

## The Doctrine of Sin (*Hamartiology*)

### Intro:

*“This alone have I discovered: God made humankind upright, but they have sought many evil schemes.”* (Ecclesiastes 7:29, NET)

In his consideration of the madness and folly and ultimate vanity of the world all around him, Solomon concludes that its source is found in Adam’s original sin. Put in simple terms, we might say, “the heart of mankind’s problem is the problem of mankind’s heart.” The problem is not ‘out there,’ but rather ‘in here,’ that is, the heart.

Solomon’s first observation is congruent with Moses’ teaching found “in the beginning”, namely that God made humankind (אָדָם, *haadam*) “upright.” This echoes God’s own words in Genesis 1:31, where, upon looking at the zenith of His creation – namely man (*adam*) – He pronounces that everything is “very good”; that is, it is now orderly, or, more literally, ‘straight’. Things are the way they ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, it does not take long before God’s ordered and “upright” creation becomes chaotic and twisted.

What is it that has put everything in our world ‘out of joint’? What has ‘de-created’ God’s originally good creation? What is it that now causes the crowning piece of God’s creation to busy himself seeking out “many evil schemes”?

The answer is found in Genesis 3.

- But before we look at the events of Genesis 3, we need to remember God’s words of warning in Genesis 2: “And the LORD God commanded the man (*haadam*), saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of

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<sup>1</sup> John Frame says, “When God declared the creation good, He meant *good* in every sense appropriate to every creature...[Thus] Adam and Eve were [also] ethically good. Their actions, thoughts, words, and deeds pleased God. Otherwise, God would not have declared them good. And their very nature pleased Him. They were good people, good servants of God. They bore God’s image without distortion. So we must reject the notion that God created us in a morally neutral state, so that we could achieve goodness by our own decisions.” See his *Systematic Theology*, 845-46.

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”” (vv.16-17)

From these verses we learn:

1. God created humans with the capacity to obey Him. This is the first commandment recorded in Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the man had to do in the garden, the main focus in the narrative is on keeping God’s commandments.
2. That God’s character is gracious, even in administering this test to Adam. The NLT translates v.16, “You may *freely* eat of every tree in the garden.”<sup>3</sup>
3. This command is given before Eve is taken from Adam’s side. Though seemingly insignificant, we will see that Paul makes much of this when he says that even though Eve transgressed God’s command *before* Adam, Adam is nonetheless the one who bears the responsibility as the “head” of his household.<sup>4</sup>
4. That disobedience and rebellion to God’s command(s) will have grave (pun intended) consequences. If they choose to distrust God and partake of this forbidden treasure, God says, literally, “dying you will die.”<sup>5</sup>

When we pick up the text in Gen. 3:1, we see that rather than ruling over the animal kingdom, Adam and Eve are instead ruled over by a certain serpent. Rather than trusting God alone, and submitting only to His word and reign, we see them through their disobedience handing over their delegated authority and dominion over the earth to the serpent.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is the first use of the verb “to command” (צוה, *tsavah*) in the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew literally reads, “From every tree of the garden, eating you may eat.” The awkward fronting of “every tree” is meant to emphasize the generosity of God. Most of us, believing the lie of Satan (like Eve), would rather focus on the *one* (only) tree we are not allowed to eat of.

<sup>4</sup> As Paul will explain later, Adam actually becomes the “head” of all of unredeemed humanity.

<sup>5</sup> In the Hebrew, this construction is identical to “eating you may eat.” The ESV correctly repeats the “surely” in both lines (i.e. “you may *surely* eat”; “you will *surely* die”).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Matt. 4:8-9. As redemptive history unfolds, it is clear that through the “seed” of the woman (Gen. 3:15), creation will be reclaimed for humankind. This is ‘kickstarted’ with God’s promise to Abraham in Gen. 12; is initially realized in Israel’s reclaiming Canaan for YHWH; is furthered through the reigns of David and Solomon (see esp. 2 Sam. 8, 10 and 1 Kn. 10:23-29]; but is never *fully* or finally realized until the true “seed” (Gal. 3:16) arrived. Unlike his predecessors “in Adam”, Jesus the Messiah was perfectly obedient to YHWH’s commands and could thus

Eating, they ate of the forbidden tree. Dying, they died.

And yet we read in the text that they were still breathing. Had they really died?

- We need to remember that the Hebrew understanding of death carried the idea of **separation**.
  - Thus, physical death is the separation between the soul and the spirit (e.g. Eccl. 3:19-21; 8:8; 12:7).<sup>7</sup>

The separation that took place in the garden was with respect to God's blessing presence. This is what sin does: it separates us from God. This is precisely what we see happen in the text:

- First, Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (3:8).<sup>8</sup>
- Second, and more strikingly, the guilty pair are exiled from the place of God's blessing presence (3:23-24).

In other words, the 'death' that occurred in Eden was a spiritual death.

- This is why Paul can say in Ephesians 2 that mankind by nature is "dead *in*" their transgressions and sins (v.1).

Because of sinful disobedience, the image of God has now become a marred image. What was once "upright" is now crooked, corrupted, and depraved.<sup>9</sup>

Even worse, we are told that *this* is the "image" that Adam will now pass on to all his progeny:

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reclaim the earth for Him (cf. Psa. 2:8-12; Psa. 8; Dan. 7:14 etc.). This will ultimately be accomplished as those "in Him" (i.e. the second Adam) obey His great commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

<sup>7</sup> Note that in 11:5 (ESV), Solomon says that one's spirit is given at conception. Other translations disagree with this rendering, but there seems to be good support for it in Ecclesiastes. We should not press "bones" too far; that is, the spirit does not 'enter' in the developmental stage where bones are being formed. In the Hebrew mind, "bones" are a synecdoche which represents the entirety and totality of the body. "Conception" is both textually and theologically fitting meaning here.

<sup>8</sup> We shouldn't miss the irony here. They try to return to the "trees" that they were originally allowed to eat from (2:16). Were they trying to trick God into thinking they were busy about gathering fruit from these certified and approved-of trees?

<sup>9</sup> Crookedness and corruption is the central idea/word picture of what depravity is.

- We see this *implicitly* in Genesis 4, in the account of Cain and Abel, where Cain, Adam’s firstborn, in a fit of jealous anger, slays his younger brother.
- We see this *explicitly* in Genesis 5, where we read that though Adam was created in “the likeness of God” (v.1), Adam fathered his son(s) “in his own likeness, after his image.”<sup>10</sup>

And so Adam’s “seed” inherits more than just his physical DNA. They also inherit his guilt and his corruption.

### Inherited Guilt

Simply put, we are counted guilty because of Adam’s sin.

Or, as the old New England Primer put it, “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”<sup>11</sup>

As unfair as this may initially seem, it is nevertheless what Scripture clearly teaches:

*“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* (Rom. 5:12)

- The first thing that Paul says is that, according to the narrative in Genesis 3, “sin came into the world through one man.” That is, God did not create sin.
- The second thing we see is that death – both physical and spiritual – came into the world *through* sin. That is, God did not create death. It is the result of sin (cf. Rom. 6:23).
- The third thing Paul says is that sin did not remain static. Rather it “spread to all people.” That is, *no one* is left unaffected or uninfected by Adam’s original sin. All people, by very virtue of being born “in Adam,” therefore share his guilt. And all share his guilt, because they all sinned when he sinned.
  - That Paul uses an aorist tense for “sinned” is significant. As Grudem notes, in this historical narrative, it indicates a completed past action.

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<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew words for “likeness” (דְמוּת, *d mūt*) and “image” (צֶלֶם, *tselem*) in Gen. 5:1 are identical to 1:26.

<sup>11</sup> This was the first reading primer designed for the American colonies. It became the most successful educational textbook published in the 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial United States and it became the foundation of most schooling before the 1790s.

- ➔ What Paul is saying here is that something happened and was completed in the past, namely, that “all men sinned.” Of course, when Paul wrote this, all men had not sinned, as billions of people had not even been born yet and thus could not have sinned (including many infants who would die before even committing any sins). Thus, Paul must be meaning that when Adam sinned, God considered it true that all of humanity sinned “in Adam.”<sup>12</sup>

Paul further buttresses this notion of inherited guilt in Rom. 5:13-14:

*“For sin indeed was in the world before the law [of Moses] was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the One who was to come.”*

- Here, Paul points out that from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, people did not have God’s written laws. Though their sins were “not counted” (as infractions of the law), they nevertheless still died. The fact that they did die is very good proof that God counted people guilty on the basis of Adam’s sin.<sup>13</sup>

This idea that all of humanity is counted by God as guilty because of Adam’s original sin is further confirmed in Rom. 5:18-19:

*“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”*

- Again, Paul uses an aorist tense for “many were made sinners,” to highlight a completed past action (namely Adam’s sin in Genesis 3). When Adam sinned, God thought of all who would descend from Adam as sinners.

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<sup>12</sup> Grudem, 494.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

- Though we did not yet exist, God, looking into the future and knowing we would exist, began thinking of us as those who were guilty like Adam.<sup>14</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn from these verses is that all members of the human race were represented by Adam in the time of testing in the Garden of Eden. As our representative (or, “covenantal/federal head”), Adam sinned, and God counted/reckoned us guilty as well as Adam. That is, God imputed Adam’s guilt to us.

### Inherited Corruption

This simply means that we are born with a sinful nature because of Adam’s sin.

- That is, we do not become sinners when we sin; rather, we sin because we are sinners by nature.

Or, as the Westminster Confession of Faith states, “From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.”<sup>15</sup>

This very notion is confirmed by King David’s words in Psalm 51:5: “For I was born a sinner – yes, from the moment my mother conceived me” (NLT). The sinful nature is not something that we acquire and accumulate during our lifetime. It is ours from birth, even from conception.

This corruption (or, as some prefer, ‘pollution’) has affected every<sup>16</sup> facet of our being, most notably ‘the heart.’

- In the Hebrew worldview, the ‘heart’ is the ‘center’ of our being, the inner disposition that governs all of our thoughts, words, and deeds (cf. Matt. 12:34-35; 15:8, 18-19).

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<sup>14</sup> Grudem notes that this is consistent with Paul’s statement that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). We weren’t even born when Christ died, and yet Paul says that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

<sup>15</sup> *WCF*, VI/iv.

<sup>16</sup> In the past, many scholars and theologians thus taught of “total depravity.” Unfortunately, this terminology can convey that we are as wicked as is totally possible. When we say that our depravity, our inward ‘crookedness’ is total, it simply means that no part of our being is left unaffected by sin. It’s corruption is thus ‘total.’

- Regarding the ‘natural’ (that is, unregenerate) heart, God says through Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick<sup>17</sup>; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9)
  - Certainly not King Solomon, despite his best efforts! (cf. Eccl. 7:29)

This framework explains the tragic narrative that follows Adam’s original sin in Genesis 3:

- Gen. 6:5-6 – “The LORD saw that the wickedness of mankind (*haadam*) was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
- Gen. 8:21 – “...the LORD said in His heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground (*haadamah*) because of man (*haadam*), for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”

The rest of Scripture also confirms and bears witness to mankind’s inherited corruption. Here is but a mere sampling:

- Psa. 58:3 – “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.”
- Prov. 22:15 – “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child.”
- Eccl. 9:3 – “The hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live.”

Thus, our unredeemed nature includes a disposition to sin.<sup>18</sup>

That is why Scripture can so boldly and frequently make such assertions as:

- 1 Kn. 8:46 – “For there is no one who does not sin against You.”
- Psa. 143:2 – “No one living is righteous before You.”

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<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew (אָנֹשׁ, *‘anūsh*) actually means, “is incurable.” NET = “incurably bad”; NIV = “beyond cure”; NAB = “beyond remedy”

<sup>18</sup> As any parent knows, our children do not need to be taught to sin or rebel against our authority. We are natural born sinners. Lying and murder are bound up in our hearts, and only a work of God’s sovereign grace can undo this.

- Eccl. 7:20 – “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”
- Isa. 53:6 – “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way.”
- Isa. 64:6 – “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”
- Rom. 3:9-12, 18 – “We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together have become worthless; no one does good, not even one...There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”
- Rom. 3:23 – “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- Gal. 3:22 – Scripture has “imprisoned everyone under sin.”
- 1 John 1:8-10 tells us that there is no one who doesn’t sin.
- 1 John 5:19 – “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”

### Total Inability

As John Frame says, to speak of corruption at the level of the heart is to speak of a sinful nature, a moral deadness. There can be no clearer passage that confirms this than Ephesians 2:1-3:

*“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”*

Morally speaking, the ‘natural’ person is dead “in the realm of” their sin.

- This is why we need a complete internal overhaul. Mere moral improvements are insufficient. As the Scriptures make clear, what we need is a “new heart.” Or, in the words of Jesus, we need to be “born again.” Or, in the words of Paul, we need to be made into a “new creation.”



Until that happens, we are not able to come to God to receive His salvation and forgiveness. This is seen in passages such as:

- Matt. 7:18 – “A bad tree cannot (δύναται) bear good fruit.”
- John 3:3, 5 – “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot (δύναται) enter the kingdom of God...Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot (δύναται) enter the kingdom of God.”
- John 6:44 – “No one can (δύναται) come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”
- John 6:65 – “No one can (δύναται) come to Me unless it is granted him by the Father.”
- John 14:17 – “The world cannot (δύναται) accept the Spirit of truth, because it neither sees Him or knows Him.”
- See Rom. 8:7-8 above
- 1 Cor. 2:14 – “The natural person (NIV = “the person without the Spirit”) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolish to him, and he is not able (δύναται) to understand these things, for such things can only be discerned by the Spirit” (my translation).
- 1 Cor. 12:3 – “No one can (δύναται) say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

Not only are we unable to come to God to be changed by Him, the Scripture teaches clearly that we need to be changed by God in order to come to Him, since we cannot change ourselves:

- Jer. 13:23 – “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to evil.”
- Rom. 7:18 – “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”
- Eph. 4:17-19 – “Therefore, this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds. They walk

this way because their minds have always been darkened<sup>19</sup> and estranged from the life God gives. Thus, their minds are closed and their hearts are hardened against Him” (my translation).

- Col. 1:21 – shows us that our evil deeds proceed from our alienated and hostile minds.<sup>20</sup>
- Rom. 8:8 – “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

The reason we are unable to do good or please God in the flesh is because, apart from the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, we are **slaves to sin**:

- John 8:34 – “Truly, truly, I say to you that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”
- Rom. 6:6-7 – “We know that our old man<sup>21</sup> was crucified with [Christ] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.”
- Rom. 6:17-18 – “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

Because we are by virtue of Adam’s sin slaves to sin, we are thus by nature **enemies to God**:

- Rom. 8:7 – “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”
- Rom. 5:10 – it was while we were enemies of God that God actively reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son on our behalf.

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that the two participles in v.18 (“darkened” and “estranged”) are in the perfect tense (hence my translation “have always”). I take these participles to be causal: they walk in sin because their minds are irrevocably (humanly speaking) darkened and estranged.

<sup>20</sup> NET = “And you were one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds.” Again, “alienated” is a perfect participle (cf. Eph. 4:18).

<sup>21</sup> Most translations have “our old *self*.” This is unfortunate, as it loses Paul’s theology of Adam’s (the first ‘man’) imputed sin and corruption to us (cf. 5:12-21).

Therefore, even if we could (which we cannot!!) come to God, we wouldn't, for we naturally hate Him and all that He stands for.

- See Paul's argument in Rom. 1:18-32.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of sin with regards to man paves the way for the saving gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

We have spent much time unpacking the 'bad news.' But, as the black back drop underneath the diamond serves to magnify its radiance and beauty, so does the doctrine of sin and total depravity magnify the radiance and beauty of God's saving and electing grace in Christ!