

Sin and the Fall

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

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Contents

Answering the Human Predicament	7
The Entrance of Sin	9
Original Righteousness	10
Evil and the Will of God	10
The First Sin and Its Outworking	11
How Then Shall We Live?	16

Something is severely wrong with humans and their world. People of all religious and nonreligious persuasions recognize this. For example, while humans in the modern era have achieved massive technological and medical breakthroughs, they have also created a terrible mess. An estimated 188 million people died by war and oppression alone in the twentieth century,¹ and many of them were raped, mutilated, or tortured before dying. Christopher Wright reports:

The world was horrified by the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, in which some three thousand people died. Africa suffers the equivalent of two 9/11s every day. . . . The tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 carried off some 300,000 people in a single day. HIV/AIDs inflicts the equivalent of a tsunami on Africa every month.²

What exactly is wrong with humans?

Answering the Human Predicament

Many people—including leaders in science, education, politics, and religion—analyze the human predicament while assuming that the theory of naturalistic evolution is true. This theory concludes that evil is part of the original cloth from which human history is woven. For example, Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher, wrote:

We sense that evil itself is part of the economy of superabundance. . . . We must therefore have the courage to incorporate evil into the epic of hope. In a way that we know not, evil itself cooperates, works toward, the advancement of the Kingdom of God. . . . Faith justifies the man of the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment], for whom, in the great romance of culture, evil is a factor in the education of the human race, rather than the puritan, who never succeeds in taking the step from condemnation to mercy.³

Islam, in some sense, also sees evil as a natural and inevitable part of human progress. This was expressed by Nomanul Haq:

The human exit from the Garden, then, was . . . akin to natural birth—a baby coming out of a mother’s womb, a bird breaking out of an egg, or a bud sprouting forth from a branch. Indeed, like nature, Adam had to evolve, morally, spiritually, intellectually—just as a baby grows into adulthood, and a seed grows into a lofty tree.⁴

Thus the human condition in Islam does not involve the recovery from a fall so as to regain some original state of glory, but rather entails the fulfilling of a set of obligations given by God in the Qur’an.

Christianity, on the other hand, uniquely analyzes the human predicament. Christianity analyzes evil by placing it under two inter-related categories: sin and the fall. Evil exists because of sin, and sin exists because of the fall that occurred in early human history. In his great treatise on original sin, Jonathan Edwards contends that Adam’s sin brought evil into the world:

I look on the doctrine as of great importance; which everybody will doubtless own it is, if it be true. For, if the case be such indeed, that all mankind are by nature in a state of total ruin, both with respect to the moral evil of which they are the subjects, and the afflictive evil to which they are exposed, the one as the consequence and punishment of the other; then doubtless, the great salvation, must suppose it; and all real belief, or true notion of the gospel, must be built upon it.⁵

Blaise Pascal writes:

It is an astonishing thing, however, that the mystery which is furthest removed from our knowledge—the mystery of the transmission of sin—is something without which we can have no knowledge of ourselves!

For there is no doubt that there is nothing that shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man was the cause of the guilt of those who were so far from the source of infection that it seems impossible that they should have been contaminated by it. The transmission of sin seems to us not only impossible, it even seems very unjust; for what could be more contrary to the rules of our sorry justice than the eternal damnation of a child incapable of

will-power for a sin in which he seems to have played so small a part, and which was committed six thousand years before he was born? Nothing, to be sure, is more of a shock to us than such a doctrine and yet, without this mystery, which is most incomprehensible of all, we should be incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangled knot of our condition acquired its twists and turns in that abyss; so that man is more inconceivable without the mystery than the mystery is to man.⁶

Only Christianity adequately analyzes the human predicament. Evil exists because of sin, and sin exists because of the fall. And sin originated not on earth but in heaven itself.

Sin did not break out on earth in the first instance, but in heaven, in the immediate presence of God, and at the foot of His throne. The thought, the wish, the will to resist God arose first in the heart of the angels.⁷

The Entrance of Sin

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The angels responded with joyful singing: “On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:6–7). After creating the universe, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The angels later sinned and were cast down (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). Adam, who has a parallel relationship to Christ (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45–49), represents the human race.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of 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.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

Sin entered the race when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit.

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—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not

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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. (Rom. 5:12–14)

Satan approached Adam through Eve his wife.

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, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. (Gen. 3:6–7b)

Original Righteousness

God created Adam upright. He possessed what we might call original righteousness. This was a probationary period in which Adam and Eve were exposed to temptation and capitulated to it. It was possible for them not to sin, and it was also possible for them to sin.

God gave to man the power of contrary choice. Man of his own will, by no external compulsion or determination, used that power in the commission of sin. There was no necessity arising from his physical condition, nor from his moral nature, nor from the nature of his environment, why he should sin. It was a free movement within man's spirit. To use Laidlaw's words, "It arose with an external suggestion, and upon an external occasion, but it was an inward crisis."⁸

Adam's temptation was reasonable, but his capitulation was not. God had blessed Adam with dominion over the earth, a wife corresponding to him, and fellowship with God himself. God put the entire creation—except for a single tree—under Adam's dominion. God's benefits were extreme, and his threat for eating the forbidden fruit was extreme.

Evil and the Will of God

God sovereignly decreed that sin would enter the world, and Adam was responsible for freely sinning.

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: