

5. The Painful Curse of Death (2007)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we began this morning by remembering that Moses, who wrote Genesis, was a preacher, not just a historian. He was a man with a message, with a gospel from God for God's people.

Moses was the great prophet of Scripture, the one who spoke to God and spoke for God in a way that nobody else since ever did until the Lord Jesus Christ came.

And Moses' message was simple, but it was very, very stark. See, God has set before you, he said, life and death, blessing and curse.

Now choose life. And Moses never stopped preaching that message all the way through his life and ministry. Let's listen again to some more words from his last ever sermon to Israel on the brink of the Promised Land.

After he'd finished writing his collected works that we call Genesis to Deuteronomy, the books of Moses, the essential digest, if you like, of his life's ministry.

[1 : 0 7] Just listen to some of these last words. It's Deuteronomy 31 at verse 24. When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, that's Genesis to Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, Take this book of the Lord, put it by the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, that it might be there for a witness against you.

For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today, while I'm yet alive with you, you've been rebellious against the Lord. How much more after my death.

Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death, you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you.

Well, he's not afraid to be blunt, is he? Moses, the preacher. He's not interested in the opinion polls. He's not trying to win elections, like certain other people.

Do you notice the references there to rebellion? I know how stubborn and rebellious you are, says Moses. That's why I've written all these things down, he says, so that even after my death, when I'm gone, you'll have to pay heed to my warnings against rebellion.

[2 : 3 3] And then after these words, Moses had one last preach, all about God's certain promises of goodness for his people, but also about his clear commands for loyalty and obedience, called the Song of Moses, chapter 32.

And at the end of that great song, he says this, Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you, so that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law.

For this is no empty word for you, but your very life. And by these words you shall live.

Well, Jesus himself, you know, endorsed Moses' gospel word of life, continually, all the time. In John 5, verse 46, he said, If you believed Moses, you would have believed me, for he wrote of me, but if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?

Because we both preach the same gospel, says Jesus. The gospel of promise and of warning, of blessing and of curse, of life and of death. And both Moses and Jesus preach the same urgent message.

[3 : 47] Choose life. In John 12, Jesus says, The Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment, and I know that his commandment is eternal life.

John 12, verse 50. But by the same token, Jesus said rebellion, disobedience to God's commandment, is death itself.

John 3, verse 36, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son, shall not see life. But the wrath of God remains on him.

Now notice two very important things in that verse. First, to believe in the Son is to obey the Son. In the Bible, belief is obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It would save an awful lot of confusion if we once got that straight, wouldn't we? But secondly, Jesus says, Not to see life is to experience death.

[4 : 52] And that is, says Jesus, to be under the wrath of God. To be under his curse. Now keep that in mind, as we come now back to Genesis 2 and 3.

Because Moses, as the Gospel preacher, just like Jesus, puts the whole truth before men and women, doesn't he? Both sides of the Gospel. Life and death. Blessing, but also curse.

And in Genesis 2, as we saw this morning, he lays out the perfect covenant of life. He shows us the delightful freedom that is for man under God's rule.

That is life in all its fullness. Belief is obedience, is life in all its delightful fullness. But you see, in Genesis 3, he doesn't hide from the other side.

He shows it to us in terrible technicolor, as we read, doesn't he? The painful curse of death. The disastrous fallout of man's rebellion in stark contrast to the delightful freedom of his submission.

[6 : 03] And that only adds urgency to his plea, doesn't it? Choose life. Don't choose disobedience and rebellion. That's the route to disaster, says Moses, to death, in all its horror, in all its misery, described here.

Now we're going to come back another time to look particularly at verses 1 to 7 in greater detail, to look at the anatomy of this great act of disobedience that's right at the heart of it.

So David Smith, I know you're very anxious to get to that. You'll just have to be patient. We will get there. But tonight I want us to look at the big picture. I want us to see the awful antithesis that there is in chapter 3 to that glorious portrait of life in all its fullness that we saw in Genesis chapter 2.

Not now the perfect covenant of life, but rather the painful curse of death. the disastrous fallout of man's rebellion against God.

And let's just get this clear right at the very start. This, the picture that we see before us in Genesis chapter 3 is what the Bible means by death.

[7 : 18] Sometimes people say when they read this, well, the serpent was right, wasn't he? God says in chapter 2, verse 17, in the day you eat of the forbidden fruit you shall die. But, well, they didn't die.

Well, there are a number of answers to that. One of which is that the phrase you shall surely die simply means the passing of a death sentence where the execution will certainly follow. There are scriptural parallels to that and that's a reasonable thing to say.

But it's better, I think, not to bring our, well, our preconceived and perhaps narrow ideas of what death is to this text.

But rather to let this text in front of us tell us what death really is according to the Bible in all its grim reality. See, just as Genesis chapter 2 defines life as it really is and as it ought to be as God's gift to man, so it seems Genesis chapter 3 is defining and describing what death really is as God's curse upon mankind.

Notice it is all about human death. There's no mention here of animal death or plant death or any sort of general idea of death. That's not on the radar screen at all of the writer.

[8 : 37] It's human death he's speaking about. And human death is described here as it is indeed all the way through scripture not, notice, as the reversal of existence but rather as the reversal of life or more precisely the reversal and the loss of all the perfection of the life that is laid out for us in Genesis chapter 2.

And you find that all the way through the Bible. Henri Blaschet in his book, by the way, which is on the on the bookstore now and I do recommend it to you. He says this, in scripture, 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, unable to enter another condition. Now you get that all the way through at the Old Testament. You might like to read Ezekiel chapter 32 later on.

It talks of the existence of the dead in Sheol, in the pit as it calls it. Describes a conscious existence of those who are dead. Of course, we quoted a moment ago Jesus himself speaking of the reversal of life being not non-existence but existence under the wrath of God.

Of course, that's why the New Testament can talk about a death that is everlasting, eternal. Not annihilation, not the reversal of existence but it's the reversal of life.

[10 : 07] That's what death is according to the Bible. And that's far more terrible in every way than the mere reversal of existence. And you see, what Genesis chapter 3 tells us loud and clear is that God means what he says.

If his promises of life are sure and certain and to be trusted and to be obeyed, so also are his warnings of death. And they must be heeded.

See, Genesis chapter 3 tells us that what God said in chapter 2 verse 17 about on the day you eat of it you shall surely die is absolutely true. And what the serpent said in chapter 3 verse 4 is absolutely false.

So Moses says, see, I set before you today life and death. Death in all its grim horror. Choose life. Choose life.

Well, let's look at the death that's described here under our first heading tonight, which is the grim horror of man's punishment. And surely it is a picture of unquestionable misery, isn't it?

[11 : 25] Even though it is fully deserved. As I said, we'll come back to verses 1 to 7 in more detail, but it's absolutely plain, isn't it, from the whole structure of the narrative that the condition of man's misery and death is not to do with bad luck.

Nor is it anything to do with the capricious whims of the gods who have to be placated. Nor is it anything to do with, well, chance and genetic mutation. Nor is it anything intrinsic to human nature as God created it to be.

It is entirely and utterly due to the rebellion and the revolt against the Lord expressed in disobedience to that command. We're given really no explanation of this great transgression, but what is clear is that there is absolutely no excuse.

Blochot again says, the enigma remains total and the evil rebellion inexcusable. And scripture invites us to probe no further into that, however much we might want to do, but what scripture does do is force us to take in the grim horror of the punishment and the disastrous fallout that follows that rebellion and the very reversal of life that we saw in chapter 2.

Can you see how the death described here in chapter 3 mirrors in dark negativity the light that we, the life that we read about in chapter 2? You see, first of all, the grandeur of God's purpose for man is reversed, isn't it?

[13 : 01] Both his dignity and his destiny are forfeited and lost. Man's dignity as the specially created and intimately created image of God who communes with God and rejoices in communion with one another in perfect harmony male and female in unashamed openness in transparency of relationship.

All of that dignity is shattered here in chapter 3. The first thing that we're told of in verse 7 is their immediate shame. That word isn't used but it's the only way to describe their state, isn't it?

They sense now their vulnerability, their nakedness. Instinctively they want to hide from one another and protect themselves because, you see, previously they both submitted only to one God.

They were both perfect subjects of his. There was no anxiety. but now, now both of them have grasped to be their own God and so they must be rivals of one another and so they hide their vulnerability from one another and together they hide from their new great rival God himself.

So verse 7 says, they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God. the dignity of humanity as kings and priests as sharing God's home in communion with God is utterly lost.

[14 : 36] They're now fugitives hiding in the bushes, alienated and anxious and unashamed instead of unashamed. well, alienation, anxiety, shame, that's what provides our psychologists and psychiatrists an awful lot of business, isn't it?

In our human race. And the dignity of man as a responsible being, responsible God to respond to God and his gracious commands, that too is lost.

He denies all responsibility. So the woman blames the serpent and the man blames the woman. The effect of sin, says Henri Blocher, is the denying of sin.

Well, that's what keeps lawyers and judges in a very lucrative profession, isn't it? The effect of sin is the denying of sin. But these things are all a shadow of death, aren't they?

In our lives, in our thinking, in our society. Man's dignity is lost, but so also is the destiny of grandeur.

[15 : 45] He was created to rule the cosmos for God, to subdue it, as God subdued the chaos and the darkness of the waters to bring harmony. That was man's calling. But now the curse brings the very opposite, doesn't it?

Cosmic disharmony. Look at verses 14 and 15. They speak of disaster and reversal on a cosmic scale, don't they? Spiritually. They speak of an enmity and a hostility that will forever be now between the two seeds, the seed of the woman and the seed of Satan, her offspring and his, two rival humanities in the world.

And there will forever after be struggle and enmity in the spiritual realm. Instead of an earth that's filled and subdued with sons and daughters of God, there will also be those who are implacably opposed to God, even, well, even within families.

As Genesis 4 begins to show us so clearly, doesn't it, with Cain and Abel. Alas, we know that to be true, don't we? And the pain and the living death that it brings to so many families that are divided spiritually like that.

Just as Jesus said, a man will be against his own father, a woman against her own mother. And man now has no power at all over these cosmic forces of evil.

[17 : 11] He's as good as dead in the struggle to subdue evil. And so also the struggle to subdue the earth in physical terms, all physical harmony is lost too.

In Eden, in chapter 2, verse 15, we read that God put man literally at rest in the garden to work it and to keep it. But now, chapter 3, verse 17, God says, cursed is the very ground because of you.

In pain, you shall eat of it. Thorns and thistles it will bring forth. I'll speak to any farmer today about that. We might have pesticides, we might have fertilizers, but look at the pain of foot and mouth.

Look at the pain even of this new blue tongue disease. Man, in all his modern capability and wonder, utterly helpless in the face of what? a midge.

And that's death, says the Bible. From the glory of humans at rest, of God's kings and priests, to the ignominious servitude of a slave laborer, the grind of the farmer in his field, the humdrum grimness sometimes of nine to five at the office, house, or nine to nine perhaps these days in the city, or eight to midnight perhaps in the sweatshops of the far east and many other places.

[18 : 43] Man no longer conquers and subdues the earth, but he is subdued by the earth. And nor does humanity any longer effortlessly fill the earth.

Look at verse 16, to the woman he said, I will multiply your pain in childbearing. What a tragic irony that is. The woman, the helper, without whom the man cannot fulfill his destiny, who helps humanity by being fruitful and multiplying, is hindered in that very calling, in that very destiny.

Do you see how death is the very loss, the very reversal, in every respect, of the grandeur of God's calling for man? It's also the loss of the generosity of God's promises and provision for mankind.

Both the beautiful place that God had given him and the beauty of the partnership God gives humanity is lost. The garden of God, where man was given a home, that place of beauty and of bounty, of lavish provision of life itself, well, it's lost.

And again, there's total reversal, isn't there? In chapter 2, verse 14, the Lord God took the man, put him at rest in the garden to keep it and work it, and commanded his enjoyment, his fulfillment.

[20 : 07] But look at verse 23 of chapter 3. The Lord sent man out of the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. A terrible expulsion.

And along with it, a reminder of that without dignity and without destiny, without the communion with the Lord that made him special, all he is, well, dust.

He loses his place, his home. Verse 24, God drove him out of the garden. We shouldn't be surprised, should we, that we live in a world that's so full of lost and lonely people.

people who feel that they are, aliens, outsiders like L'Etranger of Albert Camus' dark novel. We're not at home now where we are, that's why.

And even as people of faith, it's true, isn't it? We're strangers in a strange land, in this earth, in this world, as it is now. But homelessness, restlessness, unbelonging, wandering, humanity far away from whom, that's all part of what the Bible calls death, as the wages of sin.

[21 : 25] And that's what we have here. Humanity has literally lost the place because of sin. Just as we've also lost the harmony of the relationships and the partnership of the sexes that God created us for.

Doesn't verse 16 encapsulate a whole history of the desire for dominance and the struggle to subjugate between the sexes. There are some issues of translation here, how we're best to understand verse 16, the second part there, especially these two words, desire and rule.

It could be that the woman will desire the husband in the right way, desire his care and companionship and comfort and so on, and yet he will rule her, dominate her, mistreat her, even sometimes abuse her.

Well, we do see that, don't we? Extraordinarily sometimes in the loyalty and the devotion of some women to dreadfully abusive men.

But I think actually what this verse means is something a little bit different. That the desire that's spoken of here of the woman for her husband is actually a desire against, as the footnote suggests there.

[22 : 40] It's a wrong desire. It's a desire to control to dominate her husband in the reverse of the pattern of creation that God made. Man as the leader, woman as the helper.

Why do I say that? Well, if you look across to the next column in chapter 4, verse 7, you'll find almost exactly the same phrase used and exactly the same words about sin's desire to rule over Cain.

And that obviously can't be a right desire. And Cain himself is told you must rule over it. In other words, you must rule over sin. If that's right, then what God is saying here about the male-female relationship in marriage is that it will be disrupted because of sin.

Eve had taken the initiative that led her husband into sin instead of the other way around. And that's why Adam was held guilty by God because Adam was responsible to be the leader and he wasn't.

He abdicated responsibility. And God is saying, well, that pattern will continue. Women will seek to dominate in their marriage and their relationship. And men, alas, often will allow that to be the case.

[23 : 52] But no, says God, you must not allow that to be the case. You must play your part as a man and take the lead. See, God's saying to the women, you'll always find yourself trying to be a man, but you'll never succeed actually.

You'll only make things worse for yourself. He's saying to man, you'll always be tempted to just act like a woman. But that too will make things just worse for you and for your wife.

But whichever way we take it, it's perfectly plain that it simply describes the disorder between the sexes that we've seen all through history, isn't it? All through society today.

Not partnership, but a desire for domination. Not care and mutual love, but a desire to control and a mutual mistrust.

Know how we've lost the grandeur of our purpose and how we mourn the loss of the generous provision of God, the perfect place, the perfect partnerships.

[24 : 58] But of course, death also means, doesn't it, the loss of God's gracious protection for our lives. from the protective command of chapter 2, verse 17, not to eat so it will not die.

Now that death is a positive certainty, verse 19 of chapter 3, to dust you shall return. There can be absolutely no question that physical death is certainly part of the curse of death.

The New Testament makes that absolutely plain. Paul says in Romans 5, death entered the world through the sin of one man. through Adam. But physical death is just a part of the state of death as the Bible understands it.

And the whole Bible, just as here in Genesis 3, describes death as a condition, death as a dark power that overcomes the whole realm of humanity through that rebellion.

Paul says death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses. It reigned as a dark power. And that power of death has a hold over man because of sin, because it's sin.

[26 : 09] It's rebellion against God's rule that must exclude man from the source of life, from the very presence of God, because in God's holy presence, in his holy dwelling place, rebellion simply cannot be.

sin. And that's why verse 22 tells us that rebellious man simply cannot be permitted any longer to breathe the breath of life as it's meant to be.

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

Begins in verse 8, doesn't it? With man hiding from the presence of the Lord God, but it ends tragically in something far, far worse in verse 24. God hiding himself from the presence of man and woman.

Unquestionably miserable, and yet fully deserved. Yes, including the physical death of our mortal bodies, but far more than that, it's the non-life, without the dignity and the destiny that we were made for, without the generosity and the joy of God's provisions for life as it was meant to be, and without the assurance of hope for our eternal perfection that God had given.

[27 : 50] And that's what Genesis 3 tells us, that death as the wages of sin really is. It is a grim picture, isn't it? A grim, grim reality.

But it also tells us more, doesn't it? Because it's not just the grim horror of man's punishment. In the midst of that, and indeed it is grim and horrible, but in the midst of it there is also the glimmering hope of God's promise, is there not?

Even amid the unquestioned misery that is fully deserved, here we see a picture of inextinguishable mercy, even though it is absolutely and fully undeserved.

God's grace. You see, in Genesis 2, in God's blessings, there was only sheer grace, nothing else. But here in Genesis 3, God's curse is not only curse.

There's grace and there's mercy, even in the curse of this just and holy God. I want you to see that. First, there's grace in his calling out to man, isn't there, in verse 9.

[29 : 01] The very first words of God to fallen humanity are words of entreaty. Oh, Adam, where are you? And what have you done? He is the God of the Bible, seeking out man, man the rebel, man the sinner, man the enemy of God.

What kind of God is this? The kind of God perhaps, who, while we were still sinners, still enemies, could come himself to reconcile us to him.

There's grace in God's covering for man, in verse 21, isn't there? What the man and the woman instinctively knew instantly, they needed for themselves proper clothes, a proper covering for their newfound shame, for which their own pathetic efforts with leaves could never adequately do?

Well, God does. God covers their shame. What kind of God is this? God, perhaps, that the psalmists sing of, you forgave the iniquity of your people, you covered all their shame.

And his grace, even in the very words of God's curse himself, even in his wrath, this God remembers mercy. The woman, do you see verse 16, she'll have pain, but she will have children.

[30 : 29] Not for her the curse of barrenness. They shall be fruitful, even though there's pain. Verse 20 says, Eve shall be called so, because she'll be the mother of all the living.

Perhaps that's a mark of Adam's faith in God's word of promise. But the man, in verse 18 and 19, is cursed, yes, but he shall eat. There will be pain, there will be struggles, but three times God says, you shall eat.

You see, there will be life, even in the shadow of death. Even in the physical death, the curse of that, there is mercy. Yes, death comes to us physically as a judgment.

To dust you shall return. Yet it's also a mercy, isn't it? An end to the struggle and the pain and the burden of life. We often say that.

It's a mercy, he's away. It's a mercy, he's away at last. And it carries hope, doesn't it? Because from dust, God made man.

[31 : 37] And therefore, from dust, God can remake man. That brings us to verse 15, doesn't it? The protevangelium, as it's called, the first great gospel promise.

Now I can remember William still loving to preach on this verse. Because you see, above all, in the only curse where there is no mercy for its recipient, the curse on the serpent himself, in this curse there glimmers with bright beauty.

The promise of mercy personified. personified. I use my words very carefully there. It's a promise of absolute victory, isn't it? Over the serpent and his terrible realm of death, the power of death.

And it's a promise of victory for man from that realm and power of death. We would need a whole evening, really, to study this. But just see God's mercy to Eve in these words.

God says he will convert Eve's own heart. No longer will she love the beguiling beauty of the serpent. No, she'll have hatred. She'll have enmity for him.

[32 : 48] She will not be his. God will not allow it. She will be the first reborn one. Remade as a struggler against the serpent.

You know, that's the first description in the whole Bible of what it means to be a true believer. One in whom God has planted enmity against the devil and his world and the flesh.

I often say that to people when they say to me, I'm struggling so hard. I wonder if I can really be a Christian. Brother and sister, if you're struggling tonight against the world and the flesh and the devil, shout hallelujah, because that's the definition of someone who's a believer in Christ.

God has put that struggle in you. It's God's mercy to Eve. But there's also God's mercy for Eve's many seed, isn't there? Look at the second line there.

There will be enmity between her offspring and his. She will be the mother not only of all the born, but of all the reborn. The unbroken line of faith that shall always be preserved for God against his enemy.

[33 : 53] It's his promise. But there's also, isn't there, God's mercy truly personified here through the man who at the last will fatally wound not, notice, not the serpent's seed, but the serpent himself.

Do you see that third line? It's not Eve and the serpent here. It's not her progeny and his progeny. It's he, whoever he is, and the serpent himself.

He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. What can that mean? And what kind of God can this be? Who even in his curse on rebellious humanity should sow a seed of mercy through victory over the serpent.

That ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, the deceiver of the whole world as Revelation chapter 12 calls him. Well, he's the God who in the fullness of time sent forth his son, born of a woman.

Don't you love the delightful irony of God and his humor? Born of a woman to redeem those under the law of sin and death that we might have the adoption of sons.

[35 : 16] Yes, says John, the reason that the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. But that was the glimmering hope, the gracious promise, even here, right back then in the day of rebellion.

The day of cursing was the day of God's grace. There's grace in his calling. There's grace in the covering of God. There's grace in the cursing of God.

But lastly, yes, don't forget. Don't miss. The grace in the cost to God. Derek Kidner says in his commentary, it took the work of the last Adam to bring home to us our full downfall in the first Adam.

But it took his work also to bring home to us the full cost of his mercy. Yes, the reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the evil one. But how? No. The answer is not without cost.

Hebrews 2 tells us it was through death that he would destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil. That was the cost. The death of the beloved one, God himself in the person of his own son.

[36 : 37] And yet that too is a glorious truth that glimmers right here in this chapter, isn't it? Look again. He shall crush or bruise your heel, your head, a fatal head wound to the serpent, but he shall crush or bruise your heel in return.

There will be a great and a terrible cost to the one who brings victory ultimately. The promised deliverer, the promised victor, the promised mercy bringer will bring mercy but will bear himself a terrible cost.

He himself will bear the very curse he comes to release his people from. That's what the prophets spoke of, wasn't it? Isaiah declared of him, 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 me?

Because yes, the Bible says this is your story and my story as well as that of Adam and Eve. What kind of God is this who, even as he spells out the grim horror of man's punishment, cannot do so without also speaking of the glimmering hope of his promise of grace, of inextinguishable mercy, that though it's fully undeserved by you and me, just as by Adam and Eve, is inextinguishable.

[38 : 27] What kind of God is this who says, see, I set before you today life and death, now choose life, when for man to choose life means for God himself to choose so willingly and in loving mercy to choose the painful curse of death for himself, that we might have life.

What kind of God is this? Let me close with some words based on Derek Kidner's comment on those fateful words of verse 6.

He says, she took and ate, so simply act, so hard it's undoing. God himself will taste poverty and death before take and eat become at last verbs of salvation.

Profound truth, glorious truth. He did take on poverty and death itself. And he did so for us so that the painful curse of death for us might through his death become instead the perfect covenant of life, which he says to us, take, eat.

this is my body broken for you. See, says the God of Genesis chapter 3, see I set before you this day life and death.

[40 : 15] My death for your life. not choose life. Life.