

The Universe's Greatest Mystery

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back together for a wee part tonight to Genesis chapter 3, and we're going to look at the whole chapter, but I want us to read again verses 6 and 7.

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.

Now, tonight our sermon is about a very grand title. It's called The Universe's Biggest Mystery, and that's maybe very dramatic sounding, but I want us to think about what that might be, because there's a lot of big mysteries in the universe, and there's the big questions of high energy physics, how does all that big mass of forces and energy to the big questions, the intricate questions of subatomic particles, and you look at all these tiny, tiny building blocks, so for everything seems to be made of, you look at a picture of an atom, most of it seems to be made of nothing, don't really know how that works, but it's all fascinating how it all holds together, and then there's the whole question of time, stretching back, stretching forward, how does it start, how does it end, and how do all of these things relate together? Even though there's been so many advancements, so many discoveries in terms of how we understand the universe around us, there's still so much that is mysterious, but I want to suggest tonight that potentially the biggest mystery of all is not gravity, it's not time, it's not dark matter, it's not subatomic particles, the biggest mystery of all is people. For many, many reasons people like us are a perplexing mystery, and there's lots of ways that that shows itself. The fact that today, probably more than in any point in history, today we know about lifestyle patterns that are healthy, and lifestyle patterns that are unhealthy, things that we shouldn't do, whether that's in terms of what we eat or time spent in front of screens, and yet we still do it all so much, even though we know we shouldn't do that. The fact that we're told there's certain things in life, you should, people in our families are also the ones who are probably going to be on the receiving end of actually our worst patterns of behavior, even though they're the ones who mean the most to us, they're the ones who also get our short tempers and neglect and all sorts of patterns of bad behavior. There's the fact that we know that things like war and greed and corruption and bullying are desperately harmful, and yet these things still happen all the time, and maybe the most mysterious of all, the fact that we all know that we're going to die, and yet we live as much of our lives as possible, pretending that it's not going to happen, or certainly trying to avoid ever thinking about it. Humanity is a massive mystery. But what I want us to see tonight, what I hope we're going to see tonight, is that the Bible sheds light on that mystery, and it actually gives us an immensely helpful explanation of it, and that explanation is found in Genesis chapter 3, and it's then unpacked across all the rest of Scripture. And Genesis chapter 3, as you may know, is an incredibly important passage in the Bible. It's one that we need to keep on coming back to again and again and again, so whenever you're reading passages later in the Bible, it's always in the context of what happened in Genesis chapter 3, and so it's one that we keep on referring to, and it needs to shape our understanding of the whole of Scripture. This chapter records what tends to be known as the from where God created us to be. Sin came into our experience, and the effects of that have been devastating. And that affects so many things, it means that there's loads that we could look at in this chapter, so in many ways I'm saying a fraction of what should and could be said.

What I want to focus on is the fact that this has got so much to teach us in terms of what we call biblical anthropology, the biblical understanding of humanity. It presents us with a fascinating and very accurate picture of what humanity is like, and I want to try and summarize that under three headings, that's going to be the three points of our sermon. This passage teaches us that humanity is wounded and dangerous, battling and surrendering, naive and judgmental. And as you can see, all of those are kind of contradictions in many ways, and yet what I hope we're going to see is that all of these are exactly what we are like. Humanity is a big mystery. So first of all, humanity is wounded and dangerous. The immediate aftermath of Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis chapter three presents a situation that's contrast so sharply with the beauty of Eden described in Genesis one and two. So you read the first two chapters of the Bible, everything is good and harmonious and beautiful and idyllic, and now it all changes because of what happens in chapter three.

[5 : 56] And it badly hurt humanity. You see that in verses six and seven that are on the screen, and the fact that there's this immediate sense of shame and fear because of their actions.

They realized that they had done wrong, they were ashamed of their behavior. And then later on in verse 13, Eve speaks about how she had been deceived, all of it speaking of the damage that's been done to humanity in this process. And you read on through the rest of scripture and you look through the ages of human history up to this point, and you see again and again that sin has inflicted so many wounds on humanity. Some of those wounds are physical and that's both wounds that come through conflict and the wounds that come through illness and through the aging process. Many wounds that you and people you love are having to carry, lots of physical wounds. But the wounds are also spiritual.

When we talk about spiritual things, we're talking about the aspects of us that are real but are non-physical, the non-physical aspects of who we are. The language you used to describe that is our heart or our soul. So often at that level, we get wounded. And we get wounded in the same kind of way that Adam and Eve were. Fear, insecurity, doubt, inadequacy, sorrow, isolation, confusion, life brings these wounds. Maybe last week brought more of these wounds this week and the rest of this year.

And maybe of everything that I say tonight, this might be the point that you can relate to most. Maybe you come here this evening and maybe you just feel wounded by life. Maybe there's a whole ton of things that have happened that you never thought would happen. Maybe things have happened in your life or people have treated you in a way that you just never thought would happen.

And you're bruised and battered by the blows that life has inflicted on you. In Genesis 3, the reality of evil wounded humanity and it's never stopped doing it since. But sin has not just left humanity wounded and bruised. It's also left us all too capable of wounding and bruising others.

[8 : 25] It's interesting, you see that when we share news through said Fast Global about the persecuted church, you hear of Christians being persecuted. There's two categories of people in that situation.

There's the people who are being hurt and persecuted and then there's the people who are causing the heart and persecution and they've both got one thing in common. They're all people. They're all people. And sins left us all too capable of inflicting wounds on other people.

And you see the beginnings of that in this chapter. Tensions start to emerge between them. There's this blame and then you've got 16B where the woman's told you desire shall be if your husband, he shall rule over you. And you can see that this is hinting towards the kind of conflict and tension and hostility that is going to come. You go into chapters 4, 5, 6 of Genesis and you see human relations disintegrate. Next chapter, Cain murders his brother Abel and then in subsequent generations humanity just descends into deeper levels of sin. And that pattern said in Genesis continues through the Bible and it continues through history to the present day.

And so often if you study history, if you look at it, you will see awful actions on the part of humanity and often done under the guise of religious or ideological commitments. And it's still true today whether it's intentional or not. So much suffering is caused by the words and actions of others. You see that at a global level with ongoing conflict today, but you also see it at school or at work or even in families where the way people can treat you can cause so much pain.

I think it's maybe fair and true to say that there's a lot of things in the world that can hurt you, but nothing can hurt you as much as another person can. And it's teaching us that humanity is wounded and dangerous. And the two feed off each other. And maybe you've heard the phrase, hurt people hurt people. So the idea that people who've been hurt so often the consequence of that is that they go on to actually hurt other people as well. Hurt people hurt people. And history proves that too. And here right at the beginning of the Bible you see that reality recognized. And all of this raises a really interesting question in regard to biblical anthropology. When you look at Adam and Eve, are they victims or are they villains? Are they victims or are they villains? And of course the answer is both. They are both. They are victims in the sense that Genesis 3 is explicit in identifying the serpent, which the rest of scripture identifies as Satan. And Genesis 3 identifies the serpent, Satan as the instigator of the fall. It's the serpent that initiates this. And that's immensely important because it's reminding us of the crucial truth, the fact that from a biblical worldview the origin of evil does not lie in humanity. And that's so incredibly important.

[11 : 42] And it's actually part of the reason why a biblical worldview and particularly a supernatural worldview is so much more intellectually satisfying than a non-supernatural or naturalistic worldview.

Because if you remove the supernatural from your worldview, then when we're faced with the reality of evil, you have only two options. You can either say evil is an illusion. In other words, it seems evil to us, but ultimately, well, there's no such thing as good as evil. So it's just a kind of an appearance, something that we've constructed or an illusion. That's one option.

Or the other option is it's our fault. It's entirely our fault. Without the Bible, you're forced into one of those two conclusions, but with the Bible, we are being reminded that's an incredibly important and precious truth that scripture reveals to us. But although that supernatural origin of evil, that instigation of the devil is made very, very clear, that does not leave us guilt-free. And that's incredibly important for us to recognize. Yes, we're victims, but we are also culpable, also guilty, also villains.

And one of the things that reinforces that is the fact that one of the great truths emphasized in Genesis one and two in the creation of humanity is the fact that we have been honored by God with a position of responsibility. And that's something that's so important to remember. That's part of what it meant to be an image-bate of God, part of the unique privileged status that humanity enjoys, that we have that responsibility delegated to us by God. Genesis 3, is a tragic misuse of that privilege. And the failure, our failure to fulfill that responsibility, has left humanity guilty before God. And maybe for some of you, maybe that's the big problem that you are conscious of as you sit here tonight. Some of you might be sitting here so conscious of the bruises that life has inflicted on you. Some of you might be sitting here and you can't shake off the guilt that you feel because of things that you've done or things that you wish you had that you should have done. That when we look at Adam and Eve, when we look at world history, when we look at people around us, when we look in the mirror, we see people who've been badly hurt, but we also see people who are capable of causing great harm. Humanity is wounded and dangerous.

Humanity is also battling and surrendering. Again, this captures the contrast between Genesis 1 and 2 and Genesis 3. In the first two chapters, there's such a brilliant scene of peace, provision, provision, tranquility. You come to Genesis 3 and you're left with toil and struggle. You see that in 16 to 19, to the woman who said, I'll surely multiply your pain and childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth your children, your desire shall be for your husband, he shall rule over you.

[15 : 00] And to Adam he said, because you've 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 as 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 are taken, for you are dust and to dust you shall return.

And so you've got the struggle of sowing and harvesting, you've got the pain, the reality of pain in childbirth. Life is now a battle and a struggle for humanity and that brings a two-sided outcome. So on the one hand there is the reality of the suffering that all of this is giving rise to and the fact that we've got to push through that and we've got to overcome the other side of it, on the other hand there are still going to be harvests. So in other words there's still going to be achievements and triumphs and joys so yes it's a struggle but there will still be harvests and that's the point I want to highlight. Even though we struggle the battles that we face there's actually a sign of the dignity and worth that humanity has because in many ways the opposition and the toil and the difficulty that sin has caused is an opportunity for humanity to display the strengths and the capacities that God has given to us. In other words in response to the fall God didn't say to Adam and Eve, look you're just going to have to capitulate, you're finished, you're done. Yes there's going to be thorns and thistles but humanity is still going to cultivate and yes there's going to be great pain and childbirth but humanity is still going to multiply and this is raising a really important point that we've got to remember that although it is unpleasant for us to have to face battles it is a good thing in that situation to be a battler and when I say that I don't mean in the sense of kind of violence or aggression or anything like that I mean in the sense of perseverance and tenacity and courage and in so many ways humanity has risen to that challenge in so many ways humanity has achieved great things because it has strived we've strived to overcome the challenges that sin has caused as we've faced the reality of the disease disorder isolation and pain that sin has brought common grace as inventing the plough or inventing the iPad they're all a testimony to the God given ability that we have the fact that we can battle against the challenges that we face and maybe that's what life feels like for you at the moment maybe the past few months have felt like a battle maybe work has felt like a constant battle just trying to drag yourself into a new Monday morning every week maybe your health has been a battle where you're just so conscious that you're not as strong and as healthy as you once were maybe school is a battle where you're having to just get through subjects that you are fed up with and deal with friends and classmates that are a pain maybe relationships that you have are a battle whether that's with spouse or children or parents or friends all of these battles are hard and tiring and costly and good because it's good that we battle and we need to keep going God did not tell us to capitulate and we've got to remember that we don't battle by sinning when we sin we're just helping the enemy we fight that battle by striving to listen to God striving to be a blessing in the face of challenges in those in that sense of the term to be a battler is a good thing but at the very same time we're surrendering and you see that in verse 19 the devastating consequence of the fall is that Adam and Eve and everyone else has to surrender to that that our lives are going to end and that's what happened to Adam and Eve and that's what happened to all of their descendants when you read on into Genesis 5 you have this long list of Adam's descendants and for almost all of them with one exception which you can go and find yourself you read this phrase again and again and he died and he died and he died and he died and that's been the reality facing humanity ever since

we all we all face the reality of death and and face to face with death all we can do is surrender and there's lots of other ways that we surrender as well so often we surrender to the pressure of what other people think of us their opinion and what they might say what they might think we surrender to the temptations offered to us by sex or money or power we surrender to self-pity when things don't go well and don't turn out the way we wanted them to we surrender to bitterness and and judgmentalism when other people upset us and let us down and this is where humanity is such a mysterious weird combination of tenacious battlers and helpless surrenders and the key thing we've got to recognize is that so often so often we pick the wrong battle and we surrender to the wrong master so we pick battles with family or colleagues or neighbors or friends people that we should actually live in harmony with or we pick battles over issues we surrender to masters who have absolutely no right to rule over us we make idols out of our jobs their wealth their reputation their achievements our pleasures they they come onto the throne of their hearts and when they do so we are surrendering to whatever that idol wants from us we'll do anything to meet what that idol demands and it's actually it gets even more intriguing and mysterious because these two things can can play off against each other this battling surrendering combination can manifest itself can manifest itself simultaneously I remember as a teenager when I was young the coolest thing in the world was a center parting a very kind of long floppy kind of hairdo at the side of it and kind of the longer and floppier it looked the better and you know in that case you got my parents like cut your hair Thomas you know I'm like no I'm not going to cut my hair so I'm battling with my parents no I want this this is cool why am I battling with them because I'm surrendering to what all my classmates think and I want to fit in and now I look back at photos but that's what we do don't we and sometimes we'll battle one thing because we're surrendering to another a wise question for all of you to ask yourself is what am I battling and to whom am I surrendering humanity is battling and surrendering there was a sense in which the fall gave Adam and Eve a knowledge you see that in six and seven and they the eyes of their both of both were opened they knew that they were naked and so and there's this awareness this knowledge that they didn't have and that makes sense because they were forbidden to eat from the tree that gave the knowledge of good and evil and so their disobedience brought a knowledge that's a level of knowledge that they previously hadn't had not in a positive way but actually in a negative way because it just brought guilt and shame as they were aware of the evil that they had done but at the same time the fall seems to have brought a serious naivety into humanity's thinking and you see that in verse seven and in verse eight so they're conscious that they're naked and they sewed leaves together and made themselves loincloths now that word loincloth can also it's also translated belt and it basically describes an item that's really very small and in terms of clothing it's really pretty inadequate and so they feel naked they feel they need to be covered and they

kind of make this pathetic little thing that barely covers them and you see that later in the chapter God actually has to make proper clothing for them in verse 21 so there's this naivety that they can make this wee thing that maybe covers them and then verse eight it's even more naive where they think that they can hide from God and that's ridiculous and that kind of naivety has been a constant feature of a beautiful woman that he could get her pregnant that he could arrange for her husband to be killed and he thought that nobody would find out about it and he would get away with it. Peter said that look if everybody else might fall away from you Jesus everybody else might turn their back on you I never will and Ananias and Saphira in Acts thought that you know they could everybody else was selling possessions giving money to the church they thought that they could say look yeah we've sold a field here's all the proceeds when actually they were keeping part of it for themselves and in so many ways we did the same we think that we can hide things from God we think that we can get away with things before God we think that we can live a double life before God and sometimes we even think that we can tell God what he should and should not do and all of it is hopelessly naive because some of the most basic concepts of Christian theology are the fact that God is all-knowing all-powerful always present hiding from him pretending that we're something when we're not telling him the terms of what our relationship would should be is ridiculous it's it's actually ridiculous and yet we do it all the time and and life shows us that there's so much we don't know perhaps the most obvious example is the fact that we actually don't we don't know how tiny in comparison to God we really are sin has left us so naive and yet at the very same time humanity is so judgmental and again you see that in this passage so when the devil's strategy is to sow seeds of doubt and to plant the idea in Eve's mind that God's not actually being good to them in as this starts to happen as Eve starts to doubt as she starts to sin she is judging God rather than thinking who

God is good and always good she started to think oh maybe he's not being good to us and that's what leads on to that sin in her heart is what leads on to the sin in her outward actions in the aftermath of the fall and Adam quickly blames the woman and blames God at the same time the woman who you gave me so it's like it's both of your faults in many ways he's looking to shift the blame he's casting judgment on another and that attitude of judgmentalism and suspicion has spread to all generations of humanity so often we will think the worst of each other so often we'll feel threatened by other people so often we're very quick to make judgments over other people and we're usually we're usually very confident that we know best and that can happen in lots of different ways and one area where you see this in a really powerful way and and in a I guess a really tragic and difficult way is in people who struggle with depression and I know that that's something that many people here will have struggled with at times either yourselves or people in in your family and very very hard but I want to highlight that because one of the things that you will often see not always but what you'll often see in someone who struggles with depression is that there's this there's this tension in their thinking whereby they have a very negative view of themselves so very often they'll be so conscious of their failings and inadequacies so frustrated and disappointed with themselves in what they've done or achieved or not done they look at everybody else and think that they've done so much better they look at themselves and all they see is is something that just makes them feel dark and sad and frustrated so they kind of look at themselves and they think

[27 : 40] I'm you know I'm stupid and I'm rubbish and I'm useless and yet at the very same time they are by doing that they're actually showing a kind of supreme confidence in their own judgment of themselves so that's a negative judgment but they're convinced that they're right so I guess that's what I'm trying to say somebody who struggles with depression is that they they view themselves very very very negatively but they also view themselves as being right when the actual the actual fact that the kind of tragedy about depression is that somebody's view of themselves is actually so inaccurate and it's been distorted and yet there's this kind of confidence in their own judgment and and so all of that is just an example of the way that that this contradiction and mystery and tension and brokenness of sin manifests itself in our lives and so we need to just recognize that that you know often we'll judge others sometimes we'll even judge

God I'm very guilty of all of this when I hear you know when I hear a sermon like this or a section of a sermon like this talking about being judgmental I think to myself oh yeah they are so judgmental which of course is a very contradictory thing to think isn't it because that's me being judgmental this is where sin has left us wounded and dangerous battling and surrendering naive and judgmental humanity is a massive mystery there's two things I want to highlight very quickly as we close number one sin makes all of this inevitable we've got to recognize that we can't escape the consequences of the fall history proves this again and again and again and our experience proves this as well we are all here tonight with wounds hurt by people and by circumstances we're all here conscious of the hurt that we've caused others maybe in small ways maybe in big ways but

I'm sure every one of us can think of examples we're all battling on through the challenges that life brings we're all aware that we've surrendered helpless in the face of things that are bigger than us we've all been naive we've all been judgmental the truths expressed in Genesis 3 I think are the easiest all of this is the reality of human experience and this is what makes the Bible so amazing because from the very beginning from the very start it knows all of this and it explains all of it it's all a result of sin coming into our experience and it's all reminding us that any understanding of the world any approach to society or politics or education or life or health or anything that doesn't take account of the fall is not going to work because the consequences of our sin of sin are unavoidable that's the key point the first key point that we have to recognize the second key point is the most important one all of this is exactly what the gospel addresses all of this is what Jesus has come to fix and Genesis 3 points us towards that and some of you may know that Genesis 3:15 is one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible that in the response to the sin of Adam and Eve God says to the serpent because you've done this kershta you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field and 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 Europe spring and her offspring he shall bruise your head you shall bruise his heel this language of offspring is all telling us that in Genesis 3 the story is not over in fact it's just beginning and the rest of the whole Bible unpacks all of this it's all outworked through God choosing Abraham and his descendants who descended from Adam that line that family line through which God's purposes are being fulfilled as a shadow in the to battle against evil to conquer death in doing so he is bruised but his blow is not fatal the devil though is crushed victory is accomplished Jesus comes to save us and it's all reminding us that when we think of the mess that that sin has left us in Jesus doesn't come and say sort yourselves out and then follow me Jesus says come to me and I will sort it out and that's why we can come to him with all of our wounds and we can be healed with every hurt every sorrow every frustration every scar we can come to Jesus and the Lord please heal me and we can also come to him with all the ways in which we have been a danger to ourselves and others we can come confessing that sin and we can also come and be taught by him as he softens these sharp edges in us and as our hostility and our harshness and our cruelty are replaced with grace and mercy and compassion and we can come to him and we can come to him with our readiness and our willingness to battle and he gives us a far far better mission as he says go go out to your communities go out to all nations that's the battle I want you to fight go and bring the good news to the people who desperately need to him we can come to him and surrender to his voice and surrender before the one who actually reigns we can come to him with all our naivety and say Lord I don't know

I don't know the answers I don't know why this has happened I don't know what I should do we can come to him with our naivety and trust him and we can come to him confessing all of our judgmentalism and we can bow before him and recognize Lord you are judge you are just and good and you will sort it out and as we do that he is dealing with all this mess and mystery in our lives and he does that in two amazing ways he does that by taking all all the consequences that Erson deserves all the punishment that it provoked he takes it all upon himself on the cross everything that Erson deserves he takes and he dies in our place and then as he rises again and as he pours out his spirit he builds a new humanity where he calls people into his church into his family and by the sanctifying work of his spirit he is restoring and renewing us back into his likeness back into the people that he created us to be and he does it all because despite the fact that our behavior is a monumental mystery he still loves you and he still wants you and he came to die for you and this is where we discover that I've actually been wrong this whole sermon because the biggest the biggest mystery is the fact that despite all our unfathomable mess despite all of our despite all the ways that we stuff up despite all the ways in which we have really in many ways spat in God's face and ignored him and turned away from him despite the fact that we have made such a mess of things God still loves you and he will never give up on you he will never give up on you that's the greatest mystery of all but it's not a perplexing mystery that you think oh it's a beautiful mystery that we will spend eternity gazing into and I hope that every single one of us here tonight is looking to him and if you have not yet put your trust in Jesus or if you're not sure where you stand before him he is he's brought you here again tonight to hold out his hands to you and say look let's just leave the past in the past Jesus can deal with it all follow me tonight tomorrow and forever amen let's pray