

Batman: The Dark Knight

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

October 3, 2010

4th in the six-part series: *St. Andrew at the Movies*

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John 10:9–10 (NRSV)

⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Romans 7:14–8:2 (The Message)

I can anticipate the response that is coming: “I know that all God’s commands are spiritual, but I’m not. Isn’t this also your experience?” Yes. I’m full of myself—after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.

But I need something *more*! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ’s being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

Batman. The Joker. Two-Face.

Who would have thought such characters could give us a theologically rich film?

Wow. Where to begin? *Batman: The Dark Knight* is a big movie, filled with big questions and big theology. In a 2,000 word study or even a 30-minute sermon, we can only tackle a few of the issues raised. So let’s just plunge in and see how far we get.

The Face of Evil?

I never quite nailed down what I thought was the worldview of the Joker. Did he see himself as the destroyer of the good or the one who exposes that there is no good?

The Bible takes the existence of God and hence, the good, for granted. Indeed, in the opening verses of Genesis we get the Bible’s position: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and pronounced it good. Everything that exists is created by God and created out of goodness for goodness.

As we talked about earlier in the year,¹ evil then is the destruction of the good. It isn’t a thing. Evil doesn’t have an existence. It is destruction pure and simple. Evil only tears down; it never builds up.

That certainly seems to be the Joker: destroyer par excellence. Alfred, Batman’s trusty assistant, sees the Joker this way:

¹The January 17, 2010, Weekly Bible Study was titled, “The Question of Evil.” It, along with the entire archive of 400+ Bible studies, is available for download at www.scottengle.org.

Alfred : A long time ago, I was in Burma, my friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders by bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. So we went looking for the stones. But in six months, we never found anyone who traded with him. One day I saw a child playing with a ruby the size of a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away.

Bruce Wayne: Then why steal them?

Alfred: Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.

Is that it? Does Joker want nothing more than to watch the world burn?

I'm not so sure.

Here's the Joker in his own words during a confrontation with Batman:

The Joker: Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me! They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper! You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve.

Is that it? Is the Joker really ahead the curve, able to see and expose the fact that a human heart is only a heart of darkness? Even that there is no God, no morality, but only darkness.

Some reviews of the movie argue that the Joker in the film functions as a Satan, an accuser. And certainly, accusing others of moral hypocrisy consumes many of his waking hours. In the Old Testament, *ha-satan* functions as the chief accuser in God's court. The name even means "accuser." It is the Accuser (*ha-satan*) who accuses Job of being a hypocrite, living out a moral and upright life only because of what it gets him, not because he is actually devoted to God.

Satan knows quite well there is God. He has simply chosen to oppose God, to destroy the good. Satan and his minions just want to watch the world burn.

But I suppose that the Joker isn't really like Satan in this. He doesn't believe that there is any god, or at least not a creator who is a bit interested in our daily troubles. The Joker also knows that without a god there is no objective morality, but only our personal preferences and the power to achieve them. The Joker is out not merely to expose hypocrisy, but to demonstrate for all to see that Nietzsche was right. Without God, there is only power and desire . . . and death.

What's fairness got to do with it?

With Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face, the same question is in view. Because of Rachel's death and his own disfigurement in one of the Joker's monstrous "choices," Harvey surrenders any notion of genuine justice or goodness, becoming Two-Face. But instead of simply watching the world burn, Two-Face believes that the only morality is chance. Cold, impersonal chance. A flip of a coin is "fair" isn't it? Two-Face in his own words:

Two-Face: You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time. But you were wrong. The world is cruel, and the only morality in a cruel world is chance.

[holds up his coin]

Two-Face: Unbiased. Unprejudiced. Fair.

Chance has become Two-Face's god, the provider of morality, the decider of life and death. Two-Face has more company than we might think.

If the world was created by chance, not by God, Two-Face has a point. Those who deny the existence of a Creator are stuck with nothing more than *random (chance)* mutation acting on some primordial soup over very long periods of time to explain the fact that we exist, that we feel and love and hate and contemplate ourselves and our meaning. If we are here solely because of time and chance it is hard to argue with Two-Face. Just flip a coin.²

To reiterate, without a god who has woven goodness into the fabric of creation, there is no objective morality, no reason whatsoever to hold that things are right in and of themselves and some things are just wrong.

But we proclaim to the world that there is such a God, who has not only created us and all that is, but, by God's very nature, has taught us how we are to live with each other. And it's simple: love God and love neighbor. That's the summation of the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law of Moses. Sadly, too many in our day think you can live by the second, "love your neighbor" and ignore the first, "love God." It doesn't work that way. If there is no God, then the second tablet has no lasting value. It becomes only a statement of personal preferences. If there is no God, who is to say that murder is wrong.

The hard truth is that if we desire genuine, authentic life as we were created to live it, we have to turn to this God, indeed to the full revelation of God, whose name is Jesus. As Jesus says, it's true that the thief comes to steal and kill and destroy (it is hard to miss the Joker in this!), but Jesus came to give life, true life, a fully abundant life.

Dilemmas when seeking the good

The Joker's modus operandi is to put people in seemingly impossible situations with two choices, both of which are monstrous. Who will be saved? Harvey Dent or Rachel Dawes?

In the most monstrous choice of all, Joker rigs two ferries with explosives. One is filled with convicts. The other with ordinary folks and their families. Each ferry gets a detonator which, if pushed, will blow up the other ferry. If neither detonator is pushed by midnight, both ferries will blow up. You can see the dilemma. Will the passengers of either ferry blow up the other to save themselves? Who on the ferries, even the convicts, imagined that they would ever have to make such a choice?

I couldn't help but think of the William Styron novel and subsequent movie, *Sophie's Choice*. As the movie goes along, it becomes clear that Sophie is deeply troubled. Only late in the story do we find out why. During WWII, Sophie, Polish but not Jewish, is arrested for smuggling a ham and is sent to Auschwitz. When she and her two children arrive, a cruel SS officer tells her that only one child can stay with her and live. The other will head off to the gas chambers. She makes the choice and a few years later, takes her own life, unable to live with the guilt.

Blessedly, few of us are ever confronted with dilemmas like those faced by Sophie or by the ferry passengers in Gotham harbor. Yet, difficult choices abound in our lives. Do we choose the good or the convenient? Do we make small immoral choices for what we think is the greater good?

²Here's a ripped-from-the-headlines moment. In his new book, Stephen Hawking writes: "Because there is a law such as gravity, the Universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the Universe exists, why we exist." The question seems obvious to me – what was the origin of the Law of Gravity? Why is there something instead of nothing? By its nature, science has limitations, as does every other way of knowing – including theology and philosophy. Also, why is "universe" capitalized? Is to personalize the universe by giving it a proper name?

Even when we are confident that we know what God would have us do, it can still be so hard to do the right thing. We are tossed and torn by our desires and aspirations, many of which are thrust on us by an often godless world. So what do we do?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul talks about how difficult it can be to do the right thing; how often it is that he, and we, do the very thing we know we should not do, while failing to do the thing we know we ought to do. This is the universal human condition. But Paul also reminds us that God has given us a way out of the dilemmas; he has given us his Spirit, who will help us and encourage us to do the right thing – to put the detonator down.

It is such a great moment in the movie when a giant of a man among the convicts steps forward to take the detonator. He'll do what should have been done right at the beginning . . . We expect that he'll push the plunger, blowing up the other ferry, thus saving himself and his friends. After all, wouldn't a convicted criminal put his own interests ahead of the interests of others? . . . But no, he whirls and throws the detonator out the window of the ferry. He does the right thing, not the "smart" thing. I guess I'd call his decision a "God thing."

I'd like to think the convict is a man who has come to trust Jesus, and by his Spirit, finds the strength to do the right thing. But whether that is true or not, the Joker is hoisted with his own petard.³ Not only does the convict do the right thing, so does the man on the other ferry. There is a God. There is a deeply true morality. And both men know it.

Here's a final thought on the movie, a question really:

Batman: The Dark Knight ends on Good Friday. What could I mean? Is resurrection up next for the caped crusader?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has developed the following questions as discussion starters for St. Andrew's Fall Fellowship Groups:

Read **John 10:10**

1. Have you experienced the "way of the detonator," the seemingly impossible choice posed by the Joker on the ferries?
2. How does your Christianity inform and affect your life?
3. Have you experienced the "Joker", trying to get you to do things that you shouldn't, engage in conversations you shouldn't, and/or acts that you shouldn't?
4. How have you experienced the freedom Christ offers you?

Read **Romans 7:14-26**

1. How do you deal with the internal conflict between what you do and what you ought to do?

Read **Isaiah 55:8-9**

1. In reviewing, how can we grow to have a more Christ-like mind?
2. How can we tap into the mind of God that will lead us out of the dilemmas we face each day? How can you, how can we, do that?
3. How and why should we follow God even when it doesn't make sense?

³The phrase is from Shakespeare. A petard was a kind of explosive. Thus, someone who is hoisted (lifted up) by his own bomb refers to someone who is done in by their own scheme. The phrase seemed particularly apt in reference to the Joker. Here, his bombs and his dilemma only serve to show people doing the right thing. In other words, it has backfired on him.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 Who creates everything and how many times is creation pronounced “good?” What did you see in this oft-read chapter that you haven’t seen before?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Job 1:1-2:13 Satan (<i>ha-satan</i>) here is the accuser, the one who brings charges before God. What could you say about Satan based on this account?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Micah 6:6-8 What does this good and creative God really ask of us?</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 1:18-23 Why do you think that so many people have trouble seeing the simple truth that there is a God?</p>
<p>Friday, Joshua 24:14-15 Joshua and the people of God must make a choice. What choice do they make? Why?</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

