Rebellion in the Kingdom: The Fall & The Spread of Sin  
(Genesis 3:1-11:9)

Roger Olson summarizes the first act in the Drama of Scripture by stating three propositions suggested by Langdon Gilkey that capture part of what we discussed in our last study and then Olson goes on to add one more proposition of his own that sets the stage for the second act of the Drama of Scripture.

In his outstanding treatise on the Christian doctrine of creation titled Maker of Heaven and Earth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), twentieth-century Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey summed up the Christian consensus about creation with three pregnant sentences: God is the source of all that there is; creatures are dependent yet real and good; and God creates in freedom and with purpose. While these statements well summarize most of basic Christian belief about creation, I think it is necessary to add a fourth: Creation is fallen under a curse and needs supernatural healing (i.e., redemption) …
(The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity, Roger E. Olson, pg. 157)

Tremper Longman III reminds us of the experience of the first audience of these texts:

When Genesis was written, the world was already broken by sin. Whether written at the time of Moses or long afterward, people daily experienced harm at the hands of others, and they paid back in kind. The world quite simply is not a nice place. The creation account tells us that though no one can escape the brokenness of the world, God did not create it that way. Genesis 3 provides the account of how the world came to be the evil place it is.  
(How to Read Genesis, Tremper Longman III, pp. 109-110)

Henri Blocher adds these remarks that expand on Roger Olson’s fourth statement and that prepare us for Genesis 3 – 11.

‘The Devil is wildly optimistic if he thinks he can make human beings worse than they are.’ One could hardly conceive of a darker flash of wit than this judgment from an acute observer of a former generation, the Viennese writer Karl Kraus (1874-1936).

Kraus’s satirical barb surely earns him a front-row seat among pessimists, but who can deny that it touches reality? It certainly holds at least a measure of realism at the end of the century of Auschwitz and Kigali, of Beirut and Bosnia, of the Gulag Archipelago and daily terror in Algeria. Could we sink any lower in mass cruelty and wickedness? In addition, ‘private’ horrors seem to match the socio-political atrocities: the rising tide of divorce and abortion, the abuse and prostitution of children, corruption in business; the constant praise of immorality by the brightest luminaries of our culture, and a taste for lying; sheer despair on all hands; millions of young people apparently without a future.

The phenomenon of human evil, so widespread, so pervasive, cries out for an explanation, or at least for an examination. Dumbfounded grief should not be our final reaction, for a threefold question arises.
First, why is the perception of human evil, in the main, accompanied by feelings of indignation, guilt or shame? If human evil were merely ‘natural’, like the ferocity of tigers (or ants!), there would be no room for such feelings. Bound up with our sure sense of human evil, we find the conviction that it occurs through the exercise of some kind of ‘freedom’.

Secondly, if humans are capable of so much evil, how is it that they also reach heights of heroism, performing admirable deeds of selfless service and devotion to the truth? How can they bear fruits of beauty and wisdom? The brighter side, which Karl Kraus seemed to ignore, should keep us from cynicism; we have to acknowledge the complexity of the human phenomenon.

But how can we account for that complexity? What insight or revelation will provide an Ariadne’s thread to save us from being lost in the labyrinth? Actually, the complexity is worse than many imagine; one may discover worthy motives in outrageous actions, and ugly roots under the flowering of virtue. How can we make sense of the entanglement of these things?

Thirdly, for those who have discerned that the world is not self-explanatory, but that it owes its origin to a holy and wise Creator, the presence and power of evil in human life make the need for a word of assurance and clarification even more urgent. Without it, how can we face the apparent contradiction?

The Christian doctrine of original sin is designed to deal with this threefold question. It tries to account for sin as a universal phenomenon and yet a matter of personal responsibility, for its being ‘natural’ in a sense and yet contrary to our true ‘nature’, for its being there even as we stand before God and under God. Cardinal Newman (1893:242f.) forcefully expressed the need for the doctrine if we are not to ignore the ‘success’ of evil in our world while knowing our God:

… either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence … And so I argue about the world; – if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. This is a fact, a fact as true as the fact of its existence; and thus the doctrine of what is theologically called original sin becomes to me almost as certain as that the world exists, and as the existence of God.

If the doctrine or dogma of original sin has always been an essential part of a Christian assessment of reality, the traumas of our time heighten its relevance. Nevertheless, it has been somewhat neglected in recent decades. The reason may be that it is hard to fit within the framework of ‘modernity’, of modern (and postmodern) presuppositions – not to say prejudices. As prestigious a philosopher as Leszek Kolakowski (formerly a Marxist) has had to warn theologians not to put the light of the doctrine of original sin under a bushel.

(NSBT, Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle, Henri Blocher, pp. 11-12)

The following examples from Cornelius Plantinga Jr. also indicate that the current state of man calls for an explanation. An explanation that is rooted in what we read in Genesis 3.
In the film *Grand Canyon*, an immigration attorney breaks out of a traffic jam and attempts to bypass it. His route takes him along streets that seem progressively darker and more deserted. Then the predictable *Bonfire of the Vanities* nightmare: his expensive car stalls on one of those alarming streets whose teenage guardians favor expensive guns and sneakers. The attorney does manage to phone for a tow truck, but before it arrives, five young street toughs surround his disabled car and threaten him with considerable bodily harm. Then, just in time, the tow truck shows up and its driver — an earnest, genial man — begins to hook up to the disabled car. The toughs protest: the truck driver is interrupting their meal. So the driver takes the leader of the group aside and attempts a five-sentence introduction to metaphysics: “Man,” he says, “the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.”

The tow truck driver is an heir of St. Augustine, and his summary of the human predicament belongs in every book of theology. For central in the classic Christian understanding of the world is a concept of the way things are supposed to be. They ought to be as designed and intended by God, both in creation and in graceful restoration of creation. They are supposed to include peace that adorns and completes justice, mutual respect, and deliberate and widespread attention to the public good.

Of course, things are not that way at all. Human wrongdoing, or the threat of it, mars every adult’s workday, every child’s school day, every vacationer’s holiday. A moment’s reflection yields a whole catalogue of wrongdoing, some of it so familiar we scarcely think of it any longer as wrong: a criminal in a forties film noir hangs up a pay telephone receiver and then, before exiting the booth, rips from the telephone book the page he had consulted and pockets it. At school, a third grader in a class of twenty-five distributes fifteen party invitations in a manner calculated to let the omitted classmates clearly see their exclusion. Her teacher notes but never ponders the social dynamics of this distribution scheme. Two old flames meet again for the first time since graduation and begin to muse with nostalgia and boozy self-pity over what might have been. Though each feels happily married to someone else, somehow the evening climaxes for the two grads in a room in the Marriott.

Perhaps we think most often of sin as a spoiler of creation: people adulterate a marriage or befoul a stream or use their excellent minds to devise an ingenious tax fraud. But resistance to redemption counts as sin, too, and often displays a special perversity.

In the summer of 1973, a British journalist named Jonathan Dimbleby filmed a dispiriting report of hunger in Ethiopia. To show some of the setting of this misery, the journalist juxtaposed shots of famished Ethiopians with shots of Emperor Haile Selassie’s feasts. Newspeople from across the world soon showed up in Addis Ababa to cover the yoked stories of popular starvation and official comfort. The next wave of foreigners escorted substantial food gifts from various countries. In the arrival of these gifts, Ethiopia’s finance minister spied an opportunity. To the great emergency stores of food donated by compassionate peoples of the world, the minister applied a substantial customs duty. Of course, the donating nations were dumbfounded and said
so. Their protest, in turn, dumbfounded the imperial court:

“You want to help?” the minister asked. “Please do, but you must pay.” And [the benefactors] said: “What do you mean, pay? We give help! And we’re supposed to pay?” “Yes,” says the minister, “those are the regulations. Do you want to help in such a way that our Empire gains nothing by it?”

(Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., pp. 7-9)

How do these comments relate to our passage of Scripture? Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew describe the incident of chapter 3 and relate it to the commentary we considered above.

A major feature of any story is its central conflict, the thing that goes wrong and needs to be fixed. Eugene Peterson describes it thus: “A catastrophe has occurred. We are no longer in continuity with our good beginning. We have been separated from it by a disaster. We are also, of course, separated from our good end. We are, in other words, in the middle of a mess.” And the entrance of sin into God’s perfect world is the cosmic conflict that Genesis describes. This calamity comes upon the creation soon after God forms it, threatening to mar the goodness of creation itself and to touch with evil every event coming after it. Genesis 3 describes this element of the biblical story, often called (simply and ominously) the story of “the fall.”

As we saw with the first and second chapters of Genesis, it is important to explore the type of literature we are dealing with. When discussing the fall, some scholars too quickly resort to terms like “myth” and “legend.” But this narrative is part of a larger structure (Genesis 2:4-3:24) introduced with the important phrase, “This is the account of …,” suggesting that, for the author, what follows has to do with what really happened. Thus, we need to take seriously the events recorded in Genesis 3, even while we recognize that the details—including a talking serpent and symbolic trees—are unlike those of any historical text we are used to. In our view, the third chapter of Genesis does tell us reliably about the mysterious origin of evil in God’s world. It was rooted in the mutiny of the first human couple. They were tempted, and they succumbed, with catastrophic consequences.

It is clear from the first two chapters of Genesis that human beings are good as God creates them. And even the name of the park in which God places Adam and Eve—Eden—is meant to evoke pleasure and delight. Eden is fertile and rich in minerals. Several scholars have noted that the description of Eden shows it to be a place where God himself dwells. This is confirmed in Genesis 3:8, which says that the Lord God walks in Eden and communes there with Adam and Eve. At its beginning the creation is redolent with shalom, the Old Testament word for peace, meaning the rich, integrated, relational wholeness God intends for his creation. The life of Adam and Eve is the life of shalom. They walk with God, they have each other, the garden provides all they need as they till its fertile soil and prune its burgeoning plants. There is no storm cloud on this horizon, no hint of trouble to come. What could possibly go wrong?

We all know from our own experience that the world we live in is deeply wounded, but what has caused it to be so? When we read about life in Eden, we long for our own
lives to be like that. Why is our experience so different? Genesis 3 answers this question, though perhaps without giving us all the information we would like to have. We are not told where the talking serpent comes from or who he is. (Only later in the Bible do we learn that this “creature” is also known as Satan; see Revelation 12:9.) How could such a creature disrupt God’s good creation? These questions are not answered, and they alert us to the mystery that surrounds the origin of evil in the creation. We should take this mystery seriously.

Part of being human is the freedom to choose. Even in God’s good creation, Adam and Eve’s freedom to love means that they may also choose not to love; hence, they may experience temptation. But what would temptation involve for them? The answer is found in the mysterious “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9). The serpent tempts them to eat from this tree contrary to what God has told them to do (2:17; 3:1-5). But what does that mean? This story is the only place in the Bible where such a tree is mentioned, and it is vital to see that it represents the temptation to be autonomous (from the Greek words autos, “self,” and nomos, “law”).

Adam and Eve can obey God or they can defy him. They can yield to God’s law and enjoy life, or they can try to find their own way apart from his instructions and experience death. Adam and Eve are created beings, fully and wonderfully human as they live out their freedom under God’s reign, according to his rule of life. The temptation they face through the serpent is to assert their autonomy: to become a law unto themselves. Autonomy means choosing oneself as the source for determining what is right and wrong, rather than relying on God’s word for direction. The serpent subtly casts doubt on God’s words to Adam and Eve and doubt even on God’s own inherent goodness. It suggests that God is afraid that his human creatures might become his equals once they know good and evil experientially, through eating fruit of the tree. God has said that if they eat of it they will die, but the serpent suggests rather that to eat of it is to find the path to true life. In the light of these suggestions, the woman and the man see the tree differently—and they take and eat.

Strangely, at first, the serpent seems to be right: Adam and Eve do not immediately die. Or do they? One of the things this story should do is to make us reflect long and hard on just what “death” means. The physical life of Adam and Eve does not stop in the instant they taste the fruit: this isn’t the poison apple of the fairy tale. But something in them and between them does die. Their sense of themselves and their relationship with each other is shattered. They become morbidly self-conscious and thus try hurriedly to cover up their nakedness. They feel shame. And (what is even far worse) their relationship with the Lord God is also broken: they hide from him in fear and shame. God confronts Adam and Eve and declares judgment. The serpent is cursed, childbirth for the woman is made much harder, and the ground itself is stricken so that work is made difficult for the man and far less pleasant. Adam and Eve are driven out of Eden, and the entrance to the garden is barred.

This story is so rich in meaning that it gives us a great deal to think about. The “fall” into sin remains a mystery, but the story of Genesis 3 illumines the fundamental nature of sin. It is a quest for autonomy, a desire to separate ourselves from God. The consequences of sin are also clearly demonstrated. Just as Genesis 2 shows humankind
in our created and unfallen relationships, so Genesis 3 focuses on the breakdown of those relationships following the human mutiny against the divine King. We humans are made for relationship, but sin’s effect is to drive us apart. Above all, humankind is made to enjoy relationship with God, but the sin of Adam and Eve causes them to flee from him and be afraid, ashamed, and alone. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and Adam and Eve both seek to cover their nakedness.

All these actions show that sin has undermined both the sense of self and the sense of belonging to another. God’s judgments suggest that the social and work dimensions of their lives have similarly been twisted out of shape. Although the man and woman do *not* die physically—at least not right away—we see from this story that “death” can mean much more than the end of physical life. Death means the distortion of relationships in general, and particularly the end of one vital relationship with God.

Is the story of the world to end so soon and so sadly? By no means. Even in the tragic tale of sin’s entrance into the world, God does not give up his purposes for his creation and his kingdom. Though Adam and Eve flee from him, God graciously takes the initiative to seek them out. In declaring judgment, God curses the serpent and promises to put enmity between the serpent’s offspring and that of the woman (Genesis 3:15). The woman’s offspring will crush the serpent’s head: God promises the first biblical promise of the Gospel: Christ is to be “the seed of the woman” and will defeat Satan, though at great cost to himself, in the “wounding” of his “heel.” In Genesis 3:20, God provides for Adam and Eve’s shame, clothing them with skins of animals. In the Old Testament to remove someone’s clothes could signify their disinheritance; God’s provision of clothes for Adam and Eve is a sign to them that he has *not* given up on his purpose for them. They are still to bear his image in this world. They are still to “inherit the earth.”

As Adam and Eve leave Eden, their future seems most uncertain. (True, they have not immediately and physically died from eating the fruit. Ironically, in this one respect, the serpent has been right. But in everything else he has been quite wrong.) Disobedience has brought catastrophe. That wonderful garden now lies closed behind them, and an uncertain and dangerous world looms ahead. How awful it had been to face the Lord God when he had at last found them? How hard to look him in the face? And yet he has given them clothes to wear. And there is also that mysterious promise to consider, in which he has spoken of Eve’s offspring, who will crush the serpent’s head.  

*(The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story, Craig G. Bartholomew & Michael W. Goheen, pp. 41-45)*

C.S. Lewis attributes the darkness we experience in large part to the event referred to as the fall of man. He expresses it in the following way:

According to [the doctrine of the Fall], man is now a horror to God and to himself and a creature ill-adapted to the universe not because God made him so but because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free will. To my mind this is the sole function of the doctrine. It exists to guard against two sub-Christian theories of the origin of evil—Monism, according to which God Himself, being “above good and evil,” produces impartially the effects to which we give those two names, and Dualism,
according to which God produces good, while some equal and independent Power produces evil. Against both these views Christianity asserts that God is good; that He made all things good and for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil. …  
(The Problem of Pain, C. S. Lewis, pp. 69-71)

Henri Blocher explains the doctrine of original sin and shows how it finds its historical cause in the transgression or defection event of Genesis 3 that is generally referred to as the Fall of man.

First, though, we need some idea of just what it is we are talking about. Calvin’s definition offers as good a starting-point as any. Original sin, he writes in the Institutes, is that ‘hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19)’ (II.i.8). By way of developing and commenting on that definition, we may note the following four points. First, original sin is universal sinfulness, consisting of attitudes, orientations, propensities and tendencies which are contrary to God’s law, incompatible with his holiness, and found in all people, in all areas of their lives. Secondly, it belongs to the nature of human beings (it is also called peccatum naturale), ‘nature’ being that stable complex of characteristics typical of the class of creatures known as ‘human’, and present from birth (natura comes from nasci, ‘to be born’). Thirdly, since it belongs to our nature, it is inherited; hence its usual name in German, Erbsünde, literally ‘hereditary sin’. Fourthly, it stems from Adam, whose disobedience gave original sin a historical beginning, so that the present sinfulness of all can be traced back through the generations, to the first man and progenitor of the race.

The ‘origin’ of original sin is touched on in John 8:44, which speaks of the arche of the devil’s murderous lie. This is the ‘enemy’ whom Revelation calls the ‘original’ (archaios) serpent (12:9; 20:2). Augustine preferred ‘original’ to ‘natural’ as a qualifying term in order to stipulate that universal sinfulness had a historical beginning and cause. The famous Genevan theologian François Turretin, who won the title of the ‘Protestant Aquinas’, made the perceptive remark that sin is not radically original, since it derives not from the first origin (creation) but from a second one; yet, he maintained, the term is apt because original sin flows from the originating sin, propagates itself in each person’s origination, and becomes the origin of actual sins (1847: 569 [IX.10.4]). ‘Actual sins’ are all other sins, though the demarcation line is hard to draw, as older divines recognized. In Judaism, we are told, ‘a distinction was drawn between the original stock or capital (so-called original sin; Heb. qeren) and interest (individual sins)’ (Hensel 1975: 721). It is probably wise therefore to think of both in the closest possible organic conjunction.

That a bent towards sinning does affect all humankind, and that it cannot be isolated as belonging to any one part of the person, has been agreed on all sides, or nearly so, in the twentieth century. Even those who oppose the church dogma of original sin concur in this basic assessment of our reality. It would be hard to close one’s eyes to the data
of experience. The value of solidarity, highly prized in the modern scale of values, forbids one to draw radical distinctions between individuals, and the renewed perception that the individual is a psychosomatic unity does not favour a division between ‘parts’ of the person with regard to sinfulness.

The witness of Scripture fully warrants this consensus. It majors on sinfulness as the human problem, which alone causes separation between the Creator and his creatures (Is. 59:2). It stresses that none escapes the reign of sin and that no part of the human person is left untainted (Pr. 20:9; Ps. 14; and Paul’s quotations in Rom. 3:10ff.). But it does not formally distinguish our proneness to evil from our sinful acts or failure to act. Yet the twofold universal spread of actual sin (that is, throughout the whole race and within the whole individual life) could hardly obtain without an equally universal bent, or corruption. The Bible itself explicitly follows that logic.

(NSBT, Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle, Henri Blocher, pp. 18-20)

Albert Wolters adds these insights to the effects of the Fall:

First of all, we must stress that the Bible teaches plainly that Adam and Eve’s fall into sin was not just an isolated act of disobedience but an event of catastrophic significance for creation as a whole. Not only the whole human race but the whole nonhuman world too was caught up in the train of Adam’s failure to heed God’s explicit commandment and warning. The effects of sin touch all of creation; no created thing is in principle untouched by the corrosive effects of the fall. Whether we look at societal structures such as the state or family, or cultural pursuits such as art or technology, or bodily functions such as sexuality or eating, or anything at all within the wide scope of creation, we discover that the good handiwork of God has been drawn into the sphere of human mutiny against God. “The whole creation,” Paul writes in a profound passage of Romans, “has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:22).

If it is true that Adam’s sin carries in its train the corruption, at least in principle, of the whole of the creation, then it becomes very important to understand how this corruption is related to the originally good creation. This relation is crucial for a Christian worldview. The central point to make is that, biblically speaking, sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience. Prostitution does not eliminate the goodness of human sexuality; political tyranny cannot wipe out the divinely ordained character of the state; the anarchy and subjectivism of modern art cannot obliterate the creational legitimacy of art itself. In short, evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God’s steadfast faithfulness to the works of his hands.

Sin introduces an entirely new dimension to the created order. There is no sense in which sin “fits” in God’s good handiwork. Rather, it establishes an unprecedented axis, as it were, along which it is possible to plot varying degrees of good and evil. Though fundamentally distinct from the good creation, this axis attaches itself to creation like a parasite. Hatred, for example, has no place within God’s good creation. It is unimaginable in the context of God’s plan for the earth. Nevertheless, hatred cannot exist without the creational substratum of human emotion and healthy assertiveness.
Hatred participates simultaneously in the goodness of creation (man’s psychic makeup as part of his full humanity) and in the demonic distortion of that good creation into something horrible and evil. In sum, though evil exists only as a distortion of the good, it is never reducible to the good.

Perhaps the point can be made plain by speaking here of two “orders” that are irreducible to one another. In the words of John Calvin, we must distinguish between “the order of creation” and “the order of sin and redemption,” which relate to each other as health relates to sickness-and-healing. These two orders are in no sense congruent with each other. At every point, so to speak, they stand at right angles to each other, like the length and width of a plane figure. The perversion of creation must never be understood as a subdistinction within the order of creation, nor must creation ever be explained as a function of perversion and redemption. As fundamental orders of all reality they coexist — one original, the other adventitious; one representing goodness, the other involving deformity.

Perhaps it will be useful to reinforce the point by reintroducing two technical terms mentioned briefly earlier, terms that will play a key role in the rest of our discussion: structure and direction. In the context of the two “orders” of which we have been speaking, it can be said that structure refers to the order of creation, to the constant creational constitution of any thing, what makes it the thing or entity that it is. Structure is anchored in the law of creation, the creational decree of God that constitutes the nature of different kinds of creatures. It designates a reality that the philosophical tradition of the West has often referred to by such words as substance, essence, and nature.

Direction, by contrast, designates the order of sin and redemption, the distortion or perversion of creation through the fall on the one hand and redemption and restoration of creation in Christ on the other. Anything in creation can be directed either toward or away from God — that is, directed either in obedience or disobedience to his law. This double direction applies not only to individual human beings but also to such cultural phenomena as technology, art, and scholarship, to such societal institutions as labor unions, schools, and corporations, and to such human functions as emotionality, sexuality, and rationality. To the degree that these realities fail to live up to God’s creational design for them, they are misdirected, abnormal, distorted. To the degree that they still conform to God’s design, they are in the grip of a countervailing force that curbs or counteracts the distortion. Direction therefore always involves two tendencies moving either for or against God.

We will see in the next chapter how redemption in Jesus Christ is the ultimate and decisive antidote to creational distortion and how it renews the possibility for true obedience. Outside of redemption, however, the devastating effects of sin in creation are also restrained and counteracted. God does not allow man’s disobedience to turn his creation into utter chaos. Instead, he maintains his creation, in the face of all the forces of destruction. Creation is like a leash that keeps a vicious dog in check. If it were not for the leash, the dog (fallen mankind) would go completely wild, causing incalculable harm and probably bringing destruction upon its own head. Redemption in this image is the uncanny power by which the dog’s master persuades it to become
friendly and cooperative, so that the dog no longer strains at the leash but seeks
guidance from it. It is because of the leash that fallen man is still man, that crooked
business is still business, that atheistic culture is still culture, and that humanistic
insights are still genuine insights. The structure of all the creational givens persists
despite their directional perversion. That structure, anchored in God’s faithfulness, sets
a limit on the corruption and bondage wrought by evil.

The theological tradition offers another way of understanding the restraint of creation.
Some theologians have called curbing of sin and its effects God’s “common grace.”
Through God’s goodness to all men and women, believers and unbelievers alike, God’s
faithfulness to creation still bears fruit in humankind’s personal, societal, and cultural
lives. “Common grace” is thus distinguished from God’s “special grace” to his people,
whereby sin is not only curbed but forgiven and atoned for, making possible true and
genuine renewal from within. These terms can be improved upon perhaps (some have
suggested that the term “conserving grace” is preferable to “common grace,” since
God’s grace in Christ is also “common” in that it is offered to all humans), but they are
valuable in that they reflect a recognition that God never lets go of his creatures, even
in the face of apostasy, unbelief, and perversion. In our terminology, structure is never
obliterated by (mis)direction.

(Keith Mathison discusses the Fall in terms of the plan and promise of
redemption that emerges from this tragic moment in human history.

Genesis 2:4 introduces the first major section of the book: the “generations [toledot] of
the heavens and the earth.” This section of Genesis (2:4-4:26) explains what happened
to God’s good creation. Genesis 2:4-7 describes God’s creation of man (‘adam) from
the dust of the ground (‘adamah). Verses 8-14 then paint a vivid picture of the garden
planted in Eden by God, the garden in which he placed the man he had created. The
garden is the place of God’s unique presence much like the tabernacle and temple at a
later point in Israel’s history. In fact, as G. K. Beale observes, “the Garden of Eden
was the first archetypal temple in which the first man worshipped God.” In the midst of
this garden stand the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9).
These trees, in particular the latter, become central to the following narrative.

God gives to the man he has created a command, telling him that he may eat of any tree
in the garden, but he is forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
(2:15-17). He is then given a warning: “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely
die” (v. 17). God’s command is not arbitrary. The purpose of the command is “to raise
man for a moment from the influence of his own ethical inclination to the point of a
choosing for the sake of personal attachment to God alone.” God’s command presents
Adam with the choice between life and death, between blessing and judgment. If
Adam disobeys the command by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,
the result will be death (Gen. 2:17). By means of this command, God puts Adam’s
obedience to the test. Will he submit to God in faith or will he reject God and assert his
own moral autonomy?

What is the nature of this arrangement that God makes with Adam? Is it a covenant? It
has been objected that the word “covenant” does not appear in this text, but it is
important to note that the presence of a word is not necessary for the presence of a concept. It may also be objected that this arrangement with Adam does not involve any oaths or ceremonial rituals. However, as C. John Collins observes, this objection mistakenly “takes the features of certain covenants and makes them normative for all covenants.” We shall examine the nature of covenants more fully in our discussion of the covenantal arrangement with Noah in Genesis 6. Suffice it to say at this point that the arrangement between God and Adam may properly be understood as a covenant.

Genesis 2:18-25 details the creation of the woman and her relationship to the man as his helper. [The Hebrew word ‘ezer, translated “helper,” appears nineteen times in the Old Testament. Sixteen times it is used in reference to God, indicating that the term does not carry connotations of inferiority.] Then in Genesis 3:1, a new character enters the narrative. The serpent is an instrument of Satan, the adversary of God. Genesis does not explain the origin of this deceiver or how he came to be God’s enemy; it simply explains that he cleverly tempts the woman to eat that which God had forbidden (3:2-5). The entrance of sin into human history is then recorded in a few short words: “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” (3:6). By listening to the words of the serpent rather than submitting to the word of God, man allowed Satan to usurp dominion and establish his own kingdom in place of God’s.

God’s good creation has now been marred by sin. Evil has reared its head, and God’s goal of establishing his kingdom on earth has been challenged by a usurper. An important question has been raised. Has God’s good creation been permanently ruined, or can it be redeemed? If it can be redeemed, how will God accomplish this redemption? The answers to these questions are set forth throughout the remainder of Scripture, but a hint is given immediately following Adam’s sin.

God’s response to Adam’s disobedience is swift. After confronting the man and the woman, who both attempt to shift the blame (3:8-13), God pronounces his judgment first to the serpent, then to the woman, and finally to the man (3:14-19). He pronounces a curse on the serpent (3:14), but in the process of pronouncing this curse, God makes a promise that gives mankind reason for hope. Man’s fall has resulted in the need for divine redemption, a need that God immediately addresses. To the serpent he says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (3:15). This verse has often been referred to as the *protevangelium*, or the first gospel. It is grace and mercy in the midst of the ultimate tragedy. It is also a forward-looking promise, an eschatological promise.

God’s pronouncement hints that humanity will henceforth be divided into two communities: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God promises that he himself will initiate and perpetuate conflict between them. The verb translated “bruise,” as Wenham explains, is iterative. “It implies repeated attacks by both sides to injure the other.” The text, therefore, is profoundly eschatological in that it points to “a long struggle between good and evil, with mankind eventually triumphing.”
After pronouncing the curse upon the serpent, God turns to the woman and tells her that childbirth will now be accompanied by intense suffering (3:16). She is also told that her “desire” will be for her husband. The similarities between this statement and that in 4:7 indicate that what God means is that the woman will desire to dominate her husband. God’s judgment on the man is the lengthiest (3:17-19). Because he has disobeyed God’s explicit command, the ground will be cursed, and the growing of food will now be extremely difficult. The land will now bring forth thorns and thistles. God’s natural creation has been corrupted because of man’s sin, and it now stands in need of redemption (Rom. 8:19-22). Finally, the man is told that he will return to the ground from which he was taken. In other words, he will die.

After graciously providing clothes for the man and the woman (Gen. 3:21), God exiles them from the garden to prevent them from eating of the tree of life and perpetuating their fallen condition forever (3:22-24). By disobeying God, man has cut himself off from the place of God’s unique presence and blessing. He has allowed Satan to establish his dominion on earth (John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4). He has separated himself from the one who is life itself (Ps. 36:9). The restoration of God’s kingdom and blessing and the redemption of man will become of primary importance throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis and throughout the entire Bible. These are fundamental elements of biblical eschatology.

The first three chapters of Genesis were of particular significance to Israel on the borders of the Promised Land because Israel shared many similarities with Adam. William Dumbrell explains:

Significant for biblical eschatology are the several analogies that can be drawn between the man Adam and the nation Israel: Israel was created, as was Adam, outside the divine space to be occupied—Israel outside Canaan and Adam outside the garden. Both Israel and Adam were placed in divine space: Israel in Canaan and Adam in Eden. Israel was given, as was Adam, law by which the divine space could be retained.

The question for Israel was simple. Would she obey the law, or would she, like Adam disobey and be exiled from the land? If Adam proved unfaithful to God in the perfect environment, could Israel hope to keep the law in a land surrounded by idolaters? (From Age to Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology, Keith A. Mathison, pp. 23-27)

Tremper Longman III discusses the effects of the Fall and shows how a pattern that was established in Genesis 3 plays itself out repeatedly in Genesis 4-11.

God had warned them: “If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die” (Gen 2:17). Though Adam and Eve do not immediately drop dead, their ejection from the Garden of Eden means separation from the tree of life. It’s now just a matter of time until they return to the dust from which they came.

However, the effects of the Fall go well beyond physical death. The first place the consequences of the Fall can be seen is in the relationship, which is so important to human beings. No longer can Adam and Eve stand naked before one another and feel no shame. They cover themselves with fig leaves. Their shame extends beyond a
feeling of physical inadequacy and includes a psychological and spiritual estrangement. They no longer experience the same measure of intimate connectedness that they felt before the sin.

But this is not the worst of it. This separation of Adam and Eve derives from a more fundamental disconnection with God. Up to now Adam and Eve have had easy access to and communion with God. But now Adam hears God’s voice and runs (Gen 3:10). Their removal from Eden also implies that they no longer can easily be in the presence of God.

But there is still more. God tailors appropriate punishments for all three of the parties. Each of them is responsible for this act, though Adam blames Eve who blames the serpent (Gen 3:11–13). The curses against the serpent, Eve and Adam prick them in the heart of their identity.

The serpent is doomed from this point on to “eat dust,” slithering along the earth rather than walking on appendages. But most ominously and weighted with future significance, God pronounces: “I will cause hostility between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15).

In its original setting this passage would have been enigmatic. Who are the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman? How will the serpent’s head be crushed, and how would the woman’s heel be struck? As biblical history unfolds, we soon see that humankind is split into two groups, the godly and the ungodly. Indeed, we will see this split in the stories that follow Genesis 4–11 as well as in the genealogies that include Cain and Seth, one notably evil and the other following God (Gen 4:17–26 and Gen 5). Throughout the Bible conflict erupts between these two groups.

Even though it is unlikely that the original readers of Genesis had a clue about the final outcome of this battle, the New Testament locates its climax in Christ’s death on the cross (see Col 2:15). In Jesus’ crucifixion, the serpent strikes the foot of the seed of the woman (Christ), but by dying and being raised again to life, he crushes the serpent’s head (see pp. 166–169). For this reason this passage has been called the protoevangelium in the history of interpretation. In plain English, this is the first announcement of future salvation.

Notice that this curse goes to the heart of the serpent’s passions. From the story alone, we can surmise that the serpent is intent on undermining the authority of God among the people whom God created. Why the serpent wants to do this is beyond the information provide in Genesis 3, but the curse reveals that the serpent’s goals will not be achieved. Rather the offspring of the woman will eventually destroy him.

God then turns his attention to the woman. The woman is the womb bearer and thus is constitutionally bent toward relationship. It is precisely here that God chooses to punish her. Life will still come from her womb, but at a cost. She will endure great pain in the process. But she will suffer more than physical pain. In an often misunderstood statement, God proclaims that “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16 NIV). The key to understanding the proper force
of this part of the curse has to do with the nature of the woman’s desire. Too often that desire is thought to be romantic. The woman wants intimacy with the husband, but he responds with domination. The Hebrew word translated as desire here (teshugah) is only used two other places (Gen 4:7; Song 7:10). The first of these is most telling because it is in the same context. In Genesis 4:7 the subject is sin’s desire to dominate Cain. In the same way, the woman’s desire should be seen as a desire to dominate Adam. Thus this curse describes the power struggle that will dominate the relationship between the genders even to this day.

If relationship is at the heart of the punishment directed toward the woman, work receives attention in Adam’s curse. Appropriately for the context of the setting, where Adam has earlier been charged with maintaining the Garden (Gen 2:15), the punishment takes an agrarian shape. As the NLT translates so vividly, “the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat” (Gen 3:17-19).

That the woman is cursed in relationships and the man in work certainly doesn’t mean that women shouldn’t work or men don’t care about relationships, but it may indicate where the genders have tended to place their respective deepest significance. However, men also feel frustrated in relationships and women too struggle in their work.

The climax of the chapter, however, comes in the final few verses (Gen 3:22-24) where God banishes them from Eden forever. Never again will their life be the same. The blessing of God on human beings has been severely disrupted.

Scholars have noted that the account of the Fall demonstrates a pattern that will be repeated in the four stories that follow in Genesis 4-11 (Cain and Abel, the sons of God and the daughters of men, the flood, the tower of Babel). The pattern narrates (1) a sin, followed by (2) a judgment speech of God. However, before (4) God executes the judgment, he (3) gives them a token of his grace. In these stories we not only see how human sin has disrupted the blessing of God on his human creatures, but also God’s pursuit of them in order to restore relationship with them.

We can see how this operates in Genesis 3, the account of the Fall.

1. Adam and Eve sin by eating the forbidden fruit. The serpent sins by seducing them into this evil act.
2. God then pronounces his judgment in the series of curses that he speaks against the serpent, the woman and the man.
3. The token of grace is the clothes that God fashions for Adam and Eve out of animal skins. God encourages them in the area where they express most vulnerability.
4. He then executes his judgment by ejecting them from the Garden of Eden.

…this fourfold pattern may be illustrated by a brief summary of the plot of each of the following stories.
Cain and Abel. After ejection from the Garden, Adam and Eve had children. Two are named at the beginning of Genesis 4: Cain and Abel. These two children are as different as night and day. Cain is a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Though one school of interpretation argues that the story is about shepherds who are putting down farmers, this is unlikely. It is rather a story that speaks of proper and improper attitudes toward God.

At the time of sacrifice, both men bring products of their profession. Cain brings vegetables, and Abel brings lambs from his flock. God accepts only Abel’s offering without explicit explanation, leaving later readers guessing. Is it because Abel’s sacrifice is bloody? Is it an arbitrary decision?

The answer to this question is subtly presented in the text. The clues are the adjectives used to describe the respective sacrifices. Cain’s sacrifice of farm produce has no qualifiers. He brought plain old vegetables. Abel on the other hand brought to the Lord “the best of firstborn lambs from his flock” (Gen 4:4). Nothing is too good for the Lord. This external gift reflects the gratitude of his heart.

Cain’s apparent lack of gratitude moves to something darker. So God admonishes him not to be angry. God’s rejection of his sacrifice should have led him to change his behavior in positive directions, but his actions get much worse. The sin that was waiting to overtake him ravages his heart. Cain kills his brother, who had received God’s favor. The first recorded sin after Eden is fratricide.

Like all who do evil deeds, Cain tries to cover up his crime, but to no avail. God catches him and delivers a judgment speech: “Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has swallowed your brother’s blood. No longer will the ground yield good crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be [a] homeless wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:11-12). In other words, the curse against Adam has just gotten worse with the sin of Cain.

But in spite of Cain’s despicable act, God still extends a token that signifies his continued involvement with him and the sinful human race. In response to his fear that he will be destroyed by others, God marks him with a promise: “I will give a sevenfold punishment to anyone who kills you.” While some think this mark is similar to tattoos that criminals were known to receive in the ancient Near East, because it was a sign of grace this is unlikely. However, the text does not help us understand precisely what form this mark took.

However, what is clear is that humans continue to sin. Yet God continues to judge sin, and also extend his grace by remaining involved.

The “sons of God”: Prelude to the flood. The second story that we will examine in the post-Fall period is a true enigma. It is a brief account, but it has captured the imaginations of readers. The nature of the sin is obvious. There is some sort of sexual transgression here. Intimate relationships are formed that are not proper. The first question is, Who are the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” whose union angers God?
One popular interpretation understands the union to be between the godly line (represented by the Sethite genealogy of Gen 5) and the ungodly (represented by the Cainite genealogy at the end of Gen 4). This explanation is possible, but it doesn’t explain the extraordinary offspring that their relationship produces.

“Sons of God” is a phrase that typically refers to angels (Ps 29:1). If this is taken as the interpretive key to the passage, then the illegitimate union is between angels and humans. This is a better explanation of the children who are called the Nephilim, rightly understood as giants who are “the heroes and famous warriors of ancient times” (Gen 6:4).

The New Living Translation pushes the interpretation in this direction with its translation: “When the human population began to grow rapidly on the earth, the sons of God saw the beautiful women of the human race and took any they wanted as their wives.” Intertestamental Jewish literature understood this passage in this way, and it’s likely that this event is in the mind of the author of Jude when he says, “And I remind you of the angels who did not stay within the limits of authority God gave them but left the place where they belonged” (Jude 6). In response to those who say that Jesus taught that the angels are asexual, it may be said that a closer look at the passage says that they do not marry (Lk 20:27-40).

In any case, this story is yet another illustration of the sin of the human race that eventually leads to the flood itself: “I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them.”

**The flood.** While the flood is a separate episode in Genesis, the “sons of God” episode is the prelude that gives a concrete instance of the sin that leads to this horrible judgment. After we look at the flood, we will then recognize how the pattern we are tracking also works itself out for the “sons of God” account.

The “sons of God” incident is not the only sin that leads to the judgment of the flood. Indeed, the intensity and frequency of sin that moves God to this drastic step is quite remarkable: “The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought and imagined was consistently and totally evil” (Gen 6:5, see also vv. 11-12). God then determines to destroy humanity, but he does not do so easily. “It broke his heart” (Gen 6:6).

Having noted the sin, the passage then goes on to cite God’s speech of judgment: “I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them.” (Gen 6:7, see also vv. 13-21).

The flood, in essence, represents an undoing of creation. Back in Genesis 1, the creation was narrated as God’s shaping the formless mass (*tohu vabohu*) by moving back the waters that completely surrounded the world. The flood is thus a reversal of creation.
Whether in our efforts to reconcile science and the Bible we conclude that the flood was universal or local, when we enter the world of the text, we have to conclude that the author felt that everything was covered by the waters of judgment, with one exception: the ark. The problem was universal human sin. The waters themselves covered even the tallest mountains of the region. To picture the scene as described by the author, we must imagine a universal destruction.

But before the judgment is actually executed, God extends a token of his grace to humanity. He informs Noah, a “righteous man” (Gen 6:9), of his plan and instructs him how to build a large boat that will carry him, his immediate family and representative animals to safety.

The narration of the destruction follows in Genesis 7. All but those in the ark are destroyed, and the aftermath is depicted in Genesis 8-9. The transition point from destruction to restoration is signaled by the memorable phrase: “but God remembered Noah” (Gen 8:1). The waters recede, and the ark settles on a mountain peak. After a few more days, Noah released birds to determine that the waters had uncovered dry land.

Finally, on divine command, Noah and all those in the ark departed. Significantly, Noah’s first action is to build an altar and offer sacrifices. God then responds by promising not to “curse the ground” again (Gen 8:21). As God continues the work of reconstituting the human race through Noah on what is ostensibly a new earth, we hear many echoes of Genesis 1-2. First, God tells them to “be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth” (Gen 9:1, compare 1:28). Yet there are significant twists to some aspects of the original relationship between God and human beings that take into account the fallen nature of humanity. For instance, now God allows his human creatures to not only eat plants (Gen 2:15-17) but also animals (Gen 9:2-3). While again we find the language of image of God (9:6, compare 1:26-27), here it is in a context that recognizes social chaos in God’s world. The importance of this verse is underlined by the memorable way it is stated. The chiastic structure—“the one who sheds the blood of a person, by a person his blood will be shed”—has a special ring when read in the original Hebrew: shofekh dam ha’adam ba’adam damo yishafekh.

This reaffirmation of the relationship between God and humanity is given the name “covenant,” while mentioned in Genesis 6:18 and then spelled out in Genesis 9. A biblical covenant is similar to a treaty. God is a great king who enters into a treaty with his servant people, and Noah serves as the main human representative. This is a covenant of creation in which God affirms his intention to preserve the conditions that allow humans to live on earth. On the negative side, he promises to never again bring a flood to destroy human beings (Gen 9:11), and on the positive side he agrees to continue the life cycles of the seasons (Gen 8:22).

 Appropriately, the rainbow is declared the sign of the covenant. The sign is a symbol that represents the covenant, and when it appears, it reminds the respective parties of the need to be obedient to its provisions. The rainbow is apt because it is something that appears after the storm. Furthermore, the rainbow may contain an implicit curse.
that God takes on himself. The Hebrew word for rainbow used here is the same as the word for bow, a weapon. Taken in this sense, God hangs his bow up and its upward direction, pointing at God, may signify that God is saying that he will keep the covenant on pain of death. Of course, God can’t die, and that is precisely the point. He can’t break the covenant either.

In any case the sad truth is that it’s a good thing God promised not to destroy humankind even if they sinned, for it’s not long before we hear of additional shortcomings. Bypassing the intriguing story of Noah’s sons, we encounter another world crisis: the tower of Babel.

The Tower of Babel. The story of the tower of Babel proper is found in 11:1-9, but to complete the pattern described in Genesis 1-11, it is necessary to appeal to Genesis 10 as well. Nonetheless Genesis 11:1-9 on its own is a powerful illustration of the pervasive and profound literary artistry of the book of Genesis.

The following description is a summary of the excellent literary analysis provided by the Dutch biblical scholar J. P. Fokkelman. Fokkelman’s reading of the tower of Babel story has revealed its intricate design. He begins his study by noting word plays throughout this short episode. Certain word groups are bound together by their similar sound: “let us make bricks” (nilbenah lebenim), “bake them thoroughly” (nisrefah lisrefah), “tar” and “mortar” (hemar and homer). There is also an alliteration between “brick” (lebenah) and “for stone” (le’aben). These similar sounds give the story a rhythmic quality that draws the reader’s attention not only to the content of the words but to the words themselves. Other repeated words also sound alike: “The place” (sham) is what the rebels use as a base for storming “heaven” (shamayim) in order to get a “name” (shem) for themselves. God, however, reverses the situation because it is “from there” (misham; v. 8) that he disperses the rebels and foils their plans. The ironic reversal of the rebels’ evil intentions is highlighted in more than one way by the artistic choice of words. Fokkelman lists the numerous words and phrases that appear in the story with the consonant cluster lbn, all referring to the human rebellion against God. When God comes in judgment, he confuses (nbl) their language. The reversal of the consonants shows the reversal that God’s judgment effected in the plans of the rebels. This reversal is also reflected in Fokkelman’s analysis of the chiastic structure of the story:

A 11:1 (unity of language)
B 11:2 (unity of place)
C 11:3a (intensive communication)
D 11:3b (plans and inventions)
E 11:4a (building)
F 11:4b (city and tower)
X 11:5a (God’s intervention)
F’ 11:5b (city and tower)
E’ 11:5c (building)
D’ 11:6 (counter plans and inventions)
C’ 11:7 (communication disrupted)
B’ 11:8 (disruption of place)
A’ 11:9 (disruption of language)

Unity of language (A) and place (B) and intensive communication (C) induce men to make plans and inventions (D), especially to building (E) a city and a tower (F). God’s intervention is the turning point (X). He watches the buildings (F’) people make (E’) and launches a counter plan (D’) because of which communication becomes impossible (C’) and the unity of place (B’) and language (A’) is broken. Fokkelman’s analysis of Genesis 11:1-9 shows on a small scale what is true on a large scale: Genesis is an artfully constructed piece of literature.

After this literary analysis, we can now see the story from the perspective of the pattern of sin, judgment speech, token of grace, and then the execution of judgment. The sin, of course, is the building of the tower. The exact form of this tower is a matter of debate. Typically, and perhaps rightly, the idea behind it is the great Mesopotamian ziggurat, a stepped pyramid that represented a ladder or bridge from earth to heaven. Babylon (Shinar) is explicitly mentioned as the location of this assault on heaven, so perhaps this connection is justified. In any case, whatever the exact form of this building activity, it is an act of pride, an attack on God. It appears to be an attempt to scale heaven and represent human greatness, and it is also a countermeasure to God’s desire, in response to the Fall, to scatter the people all over the land.

God will not have it, however, and in a judgment speech addressed apparently to the divine council (see also Gen 1:27), he determines to scatter them by scattering their language. Up to now the passage implies, humans spoke a single language. God would now foil their attempts to scale heaven by dividing their language.

So far the pattern holds steady. However, what about the token of grace? At this point Genesis 10 enters our consideration. In a word God shows grace to human beings by splitting them into language groups, rather than having everyone speak their own unique dialect or completely silencing their voices. In other words, communication becomes much more difficult, but not impossible. Humans can no longer communicate with all other human beings, but there are some who speak the same language, and translation remains a possibility to speak to those outside of our own language group.

Genesis 10 reflects this reality. Unlike a typical genealogy, it really is a kind of ancient linguistic map. The groupings would not stand up to the critique of a modern linguist, but Genesis 10 groups languages that sound a lot alike to the ancient ear. Still, the point stands that communication is possible, even though severely limited.

The episode concludes by the execution of the judgment. God confuses their language, and the result is that they disperse across the face of the earth, in human clusters to be sure, but no longer able to draw on the resources of the whole.

**Persistent sin, consistent judgment, intensive grace.** The four stories of Genesis 3-11 thus reflect a similar pattern: sin, judgment speech, token of grace and the execution of judgment. What does this pattern communicate to the reader? First, it shows that human beings are addicted to sin. Human rebellion does not improve or get better with time—it arguably gets worse. And as it gets worse, God is there to consistently judge it. God does not let sin slide. Readers should observe this and be warned. But they
should also be encouraged. After all, God does not abandon human beings; he stays involved with them. He pursues them with his grace.

(*How to Read Genesis*, Tremper Longman III, pp. 111-122)

Paul House discusses how this reality of sin that is introduced in Genesis 3 continues to be the primary problem throughout Scripture and that it needs to be resolved in order for God’s good creation to be restored.

Who is responsible for all this sin? It is vital to conclude that each individual is responsible for his or her actions. Though God created the serpent, the serpent was not commanded to tempt the humans. God warned the people against eating the fruit of one tree, but Eve and Adam lacked the faith necessary to believe the Lord instead of the serpent. When faced with believing God enough to keep one law, the humans fail. Their failure is their own, though, since they had been warned and since the serpent possessed no physically coercive powers.

How continuous is this sin? How ongoing is it? Jewish and Christian scholars have stated for centuries that humans are born in sin after Adam and Eve’s fall. Many thinkers have disputed this interpretation. Though the Genesis texts make no explicit statement one way or the other, no human avoids sin after Genesis 3. No one is sinless; everyone is affected by living in a sinful world. By birth, by choice or by both, the result remains that every human sins and every human suffers for that sin spiritually, physically, emotionally, relationally and vocationally.

How important is the prevalence of sin in the rest of the Old Testament canon? In a very real sense, the rest of Scripture deals with the solution to the sin problem. Moses mediates a covenant in the Pentateuch that includes sacrifices for sins offered in faith by penitent sinners. The Former Prophets sketch how long-term, habitual sin, left unchecked, gradually pulls Israel into destruction. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah lament being among an unclean people (Is 6:5) and being a person with a wicked, diseased heart (Jer 17:9). Isaiah 13-27, Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 25-32, Amos 1:2-2:3, and other passages proclaim the sinfulness of all nations. The psalmists declare there are no righteous persons (e.g., Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; 140:3). Job and Proverbs counsel wisdom in light of human error and foolishness, while the remainder of the Writings depict the effects of sin on Israel’s exiles (see Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, Nehemiah, 1-2 Chronicles).

Thus sin never skips a generation, not does it skip a single individual. Perhaps these particular stories are not retold as the reason for relentless human sin, but the canon certainly wrestles with the results of these accounts from this passage forward. The starting point, the place where sin enters the human race, is Genesis 3, a fact Paul highlights in Romans 5:12 as a contrast to Christ’s work.

(*Old Testament Theology*, Paul R. House, pp. 67-68)

Where in this passage do we find the central role that Jesus Christ plays in the unfolding plan of God? Tremper Longman offers these comments as a way to address this question.

Whether we accept Moses as the author of Genesis or not, we all recognize that it was written and finally edited well before the time of Jesus Christ. However, the authors of
the New Testament understand that its message has relevance to the gospel of Jesus Christ, demonstrated by quoting from Genesis time and again.

Jesus himself invited, even required, his disciples to read the whole Old Testament in the light of his coming suffering and glorification. The New Testament authors apparently did this (Lk 24), and we should do so as well.

The interpretations of Genesis that are found in the New Testament were not necessarily those that would have occurred to the original audience or the author(s) of the Old Testament book. They may have had a sense that the message had a meaning that would stretch beyond what they consciously knew, but it took the event itself to illumine the depths of the meaning of the book of Genesis. Once Christ came, his followers realized the full significance of the book.

This doesn’t mean that New Testament authors or modern readers can impose a meaning on the text. The christological meaning is not something external to the text itself. It is derived from the text. There isn’t a secret meaning or a code that we need a key to decipher. Proper christological readings of the Old Testament are not forced or arbitrary.

While it would be quite impossible to be exhaustive in our Christological reading of Genesis, we can be suggestive. We will take four important texts [only one will be considered for this document] and explore how the New Testament treats them in relationship to Jesus Christ. We will begin with the so-called protoevangelium, then move on to the promise of a seed or descendants given to Abraham, the story of Melchizedek and finally consider Joseph as a character who anticipates Jesus [the last three examples will be discussed in our next handout].

**Genesis 3:15: The Protoevangelium**

> From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

**The literary context.** Genesis 3:15 is part of the curse against the serpent. The first two chapters of Genesis are an account of the creation of the cosmos and of human beings. In these chapters Adam and Eve enjoy intimate relationship with God and each other in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2 ends on a note of peace and harmony.

In Genesis 3 the serpent appears, and he deceives the woman who eats from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam, her husband, who was with her during her dialogue with the serpent, eats without offering any resistance. At this point God intervenes and punishes each of the three players in the rebellion. He begins with the serpent, and Genesis 3:15 belongs to this section of the story.

**Reading the verse in its ancient context.** If we imagine ourselves hearing this story at the time of Moses (not to speak of the time frame in which the story is set), we must admit that the identity of the serpent is somewhat mystifying. All we have learned in the narrative thus far is that God has created everything, including all creatures, and
pronounced it “good.” Up to this point in the narrative we have absolutely no indication of anything being amiss.

Where in the world did this “shrewdest of all the wild animals” (Gen 3:1) come from? And how can the serpent be so obviously evil, speaking contrary to his Maker and seducing God’s human creatures to join him in what appears to be rebellion? The narrative doesn’t explain, and the attempts on the part of some Bible readers to fit a fall of angels into the “gap” between the first two verses of Genesis 1 shows how desperate people are to come up with an explanation. Indeed, nowhere in the Bible is there an explanation of how evil was first introduced into the cosmos. While space does not permit a rebuttal, arguments presented on the basis of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 are not credible. The serpent simply appears with no explanation of its origin.

In addition, the curse against the serpent is tantalizingly ambiguous when read in its ancient context. How would someone during the Old Testament time period understand the reference to “your [the serpent’s] offspring” and “her [the woman’s] offspring”? It’s extremely doubtful that Genesis 3:15 would have been read in a messianic sense during the Old Testament time period. Certainly such cannot be proven. The fact that the text is not picked up and developed in later canonical books is a good indication of this truth.

Within the context of the chapters that follow, a strong case can be made for the idea that the seed of the woman refers to those human descendants who are on the side of God (cf. the Sethite genealogy of Gen 5), and the seed of the serpent to those who resist God (cf. the Cainite genealogy of Gen 4:17-26).

Nevertheless, it’s also clear that the New Testament authors, who are reading Genesis after Christ, understood Genesis 3:15 to have a more profound and ultimate meaning. No doubt attends the fact that the early church identified the serpent with Satan and Jesus Christ as the “seed of the woman.”

At the end of the book of Romans, Paul encourages his readers with: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom 16:20). Paul here clearly identifies Satan with the serpent. After all, Satan will be crushed underfoot. The agent of Satan’s destruction, however, is the church, with whom Christ is said to be present. Though the people of God will be the agent of Satan’s demise, it is the God of peace who will be the force behind the people’s victory.

A second passage, Hebrews 2:14-15, is less clearly citing Genesis 3:15, but many make the argument that there is an allusion to it:

Because God’s children are human beings—made of flesh and blood— the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.
This passage speaks of Jesus breaking the power of the devil by dying, and so the necessity of his taking a human form. Perhaps it is in this way that Paul in the earlier passage believes that the God of peace crushed Satan under the feet of human beings.

The third place where we find language associated with Genesis 3:15 and applied to Satan and Christ is found in the book of Revelation:

Then there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. And the dragon lost the battle, and he and his angels were forced out of heaven. This great dragon—the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world—was thrown down to the earth with all his angels. (Rev 12:7-9)

Here the connection with Genesis 3:15 is also obvious. Satan is called the “ancient serpent,” an unmistakable allusion to our text under consideration.

In summary, then, the early church read the Old Testament story in Genesis 3 and could not help but see the serpent associated with Satan, now more fully understood based on later revelation. It also understood that that crushing of Satan was now underway in connection with Christ’s victory over him on the cross.

Is this a fair way of reading the text? Indeed, it would be hard to see how the church after Jesus could read it any other way. By the time of the New Testament authors, Satan is a much further developed character in the Bible. God progressively reveals his truth to his people, and in the later Old Testament and certainly in the New Testament period people of God had come to know the personal nature of evil much more profoundly. Going back to Genesis 3 it is hard to miss the character of Satan in the serpent. Once that connection is made, it would be even more difficult to miss the connection between Jesus and the seed of the woman. The woman here is Eve, and Jesus, the fully human as well as fully divine, is a “son of Eve.” In Jesus’ crucifixion Satan bruises his heel; he brings harm to Jesus, but it does not completely do Jesus in; God raises him from death. Thanks to the resurrection the church understood this as the defeat of Satan. Granted this defeat is an already-but-not-yet act, since Satan and evil are not extinguished until the second coming (Rev 20:7-10), but that victory is certain.

Thus Christian readers can go back to Genesis 3 and read the first announcement of the good news (the evangelium) there. It’s best to acknowledge that the first readers may not have recognized this, but that the ultimate author’s purposes are recognized by the New Testament authors as they read the Old Testament in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Before leaving this topic, though, we must consider one more factor. While the New Testament is the first to connect Genesis 3:15 with the work of Jesus, it is not the first to identify the serpent with Satan or the agent of destruction with the Messiah. For that we turn to Jewish literature that comes from the period between the Testaments.  

(How to Read Genesis, Tremper Longman III, pp. 165-169)
How does this teaching concerning the Fall and the spread of sin shape our view of the world? Albert Wolters and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. provide these insights. [Note that when Albert Wolters discusses the term world, he is not using it in the sense that we use it when we talk about worldview. In the context of worldview, world refers to life, that is, our basic beliefs about life as we know it in this world.]

In our discussion of the fall we have stressed that nothing in creation lies outside its scope. As dirty water contaminates a clean pond, so the poisonous effects of the fall have fouled every aspect of creation. The term world in the Scriptures refers precisely to this wide scope of sin. A Christian’s understanding of this word functions like a litmus test of his or her worldview.

World is used in a number of different ways in the Bible. Sometimes it means simply “creation,” as in the expression “from the foundation of the world.” Sometimes it means “the inhabited earth,” as when Paul writes “Your faith is being reported all over the world” (Rom 1:8). Other times, however, when representing something that pollutes and that Christians must avoid, world has a distinctly negative connotation. Consider the following phrases from Scripture:

Christ: “My kingdom is not of the world.” (John 18:36)
Paul: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.” (Rom. 12:2)
Paul: “…deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” (Col. 2:8)
James: “Religion…is this:….to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)
Peter: “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ…” (2 Pet. 2:20)

What precisely is meant by world (usually kosmos in Greek, sometimes aion) in this very negative sense? According to Herman Ridderbos, in Paul’s usage it refers to “the totality of unredeemed life dominated by sin outside of Christ.” In other words, world designates the totality of sin-infected creation. Wherever human sinfulness bends or twists or distorts God’s good creation, there we find the “world.” World here is the rottenness of the earth, the antithesis of creational goodness. In a similar vein, James states bluntly, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?” (James 4:4).

All of this may seem straightforward enough. We should note, however, that Christians of virtually every persuasion have tended to understand “world” to refer to a delimited area of the created order, an area that is usually called “worldly” or “secular” (from saeculum, the Latin rendering of aion), which includes such fields as art, politics, scholarship, (excluding theology), journalism, sports, business, and so on. In fact, to this way of thinking, the “world” includes everything outside the realm of the “sacred,” which consists basically of the church, personal piety, and “sacred theology.” Creation is therefore divided up neatly (although the dividing line may be defined differently by different Christians) into two realms: the secular and the sacred.
This compartmentalization is a very great error. It implies that there is no “worldliness” in the church, for example, and that no holiness is possible in politics, say, or journalism. It defines what is secular not by its religious orientation or direction (obedience or disobedience to God’s ordinances) but by the creational neighborhood it occupies. Once again, it falls prey to that deep-rooted Gnostic tendency to depreciate one realm of creation (virtually all of society and culture) with respect to another, to dismiss the former as inherently inferior to the latter.

This tendency is a serious matter and has far-reaching consequences. Consider how it affects our reading of Scripture. When we read Christ’s words “my kingdom is not of this world,” many of us are inclined to understand it as an argument against Christian involvement in politics, for example. Instead, Jesus was saying that his kingship does not arise out of (Greek: \(ek\)) the perverted earth but derives from heaven. When James says that pure religion is to keep oneself unspotted from the world, we too easily read this as a warning against dancing or card playing or involvement in the dramatic arts on the grounds that these are simply “worldly amusements.” But James is warning against worldliness wherever it is found, certainly in the church, and he is emphasizing here precisely the importance of Christian involvement in social issues. Regrettably, we tend to read the Scriptures as though their rejection of a “worldly” life-style entails a recommendation of an “otherworldly” one.

This approach has led many Christians to abandon the “secular” realm to the trends and forces of secularism. Indeed, because of their two-realm theory, to a large degree, Christians have themselves to blame for the rapid secularization of the West. If political, industrial, artistic, and journalistic life, to mention only these areas, are branded as essentially “worldly,” “secular,” “profane,” and part of the “natural domain of creaturely life,” then is it surprising that Christians have not more effectively stemmed the tide of humanism in our culture?

The Bible refers to the perversion and distortion of creation with many different words. Besides “world,” it uses such terms as “futility,” “corruption,” and “bondage.” “Bondage” is of particular interest because it illustrates how the havoc wreaked by mankind is associated with the work of Satan. To sin, in the Bible, is to serve Satan—or rather, to be enslaved to Satan. Outside the service of Yahweh there is only bondage—witting or unwitting slavery to Satan. This is true of creation as a whole. Where the creature does not find its freedom in responding obediently to the Creator’s norms, there it enters bondage.

Bondage in Scripture has to do with enslavement to a spiritual empire. The Bible speaks very straightforwardly of the domination of the devil over God’s creatures and of the demonic forces that God’s people must contend with. Satan stands at the head of a whole hierarchy of evil spirits who seek to twist and spoil the good gifts of the Creator. To the degree that these spirits are successful, creation loses its luster, becoming ugly rather than beautiful. The world becomes quite literally “demonized.” It is in this sense that Scripture calls Satan “the prince of the world” (John 12:31).

Satan’s agency raises a problem. If the perversion of creation is rooted in human sinfulness, how can that perversion also be attributed to Satan? Must not the villain be
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either man or Satan? The Scriptures are perfectly clear on this matter. While constantly linking humanity’s disobedience with its allegiance to the powers of darkness, they never diminish mankind’s own responsibility. To sin is to be in bondage to Satan, and yet the excuse “the devil made me do it” is never valid. Despite the role played by Satan, it is humanity that bears the blame for making the distorted creation groan. Though something is impenetrable here, as in the question of human responsibility versus God’s sovereignty, clarity in biblical teaching is certainly not lacking.

Consider the role of Satan in the biblical story of the fall. The earthly realm is still unaffected by evil when the serpent (embodying the fallen angel from the heavenly realm) entices humankind to sin. Only when mankind sins, and only on that account, is the good earthly realm subjected to futility and bondage. Satan can wreak havoc on the good earth only by first controlling mankind. The earth and its condition is and remains a human responsibility.

The sum total of evil and rottenness in creation (i.e., “the world”) is therefore the result of both human sin and the creature’s enslavement to the devil. This link between “evil” and “enslavement” is very foreign to the modern mind because of our pride in human autonomy and freedom. Yet this association is obvious in the Scriptures and was accepted without question by Christians for many centuries. A curious and instructive relic of this earlier easy identification of evil and bondage is preserved in the Italian language. The common Italian word for “bad” or “evil” is cattivo, which is the direct descendant of the Latin captivus (diaboli), “captive (to the devil).” This derivation reflects genuine understanding of the Bible’s teaching concerning the ultimately spiritual nature of all evil.

We should also add that at times what we have said about “world” and “worldly” fits the scriptural usage of “earth” and “earthly.” When Paul enjoins us to put to death the “members which are upon the earth” (Col. 3:5; KJV), identifying these as “fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence,” and the like, and when he says of the enemies of the cross that “their mind is on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19), he clearly refers to the fallen and corrupted earth, not to the earth that was declared “very good” in Genesis 1. And since it was the earth, not heaven, that was infected by sin, he can present the exhortation to “Set your mind on things above, and not earthly things” (Col 3:2). Paul does not mean that such earthly things as sexuality and sports and carpentry are evil in themselves (they are in fact part of God’s good creation); he means that they are corrupted and polluted compared to the perfection of God’s dwelling place. To them too we must apply the petition “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven.”

To summarize, we have seen that the fall affects the whole range of earthly creation; that sin is a parasite on, and not part of, creation; and that, to the degree that it affects the whole earth, sin profanes all things, making them “worldly,” “secular,” “earthly.” Consequently, every area of the created world cries out for redemption and of the coming of the kingdom of God.

(Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview, Albert M. Wolters, pp. 63-68)
But where does all this corruption — including the corruption of religion itself — come from? Could it be that, with some hidden purpose, God causes people to sin? Does the devil make them do it? How about the “powers” that are mentioned, but not really described, in the New Testament (e.g., in Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:16)?

Christians reject these suggestions as classic cases of passing the buck. The first of them (God made me do it) smears the biblical portrait of God: “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). God is perfectly holy and therefore hates sin. God outlaws sin, judges it, redeems people from it, forgives it, and suffers to do so. So Christians naturally think it blasphemous to say that God causes anyone to sin. If some “hard saying” of Scripture hints that, to the contrary, God’s hands are not wholly clean where sin is concerned — that, for example, in the events preceding the Exodus, God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” — we have to find some way of interpreting such sayings that preserves the portrait of God’s holiness. In the case of Pharaoh, we have to notice that the book of Exodus does tell us that Pharaoh’s hard heart blocks God’s revelation and, for a time, God’s rescue attempt. But the text doesn’t actually tell us clearly who did the hardening. Did God harden Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 10:1), or did Pharaoh harden his own heart (9:34), or did Pharaoh’s heart simply harden all by itself (9:7)? Exodus doesn’t answer this question unambiguously. The narrator’s interest lies elsewhere, namely, in how God will rescue people when a hard heart is blocking the road out of Egypt.

In the Christian religion God’s holiness is strictly nonnegotiable. Not so for the one the New Testament calls Satan or the devil. This is a figure of such power and wiliness that New Testament writers grudgingly title him “the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24) or even “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). Nonetheless, Satan is no match for Jesus Christ the exorcist, the destroyer of the destroyer. Nor can Satan wreck those who faithfully cling to Christ. Satan can tempt but not coerce. Satan can accuse, but not convict. Satan can accost, but not destroy — at any rate, cannot destroy those who “put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11). A central New Testament conviction is that the evil one seduces only those who are in the market for seduction. Satan deceives only the already self-deceived.

In other words (this is the second problem), Satan does not compel people to sin. Nor do “the powers,” whatever these mysterious things are. Whether they are spirits or forces, whether demons or dynamics (e.g., the power of corruption), whether persons or personifications, whether structures of society or their patterns of influence, mention of “the powers” can cause a shiver of recognition. The reason is that, at some point in our reflection on sin, we come to understand that sin not only personal but also interpersonal and even suprapersonal. That is, sin is more than the sum of what sinners do. Sin acquires the form of a spirit — the spirit of darkness, the spirit of an age, the spirit of a company or nation. Sin burrows into the bowels of institutions and makes a home there. When this happens, “special interests” bend the law to favor special people like themselves. Whole companies engage in an orgy of deceit. Whole nations join in lockstep with brutal dictators.

No serious Christian wants to claim that the powers rob us of all freedom and accountability, that they cause us to sin. In fact, Christians confess that the powers
have already been deeply compromised by the greater power of God. Don’t the victory texts of the New Testament cry out that Jesus Christ has disarmed the powers and principalities, made a spectacle of them, and triumphed over them in such a way that they can never separate believers from the love of God (Col. 2:15; Rom. 8:38-39)?

Still, the powers are aptly named. As the Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof says, mere personal goodness cannot lick them. In fact, their force can seem inevitable.

After all, why did millions of ordinary German Christians hand over their lives to Hitler and his band of criminals, thrilling themselves with their new status as members of his movement? Why in the Middle East do neighbors keep turning against each other in a nightmare of hostility? Why do military procurement officials and defense contractors bind themselves into mutually corrupting relationships that cheated taxpayers simply cannot break?

The big systemic evils exasperate us. So many of them seem beyond human reach. They partake of the mystery of iniquity. But, then, so do our personal sins. Why would we and others live against God, who is our highest good, the source of our very lives? Why do we human beings live against each other, fighting over our cultural differences instead of enjoying them, envying each other’s gifts instead of celebrating them? Why would we human creatures live against the rest of creation, given its majesty and abundance? Why would we live against the purpose of our own existence?

We might say, as Woody Allen did when asked about his affair with his lover’s adopted daughter, “the heart wants what it wants.” But, of course, that’s the problem, not a solution to the problem.

When we come to think about it, the presence of evil in the world poses a number of enduring questions for us. One, as we’ve just seen, is that people know what’s right and still do what’s wrong. Another — to return to where we started in this chapter — is the presence of evil in nonhuman creation. According to Genesis 3, God cursed the serpent and the earth after human beings fell into sin. Reading this chapter together with Romans 8 (which describes the creation as longing for redemption), Christians have long pondered the extra-human effects of the fall. We are fallen, but so is everything else.

And so we have old questions without good answers: Is carnivorousness a part of God’s original design? Judging by the fossil record and by the incisors of carnivores, it seems so. Judging by the scriptural prophecies of shalom and by our own hearts and minds, it seems not so. In Isaiah’s picture of God’s peaceable kingdom, for example, we find some of the loveliest of all scriptural prophecies, and in them carnivorousness is only a memory:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.
The portrait captures our imagination because we wince at the stark realities of “nature red in tooth and claw.” If you watch one of those National Geographics specials on television in which young lions chase down a deer, leap at its throat or claw their way onto its back, and then start sinking their incisors into the deer’s flesh, it all looks more painful than anything we imagine God to delight in.

Here’s a place where Christians who read Scripture, read the fossil record, and consult their own sensitivities may come up with more questions than answers. If carnivorousness is part of God’s original design, is God less sensitive to animal pain than we are? If not, why do we have what looks like a design for it? Could a pre-fall in the angelic world have anything to do with an answer? Or is that mere speculation? If — actually, in the real world — carnivorousness is one day to cease in the coming of God’s peaceable kingdom, how will the lions keep up their strength?

I should add that it’s no disgrace to have more questions than answers here. It’s not even surprising. There is much we don’t know about the world, and much we don’t know about the meaning of Scripture. Following the Belgic Confession in article 2, Christians who read both the “beautiful book” of the universe (general revelation) and the “holy and divine Word of God” (special revelation) will sometimes find themselves perplexed by the apparent conflict between them, or even within them. A faithful Christian will assume that the conflict is only apparent — that God doesn’t contradict himself in the two books that reveal him. But she will not assume that we’ll be able to resolve the conflict any time soon. Honest, patient scholarship refuses to manage conflicts of these kinds by forcing an early resolution. Instead, the patient Christian scholar puts issues of this kind into suspension for a time while she continues to think about them.

The trouble (this is a third problem) is that if the fallenness of creation extends far and wide, then it extends into our thinking processes themselves. For example, we tend to resist unpalatable truth. We resist the idea that we belong to God and not to ourselves. We resist the idea that our lives themselves have come from God and that we therefore owe God our loyalty and gratitude. We resist these ideas by such devices as willed ignorance and self-deception.

The result, says Calvin, is that we claim to be mere products of nature. Or we pretend to have invented our excellences. We “claim for ourselves what has been given us from heaven.” No doubt Calvin means to observe that people often take pride not only in their accomplishments but also in their intelligence, good looks, good breeding, and good coordination, as if they had gifted themselves with these things!

Our thinking has gotten bent, and our learning along with it. Some of Calvin’s successors in the Reformed tradition, such as Abraham Kuyper and his interpreters, have thought hard about what it means that our learning has been spoiled by sin. Nicholas Wolterstorff, an eminent Christian philosopher, observes that Kuyper knew a hundred years ago what many know now, namely, that when we try to learn something we bring to the task not only certain “hard-wired capacities for perception, reflection, intellect, and reasoning,” but also mental software formed outside of school, including a whole range of beliefs, assumptions, and commitments. Nobody pursues
purely “objective” learning. Everybody pursues “committed” and “socially located” learning. In fact, everybody’s learning is “faith-based,” and this is so no matter what his scholarly or professional field. The question is never whether a person has faith in something or someone, but in what or whom.

The problem is that we human beings place our faith in nature or in ourselves instead of in God. We identify with our own social group and filter our learning through its membership requirements. So the rich do social science one way and the poor another, and it seems that neither is able to see things from the perspective of the other, and neither even wants to. Or scholars commit Godlessness, convinced that God would cramp their freedom or intellectual integrity. With remarkable candor, Richard Lewontin, a Harvard biologist, once confessed his faith in materialism:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community of unsubstantiated just so stories, because we have a prior commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.

It would be hard to find a clearer demonstration of the fact that scholars who believe in God are not the only ones to guide their scholarship by their faith commitment. And atheism at the base of the learning pyramid is only one exhibit of how thinking and learning have gotten bent. People feel estranged from the persons and movements they study, and their estrangement often stems from resentments with a spiritual base. So people from rival schools, with rival systems and worldviews, trying hard not merely to win their way but also to defeat, or even humiliate, somebody from another school. The result is the well-known envy, rivalry, and sheer cussedness of a good deal of the academic enterprise, which is in these ways merely typical of the human enterprise.

Obviously, more education won’t fix what’s wrong with education. Nor will any other merely human corrective. Such fixes are tainted with the same corruption that needs fixing. That’s the bad news. The good news is that God has addressed human corruption from outside the system, and it is on this gracious initiative that Christian hope centers.