

What's gone wrong? (Genesis 3:1-24)

When we look at our world we see amazing acts of bravery, courage, kindness and compassion. Yet we also see much evil and wickedness. What's gone wrong with the world? How does the Bible explain the complex mix of good and evil in humanity?

What's gone wrong?

Do you agree that there is something wrong with the world?

Surely much in our present news points to the evils in our world caused by human beings. The focus on the climate crisis reminds us that human greed and a lack of concern for God's world is in danger of leading to devastating climate change. Most people believe something has gone wrong.

When our government tried to overturn the conclusion of an investigation that concluded that MP Owen Patterson had breached lobbying rules, there was a national outcry. This is not right! People could see that something had gone seriously wrong with our governments judgement.

Yet, the problems of our world are not the thought of Boris Johnson or the Industrial Revolution. These may be things that are going wrong in our lifetime, but there were just as serious things wrong in previous generations.

Just think of the terrible wars of the early Twentieth Century, that we will remember next Sunday, where millions lost their lives and the sheer wickedness of the Holocaust under the Nazis in Germany.

Throughout the history of humanity there has been atrocity, selfishness, greed and evil.

And it is not just the big picture, in our own lives and own relationships we can probably quite easily think of wickedness, abuse, mistreatment and unfaithfulness by people we know and if we are honest with ourselves we are probably ashamed of some of our own behaviours and attitudes as well.

We have a deep sense that something is wrong with human beings, that something is wrong with us.

And yet there is much about humans that is wonderful and amazing. Deep acts of charity, compassion and care. Love for others and acts of sacrifice and generosity. Humanity it seems is capable of great good, but also incredible evil. What can explain such a complex situation? What has gone wrong?

If you reject the idea of God and believe that evolution or science is the only explanation for the way we are, then I wonder whether the question even has meaning? If our nature is merely a result of evolutionary forces of biology and culture, then how can we say that one way of living is any more right than another? How can we say something has gone wrong? Isn't evil wickedness and selfishness just a result of the way we have evolved? And if that is the case, what hope is there for us?

In the ancient world some societies created myths to explain why things were the way they were. One myth called the *Enuma Elis* said that man was made out of mud and the blood of a fallen god. In other words, man was by nature wicked as the fallen god was wicked right from the start! What's gone wrong? Well the way we were created in the start has gone wrong! Again, if that is the case what ultimate hope can we have to escape evil?

The opening chapters of the Bible, however, give a fundamentally different view of the world. It is one that shows that something has indeed gone wrong in the past, wickedness and evil is not the way we are meant to be, but a corruption of God's creation.

Yet, there are also hints of hope. If evil is a corruption of God's original design, then there is the possibility of transformation to something better... But before we get there, how are we to understand the past?

Understanding the Past

Reading Genesis 3:

Before we look at how Genesis 3 helps us make sense of how evil comes into our world, we are faced with a question. Is what we are reading meant to be taken as a literal description of a historical event or is it like *Enuma Elis* a myth - a made up story to give an explanation of the way things are.

Looking at the early chapters themselves seems to suggest both are true! There are certainly elements of myth - for example a talking snake! Yet, Genesis as a book does something that other ancient myths don't do. It links the story in with the rest of history. The Genealogy in chapter 5, provides a historical connection between Adam and Noah and the end of the chapter 11, gives a genealogy from Noah to Abraham, who is clearly presented as a historical person.

So how should we read these first chapters of Genesis? I think we should see them as historical events presented in mythical language. Perhaps a good example is Jesus's parable of the tenants of the Vineyard. Jesus tells a story, which is clearly not literal history, it is a story about a landowner and tenants. The tenants refuse to pay the rent for the vineyard. They abuse the messengers sent by the owner and eventually kill his son. This in one sense is a made up story, but it explains and helps us understand historic events - especially the death of Jesus himself. In the same way the early chapters of Genesis may not be designed to be read as literal history, like the story of Abraham or David, but they are meant to explain actual historic events about a first human being, Adam and his wife Eve.

So, how does this explanation of a historic event help us to answer the question: 'What has gone wrong?'

Firstly, and radically, it separates off humanity's evil from its original creation. In chapter 1, God creates man and woman in his image and says about all that he has created that 'It was very good.' God's design for humanity is fundamentally good and involves no hint of evil or wickedness. This is the way we are meant to be and why when we see evil and wickedness in the world and in ourselves we know instinctively and spiritually that something has gone wrong.

Secondly, it shows us that wickedness and evil entered the world through human choice not by God's design.

The choice is actually highlighted in chapter 2. In the Garden of Eden, where God puts Adam and Eve there are lots of trees. They are free to eat the fruit from all the trees. But two trees are highlighted. In verse 9, we are told that in the middle of the garden was the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Chapter 3:22 shows us that the tree of life was the means by which Adam and Eve could have eternal life. When they are cast out of the garden, they lose access to the tree of life and so they will eventually die.

The other tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is the one tree they are told not to eat from. God gives a clear warning in 2:17. If they eat from this tree they will die. Yet, in chapter 3, we are also told that to eat from this tree in some way makes humanity more like God. Perhaps this tree stands for the decision by humanity to take over God's role and make themselves the ones who decide what is right and wrong.

So, this is the essential choice they faced eternal life or the freedom to choose what they think is right and wrong as though they themselves are gods. The tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So why did they choose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

i. They followed the lead of a creature not the Creator

Eve listened to what the Serpent said. She was willing to do what he said rather than stick with God's warnings and commands.

In the same way Adam followed Eve's lead, rather than insisting on sticking with God's command.

In a sense they allowed the word of the creature to have priority in their thinking over the word of God.

Following the wrong word is at the root of sin.

ii. They accepted a wrong view of God

We are told at the start that the serpent was cunning. In other words we are to see that his words were designed to manipulate and confuse. Jesus later calls, Satan the Father of lies.

Here his focus is to suggest lies about God. Rather than seeing God as the generous one who had given them all the trees in the garden to eat from except one, he presents God as a restrictive master, who won't let them eat from any tree.

When the woman corrects the snake on this, he then tells half-truths about God's motives. They won't die, he says, God just wants to stop you becoming like him. Again he is making God out as a miser, when the truth is that God has blessed them with every good thing, they just need to accept that they themselves are not God and keep him as their God.

Failure to be grateful to God is the root of sin.

iii. They coveted what wasn't rightfully theirs

Then finally in verse 6, the woman looks at the fruit and desires what it can give her, even though what it can give her belongs rightfully to God alone. The word for 'desirable' in 3:7, is the word used for Covet in the tenth commandment.

Focussing on wrong desires is the root of sin.

What was the result of this wrong choice?

The promise seemed to be that they would become like God.

Yet, what happens is a total anti-climax! They become ashamed of their nakedness and try to sow leaves together to cover themselves!

But, worse than this their choice to reject God's place in their lives led to a fracturing of all their relationships.

Firstly, their relationship with God is seriously damaged. Rather than walking with him in the garden, they are ashamed to come before him and

The relationship between the man and the woman was corrupted so that it tended towards subjugation of the woman by the man rather than partnership.

Her role as child-bearer became one linked with pain and suffering.

The man's role as gardener of the land also became one linked with painful toil. This in itself is a glimpse of the problems now writ large by the climate change crisis.

Ultimately, in turning against the one who made him from earth and breathed life into him, he would ultimately become nothing more than the soil again. When we cut God out of our lives, then our existence becomes meaningless, we become nothing more than a temporary collection of dust.

All of these fractured relationships are what we still see in our world today.

Hope for the Future

Genesis 3 appears initially to be a story of utter disaster and in many ways it is. Yet, there are also hints of hope.

Where the man and woman could not cover over their shame, God provides cover for them. Where the serpent seems to get his way, God provides a promise that ultimately the woman's children will win the day.

Indeed, many have seen in the promise of Genesis 3:15 the first prophecy of Jesus's coming. It is not Adam's child that will defeat Satan, but the woman's. This perhaps hints at the virgin birth of Jesus and his bringing of a new humanity not corrupted by Adam's sin.

The striking of the head by Satan is perhaps a picture of Jesus's death on the cross, as he takes on the full force of God's anger at humanity's evil. Whilst the crushing of his head is a symbol of the cross as a victory of obedience to God despite the temptations of Satan. An obedience confirmed by Jesus's resurrection to be a new humanity that does indeed live forever more.

The overall message of the Bible is that God created man not for evil, but to be truly his children. Adam chose to reject God's plan and evil came as a result. That's what has gone wrong.

Yet, Jesus comes as a new Adam and offers us a way back to God's original plan. A way back to the tree of life, a way back to a proper relationship with God and a proper relationship with one another and the world we live in.

Challenging for the Present

That understanding of the past and hope for the future leaves us with a challenge in the present.

Will we accept Jesus as God's way to put things right, to bring us back to himself. Will we choose life by accepting God's rightful place to direct our lives or will we continue to reject God?

If we do choose Jesus, then unlike Adam and Eve we will want to:

- Give God's word the priority over all others.
- Have an attitude of gratitude to God for all he has done for us
- And learn contentment with what he has given us, not longing for what is not rightfully ours.

The more we do that, the more we will find:

- Joy in parenting.
- Marriages of joyful partnership
- And an improved relationship with our environment
- And ultimately access to the tree of life.

What choice will you make?