

# unholiness

OVERCOMING THE FORCES THAT ATTACK YOUR SOUL

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To the Norfolk United Methodist Church,  
where I (Chris) began to understand the beauty  
and power of Christ's sanctifying grace.

To Rev. and Mrs. Andrew Gerleman  
who modeled holiness for me (Jim)  
when I was a young believer.

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# introduction

## WHY FORGIVENESS IS NOT ENOUGH

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

—Matthew 1:21

The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

—1 John 3:8

Sin is humanity's great enemy. If God loves us, he must save us from this formidable foe. Therefore, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph to explain Mary's miraculous pregnancy, he told Joseph to name the baby Jesus, because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The apostle John reiterated Gabriel's declaration: the Son of God came to "destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8), sin and all its fruits. This was the purpose of the incarnation.

## the problem of sin

The Scriptures use a number of images to describe the problem of sin. Perhaps the most well-known is the legal description (Rom. 4:15). Sin is the violation of God's law. God made clear what he expects of us and we disobey him.

In the Old Testament, God drew a clear line in the sand and warned our first parents of the penalty if they crossed it. He told Adam and Eve they could eat from any tree in the garden of Eden, but they must not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil or they would die (Gen. 2:17). The apostle Paul taught that God gave the Gentiles a clear internal code of conscience and the Jews a written law to follow, but both groups were guilty of deliberate disobedience and stood under divine condemnation with the sentence of death (Rom. 2:12–23; 3:23). Each of us has received some measure of light regarding what God requires of us, yet we have not always walked according to it. Our disobedience leaves us under God's condemnation. We stand guilty in God's court of law under the threat of death.

A second image is a social one (Jer. 11:10). Sin is the breaking of relationship. The creation account in Genesis pictures humanity as communal. Adam and Eve walked in intimacy with God, loved one another, and exercised caring stewardship of the created order. Jesus summarized the Old Testament's teaching on the chief end of humanity as a call to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37–40).

Sin's problem is more than a broken law; it is the severing of relationship. It harms our relationship with God and also human social bonds. Therefore, the consequences of sin are described not only in terms of guilt, but also in terms of alienation, hostility, and divorce.

Through our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, we have undermined the very relationships by which we gain ultimate meaning in life. We are estranged from God, each other, and the created order.

A final image of sin is taken from the Jewish temple and ceremonial law (Lev. 10:10). Sin is defilement or uncleanness. All instruments used in worship in the tabernacle were required to be “clean,” set apart wholly for the purposes of God. They could not be desecrated, intentionally or unintentionally, physically, morally, or spiritually. Any type of contamination would render them unfit for use before a God of absolute holiness. The children of Israel were called to be a “holy nation,” set apart from the sinfulness of the world for the purposes of God (Lev. 11:44–45). This call extends to the church in the New Testament (1 Pet. 1:15–16). The problem of sin, therefore, goes beyond the issues of guilt and alienation; it strikes at the very essence of humanity. Sin is a defilement that pollutes us and makes us unholy. Humanity was created in the image of God to be holy as God is holy. Sin is a soiling of human nature and the divine image in humanity. It makes humanity unsuitable for God.

Compounding these problems of sin is the power it exerts in human life. The Scriptures describe human beings as slaves to sin. While it might appear we have some degree of control over sin in our lives, in the end we are slaves to it. So much so, the apostle Paul wrote that even when we know what we are called to do, and even when we want to walk in obedience to God, too often we lack the power to follow through with our good intentions (Rom. 7:14–25). If we search our hearts, we find a bent or propensity toward rebellion, disobedience, and selfishness ruling our lives. A godly life of virtue, love of God, and love of neighbor do not come easily to us. Something inside us balks at what God requires of us. We resist what we

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know to be of God's will. Our will rises up and declares, "I won't." Or, if we have some desire to obey, it cries out, "I can't." We are not able to comply inwardly or outwardly with God's will.

### salvation from sin through Christ

Specifically, by saving us Jesus deals with each problem sin raises. Salvation is summarized in Christ's work of justification, adoption, and sanctification. Justification speaks to the legal image of sin. Through Jesus' death on the cross, our offenses against God and his law are atoned. His sacrifice absolved us of guilt and the penalty for sin. He died to satisfy the just requirements of God's law for sin. He died for all sin and for all sinners. To appropriate Christ's atonement, all we need to do is receive it by repentance and faith.

Once justified we are adopted as children of God. Adoption addresses the relational image of sin. Because of sin, we are alienated from God and from each other. Through Christ we are reconciled to God and become his children. At the same time, we are initiated into the church, where we experience reconciliation to humanity, becoming sisters and brothers in Christ. As a redeemed family, we have God as our Father, the Son as our brother, members of the church as siblings, and the Holy Spirit as the source of love. Here, the "dividing wall of hostility" in all human relationships is overcome.

Justification and adoption are what Jesus does *for us* in salvation. However, sanctification is Christ's work *in us*. Sanctification gets to the heart of our problem by purifying us from sin's defilement. Christ not only forgives and reconciles, but he also cleanses us from sin. Christ actually makes us holy. Expressed in the most general terms,

sanctification addresses Christ's entire work of transformation in our lives from the moment we are born again until we are glorified in death. The ultimate purpose of sanctification is to make us like Christ so we may be holy as he is holy.

When the Holy Spirit through Christ takes residence in our lives, he begins the process of transforming our attitudes, interests, and actions, while he confronts us with an internal principle of selfishness and sin that persists stubbornly in us. This is called "initial" and "progressive" sanctification. While described in different ways, many Christian traditions believe the Spirit can cleanse this last principle of sin and enable us to love God entirely, to live in complete obedience to his revealed will, and to serve others in love. Terms such as "Christian perfection," "perfect love," "entire sanctification," and "fullness of the Spirit" describe this level of sanctification. As we continue to submit to the Spirit, our love deepens, and our knowledge and understanding of God's will increases, thereby bringing us into greater conformity with Christ until we reach "final sanctification" at death. Therefore, through the work of sanctification we are cleansed from sin, making it possible for us to be brought into full union with God.

### **where is sanctification?**

However, a problem exists in the church. There's a tendency to focus on one part of the problem of sin and Christ's saving work to the neglect of the rest of his work. For example, some of us in the church describe salvation almost entirely in legal terms. Justification becomes the sole focus of redemption. Sure, we acknowledge

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salvation as more than forgiveness, but we place so much emphasis on forgiveness that we obscure the rest of Christ's saving work. We reduce salvation to a ticket to heaven made possible through Christ's atonement.

Other Christians focus on the relational problems caused by sin. They portray salvation primarily as reconciliation. Through Christ our relationship with God is restored. We become the children of God and friends with Jesus. Salvation is about a new connection with God and growth in intimacy. We often lose sight of the role we played in alienation from God and our need for atonement. We also minimize the necessity of repentance and amendment of life through sanctification.

At times some believers focus so much on sanctification we lose sight of justification and adoption. We are guilty of judging Christians as unbelievers if they struggle to walk in complete obedience to Christ or are unable to live a life free from sin. We believe a Christian's eternal destiny is threatened by the fires of hell if he or she slips up and falls into sin or dies with any unconfessed sin. We forget John's promise to the church: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:1–2).

Christian history provides abundant evidence of believers and churches that have demonstrated a myopic vision of sin and salvation. When not held in balance, the pendulum has swung back and forth between what God does *for us* in salvation and what he does *in us*. Presently, with exceptions, we live in an age in which the church is plagued by a single-minded focus on the legal and relational metaphors. We have reduced salvation to forgiveness of sins or a

relationship with God with few demands. Overlooked is the necessity of sanctification. If we are going to be saved from sin, if Jesus is going to be a real Savior, we must emphasize more than justification and adoption. We must be cleansed of sin and experience real sanctification in the present life, even if it is not completed until death.

### why forgiveness is not enough

Unfortunately, many of us only want “fire insurance” in salvation. We don’t want to go to hell for our sins. Nor do we want to suffer any of sin’s consequences. But we don’t want to give up sin. We wish to live life on our own terms. We cling to our selfish, sinful, rebellious desires, but we want God to be there to pick up the pieces if our lives fall apart. We want him to rescue us if we fly too close to the flame. We want to try to figure out a way to keep the best part of what we love about sin and remove what we don’t. We love our sin more than the kingdom of God. We want the benefits of justification and the privileges of adoption, but we are reluctant to embrace sanctification. We fear holiness will take away what we like best about sin.

A problem arises here. Justification and adoption are not enough to save us without sanctification. Divine forgiveness for sin and reconciliation with God on paper is not enough to redeem us. We must experience real change, the cleansing from sin only Christ’s sanctifying work can do. Minimally, there must be a transformation of our desires. We must truly want to turn from our sin, begin to earnestly hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness, and turn to Christ for deliverance from sin. We must long to be rid of sin and not just rid of its destructive fruit.

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Why is this so? There are at least three reasons, each centering on the holiness of God. The first is obvious. God is a holy God. God is morally good, righteous, and just; this applies to his character, his actions, and his requirements of us. Divine holiness requires atonement for sin and reconciliation, but it also demands amendment of life. We must lead lives that align with God's character and will. Forgiveness of sin through atonement does not bring about the transformation of our character that enables us to reflect God's holiness. Yes, it wipes our slate clean and provides a new beginning, but there must be change in our character that makes us holy as God is holy. Without actual holiness, we will never enter fully into the life of God. We can't even be aligned with God's will.

Second, in final judgment God won't give us what we don't want. If we seek salvation only as fire insurance, it shows our heart's greatest desire. What we really want is our sin and selfishness. We seek our will over God's will; we just don't want to suffer the consequences of sin. We want the pleasures of sin without the pain. The problem is God isn't really going to give us in death what we don't want in the present life. If we pursue sin, he hands us over to it in final judgment. Only those who hunger and thirst to be holy as God is holy are satisfied in the end.

C. S. Lewis reflected on the danger of this predicament well in *The Great Divorce*. Lewis described final judgment as God giving us what we most desire. There is only one ultimate pronouncement in final judgment: "Thy will be done." Either we say it to God or God says it to us. If we desire God's will and God's kingdom above all else in life, we say to God, "Your will be done," and God ushers us into the joy of the Lord. However, if we want sin and our will more than God's, God declares to us, "Thy will be done," and hands

us over to our sinful desires.<sup>1</sup> God in final judgment honors us as persons and the formation of our desires in the present life.

Finally, how can we really enjoy the kingdom of God and heaven without a passion for God's holiness? Holiness establishes a life defined by the love of God and the love of neighbor. It is a life of self-giving service to God and others. There is no room for selfish agendas or self-focused living. If we are not made holy, it's impossible for us to enjoy the kingdom of God. If we want to seek a life of self-absorption, self-will, and self-pleasure, how will we be able to enjoy a life in total opposition to it?

Again, C. S. Lewis powerfully illustrated this truth in *The Great Divorce*. He imagined a group of people in hell who receive the opportunity to go to heaven. They are able to experience the delights of heaven and participate in the communion of saints. Our natural inclination is to believe these transplants would be grateful for God's grace and embrace fully their opportunity. Surprisingly, their experience in heaven is dull and uncomfortable. After a few days, they long for their previous lives; they desire to return to hell.<sup>2</sup> Because of the sinful longings of their hearts, because the kingdom of God is so contrary to their desires, they are unsuited for heaven and unable to enjoy paradise.

### a brief overview

For us to be saved from sin, God must deal with all the problems of sin. We must experience justification, adoption, and sanctification by God's grace in Jesus Christ. We must experience this work in whole and not in part. While atonement for sin and adoption as God's

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children must happen, they're not enough. We actually must be changed and transformed. The Bible's teaching through and through is that we must be holy as God is holy (Lev. 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:13–16).

The purpose of this book is to examine “unholiness,” the uncleanness that is sin. We want to look at what must be cleansed from our lives in Christ's salvific work. We face two obstacles. Because of sin's pollution, we live in ignorance of our true condition. Only the light of the Holy Spirit through divine revelation can illuminate our spiritual state. Then, when we grasp our condition, we can address unbelief about the extent to which we can be cleansed in the present life. Today's Christian climate is pessimistic about victory over sin. The Holy Spirit must give us faith to believe in Christ's sanctifying work.

A classically biblical way of describing our unholiness is to talk about (a) the flesh, (b) the world, and (c) the Devil. We are corrupted by our flesh under the reign of sin, polluted by the pervasiveness of the world's distorted messages and lies, and defiled by the work of the Devil. If these are threats to our holiness, our pursuit and experience of holiness requires that we know about them and overcome them by Christ's saving grace.

Specifically, chapter 1 reviews the origin of sin and evil. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the flesh and its problems. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the world and its spiritual pollution. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the problem of the Devil and the demonic and how they prey upon us and lead us into sin. Finally, chapter 8 discusses the resources available to us in our struggle against evil forces that try to get us to sin and become unholy.

# holy and unholy

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

—Romans 1:29

Evil is a vexing problem in Christianity. How do we begin to reconcile the biblical truth of God's omnipotence and supreme love with the reality of evil? An ancient Greek philosopher named Epicurus recognized the intellectual problem we face: "The only way to reconcile God with evil's presence in the world is to deny one of God's attributes: infinite power or immeasurable goodness. Either God is all powerful or he is all good, but not both."<sup>1</sup> The Christian understanding of God appears irreconcilable with evil.

Many Christians point to the beauty and complexity of creation as testimony to God's existence, power, and goodness. They join their voices with the psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of

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God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands” (Ps. 19:1). In contrast, David Hume, one of history’s best-known atheists, observed the senseless chaos of death, disease, famine, floods, and earthquakes in the physical world combined with the persistence of war, hatred, and unimaginable cruelty in humanity. He concluded, “If there is a God, then the world shows he is a wicked one.”<sup>2</sup>

The problem, however, is much deeper than intellectual. On an experiential level, when we see the effects of evil and sin in the world, especially upon the innocent and vulnerable, or when we feel abandoned by God in the midst of tragedy, our souls cry out, “Why, God? If you’re a loving God and have control over all existence, why do we suffer?” Platitudes such as “Trust God,” “God has a reason for it,” or “God will bring good out of it” offer little comfort. We suffer in doubt and fear from what we can’t understand.

### **the problem of evil is central to the biblical story**

The problem of evil and sin lies at the very heart of the Bible. From the first book in the Old Testament through the last chapter in the New, we have a clear, well-constructed, overarching narrative with five major plot points: God, creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The Scriptures begin with recognition of the one true God, who brings the universe into existence out of nothing. Next, the Scriptures vividly describe our first parents’ fall into sin and its impact on creation. A lengthy historical account follows. It covers the Father’s work of redemption through the call of Israel, through the incarnation of the Son, and through the birth of the church by the Holy Spirit. It culminates when all creation is brought into ultimate

union with God. How God redeems the world from evil and makes us incorruptibly holy drives the biblical story.

Many who want to find a logical explanation for evil expressed in formal arguments will be disappointed with the Bible's description. To have the problem of evil addressed through the narrative of Scripture appears insufficient on the surface. They feel like Job, who wanted God to give a clear account of evil and sin. However, God asked Job, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand" (Job 38:4).

Nevertheless, Scripture gives us the story of evil's origin, persistence, and final end. While it may seem unsatisfactory to our modern minds, we live in a world driven by narratives, and they remain the most effective way to communicate God's truth across history and cultures. Only by reflecting on the Christian story does an understanding of evil and sin begin to arise.

In this opening chapter, we want to set the context for the rest of the book by offering historic Christian reflection on the Bible's description of how evil entered into a world created good and holy by God. Let's begin by examining the creation of the universe, followed by the formation of humanity. Next, we will pause to reflect upon God's ultimate purpose for humanity and what God must do to achieve it. We will then discuss the cause of evil in general and conclude with a study of Adam and Eve's original sin in the garden of Eden.

### the creation of the universe

The opening chapters of Genesis begin with a depiction of God's creation of the world. As Christians have reflected on it, three major

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ideas have emerged relevant to our discussion. First, God brought the created order into being out of nothing. It's important to emphasize that God created *everything* from *nothing*. Although the Bible doesn't explicitly use the phrase "out of nothing," the Scriptures point to this truth. Every part of creation ultimately has its source and origin in nothing. God didn't use some amorphous substance that coexisted eternally with him as the building block for creation. If he did, then matter would be coeternal with God, and God wouldn't be its creator. Christians recognize God alone is eternal and uncreated.

God also didn't use his own divine nature as the substance of the universe. If God's nature was the basis for creation, then the created order would be divine—it would be God. Christians reject any assertion that the universe is the body of God. Instead, Genesis describes God as speaking created matter into existence and *then* molding it into different parts of the world.

Already, we are at a critical point that sets us up for the discussion of evil's origin. The fact that the universe came into being out of nothing means that all creation is mutable; it's marked by change. At one time it didn't exist, but suddenly it existed. It moved from nothing to something. It has change written all over it. To be created is by definition to be mutable. Therefore, any created substance is intrinsically mutable, because it has already experienced change and continues to change through time.

Now mutability isn't necessarily bad. Change can be positive or negative. Good mutability is seen in growth and development. We see this in the physical growth of a child, a highway in its construction, a seed in its maturation into a plant, and a young bird learning to fly. However, mutability can also be bad. We see decline

in our human bodies over time, the destruction of homes by fire, flowers that lose their bloom, and the eventual death of beloved pets.

The question is often asked in theology, “Why didn’t God create a world in which sin and evil were impossible?” To begin to answer, we must recognize that God can’t create anything that is naturally immutable. Only God’s nature is immutable; God’s nature doesn’t grow; it doesn’t become better than it already is; it can’t suffer; it can’t be harmed; it can’t die. This is a fundamental difference between God’s uncreated divine nature and the universe’s created substance. Our world experiences change because it is created.

Second, God creates out of absolute freedom. There was no need for God to create. Creation didn’t have to be. A common question inevitably arises in theology, “Why did God create?” Sometimes we hear responses like “God was lonely and needed someone to love,” or “God was bored and needed something to do.”

However, answers like these obscure the truth of God’s perfection. God isn’t dependent upon anyone or anything for his existence, continued existence, or eternal happiness. Furthermore, God is fully realized; there is nothing missing from God, there is no untapped potential in God waiting to be explored. Finally, God isn’t lonely, because God is a communion of love among three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Creation, then, is an act of sheer generosity, arising out of God’s goodness and self-giving love. It’s not about what God gets or what God gains. Creation is about what God gives. God did not become greater or better in the act of creation or by having the universe in existence. There wasn’t anything missing in the divine life. God created to share the supreme blessedness of the divine life with others.

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While there are clues about God's intentions for creation in Genesis, we don't see fully God's purpose until we get to "consummation" in the biblical narrative, seen in part throughout the story, but clarified in the book of Revelation. The ultimate end of the world is to be brought fully into the life of God and to experience union with him in heaven (Rev. 21–22). We have a foretaste of the "glory to come" through our present union with the Holy Spirit, "who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" to come (Eph. 1:14).

Third, the created order is good. Everything God made is good. At the end of each of the first five days of creation, God judged what he had created as "good." At the end of the sixth day, God declared everything to be "very good." The pronouncement "very good" is God's assessment of human creation on the sixth day, as well as his judgment of all creation. Genesis teaches that God directly created the physical universe with wisdom and purpose. Creation is an expression of divine love. As such, there is nothing inherently evil, sinful, or unspiritual about the created order. Sometimes, because of a latent dualism in Western culture, we can miss the scriptural truth: the world and humanity are good!

### the creation of humanity

Genesis describes humanity as the climax of creation. Human beings were God's last creative act before he rested on the seventh day. God "formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). As embodied souls, human beings were also made in the image and likeness of God. The divine image in humanity sets us

apart as unique in the world, commanding a dignity and glory unlike that of any other member of creation (Gen. 1:26–27). God placed his stamp of approval, “very good,” on our nature as embodied souls and on our place in the world as his image bearers.

We have a basic understanding of what it is for us to be body and soul, but what is it to be created in the image and likeness of God? Historically, the *imago dei* has been interpreted in three complementary ways. First, the divine image encompasses our rational and creative abilities, as well as our moral and affective capacities. As human beings, we have the power to understand the world around us, make sound judgments about it, and act accordingly. Furthermore, like God, who is defined by holiness and love, we are made to reflect God’s absolute moral purity by walking in righteousness and to reflect divine love in perfectly ordered affections directed to the love of God and neighbor. As created in the garden, the divine image in Adam and Eve enabled them to act in accordance with sound perception and reason, infused by holy love.

Second, the image of God is found not just in the human individual, not in our moral and rational nature alone, but in our social relationships as well. The Trinity is at the heart of a Christian understanding of God. We do not believe God is a solitary person, but a communion of infinite love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From this perspective, the divine image is not found in the human self only, but in human relationships of self-giving love, mirroring what is expressed between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We “image” God in our human communities.

Finally, Genesis explicitly connects humanity’s creation in the divine image with the exercise of dominion in the created order. Immediately after the creation of male and female in the image and

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likeness of God, God gave them the created order to work as stewards. Beyond the rational, moral, and social views, the *imago dei* is seen in what humanity does in the world. As we take responsible care of the world, we reflect God's stewardship of the entire created order. In cultivating, nourishing, and wisely using creation, Adam and Eve embodied the divine image.

John Wesley, in his teaching on Adam and Eve, brought these three views together. He understood the image of God in humanity in the garden to comprise three parts: moral, natural, and political.<sup>3</sup> The moral image enabled humanity to enjoy true righteousness, holiness, love, and knowledge of God in the immediacy of a relationship with God. The natural image gave humanity rationality, understanding, free will, and perfectly ordered affections. The political image furnished humanity with the power of governance, whereby humanity exercised dominion over the created order and walked perfectly in the love of God and neighbor.

As created in the garden before the fall, the divine image enabled human beings to desire, will, and perform perfectly God's intentions for humanity. Holiness, righteousness, and love informed humanity's reasoning, understanding, will, and emotions, which resulted in the wise exercise of stewardship in the created order, rightly ordered relationships with fellow humanity, and perfect love and obedience to God.

### created as persons in the image of God

At the center of the three major historic views of the *imago dei* and John Wesley's trifold understanding is the recognition that

Adam and Eve were constituted as persons. To be in the image of God is to be a person, whose identity is formed in relationships. God is a divine community in which each person is identified by his distinctive relationship and interaction with the other persons.

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the very identity of God. The Father is the person of the Father, because he has eternally begotten a Son, has sent the Son to us, and exalts the Son in the world. The Son is the person of the Son because he has a Father from eternity and is distinguished further by his incarnation in obedience to the Father. The Holy Spirit is Spirit because he is eternally “breathed” (*spirated*) by the Father and Son and works to glorify the Father and the Son in creation. Each of the divine persons is who he is because of his distinctive relationships with the other members of the Trinity. Their distinction comes from their relationships.

Through our creation as persons with rational, creative, and moral capacities, forged in the crucible of relationships with God, other human beings, and the world, who exercise stewardship in the created order, we image God, who is a communion or community of persons. Additionally, each part of Wesley’s trifold image enables humanity to mirror what takes place in the divine life. Through the moral, natural, and political images, we are able to walk as persons in communion of holy love with God, humanity, and the created order.

### **the corruptibility and potentiality of humanity in the garden**

While made in the image of God in the garden, Adam and Eve were not ultimately where God wanted humanity to be. His goal for us has never been Genesis 1–2, but Revelation 21–22. God’s plan

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“before the foundation of the world” was to bring all of creation into final union with him, described beautifully in the language of marriage and consummation in the New Testament’s final chapters. In the end, Christ’s saving work is not about returning us to the life Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall, but about taking us far beyond it.

Even before evil and sin entered the story, God had to address two issues in Adam and Eve if humans were to experience our final purpose: the issues of potentiality and corruptibility. Both arise from the mutability of created natures. The first is potentiality. While made in the image of God, we don’t come into life fully formed as persons. Our personhood can be forged only through the relationships and experiences we have in life, as well as through the decisions and choices we make in response to them. They work dynamically to make us who we are.

Adam and Eve were blank slates in the garden and could develop as persons only through their interactive relationships with God, each other, and the world around them. They needed to grow and mature as persons through the exercise of free will and habituating their affections through practice. Only then, as mature persons, could they receive all God had for them in final union in heaven.

Therefore, while Adam and Eve bore God’s image in the garden, they were not fully like God yet. God is “pure act.” This means God is fully actualized as persons in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is no untapped potential in God. The divine persons do not grow or develop in any way: physically, mentally, emotionally, intellectually, or personally. In contrast, we continue to grow and develop as persons. Because we will be fully actualized as persons in heaven, we will be more like God than Adam and Eve were before the fall. Our first parents needed to develop as persons in the garden.

The second is the issue of corruptibility. Although we are made in the divine image, we are capable of sin. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them every benefit. Through the *imago dei* the love of God and neighbor came naturally to them, and they were able to relate to the world wisely. Their hearts, minds, and wills were properly ordered. However, because they were created, they were subject to change, both good, as described above, and bad.

God had to deal with the latter. He had to bring humanity to a place where we would be incorruptibly holy, no longer subject to sin, evil, and death. God does this by bringing humanity into full union with him. By being brought fully into the life of God by grace in heaven, humanity will be incorruptible. Because humankind is the creature not the creator (God), incorruptibility will be made possible only through the grace of union.

Here again, Adam and Eve were not yet fully like God. God is incorruptibly holy love. He never does what is contrary to his character. God's freedom isn't what we usually associate with free will. Our natural tendency is to see Adam and Eve's will in the garden as true free will: to have good and evil as real options. However, our first parents had only partial freedom. True freedom is to do only what is in accordance with holy love, as God does. Only when we are fully united with God in heaven will we reflect God in totality. This is why Christian theology has always affirmed that in heaven we will have free will, but sin will not be possible for us. God had to move our first parents from partial to full freedom and make them more fully like himself.

## the origin and nature of evil

Now we are at a better place to address the origin and nature of evil and sin. We must begin by making a distinction between moral and natural evil. Moral evil occurs when one *wills* to do what is contrary to God's intentions. Moral evil inflicts harm on the created order. We typically call it sin. Natural evil includes suffering and pain in the world without any personal cause or will behind it. No one decides to make it happen. Some examples include diseases, natural disasters, and accidents. Generally speaking, no one intentionally causes them to happen. They are results of the present state of fallen creation.

How does evil in all forms come about in a world God created as good and holy? Christian theology has offered a threefold response. First, we must recognize that while every part of creation is good, it's mutable. As discussed earlier, going from nothing to something makes change intrinsic to created substances. If the world is mutable, it can change either for better or worse. Sin, pain, and suffering are all an inevitable possibility (but not necessity) of creation.

Second, God made rational creatures, angels, and human beings, and placed them in the world. Like the rest of creation, they are good and holy, but mutable, including their wills. Because their free will is created, it too can change for better or worse. They can exercise their will in alignment with the holy love of God and habituate in righteousness or abuse it. They can depart from the holiness and love in which they were created. We see this take place in the Bible among the angels, with Lucifer and his followers, then in humans with Adam and Eve. Evil entered the world when mutable wills deviated from God's will.

Finally, we recognize that all evil is broken, corrupted, or disordered good. All God has created is good, a declaration made repeatedly by God. Evil occurs when something good is changed for the worse; evil, then, is a corrupted or broken good. As such, evil has no independent existence; it can't exist apart from an intrinsic good, because it is simply a corruption of the good. Therefore behind all evil and sin is something that was originally good.

For example, God created us with the need to eat food to fuel our bodies. He made us to enjoy food as well. However, when the desire for food becomes corrupted in us, it leads to gluttony and other eating disorders. God created sex as a means of procreation and as a pleasurable expression of the most intimate love between husband and wife. However, when our desire for sex becomes broken in us, it causes all kinds of sexual immorality. Furthermore, God made us to love ourselves. We are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But when self-love becomes disordered in us, all forms of pride and selfishness arise. In the end, the more broken and corrupted a created nature, action, will, or desire is, the worse it is.

### the fall of humanity

Humans were created holy with their wills and affections properly ordered under the reign of the Holy Spirit. However, because humanity was created, we are subject to change: good change that entails growth and development, and bad change that brings corruption, brokenness, and privation.

The story of humanity's fall in the garden is revealing on two levels. First, when the serpent came to tempt Eve, he appealed to good desires

## unholiness

in her. As a person created in the image of God, she had the capacity to appreciate beauty. So as the serpent spoke, Eve turned and saw that the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was “pleasing to the eye” (Gen. 3:6). The serpent promised if she ate the fruit, she would be “like God” (3:5). Eve had been made for this very purpose. She and Adam bore the image and likeness of God, and were to grow into its fullness. Attraction to the fruit and the desire to be like God were good qualities, but only in the proper economy of God.

The occasion of temptation arose from good and holy desires in Eve that were subject to change; they could fluctuate. The temptation transitioned into sin when those desires became corrupted and disordered. When Eve placed enjoyment of the fruit above her obedience to God’s commands, her love became disordered. She loved creation more than the Creator. When she placed the desire to become like God above God himself, her love transitioned from centering on God to a focus on herself. Becoming like God was more important to her than God was.

Second, from Eve’s corrupted desires, we can see a sequence of events tracing the corruption of Eve’s will. It began with unbelief. The serpent persuaded her to doubt God’s earlier warning of death regarding the tree. Unbelief led to pride. Eve thought she knew better than God how to reach her ultimate divine purpose to be fully like God. She thought she had found a better way to happiness than what God had instructed. Pride gave birth to self-will. She determined to put her own will ahead of the will of the One who made her and loved her. Her inward self-will resulted in the outward act of disobedience.

Adam followed Eve’s footsteps. The consequences for humanity were devastating. Physical death was set in motion. Although Adam

and Eve did not experience physical death immediately, from that time on the human body began to deteriorate, along with the soul, mind, and will. Total corruption of our nature occurs in death.

After the fall, the image of God in humanity was left in devastation. Genesis 3–11 paints an ugly picture of its impact. It reversed the original conditions of human life. Morally, humanity became completely dead to God, self-focused, and helpless to change. Naturally, human reason, understanding, and free will became marred, and human affections became inordinate and undisciplined. Politically, humanity's relationship to the world and ability to organize socially was seriously defaced. The natural, moral, and political image of God was replaced with the image of the Devil, defined by pride and self-will.

### conclusion

To be fully human is to be holy; to be human is to be as God intended us to be. All sin is a corruption of human nature. The idea “to sin is to be human” is a misunderstanding of what true humanity is. It is because we are not fully human that we sin. The problem of evil is that it makes humanity not fully human.

In the following chapters, we will explore the consequences of the fall, the unholiness resulting from human sin: (1) the corruption of human nature (body, soul, mind, and will) and of the image of God in humanity, leading to disordered human desires and will, resulting in all forms of personal sin (the flesh); (2) the corruption of corporate humanity (the world); and (3) humanity's subjection to the lies, temptations, and bondage to the demonic (the Devil).