woman and the man.[4] The Hebrew text in Genesis 3:1–5 shows that every time he says "you," he uses plural pronouns. In other words, he did not address his words only to the woman. He said you-two, you-all, you-both. And the man was there and listened to what he said.

He attacks God and twists the truth! He disputes that they really were created in God's image and likeness. He makes a counteroffer. Eat this fruit and then you will be like God. He acts as if he were offering her good knowledge. What he is really offering is that they will know good and evil![5]

Summary

I hope it has become at least somewhat clear how differently the words to Eve have been interpreted. Through the particular interpretation, or the interpretive lens, the New Testament texts about Eve take on a certain "tint." There are only two passages:

> *[2 Corinthians 11:2–3] For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I have betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that, just as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your minds may somehow be corrupted and led away from your sincere devotion to Christ.*
>
> *[1 Timothy 2:12–15] But I do not permit a woman to teach or to rule over a man, but to be quiet, for Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and*

> *fell into transgression. But she will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with propriety.*[6]

Being deceived is a real danger. Eve is an example of this. Not because women are more easily deceived. That cannot be wrung out of the text. She is a vivid example of how such a thing can happen. Being led astray and being deceived is not a women's problem, but a human problem. Just look up these words in the New Testament, where it is always about everyone, about men and women.

Adam must take responsibility for the Fall. Eve was a victim (and, of course, still responsible). Adam was a perpetrator. He sinned "with a raised hand." With his eyes wide open and in full knowledge of God's command, he ate the fruit. He, not Eve, becomes the head of fallen humanity (Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 15), although she is the mother of all the living.

"When God judges the three at the tree, God groups the man together with Satan in his words of judgment.[7] God deals with the woman separately from these two rebels, because she does not rebel deliberately. She becomes disobedient only after she has been deceived."[8]

How one interprets Eve, her deed, and her words colors the view one has of women. That is what this text was meant for: to take a fresh look once again at the very beginning.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, May 25, 2021, hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de

Notes

1. Fleming, Bruce; Fleming, Joy; Hagemeyer, Joanne. The Book of Eden, Genesis 2-3: God Didn't Curse Eve (or Adam) or Limit Woman in Any Way. Kindle edition, p. 96.
2. Fleming, The Book of Eden, p. 33.
3. Fleming, The Book of Eden, p. 56.
4. When Paul says twice that Eve was deceived, it is because she was the first to speak, respond, and act (2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:14).
5. Cf. Fleming, The Book of Eden, p. 54.
6. I have written about this verse in detail (in my book "Women, Forgive Us!" ["Frauen, vergebt uns!"], ch. 6.3): It is not a universal ban on women teaching, but a concrete problem in Ephesus, where Timothy received this letter from Paul. Paul's warning is: Someone, whether a woman or a man, who has not been taught and has not learned, should not and cannot teach others. Neither in the church gathering nor anywhere else. For in the second letter he says clearly: [2 Timothy 2:2] "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people (Greek: anthropos; human beings: men and women) who will also be qualified to teach others," whether in the church gathering or simply anywhere, for any audience willing to learn. With this word Paul does not contradict himself when he here urges women to teach; rather, it shows that in Ephesus a woman, or some women, were the problem, just as men could have been (which, however, was not the case in this situation).
7. This also follows from the similarity between the words to the serpent and the words to Adam.
8. Fleming, The Book of Eden, p. 110.