

CHAPTER 2

A GOOD THING GONE BAD



A GOOD THING

According to Genesis, humanity was to be the centerpiece of God's creation. No other creature was given the privilege of such a special relationship with God. However, part of the nature of this relationship involved the ability to reject God.

LOVE MUST BE FREELY CHOSEN

God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.¹

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

 "Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having."

— C.S. Lewis

A man who proposes to a woman at gunpoint—besides deserving imprisonment—would be completely mistaken about the nature of love. Love, if it is to be genuine, must be freely chosen. To love is the most free thing we can do. Our hearts are entirely ours to give or withhold. Even a king,

if he seeks genuine love, must allow the peasant girl the real option of rejecting him. If there is no way to reject someone, then any "love" under such circumstances would be illusory.

THE CHOICE TO REJECT

Read the passages from Genesis 2 and 3.



Genesis 2:4-10, 15-17

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

⁵ When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. [...]

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."



Genesis 3:1-9

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" ² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

Consider what the Garden of Eden was like. Far from a wasteland of cacti and sand with that lone,

succulent (but forbidden) fruit tree in the center, Eden was filled with trees that were “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). Many people misconstrue the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:17) as some kind of trap that God designed for the downfall of mankind, but nothing could be further from the truth.

There was probably nothing inherently special about the fruit itself. The fruit was a tangible representation of Adam and Eve’s freedom that to reject a relationship with their Creator. If Adam and Eve were to choose to reject God, they could do so unambiguously by taking the fruit, crossing the one boundary that God gave them. If we think about it, every significant relationship has its own forbidden fruit.

What would be the forbidden fruit in the following relationships?

FRIENDSHIP

MARRIAGE

SOLDIER

These prohibitions are not merely incidental to the relationship, but they actually define the very meaning of the relationship and provide the boundary lines within which it can flourish. In fact, the more important the relationship is, the weightier the forbidden fruit and thus the heavier the consequences of crossing that boundary.

Notice that eating a fruit is a morally neutral act. Without understanding the relational significance of the forbidden fruit, it can seem odd that the ominous “Original Sin” of the Bible centers on such a morally ambiguous act.

Imagine that a married man approaches his wife after an argument, and without a word, hands her his wedding ring and walks out of the house.

What would this seemingly neutral act of giving back the ring communicate?

In a similar way, taking the forbidden fruit had dire consequences, not because the fruit itself was sinful, but because it meant that Adam and Eve were rejecting God as their Creator and heavenly Father.

Recall the tender picture of creation in Genesis 1: The portrait of the waiting parent preparing a place for his beloved child. Having been given the dignity of free will, however, mankind chose to reject that relationship.

To reject someone who has a relationship with you is one of the most hurtful things that can be done. That is why any form of betrayal (a weapon only in the hands of those you love)—backstabbing, adultery, desertion—leave such deep wounds. The more you love, the deeper the wound.

Imagine a college-bound high school graduate who, toward the end of August, rises early one morning, packs her belongings in a few suitcases, calls the taxi, and sits her parents down for a talk. In a calm, cold tone, she says to her parents: “Mr. and Mrs. Lee, I thank you for your efforts on my behalf all these years. I benefited from the shelter, clothes and food you provided. I could barely tolerate your values and your personalities, and so I waited for this day. I have received a full scholarship admission from a good university. I will not be telling you where I will go to college. Please do not attempt to contact me. I will be changing my name. Please don’t consider me your child any longer, and I will no longer consider you my parents. I hope to never see either of you again. Good bye.”

It’s chilling to even think about such a scenario.

Yet, the Bible presents precisely such a scenario as the accurate depiction of the situation between man and his Creator (see Luke 15:11-32).



Luke 15:11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have

sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

ESSENCE OF SIN

In Genesis 3:5, the serpent tempts Eve with the words, "When you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The alluring suggestion is that if they take the forbidden fruit from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," they would determine good and evil for themselves and effectively be their own gods.

"Sin is believing the lie that you are self-created, self-dependent and self-sustained."

— Augustine

"Sin is essentially a departure from God."

— Martin Luther

"I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul."

— William Ernest Henley, "Invictus"

What makes this suggestion to take up the authority to determine good and evil for ourselves such an appealing offer?

Adam and Eve had made their choice. From now on, no authority would be allowed to determine for them the boundaries of good or evil. Truth, along with morality, would have to give way to their personal choices and preferences.

And now that they had removed God from the position of authority in their lives, they had become their own "boss"; they would rule their own destinies by means of their own wits. This is the essence of sin: the rejection of God and the placement of self on the throne.

They wanted, as we say, to "call their souls their own." But that means to live a lie, for our souls are not, in fact, our own. They wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, "This is our business, not yours." But there is no such corner.²

— C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

This problem is not limited to the early chapters of Genesis. The tale of rebellion—man's self-assertion, self-rule, self-determination—against God has been repeated down to this very day.

This inner desire to rule over self and play "God" in our own lives is utterly intuitive to fallen humanity but runs completely contrary to our original design. If it does not feel like an illegitimate power-grab, it's only because we are so accustomed to thinking of ourselves as the natural lord and master of our own lives.

The Bible uses the term "sinful nature" to refer to this desire of man to become his own authority, to have his imperious self reign without restraint. And from this sinful nature comes all the moral evil we recognize both in the world and in our own lives—murder, greed, cheating, etc. Simply put, our "sin" (desire to be our own god) is the root that produces the fruit of "sins" (behavior contrary to God's laws and commands).

How much can you relate to this desire to call your own shots? In what area does this come up?

SIN IS AGAINST GOD

Notice that the first sinful move is not some gross moral transgression. It is, rather, a relational-spiritual enmity toward God, much like the analogy of the outrageous college student. In other words, far from being a neutral desire for self-actualization, the first sin was an act of hostility and treason against God's rightful claim on our lives. This God-directed nature of sin must be kept in mind.

It's easy for people to see the many manifestations of sin in our world and, more pointedly, in their own lives, and come to a hearty agreement that sin is a huge problem for man in general, and even for themselves personally.

However, this would be mistaking the symptoms for the disease. At the root of our numerous moral failings is a cold, hostile heart of enmity toward God.

But from this seemingly morally neutral act, Adam and Eve had "unchained the earth from its sun," as Friedrich Nietzsche would put it. Things started falling apart once they banished God from his rightful place.

What is your response to God's rightful claim over your life?

IDOLATRY

The irony of rejecting God is that mankind ended up serving far inferior things. Naturally given to worship, mankind has substituted other things for God—something the Bible calls idolatry.

 "When we cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing; we worship anything."³

– G.K. Chesterton

When man ceased worshipping God, his rule over creation was lost, and in a ghastly reversal, creation began to rule over man.



Romans 1:22-25

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

What did the people end up doing upon rejecting God?

Of course, the idols of previous eras have been replaced today with shinier, fancier things, but no one doubts that the outlandish scale of our obsession with wealth and sensuality borders on outright worship.

What are some of the most prevalent “idols” of today? What do people hope these idols will deliver?

RELATIVISM

Another consequence of our rejection of God is relativism, which is the worldview that truth and morality are up to the individual. If idolatry confuses what is valuable, relativism confuses what is true. We say things like, “Truth is whatever people believe to be true,” or “Right and wrong are determined by the individual.” After all, we are now gods over our own lives, so the desire to “call our own shots” has led to a self-serving outlook that we are free to choose from a smorgasbord of shifting morals, values and truths, picking and choosing as we please.

Although statements such as “truth is relative” sound sophisticated, such sound bites quickly lead to a culture of extreme shallowness. Armed with the blind belief that everything depends on what the individual feels, the modern man is relieved of any need to investigate truth claims. If truth is relative, there is no longer any need to deeply consider any idea, since your beliefs are just as good as mine. Shallowness reigns under the guise of intellectual and moral openness. Terms like “truth,” “good,” “evil” and “right” are discarded as antiquated and irrelevant concepts along with every regulation that threatens to hinder our desires.

 “God is dead. And we have killed him.”

– Nietzsche

Nietzsche, one of the greatest influences of the twentieth century, portrayed his ideology in a stunning way in “The Madman,” his parable about a man who breaks the news to the world that we have killed God.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? ...Are we not plunging continually?

Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? God is dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderer of all murderers? ...Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?"⁴

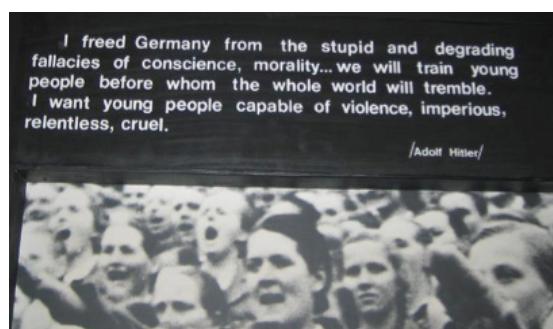
-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

In what ways have we “killed God” as a society?

Nietzsche's haunting prediction of moral chaos came true before a watching world as Hitler would later proclaim the dawn of a new race of men, saying: "I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience, morality...we will train young people before whom the world will tremble. I want young people capable of violence, imperious, relentless, cruel."

If morality is indeed relative, then the rest of the world could not denounce what the Nazis did. In fact, the Nazis' defense at the Nuremberg trials was that they conducted themselves in strict accordance with German law. However, we all recognize a "higher law" to which we are all accountable, regardless of what a particular society or culture may have decided.

Does such a “higher law” exist?



What are the implications of your answer on moral issues like civil rights, protection of the weak, etc.?

Do you believe these implications should be implemented?

For a more thorough discussion on moral relativism, please refer to **Appendix B: Moral Relativism**.

BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

A third consequence of our rejection of God is in our relationships. We become alienated first with ourselves, and then with others.



Genesis 3:7

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Adam and Eve did not know guilt or shame until they sinned against God. But from the moment they rejected God, their conscience caused an uneasiness that they could not resolve. Their awareness that they had violated something fundamental brought a **self-consciousness and discomfort** regarding themselves, experienced as a shameful sense of "nakedness." Suddenly they found it necessary to hide their shame with fig leaf coverings that protected them from the gaze of God and even from each other.

How much can you relate to a "self-consciousness and discomfort" regarding yourself?

We, too, find it hard to adjust to ourselves. Plagued with a general sense of personal inadequacy, we know that our true selves must be disguised. Like Adam and Eve, we begin to manufacture fig leaf coverings. We hide behind carefully crafted masks—each fitted for different social settings.

Even as we succeed in impressing others with our well-managed image, our inner loneliness grows as we come to see that there is no one who really knows us.

Having worn so many different masks before different audiences, we eventually find ourselves asking: "Who am I?" **We have become strangers to ourselves.**

How much can you relate to this sentiment that "we have become strangers to ourselves"?

Not only do we become alienated from ourselves, we do not know how to relate to others. After the Fall in Genesis, the once loving Adam ruthlessly points the finger of blame at Eve, triggering the note of discord that will only get louder and louder in the coming generations. In the very next generation, Adam's son Cain kills his brother Abel, kicking off the miserable cycle of violence and competition driven by the will to power over others, which has been the sad history of mankind.



Genesis 4:1-10

¹ Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." ² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. ³ In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶ The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" ¹⁰ And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

Like Cain, we too compare ourselves with others, sizing each other up to see who is taller, prettier, stronger, wittier, or smarter. The tragic result is that our interactions with others are tainted with envy and comparison. **We can't simply rest before others but must either feel superior or inferior.**

How much can you relate to this sentiment: "We can't simply rest before others but must either feel superior or inferior."

This competition fuels the world. Wanting to be special or better than others, we cease to view others in terms of their humanity. Instead, we view them only in terms of externals, dehumanizing them. A more cruel form of dehumanization happens as we then assign value only to those who are attractive to us, while those who are not become unworthy of our attention.

We do not find it easy to adjust to other people. We tend either to despise them or to envy them, to have either superiority or inferiority feelings... Sometimes we are full of self-pity, at other times of self-esteem, self-will or self-love. [...] All this is due to man's sin. We cannot trust each other. We need protection against one another. It is a terrible indictment of human nature.⁵

– John Stott

WHAT CAN FIX THIS MESS?

Most of us have at some point seen that there is something fundamentally wrong with this world. Believers and non-believers alike agree that our world is not as it should be. Moreover, when we are honest, we can sense that there is something very not right with ourselves: we know we are not the people we ought to be.

Reformers have for centuries tried to improve the lives of their citizens. Education continues to expand with the hope that better-informed people will behave better. Medical discoveries have lengthened our life spans. The past century saw unprecedented increases in knowledge, wealth and creature comforts, but it was the same century that witnessed more humans killing each other than all of the previous centuries combined.

Dorothy Sayers asks a timely, if rarely heard, question:

“It is encouraging to feel that progress is making us automatically every day and in every way better, and better, and better—but does history support that view?”⁶

– Dorothy L. Sayers,
The Mind of the Maker

According to the Bible, what is wrong with the world is not a lack of better government, education, or technology. The Bible is unapologetic in its claim that what is wrong with the world is human sinfulness. The imperious self is the problem—yours and mine. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was a victim of the terrors of the Soviet prison camps, expressed this very idea:

 "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" ⁷

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

How much do you agree with Solzhenitsyn's view of man, as supported by the Bible? Explain.

What are the implications of this fact—that every human being has evil right within himself?

ORPHANS BY CHOICE

How did we get here? Our trajectory began when we dethroned God from our lives. It began in the Garden of Eden but has been repeated in each and every human life born thereafter.

It's your story and my story. We peer into what the Bible is depicting, and see a self-portrait. We, too, find it so easy to live as if we created ourselves, rarely taking time to marvel at the mystery and miracle of our own existence. We are naturals when it comes to playing the role of god in our lives. We find it almost self-evident that we exist for our own pleasure. Our minds seem almost warped against God's claims, and warped in favor of believing things that support our autonomy. We, like Cain, find the idea of a personal God exerting his claim on our lives unwelcome, if not outright repulsive. We find it much easier to assume, without much investigation, that the universe is bereft of anything spiritual or supernatural, that God is not there, and if He is, He is remote and unknowable, an energy field of some sort...anything but the divine, loving, personal, authoritative figure presented in the Bible.

This personal sovereignty we won from God, however, turned out to be a mixed blessing. With God dethroned, values became reversed as man worshipped the creation rather than the creator, truth and morality became relativized and privatized, and his relationships became fraught with competition. Without God to worship, worthless and dead things became substitute objects of worship.

Without God to undergird the truth, man lost all absolute standards by which to measure truth or

good. Without God calling him to higher responsibility and love for his brother, man found others as simply objects to use, fear or envy.

By proclaiming our liberation from God's authority, we have separated ourselves from God's love as well, and we are left with an unmet inner yearning to be known and loved. In rejecting God, we find ourselves orphaned in the world, yet it was by our choice that it should be so.

What are the symptoms of people feeling like they are orphaned in the universe?

CHRISTMAS TREE OF LIFE



During the Christmas season, people put up Christmas trees in their homes, decorating them with candy canes, stockings, little figurines, ornaments, tinsel and lights. Some trees are sparsely decorated, while others are so lavish that you can hardly see the tree underneath all the ornaments.

Either way, it's a dead tree we decorate. A Christmas tree certainly looks lush and green. It fills the house with the fresh aroma of pine. But because it has been cut from the root, it is dead.

Although the tree gives the illusion of life, the tree's fate is sealed. Soon after New Year's Day, the tree, by then dry and brittle, will be stripped of its ornaments and unceremoniously taken out to the garbage can.

The Christmas tree is an apt metaphor for human life. The life that we live may seem full of vitality and strength, but only for a short time. People live as if the ornaments are what deserve all of our attention and efforts. All through our short lives, we "decorate" ourselves with the ornaments we hope others will admire: academic degrees, symbols of wealth and status, nice cars and houses, and even an attractive spouse.

It's all about decorating ourselves as best as we can. What happens at the end of 70 or 80 such years? Even the most impressive, most vibrant of lives, boasting the best worldly adornments, will wither and decay while the greatest problem—sin and death—will tragically not have been dealt with.

The uneasy awareness of that ever-approaching reality of death is what dampens man's spirit, keeps him thoughtful, and makes all shallow optimism seem so out of place; it brings man to a contemplation of his eternal destiny. Yet sometimes, the glow of the ornaments makes them seem so much more worthy of our attention compared to the uncomfortable reality of death.

The Bible claims that we have cut ourselves off from God, who is the source of life. Still, God calls us and awakens in us the longing for true life in a love relationship with Him.

But what can be done? Can a tree cut from its root be reattached? Who could work such a miracle?

What is your personal response to this week's material?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.
- 2 Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.
- 3 Guinness, Os and Seel, John. *No God but God*. s.l.: Moody Press, 1992.
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- 6 Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Mind of the Maker*. New York: HarperOne, 1987.
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