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The Attributes of Sin, Part 5

Success through failure

As you may know my background is steeped in football. One of my earliest memories is that of my brothers playing the game. I was standing on the sidelines watching in anticipation of the day that I would be allowed to play.

When I got to high school I learned that everything done in a game was evaluated with painstaking scrutiny. The coach hoped to discover why a certain play didn't work. He always wanted to know why a specific defense didn't stop the ball. And it was under this scrutiny, aided by film, that every foible, every error, every penalty was shown in slow motion, back and forth, before the entire team during our weekly film sessions.

I still can hear the voice of my football coach in that classroom. After watching a play in which I messed up, he seemed to always say, "Thurston you idiot! What are you doing?" And yet in my own defense, it very often worked out that I could trace a bad play made on my part to a great gain the very next play.

For example, I remember one game where I was called for holding on a play that didn't amount to much. The result was that we were backed into a passing situation where a long-bomb was thrown which produced a touch down. Now get this, if I had not held the other player so that our team wouldn't have been penalized, my coach most likely wouldn't have called for a passing play with a pass that resulted in a touch down! I

remember sitting in that room during a film session wanting to shout, “I hope you realize that if it wasn’t for my penalty, we wouldn’t have scored there!”

Of course my reasoning was flawed. It was merely speculation on my part that the penalty against me had in fact really helped our team. But , I was desperate for some vindication after being yelled at in front of my peers.

Our Sin is Used by God

And that brings us to the focus of this message discussing another attribute of sin. That God may bring blessing through our failure.

So far we have seen these attributes about sin:

- It Knows No Shame, v. 17.
- It Looks so Good, vv. 23-24.
- It always is a Rejection of God, vv. 18-19a.
- It is not without Warning, v. 25a.
- It is Disappointing, vv. 19b-22.

And now we are going to look at a sixth attribute: Our sin is used by God! And yet, as we approach this text I want to do so with this caveat: Perish the thought that if God uses my sin then my sin therefore must be good. We cannot seek vindication on account of our sin. Truly though God may bring blessing through our failure, however, we must never conclude that it therefore is good.

1 Samuel 10:25, “Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the LORD. And Samuel sent all the people away, every man to his house.”

As we considered this verse we saw that Samuel’s actions ushered Israel into a new relationship with God. During the Old Testament era when a people entered into a covenant with another nation, the practice was to place “the contract” before the altar of the god. This action served to bind the two parties together. Walt Kaiser wrote, “In Egypt, Babylonia, and the Hittite Empire, important documents were deposited in the sanctuary ‘at the feet’ of the deity.”¹ And Israel participated in this practice as well.

1 Kings 8:9, “There was nothing in the ark save the two tables of stone, which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt.

Did you get that?

When the covenant which Israel enjoyed with the Lord expanded at the time of Moses, the contract upon which the relationship rested was placed before the Lord.² This had the effect of sealing the covenant which was ratified in Exodus 24. Later in Moses’ life, when the covenant once again was renewed, this is what the prophet commanded the Levites:

Deuteronomy 31:26, “Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the

¹ Walter Kaiser, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, Exodus, Zondervan; Vol. 1-7 edition (November 2, 1992), ISBN-10: 0310365783. See footnote on verse 16, page 455.

² Compare also Exodus 25:16; 24:4-7

LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.”

With that notice that when we come to our text and here read of Samuel inscribing the “manner/ordinances of the kingdom” in a book and placing it before the Lord, we understand that Israel has entered into a new era in their relationship with God. And that is very significant as we consider the passage before us!

Recall that at creation God entered into a relationship with man- a relationship which was predicated upon God and our upholding specific obligations or standards- we call this the Covenant of Works.³ With no other creature did God deign to fellowship, except with man!

Now we know that our first parents, Adam and Eve, violated the obligations binding God and man together⁴ and so incurred the wrath of God, not only upon them, but upon all of mankind! As such justice demanded that God completely destroy this world, man and all, on account of our sin!

Yet He didn't. Instead He re-established the relationship which was forfeited on account of man's sin. This is what we call the Covenant of Grace. This time He excluded any activity on our part as the basis for the relationship.

In this relationship established by the Covenant of Grace, God took upon Himself both His and OUR obligation. As such, He Himself became man, having been born under the obligation of the first covenant, the Covenant of Works.⁵ Now, the Covenant of Works still demands our death on account of the violation of Adam and Eve. God did not do away with the first covenant. Rather He deigned to fulfill it on our behalf- and so after fulfilling the Law perfectly, He offered Himself as a sacrifice on a Roman cross in our place.⁶

Let me remind you that from the time of Genesis 3:15 until this day, our world has lived in an era of grace. We forget this and so assume that as Adam and Eve sinned so long ago, their sin has no relevance on us today. And yet this is a faulty assumption.

If Jesus hadn't died on the cross to pay for the sin of violating the first covenant, **ALL OF US STILL WOULD BE UNDER THE WRATH OF GOD.** And yet, we are not all under the sentence of death, because of the Second Covenant which God established with man. This second covenant was established as far back as Genesis 3:15.

As such, note that everything written in your Bible from Genesis 3:15 on is given in explanation and expansion of this second covenant. Accordingly if you trace redemptive history through the Bible you discover that at certain climactic times, God refined the covenant/relationship by doing three things:

- He ordered that a ceremony should take place where the covenant enjoyed between God and man would be renewed.
- The elements of this renewed relationship would be formally written down in a book.
- This book would then be placed before the Lord.

Now we read of these covenantal “refinements” during the time of

³ Compare also Genesis 2:15-17

⁴ Compare also Genesis 3:1-7

⁵ Compare also Galatians 4:4

⁶ Compare also 2 Corinthians 5:21

- Noah, Genesis 6-9.
- Abraham, Genesis 12, 15, 17.
- Moses, Exodus 24.
- Saul/David, 1 Samuel 10; 2 Samuel 7.
- Christ, 1 Corinthians 11:25.

With each “climactic refinement” God’s people’s original relationship was reaffirmed and yet advanced (just as the children’s relationship with their parents change as they mature).

Well brothers and sisters, our text is describing a time when Israel’s relationship with God underwent a “climactic refinement.” Prior to this passage, Israel was a nation whose king was God. NOW Israel became a nation ruled by an earthly king.

God’s Choice

You say based on everything we’ve seen, “But this was a settling on account of Israel’s sin- a response to their wickedness.”

And that’s true! Saul was hand-chosen by God as the answer for the people’s rebellion.

1 Samuel 8:6-7, “But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.”

So indeed from the perspective of 1 Samuel 8, Saul was not God’s choice for Israel’s King, he was the people’s choice. But then we read our text and the inscribing of the “ordinances of the kingdom” in a book which was placed before God’s altar and we conclude these things:

- Number 1: Israel’s relationship with God here is undergoing a climactic change as the outworking of the covenant is here taking a leap forward (according to that which was anticipated in Deuteronomy 17:14-15). ****as such****
- Number 2: While Saul was the people’s choice, **WE NOW CONCLUDE THAT HE ALSO WAS GOD’S CHOICE!**

But wait! Saul is the product of the sin of the people of God in 1 Samuel 8. AND the passage at which we are looking is nothing less than a snapshot of a people engaged in sin. (Just take a look at the title of our sermon series!) And the people of God say so themselves.

1 Samuel 12:19, “And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the LORD thy God that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king.”

So how could Saul be God’s choice?

The answer is that God is so great that He can use even the sin of man to further His own perfect plan and purpose. And that brings us to a fifth attribute of sin portrayed in this text: It is used by God! God deigns to use it for His glory and our good! And thus we read of passage after passage in Scripture which testifies to the absolute sovereignty of God by which he takes our ill and uses it for good.

1. For example, in his lust and wretchedness, Judah lay with what he thought was a prostitute (Genesis 38:18) in reality it was his daughter-in-law. Such wretchedness (Genesis 38:26)! Yet God used this to provide for us Christ, the messiah (Matthew 1:3)!
2. Though Pharaohs hated the people of God and sought their continued imprisonment, God nevertheless used this sin to demonstrate His glory to His people. Paul said this when he wrote, “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.” (Romans 9:17).
3. God transformed Samson’s sinful infatuation with the Philistine woman into an opportunity to preserve Israel, Judges 14:4.
4. On account of David’s sin, Bathsheba was defiled, Uriah murdered, and Israel destined for civil war. Yet on account of God’s sovereignty and goodness, the Lord once again provided the line which eventually would give us the Christ (2 Samuel 12:24; Matthew 1:6).
5. Peninnah hated Hannah and tormented her so much that she became a broken woman (1 Samuel 1:7). Yet God used this hardship to prompt this godly woman to long for a child who would stand in the gap and serve the Lord. As a result Samuel was born (1 Samuel 1:20).
6. In desperation for a better life Elimelech left the people of God, moved to Moab, and there raised his sons to inter-marry with the Moabite women of the land- this was a horrible sin (Ruth. 1:4). Yet God used this once again to provide for the line of Christ (Ruth 4:13, 17; Matthew 1:5-6) and thus ultimately our salvation.
7. Job’s rebellion resulted in God giving an extended treatment on what constitutes genuine Christianity, Job 3-42.
8. Manasseh’s sin taught us the invincibility of grace. If someone as bad as Manasseh could be forgiven, then so can you (2 Chronicles 33:12-13).
9. Paul’s rebellion resulted in the dispersion of the early church. Yet God used this sin to spread Christianity beyond Jerusalem unto the remotest part of the earth, Acts 8:1.
10. Consider almost every epistle found in the New Testament. God transformed the rebellion of the early church- their
 - Disunity.
 - Hatred for one another.
 - False belief.
 - Heresy.
 into an opportunity to provide the body of Christ with twenty-two letters containing truths into which Angels have longed to look!
11. And that brings us to THE most profound “transformation of sin into good” known to mankind, Judas hated Christ and so betrayed Him to the Sanhedrin- a sin so great it would have been better had he never been born (Matthew 26:24). Yet do you know what the Lord did with this sin? He used it to as the catalyst to affect the salvation of the world (Isaiah 53:1-12)!

God Redeems Sin

I hope you see it. Though God does not delight in our sin⁷ nevertheless He uses it to provide for His glory, purposes, and our good. Truly in the words of Isaiah, “For from of old they have not seen a God [like this]” (Isaiah 64:4).

And with that we see a sixth characteristic of sin, though heinous in His sight, nevertheless God uses it!

Now I began by giving you an exhortation which Paul himself anticipated when it came to this seminal doctrine. In the book of *Romans* Paul addresses sin and the child of God. Here he proclaims the glorious

⁷ Compare Ecclesiastics 5:4, Isaiah 65:12, Ezekiel 33:11

truth that though our sin is great, nevertheless God uses it to bring about His good in proclaiming His righteousness and grace to the world.

In anticipation of the wickedness of man who might twist this truth and therefore conclude that sin therefore must be good since God uses it to bring about His purpose and that hey, let's go out and sin a lot more! Paul wrote this:

Romans 3:7-8, "For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just."

The suggestion that one should sin because God uses it for His purpose is ludicrous and evil. This position doesn't need a defense. The one who might live this out stands condemned! Accordingly the obvious conclusion from this is NOT that we therefore have a "get out of jail free" card on account of God's sovereignty **or** we can do whatever we want trusting God to bring about the good, as if the ends justified the means that should be obvious.

And yet if that is not the conclusion, then what are we to take from this passage?

Brothers and sisters and all who are sincere of heart, I hope you see the comfort in this doctrine. Yes we sin. And yes we ought to feel bad about it. But don't miss it! Not only does God sanctify our good intentions and use them for His glory, BUT He also does this with our sin!

Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Do you understand what that means?

We can look at

- Our past failings.
- The things we have done or not done- things over which we grieve most.
- Our wretched choices which have caused so much pain.
- The violence which we have suffered on account of another.

And though we might rightly grieve on account of our sinfulness and the sinfulness of the estate in which we live, nevertheless we have the confidence that God has and will continue to use sin NOT ONLY to bring about His glory BUT to accomplish His kind intentions in our lives.

You must hold on to this if you are to live your life without bitterness!

Babes, Young Men, and Fathers

Most of you know of the categories which John, the aged apostle, delineated in 1 John 2⁸ regarding the three stages of maturation which can be found in the body of Christ. These are

- Those who are BABES- though they know so little about doctrine and truth, nevertheless they love

⁸ Compare 1 John 2:12-14.

God.

- Those who are YOUNG MEN and WOMEN of Christ.
 - They are able to defend against the attacks of Satan, yet they remain rather shallow in their relationship with Christ.
 - They have mastered many parts and points about God's word, yet they have yet to be mastered by it.
 - And so while they can teach and defend, they have yet to become wise.
- Those who are the FATHER and MOTHERS of the faith.
 - They know their doctrine, but more importantly, they know their Lord.
 - For them life is not about getting noticed or getting their way, but walking humbly with their God.

This is such a beautiful image painted by John who himself at the time was a father in the faith. And yet brothers and sisters recognize that becoming a father or mother in the faith doesn't just happen with time. Maturation in our walks occurs as we live in light of the truth of God's word. As such it is possible, and many have born it out in their lives, never to grow beyond just being a babe or a young man or woman of Christ, but to spend the sunset years of your life as bitter, broken, grumpy old people.

Christian, that we might not be "grumpy old people" at life's end, but rather vessels useful to the Master

- Pliable.
- Soft.
- Gracious and kind.
- Exuding the face and affections of Christ.

What is needed, in light of the truth of this passage is the submission of ourselves to God and His kind intentions and not just ourselves but

- Our heartache.
- Our past.
- Our failed plans.
- Our resentments.
- Our tragedies.

And thus, the acceptance and so the welcoming of the ill, the evil, and the mistakes of our past as messengers to keep us from boasting ever and always reliant upon Christ. And thus Paul could say to "the messenger from Satan" who made his life so difficult:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10, "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Joseph could look at ten men who literally ruined his life, robbing from him the love of his dad and the privilege of growing old with him, and say thus:

Genesis 50:20, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."

Oh Christian, though sin

- Knows No Shame, v. 17.
- Is always is a Rejection of God, vv. 18-19a.
- Is Disappointing, vv. 19b-22.
- Looks so Good, vv. 23-24.
- Is not without Warning, v. 25a.
- Nevertheless God Uses It for His Glory and Our Good!

Accordingly we have the confidence to say with Samuel Rutherford who wrote this after the agonizing death of his wife:

“When ye are come to the other side of the water, and have set down your foot on the shore of glorious eternity, and look back again to the waters and to your wearisome journey... ye shall then be forced to say, 'If God had done otherwise with me than He hath done, I had never come to the enjoying of this crown of glory.’”⁹

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on October 14, 2007. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church

⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Banner of Truth; Facsimile Ed edition (April 7, 2006), XI page 52 ISBN-10: 0851513883 many of the his letters can be read at Purtansermos.com