

Image Distorted

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 October 2023

Preacher: Mark Stirling

[0:00] Okay, here we go. Do you know when you're reading, how do you feel? Let me just ask you, how do you feel when you hear that Genesis 3 account being read?

It's worth thinking about that, though, just reflecting on that. How does that make you feel? Because there's something about that account, it's just absurd, isn't it? Why? Why did you do it?

And there's something about the way that the Bible speaks about sin that confronts us with that unanswered why question.

We're left thinking, this makes no sense. It's absurd. It's anti-rational in every possible way. And there's something about that in this account in Genesis 3.

It's hugely explanatory of so much of what we experience in this world, of course. And that's why we're going to spend a little bit of time on it and just unpack it a little bit further.

[1:04] What we want to do is just talk a bit about the text and some of the features of sin and what it is and what it does. Look at the extent of it. Think a little bit about why the extent of it, and talking about that actually paradoxically is good news.

And then think a little bit about some of the cultural factors in this cultural moment that take aspects of this sin, this problem, and amplify it so that we can begin to relate that to this moment that we're living in.

I mean, it doesn't take a genius. Yes, these are just a bunch of photos of ugliness, really. It really doesn't take much of a genius to say that things are not the way that they're supposed to be.

How else do we talk about stuff that goes on in the world? I think about Only a Stone's Throw from Here was where I did one of my first ever funerals.

Preached at a funeral for very dear friends of mine whose daughter had been born at 26 weeks and only lasted a matter of a couple of hours after birth.

[2:24] What do you say in those circumstances? Tough? It's always been like this? These things happen? Because they do, right?

It has pretty much always been like this. These things do happen. Get over it. I wouldn't recommend that as a preaching strategy or a pastoral strategy in those kind of situations.

Really, the only thing I could say, and it was taking that passage from Revelation 21, was this is not the way it's supposed to be. It wasn't meant to be like this.

It wasn't created to be like this, as broken as this. And therefore, the way that we feel about it, the anger that we feel, the indignation at the wrong, the sorrow, the lamenting, the howling grief, is right and proper.

It's a proportionate, proper, right response to things being broken. And you know, that response that we have makes no sense if things have always just been this way.

[3:39] This is one of the reasons that, in fact, the problem of suffering or the problem of evil is much more of a problem for the atheist than it is for the Christian.

Intellectually, it's really hard to give an account of why we should have a problem with it if there is no absolute outside of ourselves, if there is no way it's supposed to be.

Where on earth does that come from? Otherwise, it's just, has always been like this. Suffering is nature, red and tooth and claw, so why should we have a problem with it? We have a problem with it because it's not the way it's supposed to be.

It's marred. It's twisted out of shape. It's, and this is to use Augustine's picture, it is humankind curved in upon itself.

Think about that as a way of thinking about what sin is, just for a second or two. I'm going to focus very much on the concept here of autonomy. Autonomy, a word that's used frequently in our cultural context, but *autonomos*, self-law.

[4:51] You know, we decide ourselves. We're in charge ourselves. So the key concept I want us to get a hold of, and it's almost certainly where we're going to go tomorrow in the morning, is that at the heart of the way that the Bible's seeing this, is that if you like, life is intended to have God himself on the throne and ruling, and us on his behalf reflecting that good reign and rule to those around about us.

And that this gets disordered when we throw God off, when we push him aside, and when we push him aside and take his place on that seat, on that throne instead, this autonomy, this, as Augustine then said, self-curved in upon self.

Instead of loving God and loving others, we curve in instead. That idea then of autonomy, of this thrusting of God aside, and the putting of ourselves in place, is exactly what we're seeing in this account in Genesis.

The temptation to the woman, it starts with what? Did God really say? Question about his word. How, by the way, was Eve to know what God had said? If you read through the, we didn't read it this morning, but if you read through Genesis 2, you'll see Adam created first, and God's mandate, God's instructions to Adam about where he's not to eat are given before Eve is created in that account in Genesis 2.

[6:36] So how's she meant to know what she can and can't eat? Because Adam's meant to tell her, right? And so if she gets it wrong, at least in part, we can ask whose fault is that?

And where is Adam, by the way, when she's being tempted? Did you notice that as we read that? It's right there with her. Right there with her.

Like a big numpty saying nothing, if you like. It's fascinating. But the temptation, did God say a doubt about God's goodness? Is God really good?

Can you really trust him? As one of the Puritan authors said, that in every sin, there is atheism. In every sin, there is a doubt about God and his goodness.

And really, that's the case. It's a question. Is he good enough that I can trust? But the temptation goes beyond that for Eve. It goes beyond that to, if you eat this, you will be like God.

[7:44] Fundamentally, we see in Genesis 3 a rejection of creatureliness, a rejection of our place in creation as creatures under the Creator, given a place and a task, a mandate, a glorious gift of life as creatures.

And the temptation, no, no, no, you can be like God. A rejection of creatureliness. Now, we might say, given the creation account that we've just read earlier on, that when we reject creatureliness, we shouldn't expect things to go well.

And indeed, they don't. They really don't. I wonder if there's been a cultural moment when creatureliness has been more rejected at a cultural, at a societal level than it is being right now. You know, when we have, for example, just to take one controversial example, primary school kids being told how you feel about yourself inside, that, well, you know yourself best, that defines reality. And whatever you feel about that, that's true. But there's a rejection of the givenness of creatureliness, that there's things we don't get to decide because we're creatures, not the creator.

[9:17] So, this account then is hugely explanatory of so much of what we then see in our life and in our culture right now.

There is a rebellion in Genesis 3. It is rooted in a doubt of God's goodness. If we don't believe that God is good, why on earth would we want to obey Him?

Why would we want to be in that position? I mean, you know, obedience that is just sort of a white-knuckle determination to do it right because I'm scared of the consequences. Augustine had something fascinating to say about that.

He said, obedience to the law that is rooted in fear of punishment is not obedience at all, he said, because it's done in a spirit of servitude instead of a spirit of sonship.

You're doing it like a slave instead of a child. And the reason that's important is the idea we introduced in the last session that the human mandate is to represent the character of God.

[10:24] When you see, and this is the mandate then for the church, the vocation of the church is then to present to the world who God is and what He's like.

And if our obedience is out of a spirit of servitude, of slavery, we are saying our master is a slave driver instead of saying we are loved children and our master is the loving Father.

so that how we then relate to Him, whether we believe His goodness or not, to be captured by the goodness of God, there is nothing more important we could say.

We see the curses, the effects of sin in that account that we read. I want to say one thing about one of the bits of translation there where it speaks of the curse on the woman.

Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you. It's a fascinating little bit there because the Hebrew term for your desire for your husband only occurs one other place in the whole of the Hebrew Bible and that's in Genesis 4 and it's about sin crouching at the door desiring to master you.

[11:36] In other words, I think, I think, maybe a better way of that, it's not, in other words, it's not a text about sexual desire. it's a text about somehow the relationships between the sexes being broken and being competitive where they're not meant to be competitive.

I think that's something of what's going on there. But everything is spoiled. Work is spoiled. Labor is spoiled. Everything is frustrated and the whole of creation is affected by it.

we're designed for that intimate presence with God doing meaningful work and yet, how does it feel for most of us most of the time?

We could say that what happens in that account in Genesis 3 is a fourfold disruption of relationship. And I'm just going to put them all out there so you can see them all at once.

First of all, and obviously, there is a disruption of relationship with God himself. I mean, that's obvious because the first thing they do, having wanted to know as God knows, and by the way, just as a little aside, a little sort of philosophical aside, we don't know as God knows.

[12:58] We know as creatures to whom God reveals. And that, by the way, is just huge implications for how we think about knowledge and some of the ways in which we've gone wrong in society.

If anyone's talked about that later, delighted to do so. But that relationship with God is broken, is disrupted. The first thing they do is to hide from God in the garden when he comes to walk with them in the garden.

But to hide from God and then to hide from each other, to cover up, because the end of Genesis 2 says that the man and the woman were naked and had no shame.

It's a beautiful picture. Absolutely beautiful picture. And, of course, it's not just the idea of physical nakedness.

It's the idea of relationship in which there is no shame. Think about this for a second as a slight aside, but I think it's important. Where do you look when you feel ashamed?

[14:00] Where do your eyes go? Down. Right. You look down. Okay. The Hebrew expression, and this is fascinating, and it relates to the story I told at the beginning.

My last conversation with my father just five days before he died in a plane crash. It's another story. I wrestled with him to get him to look me in the eye so that I could bless him and tell him that I loved him and I was proud of him.

And finally, it's like, look me in the eye. It was a real wrestle and my mother was getting nervous in the background. Look me in the eye. You need to hear this. I am unreservedly proud of you.

And he looked me in the eye and he accepted it. Just after that, I was preaching through Malachi. The Hebrew idiom in Malachi for God accepting us is, will God lift the face?

Think about that just for a second. But the answer to shame is a lifting of the face. Think about the Aaronic blessing. Lord, that Yahweh bless you and keep you and make his face shine upon you.

[15:13] This idea of face-to-face is an incredibly rich biblical idea and God's acceptance of the shamed one to lift the face and to look and to confer blessing and honor and dignity.

And what happens here is the eyes go down because they hide. They hide from God so relationship is disrupted with him. They hide from each other. Relationship is disrupted with each

other and they lie about it so they're actually introducing a disintegration in themselves. They're actually, their relationship with themselves at that point when they're lying about it is also fractured. And then we see with the result of the curses that the relationship with the whole of creation is also adversely affected.

Fourfold disruption of relationship that kind of explains pretty much everything that we experience day by day in the frustration of living. Broken relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the creation itself.

That's the effects of wanting to be like God. Rejecting our creatureliness. So that's Genesis 3.

[16:31] That's the account of it. And at the heart of it is this autonomy. I will be like God. I will be in charge. I always think about my daughter.

She's now 30. Actually, she's still like this. It's not just when she was little. It would be, I do it myself. I do it myself. And then, you know, 10 minutes later, whatever.

Dad, help. She's still at that at 30, which is slightly concerning. But anyway, autonomy. I do it myself.

I be at the center because I can't trust anybody else to do so. I need to be at the center to arrange my life, my circumstances, my relationships, everything around me.

It all exists to serve my comfort, my security, and my pleasure. That's the call of autonomy. And fundamentally, this is what I want us to grasp, is that that's a rejection of creatureliness.

[17:35] It's putting ourselves in the place of God himself who's the one who guarantees to meet those needs for us. And when we reject that creatureliness, we shouldn't expect things to go well.

Why is this good news? Because it doesn't sound very much like good news, does it? But the universality of it actually is good news. I'm just going to skim through this next section.

But it's good news for this reason. It is a universal diagnosis. And that means that there's nobody here who is not infected by this.

This doesn't mean that all of us are as bad as we could be, but it does mean that every part of every single one of us is infected by this same disease, this same bent towards autonomy, this same curving in on ourselves instead of loving God and loving others, trying to get what we can from the world to make our lives work.

This desperate attempt to construct identity for ourselves, to answer those questions on our own terms. We're all infected by it.

[18:49] And the thing about that is that if we're all infected by it, then one of the things this means is that there is nobody here who is any worse than anybody else. Which means that if you're sitting feeling crushed by your sin, and you look around and you make that cardinal error of comparing how you feel outside, inside, to how others look outside, do you know that mistake that you can make?

Well, they look like they're sorted and together and that life is fine, but I know how I feel internally. It's a big mistake we all make is comparing those two, but it's not a fair comparison. But if you're sitting and you're thinking, well, these people clearly don't sin the way that I do, don't struggle the way I do, this is good news because it's saying, no, no, actually, we're exactly the same.

The ground is level or we're all in the same boat, whatever metaphor you want to use there. But if you're also sitting here and you're thinking, well, I'm pleased with yourself because you've done pretty well in life and you've sorted things out, you've achieved and you're a jolly nice person, well, there's news here that also levels the field for you because you're in exactly the same boat as everybody else.

So the wonderful thing about this is it's actually incredibly leveling, though none of us as sinful as we could be, we're all infected. One of the things this does then is to free us from our pride.

There's nothing to be proud of, we're all on the same level. One of the things that was said to me, I remember it vividly, I was a medical student at the time, I was at the Christian Medical College Conference in Creef and I was boasting to this Chinese medical student about my own commitment to God and how I was so much more committed than these other guys who didn't take it seriously as I did.

[20:44] And he said one thing to me, he said, Mark, the ground is level at the foot of the cross, thereby chopping my legs from under me in a

wonderfully merciful moment.

The ground is level. There's no one better, no one worse. No reason to feel better than your brother or sister, no reason to feel worse.

than your brother and sister, but instead to be shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters, because we are all struggling with the same thing. That means then, and this is lovely, there is no space for self-righteousness.

How can people who are so infected with this particular disease feel proud of the stuff that we've done, feel that we've managed to arrange our lives in such a way as to establish our own righteousness?

That too is an autonomous rejection of creatureliness. Have you ever thought about self-righteousness as a rejection of creatureliness? But it is.

[21:47] It's exactly what it is. This also frees us to face reality. We don't need to pretend that things are different to what they are. We don't need to kid on that we're sorted and together.

One of the things that has so blighted the church and especially in this land and I now live in the highlands and boy it's kind of off the scale that has been historically there is this kind of pretense that somehow maturity as a Christian looks like not having any troubles anymore, not having any struggles, being free from sin.

You have this absurdity of a view of Christian leadership that says something like let me tell you how much you need Jesus whilst I show you how little I need him myself. A false view, an utter lie that says I'm sorted and together and I don't have any issues and troubles and struggles anymore. No, this doctrine is wonderfully leveling. It brings us all to the same place as brothers and sisters before the same God desperate and this is the thing, it makes us look outside ourselves.

We can't fix this ourselves. It forces us, once we begin to understand this doctrine of sin rightly, it forces us to look outside of ourselves to the answer, to look to God to say, have mercy on me.

[23:20] Would you do something about this? And it frees us from any attempts to fix it ourselves. us. And that's good news. Really, really briefly, just in passing, it's not just pretending about sin not being there that's a problem.

We need to be willing to talk about it appropriately. It's also our naivety about it. I've just finished editing a book on the misuse of power in the church, which is a pretty sobering subject.

But there's one whole chapter that a friend of mine wrote on evangelical naivety about sin. We don't think it can happen here. Do we really think that any of us is incapable of any particular sin?

Being free to face it and talk about it, not be naive about it, because it's in being naive about it we allow really dark things and especially abuse to flourish. That's just a side note in passing.

So we might say as we think about this, who am I? This framework, remember that creation, fall, redemption, and new creation? We're kind of covering creation, fall, we've talked a bit about new creation, redemption, we'll talk about more tomorrow, although it's kind of woven through everything that we're saying.

[24:36] We're created image bearers, but also we're sinful rebels. The Bible's very clear on this one. And we'll talk more about the fact that we become children known intimately and part of an entity that has a purpose in the world.

Let me ask this then, as we think about this. When you're asking this question, just take these questions and we can maybe come back to them. The serpent comes to Eve and tempts her with, did God really say?

And whispers lies to her. The tempter is described in various other parts of scripture as the devil, which is an anglicization of the Greek diabolos, which means the slanderer.

The slanderer, the one who tells lies to destroy or the accuser. It's just worth asking, what other voices do you listen to that answer the question, who am I?

Who are you? What answers that voice in your head, that question in your head? So what other voice is speaking there? You know, I've already shared a bit of my own story, so things like being told, yeah, you're an intelligent idiot, it's really helpful, stupid, you look in the mirror, the voices that are telling you, what are they saying about you?

[26:05] How does that make you feel? And there's a fourth question, what do you do with that? How do you answer the who am I question?

What pain does it cause you and what are you taking for the pain is a really great way of understanding how we function as human persons. Let me say a few things as time, as we hurtle in this train towards the buffers at the end of the station.

Autonomy and identity. Let's just add in a few cultural factors. So I'm saying something that's a core idea. Autonomy is a problem. It's in fact the problem involved in this rejection of creatureliness and we live in a cultural moment that takes that and amplifies it to the nth degree, to a degree that's perhaps never been seen quite in the same way historically.

This cultural moment that speaks much about identity but defines identity in terms of internal state or feeling rather than something that is given to us, something that is chosen.

Now there's a real danger actually for many Christians to talk about well yeah you've got your identity in that but I've got my identity in Christ. There's a similar problem because it's still placing you as the one who chooses, as the autonomous chooser and I'm just choosing the best product out there off the shelf.

[27:38] rather than an inferior one. No, and this is what we will come to tomorrow, Jesus' call to discipleship dethrones the autonomous self completely. But the culture is encouraging that sort of autonomy, a rejection of creatureliness, you decide how you feel and on the basis of that, that's reality.

I don't think it's uncontroversial to say that's something that's being massively encouraged through our culture, through our education system. through many of our news and entertainment media as well.

Alongside that, there's this loss of absolutes. And I'm hesitant in saying this because although there is a kind of a denial that there's something out there that defines what is right and wrong for everybody regardless of how I feel about it, that there are such a thing as absolute moral rights and wrongs.

wrongs. There is a rejection of that. If you want to really dig into this, C.S. Lewis and the Abolition of Man is one of his most important books written 80 years ago and just incredibly prophetic in describing where we've got to culturally right now.

But the loss of the idea that there's a right and a wrong out there that doesn't depend on how I feel, the ethics, therefore, what I decide is right and wrong, isn't just about how I feel about things.

[29:05] When I say something's wrong, I'm not just saying I don't like it. I'm saying there is something wrong out there. Now, that loss of being able to say there's something absolutely wrong is a real problem in this rejection of creatureliness.

The enthroning of ourselves is the ultimate arbiters of truth and right and wrong. Now, I said I'm hesitant in saying it because nevertheless, as created image bearers, we can never really fully escape the idea that there is an absolute out there.

Otherwise, why would you cancel people? If it's just a matter of preference and how you feel, no, people actually really do still deep down believe there are some things that are wrong for everybody all the time.

And when we're having conversations with them, we need to try and connect with that and recognize that. We're talking about an expressive individualistic culture. that the worst thing, the worst sin that can be committed is to stop the individual from expressing how they feel.

So there must be no law. There must be no restriction and no constraint. So in an expressive individualistic society, shaped by that, this is, for those who want to go into that more, it really is Nietzsche via Disney, if you like, is how we end up where we are.

[30:32] The idea that I have within me all the good that needs to be expressed and anyone stops that, that that's an evil. That's the evil in the world. And therefore, a God who comes along with commands, that's wicked.

That's something we need to reject. And in that cultural context, education then becomes, instead of what education has been historically through the centuries and millennia, education has been training people to love what is good and to hate what is wicked and evil.

A training of the desires and the loves. And when we don't do that, what we end up with is education as propaganda instead of formation and shaping.

These are just some of the aspects of our cultural moment. I suspect folks will want to talk a wee bit more about that in questions. I hope you do because I think this is where it really starts to get gritty and real and very challenging because the question is, how do you relate to that in ways that are Jesus-like without resorting to just hating it?

We're living in a moment, yeah, I believe in me. How's that turning out for us? It's an important question to ask in a culture that has enthroned autonomy more than any other culture ever at any point.

[32:09] Ironically, what we see is people who are infinitely manipulable by whoever has the levers of propaganda and information.

It's a terrifying prospect. How is it turning out? It's not well. This generation of young folks, students, folks under the age of 30, are, of all the generations that have ever been examined and measured, the most depressed, most anxious, most suicidal, most miserable, least well-educated, etc.

This isn't turning out well. And just that question of how is this going? And will more of the same, but better, fix this? Silly slide.

I'm going to, well, we're nearly at that. I'm going to finish with this. Will I? This is from 100, oh, when's Sartre again? 30s, 40s, somewhere in about there.

Anyway, it's a long time ago, but he's writing this. Whatever happens, he says, and this is, I think, sums up this moment. Whatever happens, it's by my agency, everything must happen.

[33:17] I am autonomous, in other words. Even if he let himself be carried off like an old sack of coal, he would have chosen his own damnation. He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate.

He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him. There would be for him no good or evil unless he brought them into being. He was alone, enveloped in this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance, without excuse, condemned to decide, without support from any quarter, condemned forever to be free.

That's how your average 15-year-old high school student in Scotland feels right now. My wife works in a mental health support charity and she hears the response to this all the time.

this is a catastrophe for everybody but especially for a generation that grows up believing this, rootless, foundationless, miserable, anxious, desperate for love, desperate for approval, desperate for real relationship because that's what they were created for and this is not the way it's supposed to be.

Autonomy is not the answer. it's the problem. Let me just this really I mean there we go. This applies to everything obviously and we can maybe tease some of this out a bit more in Q&A; this afternoon.

[34:53] And a positive place to finish. The dethroning of the autonomous self then is good news and that's exactly what Jesus calls us to do.

Let's pray. Father thank you. This is a sobering topic. It's deep, it's weighty and Lord we cry out to you for a generation of young people who are being lied to, misled, in whom the image of God is being defaced.

And Lord we long that the good news that you have shown to us we might shine outwards as light into this culture that men and women young men and women might be transformed by encountering the living God and might be set free from this corrosive autonomy.

Have mercy on us Lord. Would you please shine your light in each of our lives today right now on the areas in which we need to get off that throne? If we are proud Lord would you humble us?

If we are crushed by the weight of sin would you let us know that we are side by side with brothers and sisters and that you in your mercy would save and forgive?

[36:19] Oh Lord please be with us as we eat together now and enjoy each other's company. Would you guide our conversations that they would be up building to us and pleasing to you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.