

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
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**God Made a Real World**

Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

Psalm 8 (NIV)

*1 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory in the heavens.*

*2 Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*

*4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?*

*5 You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:*

*7 all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,*

*8 the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

*9 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Psalm 19:1-4 (NIV)

*1 The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

*2 Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.*

*3 They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.*

*4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.*

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! I happen to enjoy science fiction and fantasy literature and films or TV shows. Some of my grandchildren enjoy these computer games, like Minecraft, where you can create your own pretend world. Stories and movies and computer simulations offer us wonderful chances to explore imaginary worlds. It's fun to visit these places in our imaginations, to pretend that we're elves or action heroes or that we can transport. But we live in the real world, where you can't defy the laws of physics and outrun the exploding ball of fire.

[Slide 2] *Review*

Last week we began exploring this question of how to reconcile belief in a God who is perfectly good and all-powerful with the reality of pain and suffering and evil in the world. How can all three parts of this paradox be true? This is a legitimate question (when asked honestly, by someone looking for an answer, rather than assuming that posing the question immediately proved that no answer was possible). And it's a question that has to be answered by every religion, every philosophy, everyone who wants to make sense of the world in which we live.

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We looked at the most common answers that are proposed and found that they are simply inadequate. Either they don't come to grips with the reality of suffering or they don't line up with biblical thinking about God, or both. So they aren't viable options for anyone who wants to believe in the God of the Bible. And they really don't commend themselves all that well for anyone else, for that matter.

[Slide 4] *Introduction*

Let's recall something else that's important as we jump into this difficult question. For most, if not all, of us, there are two different aspects of this problem. There's the intellectual side—how can I wrap my brain around these things that appear so completely contradictory? How can I find an answer that at least gives me a way to make some sense of this world, even if I can't understand it completely? But there's a second side, the emotional or personal side of the problem, the part where it just hurts so bad that I really don't care about logic or intellectual satisfaction.

Most of this series is aimed at tackling the first of those two hurdles. My hope is that I can clear away the nagging questions that get in the way of facing the deeper problem, the “*why do I hurt?*” problem. But we're also going to deal with that part, too. So don't quit before we get to the end!

[Slide 5] *Intrinsic and Necessary Properties of a Real World*

The first part of the answer to the question of suffering and evil is this: *God created a real world, rather than a fantasy world.* This is the most fundamental aspect of the solution to the problem of suffering and evil: this principal truth underlies all of the other parts of the solution. Everything else in this series builds upon this truth. Understanding this part of the answer provides an essential framework from which we may build the rest of the answer.

Saying that God created a real world may seem silly and obvious. But recognizing this fundamental truth helps us understand the nature of the universe God made. And that can help me begin to make sense of my own personal suffering or the suffering I see around me, which provides the opening for explaining the rest of the answer. So let's unpack this foundational truth.

[Slide 6] *Necessary constants*

What do we mean, "*God made a real world*"? What is the point of that seemingly obvious statement? It has to do with the nature of the universe that God created. For the world to exist in reality, certain properties must hold true throughout the creation, and in every circumstance—they are *necessary constants* that cannot be removed or changed for the universe to exist as a real entity. These constants are the laws that govern the universe and give it stability—such as the laws of mathematics, physics, chemistry, logic. These constants also include spiritual laws that govern the personal and spiritual realms.

The existence of the universe is predicated upon the fact that it is real; *without the constancy of these properties or laws, nothing could exist at all.* This consistency of properties is what makes the universe real. But it also makes it possible for suffering and pain to exist in this real world.

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So, for instance, in order for a solid substance, such as wood, to be able to function as it was intended, it must retain its density, shape, tensile strength, hardness, etc. *no matter how it is used.* This allows us to build houses, walls, chairs, etc. We can calculate how much weight that wood can bear, depending upon how it is placed, supported, and joined. We know that we can count on the fact that the wood will be able to support a certain amount of weight or resist a certain amount of force that is applied to it without collapsing.

But that same physical law that allows us to use wood to build chairs or frameworks for houses dictates that if I swing a piece of lumber or launch it at high velocity so that it impacts a person's head, the result will be severe head trauma to that person. *God does not magically intervene to transform the wood into foam rubber if it is being used in a way that might cause someone pain.*

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Similarly, we have a natural law, a property of the universe, that causes air to move from the state of being under a high amount of pressure to a state of being under a low amount of pressure. That property of air allows my lungs to breathe so that I can live. When I exhale, it produces a low pressure situation in my lungs. Then I inhale and air rushes in under the force of the higher pressure outside of me. That same property of air also allows tornadoes and hurricanes to form.

Gravity is one of the four fundamental forces of physics in the universe. Gravity prevents everything on our planet from flying off the surface into space, which is great. It makes it possible for us to live on the earth. That's a wonderful gift from God. But that same force will cause those who fall or jump out of windows of skyscrapers to plummet to their death. The same water that quenches my thirst and allows me to live will kill me if I try to breathe it instead of drink it.

The constancy of these properties of the universe is what makes it real. Those properties make it possible for anything to exist at all. But they also open the door for the possibility of unpleasant, even tragic kinds of painful experiences.

[Slide 9] *The constant of time*

So far, I expect most of you are thinking, "*Ok, I get it. Of course, that makes sense. But that's just ordinary stuff, it doesn't answer everything.*" You're right. It doesn't. (That's why there's more to this point and seven more parts after that!) But it does establish a foundation that has far more implications than you might think at first.

One of the most important and significant constants of the real universe that God created concerns time. Time operates only in one direction: therefore *all actions have consequences, and no consequences can be undone*. This principle of actions having consequences may be termed the *law of consequences*, or the reality of *cause and effect*. Scripture gives ample evidence of this truth. Here are just a couple of notable examples.

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*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."* (Genesis 2:16-17)

*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.* (Galatians 6:7-8)

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Let me restate the law of consequences in a slightly different form, which happens to be one of the most powerful statements of truth I have ever heard: “*You may choose your actions, but you may not choose the consequences of your actions.*” No matter how intensely or sincerely I wish that the consequences of my actions would not happen, or would happen in a certain way, my feelings or intentions will have absolutely no effect on the consequences. I may be able to predict to *some* extent of accuracy *some* of the consequences of my actions, but I can neither predict nor determine all of the consequences—and therefore cannot choose which consequences I will experience. Nor can I limit those consequences simply by expressing my desires or intentions: there are always unintended or unforeseeable consequences for every action. My sudden regret for leaping out of the window will neither slow my descent nor cushion the impact.

[Slide 12] *The domino effect*

The consequences of actions include not only the immediate effects of those actions upon other beings or things, but the subsequent effects as well. So, for instance, your action of launching a two-by-four in the direction of your neighbor’s head might have the immediate effects of causing damage to tissues and the experience of pain (depending upon your aim and your neighbor’s awareness and agility). But it could also lead to other effects. So for instance, your neighbor could decide to retaliate by pressing charges of assault and battery against you, or to return your two-by-four by tossing it through your window. And you don’t get to choose either of those consequences or any others that come.

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The second half of the law of consequences says that “*no consequences can be undone.*” Consequences may be mitigated by subsequent actions or decisions but they cannot be undone, since the original action cannot be undone. This principle was famously well-presented in the classic series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, Digory ignores the solemn warning that his actions cannot be taken back and rings the bell that awakens the evil queen Jadis. The consequences of his seemingly small and insignificant action eventually result in the introduction of evil into the newly created world of Narnia.

[Slide 14] *Two types of consequences*

So we have two types of consequences: those that are certain and those that are merely potential.

*Certain consequences* will follow regardless of future actions: The consequence of striking someone in the skull with a piece of lumber will certainly

result in tissue damage. That consequence does not depend upon any future actions. The only things that can limit those consequences are other past actions, such as the putting on of a helmet, or the fusion of a metal plate to the skull.

*Potential consequences* depend upon future actions that are as yet undetermined: The possibility of surviving a blow to the head with a piece of lumber and the possibility of restoration of function to the damaged tissues are two potential consequences. Each of them depends upon future actions that are unknown at the time of the initial action: whether the victim is given medical care, how quickly that care is given, the quality of care given, and the availability of resources that enable tissue repair and healing.

All actions have consequences, and no consequences can be undone. That principle is not an axiom that establishes an inevitable and unalterable future based on a single action. It is simply the recognition that the consequences of actions are not a function of our desires or wishes or imagination, but a function of the nature of the universe, the kind of a world that God made—one that is real.

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The key realization for us is that no action or its consequences can be undone, *even if the consequences of an action result in unintended or unexpected pain and suffering*. We all want to live in a fantasy world where our choices that lead to suffering can be taken back, where every bad decision gets a mulligan, a do-over. But in the world that God made, the consequences of our actions stand—he does not nullify them.

A few examples from Scripture can demonstrate the point that God does not invalidate human (or angelic) choices or alter the past.

1. Adam is warned of the consequences of disobeying God's command: When he and Eve sin, God pronounces judgment upon them rather than preventing the entrance of human death into the universe (Genesis 2:17; 3:14-19; Romans 5:12).

2. Cain suffers God's judgment for murdering his brother: Abel's death results in a need for retribution, which God honors by judging Cain. But his death does not result in God resurrecting Abel, despite the injustice of Cain's action (Genesis 4:8-12).

3. The prophet Nathan announces God's judgment upon David for his sins of adultery and murder: the child conceived by Bathsheba will die. David's remorse, confession of sin, request for mercy, and prayers for the life of his child do not cancel the judgment of God (2 Samuel 12:7-23).

4. Satan's rebellion against God, including his deception of one-third of the angelic host, results in a war in heaven and the condemnation of the angels (Revelation 12:7-9; Jude 6; Hebrews 2:16).

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These passages show that *consequences that are certain cannot be changed either by our desires or our subsequent actions*. But it is possible that *potential consequences may be mitigated (lessened or altered) by taking other actions that can offset or reduce the severity of the consequences of the initial actions*. It is also possible that potential consequences can be nullified by future actions, even consequences that have been announced as certain. So, for instance, Jonah declares the destruction of Nineveh as a certainty determined by God. Yet the subsequent repentance of the inhabitants of Nineveh results in the cancellation of the announced judgment.

Consequences cannot be undone. This is not only true for us but for God as well, because he has limited himself to acting within the bounds of time and space in relation to human beings. *God cannot change the past*; omnipotence does not extend to breaching the structure of the universe which he has made.

[Slide 17] *Recognizing God's self-limitation*

This is not a limitation on God's power, but the recognition that God has created a universe according to his wisdom, and having made such a universe, will not act in relation to that creation other than by the means he has instituted and in accordance with the nature of that which he has made. God created the universe in such a way that time runs in one direction only. He cannot now cause time to run backward so that prior events may be undone, any more than he can make it possible for you to be in two places at the same time while still mortal.

Because God is infinitely powerful, he could have created a different sort of universe. Therefore it is conceivable that he could have created a universe in which it was possible for time to be very different than in this world. In that sort of a world, he might have made it possible for time to run in many directions. But it is not so in this one. (Things may be different in the next age.)

[Slide 18] *Recognizing God's involvement in history*

*What God can do* is to intervene in space and time (in human history or in the history and reality of the universe) so as to bring good out of that which was done, to *alter the course of potential consequences through his own subsequent actions*. He can get actively involved in the ongoing saga of history. There are no examples in the Bible of situations where God changes the past, even when the actions of persons bring about calamitous consequences. The only thing that we

see in the biblical narratives is God acting in response to human actions in ways that make a different future possible as a consequence of his (or others') actions. The raising of Lazarus is such an example. Jesus did not change the past so that Lazarus did not die. What he did was to bring a new possibility to reality by bringing Lazarus back to life.

[Slide 19] *Consequences (cause and effect)*

Here's the great news in all of this. The reality of cause and effect (the law of consequences) means that *my choices are real and therefore meaningful*. My decisions have value and meaning because they have real consequences. *Therefore my life has meaning and value*.

Just as God does not transform the properties of substances if they are used improperly in order to prevent causing harm to people or things, God does not cancel the consequences of our decisions simply because those decisions might (or will) result in harm to someone.

By the same reasoning and for the same purpose (maintaining the possibility of meaningful, valuable choices by human beings), *God allows the consequences of human decisions to stand, and does not always intervene to mitigate or prevent those consequences if they might cause pain or suffering to the person making the decision, or to others affected by that decision*.

In a fantasy world, every action I might take that had the potential for harming myself or any other person or creature or thing could be cancelled by God in order to prevent the harm from happening. Or he could intervene in such a way that no one ever experienced any pain or suffering (by supernaturally anesthetizing everyone who would otherwise feel the pain of consequences). But in that world, nothing that I did would have any value or meaning. Life would be pointless. I may prefer to live in a fantasy world, but that is not the kind of a world God made, and it is foolish to accuse God of failing to live up to my expectations of what a fantasy world should be.

[Slide 20] *The good side of pain*

Here's another important part of this recognition that God made a real world.

It is apparent that God created humans to function in the real world, where we would be certain to encounter pain as a result of choices we made or because of the inherent properties of the world itself. And it is apparent that this was purposeful on his part. One significant piece of evidence of this is the fact that God created human beings (and animals) with appropriate mechanisms and systems that are designed to anticipate and respond to painful stimuli—such as our

nervous system, instinctive reactions, adrenaline, and emotions. They are all part of the body's means for protecting itself.

The existence of these systems and capabilities in our bodies indicates that God intended pain to be a part of our experience of life as embodied creatures, even before sin entered the world. (1) They serve to warn us of dangerous consequences or of potential harm. Think about how you instinctively respond to remove your hand from excessive heat. (2) These systems alert us to the need for care when damage has been done to the body or when we've suffered personal trauma. We register both physical and emotional pain, a signal that we need care to repair the damage, whether that is a physical feeling of pain after an injury, or the sensation of anger when I have been treated unjustly. (3) These systems were designed by God to enable us to respond to danger in order to take protective action (e.g., by stimulating the production of adrenaline so that a person may rapidly flee from danger). They help people (and animals) respond to pain in order to avoid greater amounts of pain or more severe suffering, or mitigate the effects of consequences for the good of oneself or others. The existence of these natural alarm systems in our bodies indicates that *some pain is a necessary and inescapable aspect of life in a real world.*

[Slide 21] *God's gift of pain*

The existence of these systems in our bodies suggests that people were intended to use pain as a tool for learning as they experienced life in a real world. The biblical account of the fall of Adam and Eve does not suggest that God radically changed their biological make-up as a consequence of their sin. He did not wait until after they sinned to give them nervous systems that registered pain. Rather, the curse on Eve to "*multiply your pain in childbirth*" (Genesis 3:16) indicates instead that those physiological systems for recognizing and learning from pain already existed. Human capacity to experience pain—and to learn from it—was a part of God's good gift to us as a function of being created, not as a function of having sinned.

The same is true with regard to sickness, disease, and the possibility of injury. We have systems in our body for healing damage to the body (clotting of the blood), for protecting the body from attack (white blood cells), and for developing antibodies (B-lymphocytes). That indicates that God intended for us to encounter things that could cause pain or suffering to some degree.

The experience of pain, therefore, is not simply, or by itself, indicative of an evil cause. Neither is it to be equated with evil. And as we saw last week, the presence of pain cannot be simply and always equated with a consequence of

sin—neither our sin, nor our first parents’ sin. Rather, pain is in some ways a very good thing and the bodily systems that register pain serve a self-protective function, without which we would be in serious jeopardy.

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Nowhere has this been more ably demonstrated than in the work of Dr. Paul Brand with those who suffer from Hansen’s disease (formerly called leprosy). For centuries, leprosy was believed to be a horribly disfiguring and highly contagious disease that gradually and inexorably destroyed the hands, feet, limbs, and facial features of its victims. Dr. Brand proved that the tissue damage suffered by those with leprosy was not due to decay caused by leprosy. Rather, leprosy was an infection that damaged the person’s nervous system with the result that he or she no longer recognized painful stimuli. As the disease progressed, the inability to feel pain meant that those with the disease engaged in behaviors that damaged their own bodies, often in horrific ways, *because they could not feel any pain from the damage they were doing to themselves and therefore did not sense that anything was wrong!* God’s gift of pain is designed to alert us to the fact that we are injured so that we don’t keep doing damage to ourselves!

[Slide 23] *Conclusions*

Let’s pull all of this together now for the first part of our answer. Here is what we have seen so far.

(1) *Some suffering is due merely to the fact that we live in a real world.* The nature of God’s creation and the nature of his involvement with that creation (i.e., limited intervention) means that a certain amount or kind of suffering is unavoidable. But the goodness of God’s created world can be seen in that my life and choices have substantial, even eternal meaning and significance as a result.

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(2) *Pain—some pain, at least—was therefore expected to be a beneficial part of God’s good creation.* Certain kinds of pain and suffering actually serve to further what is good and prevent greater suffering or to mitigate potential consequences which could bring about even more painful suffering. Therefore it is unreasonable to assume that pain and suffering of this type should be evidence that God does not exist or that he is not good or that he does not care for his creation. (In fact, it indicates the opposite.)

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3. The properties of the real world thus show us that *some kinds of pain and suffering that result from the constancy of properties in a real world are compatible with a good and loving and all-powerful God, for they reflect*

*necessary conditions for life in his good world. Some can even have beneficial aspects that enhance or protect our experience of good in the world. (Even things like hurricanes and volcanic eruptions actually are beneficial to the health of the planet and necessary for sustaining life on Earth.)*

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4. These conclusions indicate something quite important: *We have been mistaken in what we assumed must be true about a good God and our world. We have wrongly imagined that a “good” world made by a “good” God must be one in which there is no pain of any kind*, when in fact the opposite is true. Such a world only exists in fantasy, and does not correspond to the kind of a world God made for his good purposes.

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God made a real world, a good world; he made a world where our choices matter, and our decisions are allowed to stand, even when those choices brought pain and suffering to us and to the world. But he also stepped into our history to bring a new possibility, the possibility of being forgiven and spiritually renewed. He will not force your decision and he will not make it for you. So consider now, do you want to suffer all of the consequences of your own bad choices? Or would you like to receive the consequences of Jesus’ sacrifice on your behalf?

*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*

God intervened in history in order to make a new possibility, the possibility of having a different set of consequences. He came to us in the person of Jesus, lived a sinless life, and died on a cross as a substitute for you and for me to make it possible for you to be right with God, to know God, to experience new life.

We celebrate communion as a way to say again with cup and bread “thank you” for making it possible for the consequences we deserved (eternal separation from God) to be annulled and the consequences we didn’t deserve (eternal life) to be given to us through our faith in Jesus Christ.

*Benediction /Blessing*

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]*

