

Based on a True Story

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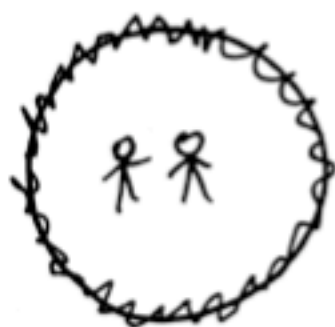
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When I read the news, it's easy for me to lose hope. Tanks and infantry invade other countries for sleight-of-hand reasons while the blood and corpses of civilians and soldiers fill the streets. Slave traders kidnap and sell thousands of Indian women and children into lives of forced prostitution. North Koreans eat the bark off of trees to stay alive. AIDS ravages the African subcontinent. One in every six American women is sexually assaulted, most of the time by someone she knows. And environmentalists predict that, in time, our planet may cook like a bowl of ramen. I really wish I could sing to you in my best raspy voice about a Louis Armstrong wonderful kind of world.

But it's far from wonderful. It's not even close.

We live in a damaged world, a place where

things aren't the way they're supposed to be. And it's tempting to ignore the sad news. Honestly, I'd rather be hitting tennis balls under the San Diego sun or watching an action-packed summer blockbuster—anything to put my mind at ease. I really have enough to stress out about. But I know I'd be avoiding the truth. And somewhere in the swampy parts of my mind, when I finally do get real, I know that this great blue marble we live on—and much of what goes on in it—has somehow missed the mark. When I actually let myself face the world's problems, I start to long for a better world. But is a better world possible?



The Christian story speaks powerfully into this

longing. Unfortunately, many misconceptions float around about what that Christian story is—for example, “it’s all about getting into heaven”—but you might be surprised to find out that Jesus didn’t come primarily to talk about that. He doesn’t just offer a lifeboat from this sinking ship we call earth. Quite the contrary. Jesus started a revolution of love, service and justice. And since our world desperately needs hope and transformation, Jesus offers a solution that, though costly, might actually work.

Designed for Good

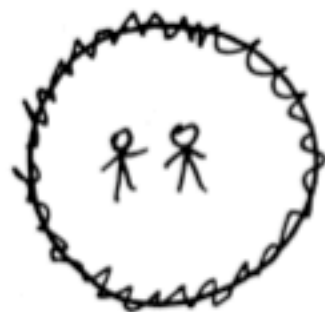
As hunger points to the existence of food and thirst highlights the reality of water, our longing for a better world seems to point to the possibility of its actual existence. Either our world was formerly better or it will be one day.

In the Christian story, a better world did exist. At the start of time God designed and created this planet. Everything in it and around it. This truth has nothing to do with which side of the creation-evolution debate you fall on. Because no matter how the world came to be, the Christian story says

that when we look at eucalyptus trees, windy rivers, majestic mountains, the shining sun, starfish, polar bears, Dungeness crabs, duck-billed platypuses, and (especially) you and me, you can see that all of it was designed for something. All of it has a purpose.

The story goes on to say that God had fun designing it all. Like a French chef who taste-tests while cooking his masterpiece, the Genesis narrator gives us the sense of a joyful artist enjoying his work along the way: *C'est bon!* And in his own review, he gave it the highest score: "very good". Not only was everything well-made, but everything was also designed *for* good.

Designed for good



Us and the world. The planet's systems were designed for good. Technically speaking, a system is a set of connected parts that form a complex whole. God designed a solar system that provides us with a livable atmosphere, ecological systems where flora and fauna support each other, a relational system of love and support with one another and with God, and a bodily system of ligaments, muscles and organs.

Take our environmental system, for example: we're designed to take care of the planet, and it was designed to take care of us. The Genesis narrator wrote, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." God was the first environmentalist! From the outset, human beings were supposed to take care of the planet. In return, God, through the planet, provided a sustainable climate and healthy nutrition to human beings. It's what theologians call providence.

Us and each other. We're designed to take care of each other. God designed relationships as part of our DNA. We're relational beings. We're made to enjoy communities of intimacy where we can fully

be ourselves, unashamed. God himself said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” We’re not created to be hermits; we’re supposed to be with other people, to have relationships full of intimacy and love. Our longing for friendship and community point to this original design.

Us and God. We’re designed to be in a personal relationship with God. To understand the Christian worldview, we need to know that God doesn’t want to be a distant Clockmaker, winding up the universe then letting it go. He’s intensely relational and loves us passionately, and he wants to hang out with us. Instead of producing anxiety, God’s nearness was originally a source of comfort and community.

Damaged by Evil

But clearly the world isn’t living according to its design. It’s damaged. A lot of the stuff out there is just, to use an old-school word, evil. Paul of Tarsus, one of the early Christian leaders, wrote, “The whole creation has been groaning.” Imagine Planet Earth with a forlorn face, sighing as she watches every-

thing that's happening on her surface. And you wonder why the earth is blue.

So how did we get here? The Genesis narrator gives us a clue: we wanted to be in charge—to “be like God.” We warped our relationship to everything on the planet so that it would serve our own needs. And when we live as if we're the center of all of our purposes, without concern for others, then we are only paving the way for greater atrocities to come at autobahn speeds.

Designed for good



Damaged by evil



Us and the world. To maintain my lifestyle, I'm part of a system that drains the planet of her oil, clears her forests for large houses and reams of pa-

per, fills her air with pollutants to commute, and drenches her fields with chemicals so we can have choice produce. I don't like to think about it, but I benefit and contribute to these practices every time I flip on a light switch, drive my car, shop at my supermarket or have my trash picked up. I'm part of a system that damages the planet. In the meantime, the planet hits back like a heavyweight boxer, except that her hurricanes float faster than a butterfly, and her heat waves sting harder than a bee. And the poorest of us, as we've seen in the aftermath of devastating tsunamis and hurricanes, suffer the most.

I'm a part of other damaged systems as well. For example, our system for protecting children is broken, allowing child sex trafficking to exist. Pedophiles pay for sex, poor parents sell their children, evil men trade children for profit, local law enforcement is ineffective or under-resourced, children are too weak to defend themselves—and a general public has other concerns. I contribute by not caring, and these factors combine to sustain a cycle of evil that abuses children. Cycles of racism, sexism, ageism, classism, elitism, oppression, corruption and

injustice also infect systems of cultures, institutions, economies, governments and communities—now and throughout history.

Us and each other. Though we try our best, we still end up hurting our fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, friends and neighbors. I'm capable of showing tender love to my wife, but if she corrects my driving, I'm likely to snap at her like a viper. And I wish that was the worst I did. Unfortunately, we all lie, steal, cheat, spin, gossip, angle, manipulate—so that we can each have our own way. Some of us go farther and hit, abuse, rape, punch, shoot or kill. My life naturally revolves around me, warping the way it's supposed to be—which is about loving others. Though God designed me to love my neighbor, I often love myself far more. And as we live for ourselves, calluses grow hard over our hearts, and our inability to love, bless and take care of each other is at the center of the grandest of global atrocities and the smallest of familial catfights. Even the media can't keep up with all of our stories.

Us and God. By our lack of care for the planet

and each other, we ultimately give the Designer the middle finger. I often act like his plans and purposes belong at the bottom of a garbage dump. Sure, he's big enough to take all of our abuse, but one of Jesus' most loved students wrote, "God is love." And in his love, God aches when he watches our selfishness, like a mother who sees her child taking the wrong steps in life. In the past, when he saw the unchecked violence throughout the planet, God was "grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." He still grieves today. And because of our constant self-centeredness, our relationship with God is broken. Though he still loves us, God seems oppressive, intolerant and distant.

The world is damaged, wounded, hobbling along. The cycle of evil escalates: the wounded continue to wound, and if there's no intervention, our world is on a crash course to become a living hell. We're all contributing to the problem. Anyone who witnesses violence on a daily basis either at home or in their communities catches a foretaste of what hell will be like.