

Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The language of Christianity is dead . . .

If it isn't dead, it certainly is dying.

Why?

Frederick Buechner explains it this.

He says take the word *umbrella*.

Try repeating *umbrella* twenty times in a row.

Umbrella is no longer a word.

It's a noise, stripped of all its meaning.

So then take a word once filled with meaning
Like some of the words from the Bible

And repeat it over and over again
For some 2,000 years
Much the same thing happens.

As Buechner says, *through centuries of handling and mishandling [words] have tended to become such empty banalities, that just the mention of them is apt to turn people's minds off like a switch.*

Justification, sanctification, sin and judgement
Redemption, atonement, and faith . . .

Words that were once so important
We barely have the energy
To try and understand what they mean.

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I don't use them much anymore.

I try to say the same thing without them.

But truth be known

I still embrace their meanings

And seek to convey them in my preaching.

Take for instance, sin.

Sin is a word left to preachers and theologians

Not a word we'd use on the streets.

And yet, I believe

The human condition is in a negative situation.

There are things in the human soul

Preventing us from leading meaningful lives.

Ann Lamott says it this way: Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy and scared, even the people who seem to have it most together. They are much more like you than you would believe, so try not to compare your insides to other people's outsides. It will only make you worse than you already are.

St Augustine, an early church father,

Identifies the human condition

Perhaps in a bit more elegant fashion

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

Our lives were meant to be lived in the fullness of God.

Somehow, along the way, we got separated from God

An spiritual disconnect, a restless spirit

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A life removed from God.

Maybe it's caused by life itself.

We leave our mother's womb
And spend the rest of our lives trying to return to it.

We're stuck between a rock and a hard place!

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Many years ago,
Bill Moyers produced the PBS special *Genesis*.

There were panelists from diverse backgrounds
That spoke to the issues raised in the first book of the Bible.

Many of them tiptoed around the problem of sin
Which has beset humankind since the beginning.

However, the bestselling novelist Mary Gordon
Got sick of all the political correctness.

Frustrated she finally said: *People just aren't right. There is something fundamentally wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves.*

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We're stuck between the longing to be complete and whole

And the reality of a life broken and separated from God.

We're stuck between

Sin, the definition being, separation from God
On one hand, and death on the other.

We're stuck longing to live in the Garden of Eden
And the reality of living as outcasts.

St Augustine calls this plight of humanity, original sin

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The concept that the soul's corruption
Is the direct result of Adam and Eve's disobedience.

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**Romans 5:12 You know the story of how Adam landed us
in the dilemma we're in—first sin, then death, and no one
exempt from either sin or death.**

Adam and Eve, representing first man and first woman
And every man and every woman
Cast out of the Garden.

Consequently, like Adam and Eve
We, too, are no longer people living in Paradise.

Separation from God has become part of the human fabric.

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Each of us catch glimpses of what life could have been like
If Adam and Eve would have stayed in the Garden.

We catch glimpses of it in our own dreams

Dreams of life filled with joy, meaning, and purpose
The epitome of the Cleaver family
Or Andy Taylor, Aunt Bee, and Opie
Or the Walton family.

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Or take the art work of the late Thomas Kincaid.

He stated that his paintings were attempts to create images
Of how the world would have been
If sinned never entered the human condition.

In his paintings, we see images of peace and quietness
A particular light suggesting the presence of Christ.

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We now know that even though Thomas Kincaid
Could capture these pre-sin images, as he called them

He struggled with a drinking problem
And was accused of sexual improprieties.

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We live with this innate sense that life
Isn't how it was initially meant to be.

Life is full of disappointments, failures, hardships
Broken dreams and empty promises.

All this is summed up in one word, sin.
But again, the word sin,
Has lost much of its meaning over the years.

Most, if not all of us,
Have experienced the plight of the human condition.

This separation from God is universal.

The writer of Ecclesiastes found this to be true as well

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 (NLT)

²² So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? ²³ Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.

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But the Apostle Paul says, "wait . . . !"

According to Paul's way of thinking
Just as sin and death comes
Through the disobedience of one man, Adam

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The fullness of life, and life eternal
Comes through the obedience of another, Jesus Christ.

In short, God uses Christ's obedience
To offset Adam's disobedience.

2 Corinthians 5:19 (CEV)

¹⁹What we mean is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world.

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God in Christ redeems, renews,
And transforms a new spirit within us.

God heals us from the brokenness of the human condition.

In Christ, we find the fullness of life!

2 Corinthians 5:17 (CEV) What this means is that those who become Christian become new persons. They are not the same anymore for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!

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The story goes, a newspaper reporter asked
The well-known church leader G.K. Chesterton
What was wrong with the world.

His answer was simple.

He skipped over the assume responses.

He didn't say it was the result of corrupt politicians
Or warring factions
Or the greed of the rich.

He didn't respond by suggesting it was poverty

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Unjust laws, or inadequate education.

He didn't say it was the environmental degradation
Population growth, or evils of institution

When asked what was wrong with the world
He simply replied, "I am!"
We live lives caught between a rock and a hard place.

Longing to be whole and living with brokenness.

When Christians describe the condition as sin
People just tune out that old archaic word.

Tim Keller explains

When others hear a Christian call something 'sin', they believe you are saying "These are bad people (and I am good). These are people who should be shunned, excluded (and I should be welcomed). These are people whom God condemns because of this behavior (but I am accepted by God because I don't do that)."

You may not mean that by the term 'sin' at all, but you must realize and expect that others will hear what you are saying that way. They will probably understand your invoking of the word 'sin' as self-righteous condemnation—no matter what your disclaimers.

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We leave the womb of our mothers
And spend the rest of our lives
Trying to find our way back in . . .

Adam and Eve get kicked out of the Garden
And spend the rest of their lives
Longing for Paradise.

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We, too, spend our lives as aliens
Trying so desperately to find our way back.
Like Joni Mitchel's song

*"We are stardust
We are golden
And we got to get ourselves
Back to the Garden."*

The answer to the dilemma of the human condition
This separation from God, our Maker
Is in Jesus Christ.

And we can take the time
To learn all those old, dusty, theological terms.

Or we can simply place our trust in Jesus.

The Christian's answer to the plight of the human condition
Is simply Jesus.

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And so when asked, "What is the problem with the world?"

We, Christians, answer, "I am."

"And how do we fix it?"

"Put our heart, soul, and every fiber of our being
On Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

*"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord
And our heart is restless
Until it finds its rest in thee."*