

The Painful Curse of Death

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[0 : 00] So we're now going to turn to our Bible reading. And we're continuing our series in Genesis that Willie Phillip, our senior minister, has been leading us through.

And this morning we're going to be reading together Genesis chapter 3. Genesis chapter 3. And whilst you're turning that up, let me draw attention to the handout that you should have received, or should be on your seat or received on the way in.

Do make the most of that. That's a handout that will help us see the deliberate shaping of the text for emphasis. It shows how chapter 2 and chapter 3 are two acts of one drama, showing life and showing death.

So you can potentially read over that during the offering later in the service. And do bring it along with you again next week. But now, Genesis chapter 3.

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?

[1 : 18] And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. 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. But the serpent said to the woman, You shall not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

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

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.

[2 : 28] But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.

He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.

Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all livestock, and above all beasts of the field.

On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain and childbearing.

[3 : 41] In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it, all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hands and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever.

[4 : 53] Therefore the Lord God sent him from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Well, amen. This is God's words, and we'll return to it again shortly. Well, let's turn then to Genesis chapter 3.

Either have your Bibles open or have the handout before you, which contains the whole text there. Now, the Lord Jesus said to the Israelites of his day, If you believed Moses, you would believe me, because he wrote of me.

That is, Moses preached the same truth, the same Christian gospel as Jesus. In fact, Jesus' last words of his public ministry in John chapter 12, he cries out passionately, and he summarizes his message by saying, The Father has given me a commandment to proclaim, which is eternal life.

And he urged people to obey him and to find that life. And that was Jesus' constant message. In John 3, verse 36, he said, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, and the wrath of God remains on him.

[6 : 36] Notice two vitally important things Jesus is saying there. First, to believe in God the Son is to obey him, to obey his command for life.

Real belief in the Bible is obedience to God and his command. And secondly, Jesus says, To not see life, that is, to experience death, is to be under the wrath of God, to remain under God's wrath, under his curse.

And that was Moses' constant message also. Moses was the great prophet of God. He spoke for God. And he put before the people life and death, blessing and curse.

And he urged them, like Jesus, to choose life. And in his last sermon, just like Jesus, in his last message, he is doing that.

If you read it later, in Deuteronomy 31 and 32, he said to Israel, I know you, how stubborn you are, how stiff-necked you are. You're rebellious. So you need to take heart.

[7 : 42] Every word that I have written down for you, it's no empty word. This is your life. Choose life, not death. And you see, that is the message of Genesis 2 and 3.

It is placarding vividly in front of us the meaning of life, real life, the delightful freedom that there is for human beings under God's rule.

That is life in all its fullness. That's what we saw in Genesis 2 last time. But it's also showing us the sheer horror of real death, the disastrous fallout of man's rebellion against God.

And that is what is before us here in chapter 3. Not, now, the perfect covenant of life, but instead the painful curse of death, real death, in all its grim horror.

death as the wages of human sin. Now we're going to come back next time again to this chapter to focus particularly on verses 1 to 7 and the great act of disobedience, the transgression of this covenant of life through the temptation of the serpent.

[8 : 59] But today I want to look at the big picture. And I want us to see the stark contrast that there is between this perfect covenant of life in chapter 2 and the painful curse of death here in chapter 3.

And let's get very clear right at the start. This, the picture that's described here in Genesis chapter 3 is death. Sometimes people say when they read this, oh, the serpent was right, wasn't he?

He says in 2 chapter 17, God says, if you eat the forbidden fruit, you will surely die. But they don't seem to die. Well, don't impose our preconceived and very narrow ideas of what death is onto the text.

Let the Bible itself tell us what death really is in all its grim reality. Because just as Genesis chapter 2 defines life as it really is, as it should be, as God's gift to man, Genesis 3 is defining and describing death as it really is.

as God's curse on man. Now this chapter is all about human death. It doesn't mention animal death or plant death or any kind of generic idea of death.

[10 : 14] That's not on the radar screen here. It is human death that is described here. And all through Scripture, human death is described not as the reversal of existence, but as the reversal of life.

More precisely as the reversal and as the loss of all the perfection that is real life as created by God as is laid out in Genesis chapter 2.

And you'll find that all through the Bible. Henri Blocher says to die is not to cease to be, but in biblical terms it means cut off from the land of the living. Henceforth unable to act or to enter another condition.

And you can see all the way through the Bible that's so. For example, read Ezekiel chapter 32 later. It talks about the existence of the dead in Sheol, in the place of the dead, the pit, a conscious existence of those who are dead in body.

And of course, Jesus, I quoted you a moment ago, Jesus described the reversal of life as being existence but under God's wrath, remaining under God's wrath.

[11 : 33] That's why the New Testament can talk about a death that is everlasting, that is not annihilation, is not the reversal of existence, but is the reversal of life.

That is death. And that is far, far more terrible and terrifying than the mere reversal of existence. And what Genesis 3 tells us loud and clear is that God means what He says.

If His promises of life are sure and certain and can be trusted and obeyed, well, so also His warnings of death are sure and certain and must be heeded.

Genesis chapter 3 tells us that what God said in chapter 2, verse 17, you will surely die, is absolutely true. And it tells us what the serpent said in chapter 3, verse 4 here, you will not die, is absolutely false.

See, says Moses, I'm setting before you death in all its grim horror. Now choose life, turn away from this.

[12 : 48] So let's look at death as it is described here then. And this is my first heading this morning, the grim horror of man's punishment.

This is surely a picture, isn't it, of unquestionable misery. Although it is absolutely and fully deserved. As I said, we'll come back to verses 1 to 7 in more detail.

But you can see it's plain from the whole structure of this narrative that the condition of man's misery is not due to bad luck, not due to the capricious whims of pagan gods, it's not due to genetic mutation, not due to something intrinsic in our human nature as God created it.

It is entirely due to the rebellion and the revolt against the Lord which is expressed here in disobedience to God's command.

That is what this whole story turns on. Right at the center there you can see. We're given no explanation of this great transgression, but what is clear is that it has absolutely no excuse.

[14 : 02] Blocher again. The enigma, he says, remains total and the evil rebellion inexcusable. And scripture invites us to probe no further however much we might want to.

But it does force us to take in the grim horror of the punishment, the disastrous fallout which is described here as the reversal of life.

The reversal of everything laid out in chapter 2. Do you see how the horror of death in chapter 3 exactly mirrors in dark negativity? It exactly mirrors the life of chapter 2.

First of all, the grandeur of God's purpose for man we see in chapter 2 is reversed. Both his dignity and his destiny is forfeit, is lost.

Man's dignity is the specially created, intimately created image of God who communes with God, who rejoices in his present and who has a beautiful, harmonious, transparent relationship with one another as male and female.

[15 : 12] Unashamed openness, transparency, that's what chapter 2 verse 24 describes. And that dignity now is utterly shattered. The first thing we're told about them in verse 7, the human beings is their shame.

They were unashamed before. Now the word isn't used here, it's the only way to describe their state, isn't it? They sense immediately their vulnerability, their nakedness and instinctively they want to hide, hide from one another, protect themselves from one another.

When both of them submitted joyfully to one God, there was no such anxiety. But now both of them of course want to be their own God and so they've become rivals to each other.

So they hide their vulnerability from one another. And together they hide from the great rival to both of them, from God himself. Verse 8, so they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God.

The dignity of humanity as kings and priests sharing God's home in common with God is gone. Now they're reduced to fugitives hiding in the bushes.

[16 : 26] They're alienated, they're anxious, they're ashamed. well that's what still provides psychologists and psychiatrists and so on with all sorts of business today, isn't it?

And the dignity of man as a responsible being, responsible to God, to respond to God and his gracious commands, that too is lost. Man denies responsibility in verses 12 and 13 there.

The man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent. In fact, man blames God for giving him the woman. Henri Blashe again says the effect of sin is the denying of sin.

Well that's why lawyers and judges are never out of work. And these things are a constant shadow, aren't they? Of death. Right throughout our lives, throughout our thinking, throughout our society.

Man's dignity is lost and so also is his destiny of grandeur. He was created to rule the cosmos for God, to subdue it as God subdued the chaos and the darkness and bring harmony in the world.

[17 : 36] But now, he brings cosmic disharmony. Verses 14 and 15 speak of a disastrous reversal on the cosmic scale spiritually.

An enmity, a hostility that there will forever be between two seeds, the seeds of a woman and the seed, the offspring of Satan.

Two rival humanities. And forever after, there will be struggle and enmity in the spiritual realm. Instead of the earth being filled and subdued with sons and daughters of God, there will also be those who are implacably opposed to him.

even within families. As Genesis chapter 4 immediately goes on to show, very painfully, doesn't it? And we know that's true.

We know the pain, we know the living death that that brings to many. Just as Jesus said, a man will be against his father, a daughter against her mother. A man has no power over these cosmic forces of evil.

[18 : 48] He's as good as dead in the struggle to subdue evil. And so also in the struggle to subdue the earth in physical terms. Physical harmony is lost along with the spiritual.

In Eden, chapter 2, verse 15 says, God put man literally at rest to work it and to keep it, to guard it. But now, look at chapter 3, verse 17. Cursed is the ground because of you.

In pain you shall eat of it. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth. I'll speak to any farmer today.

They know that. Speak to any worker today. That's death, says the Bible. You see, from the glory of the harmonious rest as God's king, God's priest over the world to the ignominious servitude of little more than slave labor.

The grind of the farmer in the field killing the weeds. the humdrum of the office worker day in, day out. The nine to nine in the city.

[19 : 55] The eight to midnight in many of the sweatshops of Asia and so on. Man no longer subdues the earth, he is subdued by it. And nor does humanity any longer effortlessly fill the earth, verse 16.

And to the woman, he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing. It's a tragic irony, isn't it? The woman, the helper, without whom the man cannot fulfill his destiny, who helps humanity to be fruitful, to multiply.

She's hindered in that very calling. Because she didn't help, but she hindered her husband. You see how death is the loss, it's the absolute reversal in every respect of the grandeur of God's calling for mankind.

And it's also the loss of the generosity of God's provision for mankind. Both a beautiful place and the perfect partnership is lost and reversed. The garden of God where man was given a home, the place of beauty and of bounty, lavish provision.

And the source of life itself, well, it's lost. And there again, there's a total reversal. In chapter 2, verse 14, God put him at rest in the garden to work it, to keep it.

[21 : 18] He commanded man to enjoy all God's creation, to be fulfilled in it. But now in chapter 3, verse 23, the Lord sent the man out of the garden to work the ground from which he was taken.

A terrible expulsion and a reminder that without the dignity and the destiny that he had only through communion with the Lord, the giver of life himself, without that, all he is is dust out of the ground.

He loses his place, his home. Verse 24, God drove out the man. Well, we shouldn't be surprised, should we, that the world is so full of lost and lonely people, people who feel they're aliens, they're outsiders, not at home.

Even as people of faith, even as believers, we feel it, don't we? We're strangers in a strange land in this earth as it is. But homelessness, restlessness, unbelonging, wandering, humanity, a far away from home, that is all part of what the Bible calls death as the wages of sin.

And that's what we see here, humanity literally having lost the place because of their sin. Just as we've also lost the harmony of the relationships that God created us for, the perfect partnership of man and woman.

[22 : 50] Doesn't the end of verse 16 encapsulate a whole history of the desire for dominance, of the struggle to subjugate between the sexes? There are issues here about how best to understand verse 16 there.

The two words desire and rule. Notice the footnote. It could be, as is written in the text, that the woman will desire a man in the right way, the love of a man, desire the care, the companionship, the comfort, and so on.

But, the man will rule her, he'll dominate her, mistreat her, even at times abuse her. Well, of course, we see that, don't we? A plenty in the world.

We also see sometimes the extraordinary loyalty of some women, even to dreadful abuse of men. But actually, I think that what this means probably is rather different as per the footnote that we should read it against and not for.

In other words, the desire of the woman for her husband is rather a wrong desire. It's a desire to dominate him and to control him. In the reverse of God's created pattern for the man to be the leader and the woman to be his suitable helper.

[24 : 06] Why do I say that? Well, if you read into the very next chapter in chapter 4, verse 7, you'll find that exactly the same words are used in an almost identical phrase about sin's desire for Cain, which certainly can't be a right desire.

It's desiring to rule Cain, to dominate Cain. And God says to Cain, no, you must rule over it. So what God is saying, I think, is that male-female relationships and marriage will be disrupted because of sin.

Eve took the initiative and led her husband into sin instead of the way it should have been. Adam was more guilty in God's eyes because he was responsible to be the leader and he abdicated responsibility and Eve took it.

Adam was certainly there. Verse 6 is clear. Adam was with her, but clearly he took no lead and did not protect. And that pattern will continue in a disordered world.

Women will seek to dominate. And many men often will allow that to be so. Anything for a quiet life. No, says God.

[25 : 16] Man must play his part and take the lead. And God's saying to women, you'll always try to be men, but you'll never succeed.

And in doing so, you'll only make matters worse for yourself. And men, he's saying, you'll be tempted to take the second place, to abdicate responsibility. But the more you do that, the worse you'll make it.

That's what I think this is saying. But whatever way we take it, it's perfectly plain that it is simply describing the disorder between the sexes that we've seen all through history and we see right across society.

Not perfect partnership, but struggle for domination. Not care and mutual love, but control and very often mutual distrust. Well, have a look around at the world today.

how we've lost the grandeur of our purpose and how we mourn the reversal of God's generous provision of a perfect place, of perfect relationships.

[26 : 25] But of course, death also means the loss of God's gracious protection for our lives. From his protective command in chapter 2, verse 17, not to eat so you will not die, now it's a positive certainty in 3, verse 19.

To dust you shall return. There can be absolutely no question that physical death is part of this curse of death for humanity.

New Testament is very plain on that. Romans 5, verse 12, death entered the world through the sin of one man, of Adam. But physical death is just part of this state of death.

In the whole Bible, just as here in Genesis 3, death is described as a condition. It's described as a dark power that overcame the whole realm of humanity after this great rebellion.

Death reigned from Adam to Moses, says Paul. And that power of death has a hold over humanity because of sin, because it is sin.

[27 : 34] It's rebellion against God's gracious rule that must exclude humanity from the source of life, from the presence of the Lord himself, the only life giver. Because in his holy presence, in his dwelling place, there can't be rebellion.

It cannot be alive. That's why verse 22 here says, rebellious man cannot be permitted any longer to breathe the breath of life as he was created to do.

And so verse 24 says plainly, the way to the tree of life is barred. It's an impossible barrier, a flaming sword. And that is the painful curse of death, the grim horror of man's punishment.

It begins here, doesn't it, in verse 8 with man hiding himself from the presence of the Lord. But it ends in verse 24, far, far worse, with God hiding his presence totally and barring it from sinful human beings.

Yes, even including the physical death of our mortal bodies, yes, but much, much more than that. The living death of non-life. Life without the dignity and the destiny that we were created for.

[28 : 57] Life separated from the generosity and the joy of God's perfect provision. And life without the assurance and the hope of his eternal protection of us.

That's what Genesis 3 tells us death as the wages of sin really is. But of course, it also tells us more than that, doesn't it?

Because it's not just here the grim horror of man's punishment. In the midst of that, indeed, it is grim, it is horrible.

But in the midst of it, there is also the glimmering hope of God's promise. Even amid unquestionable misery here, fully deserved, there is inextinguishable mercy.

mercy. And even though that is fully undeserved. See, in Genesis 2 in God's blessings, there was only sheer grace, only grace.

[30 : 06] But here in chapter 3, his curse is not only curse. There's grace and there's mercy even amid the curse of this holy God. There's grace, isn't there, in the calling out of God to man.

verse 9, the very first words of God to fallen man are words of entreaty, aren't they? Oh, Adam, where are you? Verse 13, Eve, what have you done?

You see, here's the God of the Bible seeking out man, seeking out the rebel, seeking out the sinner, seeking out the one who's become his enemy. What kind of a God is that?

kind of God who perhaps one day, while we were still sinners, while we were still enemies, would come himself to reconcile us to him at great cost.

There's grace, verse 21, in his covering for mankind. What they instantly knew they needed for themselves in their new state, proper clothes, a proper covering for their new find shame, but what their own feeble human efforts with fig leaves and so on were utterly unable to do, what they couldn't do, God does.

[31 : 27] God covers their shame for them, do you see? What kind of God is this? Well, he's the God that we hear the psalmist singing of, isn't he?

You forgave the iniquity of your people. You covered all their sins. There's grace even in the words of God's curse itself, even in his wrath.

This God remembers mercy. The woman, verse 16, will have pain, yes, but she will have children, not the curse of utter barrenness. They will be fruitful, even through the pain.

Verse 20, Eve shall be the mother of all the living. and naming her Eve, which means living, is surely a mark of Adam's faith in God's word there in verse 16.

And verses 18 and 19, the man, he says, will eat. Yes, there'll be pain. Yes, there'll be struggle, but three times God says, you shall eat. There will be life, even in the shadow of death.

[32 : 38] Even the painful curse of death contains mercy. Yes, it is a judgment. To dust you will return. And yet, even that physical death contains mercy, doesn't it?

Because it brings an end to the struggle and the pain and the burden of life under the curse. We often say that ourselves, don't we, if somebody has been struggling with ill health and going downhill and suffering and pain, oh, it's a mercy that is a way.

it carries hope, doesn't it? Because if from dust God made man, then from dust he can also remake man bodily.

And that brings us to verses 14 and 15 here, verses sometimes called the protivangelium, which is just a posh word of saying in Latin, the first gospel promise.

for above all, in the only curse here where there is no mercy for its recipient, look, the curse on the serpent himself in verse 14, no mercy.

[33 : 51] In this curse glimmers the bright beauty of the promise of God's mercy personified. It's a promise of victory over the serpent and his terrible realm of power and death and a victory for man from that realm and from that power.

Now we need another whole session really to do justice to this, but just see first of all, God's mercy to Eve in that first line. God will convert Eve's own heart, he says.

Convert her from the beguiling infatuation with the serpent to being somebody who has hatred for the serpent, who is at enmity with him.

Eve, you will not belong to him. God will not allow that. And Eve will be the first reborn one, remade. God makes her again into a struggler with the serpent.

This is the first description in the Bible of what it means to be a believer. It is to be someone in whom God has placed enmity, struggle against the world, against the flesh, and above all, against the devil.

[35 : 13] A believer is one in whom God has put that lifelong struggle. And I find that such an enormous encouragement. If you are somebody who is struggling along in your Christian life and feeling you're a failure, then, friends, rejoice, because the presence of that struggle tells you you belong to the seed of promise.

God has put that struggle in you against sin and evil. But Eve was the first, God's mercy to Eve, but also in the second line there, there is God's mercy to Eve's seed, to all who come after her in faith.

There will be enmity between her offspring and his. Eve will be the mother not only of all the born, but of all the reborn, an unbroken line of faith that will always be preserved in this world for God against his enemy.

That is God's promise. Because, you see, above all, look at that third line there, where we see God's mercy personified through the seed, through the man, who at last will fatally wound, not the serpent's seed, but the serpent himself.

Look at that third line. It's not Eve and the serpent now, it's not Eve's progeny and his progeny, it's he and it's the serpent himself. Do you see? He will bruise your head and you will bruise his heel.

[36 : 44] What can that mean? What kind of God can this be? Who even in his curse on rebellious humanity should sow a seed of mercy and victory over the serpent, over that ancient serpent who's called the devil or Satan, the deceiver of the whole world as Revelation 12 puts it?

Well, he is the God, says Paul, who in the fullness of the time sent forth his son, born of a woman, note the divine irony, to redeem those under the law, under the law of sin and death, that we might have the adoption of sons.

Yes, says John, the reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. But this was a glimmering hope, even here in God's promise, God's gracious promise, even in the very day of rebellion itself.

The day of cursing was also a day of grace, grace in the calling of God, grace in the covering of God for his people, grace in the cursing of God even.

grace in the cost to God. Derek Kidner says it took the work of the last Adam to bring home to us our full downfall in the first Adam.

[38 : 15] But it also took until his work to bring home to us the true cost of his mercy. Yes, the son of God, the savior appeared to destroy the works of the evil one.

But how did he do that? Not without cost. Hebrews 2 tells us, doesn't it, that it was through death that he would destroy the one who had the power of death, that is the devil.

That was the cost, the death of the beloved one, the son of God himself, God himself in the person of his son. And yet that too is a glorious hope that's glimmering even here.

He will crush or bruise your head. He will deal the serpent a fatal head wound. But you will bruise his heel in return.

There will be a great and terrible cost to the seed for that great victory. The promised deliverer, the promised victor, the promised mercy bringer will himself bear that terrible cost to release his people from the curse.

[39 : 39] That's why the prophet Isaiah later spoke of him saying he was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

With his stripes we are healed. What kind of God is this who does this for you and for me because the Bible is so clear, isn't it?

This story is not just Adam's story, it's our story. It's humanity's story. For as in Adam, all die. The grim horror of man's punishment.

As he spells that out to us, he can't do so without also speaking of the glimmering hope of a promise of grace, a promise of inextinguishable mercy for you and for me, so utterly undeserved just as it was for Adam and Eve.

What kind of God is this who says to his people, see I set before you life and death. Now choose life when for us to choose life means that God the Son himself must choose willingly in loving mercy the painful curse of death for himself.

[41 : 06] To taste that awful death under the curse that we might again have that life. Derek Kidner again comments on Eve's fatal act in verse 6 and says she took and ate so simply act so hard it's undoing.

God will taste poverty and death before take eat become verbs of salvation. And he did.

he tasted so deeply that awful curse at the cross at Calvary so that our painful curse of death might become through his death for us the perfect covenant of life in which he says to us take eat this is for you.

See I set before you life and death my death for your life. Choose life.

Choose life. Friends this is the gospel of Moses. This is the gospel of Christ. Amen.

[42 : 33] So may it be the gospel to each one of us today. Let's pray. O God who declared thy mighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace that we running the way of thy commandments may obtain thy gracious promises and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.