

# Sin

Naturally, we do not like hearing bad news. This means we do not like thinking about sin. Yet, strangely, the biblical view of sin is in fact a dark but essential pathway to great rejoicing in Christ. Let us see how.

## Adam's Sin

To understand sin properly, we need to start before we each individually sinned or were even born. In the beginning, God created a cosmos entirely and absolutely good (Gen. 1:31). Sin and evil were not among his creatures. Sin, in other words, is a perversion that entered the world when, at the very beginning of human history, the first man sinned. Commanded by God not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve did so anyway. And in that catastrophic moment we were all affected: that is why we sin, and that is why we die. The apostle Paul explains: "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin. . . . Many died through one man's trespass. . . . One trespass led to condemnation for all men. . . . By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Rom. 5:12–19).

First of all, this means we descendants of Adam are born sinners. After he sinned, Adam "fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image" (Gen. 5:3). Like father, like son; we are chips off the old block, sharing Adam's sinful identity. Instead of being sinners because we each sin, we were *bornsinners*—and *that* is why we sin. Our acts of sin simply manifest who we are and what we are already like.

Second, we not only became sinners ourselves but also "died through one man's trespass" (Rom. 5:15). As Paul sees it, we have not simply inherited Adam's sinful tendency and *character*; we have inherited his guilty, death-and-hell-bound *status* (cf. Eph. 2:3). People often balk at this, believing it unfair. But this is simply what it is to be human: we share the fate of the head of the race to which we belong. And that turns into gloriously good news when we think of Christ, who bore our sin as the head of the *new* humanity: all who are born again in him freely share a righteousness they do not deserve but which is his.

Our problem is not that we tend to slip up and need a bit of forgiveness when we do. If that were the case, it would be easy to think the solution to our sin is to try harder. No. Since we are born of Adam, sharing his character and status, our very identity is the problem. Trying harder will do us no good whatsoever. We have one hope, which is infinitely sweeter: *we must be born again*. We need to be taken out of sinful, guilty Adam and united to the head of the new humanity, Jesus Christ.

## Our Sin

But what precisely *is* sin? New Testament terms for sin depict it as *missing the mark* or "fall[ing] short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); *transgression* or deviation (Heb. 2:2); *disobedience* (2 Cor. 10:6); *lawlessness* (1 John 3:4); *unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9) and *wickedness* (James 1:21).

To understand just what those words mean and how they fit together, it helps to ask this question: What *exactly did* Adam and Eve do wrong in Genesis 3? At one level, it is simple: they disobeyed, doing what the Lord God had forbidden. But look closer and it is clear the problem goes deeper than their external action: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen. 3:6). She ate because she had come to *desire* the fruit more than she desired God. And this is the essence of sin: desiring and loving something—anything—rather than God. The law's greatest commandment, what we were created to do, is to love the Lord our God with all our heart (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37–38). Sin is that love perverted and misdirected so that we love other things more than God—indeed, that we *hate* God. Far worse and more profound than acting wrongly, we *love wrongly*.

The problem of sin therefore goes as deep as it could, down into our hearts, controlling what we long for and love. With a bit of effort we can try to disguise the problem, but nothing in us can be clear of it, for it affects our very alignment, our orientation and motivation. Instead of loving God and finding our satisfaction in him, we instinctively love darkness (John 3:19) and vainly seek satisfaction elsewhere. James put it like this: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15).

While we freely choose to do all the things we want, and are capable of living respectable lives of outward morality, left to ourselves we will never instinctively choose God, because we do not naturally love or desire him. This is why Pelagian and semi-Pelagian dreams of salvation by self-effort and self-will are doomed to failure: they fail to realize our very *wills* are perverted, that all our self-effort is fuelled by self-love, not love for God. In other words, sin has enslaved us as deeply and pervasively as it is possible to be enslaved. Improving our behavior and acting in ways that seem more religious or moral will not help us; sinners need radical rescue and fundamental reorientation. Born sharing Adam and Eve’s desire for things other than God, we each need to be given a new heart that will freely love and be pleased with God (Ezek. 36:26–27; Mark 7:14–23; John 3:3).

Yet even then, when a person has been regenerated, receiving a new heart that has begun to love God, sin remains. When people become Christians, they are freed from the *slavery* and *domination* of sin (Rom. 6:14), but the *influence*, *presence*, and *effects* of sin still remain. The Christian must battle with temptation and internal wickedness until death or Christ’s return (1 John 1:8–10). Only then will we finally and completely be freed from all sin and its corrupting effects on body and soul. Christ, having borne the *punishment* for our sin, now helps his people battle the *power* of sin; then, when he returns, he will entirely remove from his people and his creation the very *presence* of sin.

## The Dark Lane to Life

The biblical view of sin could scarcely be more repellent to twenty-first-century culture. We want to believe we are basically good, that we can fix ourselves. We do not want to hear that we, in ourselves, are fundamentally misguided, totally corrupt, utterly helpless.

Yet it is only when we come to realize we cannot fix ourselves that we will be prepared to look outside ourselves for help and to depend on Christ. Only when we know how great our problem is will we see how great the Savior is (Luke 7:40–43). Only when we see that people are helplessly addicted and enslaved to sin will we give them the one thing with the power to turn and liberate their hearts: the gospel (Rom. 1:16). The biblical view of sin is, therefore, the bringer of liberty, joy, and compassion when coupled with the announcement of its antidote—the gospel.

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