

# Felix Culpa

Genesis 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Sometimes in my sermons, I like to start with something a bit light—a story, an intriguing article, something humorous—as a disarming way into whatever the theme of the day is.

Not today. Today, we're going to jump right into the deep end of the pool.

I want you to think about a time in your life when you went through something really, really hard.

Maybe it was the death of someone close to you. Maybe it was the disintegration of a vital relationship. Maybe it was a severe injury or a prolonged illness or an intense period of anxiety and depression. Maybe it was a season of deep homesickness.

Maybe it was a crisis of some kind—vocational crisis, mid-life crisis, identity crisis. Maybe you got to a certain stage of your life, and you thought, “I’ve been following the rules of the game, doing what’s expected of me, trying to check off all the boxes, and here I am—decades into the journey—and I don’t even really know who I am or what I want.”

Maybe it was a crisis of faith. “Do I even believe any more? I was given this religious package as a kid, but I’ve never even really bothered to make it my own. What actually is the meaning of this thing called life?”

Maybe it was a season where you just felt profoundly lonely and unloved—like nobody really had much interest in getting to know or understand the real you.

Maybe you did something terrible. Maybe something terrible was done to you.

I don’t know what specific hard thing you might have in mind right now, but I do know that we all have something simply because we are all human beings living in a broken world where bad things happen.

Do you have something specific in mind?

Now, I want you to think about the role that this hard time in your life has played from that time forward.

My guess is that our responses run roughly down three tracks.

For some, the hard time was a crucial defining moment in your story. You look back on that part of your life with gratitude. Your suffering was deeply redemptive. Your character was strengthened, your hope grown, your vision of God and life expanded.

With the benefit of hindsight, you would say that you were thankful for that season in your life because you learned things about God, yourself, those around you, and your calling in life that you couldn't have learned any other way. You wouldn't trade that hard thing for anything because you wouldn't be able to make sense of your story without it.

Others might have a slightly more muted assessment of their hard time. There was good that came out of it, certainly, but you're not sure it was enough that you would say that you were thankful for it. The pain still sort of seems to outweigh whatever positive benefits emerged out of it. You would have been glad to learn whatever lessons came your way another way.

You would say that at the very least it's not obvious that your suffering was redemptive in the final calculation. There have been positives and negatives, but you're not entirely sure which way the scale tips. It might depend on the day you're asked!

The third category is the hardest one. For some, the pain was nothing but destructive. The hard time was simply hard. All that you can say is that you endured it. You can't point to any obvious benefits in your life, no grand moral improvements or life lessons. If anything, it's made you more jaded and cynical, more suspicious, less trusting of God.

You would describe your suffering as utterly unredeemed. Just a plain old waste. Something you wish you could cast into the deepest sea of oblivion and forgetfulness.

I've seen all three of these interpretations of hard times in my time as a pastor. I try to resist evaluating how people interpret their own pain. I don't think that the first category represents the most faithful response and the third one represents a failure of faith. Life and faith are quite a bit more complicated than that.

I celebrate with those in category one. I sit in the ambiguity with those in category two. And I mourn with those in category three.

In all three, I try to encourage people (including myself!) to remember that none of our stories are finally told—that God isn't finished with any one of us yet.

We may yet come to see things differently. God may yet guide us into new paths of redemption, self-discovery, healing, and forgiveness.

I think often of the famous words of Frederick Buechner who says that what the resurrection of Jesus Christ means for us is that “the worst thing is never the last thing.”

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In the biblical narrative, hard times begin in Genesis 3. In the preceding chapters, we read only of goodness, creativity, order, harmony, communion with God. And then, things take a dark turn.

There is a serpent in this garden of goodness and this serpent is crafty. He plants a seed of doubt in the first humans' minds.

*Did God really say...? You won't die. God is just jealous. God knows that if you eat of the tree, you will know good and evil for yourselves. Why be content with your secondary creaturely status? Why be satisfied just bearing God's image when you can be little gods yourselves! Cut out the middleman!*

And so, of course, they eat. Their eyes are opened. But with eyes wide open they do not experience fresh new vistas of god-like knowledge.

They are instead plunged into vulnerability, shame, and blame. They cover their nakedness. They hide from what they have done and from what it means. They are afraid. Of the consequences of their actions. Of what it all might mean. Of God.

The Creator with whom they walked and talked with in the garden is now experienced as a judge.

In the story of the first hard thing, the man blames the woman and, indirectly, God himself. *The woman **you** gave to be with me gave me the fruit from the tree... It's the woman's fault. Or yours, God, for creating her! Thanks for nothing!*

It is a floundering, flailing response, a desperate attempt to avoid taking responsibility for his own actions.

The woman blames the serpent. *He tricked me. What could I do? He told a pretty compelling story. As far as sales jobs go, it was a pretty good one!* Another hopeless evasion, another cycle of blame motivated by shame.

This is followed by a series of consequences. The serpent is cursed to a life on its belly. The woman will experience pain in childbirth and the crushing effects of patriarchy that extend to this day (the man will rule over you). The man will be consigned to a life of hard and sweaty toil.

And of course, the awareness of death enters human experience. *To dust you shall return.*

I think all stories in Scripture on some level tell our own stories all these years later, but few do so with such devastating accuracy as this one.

I hardly have to tell you that blame and shame in the context of human sin are still alive and well today.

The scene is one that most of us have little trouble resonating with. Anyone who has been a parent is well-acquainted with the narrative trajectory here.

Our child does something they know is wrong. They hide. They are discovered. Their first instinct is to blame someone else. They are embarrassed, half-heartedly defiant, ashamed, afraid.

And of course, it's not just children that follow this pattern. Many of us are painfully aware, whether from our workplaces or our families or our churches or our own track records, that this is how things often play out when grown-ups do things wrong, too.

We still lash out at others to mask our shame.

*The devil made me do it. Or it was my upbringing. Or it's the system. I never had a chance. I was tricked. I was provoked. I may have overreacted, but can you believe how stupid all those other people are? I know good and evil perfectly well. My cause is righteous, they are obviously morally bankrupt!*

Underneath it all, we are still afraid of what we have wrought. And we still hide.

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Perhaps you've been puzzling over the title of my sermon this morning. *Felix Culpa?! What on earth does that mean?* One person this week asked me, "Is that like, blame the cat?"

It does not mean “blame the cat,” although that did make me chuckle. It’s actually a Latin phrase that goes back to the early church which means “happy fault” or “fortunate fall.”

(For the linguistics geeks out there, we get English words like “felicity” or “felicitous” from *felix*; and the Latin *culpa* winds a trail to words like “culpable” which has to do with finding fault and assigning blame.)

The theology behind *felix culpa* is that the sin of the first humans is viewed as fortunate, because it brought about the blessedness of Christ’s redemption.

The original wanting to be like God prepares the way for God, inexplicably “wanting” to be like us and taking on flesh in Jesus Christ.

The overreach of Adam produces the underreach of God who, in Christ, set aside divinity and took on the form of a slave to rescue and redeem us.

The rebellion of the first humans led to the ransom of the one true human being.

The first hard thing is the means through which the best thing—a love unlike any other—is made known to humanity.

I don’t know what you make of the expression *felix culpa*. I don’t know how you would evaluate the implicit math in the assertion that the introduction of sin into God’s good creation was “worth it” because it led to Jesus and to the salvation he has accomplished.

Maybe it sounds a little simplistic to you. What about all the violence and bloodshed of history? What about all the death and plagues and destruction? What about all the evil that we have let loose in the world? What about all the tears and sorrow that human beings have endured down through the ages?

Can we really call the fall “fortunate” because it led to Christ and because we believe that one day Christ will indeed wipe away every tear?

There was a time when I would have agonized over the math. I would have imagined myself to be a clear-eyed realist in soberly assessing just how much pain our world has seen and not rushing too quickly to imagine that the hope of heaven would compensate for it.

I don’t do this anymore.

I don't think there is any kind of objective way to add up all the pain and sorrow of human history and put it one side of the scale, and then add up all the goodness of Jesus and the hope of his promise on the other side of the scale and see which side is heavier. This now seems like a fool's errand to me.

It's also a bad strategy on the personal level, as I alluded to earlier. Few people in pain are comforted by a blithe assertion like, "Don't worry, God's bringing about something good through this. The math will all work out."

But there is this wondrous phrase from the pen of Paul in our second reading from this morning: "the weight of glory." Some of you will know that C.S. Lewis has a book by this name (one of my favourites, actually).

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure (2 Cor. 4:15-17).

The glory of Christ and the hope of new creation does indeed have weight to it.

A weight that is beyond all measure. A weight that reduces our calculating minds to silence and reverence. A weight that does not trivialize human pain, but overwhelms it with the forgiveness, healing, and love of God.

In the middle of the Genesis reading this morning, there is this strange phrase: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15).

Biblical scholars and theologians refer to this as the *proto-evangelium*, the first gospel, an allusion to one of Eve's offspring who will eventually defeat the serpent.

I don't know if you've looked at the image on the cover of your bulletins this morning. I'll put it up on the screen now.

I love this image, created by a nun at a monastery in Iowa. It is Mary comforting Eve.

What I love most about this image is that it does not portray a math equation. I don't see Mary saying, "Eve, don't worry, the scales will balance, the good of what's coming will outweigh the bad that you've set loose in the world."

There is a tenderness and a sorrow in the image that acknowledges the reality of suffering—suffering that resists all attempts to measure and quantify and categorize.

But there is also the hint of a smile on the corner of Mary’s lips. Can you see it? It’s almost as if she knows that there is a love that is coming that will overwhelm all of our fear and shame, all our scorekeeping.

Eve clings to the fruit that symbolizes her sin with one hand. Mary forces her other hand to touch her stomach and all of the hope it symbolizes.

Your pain and your shame are real, Mary seems to be saying. I know it hurts. I know that hard things can bring us low. ***But there is more to the story than you know.*** Your seed will indeed crush the serpent and all he has wrought in the world.

There is one coming who will make the heaviness of this moment seem light—a “light, momentary affliction,” as Paul puts it.

The worst thing isn’t the last thing. Because God will not allow it. God will not allow it in the grand story of the cosmos. God will not allow it in your life.

Earlier, I asked you to imagine a hard thing that you had been through in your life. But of course, hard times are not just past tense for us, something we can reflect on from an undisturbed present.

There are those who might presently be in the middle of a very hard time. Maybe it’s this pandemic and all that it has changed in our world and in our lives.

And others have hard times looming in our futures, we just don’t know it right now.

Whenever hard things come and whatever role they are playing in your life right now, the good news of Jesus Christ is that there is nothing that you have endured, are enduring, will endure, nothing you have done, are doing, or will do that cannot be redeemed.

The worst thing is never the last thing.

I want to close with the full quote from which this line was taken. This from Frederick Buechner’s book *The Final Beast*:

“The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.”

Amen.

