

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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The World Is Broken

Genesis 3:1-7 (NIV)

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. 5 “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

11 And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

12 The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

14 So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

16 To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

20 Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

21 The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. 22 And the Lord God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." 23 So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Romans 5:12-19 (NLT)

12 When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. 13 Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. 14 Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. 15 But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. 16 And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. 17 For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who

receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. 19 Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We're engaged right now in the exploration of a difficult and complex issue related to the nature of God and the reality of human suffering. I told you that I wasn't going to subject you to all of the intricacies and complications of theological debates on this matter. And I'm still trying to keep my word on that. But I have an admission to make to you.

[Slide 2]

Several of you have heard me say that each week I'm trying to figure out how to stuff two and one-half pounds of hamburger (or more) into a one-pound meatloaf. What that means is that I have to leave out a lot of important points that add nuance or qualify things that I'm saying. It also means I have to omit some significant development of various points and a lot of the Scriptural support that undergirds and illustrates what I'm teaching. (If you really want to hear or see all of that extra material, I can probably make it available somehow at a later time.)

I had intended today to combine two parts of the answer into one sermon. But after a lot of frustration, I finally admitted defeat and gave up the effort. It throws a monkey wrench in my overall planning, but I'll figure out how to adjust. And my wife assures me that I'm the only one who is really bothered by it.

[Slide 3] *Review*

We began this series asking this universally troubling question: How is it possible 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?

[Slide 4]

We then 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 don't really solve our problem.

[Slide 5]

Last week I presented the first of eight parts of an answer that reflects the biblical teaching and Christian faith: *God created a real world, not a fantasy world*. In order for the universe to exist, certain properties—necessary constants—must hold true throughout the universe. But those constants make it possible for painful or even tragic consequences to occur, since God does not nullify those consequences if they might lead to harmful results.

[Slide 6]

The properties of the real world 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.*

Most of us don't really have a problem at this point. We have a common-sense understanding that certain kinds of pain are natural and not the result of some evil cause. We don't blame God or anyone else when we turn a corner too quickly and bang our knee into the table. The pain is real, and we don't like it, but we don't see that as evidence that God doesn't exist or that he isn't good. We understand that the occasional banged knee is simply the result of living in a real world.

What we need to see, though, is that this foundational truth applies to a lot more than what we would call "ordinary pain." It is the underlying reality about the universe that God made—and that is crucial for understanding more about the kinds of pain and suffering that seem to us to be too harsh, too unfair, too much, or too close to home. So let's move now to the next part of our answer.

[Slide 7] *Introduction: Part 2: The world is broken*

The fact that God made a real world rather than a fantasy world establishes some foundational truths. Those truths then lead us to a second aspect of the answer to the problem of suffering and evil.

One of the fundamental properties of the real world is that the law of consequences (cause and effect) is a part of the fabric of the universe. But the law of consequences isn't restricted to the physical realm. We know this, of course, because we see it at work all the time in our relationships. My unkind remark or selfish action causes a reaction in the people who are around me. Suddenly I have to deal with unexpected anger or distance in the relationship. And that leads to further consequences: I have to decide whether or not to ask for forgiveness, I may need to buy some flowers, or face the possibility of losing a friendship. So it isn't a huge stretch to understand that just as there are consequences (cause and effect)

in the physical realm, there are also consequences in the spiritual realm, *for the spiritual realm is also a part of the created order*. In fact, they are far more connected than we often realize.

[Slide 8]

People who dismiss the notion of the spiritual realm tend to think of it as something imaginary, something that is unreal. But it is very real and the Bible assumes it on every page.

Even within the physical realm (i.e., within time and space), we see that people are connected in ways that go beyond physical relations of location, size, shape, etc. We share a variety of different connections with people. Those connections can be emotional or intellectual, casual or deep, romantic or professional, friendly or transactional. Recognizing the reality of those relational connections can help us understand how the spiritual realm is a part of our world. You see, as people, we exist in a nexus of five arenas—physical, emotional, intellectual, relational/social, and spiritual—that together make up what we may term the *personal realm*. Every person is therefore connected to the spiritual world, whether or not they acknowledge it, recognize it, or actively engage with it.

This understanding also helps us dismiss a popular fallacy that we sometimes find in our culture and even in the church. It's the idea that our body is just the box for the "real" me. But human beings are not simply physical containers in which is deposited the spirit and soul (or mind). We are whole persons: each of us is a body-soul-spirit-in relationship. We are whole beings who are connected internally so that every aspect of our being affects every other aspect. We are also connected externally to others, including others within the spiritual realm, whether those others are other persons, angelic beings, or God. And just as what happens to me emotionally can affect me physically or spiritually or relationally, what happens in the realm of the physical universe (including the personal realm) affects the spiritual realm, and vice-versa.

How do we know that? Consider the passages of Scripture that we read today. They give us additional evidence that the law of consequences operates in the personal, relational/social, and spiritual realms.

[Slide 9] *The operation of consequences in the personal realm*

(1) As soon as Adam and Eve, the first humans, disobeyed God's command (a physical action within time and space), there were immediate spiritual and personal consequences. Instead of enjoying God's presence as they had previously, they were now afraid of God and tried to hide from him. They felt shame and guilt for having acted unfaithfully. That sense of personal guilt and

shame led each of them to try to excuse their behavior by shifting the blame for their sin onto someone else. Their personal trust and love for one another had been broken. Death—spiritual separation from God—had taken root in the universe.

(2) Second, in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans, we see the universal spread of sin to all of Adam’s descendants, with the result that death was also universal: everyone was separated from God. So the same things that were true of Adam and Eve we find happening in ourselves, both internally and in our relationships.

We could multiply examples from Scripture, almost without end. For the entire Bible deals with this basic problem: how to overcome the breach between God and people that has occurred because of human sin. The story of Scripture is the story of God intervening in human history to repair his good world that has been broken by sin and to rescue people whom he loves from the consequences of their actions.

But if the world is broken, why did God allow it to happen?

[Slide 10] *Free will—a necessary construct for the creation of people*

When God created a real world, part of that real world included human beings, people to whom he had given the capacity to determine their own choices—what we call “*free will*.” This capacity is a part of what it means to be created in the image of God: as humans, we are capable of choosing, of responding freely and responsibly to various options which are presented to us. And it is important to note that this capacity for meaningful choices, in which the consequences of my decisions stand, and are not annulled by God, remains a part of the image of God in all people, even after the entrance of sin into the history of humanity.

There are two clear reasons that we can see why God gave people “*free will*.” The first has to do with the nature of the real world that he made. The creation of the world involved a choice God made—the choice that something other than himself would exist. As part of that decision to create, he decided that he would create a sentient being, a being that was self-aware. It would know itself as “I,” and also know that it was not God. If I know that I am me and that I am not God, there is the intrinsic and inescapable possibility that I could choose to follow my desires and inclinations rather than God’s. I could reject God’s claim on my life and assert my intention to be my own master, to be like God. Thus, the instant God created the first angel and again when he created the first human, the option of choosing evil became a part of the real world. The potential for evil exists intrinsically in the creation of self-aware beings who are not God.

[Slide 11]

This capacity to choose freely is implicitly acknowledged in Genesis 2: 15 *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

Adam is given a task—cultivating and maintaining the garden—which requires him to choose courses of action for which he will be held responsible. He is given an explicit command involving a choice between two mutually exclusive options (“*eat [or don’t eat] from the tree*”), one of which is forbidden to him. Both the giving of a command and the implicit potential responses require that Adam have the capacity to choose whether to obey or to disobey.

The consequences of choosing the option of disobedience are explained: God clearly tells Adam what the consequences will be if he chooses to disobey (death). It is a real option with real consequences. God will not annul those consequences if Adam chooses to disobey, despite the fact that they will bring pain and suffering into the good world he created. Adam’s choice thus has both significance and genuine value.

[Slide 12]

“*Free will*” does not mean that my choices are unencumbered at all. It does not mean that I am free from all external influences in my choosing, or that I have an infinite number of choices at any point. Clearly, a girl born into a Christian family in the United States in the 21st century will have different influences and limitations upon her that shape her choices than a girl who was born into a Muslim family in Saudi Arabia in the 13th century. The same is true for the child of an alcoholic or a person sold into slavery. My situation limits my choices. But it does not eliminate my capacity to choose. “*Free will*” simply refers to the fact that I may choose and God will allow the consequences of that choice to stand, even if I choose contrary to God’s will, intentions, and desires.

Thus, “*free will*” is one of those necessary conditions that form part of the fabric of the universe; it exists as a moral structure of the spiritual realm related to the constancy of properties and the law of consequences in the physical realm. But there is a second reason that God gave humans and angels “*free will*.” For the capacity to make genuinely free choices also represents an aspect of the created order that is necessary to fulfill God’s intended purpose for creation.

[Slide 13] *Free will—necessary to fulfill God’s purpose for creation*

God created humans because he desired to share a relationship of love with them. They would be the recipients of his love, and would love him in return. The possibility of a response of love necessitated the creation of a world in which real choices were possible, for love that does not come from a choice to love is not true love. Coercion and force may produce submission or compliance, but they do not produce a response of love.

[Slide 14]

God could have created a world in which we were compelled by his overwhelming power to ensure that we took the proper actions. He could have created beings who were incapable of resisting his power, whose only response to his commands was immediate compliance. But that kind of obedience would not be a response of love. God could not compel a loving response, because love, by its nature, cannot be compelled. Nor could he “program” such a response into the nature of human beings, as if we were robots or unthinking animals, since this would simply be a different form of coercion. Instinctual actions are not freely chosen, nor do they have the same value as deliberately chosen actions.

[Slide 15]

The world that God created required that freedom exist as *a necessary construct of the world*. In such a world, the possibility of choosing contrary to God’s intention and will must also exist, despite the evil consequences that would happen if such choices were made—consequences that God would not annul, even when the result of those choices meant pain and suffering that God did not intend for us to experience. Apparently God considers that it is good and worth the cost of possible evil to have possible love in this world.

[Slide 16] *A good world broken*

Although God made a good world (one which included the possibility of experiencing pain and the capacity in humans to choose freely), this world has been damaged by the introduction of sin into human history.

The decision by Adam and Eve to live independently from God resulted in a broken relationship with God. That horrific breach brought with it all of the attendant ills that come with trying to live separated from the only source of life, and the only measure of what is true, good, and right. It is the cause of much of the pain and suffering in the world.

Some pain and suffering in the world is the direct consequence of this broken relationship with God, such as becoming subject to decay (aging) and physical death. Some pain and suffering is a consequence of God’s cursing of the ground. There are aspects of the physical world that now reflect the brokenness of

creation. Consequently, some of what would have been merely natural pain (from living in a real world) has become enhanced so that it now reflects even greater pain. Work, for instance, has become more difficult, less fulfilling, and filled with greater troubles, than it would have been apart from sin. We could also point to pregnancy, where something has been lost from God's original creation of women with the result that they experience greater pain during pregnancy and childbirth.

[Slide 17]

Other direct consequences of sin and separation from God that introduced pain include aspects of the personal realm. As we saw in Genesis 3, there are both personal and relational consequences that are due to sin. Like the first couple, we experience fear, shame, blame-shifting, and delusion. With the entrance of sin, the relational wholeness that had originally been characteristic of marriage was now damaged; the attempt to dominate and manipulate one another replaced a fundamental equality and mutuality.

[Slide 18]

Not only did our first parents introduce sin and its consequences into human history, but those consequences multiply as we follow in their pathway. As the prophet Hosea proclaimed, we have sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind: everything we do always brings an increase. In both our personal relations and in all human societies, there are indirect consequences of sin that both extend and strengthen the effects of evil and enhance the suffering that results from alienation from God.

So we see that both individuals and societies may develop an *increased capacity for and embrace of evil*, so that they come to prefer evil to good, and actively champion what is contrary to God's nature, even what is contrary to their own or humanity's benefit. We could list all kinds of examples: (a) self-destructive behaviors and addictions; (b) sexual abuse and perversity; (c) tyranny, oppression, slavery, corruption; (d) greed, theft, extortion, exploitation; (e) love of violence.

[Slide 19]

The *power of deception* strengthens delusional beliefs, reinforcing erroneous belief systems, and holding individuals and cultures captive. Again, there are plenty of examples that come easily to mind: (a) paranoia (whether in a person, group, or society); (b) dangerous folklore and fallacies (e.g., that AIDS can be cured by having sex with a virgin); (c) atheistic/materialist communism; (d) belief in karma; (e) white supremacy.

[Slide 20]

Cultures reinforce certain evils to which they have become accustomed, so that personal sin becomes *endemic and systemic sin*, and evil becomes entrenched within a culture or sub-culture so that it becomes nearly impossible to eliminate from life among a particular people. Think, for instance, of (a) criminal activity and violence as a way of life among gangs, cartels, or crime families; (b) piracy (Somalia, stealing technology, pirated entertainment, Wall Street); (c) slavery (many places in the world's history); (d) governmental corruption as a fact of life (much of the Roman Empire, medieval papacy, and many countries today); (e) dehumanization of perceived or declared enemies (Europeans and native Americans [both sides], Nazi Germany, Japanese in WW2, many others).

All of these consequences of living apart from the influence and life-giving power of God result in painful suffering for others, for they are contrary to life as God designed us to live. The world is broken, and our sin is the reason.

[Slide 21]

The net effect of all of these aspects of sin upon every person may be described as the confluence of several factors.

(1) I am born estranged from God, devoid of spiritual life, and therefore subject to the proclivity of my own selfishness, seeking to satisfy my desires which can only be fulfilled in relationship to God, which I lack.

(2) My estrangement also means that I have inherited a tendency to rebel against God's person, nature, and ways. I am inclined to resist him and to assert my own independence in the face of the truth that I need him.

(3) My personal choices to assert my independence and to seek out my own desires cause me to pursue ends that are not good, by ways that are not good, both of which damage me and others.

(4) My sinful desires and choices are reinforced by the people I live with, who teach me and inculcate within me the warped values of a culture estranged from God and his ways. They help me develop new desires and patterns that are self-destructive and mutually reinforcing.

(5) My sinful desires create "taste buds" for evil that become temptations, lusts, and obsessions, eventually consuming my life and harming others as I pursue wrong ends.

[Slide 22] *Conclusions: Part 2*

What have we seen today? Let's summarize what we have learned in this second part of the answer to our question about suffering and evil.

(1) *The introduction of evil into the world of humanity—acting contrary to God’s intention for his world and choosing to live independently from him—has resulted in substantial amounts of pain and suffering in the world.*

[Slide 23]

(2) *As a result of being cut off from God by sin, we are broken, and we act out of brokenness with the result that we damage others as well as ourselves, both intentionally and unintentionally. (“Hurt people hurt people.”)*

[Slide 24]

(3) *Consequently, much of the pain and suffering and evil in the world is due to: (a) the effects of human sinfulness on the natural world; (b) the sinful choices of people; and (c) the consequences of those choices, including the systemic and universal integration and enculturation of evil.*

The first part of the answer demonstrated that some pain and suffering wasn’t our fault exactly—it is the necessary result of the creation of a real world. But some pain and suffering—a great deal of it, in fact—is directly or indirectly due to human sinfulness. So it would be unreasonable and unfair to conclude that the mere existence of pain and suffering argues against the existence of God or that it proves he is impotent or not good. But we have more to explore; this does not solve our problem by itself, so be sure to come back next week.

[Slide 25]

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 intervened in order to solve the problem of human sinfulness. 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 . . .]