

It Is Good

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Preface

There's a lengthy history to this writing.

It began in 1999, when I was a youth pastor at a church in Oregon. I preached from time to time, and the Senior Pastor, Gary Ivey, had proposed we share a preaching series. It included the three main characters: Eden, Job, and Jesus. Some of the other elements (Satan's role, silence) were there as well; and it would culminate in a final Victory sermon the week after Easter. I preached the Satan and Victory sermons. I don't remember anything of Gary's sermons, but I do remember having fun with mine (I still have those notes, though they're something very different from what you'll read here).

I didn't originally realize the potential. It took two more tries, and a seminary theological education, to appreciate how important the subject matter was. Herein lay the makings to discuss fundamental issues of suffering and redemption—of failed friendships and broken families, of feeling distant from God, of a needed hope both for the future and today. Herein lay the potential to discuss the very reason why things go wrong—a theology and worldview that has since become the lens through which I view...pretty much everything. As I cemented these ideas, I came to understand that this is the single best explanation for why bad things happen—and, likewise, the single best hope.

The writing of these messages helped shape my theology and worldview, and it has since become foundational. To understand these issues is to understand how I view the basic Christian message. My purpose in this writing is to create a venue to share in a more concise manner. May you find this as illuminating and helpful (and *hopeful*) to read as I did to write.

--Dan Russell

It Is Good... *Genesis 1*

I'd suggest, before reading any further, that you first pick up a Bible and read Genesis chapter 1. Even if it's "old hat" to you, take a moment to read it again. Notice the repeated phrase: "it was good." Notice especially how the chapter ends: "God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*" [NIV, emphasis mine].

There's an interesting clip from the movie *Grand Canyon*. Danny Glover's character, a tow truck driver, is in danger of being mugged while trying to rescue a stranger driver (also in danger of being mugged). With a sigh, he says to the gang:

"Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. I mean, maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. That dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is."

One wonders if Glover or the writers realize how deeply theological that scene is.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be. We read in Genesis 1 that when God created the things of this world, He saw—and said—that "it was good. And when He finished creation, He saw and said that it was "*very good*." And yet inevitably, a time will come—depending on the kind of day you've had, or what you've heard on the news—in which you look around and say, "This is *not good*."

We live in a world where marriages fail, where friendships falter, where hearts are broken. It is very difficult to reconcile the life we see with the life we read in Genesis 1. And we ask: "What happened?" There is an answer to that question. We're not going to get to it yet. Before we talk about what went wrong, let's spend a little time talking about what went right.

It is Good

In Genesis 1, God created everything, and He created it good. *We* were created good. When Genesis talks about our creation, it talks about it in very unique terms:

Genesis 1:27, 31a—So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them...God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

God's been creating things, looking at them and saying, "It is good." When creation is complete, He looks at everything He's made—including us—and says, "It is *very good*."

We are created in the *image* and *likeness* of God. This is a unique aspect of God's creation. Nothing else in the entirety of God's creation is ever described as having been made in the image and likeness of God—that makes us unique.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Vernon Elmore says,

"According to the Scriptures, humans are not an evolutionary accident but a special creation. Human beings were purposefully produced by God to fulfill a preordained role

in His world. They have peculiar qualities that somehow reflect the nature of God Himself and set them apart and above all other created beings.”

Millard Erickson writes that we *belong* to God—we are only complete when we are in proper relationship with God. We are *valuable* to God; the reason we know we are valuable is that God sent His only Son to redeem us (John 3:16). You are a *special* creation, made in the image and likeness of God. God’s thumbprint is on each one of us; it’s almost as if we’ve been “hard-wired” to be good.

However, some of us may be thinking: “I don’t know if I *feel* like I bear the likeness of God.” “I don’t feel like a good person.” Or more simply, “I don’t feel like this is a good world.” Maybe there are days when we look at the world around us, compare it to that phrase in Genesis (“It was very good”) and ask ourselves: What in the world happened? When did it *stop* being “very good?” Likewise we may ask, is there a reason for this? And does God have a plan in this?

The answer is “yes.” This writing is devoted to discussing this. Something happened to turn this world which God created “very good” into the broken world in which we live today. A broken world which has fractured our ability to bear God’s image. A broken world which has hurt our families, our friends, and even our relationship with God.

Eden, Job, Jesus

There are going to be three players in this saga. The first we’ve already looked at: the Garden of Eden, where everything starts—and where everything starts to go wrong. Let’s briefly introduce our other two players:

Job 1:1—In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Look also at what God says about Job in 1:8—

“There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”

Can you imagine being this person? Being a person so faithful and upright, God Himself brags about you in Heaven. Your first reaction may be to say, “No way—there’s no way I could live up to that.” Well, let me say this: there’s nothing supernatural about Job. Job is going to be the “every man” in this series. There’s nothing supernatural about him, he doesn’t get any kind of “head start” above us; he’s a normal guy, like us. There’s no reason any of us can’t be like him. While Job did not play a role in the reason or resolution of what went wrong, he—like us—must make his way through this broken world, with all its trials.

Right now, life is good for Job. But if you know his story, you know he’s in for a rough ride. We’ll start seeing that in the next chapter.

And now to our third player:

Matthew 3:16 – 17—As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and

lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Life is good for Jesus, too. But Jesus also is going to face trials; trials which will threaten his relationship with his family and his friends, and might even threaten his relationship with God the Father.

Something happened in this world. It was created “very good,” but something has gone wrong. In the chapters to come, what we’re also going to see the following:

- God is aware there is a problem
- God has intervened in the problem
- God is moving us along a path according to His plan

A Perplexing Hope

We’re going to see all that in the chapters to come. To start, though, let me say this: if the world was created good, then obviously this is not the way things are meant to be. Let me say that again, to be clear: this is not the way things are meant to be. And if God Himself is good, He must be working to make things better. Once again, both points:

- This is not the way life is meant to be
- Life is going to get better—God will see to it

Once upon a time, God’s creation was good. It will be again. And when we say God’s creation was good, that includes us as well.

Some time ago, I went with a young man to court. He’d gotten himself into trouble; and for what he’d done, he could face jail time. But the judge looked at him and said, “You strike me as someone worth getting a second chance.” He didn’t know it, but that was a deeply theological statement. Indeed, that could have been God’s words to us right before He sent Jesus Christ: “You strike me as someone worth getting a second chance.”

Why do you suppose that is? Even the Psalmist found it perplexing that the Cosmic Creator of the Universe would take such an interest in us:

Psalm 8:3 – 4—When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him?

Every week at my church, we say, “You are loved.” It sometimes begs the question *why* we are loved. That’s a huge question; and no doubt God has a huge answer, but part of it must go back to the very beginning:

Genesis 1:27, 31a—So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them...God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.

We are a part of God’s creation, and God’s creation was good. Remember that in those dark nights of the soul. Remember that when this fallen world steps in and tries to make you forget.

It was not always like this; it will not always be like this. You are God's wonderful creation—
and it is very good.

Enter the Dragon

Genesis 3:1 – 6

In the last chapter, I encouraged you to read the first chapter of Genesis. If you did, hopefully you noticed (especially since I kept repeating it!) what was said at the completion of creation: God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*.

The entire story is filled with that. On the fifth day, God created all the creatures of the land, sea, and air; and God saw that *it was good*. On the fourth day, God created the Sun, the Moon, and the stars; and God saw that *it was good*. On the third day, God had created land, seas, and vegetation; and God saw that *it was good*. On the second day, God created the sky; and God saw that...

Don't say "it was good!" It's tempting, but don't do it. The Bible does not say that the second day was good. Every other day of Creation has something good about it. On the first day, God created the light, and He saw that it was good. On the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth days, at the end of each day, God saw that it was good. But day two is conspicuously absent of being called "good." Why do you suppose that is?

There's a theory. Are you ready for the theory? It's actually not even a *theory*; theories tend to be based on *something*. This is more of a guess, or a "what if." But it's interesting.

What if the reason day two does not have a "it is good" is because day two is the day Satan tried to rebel against God, and was cast out of Heaven? As I said, it's a "what if" scenario based on nothing at all. We don't know. What we do know is this: throughout Scripture, Satan has a presence—particularly in the three stories of this writing. He works against the human, and wages war against God. And we are caught between he and God. In this chapter, Satan enters the picture.

Homage and Imagery

The first time I ever preached this as a sermon, I used the opening title sequence from the Bruce Lee movie of the same name:



I did so playfully (the music, coupled with Bruce Lee's shouting, still makes me laugh), but also with Revelation 12:9 in mind: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." The Senior Pastor under whom I served,

though, apparently wasn't sure anyone would make the connection, and so preceded to introduce my sermon with a mildly lengthy explanation of the connection.

So, lest anyone be confused at this chapter's heading title, there it is. And now (ahem), to the purpose of this chapter.

Enter the Dragon (that's Satan)

Genesis 3:1 – 6—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?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 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.’” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 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.

Here's Adam and Eve in Eden. They have an entire garden to choose from. There's only one rule: “You can eat anything else—anything!—*except* this. Anything else but this.” It is simplicity itself, and yet they break that one rule.

There are several things the Serpent has managed to accomplish. Some of them are little things:

He has caused them to question God's *authority* and God's *trustworthiness*. “Did God really say that?” says the Serpent. “Well, God is wrong.” Walter Brueggemann writes:

“The prohibition which seemed a *given* is now scrutinized as though it were not a given but an *option*. The serpent engages in a bit of sociology of law in order to relativize even the rule of God. Theological-ethical talk here is not to serve but to avoid the claims of God.”

Do we see this today? You bet we do. We live in a world where God's law is up for grabs. The world tells us it is our *option* to obey God, not our *duty*.

He gets Eve to talk *about* God, but not *to* God. Imagine if they had just asked. “A question has come up about the tree—could You clarify?” But they did not. Indeed their focus seems here to be solely on themselves:

He gets them to think *first*, and *only*, of themselves. What kind of motivations are we seeing here? It certainly isn't to please God. The serpent's motivation was to work *against* God; Adam & Eve's motivation was to *be like* God. They took their eyes off God, put it on themselves—and decided they were more important.

As I said, these seem at first to be little things. That decision will hurt them. It will lead to their fall. That decision will likewise hurt their children, and still lives with us today.

But these little steps lead to cataclysmic consequences:

Sin and death have now entered the world. Romans 5:12 says, “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin.” This is the beginning of the *Fall*, and don't miss the

importance of it. If you've ever wondered why we die, why our hearts ache, why things go wrong—it begins here. This moment serves as the foundation for why this world is the way it is.

Separation forms between humanity and God. This is not a minor spat, such as you would have with a friend or family member: "I've been feeling a little distant from [so-and-so] lately." Imagine feeling distant from oxygen. This is a dire situation...though Adam and Eve don't seem to realize it yet. Look at how they react when God confronts them (This is so typical):

Genesis 3:11b – 13—"Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman You put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Adam says, "Don't look at me! It's not *my* fault; it was this *woman*—and *You're* the One who gave her to me!" It's the double denial! Now the Bible doesn't say this, but you know, being a woman, the first thing Eve did was to turn and slap Adam. Then she says: "It's not *my* fault—it was this serpent here." This is typical human behavior. "It's not my fault!" They don't take responsibility for their actions. And yet (and perhaps not surprisingly), here's the interesting and sobering point: God is not impressed with these excuses. And God holds all three of them accountable for their actions.

Sin has now entered the world. And yes, it was their fault, despite all their denials. But now let's look at someone for whom it actually was not his fault.

Job

Job 1:8 – 12—The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out Your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

And then a terrible thing happens. A messenger comes running up to Job and reports, "The ox and donkeys were grazing, and a raiding party came and stole them, and killed the servants—and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you." While he's still talking (and the Bible actually says that, "While he was still speaking"—the first hasn't even had a chance to finish speaking yet), a second guy runs up and reports, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up all the sheep and servants—and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" While he's still speaking, a third guy comes running up and reports, "A raiding party has taken off with all your camels, killed all the servants—and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" *While he's still speaking*, a fourth guy comes running up and reports, "Your sons and daughters were all eating in the same house, and a great wind came and knocked the house down—and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

It's almost funny. You could see this in a movie. But it's not funny. This is true tragedy. Look, though, at Job's reaction to true tragedy:

Job 1:20 – 21—At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground *in worship* and said: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”

That is a powerful statement both of Godly character, and realization. “I wouldn't have had any of this if it weren't for God. “Praise God—in all circumstances, I will praise God.”

This really burns Satan up (no pun intended), so he goes back to God and argues, “Those are just *things*. The guy himself is unharmed. Harm the man, and he'll turn away from you.” And so Satan harms Job. He gives Job painful sores, from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Yet again, Job will not turn from God—which would be victory for Satan. Notice that Satan can't force Job turn away from God; the power of decision is still in Job's hands, and he decides to stay true to God:

Job 2:10b—“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

That is very interesting—“Shall I accept good, and not trouble?” The world is very much like that. When things are going good, they love God. But when things aren't going good, they push God out of the picture. Consider this relationship with God. Does it only counts when God spoils us? *Only* when it's good? Not so Job. Job is a man of integrity. He sticks with God.

This is the effect of sin having entered this world. This is what it is to live in a Fallen world: it affects even the innocent. Such is the broad scope of sin's affect: sin affects us, even when we are not the cause. As for whether we turn away from God, though, that is our choice. Job stands by God.

Jesus

Luke 4:1 – 13—Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’” The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Even Jesus, having become incarnate in this fallen world, must wrestle with the trials of this fallen world. Jesus has been in the desert for 40 days; he hasn't eaten anything, and Satan comes and tries to tempt Him.

Notice carefully how this plays out. Every time Satan tries to tempt Jesus, Jesus responds with Scripture. This is Jesus' weakest moment—40 days with food; he is physically and mentally vulnerable. His sure foundation, though, is God's Word. Notice also, though, that Satan tries to turn it against him. It is a battle of wits with dire, dire consequences hanging in the balance.

Consider the precarious position Jesus is in. Jesus has become human; sin is the most *dehumanizing* aspect of Creation. Had Satan won here, it would have been his greatest victory. When we sin, it is his victory. We are created in the Image of God. To sin is to vandalize that Image.

In a Nutshell

To recap, here's what has happened:

- A rift has begun—a chasm separating us and God has begun to form
- Death has entered the world through sin

Here's what *is* happening:

- Satan seeks to complete the rift
- A war wages for our souls

C.S. Lewis writes, "There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan."

And here's what *must* happen:

- We must not turn away from God
- We must not turn away from God (yes, I wrote that twice, just to be sure)

In each of these stories, what Satan has tried to do is turn these people away from God. Adam and Eve did—they turned away from God. It was just for a moment, but the damage was done. Job, so far, is staying true; as is Jesus Christ. We must not turn away from God.

To that end we use all the tools God has placed at our disposal:

- The power of God's Spirit
- The instruction of God's Word
- The salvation of God's Son

The Plot Broadens

Up to this point we've concentrated on how the Fall affects *us*. But we are not the only ones affected. Creation itself—even nature—has been affected by the Fall. Romans 8:22 says, “We know that the *whole creation* has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Creation *groans*—but notice *how* it groans. It groans as though in childbirth. Natural childbirth is painful, but it is pain that leads to something good. Creation groans—but what is it groaning to?

Romans 8:18 – 19—I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in *eager expectation* for the sons of God to be revealed.

“Eager Expectation” here literally means, “Stretch the head.” Creation is craning its neck, eagerly expecting something to happen.

Paul doesn't try to hide the fact that believers suffer. Indeed, he highlights it. Something has gone wrong in this world—we can all agree on that. But a coming glory will one day be revealed. It is this coming glory Creation strains its neck to see, groaning as it waits for this glory to be revealed.

Romans 8:28—And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

This verse is not to say that *all* things are good. The Fall was not “good.” But God is at work, repairing the chasm that appeared the moment sin entered this world. Jesus became incarnate in this world. He took the worst that sin and Satan could dish out, and He came out victorious. *His* victory becomes our victory *through* Him, as we'll see later. But before that happens, we still live in a Fallen world. In the chapters to come, we're going to see how that affects our relationship with families, our friends, and even our relationship with God.

The Good News is this: we now know what has happened. We know what mistakes not to make, and we know how to resist. We also know that God, too, has a plan, and it is in motion. Something glorious is around the corner; Creation itself strains its neck to see it. God has a plan to restore Fallen Creation. Things are going to get better—God will see to it. How He does it, and what it means for us and Creation, comes next.

Family Matters

Genesis 4:1 – 8

Several years ago, I was leaving a restaurant with my parents and grandmother. As we were arriving at our car, the couple parked next to us was arriving simultaneously. Our car had an electronic clicker that allowed me to unlock the doors from afar, and the man next to us heard the doors unlocked. Seeing my mother standing at the passenger-side door, this stranger chivalrously opened door for her and announced, “I was raised in the old way.” The gesture would have been far more impressive, though, if he hadn’t left his own wife standing on the other side of his locked car watching him open the door for another woman! From the look on her face, I suspected he was in for a quiet ride home.

Family fights are tricky things. If you get into a knock-down, drag-out fight with a friend, and it does not go well (the friendship ends), it’s a tragedy. But it’s over. Family, though, is family. You get into a fight with family, and they’re still family.

A friend of mine had a misunderstanding with her sister. Christmas was coming, and she was hosting the family dinner at her house; she called family members, asking each to bring a different item for the meal. When she called her sister, she asked, “Why don’t bake 3 or 4 dozen cookies.” It seems like a simple request. The sister, however, showed up Christmas morning seething with bitterness. As she walked through the door, she growled, “Really, I don’t know why you wanted me to bake *thirty-four* dozen cookies.”

Yes, she really had baked 34 *dozen* cookies. If you’re curious about the math, that’s 408 cookies. Here’s what cracks me up about this. You have a picture of this poor woman, slaving away in her kitchen, no doubt cursing her sister as she goes about her task. Just think of the stubbornness and pride that must have encompassed her, to the point that she wouldn’t simply pick up the phone and ask: “Did you really say 34 dozen?” (“No, I said *3 or 4* dozen!”)

Family is tough business—as we’re going to see in this chapter.

Eden

When last we were in Eden, we were actually kicked out of Eden. Adam and Eve sinned, and were banished from God’s garden. Amidst the heartache of that consequence, here is what comes next:

Genesis 4:1 – 2—Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.

Joy reenters the world. Children are born. Cain becomes a farmer, Abel becomes a shepherd. But then we read this:

Genesis 4:3 – 7—In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what

is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

That last sentence is very important: “*Sin is crouching at your door.*” It was Adam and Eve who introduced sin to the world. They had no idea that their actions—their sins—would be carried down to their children. Now, their children are plagued with the consequences of their actions.

Such is the nature of family. Sometimes our sins are carried down to our children. Most abusers and molesters were at some time in their own life abused. Children bear the emotional scars of broken families. Our actions continue to reverberate even to our children. God warns Cain, “Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” In the end, though, it is sin that masters Cain. In the very next verse, Cain kills his brother Abel.

We really aren't given much of an insight into Adam and Eve's reaction to the death of their son, nor their reaction upon learning that the murderer was their other son. Speaking personally, I can only imagine; yet there are those in this world who have experienced the dilemma firsthand. Imagine that the heartbreaking dilemma for Adam and Eve: on the one hand, Cain has killed their son; on the other hand, Cain is now their only surviving child.

Job

Adam and Eve lost a child; last week, Job lost his *children*—seven sons, and three daughters. He has lost all his livestock, and his home. Only his wife is left...and in this case, that's not necessarily a comfort. In Job 2:9, she says to him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!”

I wonder what this sounded like. It's one thing to read it; but how was it spoken? Was it spoken in anger: “You stupid man, curse God and die!” Was it spoken in despair: “You have nothing left—curse God and die!” Was it spoken in broken-hearted pity: “All is lost, you have painful sores from the soles of your feet to the top of your head; PLEASE...curse God and die—end your suffering.” However it is she said it, Job is not impressed:

Job 2:10—He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

On Job's part, we see remarkable character. Yet we see also here a genuine tragedy that happens even today: in a time when husband and wife could have (and should have) turned to each other for comfort, they instead turn away from one another. He has lost almost everything—and what does remain turns not only against him, but tries also to turn him against God. On the one hand, she is his wife—the source of his one remaining comfort; on the other hand, she is counseling him to turn away from God.

Jesus

One would think that, of all the families in the Bible, surely *Jesus'* would have it together! Unfortunately, when we look through Scripture we see that even Christ's relationship with his family was troubled. Take a look at two passages:

John 7:2 – 5—But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus’ brothers said to him, “You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.” For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Mark 3:20 – 21—Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

They didn’t believe in him. Why not? Didn’t they know? Wasn’t Mary told by the angel Gabriel? Didn’t an angel also appear to Joseph? Didn’t wise men from the East come to worship him, bringing gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh? Didn’t shepherds, informed by angels, come to Jesus and glorify His birth? Didn’t Simeon and Anna say incredible things when Jesus was dedicated? What is it like when the people who should know you the best, seem instead to know you the least?

Don’t Give Up Yet

At this point, you begin to wonder if it is time to give up on family. Interestingly, despite all their struggles, none of the people in our three stories are ready to give up on the idea of family. Take a look at Adam and Eve:

Genesis 4:25 – 26—Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord.

“God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” Once again: how to read that comment? Was it said in disgust, anguish, heartache? We really don’t know. What is seen, though, is the hope in that moment: “God has granted me another child.” What we read in Scripture is that through this new child, men begin to call on the name of the Lord.

Furthermore, we look at Cain himself. He is an outcast, but he is still alive. Their older son still lives, a new son now lives. The family continues.

Job 42:11—All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring.

Earlier I suggested Job was left with only his wife; that was not entirely correct. He still had family. He had brothers and sisters. And it is the family who comes to console him. We then read this:

Job 42:12 – 17—The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. Nowhere in all the land were

there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years.

Job again has a family. Now, a new child does not take the place of the one who has died. But it does offer hope. And even though the Scripture does not explicitly say, presumably it was Job's wife who bore these new children. The family has been restored; the family continues.

Acts 1:14—They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

It takes the resurrection of Jesus for His family to finally, fully understand. But they do, and they are there—they are there with that early church. Indeed, Jesus' brother James goes on to become one of the most important leaders in the early Church. Paul tells us Jesus' brothers were traveling evangelists; history tells us they played important roles in the early Church. The family is present; the family continues.

It Can Happen Today, Too

The title of this chapter is "Family Matters." Delivering it as a sermon, I was asked, "Do you mean that like a noun, or a verb?" I said, "Yes." It was meant as both. It was meant as a noun: matters of family. It was also meant as a verb: Family matters—family is important.

Scripture will never try to hide how difficult family can be. But it also will never downplay how important family is. Family in a fallen world is a difficult thing. We quarrel and fight; sometimes we swear up and down we aren't going to talk to each other anymore. But family also brings comfort, and *hope*. It is that note of hope on which this chapter ends.

In the summer of 1995, my family received the call that my grandfather was not doing well. It was important that we come soon, before the end. We did come, and for the first couple days he mustered up his strength for us. On the third day, however, he had no more strength, and we knew the time would be soon. I was a student in college at the time. My grandparents' pastor asked the family to leave the room so that he could have a time of prayer with them; however, because he knew I was studying to be a pastor, he silently directed me to sit in the far corner of the room.

What I saw was an amazing thing. I saw my grandparents, who had been married for over 60 years, say goodbye to each other. Over sixty years of marriage, and only death had done them part.

Nine years later, in the summer of 2004, my grandmother passed away. It had been a very lonely time for her—she missed my grandfather. I used to tease her: "Grandma, do you ever have suitors come knocking at your door?" She said, "Oh yes, I have many gentleman callers—but I tell them I'm a married woman."

At my grandmother's memorial service, her nurse came forward to speak. We had not known she would be coming, and she said she usually didn't. But she thought there was something we should know. On my grandmother's nightstand was a picture of her and my grandfather. On her last night, she took that picture off the nightstand, laid it on her chest, and so passed away.

We've been looking at the struggles that certain families of the Bible have faced, and I don't want to leave you without hope. There is hope for family. God created us to be in family. Family in a fallen world is a difficult thing, but through God's grace and power, family can make it.

With Friends Like These

Ecclesiastes 4:7 – 12

We live in a world originally created good. This includes you and I—we were created, uniquely, in the image and likeness of God. Yet we also live in a world in which things go wrong. The reason for that is a decision that was made long ago, when Adam and Eve, the first humans, chose to rebel against God. That decision introduced sin into the world; and through sin, death and decay. It affects everything around us. It affects our world, our health, and our relationships: relationship with family, which we talked about last chapter; our relationship with God, which we'll talk about next chapter. In this chapter, we see how the Fall affects our relationships with our friends.

The author of Ecclesiastes says life without friends is meaningless:

Ecclesiastes 4:7 – 12—Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. “For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” this too is meaningless—a miserable business! Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

It is better to have someone than to have no one; but what happens when friendship goes wrong in a fallen world? Most, if not all, of us know what it is to have a friendship go sour. This chapter touches on maintaining friendship in a Fallen world, and, more importantly, the ideal of what friendship should be.

Eden

In the Garden of Eden, there was a relationship. The relationship, though, *falls*. That decision to sin had cataclysmic consequences for the world and history. But it also had a very personal consequence for Adam and Eve and their relationship. Before Fall (Genesis 2:25) we read “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” But after the Fall, we read this telling statement:

Genesis 3:7—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.

What do you suppose is happening here? 3:10 offers us further insight, as Adam says to God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” Shame has now entered the world, and it affects relationships to this day. It serves as a barrier to true friendship. We guard ourselves—we hold back—because we're afraid of what might happen if we truly exposed ourselves to our friends.

Besides which, isn't this just what sin is like? When we do things we know we shouldn't do, there's this great anticipation of what it's going to be like. But afterwards, it's never as great as we thought it would be—and we're filled with shame. Two important things, then, need be said about sin:

- It is never as great as we think it will be
- It is never worth the cost or consequence

As we noted in an earlier chapter, there is likewise an issue of motivation. What kind of motivations are we seeing here? It certainly isn't to please God. And in that decision to place their own fleeting desires, they took their eyes *off God* and placed them squarely and solely *on themselves*—and decided that they were more important. This decision hurt them, leading to their fall; and as we saw in the last chapter, it had reverberating consequences for their children as well. Likewise, the reverberations of that original sin still live with us today.

Imagine, though, that Adam and Even had decided God was more important than their desires. What a difference it would have made in their lives, and what a different world we might see today. In a Godly view of friendship, **God comes first—God is the highest priority.**

Job

Job has been going through a very difficult time. He's lost his possessions, and his children. This week, Job's friends enter the picture. Job 2:13 tells us, "Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."

That is great. For seven days and nights, they are silent. They are there to offer the comfort of their presence while Job grieves. Jews today still practice something similar to this, which they call "Sitting Shiva." *Shiva* is the Hebrew word for seven; after a loss, you mourn for seven days. When people come to visit, they wait for you to initiate conversation. If you don't—if *you* don't initiate the conversation—they sit together with you in silence. Sometimes silence is the greatest gift we can give for a grieving friend. Don't offer advice, don't try to fix the problem, don't ruin the moment with useless rhetoric. Just be there.

The problem here is that Job's friends don't stay silent. Job's friends have a certain theology. Their theology says that bad things happen to people who have done something wrong. Their theology, unfortunately, falls short; as we seen, in a Fallen world sometimes bad things happen even to the innocent. Job is one such example.

But they don't see it that way. They don't know what Job is guilty of, but they're certain he must be guilty of *something*. They have a conversation, and it lasts from chapter 3 to chapter 38. Thirty-six chapters of guessing blame, and fruitless defense of innocence. They charge with comments such as this:

Job 4:7 – 8—"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it."

When Job tries to defend himself, this is how they respond:

Job 8:2 – 3—“How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?”

But Job knows he’s innocent. And he tries to tell them, with statements such as 6:24—“Teach me, and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong.” But they don’t believe him. Understandably, Job becomes very frustrated. Perhaps my favorite line is found here:

Job 13:4 – 5—“You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, *that* would be wisdom.”
[emphasis mine]

Job is innocent. *We* know he’s innocent, *Job* knows he’s innocent. But for some reason Job’s friends don’t see it that way.

Do you know what it is when those closest to you don’t trust in you? Now, in their defense, sometimes in a Fallen world our closest friends betray our trust. So it is important to state our next point as follows: in a Godly view of friendship, **a friend is trusting and trustworthy.**

Jesus

We come to Jesus, and we come as he is drawing nearer to the cross. The night before this, he had a “last supper” with his disciples, and there he talked about friendship.

John 15:12 – 15—“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

God has become Incarnate. He has entered the world as one of us, so that He might save us, and redeem this fallen world. That is the *cosmic* scheme of what is going on here. But there is also a very *personal* aspect to what is happening. God loves us—He considers us His friends. Even the Psalmists found it perplexing that the Cosmic Creator of the Universe would take an interest in mankind:

Psalm 8:3 – 4, 144:3—When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him? ...O Lord, what is man that You care for him?

Such is God’s great love for us. Though we have sinned, God does not abandon His relationship with us. God is right now moving us along a path according to His plan. Part of that plan means God goes to the cross on our behalf, in our place. And He has already told us why He is going to do this:

John 15:13—“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

God loves us. He considers us His friends—so much so He is willing to lay down His life for us.

In a Godly view of friendship, **friendship is not centered on self**. The welfare of your friends matters more than your own. Imagine if Adam and Eve had thought that way. Imagine if Job's friends had thought that way. The world might be a very different place. Fortunately, God thinks that way—and because of this, the world will *become* a very different place.

A Sharpening

Let's go back to what God said very early on:

Genesis 2:18a—The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

God knew this from the very beginning. God's created design for us was that we would not be alone. And in God's perfect world, we never would have to be. But we live in a Fallen world.

The author of Ecclesiastes saw this:

Ecclesiastes 4:7 – 12—Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. “For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” this too is meaningless—a miserable business! Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Life is hard when we don't have meaningful relationships. We're meant to be surrounded by one another. That is also one of the purposes of the Church: to provide Fellowship, and help each of us sustain ourselves during difficult times. Our Fellowship and Companionship also helps one other grow.

Scott and I have been friends now since high school. We attended college together, and for a time were roommates. We both became Pastors. But as happens in life, God sent him to one place, and me to another. Our friendship, though, continued strongly, and we would e-mail each other. Indeed, before the days of chat rooms and text-messaging we were essentially effecting the same thing through e-mail.

We'd often write each other on Saturday nights, and talk about our Sunday messages, and on one such night Scott wrote, “I'm talking about accountability. Does anything come to mind?” This is what we'd do—we'd bat ideas back and forth. So, I responded: “I'm using Proverbs 27:17.” Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

Scott liked that, thought he might use it himself, and went to it for awhile. But a bit later he wrote again, “I'm trying to get a feel for this Proverbs verse. What do you think of? We sharpen each other. How?” It was a good question, one that would come to define our friend. I responded, “I think we sharpen each other through dialogue—by talking. We bring up different ideas. We share our faith with each other.” This went on for a time until Scott wrote: “You realize what's happening—we're sharpening each other, right now.”

I still have those e-mails.

Such is the nature of having a Godly friend. It's a tragedy that friendship takes a hit in this Fallen world, and some of you may know what that's like—to have had a friendship that went awry. But there is still hope for friendship. Consider if that is something you would like in your life. Consider a friendship where God comes first. A friendship that is trusting, and trustworthy. A friendship that is focused on something other—something higher—than self. The idea seems attractive, pursue it. Choose Godly friends, and be sharpened in Godly ways.

Silence of the Lamb

Psalm 22

Several years ago, both in keeping with a sermon subject and out of curiosity, I hid in the Sanctuary sound booth just as Communion was coming to an end, and the sermon was scheduled to begin. I wanted to see how people would react to my absence, and they did not disappoint. There was the initial turning of heads, as people turned to see where I was. One young lady jumped out of her seat and sprinted back to the church office, thinking I might have gone in there. My parents, too, happened to be among the Congregation, and my mother slapped by father's side and said, "He's not up there!" "What do you expect me to do about it," my father responded. Eventually I revealed myself.

Most (if not all) assumed something had gone wrong, and I've found that to be common. We often take silence as a sign that something's gone *wrong*. We're uncomfortable with silence, which is interesting. Physically—naturally—silence is the *easier* condition: it takes more energy to produce noise than to remain silent. So you would think silence would be the more natural, comfortable state of being—but it's not. We've gotten to the point where, to have silence, we have to *plan* silence—we have to make silence an event. To commemorate someone, we have a moment of silence. In Church, we have to announce a moment of silence. If that announcement isn't made—if there's no event—then we're uncomfortable with it, because we think that something's gone wrong. If there's no announcement of silence—if there's no event with which to herald the silence—our first assumption is that the silence is a signal of something having gone wrong.

At the same time, sometimes we take silence as a sign of affirmation. "If I don't hear back from you, I'll assume..." Or, when an accusation is made, if the accused stays silent we take it as a sign of guilt: "If he's not guilty, he would have said something!" This is what we call a loaded silence—which really should be a contradiction in terms. The definition of silence is absence of sound; it doesn't make sense to say that there is a *loaded* silence, because silence is empty! What that means is this: if the silence is indeed loaded, it is loaded only with what we have brought into it. What do we put into it?

I've already mentioned two things: silence as the mark of something wrong, and silence as an affirmation of our suspicions. If those are assumptions—and those assumptions are not always correct—what does it mean (assumptions aside) when *God* is silent?

Silence

First of all, it happens. Isaiah 42:14a reads, "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held Myself back." Likewise we read in 1 Samuel 31b, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." There are times when God is silent. It need not be, necessarily, a reflection of something having gone wrong.

There's an interesting story in the Bible in which God calls Gideon. Gideon is discouraged, saying:

Judges 6:13—"If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

There are two interesting things about this passage. The first is God's response:

Judges 6:14—The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

Did you catch the irony? Gideon is complaining about God's silence *while* God is trying to talk to him! The other interesting thing is the comment Gideon makes about the "wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?'" He's speaking here of the great days of the Exodus. The funny thing is, though, that the people who were actually involved in the great days of the Exodus didn't think they were so great!

Take a look at what the people in Exodus say. They're in the midst of God's miracles—they're seeing miracles left and right. But the minute something goes wrong, they cry out:

Exodus 14:11 – 12—"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Moses, in response, gives a very eloquent speech. "Don't be afraid, stand firm, and you will see the deliverance of the Lord, the Lord will fight for you, don't worry," and such. It's very pastoral. But then God steps in and says this:

Exodus 14:15—Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to move on."

Move on! Quit complaining, and *move on!* Gideon laments he doesn't see the great works like the Exodus, and yet the people of the Exodus sounded an awful lot like Gideon—why isn't God doing anything?

There were other times people were concerned about God's silence. But God tries to reassure those concerns

Isaiah 59:21b—"My Spirit, who is on you, and My words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the Lord.

He tells us that His Spirit will not leave us. You'd think they would have learned when they were leaving Egypt: God doesn't leave us. It might *seem* so, especially during difficult times. But God has shown us, through promise and example, that He does not leave us. What does this tell us about moments of silence? God isn't gone—we just may not recognize His presence.

Eden

Let's return to Adam and Eve. Genesis begins with God's good Creation. Everything was created good, including us. We were created good, in the image and likeness of God. Adam

and Eve were created good, but they fell. That's the answer to the question we've been asking: if creation was good, what happened? What went wrong?

The Fall happened. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and disobeyed God's command. That decision introduced sin into the world, and the introduction of sin into this world has had all manner of consequences. Death has come into the world, and we have to contend with that every day. Disease and hardship wrack our lives. It has affected our relationship with family and friends, and it has affected our relationship with God. A chasm has formed between us and God, and one of the effects of that chasm is that we begin to experience silence from God.

Genesis describes God as walking among Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden before the Fall:

Genesis 3:8a—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...

They knew what it was like to live in the presence of God. But now something has gone wrong. We touched on this briefly in the last chapter: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25). And yet, after the Fall, we read this:

Genesis 3:8b – 10—They hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

Sin has introduced shame to the world. Mankind hides from God. And because of sin, God must now separate Himself from Man. The relationship with God has changed.

This tells us that sometimes times of silence are an unfortunate consequence of living in a Fallen world. Our sin separates us from God, and we feel that separation. And the same time, though, sometimes *we* are the ones who are hiding. It's not that God has left us; rather, we have left God.

Job

We come to Job, and in his book, God is silent for 35 chapters. Unfortunately, just because *God* is silent doesn't mean Job is surrounded by silence. Job's friends are more than happy to drone on. But Job has a problem even more grievous than talkative friends: things are happening to Job, and he doesn't know why. So, he begins to call on God, demanding an answer. "I'm innocent!" he cries out. "I don't deserve this, and I want to know why this has happened!" Well, after 35 chapters of silence, God speaks up. And suddenly Job wishes they could go back to the silence.

Job has demanded that God provide him answers. Before God does so, He starts asking Job questions of His own. God asks Job 70 questions, and you quickly realize they're all rhetorical. I don't know if it's amusing or disturbing to see God employ sarcasm: "Brace yourself like a man—now *I'll* ask the questions, and *you* give the answers. Where were you when I created the Earth? When I set the dimensions, and laid the foundation? When I created a boundary for the sea—when I said, 'You can come here, and no farther—your proud waves halt

here'? Where do I store light? Where do I store snow? Where do I store thunder? No, no, no—you tell Me...because *surely* you know!"

Finally, Job answers. And does so very humbly:

Job 42:3—"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."

In times of silence, we must remember: we aren't meant to know everything. For as frustrating as that is, we aren't meant to know everything.

Jesus

What about Jesus? We're discussing silence; did Jesus, the Son of God—God Incarnate, God literally in the flesh—ever experience times of silence? There is scene in *The Passion of the Christ*—one so quick you might miss it—in which Jesus is walking through Jerusalem, carrying the cross. He has a sudden flashback to the Triumphal Entry; people are cheering him, laying down palms as He rides into Jerusalem. Just as suddenly it goes back to the cross; he struggles with each step, and people are now jeering him as he goes. One wonders if, in his humanity, at that very moment Jesus asked the same question we've been asking: "What went wrong? How did it come to this?" Presumably not; in his divinity he knew this day was coming, and spoke of it beforehand. But did Jesus experience times of silence? The answer, which may surprise some, seems to be "Yes."

There are at least two examples, and they are both grave examples. The first is in the garden the night of His betrayal, the night before he goes to the cross:

Matthew 26:39, 42, 44—Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as You will..." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may Your will be done..." So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Three times Jesus prays, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me." Essentially what he's asking is that God set aside the entire purpose of him coming. His humanity is almost overpowering here. But there is no response recorded in the Scriptures. It may be that he received a response, but no one wrote it down. But I tend to think the reason he received no response is because he already knew the answer; certainly, this happens with us. As such it reminds us that during times of silence, we may already know the answer.

The other, most serious, example in particular occurs when Jesus is on the cross itself:

Matthew 27:46—About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

He's on the cross. He's been beaten, tortured, and ridiculed; he's been hanging on the Cross for three hours. He cries out, "God, why have You forsaken me?" At a time when Jesus needs God the most—God is silent.

What is happening here? How is it—why is it—that God has now separated Himself from His Son? There are two things for us to realize at this moment. When Jesus came into this world, he lived a sinless life. He went to the cross an innocent man. But on that cross he takes *our* sins upon himself, so that our sins will die with him on that cross. There is a terrible affect to this, though. God’s Son has now taken the entirety of humanity’s sins upon his shoulders; and in this moment, God the Father must look away.

Isaiah 1:18a says, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” In order for that to happen, though, Jesus—who was already white as snow—must now become blackened with our sins. And God the Father can no longer look upon him.

This is the price of our salvation. Sin has entered the world. Only one Man can save us. The way to do that, though, is for Jesus to take on our sin; and in doing so, also take on our separation from God. William Hendriksen puts it this way:

“The darkness meant judgment, the judgment of God upon our sins, his wrath as it were burning itself out in the very heart of Jesus, so that he, as our Substitute, suffered most intense agony, indescribable woe, terrible isolation or forsakenness. Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Savior descended into it and bore its horrors in our stead.”

This is the price of our salvation: in order to reconcile us to God, Jesus must suffer momentary separation from God. But notice the caveat: *momentary* separation. Let’s look deeper at what Jesus says:

Matthew 27:46—About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”

That very same phrase is found in Psalm 22:

Psalm 22:1, 7 – 8, 16 – 18—My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: “He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.” A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

These words describe Jesus. Here is a Psalm, written a thousand years before Jesus became incarnate, prophesying what he would go through. And Jesus turns to this Psalm while he is on the cross. But Psalm 22 says other things as well:

Psalm 22:4 – 5, 24—In You our fathers put their trust; they trusted and You delivered them. They cried to You and *were saved*; in You they trusted and were *not disappointed*...For He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; He has not hidden His face from him but has listened to his cry for help. [emphasis mine]

There is hope to be found in this Psalm. Do you suppose Jesus knew this? In his moment of greatest despair, he calls upon a Psalm that mirrors his agony—but also mirrors his hope. He is

momentarily separated from God, but he knows it will not last forever. Jesus knows his relationship with God will survive this time of silence.

What does it mean for us to affirm the presence of God in our lives—even during times when He is silent? The Christian music industry has slowly begun to explore this. Matt Redman’s song, “Blessed Be the Name of the Lord,” says:

“Blessed be Your name when the sun’s shining down on me;
When the world’s all as it should be, blessed be Your name
Blessed be Your name on the road marked with suffering;
Though there’s pain in the offering, blessed be Your name”

Jeremy Camp, who lost his first wife at the age of 21, writes: “Scattered words and empty thoughts seem to pour from my heart; I’ve never felt so torn before...I still believe in Your faithfulness; I still believe in Your truth; I still believe in your holy word. Even when I don’t see, I still believe.”

It takes a strong faith to live like that. It is a faith mirrored in Scripture, in books such as Lamentations, and the Lament Psalms. These special Psalms comprise, by some counts, more than half of the collected Psalms. They were written by men crying out in their despair—admitting to God their doubts and frustrations, and pleading with Him to take action.

The remarkable thing

In times of silence, we remember there is hope. Don’t lose heart. Even in moments of despair, there is hope.

The Sound of Silence

None of this is to say that it isn’t frustrating—that times of silence from God aren’t frustrating. The Apostle Paul himself had a similar experience, which he records:

2 Corinthians 12:7 – 10—To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. The Lord said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

There was a purpose to Paul not receiving the answer he wanted; furthermore, the experience served to strengthen his faith.

There is a paradox to God’s silence. During times of silence, we are forced to rely not on what is tangible—because the tangible is not there. Instead, we rely purely and completely on faith. Which means during times of silence, we *exercise* our faith. Now, a body is strengthened by exercise. So if we apply that to our faith, then our faith is strengthened during these times. If we’re relying on faith—well, that means we’re closer to God, doesn’t it? That’s the paradox: in those times of *silence* from God, we’ve never been *closer* to God.

This principle is perhaps best seen in the classic poem, "Footprints in the Sand." The poem itself has something of an ironic history, in that the author was for several years "silently" accredited as "Anonymous." Several names are currently passed around as candidates, and we will not debate the merits here. We simply reprint it.

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,
other times there were one set of footprints.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life,
when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat,
I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord,
that if I followed you, you would walk with me always.
But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life
there have only been one set of footprints in the sand.
Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand,
is when I carried you."

...and will be Again

Romans 8:18 – 28

We live in a fallen world. These writings began by asking a question. Genesis tells us that when God created the world, His assessment was, “It is good.” Yet we look around the world, and we see things that aren’t good. The question we ask, then, is “What went wrong?”

The answer is the Fall. When Adam and Even rebelled against God, they were fooled them into thinking that what they were about to do was a little thing. But that little thing had enormous, cosmic consequences. It served to separate humanity from God. If you’ve ever wondered why we die, why our hearts ache, why our own bodies turn against us, why the innocent suffer, why things go wrong—it all begins at that Fall. Our ongoing sin does the same.

It hurts all of Creation, and it hurts us. It hurts our relationships with friends, family, and with God. But we remember:

Romans 8:28—And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

God has not abandoned us. God has intervened, and is moving us along a path according to His plan. In this chapter, we look at that plan.

The “Everyman”

Let’s look first at Job. We’ve been exploring three different stories. Eden is the Fall. Jesus is God’s plan for redemption. But Job is us. Job is the “every man” in this series. Satan throws Job the worst he has to offer, and maybe some of us feel like we can relate to what Job went through: friends, or even a spouse, turning against you. Lose of property or financial security. Lose of a family member (or members). And for a moment, it even feels like God has turned against him. But Job takes everything Satan throws at him.

There’s nothing supernatural in Job’s perseverance. What Job has is the same thing available to each one of us: a convicting faith that in the end, God is in control. No matter all the hardship he’s gone through, the one thing Satan can’t take away from him is his faith. That faith sees him through the darkest moments in his life. In the end, he is vindicated.

It is a bittersweet ending, though:

Job 42:12 – 17—The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters...Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years.

Here’s what Job gains. He persevered through greatest hardship, and survived. He had been surrounded by people who told him he must have somehow failed in his relationship with God; but then God stepped forward and vindicated Job. God restores to Job the things he had lost.

That sounds great, but there are still scars. These are new children; it doesn't seem that God has resurrected the children who died earlier. Those children are still lost to him. Many of us know this firsthand—that when you suffered loss, a rebound doesn't always take away the hurt of what was lost. So there's still something bittersweet here.

Even though the story of Job precedes the Incarnation of Christ, there's a principle that still holds true for us as Christians: a relationship with Christ does not exempt us from the effects of a still-Fallen world. We're still going to have difficulties in this world. Jesus himself said this:

John 16:33—"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We still experience present sufferings—but we have a future hope.

A Coming Hope

The Apostle Paul writes about this future hope:

Romans 8:18—I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

How is it that we who have Christ still suffer? Paul begins his answer to that question pointing out that though we have present sufferings, they do not even compare to a coming glory that will be revealed. He continues:

Romans 8:19 – 21—The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The Fall has not just affected us—creation itself has been affected by the Fall. It is now held in bondage to decay. And Creation itself eagerly awaits for God's full plan to be unveiled:

Romans 8:22—We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Creation groans—but notice *how* it groans. It groans as though in childbirth. Natural childbirth is painful, but it is pain that leads to something good. Creation groans—but what is it groaning to? The NIV translates the phrase in v. 19 as "Eager Expectation." The term literally means, "Stretch the head." Creation is craning its neck, eagerly expecting something to happen.

Romans 8:23 – 25—Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

We too wait for God to put right what once went wrong. We wait much the same way a person waits before a show in the theater: the curtains are drawn, but when those curtains open we sit up and crane our necks to see what is going to be revealed. We wait for God to pull back the curtain, and reveal the coming glory: reveal His plan for restoring this fallen world. And while we wait for this—while we wait in hope—we do not wait alone.

Romans 8:26 – 28—In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

This is the great hope of our faith. And just a few verses later, we read:

Romans 8:31 – 32—What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

“He who did not spare His own Son.” God is on our side. And if you want to know how far He’ll go to bring us back to Him, all we need to do is look at Jesus. God held nothing back to rescue and redeem us from a Fallen world. God sent His Son, Jesus, to offer us a new chance at life. His Son died, and was then Resurrected; and His Resurrection initiates a chain of events that is still in progress.

The Resurrection

Jesus’ Resurrection means that our sins can be forgiven. Our relationship with God, fractured through the Fall and our continued sins, can now be restored. But it also means that everything in Romans 8 leading up to this is going to happen as well. Creation itself now knows that full restoration could come at any moment. It groans because it is still Fallen—but it groans like someone who is in labor. It groans as it waits for something new and restored to come about. What will that restoration look like?

Go back with me for a moment to the beginning. Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil:

Genesis 3:22 – 23—“He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

There was another tree in that Garden—the Tree of Life. After the Fall, they are not allowed access to it. That’s in Genesis. In Revelation, though, we find the following:

Revelation 22:1 – 5—Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great

street of the city. On each side of the river stood the Tree of Life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 21:1 – 7—Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be My child.

It’s beautiful. Everything comes full circle. What was once denied is now freely offered. The separation between humanity and God is now healed. As part of that, we will receive new bodies:

1 Corinthians 15:42 – 43—So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.

These will be different bodies than we have now. These will be bodies that are *not* susceptible to disease, cancer, or death; perfect bodies made possible through Christ’s redemption. Everything that has gone wrong will be put right. In the meantime, as we wait for this restoration, we remember this:

Romans 8:34—Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

We have a *future* hope—but also a *present* salvation.

An Answer to the Question

We began this series asking, “What happened?” If, in the beginning, God looked around and said, “It is very good,” what in the world went wrong? I genuinely believe that we have the best answer to that question—the best answer in the world. And also the best hope.

We began by asking “What went wrong?” But we also said, “Life is going to get better—God will see to it.” And now we know how. Now we see that God is working towards restoring this Fallen world. This here is not the way life is meant to be. Life will get better. We are a part of God’s creation. When God created it, it was good—and it will be again.

Be sure to remember that in those dark days of the soul. Remember that even when this Fallen world steps in, and tries to make you forget. It was not always like this. It will not always be like this. We have a Savior at God’s right hand, interceding on our behalf.

What does all this mean for us? First of all, we will be a part of this. The grand, cosmic events we just saw—we will be a part of that. But there’s a far more personal hope as well. If God can pull all of this off, don’t you think He can handle the problems in your life as well? God held nothing back to offer you a chance at a new life. This is the God who can fix the universe; He can fix you too.

Romans 8:28—And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Anything that has gone wrong in your life, that’s getting you down: God is big enough that not only can He handle it—He can turn it around. Once upon a time it was good, and it will be again. God’s going to see to it.