

Lesson title:

What is 'evil'? Is there a solution to suffering?



This lesson explores the problems of evil and suffering in a Christian context. Students are encouraged to consider different forms of evil and to debate whether suffering is gendered. They will learn about theodicy and the different ideas of early Christians, before considering a theodicy to justify evil and suffering in the modern world.

Flexibilities:

The learning ideas in this lesson can be used as they are written, but are flexible. You might like to try:

- simplifying the newspaper pages activity by giving lower-achieving students some which are partly filled in already
- setting an extended writing task at the end for high achievers, in which they consider whether Christian communities could and should do more to combat extreme poverty
- asking students to consider the argument that charities prop up systems that maintain the

poverty of the poor

- high achieving students might use the Christian Aid report on gender and development to consider feminist theological responses to development questions. They might investigate feminist theologies from Judaism and Islam alongside those found in Christianity
- drawing attention to Christian beliefs and teachings about equality in both the Bible and contemporary churches. Does the Christian community have a charge to answer – that it has been anti-women for many centuries?

Good learning: what's working well here?

- It is based on factual learning, but quickly moves on to require students to analyse and argue.
- It links Christianity, beliefs, practice and a philosophical problem.
- Students are challenged to think for themselves about links between religious, political and social questions.

Text and Beliefs

This work enables students to study some biblical texts and consider what they mean and how they should be interpreted.

Impact

Students examine the ways these biblical and spiritual ideas make a difference in the practice of Christian Aid, analysing and applying beliefs and values to 'real world' social issues of justice. The key GCSE RS concept of 'influence' is explored.

Connections

Students are challenged to consider their own attitudes and behaviour: how far can we all work for a better world? Do some people find it easier to be good than others? Why?

Learning outcomes:

Emerging

- define natural and moral evil
- outline an example of Christian Aid's practical work towards ending extreme poverty.

Expected

- define ecological evil
- outline the differences between emergency aid and development
- explain some of Christian Aid's underlying principles, including strengthening the poor, partnership and working with the poorest people
- offer a reasoned view as to whether poverty is evidence of human brokenness.

Exceeding

- offer a reasoned view as to whether suffering through poverty is gendered
- offer a reasoned view as to whether people who believe in God have a problem explaining suffering, considering arguments on two sides.

Teaching notes

1: Are humans broken?

a) Ask the class to suggest personifications of evil. Suggestions might include historical figures and perhaps the devil, Satan or Lucifer. Encourage the class to think about personifications of evil in fiction and film, such as Darth Vader, Lord Voldemort, Sauron, Narnia's White Witch and other characters. Discuss why human societies have always created characters that represent evil. How does it help us? Are other character traits ever personified, such as love, courage or jealousy?

b) Ask the class to define evil and to suggest things that they consider to be evil. You could offer them some newspapers to look through and select stories that they think include elements of evil-doing.

c) Display Christian Aid's guiding belief: 'Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.' Do pupils think that poverty could be described as evil, or is 'evil' more individual and personal? Can the actions of millions of different people be called 'evil'? Discuss in relation to Christian Aid's key principle.

d) Cut the examples of 'evil' on the How Evil? Activity Sheet into cards and ask groups to align in order of 'most evil' to 'least evil' or 'not evil'. Discuss if there is a difference in types of evil. Suggest further categories: natural evil (caused by nature), moral evil (caused by humans) and ecological evil (damage caused to the environment by human actions).

e) Focus on moral and ecological evil, both caused by human actions. Is the suffering caused by our evil evidence of human fallenness, or brokenness? Read Genesis 3, the story of the fall from grace. Summarise the story into six points as a class, then split into six (or twelve) groups and allocate a point to each group. They must create a news headline and the front page of a newspaper to portray their point, and they should use short amounts of text and an image. There is a template in the Activity Sheet.

f) In his book *The News: a User's Manual*, author Alain de Botton points out that news headlines are not written by 'a conclave of angels but by a group of usually rather weary and pressured editors', so the headlines do not 'constitute an ultimate account of reality so much as some first hunches as to what might matter'. Discuss why there isn't more good

news in the news media – do we seem to focus on bad news and ignore the love and courage that are also a feature of our world?

Split the class into at least six groups. Each group will choose a different example of how Christian Aid is working in the world right now. Go onto Christian Aid's 'Emergencies' webpage, christianaid.org.uk/emergencies, and print off different examples: responses to natural disasters; support to those fleeing war and conflict; assistance to people battling the impact of drought and famine, etc. (Please note: special sensitivity may be required for young people affected by some of the issues raised. If you have students who are refugees or asylum seekers, we advise having a private conversation with them first to make sure they are comfortable with raising these issues in the group setting.)

g) Once groups have chosen, ask them to complete a further set of front page templates, describing their example in a paragraph, a headline and an image. Display Christian Aid front pages alongside the 'fall from grace' front pages. Discuss whether endemic global poverty is evidence that humans are broken, lost or fallen, or if the work of charities like Christian Aid is evidence to the contrary.

2: Can suffering ever be a good thing?

a) Ask the class what cheered them up this week. How many students were cheered up by someone else's kindness, friendship or good humour?

Hand out a blank target board with three circles. Ask pairs to choose one example of evil from the Christian Aid examples that have been made into front pages. In the centre circle they write the event or reason for suffering. In the second circle pairs write all the forms and types of suffering resulting from this event or problem, such as death, bereavement, fear, hunger and loss of dignity. In the final circle, pairs record all the ways Christian Aid offers practical and emotional support, attention, practical measures, money, love and sympathy, etc.

b) Discuss whether suffering can ever be a good thing, and why. For example, does it enable us to see how brave and loving people are in response to suffering? Does it enable us to appreciate good times? Does this question upset students? Discuss both answers to the question, and how students feel about the question itself.

If you feel this question may be difficult for your students, you could try watching this film instead: animated TED talk by Jeremy Rifkin on 'The

Empathic Civilisation': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTn7pRmbVmA>. Rifkin argues that humans are not defined by violence and competition, but by empathy. He argues (at 4:40 onwards) 'there is no empathy in heaven'. Why does he argue this? Because there is no suffering in heaven, and to have empathy we need suffering. Use this fascinating talk to further discuss the idea that suffering is necessary to appreciate good.

3: Do women suffer more than men?

a) Read Genesis 3:16-19. According to this story, suffering entered human experience when Adam and Eve were ejected from Eden. This is a symbolic story: give the class time to discuss what it means. What do key parts of this story like the figures of Adam and Eve, the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the serpent and the expulsion from Eden symbolise – and how does this resonate with all human experience?

b) Return to the different punishment meted out to Adam and Eve. What punishment does God give Eve and why? Do the class think that women and men suffer in different ways? Gather examples and views.

c) Christian Aid (and many others) are concerned that poor women suffer disproportionately because they are seen as less important than men. As a result, they often lack control and agency over their lives.

Ask students to read the Information Sheet on gender injustice to highlight the ways women suffer because they are women. Then, ask them to use another colour to highlight how Christian Aid works to overturn this.

Christian Aid recently produced a fascinating report on how theology interacts with gender, *Of the Same Flesh*, which is available for all to read on its website <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/of-the-same-flesh-gender-theology-report.pdf>

d) As an extension, ask students to think about the list of points about the church and gender and the Bible quotations. What do they think the connection between the church and gender injustice is? Split students into groups and ask them to read passages of the Gospels where Jesus interacts with women: John 4:1-29 (the Samaritan woman), Mark 5:25-34 (the woman suffering from haemorrhages), Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha's house), Matthew 28:1-7 (the two Marys at Jesus' tomb). Ask them to present back to the class their reaction to these stories and what they tell us about God's attitude to women.

Explain how Christian Aid argues that at its heart, Christian theology is 'profoundly radical and counter-cultural in its assertions about gender'. The creation story in Genesis affirms the equality of male and female, both made in the image of God. Jesus sought to enable women to teach and lead as well as men in his service, and after he died women were formative in the growth of the early church.

4: Why is evil and suffering a problem for people who believe in God?

a) Display this well-known quotation from the Greek philosopher Epicurus:

'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?'

b) Look at images of Lucifer by Gustav Doré or William Blake. In one form of the myth of the Devil, Lucifer was beloved by God but chose evil. However, Lucifer is not as strong as God, and this leads to the problem of evil in Christian theology. Through discussion, arrive at the 'problem of evil': Christians believe that God is all-powerful and all-loving, yet evil and suffering exist.

c) Recap the Fall story from Genesis 3 by looking at the Fall front pages you have created. Discuss how far suffering is caused by humans acting under their own free will.

d) Teach the idea of theodicy: a defence of the idea of a loving and just God in the face of the existence of suffering. Read the theodicies developed by early theologians Irenaeus and Augustine on pages 10-11. Why does Irenaeus argue that God permits humans to suffer? Do any of the class find this argument persuasive? Where does evil stem from, according to Augustine? Do the class think this lets God off the hook, or is it pretty accurate? Discuss the difference in each thinker's view of the origins of evil.

e) What would Christian Aid's theodicy be? Create a theodicy that fits Christian Aid's commitment to human rights as well as its commitment to the power of faith in healing the world. What is God's role in this theodicy? What is humanity's role? Express this in bullet points, as for Augustine and Irenaeus.

Supporting the Christianity paper

This page summarises the ways in which this lesson contributes to meeting the requirements of the GCSE Christianity papers.

In the specifications

AQA

The nature of God:

- God as omnipotent, loving and just, and the problem of evil and suffering.

Edexcel

Beliefs 1.7

The problem of evil/suffering and a loving and righteous God: the problems it raises for Christians about the nature of God, including reference to omnipotence and benevolence, including Psalm 103; how the problem may cause believers to question their faith or the existence of God; the nature and examples of natural suffering; and moral suffering.

Beliefs 1.8

Divergent solutions offered to the problem of evil/suffering and a loving and righteous God: biblical, theoretical and practical, including reference to Psalm 119, Job, free will, vale of soul-making, prayer, and charity; the success of solutions to the problem.

Eduqas

Beliefs: the nature of God

- Omnipotent: Exodus 7-11, Exodus 14:21
- Omni-benevolent: Psalm 86:15, John 3:16, Romans 8:37-39
- Evil and suffering: quote on God and evil from Epicurus, Book of Job 1:8 -12, 42:1-6

OCR

Beliefs: the problem of evil and suffering and a loving and righteous God.

Concepts of evil

- Different types of evil: natural evil and moral evil
- Causes of evil
- The Fall of mankind as the result of Free Will
- The concept of original sin
- The concept of Good
- The problem of the existence of evil and suffering: how an all-powerful (omnipotent) God can allow evil and suffering if he is also loving (benevolent) and righteous
- Different interpretations and emphases given to sources of wisdom and authority by different Christian denominations.

Glossary

Gender justice means an end to the inequalities between women and men that exist in different areas, including within the family, the community, the economy and in politics.

Normative refers to a norm or standard that has been established, especially of behaviour.

Theodicy is an attempt to answer the question of how a good and powerful God could allow evil and suffering.

How evil?

Torturing your family pet

Not recycling your waste

A dog kills a farmer's sheep

People hunt wild birds to extinction

An earthquake destroys a school, killing hundreds of children

Deer strip bark from trees to eat, killing the trees

Taking food away from a hungry child

Buying clothes from shops that use child labour

A logging company causes deforestation, leading to habitat loss

Picking a wild flower in a meadow

Corrupt officials take bribes and lie that buildings meet earthquake-proofing regulations

Not giving money to charities that support poor children in the UK

Owning a cat which kills a lot of birds

Buying food grown in distant countries


Not giving money to charities that help children at risk of starvation overseas

Driving short distances when you could walk or cycle

Bullying younger children at school

Buying products from a country with an oppressive regime

Persuading yourself that poor people are lazy and do not deserve sympathy



Headline: express the story in one punchy, eye-catching phrase

Paragraph 1: main feature of the story

Image: what best sums up the story?
What best communicates the key emotion? What inspires empathy?

Paragraph 2: explanations of the main feature, anything else interesting, quotes from two sides of a controversy

Information sheet: The 'evil' of gender injustice

According to the United Nations:

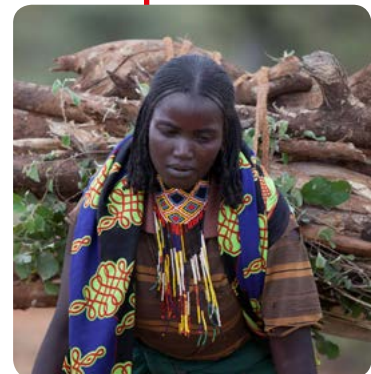
- The majority of people living in absolute poverty are women
- 80% of women in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa do not have a stable income
- Around the world, women do ten times more unpaid care work than men
- 22% of the world's elected politicians are women
- Globally, 35% of women suffer violence or sexual violence at the hands of a partner



Two women a week in England and Wales are killed by a partner or former partner. Whilst domestic violence can of course be perpetrated by women as well, the domestic violence charity Refuge states that in reported cases of repeated domestic violence, 89% of victims are women.

Loko Jarso is a young woman in Ethiopia who supports her family of eight. Loko had to walk up a mountain for eight hours a day, four times a week to gather firewood to sell. This was her only source of money to feed her children. Women in many more communities like Loko's are expected to fetch and carry water for their households, whereas men have much more leisure time.

But thanks to Christian Aid's partner, Loko's life was transformed. She was given a cow and two goats. She can now feed her children nutritious milk and grow a herd to sell. And because owning livestock gives you status in rural Ethiopia, Loko is now respected in her community.



Fridah Mwari lives in rural Kenya with her husband and two children. When she had her first baby, she gave birth at home without medical care, which sadly meant her daughter was very unwell when she was born. At home, her husband Steve didn't respect her, barely talking to her and his children.

But Christian Aid's partner, a branch of the Anglican church in Kenya, invited Gerald to a father's support group. His attitude to his family has totally changed: he now respects Fridah. And when she was pregnant again, Fridah went to a mother's group which our partner set up and learnt about the medical care she needed. She gave birth to her son Steve in hospital by caesarean section.



Fran, who lives in Brazil, had to flee her home because of her violent ex-husband, who started to beat her after they got married. Fortunately, Fran managed to reach a safe house set up by Christian Aid's partner. She left with nothing but was given new clothes and essentials by the safe house, and she and her children were given psychological therapy. The staff at the house also trained her to make craft items to sell, which means she can support herself and never needs to go back to her husband.

Thousands of women are killed by male partners each year in Brazil. Christian Aid's partner which runs the safe house is part of the Anglican church. They realise that some stories in the Bible portray violence against women, but they state that Gender Based Violence is never acceptable.



Almira comes from the small village of Pashan in West Bengal, India and was the first girl from her village to go to high school. When her parents started arranging her marriage, she said no – she wanted to finish her studies and get a good job first. 'I was determined to shape my own future', she said. Christian Aid's partner in India started a campaign against child marriage, which limits girls' opportunities, puts them at risk of abuse and threatens their health.



Almira was the first to get involved with the campaign in her village, starting a support group for teenage girls like her. She's determined that girls should be independent, and has already helped one of her neighbours stop her own arranged marriage.

What does the Bible have to say about gender injustice?

'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27)

'Most religious teachings have encouraged maintenance of traditional male and female roles' – Alice P. Tuyizere, an RE scholar in Uganda.

'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28)

'The Church has contributed to ways of understanding gender that have been profoundly unjust and oppressive.' – Christian Aid.

'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent' (1 Timothy 2:12)

'Women should be silent in the churches' (1 Corinthians 14:34)

'Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them' (Colossians 3:18-19)

'He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately' (Acts 18:26)

Two theodicies

Irenaeus' theodicy

Irenaeus was a second-century bishop, living in Roman France, in present-day Lyon.

- Humans, although made in the image of God, are clearly not perfect. We are not yet like God.
- We are still learning. We learn about goodness through witnessing evil. We learn about love through our experience of suffering.
- God allows us to experience evil and suffering because they teach us so much, although their presence means we are at an imperfect stage of creation.
- As we learn, we move towards the second stage of creation, which will be easier, but we are not there yet.

The contemplations of Irenaeus



The contemplations of Irenaeus, recently made bishop of the church at Lugdunum in Gaul, in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, in the year of Our Lord Jesus Christ 177

Today I have been thinking about evil.

I noticed how tempting the gods of Greece and Rome still appear to the people of Gaul.

What is evil? And what is a human being? The animals don't have a sense of evil.

Does God allow us to know evil to teach us?

God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, yet there is evil. However, if God wanted an earth free of evil he could have it. Therefore I will conclude that God wants there to be evil. But why?

God created us humans in his image, yet we are clearly imperfect, ungodly wretches.

God must plan for the creatures he made in his image to one day be able to grow into his likeness, and to finally be perfect and godlike.

We must still be progressing from the state of the image to the state of the likeness of our creator. Evil must exist to teach us.

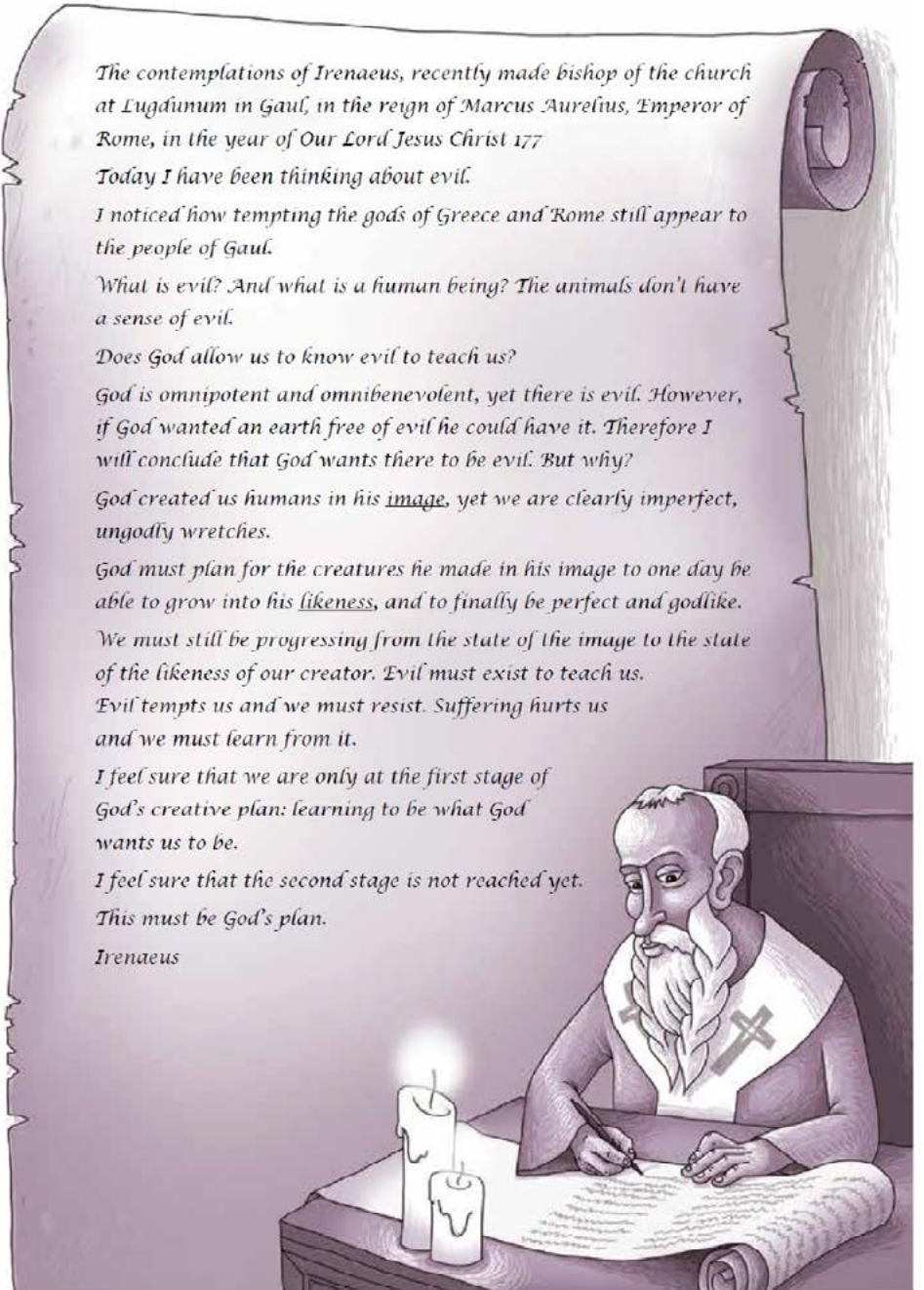
Evil tempts us and we must resist. Suffering hurts us and we must learn from it.

I feel sure that we are only at the first stage of God's creative plan: learning to be what God wants us to be.

I feel sure that the second stage is not reached yet.

This must be God's plan.

Irenaeus



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Augustine's theodicy

Augustine was a fourth-century bishop, living in Roman North Africa, in present-day Algeria.

- There is certainly evil in God's wonderful world, but what is evil?
- Evil is not a thing in itself; it is the absence of good.
- Although God's original creation was perfect and blissful, it changed when human beings arrived.
- When the first humans disobeyed God they suffered, and every human who gives in to temptation and allows evil into the world suffers. We have brought evil into God's perfect creation.



The private reflections of Augustine



The private reflections of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, in the year of Our Lord 396, the episcopal residence.

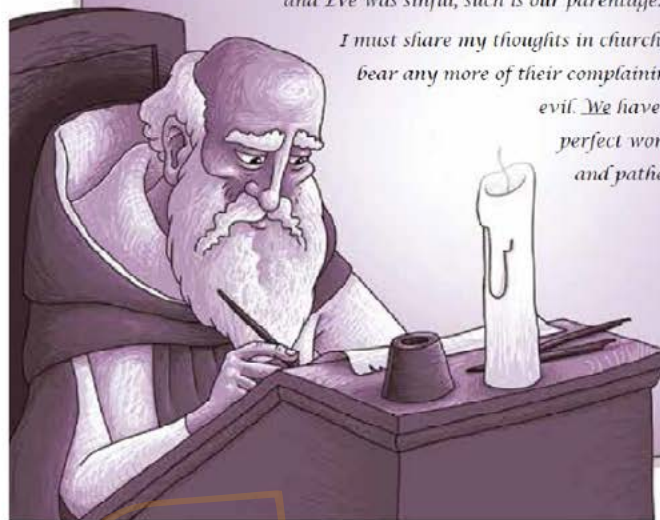
I have sold my property, given the money to the poor, turned my house into a monastery and even given that to the church. I have nothing and I want for nothing. All I ask for is a life of prayer and contemplation. All the authority I have earned, in teaching and in my religious life, I only use to enlighten the poor and the powerful alike to the great truth and reality of the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Yet why am I so troubled by their incessant doubts? A servant girl in my congregation lost her baby son and abandoned us. My son died at 16 yet I did not abandon my God, as God will never abandon me! A young man I have tutored for three years now wheedles and whines as he wanders through his lessons. He doubts God's love! He wants some sort of personal proof, even as he sits with the Holy Scriptures on his lap, picking at the paper as if it were a loose thread on his robe.

Of course evil is something I have considered, especially in light of my past lusts and sins. Of course I have wondered about the fullness of God's love, when his creations suffer so cruelly. I am beginning to see that evil is nothing, a non-thing. Evil occurs when we fail to stop it. Evil is our creation, as goodness and love are God's creations.

Consider Eden, which was perfect and where man lived in bliss. God created us with moral freedom, because God wanted us to be truly free. And how did we repay that gift of freedom? By taking the first chance we had to disobey God. Eve was the first sinner. Eve was the first temptress, but was Adam any better? Adam was weak and Eve was sinful, such is our parentage.

I must share my thoughts in church this Sunday. I cannot bear any more of their complaining. We are the cause of evil. We have brought it into God's perfect world with our disobedience and pathetic weakness.



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