

God's world – Session 2

Dark Days

Outrage

Mike was one of those personality-plus people, the kind who are always at the center of the group at a party, who always have something interesting and valuable to say, and who seem to have few 'gaps' in their character. He had moved overseas, married and had children, and so I had lost touch with him, until I found out that he had been killed instantly in a car accident on an Italian motorway. Susie had really turned her life around, and after looking like she was heading off the rails in a big way, had managed to pull it together. By the time the cancer was diagnosed, it was already huge, with multiple secondaries, and the life expectancy was given at weeks and months rather than years. James was enjoying life as a student, that is until he came down with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which drained him of any energy or light in his life. He went into a relationship 'black hole', where all he could do was suck the vibe out of any situation. It was 10 years before he emerged, but by then he was a different person.

The fact is, this world is very far from the life and peace for which God created it. It may be that you have experienced that up close and personal; or it may be, thank God, that you are relatively untouched by the dark side of life. Either way, pain is never too far from us, and when things go wrong, often the first question that springs to our lips is 'Why?' Partly because we don't understand, and partly because it is not understandable, pain and difficulty and suffering continue to come to us as a shock. There is something profoundly right and Biblical about that shock, and something profoundly wrong and dehumanising when the presence and impact of evil is regarded as normal, as simply one of those things.

This session, we take a look where often the temptation is to shut our eyes and pretend that things are not as bad as we suspect. The fact is that no matter how hard we pretend, or how deeply we try to bury our heads in the sand, each of us knows that this world is not even close to perfect, and desperately needs saving. What's more, that is true of you and me at a personal level as well; we are not even close to perfect, and desperately need saving.

The Bible is ruthlessly honest on this issue, what author C.S. Lewis called, 'The problem of pain'. And it sheets home responsibility for the problem directly to us human beings.

Read Genesis 3.1-24.

Gen. 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 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 middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not 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 loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, 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?” 10 He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” 11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12 The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” 16 To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” 17 And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

20 The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. 22 Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” — 23 therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Make a list of all the ways that Adam and Eve turned away from God.

To what alternatives do they turn as sources of knowledge and fulfilment?

Sin, and Evil

From the Bible's point of view, the greatest shock is that there should be Dark Days at all. What God had created was good, and then very good, so that God came to the end of his creating of the heavens and the earth, and rested, not out of exhaustion but out of satisfaction and completion. What's more, the one through whom God created the universe, his own Son, was life, and that life was the light of all people. All that was needful for those first humans was to live in that light as faithful image bearers. His love and provision for them knew no limits. And so it is a shock, an inexplicable outrage, that the first humans should turn on the one who had breathed into them the breath of life and betray the one whose likeness they bore; it just doesn't make sense.

When the Bible depicts this catastrophic initial sin, we see exposed the nature of all sin. As we saw last session, righteousness is all about God, humanity and the world being in right relationship with each other, in peace and love and trust. It makes sense then that sin, as the opposite and denial of righteousness, is best understood as essentially a breach of that rightly ordered matrix of relationships. In particular at its heart sin involves, on the one hand, a turning away from the living and true creator God as the one in whom life and joy is found, and refusing to accord to him his rightful place in our lives as our creator and sustainer and judge; and at the same time, because we humans are created as worshipping beings, there is also a turning to some alternative.

The Bible is aware of two fundamental alternatives, which correspond to the two central ways sin is portrayed. The first alternative is oneself. At one level, this makes sense; once God is rejected, worship finds its home in the next greatest thing, that which bears God's image. This is the sin of pride. Now pride is a tricky subject. It is a different thing from a healthy self-esteem, and we are increasingly aware of the impact on people of having a damaged sense of themselves. Pride on the other hand, consists of placing oneself at the center of life. It is a blend of self-absorption and an over-estimation of one's abilities or worth. It can take obvious form - for example, consider what it takes to write an ad in the personal section of a magazine like this:

"Strikingly beautiful: Ivy League graduate. Playful, passionate, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate original in mind, unique in spirit. I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth, sophistication and earthiness, seriousness and a love of fun. Professionally successful, perfectly capable of being self-sufficient and independent, but I won't be truly content until we find each other ... Please reply with a substantial letter describing your background and who you are. Photo essential."¹

Or again, on one occasion after an argument with an employee, Winston Churchill complained that he had been rude; the employee, speaking his mind, replied that Churchill had also been rude. Apparently, Churchill replied after a moment, "But I am a great man!" This is pride on the surface; but there is also pride in a far more subtle form

¹ New York magazine, 8 June, 1992, p. 111. The illustrations in this section are taken from Cornelius Plantinga's book, *Not the way it's supposed to be: A breviary of sin*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995.

(perhaps if your reaction to those 2 stories was, 'That's awful', it's a little closer than you might think!). Subtle pride may be quiet, but it is no less part of a sinful rejection of God and turning inward for that. And it is pride which expresses itself in all the selfish living that drives out love, the kind of life that resorts easily to violence to get one's own way, or to lying to make things smoother, or to finding excuses like skin colour or sexual orientation to hate someone. Pride, as the turning away from God and replacing him with oneself at the center of life, is at the root of so much that is wrong about the world.

The second great alternative to God at the center of life is to turn toward the creation. Human beings are given the task of exercising God's loving authority in the world, receiving from it what they need for life. The material world around us makes a great servant, but a lousy master, and seeking to find life and fulfilment in that creation, perhaps in the abundance of possessions or experiences, taking that which is good by God's grace and using it to replace God, is called in the Bible the sin of idolatry. It expresses itself in a level of devotion to any element of creation, whether that be a person or a thing or a cause or a company, which belongs only to God. We are familiar with instances of a crude idolatry in traditional cultures in scenes of worshipping totem poles. Contemporary idolatry is more sophisticated, but just as twisted – seen for example in an obsession with one's own body, and the kind of dedication to the body-beautiful that fuels the gym and personal trainer industry; or the level of expenditure on home renovation and house-and-garden level home improvements; or even more commonly, a workaholism that sees people invest more in their careers than in their relationships.

What is at stake here is the issue of the heart. In his book, "The life of God in the soul of man", Henry Scougal's made this insightful comment: "The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love". From the perspective of the Bible, the living and true God is alone worthy to be the ultimate object of our soul's love. Anything less than this is sin. Pride is finding in yourself what should only be found in God; idolatry is finding in the world what should only be found in God. These two alternatives are captured in the diagram, where figure 2 is the situation under sin, contrasted with figure 1 from last week, the world the way God created it to be:

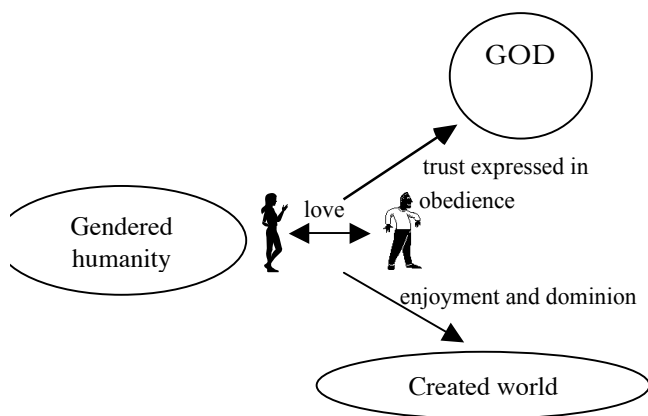


Figure 1

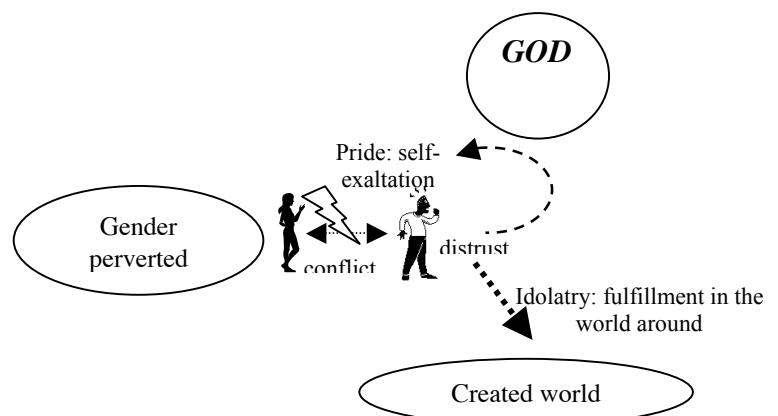


Figure 2

So begins the sad story of sin in the Bible. The Bible describes this catastrophe as falling short, in particular falling short of the glory for which God had created and destined the world. And having fallen short of the glory of God, the LORD God gave them over to the darkness they had embraced, though it gave him no pleasure, and indeed broke his heart. His love for his people was not diminished, but his relationship with them was broken. Where God had said, 'Let there be light', and it was so, now the first humans had said, 'Let there be dark', and, because he had given them the power even to rebel, it too became so.

Now read Romans 5.12-21

Rom. 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned — 13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14 Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Describe how Paul depicts the relationship between humanity and sin.

What were the results of the initial sin for humanity and the world?

That first rebellion was the second-most decisive act in the course of human history, to be matched and overcome only by God's grace-filled response. From it we learn both about the nature of sin and evil, and their effects in the world.

As the story of the Bible unfolds, it becomes clear that there are two aspects to humanity's relationship to sin and Evil. First, when the Bible speaks of sin, we are in the realm of moral and spiritual responsibility, or what can be called **agency**. All people, as descendants of those first humans, unfailingly and wholeheartedly embrace sin, turning from God and towards ourselves or towards the creation. Some do so in an obvious and anti-social way, stealing, hurting, lying. On the whole, we feel reasonably comfortable identifying people who do these things, especially when it causes pain and damage to others, as 'sinners'. Of course, other people live their lives in basically pleasant and even socially acceptable ways, and we have a much harder time understanding how it could be fair to call such people (perhaps even yourself!) sinners. That's where the material we looked at in the first couple of pages is so important. You see, it all depends on the frame of reference. If sin was fundamentally about how we treat other people, and whether they were hurt by us, then it would be unfair, and maybe even just nasty, to call fundamentally pleasant people sinners. But that is not at the heart of sin. Sin is first and foremost about how we treat God, before it's about how we treat others. In fact, the very way in which we don't include God in our configuration of how we ought to live, the fact that we can feel completely comfortable about treating others well and entirely ignoring Him, is itself the essence of sin. From this perspective, once you include God in the picture, in fact at the center of the picture, it's easy to see how even pleasant people who don't hurt anyone else can be as much sinners as anyone else.

Insofar as we turn away from the God who made us, even if we do it nicely, we are perpetrators of sin, and God's response to sin by moral and spiritual perpetrators is judgment, and especially the judgment of death, which we will discuss below. For the moment, it is important to note that there is another way that the Bible speak of what has gone wrong in the world, which is the moral flip-side of agency; and that is in terms of **victim-hood**.

The Bible make it clear that the first sin opened the door to something far bigger than individual acts of rebellion, to a power which is so all-pervasive that it can only be described as the cosmic enemy of God. Sometimes this enemy is depicted as Sin, sometimes as the Evil One or the Devil. This enemy is evil personified, a force or power which stands against God, and under whose power stands the whole world and all human beings. Jesus describes the purpose of his ministry as defeating the power of this "strong man" and plundering his property, thereby freeing those whose lives are held in slavery to him by the fear of death. Humans are perpetrators of sin, yes, but victims also.

Fill out the table by describing how each of the following passages depicts humanity as both agent and victim of sin.

Passage	Agent / perpetrator	Victim
<p>John 8.31-38</p> <p><u>John 8:31</u> Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <u>32</u> and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” <u>33</u> They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” <u>34</u> Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <u>35</u> The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <u>36</u> So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. <u>37</u> I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. <u>38</u> I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”</p>		
<p>Ephesians 2.1-3</p> <p><u>Eph. 2:1</u> You were dead through the trespasses and sins <u>2</u> in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <u>3</u> All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.</p>		

Hebrews 2.14-17

Heb. 2:14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

If you have a Bible, you might also like to look up the following verses: Acts 8.22-23, Romans 5.21, Romans 6.6, 15-23, Romans 7.5, 14-24, Romans 8.5-8, 2 Corinthians 4.3-4.

What seems to be the relationship between humanity's agency and victim-hood?

What these verses clearly show is that each of us, as descendants of those first humans, are in some sense born into slavery to sin and evil, and so we are victims. Ever since the first turning away from God (called 'the fall'), humanity has suffered from what one author has described as 'a necessary moral incapacity'. What that means is that however much we humans may try to live a moral life, we are broken and cannot help but sin, we are (as Jesus put it) slaves to sin. Interestingly, our own experience of life frequently testifies to this Biblical truth. It's true that some people have seared their consciences like a steak on a hot-plate, so that they do not feel guilt for the things that they do wrong; but for most, they can relate only too well to the frustration they experience as a result of this inability to do

the right thing in a consistent way. Many people are aware that they fail even to live up to their own moral standards. You may have noticed this as you talk to people about their loves and their struggles. Often the response is simply 'I can't help it' or 'it's not my fault'. To some extent, they are right!

And yet at the same time, all people unfailingly and wholeheartedly *embrace* sin, acting truly according to our corrupted nature, turning from God and into ourselves or towards the creation, and so are perpetrators of evil as well; responsible for our own sin and accountable before God. But it's both, and we must hold the two simultaneously - all people are both agents and victims of sin.

Perhaps the situation that is closest to this dual position as victims and perpetrators is addiction. Addicts are in a terrible bind. It feels like a power has a hold of you, in the face of which you feel entirely helpless. There is a way in which you are desperate to break free, but find yourself trapped, enslaved to the power of the addiction which grabs you and throws you around even though you know that you are doing damage to yourself. At the same time, addicts know that they are responsible, they have and continue to make choices, they are decision makers as they continue to feed their addiction; in fact, to take this responsibility away from them is the last step on the path to handing them over utterly to their addiction. And what the Bible says is that we are addicted to sin - it is both a power that holds us mesmerised; and at the same time, a choice we make to be the kind of people we are, and for which we are responsible.

All this has three important implications: first, it means that help can come only from outside. We human beings are fundamentally incapable of dealing with our own situation; we are not part of the solution, we are the problem, we are carriers of the sin-virus in our very nature. And that means even our best efforts and intentions, in education or in political activity and reform or even in sheer moral and spiritual self-help, are themselves tainted with this disease of sin and evil. Put simply, we need saving, and trying to save ourselves is like trying to lift ourselves up by the bootstraps - it just can't work. We need saving, and therefore we need a Saviour.

But second, God's fundamental orientation towards human beings remains that of love for his image bearing creation, and therefore to save them from their slavery, to provide this Saviour. It's interesting to see how most parents respond to kids who become trapped in addiction or substance abuse - there is so much pain, sometimes even the pain of having to do things which the kid regards as hurtful, and yet in the hearts of so many parents, the deep devotion of fierce love remains, despite the hurts. So it is with God.

And third, it means that in an important sense, it is Evil, Sin and their consequence, Death (1 Corinthians 15.25-26) that are the real enemies of God; and therefore it is against these things that his holy wrath and judgement are directed. We will return to this point in our

fourth session, but it's important to notice both sides of this reality. God would be less than just (in fact the word we use for it is 'corrupt') if he were to simply turn a blind eye to sin and evil, and not rise up in judgment and fierce anger at the terrible spoiling of his good creation. But at the same time, God's judgement is only secondarily against human beings, and that insofar as they continue to align themselves with Evil. Far from standing over the people he has made with a club, ready to strike anyone who is disobedient, the Creator God is like a patient Father, waiting and waiting for his children to return to him. He is patient even in the face of 'scoffers' who ridicule his justice and doubt that he will in the end do away with evil. It is his desire that none should perish. His judgment will come on those who are disobedient, but only if they refuse to accept his mercy and continue to align themselves with the primary enemies of God.

Sin which leads to Death

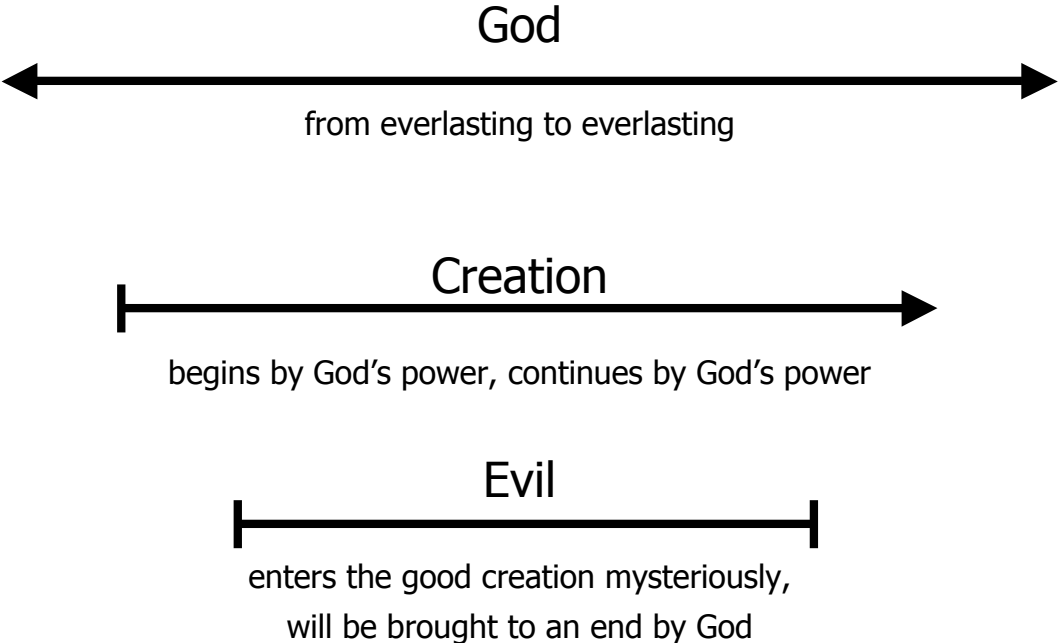
We have seen that God's good creation, the world he made in love to be a place of life and peace, was hijacked by Sin and Evil, through the turning away from God of the first pair. In their sin we see the character of all sin, a rejection of God as rightful Lord, and a turning elsewhere for all that God had promised. Further, we have explored the way that this first sin opened the door to a terrible power, which continues to wreak havoc in the world, making slaves of people, much like an addicts enslavement. There is one final piece of the puzzle. Given what we have looked at, it makes sense that the fruit of Sin and Evil, which oppose themselves to God, should be the opposite of the blessing that comes from God, life and peace. And so it is that the world, and the individual worlds of each person, are characterised by death and conflict. We see this at the cosmic level, at the national and international levels, and in the day to day existence of people. Death and conflict are the basic experience of a world where 'there is something wrong with everything'. These then are the Dark Days.

As we think about these issues, there is often a question that nags at us - where did evil, the kinds of evil that we see all too frequently, come from, whether that be the natural evil of earthquakes and tsunamis, or the human evil of genocide and grinding poverty? We think somehow that if we can answer the question of the origin of evil, then we might be able to find a solution for evil.

The problem is, the question itself assumes that evil ought to have a rational explanation. And some have been attempted. On one hand, some people suggest that evil has always been there, and is just part of the fabric of the universe; but (as we saw last session) not only does that eliminate all hope from human existence, it does not even square with our best scientific knowledge, which indicates that the world had a definite beginning in time. On the other hand, some people suggest that God himself is actually responsible for the evil in the world, and made things flawed; but again, as we saw last session, the straightforward testimony of the Bible is that God made everything "very good". And as a

third alternative, some people suggest that evil is neither eternal (option 1) nor created (option 2), but actually an illusion, simply a product of our false desires, such that if we could eliminate our desires then we could eliminate evil; but of course, this is to appallingly ignore the actual experience of evil and suffering in the lives of so many. No; evil is neither eternal, nor is it created, nor is it an illusion – the reality to which the Bible bears witness is that it is a non-sense, literally, a thing which has no rational explanation. What’s more, it is important that there be no conceivable explanation, neither for that first act of evil, the deliberate and knowing disobedience to the word of God, nor for our subsequent sin-addiction. In fact, to locate an explanation would find a place for sin, a home for it somewhere in the creation, created purely good. Rather, it comes ‘out of the blue’, and is catastrophic.

These profound and important truths are represented in the diagram below:



The reason that there can be hope for an end to the devastation of sin and Evil is precisely because Evil had a beginning, and what has a beginning can logically have an end. But even more than that, the reason that the end of Evil does not necessarily entail the end of creation is that Evil only subsequently entered a creation that was originally good. So Evil can be destroyed, and the destruction of Evil is the redemption of creation. This is hope!

In other words, there is more to be said than that these are ‘dark days’. As we have indicated, this is not a world abandoned by God, and simply awaiting destruction. God’s purpose remains to be Lord of a world which reflects his power and goodness. And in the same vein, his purpose for humanity remains blessing, life and peace. And so it is precisely into this world and to accomplish this purpose that God gave his Son, sent into the heart of our situation, the heart of darkness, to once and for all deal with sin. But more on that next week. For now, we need to ask the question, “so what?”

So what?

Songwriters are the popular poets of our time, some better than others. Neil Finn's song, "Sinner" on his 1988 album "Try whistling this" is a slow but fierce ballad that sums up the feeling of our culture in regard to the issue of sin: "sinner, there is no such thing." Maybe he is reacting to a strict religious upbringing, maybe he just wants to feel free ("Under moonlight I stood wild and naked, felt no shame just my spirit awakened"). What's clear is that he sees no use for a discussion like this about sin.

But the fact is that 'find sand: insert head' has never been a realistic response to real problems, and if there's one thing in all the world that's obvious, it is that sin and Evil are the problem. Humanly and environmentally, we stagger from day to day under the heavy effects of these twin terrorists, and see all too often their harvest of death. The challenge to you as you reflect on this material is whether you will put your hand up as a sinner; see yourself as compromised, as part of the problem, as a one who is both a willing agent and also a helpless victim of sin? And not in the superficial sense of 'no one's perfect'; rather in the substantial sense that no one's even close to perfect, not even with the people they love and care for, let alone the people they are indifferent towards, or worse the people they hate!

No, the fact is that you and I sin, sin badly, sin most importantly by not treating God right, and therefore sin by not treating other people and other parts of the creation right. The question is, will you acknowledge this sin?

We may aptly summarise the teaching of the Bible on the Dark Days of this world, as follows:

But Evil entered God's world...

a. First humans

- arrogantly asserted independence from God
- opened the door for Evil

b. Evil

- infects every part of God's world
- leads to death and conflict

c. Every human since

- has bought into Evil by seeking independence from God
- is enslaved to Evil