

Dr. Strange
July 22, 2018

Worship Song – Lord I Need You

Feature – Shattered

Video Clip – 01 SHATTERED (2.3 min)

(Begin) Car speeding on a highway in the dark

(End) Strange: “I could have done better”

And he *could* have done it better because he *is*, after all, the world-renowned surgeon Dr. Stephen Strange. His brilliant mind and his remarkably steady hands have given Strange the ability to successfully deal with complex brain and spine injuries better than anyone else in the world.

But now, those hands and (as we’ll see) his entire life are shattered.

I’m curious:

- How many of you have seen this movie?
- How many of you enjoyed it?

I’m not particularly a big fan of superhero movies but I have to say that *I loved this one* – even though it was somewhat of a challenge to pick up on all the details the first time I watched it. There’s so much action and so much of it happens in “other worlds” that it takes a couple of viewings to fully understand what’s going on ... which we’ll attempt to do shortly ...

But first, a quick reminder of what we’re attempting to do in this series, *At the Movies: When Evil Comes to Call*.

We’re looking at five recent movies, each of which illustrates a different type of evil that most (if not all) of us will eventually encounter in our lives.

There’s ...

- *Random evil* (which we talked about last week when we looked at John Krasinski’s movie, *A Quiet Place*) ... which is the bad stuff that happens to us simply because our bodies and our minds are subject to the curse of sin on our fallen world; it’s the bad stuff that happens because we’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

- There's also *malevolent evil* which we suffer at the hands of those who are intentionally cruel and malicious. (We'll look at that next week).
- And *systemic evil* which we suffer from unjust human systems and institutions.
- *Interpersonal evil* which we suffer from people close to us who unintentionally (or sometimes intentionally) hurt us.
- And then there's the evil that we're going to talk about today – *self-inflicted evil*: the bad things we bring on ourselves because of our own foolish or sinful actions.

The Law of the Harvest

Self-inflicted evil, for example ...

- Is when you wreck your car and your body because you decided that you really *can* text and drive safely ... at night ... during a storm (like we saw in the movie).
- Or when you develop a heart condition or cancer or some other ailment because you neglected your body and filled it with junk for years and years.
- Self-inflicted evil is when your spouse leaves you and takes the kids because they can no longer put up with your anger and abuse ... or your infidelity ... or your drug addiction ... or whatever.
- It's when you have no money because you've lived beyond your means for so long that now you can't afford the payments.
- It's when you don't get a raise or a promotion or you lose your job because you don't show up for work or you goof off or you have a bad attitude when you do.

And the list could go on and on.

Self-inflicted evil is all of those bad situations and experiences we bring on ourselves because of our foolishness and/or our sinfulness.

And very early in this movie, we see both of those causes at work in the life of Dr. Stephen Strange. Not only does his foolishness behind the wheel destroy his career, the sinful trio of pride, arrogance and self-centeredness destroys the rest of his life.

After he leaves the hospital, Strange engages in a desperate quest to regain the use of his hands. But every option he pursues turns out to be a dead end. It's clear: *there is nothing more that medicine can do for him.*

One day, after he receives the final rejection, the only person in the world who cares about him (and who has constantly stood by him during his recovery) tries to tell him that maybe he needs to accept reality.

Watch what happens.

Video Clip - 02 GOODBYE STEPHEN (1.6 min)

(Begin) Christine: "He won't do it."

(End) Christine walks out.

Wow!

There's a proverb in the Old Testament wisdom literature which says that ...

Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18 (NIV)

And proud Stephen Strange has fallen. He has ruined his life in almost every way possible: physically, financially, and relationally just to name a few. He is totally at rock bottom. And worst of all, *he did it to himself.*

Now, in "real life" very few of us ever experience *self-inflicted evil* at that level. Typically, it's more localized. It's physical *or* financial *or* relational *or* <something else> but usually *not* all of them at once.

That said, when self-inflicted evil *is* happening to us (at whatever level), what we're experiencing is often referred to (in Christian theology) as "the Law of the Harvest" ... which is spelled out by the Apostle Paul to the first-century followers of Jesus living in the Roman province of Galatia.

He wrote:

Make no mistake about this: You can never make a fool out of God. Whatever you plant is what you'll harvest. If you plant in the soil of your corrupt nature, you will harvest destruction. Galatians 6:7-8a (GW)

... which is what we see depicted so obviously in the first 20 minutes of the movie.

However, what Paul is getting at when he talks about "making a fool out of God" is not so obvious so let me explain.

As we all know, we live in a predictable “cause and effect” universe. For example, if you plant corn and you water and fertilize the soil, *corn* is what will come up – not beans.

That’s how God created things to be. That’s why the things we do in science and engineering and medicine and agriculture *work*. And we all understand that and appreciate that and benefit from that.

However, when it comes to *how we live our lives*, even though God has made it clear again and again that foolishness and sin *will lead to destruction*, in our arrogance and pride we tell ourselves “Well, you know, I’m not really sure that applies to *me* and *my* situation. I think God is somehow mistaken about that” ... as if we’re smarter than God; as if God is some tottering old fool warning us about trivial or non-existent dangers.

But we’re wrong Paul says. God is no fool.

If you do what’s stupid and sinful (which is what Paul means by “planting in the soil of your corrupt nature”), evil *will* come upon your life at some point, and you will have no one to blame but yourself.

That’s just how the Law of the Harvest works.

By the way, that’s true even when our motives are not intentionally evil ... which is important to understand because, a lot of times, we do foolish and sinful things out of emotional or physical pain or because something is lacking in our lives, and we want to think that somehow excuses us, but it doesn’t.

The law still operates regardless of motive: *keep planting it and watering it and it will come up*.

What Now?

Now, I realize that I’m painting a pretty grim picture here (and some of us today are actually in the middle of that picture) but the picture itself is not the point.

The point ... the reason for this whole discussion ... the reason I picked this movie ... is this:

- When self-inflicted evil happens to us (and, if it hasn’t already, it will because all of us are fools and sinners at some level), how are we going to respond?
- What are we going to do when our body, finances, relationships, career, and whatever else are shattered because of our own actions?

What a lot of people do – in particular, those who follow Jesus – is to ask God to forgive them and make it all better. I know because I’ve done that myself.

And thankfully, because of what Jesus did for us, God is always willing to do the first of those ...

... which is why the Gospel is – the *good news* is – that ...

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:1-2 (NIV)

In other words, if you’re a Christian, your foolishness and sin will not result in the ultimate self-inflicted evil, which is eternal separation from God. Because of faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone, you are already forgiven before you even ask!

But, as to the second thing people usually do (asking God to make it all go away; to make it all better) ... well, think of it like this: *what happens when you plant corn by mistake and then pray for beans to come up?*

It’s not a trick question: if you plant corn and pray for beans, you still get corn!

Point being ... God won’t probably won’t change the corn of self-inflicted evil into something else just because you ask Him to. Instead, what God *will* do in your life at that point is to help you plant and grow so many beans that the corn becomes less and less significant.

To say it more plainly and less metaphorically ...

God will help you overcome the evil you brought on yourself as you implement the Law of the Harvest in a *positive* manner.

What we’ve talked about (and seen in the movie) to this point is the *negative* application of that law: “if you plant in the soil of your corrupt nature, you’ll harvest destruction.”

But there’s another side to the law which Paul describes like this:

Whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Therefore, let us not become weary in doing good for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Galatians 6:8b-9 (NIV)

Two things to notice here:

- First of all, it might sound like Paul is saying you have to earn salvation (“reaping eternal life”) by pleasing God’s Spirit; by “doing good.”

But the Greek word translated as “eternal” in that verse actually refers to the “quality of life which the eternal God Himself experiences;”ⁱ the kind of life that Jesus described as “abundant and full” and said that He was making available to those who followed Him.ⁱⁱ

So what Paul is saying here isn’t “earn your salvation by being good.” He’s saying “plant the things that produce the quality of life God desires for you.”

- However, and this is the second thing to notice ... as you do that, you can’t give into discouragement. You have to stick with it – keep planting the good stuff – even though you may not choke out the fruit of self-inflicted evil for a long time.

A “Strange” Change

Now, the reason for laying all of this out in such detail is that it’s this *positive* application of the “Law of the Harvest” that is illustrated so well by what happens from this point on in the movie.

In fact, even though *Dr. Strange* is clearly not intended to be a “Christian movie” – God and Jesus are never mentioned and there’s a lot of magical stuff (and, if that bugs you, remember that the great Christian philosopher and author C.S. Lewis also employed a lot of magic in his fictional novels).

Even though this is not a “Christian movie,” in my opinion *Dr. Strange* is practically an instruction manual on Christian transformation: *the process of changing from who we are in our natural state (which is proud, arrogant and self-centered) to someone who more and more reflects the character and nature of Jesus.*

I suspect that part of the reason for that is that the director, Scott Derrickson, is a practicing Christian – a follower of the Way of Jesus.

In any case, let’s pick up the story and let’s follow the process of transformation as it unfolds in the life of Stephen Strange.

Not long after hitting rock bottom and losing everything and everyone, Strange meets Jonathan Pangborn, a man who claims to have been healed of total paralysis ...

... by someone known as “The Ancient One.”

So he pulls together his last bit of money, travels to Nepal to find out if it’s true and, if so, how she did it.

And she tries to explain it but, in his typical arrogant and condescending manner, Strange at first *ridicules her ... but then ...*

Let's watch.

Video Clip - 03 TEACH ME (3.2 min)

(Begin) Ancient One: "Don't like that map?"

(End) Strange falls onto the ground

Now, eventually the Ancient One does take him in, but only after he knocks and knocks and begs and begs ... which is quite reminiscent of Jesus' encouragement for us to "keep on asking and keep on knocking for those who ask receive and those who knock will find the door opened."ⁱⁱⁱ

But that's not the point of the scene we just saw.

The point is that the first "spiritual seed" to plant; the first step in overcoming self-inflicted evil is ...

Step 1. Humble repentance – to admit your thinking is flawed and to open yourself to another way.

"Open your eyes" the Ancient One says ... which sounds a lot like Jesus when He said "The Kingdom of God is near so *repent* (which means to 'change your thinking' ... 'see it differently' ... 'open your eyes') and believe what I'm telling you."^{iv}

And, quite frankly, this is why some of us never escape the cycle of self-inflicted evil in our lives:

- We won't humble ourselves and admit that the primary reason *why* we are *where* we are is *us*.
- We aren't open to changing our thinking.
- We won't say "teach me a new and better way because what I'm doing isn't working."

But that's the key – that's the first step. And it's non-negotiable. Nothing else matters without this one.

That said, *repentance alone* doesn't change anything, which is why Strange has to take another step; one which becomes very clear in his first lesson with the Ancient One.

As we watch, pay close attention to his question and her answer near the end of the clip.

Video Clip – 04 STUDY AND PRACTICE (1.4 min)

(Begin) Ancient One (voiceover)

(End) Strange walking into library: “hey”

Did you catch his question? “How do I get from here to there?”

In other words, now that I know that my thinking is flawed and I’m open to another way, how do I make that new way part of my life?

Her answer is step two in overcoming self-inflicted evil.

Step 2. Study and practice the new way.

So often we have these “aha” moments where we realize that things need to be different in our lives and because those moments are emotional, we get fooled into thinking that the realization alone is enough.

But it’s not because reality is that we have invested years and years into “planting” one way and now we need to plant in a way we’ve never done before ... and that takes study and practice.

... which is why one of the most important things Jesus said to his followers was “learn from me” – which, if we’re Christians, means investing time in reading the New Testament, listening to sermons, learning from others who’ve been following him ... and then, trying to put into practice what we’re learning.

Of course, that is where the discouragement often sets in. Because it’s new to us, the way of Jesus is hard to understand and we’re not very good at it ...

... which is what happens when Strange tries to do what *he’s* learning. He gets discouraged. In his mind, the fact that his hands are still messed up is the reason he keeps failing but the Ancient One tells him it’s something else.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip - 05 SURRENDER CONTROL (1.4 min)

(Begin) Strange: “My hands ...”

(End) Strange falls onto the ground

“Surrender, Stephen. Silence your ego and your power will rise” sounds an awful lot like what one of Jesus’ friends once said:

The Apostle Peter wrote:

Humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.

1 Peter 5:6-7 (NLT)

And that's step 3 in the process of overcoming self-inflicted evil.

Step 3. Surrender yourself (and the outcome) to God.

See, it's possible to implement the new way with the exact same self-centered pride and arrogance of the old way.

In other words, we can do the right thing for the wrong reason – which is to try to control the outcome of our efforts and thus feed our ego just like before.

But, the two don't mix. In the way of Jesus, it's not our role to control anything.

Our role is to do what He tells us – to keep planting the good seed and trust Him even when the outcome doesn't meet our expectations; to trust that at the right time the seed *will* produce the good harvest.

Now, one reason that surrendering and trusting is so difficult is revealed by what happens next to Strange.

In the process of developing his abilities and powers, he discovers a secret and dangerous spell (using the Eye of Agamotto) that can break time. He can stop it, rewind it to a certain point and then make it run forward again ...

... which gets him into big trouble with Wong, the librarian ...

... who decides that's it's time to school Strange in what's really going on: the battle that's taking place behind the scenes, the purpose for which their powers exist in the first place.

As we watch this scene, Wong's description is pretty complex and the key to understanding the rest of the movie but what's most important for right now is Strange's response to what Wong says.

Here we go ...

Video Clip - 06 HIGHER CALLING (2.1 min)

(Begin) Wong: "While heroes like The Avengers protect the world ..."

(End) Strange falls onto the ground (again)

“Bottom line,” Wong says, “we’re here to serve the world by protecting it from the demon Dormammu and his followers.”

To which Strange basically responds, “That’s your deal, not mine” ... and immediately discovers that it *is* his deal. It’s his battle, too and he must accept it ... which he does.

And that is step four in his continued development (and ours, if we’re Christians):

Step 4. To accept the higher calling of serving others.

One of the greatest principles in the teaching of Jesus (as well as those who came before Him) is that God never blesses a person solely for their own benefit. He always blesses us so that we can also be a blessing to others.

And when we come to the point of accepting that and living by that principle, an amazing transformation has taken place in us. The focus of our lives has totally shifted. No longer is it inward and ego-driven. It’s outward and other-driven just like Jesus was.

However, unlike Jesus, as we discover near the end of the movie, that shift isn’t guaranteed to remain unless we keep coming back to one incredibly challenging thought which the Ancient One expresses to Strange just before she dies.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip - 07 NOT ABOUT YOU (1.3 min)

(Begin) Ancient One: “You wonder what I see in your future?”

(End) Ancient One: “The world would be all the lesser for it.”

“Arrogance and fear,” she says, “still keep you from learning the simplest and most significant lesson of all: *it’s not about you.*”

In other words, and this is step five in the process of planting good seed that chokes out the crop of self-inflicted evil.

Step 5. You must always continue to battle with your ego.

You must always go to battle against the pride, arrogance and self-centeredness in you that produced the self-inflicted evil in the first place because that stuff never goes away.

And the way you do that – the way you engage in that battle –

... is to repeat steps one thru four.

- Humble repentance
- Study and practice
- Surrender yourself to God
- Accept the “higher calling”

And when you do those things long enough, you will start to look a lot more like Jesus than you ... which is, shockingly (at least to me), the amazing conclusion of this story.

Stephen Strange does what is probably the most theologically Jesus-like thing I've ever seen in a movie.

The Bible tells us that by going to the cross, Jesus rescued us from the power of death and hell by dying in our place; taking onto himself the penalty of sin that we deserve so that we could go free.

However, the Bible *doesn't* go into detail about *how* Jesus did that other than to say that there was some kind of a confrontation between Him and Satan ... which might have been something like the confrontation between Strange and the demon Dormammu.

Because he has discovered how to control time, Strange traps Dormammu in a never-ending time loop. It starts, it runs, it ends and restarts, over and over and over.

Eventually Dormammu realizes what is happening and, as we watch, pay close attention to the price Strange is willing to pay.

Video Clip - 08 I'VE COME TO BARGAIN (3.0 min)

(Begin) Strange: “Dormammu, I've come to bargain.”

(End) Bad guys disappear into the Dark Dimension

When Dormammu says, “You'll will suffer,” Strange responds, “yes but everyone on earth will live.”

And when Dormammu says, “You'll never win,” Strange responds, “no, but I can lose again and again and again.”

Again, I don't know if that's exactly how it worked between Jesus and the real demonic force in this world, Satan, but that's a very helpful analogy ...

Response Time

... which is why we do this series, *At the Movies*. These movies are analogies describing spiritual realities that affect us all.

And I think that what we've seen today is an incredible helpful one: how we can deal with the evil we inflict on ourselves through our foolishness and sin.

As we close this morning, our band is going to lead us in a congregational song that expresses the steps we've talked about this morning, especially the idea that it's not about us.

I lean not on my own understanding

I give it all to you trusting you'll make something beautiful in spite of my messes

I will climb this mountain with my hands wide open

I invite you to join in and sing this with them as prayer and an expression of desire to begin or continue "sowing to the Spirit" – planting the good things that, eventually, will overshadow any of the bad that's come up in our lives.

So let's stand together and sing and then I'll come back to do our closing blessing.

Congregational Song – The Climb

1. Blessing –

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord make His face to shine upon you

And may he grant you the courage ...

- To humbly repent of your foolishness and sin
- To study and practice the way of Jesus
- To surrender yourself to God
- To accept the "higher calling" of serving others
- And to never forget that it's not about you

2. Next Week – *Murder on the Orient Express* (the new version with Johnny Depp as the villain)

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://orvillejenkins.com/theology/aionios.html>

ii John 10:10

iii Matthew 7:7-8

iv Mark 1:14