CHAPTER 6. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?\(^1\)

I. Something’s Rotten in Denmark!\(^2\)

A. *The Plague* (French: *La Peste*) by Albert Camus. This book is an existentialist classic. It tells the story of an Algerian city (Oran) struck by a plague that no one really understands (its cause, its cure, and how it is spread). The city is quarantined and the gates are shut. The characters in the story (doctor, priest, vacationer, criminal, etc.) must figure out how to live in such tragic conditions. The book’s message seems to be this: be **courageous** and **authentic** even when life is absurd. The final paragraph reveals Camus’ pessimism about the human condition.

    *And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.*

Existentialism in general and *The Plague* in particular seem to be **strong** on understanding the extent and the depth of the problem (a plague caused by rats) but completely **bankrupt** in pointing to a cure. Life is absurd: deal with it!

B. There is great agreement among all people everywhere that something is wrong. There is great disagreement on what that something actually is! But until the problem is accurately diagnosed, the solutions proposed will be **inadequate** at best and **toxic** at worst. Throughout history, a long line of would-be “messiahs” have offered their own brand of “salvation” based on the “disease” they felt lay at the root of the tragic human condition.

1. Philosophers (Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, etc.) seem to believe that the problem is **ignorance**. Therefore the solution is **education**. Example: the way to deal with the sexual problems in our culture today is more “sex education” classes in schools.

2. Krishna (Hinduism) seemed to believe that the root problem is our **bad karma** which is the result of our bad behaviors in a previous life. The goal of salvation is to build up a bank of better karma by our good behavior so that we can eventually **escape** this wheel of endless reincarnations and enter the state of Brahmin.

3. Buddha taught that the basic human problem is **suffering** and the reason we suffer is because we have desire. Therefore the solution he offers is to **cease all desire** so that we can enter Nirvana—the state of the snuffed out candle.

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\(^1\) I am indebted to G. K. Chesterton for the idea for the title for this lesson, which is taken from a book he wrote in 1910 entitled *What's Wrong with the World*?

\(^2\) This expression comes from Act I, Scene 4, of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Spoken by Marcellus, the true quotation is “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The phrase means that all is not well in the political hierarchy but over time has come to be used to describe a situation when things are not what they ought to be.
4. Marx believed the problem was an unequal distribution of the wealth. Therefore his proposed solution was to find ways to redistribute economic resources, thus making possible a utopian paradise on earth.

5. Freud saw the root problem as lying in our subconscious; wounds and deficiencies that lie buried from our dysfunctional past producing neurosis, psychosis, etc. Therefore, the salvation he offers is one based in psychological therapy.

6. Medical professionals tend to think that the real human problem lies in our lack of good health. Therefore, if we can just find better health care, exercise, diet, etc. all will be well.

7. Politicians often see the problem as the lack of government programs. Their promise of salvation typically relates to higher taxes and bigger government.

Until we get the diagnosis right and figure out what the root problem really is, we will never be able to bring real solutions to our world. Our eternal destinies as well as the future of civilization hang in the balance when we answer the question “What’s wrong with the world?”

II. Paradise Lost: Genesis 3 is the Biblical explanation of the tragic human condition.

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A. Temptation and the fall (vv. 1–6).

1. There’s a snake in the garden!

To understand the origin of the snake one must read the prequel that describes the time when there was “war in heaven” and Lucifer was thrown out, falling to earth (see Rev. 12:7-9; Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:12-17). In Genesis, the author does not want us to get hung up on the origin of the serpent. Rather, he wants to emphasize that the origin of sin and evil is not to be found in holy God, not in the sinless man and woman, and not in the perfect environment.

2. There’s a question in the heart!

Because there is one prohibition (2:16-17) and because there is a snake in the garden, we have all the ingredients necessary for freedom and therefore for making a bad choice. God did not create Adam and Eve as robots. He wanted a relationship, he wanted their love! Therefore, it was essential that they have freedom of choice. Indeed, free will is part of the image of God. The will is the only thing we really possess. The will is the only thing God really wants. This is where the battle is won or lost!

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” (C. S. Lewis. The Great Divorce.).

3. There is an intention and an act.

The Bible talks about sin and sins, the sin nature and the sinful action. Sin is not just a behavior, it is an attitude. Criminals may have dirty hands yet clean
hearts. Pharisees may have clean hands yet dirty hearts. In the beginning, Adam and Eve had no sin and thus they committed no sins. But when they allowed their appetites to become fixated on forbidden fruit, then sinful behavior was sure to follow. The Bible is a food-driven book. Adam’s descendants, however, are born with misplaced appetites and a perversity that is un-natural. The doctrinal term to describe this reality for the human race is Original Sin, or sometimes Total Depravity.

4. We are not ignorant of Satan’s schemes (II Cor. 2:11).

Though Satan is crafty, he lost his strategic advantage of secrecy when he tempted Adam and Eve! Now, we know his tricks and his clever devices. Beware! He is a liar and the father of liars (John 8:44).

- First, he tries to make us doubt God’s Word. Did God actually say...? (v. 1). Satan knows if we begin to doubt the veracity, integrity and authority of God’s Word, he wins! He has many ways to do this: liberal theology, higher criticism, creative interpretations, historical application, relativistic hermeneutics, etc.
- Then, he tries to make us doubt God’s character. God know that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God (v. 5). In other words, God is keeping something from you. Is he really good? Does he really have your best interests in mind? “Come on, Eve. Take control of your destiny. You can’t trust God to take care of you!” Perhaps the precise moment of The Fall was that second when Eve said in her heart: “I can’t trust God. I have to trust in myself.”
- Finally, Satan tries to make us doubt the harmful consequences of sin. You will not surely die (v. 5). “No one is going to get hurt. What’s the big deal with eating a piece of fruit?” Satan wants us to think we can sin with impunity. Sin came into Eve’s heart and into the world when she began to think that which was good was evil... and that which was evil was good (Isa. 5:20). Remember that this tree was called “the knowledge of good and evil” (2:9,17).

B. Personal and psychological consequences of sin (vv. 7-13).

1. Shame. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized they were naked (v. 7). Prior to their sin, they were “naked and unashamed” (2:25) but sin makes them blush (cf. Jer. 6:15). They try to deal with their shame by sewing fig leaves. But fig leaves are inadequate to cover what needs to be covered!

2. Guilt (vv. 8-10). The psychological consequence for breaking God’s law is a guilty conscience. They deal with their guilt by hiding behind trees. This was a primitive psychological mechanism that today might be called avoidance or denial.

3. Fear (vv. 8-10). ...I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid... and hid (vv. 8-10). Prior to this, Adam and Eve had enjoyed God’s presence and the expanse of the garden. Now they are terrified. He had behaved like a traitor, usurping the place of God. How would God respond?

4. Blame. When God asked the guilty humans what they had done, he was giving them a chance to confess, repent and be forgiven (vv. 9-13). They are free moral agents, therefore God is going to hold them responsible! Instead, Adam and Eve played the blame game, they chose to be victims rather than take
responsibility for their choices. Adam blamed his sin on his wife and Eve blamed her sin on the snake! More subtly, they are both blaming God who allowed the snake to be in the garden in the first place! “It’s not my fault. Don’t blame me. I’m not responsible.” When we pass the buck and refuse to take responsibility, we seal our fate and remain locked in sin forever!

C. Cosmic and theological consequences (vv. 14-24).
   1. For the serpent (vv. 14-15). He is cursed and ultimately doomed.
   2. For the woman and the man (v. 16-19). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23; Gen. 2:17). Further, the woman will bear children in pain and have difficulty relating to her husband. The man will struggle and toil to till the ground and earn a living.
   3. For God (vv. 20-24).
      - He will send the serpent-crusher (v. 15).
      - He covers their nakedness with animal skins, not fig leaves (vv. 20-21).
      - He expels them from Eden (vv. 22-24). They will be forever homesick, wandering in spiritual exile “east of Eden” (4:16).
   4. Ever since Genesis 3, everyone is born in the image of Adam (Gen. 5:1-3). Though the image of God remains, it is seriously marred. We are each now born with a sin nature that creates in all of us a “bent to sinning.” (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Psalm 51:5; Rom. 3:23; etc.).

III. So, what’s wrong with world?
   A. Who will deliver me from this dwelling-in-me sin (Rom. 7:17)?

When Yehiel Dinur (a prisoner from Auschwitz) met Adolf Eichmann (one of the master minds of Hitler’s Final Solution) in 1961 at Eichmann’s trial, he collapsed. When asked to explain his reaction, Dinur responded that Eichmann didn’t look like the mass murderer and evil monster he had anticipated. He looked like a grandfather, the neighbor next door who works in his garden. “Eichmann is in all of us,” Dinur soberly concluded.

Years ago a London newspaper had a contest, inviting readers to write an essay on the question “What’s Wrong with the World?” They promised to publish the essay they felt was the most creative and insightful. Though no one really remembers now who actually won the contest, many remember the “essay” turned in by G. K. Chesterton. It was short and to the point.

   Dear Sirs,
   I am.
   Sincerely yours,
   G. K. Chesterton

B. Genesis 3 underscores this simple yet sobering reality: I am the problem; I am what’s wrong with the world. It helps me to understand three very important questions:
   - Why I am so messed up. The problem is not just my lack of education, my poor health, my psychological baggage, my economic circumstances, etc. The problem is that I am in rebellion against God!
   - Why you are so messed up (my wife, my children, my pastor, my friends, my president, my enemies, my boss, my professors, etc.). Genesis 3 actually helps me to cut you some slack and have more patience. You are as messed up as I am… maybe more!
Why all creation is so messed up (work is hard, babies are painful, tsunamis happen, cancer, etc.). Indeed, the whole creation is “groaning in pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:18-25).

Genesis 3 tells me at least seven things that I need to always remember about the human condition and what’s wrong with the world:

1. **Sin** is the name of the root cause that lies behind every human malady. Therefore, the hope of the world is going to require a work of salvation that is much greater than politics, economics, medicine, the military, education, psychological therapy, etc. Because the problem is essentially **spiritual**, the solution must be as well.

2. Sin occurs when we disobey God’s plan for our lives and insist on “my will be done.” **Self-will** is at the root of what sin really is.

3. Sin has many tragic consequences: fear, guilt complexes, shame, blame, marital conflict, toil in work, labor in childbirth, death, etc. Though we need to address these symptoms and seek to **alleviate** the consequences of sin, we must devote our primary energies to find a **cure** for the root cause. *Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?* (Jer. 8:22). *(cf. Mk. 2:17).*

4. This chapter helps me to understand that sin is much **deeper** than my behaviors (what I do). It first resides in my **heart** (who I am). Therefore, the gravity of a person’s sin must never be measured by outward behaviors alone! The Gospel is not merely behavior modification. The Gospel promises to cover my sins (the skin of animals) and ultimately crush the serpent. But it also promises a deeper work; that of inner **cleansing** of the very nature of sin and heart purity.

   *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to **forgive** us our sins and to **cleanse** us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9).*

5. Sin makes us **blind** to sin! Therefore, when we try to deal with “the problem” in our human strength, the best we can do is come up with “fig leaf” solutions: they simply don’t work.
   - We **deny** our sin.
   - We **rationalize** our sin and make excuses.
   - We **justify** our sin.
   - We **blame** our sin on others.
   - We try to **cover** our sin.

6. Only **God** can deal with sin! He wants to cover what needs to be covered. But animal skins require the shedding of **blood**. And he also wants to **heal** and **restore** what needs to be healed and restored (that requires inner work of his sanctifying Spirit). This chapter gives us the first announcement of the promised Messiah: the serpent-crusher (v. 15). Jesus came to save us **from** our sins; not to leave us in them (Matt. 1:21). He came to **destroy** the works of the devil (I John 3:8).

7. The only way to find victory (covering for our sins and healing from our sin) is to **confess** our sins and our sin! *(Psalm 32:1-5; I John 1:9).* Perhaps these words, written by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) and included in *The Book of Common Prayer* can help us to do just that!
Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all; we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time most grievously have committed by thought, word and deed against Thy Divine Majesty, provoking most justly they wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous upon us; the burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us most merciful Father; for Thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake. Forgive us all that is past; and grant that we may ever serve and please Thee in newness of life, to the honour and glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

TABLE TALK

1. Why is it so important to be clear about how we diagnose “what’s wrong” with the world?
2. Describe the difference between a disease’s cause and its symptoms (consequences). How does this impact the practice of medicine? What spiritual analogy can we draw?
3. Did this chapter comfort you or trouble you? Explain.
4. Have you ever doubted God’s Word? What were the spiritual results of such doubt?
5. Which reaction to sin best describes your own “natural” response when sin is exposed in your life: Guilt? Fear? Shame? Or blame?
6. Describe a situation you have experienced when someone refused to confess sin and rather tried to deflect it (rationalize, deny, blame others, etc.). How could this situation have been different if the person had only confessed?
7. What have you learned today about confession?