

“Sin and Death”

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¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned — ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just 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.

(Romans 5:12-19)

What someone thinks of the concept of “original sin” is largely determined by how much water they see in the glass of human nature. If the potential for human goodness is a glass half empty, we are more likely to buy the idea that human nature is inherently broken... that we can no more avoid sinning than a fish can avoid swimming in water. On the other hand, if we are more optimistic about human achievement, if we see the glass of human potential as half full, then we might be tempted to dismiss the old story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as overly simplistic... overly pessimistic. We might say, we human beings, we aren't all that bad, are we?

I will grant that there is a certain pessimism in the doctrine of Original Sin. For Paul, that doctrine is summed up in the first verse I just read from Romans 5: “*sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.*” The “one man” in this scenario was Adam, who had been told very clearly not to eat the fruit of one particular tree in Eden. “You can eat from any tree in the garden,” God said, “except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from that one. The moment you do, you're dead.” That was the only rule, but it was too much for Adam and Eve. They ate that fruit, and everything changed. In the words handed down to us in the Scots Confession of 1560: “By this transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin.”¹ In one bite, Adam and Eve ruined things for everybody, forever.

Like I said, pessimistic. Are we human beings really that bad? We do some good stuff, don't we? We have the capacity to love, to give, to help, to serve. For a while, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr chose a more optimistic view. He saw the progress humanity had made

¹ Scots Confession, 3.03.



in the 19th century – the abolishment of slavery, rising concern about laborers and the living conditions of the working poor, developments in education, the beginning of women’s rights – as evidence of humanity’s potential. Good things were happening. Humanity was gaining ground. But when the “War to End All Wars” did not live up to that name, with totalitarianism on the march and fascism on the rise, his optimism began to fade. He was attracted to the idea that our human capacity for good exceeds our capacity for evil. He wanted to believe that there is no problem we cannot overcome if we just work long enough, smart enough, and hard enough. But he would eventually conclude that such belief amounts only to folly. To quote him directly, he said that an overly optimistic view of human nature was not only an illusion; it was “*the culminating error in modern man’s misunderstanding of himself.*”²

He wrote that in 1939. I wonder what he would say today, if he were alive. Would the Holocaust have restored his faith in humanity? How about the rise of nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, the violence of the Civil Rights Movement? Or more recently: 9/11, January 6th, 2021, October 7, 2023? Would his view change? I think not. What would Paul say about our human ability to be righteous? What would John Knox say about human faithfulness?

[dump water glass out on the floor]

My goal today is not to be pessimistic, but it is to be realistic – realistic about the flawed, mortal, human aspects of our human nature. Our journey through Lent, and our journey through Romans, begins with an honest engagement with the concept of original sin. We start by looking in the glass – looking in the mirror, and looking honestly into the glass of human potential. How full is it, really? How good are we, *really*?

Guided by the ancient wisdom of Paul, we begin exactly as someone in a twelve-step recovery program would do. We start with a confession that we have a problem. We concede that we are powerless against sin... that we are sick with sin, even addicted to sin, and we cannot control our sin without help. Do not fool yourself, Paul says, into thinking you have sin under control. Do not put confidence in your capacity to overcome it. Don’t even look at someone else and say, “Well, at least I’m not that bad.” Hold fast to the conclusion that Paul uses three whole chapters to prove: that “*There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one. Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive... The venom of vipers is under their lips... ruin and misery are in their paths... and the way of peace they have not known... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”³

Is that pessimistic, or is it just realistic? Each of us has to wrestle with that question. In your heart, in your life, what is your take on original sin?

As you think about that, I encourage you to be open to two perspectives that I think will help you see through the glass more clearly. First, I would encourage you to ***embrace your connection with Adam and Eve***. Don’t get hung up on why or how the fleeting, individual sins of two people who lived so long ago should have such a dire and lasting effect on all of humanity. Trust me, the church has tried to explain this, we have gone down some pretty crazy rabbit holes. Some have argued that Adam was the “representative” for the whole human race -- that because he was our “agent,” his sin is imputed to us. But we certainly

² Joseph E. Hartman, “Democracy and Sin: Doing Justice to Reinhold Niebuhr,” <https://www.nas.org>

³ Romans 3:10-23.

didn't vote for him; so that theory doesn't hold much water.⁴ For centuries it was also believed that the problem was genetic... that Adam and Eve passed their "sin gene" down to us biologically. I'm guessing that idea got tangled up with the attempts to pin the whole rap on Eve. For centuries it was accepted fact in the church that Eve was the original O.G. sinner. Poor, hapless Adam, well he just got involved with the wrong girl who "made him" do the wrong thing. Pathetic, ridiculous notions. Don't get hung up on stuff like that.

Through the years, I have really only heard one explanation that makes sense to me, and it turns out that it is the way that Jewish interpreters have always read the story. Judaism has never been an individualistic faith. Faithful people are not in competition with one another; instead, they rise and fall together in solidarity. Seen in this way, all people really do share the sin of Adam and Eve, because we are all like Adam and Eve. Their weaknesses are our weaknesses and their faults are our faults, because we are all the same.

Just to make sure we don't miss this point, the Hebrew makes it literally obvious. Adam, as it turns out, is not a name. At least not at first. In Hebrew, the word *adam* simply means "man" or "person." So, Adam is not a representative of all humanity because he has some magical agency to pass his guilt on to others. Adam and Eve are our representatives because they *are* us.

Try to remember this, because you will need it later. In the very same way, we stood with the people who stood before Pilate and chose to side with a known criminal instead of with Christ. We laughed with those who mocked him. We helped hold the hammer that drove the nails through his hands and feet. As the old hymn asks: "were you there, when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, I was there. You were there. We were all there. During Lent, try to embrace your spiritual connection with Adam and Eve, because we were all in that garden. We are all fragile, broken vessels. There is no one righteous; not one.

I also encourage you to ***embrace the connection between sin and death***. We may not link them in our minds, perhaps because sin seems more like a choice, while death is an inevitability. Still, it is clear that, in the Old Testament and the New, sin and death are a package deal.

Again, Jewish interpretation of the book of Genesis helps us see the linkage clearly. Jewish belief, which is supported by the biblical text, is that, were it not for Adam and Eve's sin, human beings would have been immortal. Bearing the image of God, we were made perfect. Death never entered the conversation until the original sin occurred. So overtly Paul couples the two things together Romans: "*death came [into the world] through sin... [and] death spread to all because all have sinned.*"

It reminds me of that famous choice described by Andy Dufresne in the movie "The Shawshank Redemption": "Get busy living or get busy dying." Four hundred years earlier, the Puritan theologian John Owen put it this way: "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you." Sin really is like death in many ways, because sin is a cancer that strikes at the very best parts of us. Sin kills joy. Sin kills kindness. Sin strains the bonds of peace. Sin infects the heart and weakens its capacity to love. Embrace the connection between sin and death, because they are a package deal.

Like it or not, this is where our Lenten journey begins. Scripture tells us that we are all broken. If indeed there is any water still in our glass, that water is hopelessly polluted, bitter, and caustic. Yes, we have the capacity for good, for love, and for peace, because we

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 93.

are made in the image of God. But that image has been scarred, marred, and defaced by sin. During Lent we will talk more about what sin is and what sin does to us. But for today, as we begin this trek through Romans, it is enough for us to recognize that, as human beings, sin is a very real presence in each of our lives... and whether we are ready to admit it or not, it is killing us. ***Amen.***