

# *Humanity and Sin*

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## Contents

### 8. **The Effect of Sin on Human Nature**

### The Effect of Sin on Human Nature

After they had been driven out of the Garden, Adam and Eve found that the only road back was blocked by the flashing sword and the cherubim. They had not hesitated to challenge the authority of God when it took the form of a verbal threat, but the sword would prove more effective than the commandment. Self-interest now told them to stay where they were. That way they could at least stay alive, although life here was certainly different. There would be no more easy cultivation of the fruit trees, as the ground felt hard beneath their feet and their clothes snagged on the wild brush. Better to tear garments than one's flesh, and neither of them wanted to go naked, but those clothes still felt odd next to their skin. That wasn't so bad; they would grow used to the clothing. But the loneliness was something different. Standing together to the east of Eden, each felt all alone – betrayed by the other, alienated from God, and confused about how it had all come apart so quickly. Neither they nor their descendants would ever be comfortable with that.

The children were all born outside of Eden. Cain came first (Gen. 4:1), then Abel (4:2), Seth (4:25), and other sons and daughters (5:4), who married and had children of their own.<sup>1</sup> None of them ever saw the tree of life or had a chance to taste or reject the forbidden fruit. At the same time, none of them enjoyed marriage relationships without some degree of rivalry or resentment, and they inevitably ate bread produced by the sweat of their brow. Born into a fallen world, they never knew Eden, only the curse. Still, they knew this was not the way life was supposed to be. When Noah was born, his father Lamech hoped that somehow the boy would bring relief “from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the LORD has cursed” (5:29).

Adam and Eve had sinned alone, but they were not the only ones locked out of the Garden. Cut off from the tree of life, they and their descendants were all destined to die. That fact is underscored in Genesis 5, which contains the Bible's first genealogy. Many other Scripture passages record family histories, but this is the only one that contains the repeated phrase, “and he died” after each name listed. Adam lived 930 years, “and he died” (5:5). Seth lived 912 years, “and he died” (5:8). Enosh lived 905 years, “and he died” (5:11). And he died. And he died. And he died. Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Methuselah, Lamech – every one of them died. Other than Enoch, whom God “took” (5:24), every one of Adam's descendants experienced death the same way he had. Each one followed Adam from dust to dust, apparently sharing the consequences of his disobedience.

That arrangement may not seem entirely fair to us. We might think it wiser for the angels to run a nursery school for Adam's children back in the Garden, giving each of them a chance to

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#### <sup>1</sup>Chapter 9: The Effect of Sin on Human Nature

Incidentally the skeptic's question – “Who was Cain's wife?” – can be answered quite simply from these verses. Marriage to a near relative had not yet been forbidden, and she was apparently one of his sisters.

grow, mature, and take their own turn with the serpent. There would be two different civilizations – one consisting of those who had not yet disobeyed and the other of those who had, with buses departing Eden each evening for those who failed the test. But God did not orchestrate things that way. As the patriarch of the human family, Adam made choices that continue to affect his descendants. We have all made additional choices ourselves, for which we are held responsible (as Cain was for his rejection of God’s warning and his murder of Abel; 4:7–12), but we continue as members of Adam’s family. Born and raised outside of Eden, we live out the penalty of his disobedience as if it were our own.

### *Spiritual Death and the Inheritance of Adam’s Guilt*

#### *Dead in Trespasses and Sins*

In Ephesians 2:1 Paul began a review of his readers’ salvation by reminding them that they had been “dead in trespasses and sins” before experiencing new life in Christ. Since they were obviously alive physically during that time, commentators often describe this as “spiritual death.” That expression does not mean that one’s “spirit” has ceased to exist, for that would constitute the annihilation of the individual. To be spiritually dead is to be alienated from God, to have no vital relationship with Him.

We have already seen that the Jewish view of life encompassed more than just physical existence. It also included blessing in the land of promise in fellowship with God. Those who lacked that kind of existence (like Israel in the exile) lacked life in its fullness. Since Gentiles, like deceased persons (Ps. 88:4–5), were estranged from the worshiping community and alienated from God’s life-giving Spirit, it was not uncommon for later rabbis to describe them as “dead.” That description accords well with Paul’s comments about his readers’ preconversion condition. As those who were spiritually dead, they had been “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel . . . strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). “Alienated from the life of God” (4:18), they were cut off from communion with Him, isolated by their sinfulness (Col. 2:13).

We who have been born outside of Eden have been born into that condition. Held back from the tree of life, we are estranged from God’s presence from the very beginning. We can see that condition in the experience of Adam’s immediate descendants, but also in Paul’s letter to the Romans. “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned – for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of Adam’s offense, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:12–19).

This lengthy comparison between Adam and Christ began with Paul's emphasis on the mediation of Christ in the first part of the chapter. "We have peace with God *through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (5:1). He is the One "*through whom* we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand" (5:2). He "*died for*" us when we were ungodly sinners (5:6, 8). We have been "*justified by His blood*" and "*shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him*" (5:9). "*We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son*" and "*shall be saved by His life*" (5:10). We now "*exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" As the Mediator of our salvation, Jesus Christ is the one "*through whom* we have now received the reconciliation" (5:11). Those statements reveal the apostle's major focus at this point in his letter. Describing the work of Christ on our behalf, Paul used the cross as a conclusive proof for the doctrine of justification by faith.

If Paul had ended his description of Christ's mediation after verse 11, Romans 5 would have remained an extremely important theological text, but it would not have been terribly controversial. However, the apostle added a clarifying illustration, and, as every teacher knows, sometimes the illustration gets in the way of the argument. In this case, Paul continued to focus on our response to the cross of Christ, but discussions about his illustration have made this one of the most famously debated passages in all of Scripture.

#### *An Examination of Romans 5*

To clarify the mediatorial effect of the cross, Paul compared it to the sin of Adam. "Therefore," he wrote, wrapping up his summary of Christ's intervention, "just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned . . ." (5:12). He never actually completed that sentence, jumping to an aside in verse 13, but the point of the comparison is plain from the rest of the paragraph. Just as sin came to all persons through Adam, salvation comes to all believers through Jesus Christ. Again, we do not struggle with his main emphasis, the mediation of Christ. It's the relationship between us and Adam, which Paul treated as a familiar concept, that has caused our confusion.

Paul said that sin entered into the world through Adam. He did not intend to bypass the role of the serpent, whom he apparently identified with Satan (16:20), but to highlight sin's entrance into human experience and its resulting effect on the cosmos (cf. 8:19-20). "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin." Adam opened the door to sin as an invited guest, but the guest brought along a companion—death. God had warned Adam that death would follow sin, and humanity's banishment from the tree of life fulfilled His word.

Paul continued, "so death spread to all men, because all sinned." This is the portion of the verse that has occasioned so much discussion. We have no problem affirming that all people die, but what did Paul mean when he linked death to sin—"death spread to all men because all sinned"? We need to answer several related questions in order to understand the apostle's statement. First, what kind of death was he describing? Second, in what sense have all sinned? Third, what is the meaning of the Greek phrase *eph ho* (translated "because" in 5:12), which shows how sin and death are related?

Working with a Latin translation of Romans, Augustine (who lived from 354 to 430 and was one of Christianity's most influential theologians) had to make a decision not about the Greek words *eph ho*, but the Latin *in quo*. He determined that the phrase meant "in whom," and he interpreted that as a reference to Adam. As a result, Augustine thought Paul was saying, "through one man sin entered into the world . . . and death spread to all men, in whom (Adam) all sinned." Adam's sin was ours as well, for we somehow sinned "in him." From this perspective, that "original sin," which we shared with Adam, renders us all guilty of sin from the beginning of our existence.

Augustine's Latin text did not provide him with the best rendering of the original Greek, which cannot mean "in whom." He was guilty of an exegetical error that might have been avoided had better sources been accessible to him, and some observers believe that his mistake produced a wrong understanding of original sin that misled theologians for centuries.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that Augustine was wrong about the meaning of *eph ho* does not necessarily mean that he misunderstood the nature of sin and death in Romans 5. Nor does it mean that his doctrine of original sin is necessarily false. Augustine's contention that the rest of us sinned in Adam may be correct, and many interpreters agree with him on that point even though they suggest better translations of *eph ho*.

Most grammarians have argued that *eph ho* means "because," and that preference is reflected in the majority of popular translations and commentaries.<sup>3</sup> If their view is correct, then Paul's words may be paraphrased, "death is universal because sin is universal."<sup>4</sup> That concept would be compatible with the idea that "the wages of sin is death" (6:23), and it fits the pattern established in the Genesis account of the Fall, and also echoed in the first part of this verse. Death comes as a consequence of sin.

This interpretation still requires that one determine the manner in which "all sinned," and many follow Augustine by arguing that all sinned *in Adam*. The continuing popularity of this position suggests that it must be supported by more than a medieval misinterpretation of the Latin text, and it certainly is. However, the argument demands and deserves a fairly lengthy explanation.

Paul said that "death spread to all men because all sinned," and some believe that his statement referred to the independent choices of individuals. In other words, all people choose to sin of their own free will, and we all die as a result. However, that view runs into two major problems. First, what about infants and mentally handicapped persons who die without making moral choices? How did death spread to them if they have not sinned? Second, how would this position do justice to the rest of Paul's argument? In verses 15–19 he made several statements describing the universal consequences of Adam's sin. "By the transgression of the one the many died" (5:15). "The judgment arose from one transgression, resulting in condemnation" (5:16). "By the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one" (5:17). "Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" (5:18). "Through the one man's disobedience the many were

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<sup>2</sup>For example, David L. Smith wrote, "Much of the problem in establishing a reasonable doctrine of the transmission of sin may be laid at the doorstep of the premier theologian of the church, Augustine of Hippo" (*With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994], 358).

<sup>3</sup>This is the view taken by C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1975], 1:277); James D. G. Dunn (*Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1988], 273); John R. W. Stott (*Romans: God's Good News for the World* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994], 150); Douglas J. Moo (*Romans 1–8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1991], 334); and A. T. Robertson (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], 963).

<sup>4</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 305.

made sinners” (5:19). According to these verses Adam’s sin brought death, judgment, and condemnation to all his descendants. Since we experience these things as a consequence of his sin, not ours, there must be some special relationship between us and Adam.

Verses 15–19 also seem to oppose a second possibility, that Paul’s statement “all sinned” (5:12) means all persons choose to sin because they have inherited a fallen human nature from Adam. This view rightly acknowledges some relationship between Adam’s sin and our guilt, and it also reminds us that we share responsibility for our fate. That is, we cannot blame anyone but ourselves for the choices we make. However, it fails to account for those who die before making such choices, and it does not acknowledge Paul’s emphasis on a *single* act. Again, “through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men” (5:18). As S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. pointed out, “Hereditary depravity cannot be called one trespass.”<sup>5</sup> In this passage, Paul traced death, judgment, and condemnation to Adam’s sin in Genesis 3, not to our own repeated acts of rebellion.

That conclusion raises a third option—that “all sinned” means we all sinned in Adam. If verse 12 says we experience death because *we* sinned (“death spread to all men because all sinned”), and the rest of Paul’s argument says that we experience death because *Adam* sinned (“by the transgression of the one the many died,” 5:15), our sin must be identified with his.<sup>6</sup> Obviously Augustine was looking at more than a single phrase in that Latin New Testament of his.

This third interpretation also offers an explanation for the death of those who never had the chance to make their own moral choices. They died not because of their sin, but because of Adam’s. Paul seems to say as much in verses 13 and 14: “for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of Adam’s offense, who is a type of Him who was to come.” People who lived before the Mosaic Law clearly committed sin (“until the Law sin was in the world”). Two of the Bible’s most familiar acts of judgment—the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—occurred during this period. However, apart from the clearly defined boundaries that would be marked out by the Law, not everyone’s sin was evident (“sin is not imputed when there is no law”).<sup>7</sup> The Law would eventually reveal sin to be sin and make everyone’s failure apparent (3:19–20; 7:7–13), but from Adam to Moses the boundaries were not always so clear. As Paul said earlier in this same letter, “where there is no law, neither is there violation” (4:15). Still, even those who were comparatively righteous died during this period. “Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of Adam’s offense.” Adam had transgressed an explicit commandment, and so would the recipients of the Law. Between them, however, lived people who had no stated commandment to

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 308.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Moo, *Romans 1–8*, 338.

<sup>7</sup>Cranfield wrote, “oujk ejllagei'tai must be understood in a relative sense: only in comparison with what takes place when the law is present can it be said that, in the law's absence, sin oujk ejllagei'tai. Those who lived without the law were certainly not 'innocent sinners'—they were to blame for what they were and what they did. But in comparison with the state of affairs which has obtained since the advent of the law sin may be said to have been, in the law's absence, 'not registered,' since it was not the fully apparent, sharply defined thing, which it became in its presence” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:282).

transgress, no clear boundary to cross. But they still died. Moral men, virtuous women, newborn babies – they all died. Why? Paul’s words in 5:15 offer an explanation. “By the transgression of the one the many died.” Their death shows their guilty standing for a sin committed – in Adam.

This interpretation of Romans 5 has much to commend it, and accordingly it is widely held. However, an alternative may be even better. As noted earlier, Augustine thought the Latin version of the Greek *eph ho* meant “in whom,” but most interpreters have translated the original as “because.” If it means “because,” then Paul was saying in verse 12 that everyone dies because everyone sinned. If that is Paul’s point, then his argument is best explained by saying that we have all sinned in Adam. However, if *eph ho* does not mean “because,” then we need to consider an alternative interpretation.

Another possibility for the interpretation of *eph ho*, has been proposed by New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer. Assisted by a computer-driven search of ancient Greek literature, Fitzmyer cited a multitude of examples suggesting that *eph ho* should be understood in a consecutive sense, meaning, “with the result that.”<sup>8</sup> He translates verse 12 as follows: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death came through sin; so death spread to all human beings, with the result that all have sinned.” That translation calls for a different perspective on Paul’s argument, one that is worth considering carefully.

We’ll start again at the beginning of the verse. “Through one man sin entered into the world” – Adam opened the door and invited sin into human experience. “And death through sin” – the uninvited guest barged in through the open door. “And so death spread to all men, with the result that all have sinned.” This brings us back to our other two questions. In what sense have all sinned, and what kind of death is Paul describing?

The most natural way to understand the statement that all have sinned is to see it as a summary of ongoing human rebellion. As in Romans 3:23, all persons make personal, sinful choices and stand in need of salvation. The reason this phrase is so often understood to mean that we sinned in Adam is that 5:15–19 attribute death to his transgression, not ours. If verse 12 says that death spread to all people “because” all sinned, then Paul has attributed death both to Adam’s transgression and to ours, implying that they are one and the same. However, that understanding collapses if *eph ho* does not mean “because.” If that Greek phrase is to be understood consecutively, meaning that universal transgression *follows from* death rather than causes it, then the basic idea of the passage shapes up a little differently.

Adam brought sin and death into the world, and death spread to all people. “By the transgression of the one, the many died” (5:15). If Paul meant by this that all people eventually die, we might have expected him to use the present tense (“by the transgression of the one, the many die”). However, his use of the Greek aorist verb tense, which denotes past action, suggests that he was thinking of death in a broader sense. He contrasted it throughout the passage with the life that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, indicating that all people have received death and condemnation through Adam but may now experience life and justification through Christ.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “*εφ\_ω* | /J in Romans 5.12,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 321–39.

<sup>9</sup>It is worth noting that in Romans Paul generally maintained what has been called an “eschatological reservation,” speaking of resurrection life as a future experience more than a present one (Robert A. Pyne, “Dependence and Duty:

“For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (5:17). As in Ephesians 2, the life and death described here are more than just physical. The terms refer to the presence or absence of a relationship to God (cf. John 17:3). Because of Adam’s sin, every one of his descendants was born outside of Eden, alienated from God, cut off from the tree of life, and destined for dust. Born under the curse, we experience the judgment and condemnation that accompanied Adam’s sin (5:16). “Death reigned” (5:17).

As noted above, the whole point of this section is that Christ has reconciled believers to God, and Paul brought Jesus’ representation into focus by comparing it to Adam’s. Adam’s act brought sin into the world, thereby plunging the human race into spiritual death—alienation from God and banishment from the tree of life. Christ’s death brought salvation into the world and provided believers with eternal life. Even if we die, we will be raised from the grave and given free access to the tree of life (8:11; Rev. 22:2).

If Paul’s statement that “death spread to all men” means that all people enter life in a state of spiritual death, we need to remember that, in such condition, people do not naturally perform acts of righteousness. They sin. Paul described unbelievers as “slaves of sin” (Rom. 6:20), and he also wrote, “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (8:7–8). Those who are estranged from God exacerbate their predicament by continuing to sin. “Death spread to all men, with the result that all sinned.” Spiritual death is not the consequence of personal sin in Romans 5:12. *Personal sin is the consequence of spiritual death, which we experience because of Adam’s sin.* In that sense, we see a progression from sin to death to sin to death. Adam’s sin led to death for himself and all humanity, and in that state of death all people continue to sin, compounding the guilt they received from Adam and leading to eternal condemnation, the second death (Rev. 20:14; Rom. 6:23; 8:13).<sup>10</sup>

Given this perspective on Romans 5:12, the rest of the chapter unfolds much as before. Verses 13–14 demonstrate the universality of death even before the Law—the many die because of Adam’s offense, not their own—and verses 15–19 describe the radically different results of Adam’s mediation and Christ’s. Adam’s sin brought physical death, alienation from God, and condemnation on all his descendants. But Christ’s work on the cross brings resurrection life, reconciliation with God, and justification to all who place their trust in Him.<sup>11</sup>

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The Spiritual Life in Galatians 5 and Romans 6,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 151–55). However, Paul saw the believer’s present experience of regeneration as a foretaste of the life to come (Rom. 6:11; 8:10–11, 23).

<sup>10</sup>For sake of balance we should note that Christ’s act of righteousness (Rom. 5:18) enables believers to experience new life in regeneration, which results in acts of righteousness (Eph. 2:10), which in turn lead to life (Rom. 6:22). So we have one progression that consists of sin to death to sin to death, while the other consists of righteousness to life to righteousness to life.

<sup>11</sup>Some of these verses make it seem as if justification is universal. Verse 18, for example, reads “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted

### *Implications*

From this perspective we may see our way through some of the long-standing discussions about original sin, the most prominent of which has focused on the precise nature of the relationship between us and Adam. Theologians have always had an awkward time explaining how all people “sinned in Adam,”<sup>12</sup> but it may be that we can avoid that expression. The interpretation offered here argues that we have inherited the consequences of Adam’s sin, but we need not describe that sin as our own. Since we are born outside of Eden in a state of spiritual death, Adam’s sin affected us profoundly even if we were not part of the event itself.

That conclusion strongly favors “federalism” over “realism” in the ongoing debate about our connection to Adam. Although we have already used the label *realism* with regard to our use of science and our hopes for moral behavior in society, we now employ it again because of its common use in theological discussions of sin. In this context, realism is the belief that all persons *really* sinned along with Adam. As Berkouwer stated, “The hallmark of realism is the conviction that all men are ‘co-sinners’ with Adam in the fullest meaning of that word.”<sup>13</sup> John Murray described it more explicitly:

In brief, the position is that human nature in its unindividualized unity existed in its entirety in Adam, that, when Adam sinned, not only did he sin but also the common nature which existed in its unity in him, and that, since each person who comes into the world is an individualization of this one human nature, each person as an “individualized portion” of that common nature is both culpable and punishable for the sin committed by that unity.<sup>14</sup>

Realists insist that we can be held accountable only for what we have actually done, and they often see a model for our relationship to Adam in the biblical argument that Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek while in the loins of Abraham (Heb. 7:10). Some have understood this “seminal” connection quite literally, maintaining that sin is passed from one generation to another through the seed of the parents.

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justification of life of all men.” That has caused some interpreters (John Wesley among them) to say that Christ’s death removed the guilt of original sin from all persons. However, Paul’s comparison between the mediators and the consequences of their deeds becomes almost meaningless if the two groups are coextensive. He continues the pattern of comparison through chapter 8, where it becomes clear that life, justification, and righteousness are experienced only by those who are in Christ. One can see the same themes in 5:1–11, which certainly do not describe a universal experience. As Paul stated in 5:17, “*those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ*” (italics added).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin*, trans. P. C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 436–37.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>14</sup>John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), 24.

"Federalists" are not as confident that the consolidation of human nature in Adam resulted in universal culpability, nor do they believe that we must have been "in" Adam to share the guilt for his sin. If we are guilty because we were in Adam's loins, they ask, does that mean we are also guilty of every sin the rest of our ancestors committed? Why would Adam's sin be highlighted if that were the case? Federalists believe that there must be an explanation for Adam's uniqueness that goes beyond the fact that he was the first man, so they say that Adam represents us as our covenantal or "federal" head. Within this model, his guilt is imputed to us on the basis of his representation of humanity. Some defend this through the concept of "corporate solidarity," in which one member of a group essentially stands for all others. That concept has probably been overstated by some adherents, but it is true that the decisions of kings and patriarchs in the ancient Near East largely determined the fate of their people (Josh. 7:24; 2 Sam. 24:15-17). As king of the earth and patriarch of the human race, Adam failed on behalf of us all.

A softer version of federalism maintains that Adam's sin was imputed to us through the mediation of our own choices. In other words, we share in Adam's guilt because each of us has repeated his rebellion. As we might expect, this concept of "mediate imputation" encounters some difficulty in Romans 5, where we have already witnessed Paul's emphasis on the single transgression of Adam. That is why so many federalists hold to "immediate imputation," the idea that Adam's guilt is imputed directly to us, independently of our own sin.

The perspective of Romans 5 offered above favors federalism over realism, and immediate imputation over mediate. Death spread to all persons not because all sinned in Adam, but because Adam sinned as our representative. Federalism with immediate imputation also best fits the parallel that Paul established between Adam and Christ. We are justified through the work of Christ, not because we were "in Christ" in some seminal or realistic way, but because He functioned as our representative, dying for us and rising again as the Head of a new humanity. Further, our justification does not depend on our own righteous deeds (Rom. 3:28; 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9), or even our own determinative choice of Him (Rom. 8:29-30; 9:11-22), so it is best to say that the benefits of salvation are not mediated through our works in any sense. The choices of both representatives, Adam and Christ, are immediately imputed to those under their headship.

Many find the idea of inherited guilt very offensive. It seems to hold people responsible for something in which they had no part, and that arrangement does not seem fair. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. answered this charge by appealing to the imputation of righteousness in Christ. But Adam's act is not the final determinative of our eternal destiny. . . . One may still turn to the Last Adam and his headship. Furthermore, such representation, assuming the desirability of human creation and existence, is really to our advantage. For, in the first place, if we should stand our probation ourselves, we would be just as likely to fall as Adam, if not more so. We are not better than our first parent. And if we should stand for ourselves, the chances are that the end would be fatal and final. When angels fell, sinning individually, there was no hope of restoration for them, so far as the Scriptures reveal. Sinning individually, they sinned beyond all recovery. . . . And finally, since we have fallen in a representative, it is much easier to see why we may be restored through a representative. In the wise and infinite mercy of God there has come a Second Man, a Last Adam. On the principle of representation, he may stand for us. Since he has stood his probation for us victoriously, we may rise in the same manner in which we fell. We fell through no personal fault of our own; we rise through no personal merit of our own. When a father strikes oil, the children get rich. And we have hit a gusher in the Last Adam! I must say that I like representation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Johnson, "Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," 315-16.

Few people object to representation when it brings so obvious a benefit, but many still believe the principle is unfair when the consequences are negative. They often argue that the Lord explicitly denied inherited guilt when He spoke the following words through Ezekiel: "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live . . . you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel any more. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die" (Ezek. 18:2-4).

Jeremiah also prophesied against the "sour grapes" proverb, writing, "In those days they will not say again, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge" (Jer. 31:29-30). Maintaining that these texts emphasize personal responsibility while ruling out inherited guilt, Smith wrote, "Augustine's doctrine that all human beings are made guilty (and the similar doctrine of others since) because of Adam's sin is simply unbiblical. Ezekiel disposes of such a concept."<sup>16</sup> The objection is more damaging to federalism than to realism, since the latter claims that every individual actually ate the sour grapes in Adam. However, the broader context of these prophecies demonstrates that they are not inconsistent with either model of original sin.

While warning of impending exile, the prophets had to endure scorn, ridicule, and excuses from their skeptical audience. The proverb about sour grapes was apparently one of the more popular excuses. Expressing self-justification and blame, the people claimed that it was unfair to punish them, innocent as they were, for the sins of their fathers. God told Jeremiah, "Now it will come about when you tell this people all these words that they will say to you, 'For what reason has the LORD declared all this great calamity against us? And what is our iniquity, or what is our sin which we have committed against the LORD our God?'" (Jer. 16:10). God then instructed the prophet to tell them the judgment was coming not only for their fathers' sin, but also for their own. "Then you are to say to them, It is because your forefathers have forsaken Me, declares the LORD, 'and have followed other gods and served them and bowed down to them; but Me they have forsaken and have not kept My law. You too have done evil, even more than your forefathers; for behold, you are each one walking according to the stubbornness of his own evil heart, without listening to Me. So I will hurl you out of this land into the land which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers; and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I shall grant you no favor" (16:11-13).

The exile *was* connected to the sin of their fathers, but the present generation was guilty as well. God did not allow them to justify their own sin by blaming others. In the same way, God told the nation through Ezekiel that they had no right to accuse Him of being unfair in His punishment. "But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?" (Ezek. 18:29).

The slogan about the sour grapes had become a statement of self-justification and blame. The people of Israel used it to deny their own sin, to blame their fathers for whatever judgment was to come their way, and to accuse God of injustice. In that context, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had an important message to deliver. Those who were about to experience exile could not excuse themselves by blaming earlier generations, for they were just as sinful as their fathers.

That message does not challenge our interpretation of Romans 5, but rather enhances it. Our tendency toward self-justification makes it especially tempting to blame Adam for God's

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<sup>16</sup>Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin*, 366.

judgment, just as those in Ezekiel's generation blamed their fathers, but Paul did not leave room for that excuse. As Berkouwer concluded, "Our confession of original sin may not function and cannot function as a means of *excusing ourselves* or of *hiding behind another man's guilt*."<sup>17</sup> We do share a corporate responsibility, as did Israel, but we also have our own personal guilt. "Death spread to all men" because of Adam, "with the result that all sinned" of their own accord. Our own choices continually reinvest the dividend of guilt imputed from Adam, and the interest is compounded daily.

Many hear about the authoritative representation of kings and patriarchs and ask, "Who made him king over me? I ought to rebel! Why must I suffer the consequences of his folly?" In the case of Adam, the objection encounters two major obstacles. First, if God made him king of the earth and patriarch of humanity, then to challenge that system is to challenge the One who designed it. Second, though we might say that we would like to overthrow Adam's headship, the continuing sinfulness of our choices demonstrates that we are more comfortable with his leadership than we confess.

These questions about the fairness of original sin are closely related to a much greater issue—the origin of evil and its relationship to the sovereign God. That subject has been the most pervasive theological problem of the twentieth century, and it cannot be avoided in any discussion of human existence in a fallen world. We will take up this question in the next chapter. For the moment, we return to Romans.

Alienation from God involves much more than guilt. As noted in Romans 5:12, spiritual death leads to sinful behavior. That concept has important implications for our understanding of original sin, but it is even more critical for our understanding of human nature and conversion. What shall we expect from people who are spiritually dead? How capable are they of responding to God? What is the nature of human depravity?

#### *Spiritual Death and the Doctrine of Total Depravity*

In chapter 4 we briefly considered the effect of the Fall on humanity's being created in the image of God. The image has been defaced but not erased, tarnished, but not destroyed, as humanity has exchanged the glory of God for idolatry (Rom. 1:22–23). We retain the capacity to demonstrate God's likeness (even though it is not fully realized), the ability to make moral decisions (even if we make them wrongly), and the potential to reflect the glory of God physically (even if it doesn't look that way now). We were created to reign over the earth as God's vice-regents, but through sin we have surrendered our allegiance to another authority, Satan. Therefore, in spite of the fact that all things were subjected to people (Ps. 8), we do not presently see all things subjected to us (Heb. 2:8).

Because of the Fall, all human existence is today only a shadow of what it was supposed to be. No one fully manifests the image of God. No one is clothed with God's glory the way Adam was. No one stands over creation the way he did. No one demonstrates God's likeness the way he could. Other than the last Adam, Jesus, no one has done any of those things adequately since the day Adam fell. Instead, we find ourselves born as fallen people into a fallen world. We have inherited depravity.

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<sup>17</sup>Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin*, 435.

Not everyone sees it that way. Those who deny the historicity of the Fall typically deny the fallenness of human nature as well, frequently maintaining that all people are born essentially good, or at least morally neutral. While their optimism may be tempered by experience, such persons usually believe that we have the ability, through education and will power, to transform human relations and society. We may never create a new Eden, they say, but we could make it close.

Christians are not usually quite that cheerful about human nature, and not just because we believe in the Fall. We also believe in salvation by grace through faith. If people can be truly obedient to God or see genuine moral progress in society apart from Christ, what is the place of the gospel? What is the need for grace?

Our beliefs about human nature and the role of grace determine the course of our theology like the rudder on a sailboat. An errant turn here and we shall run aground, endangering the gospel itself. The issue of human ability shapes our expectations for individual morality, social reformation, and spiritual regeneration. It affects the methods we employ in evangelism, discipleship, preaching, and teaching, and it establishes a pattern for our worship as we come to appreciate the matchless grace of our Savior.

### *The Pelagian Controversy*

A few names should become familiar to every student of Christian theology. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine would certainly belong on that list, as would Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and a few more contemporary figures like Karl Barth and perhaps Jürgen Moltmann. Another person we should come to know, if only to avoid his error, is Pelagius.

An ascetic monk from the British Isles, Pelagius was a popular Christian leader in Rome at the end of the fourth century. By all accounts, he was a gifted individual. Trained in both law and theology and fluent in Latin and Greek, Pelagius developed a strong following among Roman aristocrats, many of whom dedicated themselves to the ascetic life under his supervision. That life, as understood by Pelagius, was made possible by the grace of God, who gives everyone the natural capacity to follow His will. Someone wishing to please the Lord needs only to exercise that capacity for obedience in will and behavior. He wrote, "We do either good or evil only by our own will; since we always remain capable of both, we are always free to do either."<sup>18</sup> Though he believed Christians should be better persons after being cleansed by the blood of Christ and regenerated, Pelagius maintained that all persons are capable of holy behavior. They may have developed habits of sin that are later difficult to break, but the fault lies not with their nature or with God's standard, but only with their will, which can direct them to either obedience or sin. Pelagius supported his view in the following way.

God himself, of eternal majesty, of indescribable and incomparable power, bestows on us the sacred writings with the venerable points of his precepts. We do not, however, immediately receive them with reverence and joy. We do not consider it a wonderful privilege to be ruled over by such a great and honorable power, especially when the lawgiver's objective is the profit of the governed rather than his own advantage. In fact,

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<sup>18</sup>Pelagius *Letter to Demetrius* 8, in *Theological Anthropology*, ed. and trans. J. Patout Burns, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 49.

we act like lazy and insolent servants, talking back to our Lord in a contemptuous and slovenly way: "That is too hard, too difficult! We cannot do that! We are only human; our flesh is weak!" What insane stupidity! What impious arrogance! We accuse the Lord of all knowledge of being doubly ignorant. We assert that he does not understand what he made and does not realize what he commands. We imply that the creator of humanity has forgotten its weakness and imposes precepts which a human being cannot bear. At the same time, moreover, we impiously charge the just God with wickedness and the loving God with cruelty. First we complain that he commands the impossible; then we assume that he condemns people for things they cannot avoid. . . . No one knows the extent of our power better than the one who gave us our strength. No one understands what we can do better than the one who endowed us with the capacity for virtue. The just one did not choose to command the impossible; nor did the loving one plan to condemn a person for what he could not avoid.<sup>19</sup>

Such statements met the approval of many examiners in Pelagius's own day, and modern readers may also be perfectly comfortable with his position, which sounds like some recent defenses of free will. His most significant contemporary, however, recognized some problems.

We have already seen that Augustine regarded the Fall as a watershed in human history. Pelagius apparently didn't see it that way, and that was bound to produce some disagreements. Augustine was not as well trained as Pelagius, and he may not have had as charismatic a personality or as rigorous an appearance. However, as anyone reading his *Confessions* can see, Augustine knew the grace of God, and from his own experience he knew the weakness of human nature. He saw neither of these concepts in the teachings of Pelagius.

From Augustine's perspective, Pelagius did not properly acknowledge the role of God's grace in obedience. It was not sufficient, he argued, to say that God provided us with examples of faithfulness, insight into His commandments, or a neutral capacity to make decisions. Citing Paul's statement that God is at work in us "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13), Augustine said that God must act to produce good works in us if they are to be performed at all. Otherwise, we neither will nor act as we should. Pelagius's error, he said, was in believing that our will and our capacity to act "are so stable, strong, and self-sufficient that they do not need God's aid. Thus he believes that God does not help us to will, that he does not help us to act, that he helps us only to be able to will and to act."<sup>20</sup> Augustine's own perspective is evident in the following statement.

My entire hope is in your very great mercy. Grant what you command, and command what you will. You require continence. A certain writer has said (Wisd. 8:21): "As I knew that no one can be continent except God grants it, and this very thing is a part of wisdom, to know whose gift this is." . . . He loves you less who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake. O love, you ever burn and are never extinguished. O charity, my God, set me on fire. You command continence; grant what you command, and command what you will.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. 16, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 52–53.

<sup>20</sup>Augustine *On the Grace of Christ* 5.6, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 64.

<sup>21</sup>Augustine *Confessions* 10.40, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Augustine's view was plain. Left to ourselves, we will not obey. "Command what you will" – Lord, tell me to do whatever You wish. But "grant what you command" – unless You move me to do what You have commanded, I simply will not do it.

That selection from Augustine's *Confessions* reportedly enraged Pelagius, who saw it as an example of the passivity he sought to condemn. Why would God have to grant us the ability to obey if He has already created us according to His own plan? Did He not know what He was doing when He created us, or perhaps when He gave us commandments? Pelagius believed God had been gracious in giving us laws and helping us understand them. Augustine agreed, but said God was even more gracious in helping us obey them. Apart from that grace, we would transgress His commands, and the Law would result only in condemnation. As Augustine wrote, the Law "diagnoses illness but does not cure."<sup>22</sup>

At the heart of their debate lay a simple disagreement about human nature and the Fall. Pelagius believed that people had been created neutral and could choose to obey or disobey. Augustine believed that because people are fallen, they are no longer neutral. Fallen people, he argued, have a bent toward evil, and they will perform evil unless moved by God to do good. He wrote,

Since [the saints] will not actually persevere unless they both can and will, in the abundance of [God's] grace he gives them both the capacity and the will to persevere. Their wills are so inflamed by the Holy Spirit that they are able because they so will, and they so will because God causes them to will.<sup>23</sup>

Augustine's model of human nature is obviously connected to a much larger question – the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation. The implications for salvation are what make this issue so important. Are all persons capable of choosing salvation? Or are our hearts so hardened by sin that we will not choose God unless He first chooses us and then moves us to embrace the gospel? Augustine strongly believed the latter, so he thought that Pelagius's emphasis on human ability constituted a denial of the grace of God, even a denial of the gospel itself.

According to Augustine, "the grace Pelagius acknowledges is God's showing and revealing what we ought to do, not his giving and helping us to do it."<sup>24</sup> Augustine responded to this teaching by citing biblical texts which describe God's work in salvation, arguing that God evidently influences the will of selected individuals, making them willing to embrace the gospel. For example, he observed that John 6:45 reads, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me," then commented,

If this grace only helped our capacity, the Lord would have said, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father can come to me." This, however, is not what he said, but instead, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." . . . Yet it does not follow that a person who can come actually does come unless he wills and accomplishes it. Everyone, however, who learns from the Father not only can come, but

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<sup>22</sup>Augustine *On the Grace of Christ* 8.9, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 67.

<sup>23</sup>Augustine *On Rebuke and Grace* 38, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 107.

<sup>24</sup>Augustine *On the Grace of Christ* 8.9, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 67.

actually does come. Here, the actualization of the capacity, the movement of the will, and the achievement of the operation are found together.<sup>25</sup>

In the same way, he wrote,

Christ said not only, "Without me you can do nothing" [John 15:5], but also, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should endure" [15:16]. By this statement he indicated that he had given them not only justice but perseverance in it as well. When Christ appoints them to go and bear fruit and that their fruit will endure, will anyone dare to assert that it will not, or even that it might not endure? "God's call and gifts are irrevocable" [Rom. 11:29], and they were called according to his purpose. With Christ praying for them that their faith not fail, it certainly will not fail before the end. Thus they will endure faithfully unto the end, and the end of this life will not find them any other way.<sup>26</sup>

We are drifting rather quickly into issues better treated in a volume on salvation, but Augustine treats all these doctrines as implications of his view of sin. If the Fall has left us unwilling to come to Christ, then God must make us willing if we are to be saved. Not everyone comes, only those whom God graciously draws to Himself, whom He has chosen for salvation before they even existed to somehow merit the choice. If He so moves our will, we inevitably embrace the gospel. Moreover, we continue to persevere in the faith only because God continually enables us to do so, completing the work He set out to accomplish.

We whom God is pleased to aid more fully through Jesus Christ our Lord receive not only the assistance necessary to be able to persevere if we so will, but the kind of help which also makes us will it. This grace of God not only makes us able to do what we will in receiving and steadfastly retaining good, but it actually makes us will to do what we can.<sup>27</sup>

Here we see concepts that have been taught and debated throughout the history of the church until the present day. Irresistible grace, the perseverance of the saints, and unconditional election, three of the doctrines that became definitive for what would later be called Calvinism, can all be found in Augustine's writings against Pelagius. We will not consider those teachings in any detail, but we do need to take some time with a fourth "Calvinistic" doctrine, the one that served as the focal point of the Pelagian controversy and held the rest of these ideas together—the concept of total depravity. J. Patout Burns summarized that belief as it was taught by Augustine.

In [a] fallen condition, asserted Augustine, the human person lacks the resources to love and choose the good which he can still recognize through the natural light of reason, the revelation of the commandments, the teaching and example of Christ. In the absence of the grace of charity, he is morally and religiously impotent, incapable of moving toward salvation. Although he may struggle against the power of concupiscence and restrain his fleshly appetites, he only overcomes one passion by another or by the fear of punishment

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid. 14.15, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 72–73.

<sup>26</sup>Augustine *On Rebuke and Grace* 34, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 104.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. 32, in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 102.

rooted in self-love. Without the grace of Christ, a person's freedom of choice is in servitude to sin, selfishly choosing among evils.<sup>28</sup>

Siding with Augustine one year after his death, the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus condemned Pelagius in 431. Their assessment has been repeated by almost every major council, creed, and confession ever since, so no self-respecting Christian theologian would ever want to be known as a Pelagian. However, not everyone agreed with Augustine, either, and moderating positions have been suggested for almost 1,600 years. That makes it all the more necessary that we examine the issue of depravity from a biblical perspective. Are people born morally neutral, or with an overwhelming tendency toward evil? How has the Fall affected our ability to make moral choices, to reason rightly, or to desire what is good?

### *The Fallen State of Humanity*

Early in Jesus' ministry, when He was in Jerusalem for the Passover, many people were believing in Him because of the signs He performed. "But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man" (John 2:24–25). John did not go any further to explain what makes all people untrustworthy, but we might speculate that it is a heart that prefers personal glory to God's (5:44).

Many Roman Catholics, following Augustine, have argued that baptism overcomes original sin by infusing sanctifying grace, the grace of God by which an individual manifests personal righteousness. Some have relied on that doctrine to say that the primary effect of original sin itself must be the *absence* of sanctifying grace.<sup>29</sup> However, our sinful state consists of more than just alienation from God or the privation of His grace. We also have a natural tendency toward evil. After all, we not only fail to perform good works, sins of omission; we also actively pursue rebellious deeds, sins of commission. Left to our own devices, we will sin. Jesus knew "what was in man," not just what was lacking.

Still, immediately after reporting Christ's negative assessment about human nature, John presented the story of Nicodemus, who heard Jesus say that "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). To be born again, or born of the Spirit (3:5–8) is to be regenerated by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (7:37–39; Titus 3:5–6). John set up an interesting tension by placing these two accounts together. Jesus "knew what was in man" – an untrustworthy heart. But He focused on what was not in man – the Spirit.

The solution makes good sense in light of biblical theology. The spiritual death that resulted from Adam's sin might be described most clearly as alienation from the Spirit of God. His absence brings death, but His presence through the gospel brings eternal life and ethical transformation (Ezek. 36:27; Rom. 8:11–14; Gal. 5:22–25). That ethical transformation is demanded by our natural tendency to sin, a predisposition that God counters in the elect as He re-creates them through the inbreathing of His Spirit. We will see that pattern repeatedly as we examine several verses that treat the presence of the Spirit as the solution to human depravity.

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<sup>28</sup>J. Patout Burns, "Introduction," in Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 14.

<sup>29</sup>George Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 41.

According to 2 Corinthians 4:4, unbelievers have had their minds blinded by Satan, “the god of this world.” As a result, they cannot come to an accurate assessment of the gospel. For believers, however, the situation is different. “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6). He has taken the initiative to remove the blindness, enabling us to see and embrace the gospel. As a result, “we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (3:18).

We see the same pattern in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. People do not naturally embrace the message of the cross, but instead regard it as absurd (1 Cor. 1:18). “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (2:14). The context reveals that “the things of the Spirit of God” are the essential features of Paul’s gospel preaching, and here he explains why people don’t accept the message. They think it is foolish and they can’t understand it. They might be able to repeat the tenets of the gospel, but they do not recognize that it is true. They just don’t get it. Why? Because the message is “spiritually appraised.” Apart from the Spirit, they do not come to an accurate understanding. Without His appraisal, it looks foolish.

In Ephesians 4:17–19, Paul wrote, “This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.”

Some may see this generalized statement about the condition and behavior of Gentiles as an example of Jewish bigotry, but Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, was addressing a largely Gentile church and encouraging them not to fall back into their former manner of life. This is not prejudice, nor is it hyperbole. It is Paul’s perception of those with unbelieving minds. They are hard-hearted, ignorant of the truth, and spiritually dead. They are not morally neutral, but committed to sensuality. By contrast, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that they had been given life through the gospel (2:4–6), and he prayed that God would grant them strength and a deep knowledge of God’s grace through His Spirit (3:14–19). Again, if not for the Holy Spirit, they would be just as depraved as their neighbors.

Romans 1:20–32 contains a similar indictment. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things

which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful, and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

That was a long quotation from a relatively familiar passage. Did you take the time to read it carefully? If not, go back and linger over the apostle’s words. Look especially at his use of the present tense at both ends of this section. This rebellion is not just a matter of historical record; it is ongoing. People are *now* suppressing the truth that is evident in the creation, and they are *now* filled with every imaginable evil.

Note, too, that Paul intended to include all humanity in this description. The vice list in his last paragraph was meant not to be selective, but inclusive; these are the sorts of things that sinful people do. If anyone thinks he has been left off the list, he is mistaken, for arrogance and boasting show up along with all the rest! To drive that point home, Paul opened his next paragraph by writing, “Therefore, you are without excuse, every man who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (2:1). He then addressed the Jewish members of his audience more specifically, recognizing that they may have thought chapter 1 was only about the Gentiles. He wrapped up his case in 3:9–20 by writing, “What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.’ ‘Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving,’ ‘the poison of asps is under their lips’; ‘whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness’; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace have they not known.’ ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.”

For someone attempting to go the way of Pelagius, this passage of Scripture would not be very encouraging. It calls to mind the statement in Genesis 6:5, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Are there not some unbelievers who earnestly seek the Lord? Are there not some who do good? Once again, it is tempting to think that Paul must be exaggerating, but he explicitly included all persons in these charges. “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God . . . there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom. 3:10).

God’s grace in bringing us to salvation must go beyond His gracious gift of the Law, for Paul argued that the Law offers no way out. It only reveals our sinfulness. The problem is not one of clarity, but one of willingness. Natural revelation should have made God’s presence obvious (1:19–20), and every person’s conscience bears witness of universal standards (2:15), but the Law went much further than that. It provided “the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth” (2:20). Paul’s point is that all people know what they should do, but nobody does it. We may naturally know moral standards, but we don’t naturally pursue moral behavior. Our utter failure demonstrates that salvation can only be by grace. If it hinges on our obedience or our own natural willingness to seek after the Lord, it simply won’t happen. “There is none who does good, there is not even one.”

This bleak conclusion about the condition of the human race provided the foundation for Paul's emphasis on justification by faith, which he explained in chapters 4 and 5. Christ died for us when we were helpless, ungodly sinners (5:6, 8). We were God's enemies, alienated from God through the fall of Adam, guilty of our own sinful actions, and more inclined to rebel than to obey, but "we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (5:10). On our own, we did not seek after the Lord, and we might even have been described as "haters of God" (1:30). But "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (5:5), and He has enabled us to "exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the reconciliation" (5:11). That change of heart may not be quite what the psalmist had in mind, but his words still fit: "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Ps. 40:3). That song wasn't in our hearts before, and we didn't write it. We praise the Lord as an expression of His grace.

Grace has always made some people a little uncomfortable. A newspaper columnist recently referred to eternal security as "the doctrine of slack." Paul anticipated that response from some of his readers. "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?" (6:1). That question set up a lengthy discussion in which the apostle told his readers why they should faithfully obey God. It would take us beyond our subject to examine the entire argument, in which Paul essentially reminded believers that they no longer owed any allegiance to sin, but are newly accountable to God, who has reconciled us to Himself in Christ.<sup>30</sup> However, we do need to ponder Paul's comments here about the condition of individuals apart from Christ.

"You were slaves of sin" (6:17), Paul wrote, and "you presented your [bodily] members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness" (6:19). To be a slave of sin is to follow its lead continually. Now, since believers have been "freed from sin and enslaved to God," Paul said, "do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts" (6:12). It should no longer govern our behavior as it did when one act of disobedience led to another, when we were on that slide toward radical evil.

Paul provided an extended illustration of sin's mastery over an unbeliever in Romans 7. "For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. . . . For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (7:14-15, 22-23).

Many interpreters read these words and conclude that Paul must have been describing his own present experience. After all, he wrote in the first person, used the present tense, and spoke of wanting to do good. However, several factors suggest that he was describing a typical unbeliever's experience (perhaps his own).

First, we need to recognize the structure of Paul's argument. We see from 8:9 that Paul would never describe believers as being "in the flesh." That verse reads, "you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." Believers, all of whom belong to Christ, are all indwelt by the Spirit of God. Those not indwelt by the Spirit – unbelievers – are all "in the flesh." That sheds considerable light on Paul's introductory comment in 7:5: "While we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death." That statement, which reflects back on preconversion, "in the flesh" experiences,

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. Pyne, "Dependence and Duty," 149-51.

provides a preview of what follows in the rest of the chapter. In verses 7-11 Paul described the manner in which sinful passions were aroused by the Law, and in verses 11-23 he discussed the way in which those passions were at work in the members of his body to bear fruit for death. Thus verse 5, which describes the experience of one "in the flesh," nicely previews the rest of chapter 7. Verse 6 then previews chapter 8: "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." Chapter 8 opens with the idea that we have been freed from the law of sin and death at conversion, and it describes in detail our service to God through the Spirit. If 7:5-6 provide a preview of the rest of Paul's argument, as they seem to do, then most of chapter 7 is describing a preconversion experience.

Second, Paul's statements about being "sold into bondage to sin" (7:14) and being made "a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (7:23) more appropriately describe the experience of an unbeliever. Many of us read Romans 7 and identify with the struggle it details, but the fact that we see ourselves here does not mean Paul wrote these words to describe believers. It may simply be that our experience is alarmingly similar to that of an unbeliever attempting to fulfill the Law. Since Paul had just said that believers are "no longer slaves to sin" (6:4), are "freed from sin and enslaved to God" (6:22), and are "released from the Law" (7:6), it would be surprising to see him immediately describe himself as sold into bondage to sin.

But why did he write in the first person, using the present tense? Paul apparently regarded himself as a representative Israelite, identifying with his people so thoroughly that he put himself "in their shoes" with his writing. He used the same technique in 3:7: "But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?" Paul did not believe he was still subject to judgment any more than he believed he was still a slave of sin, but he identified with those who remained in his former condition and vividly recalled the experience.

If Romans 7 does describe the preconversion experience of someone who wished to fulfill the Law, it gives us a more complete picture of human depravity, one that provides balance to the passages discussed earlier. Unbelievers can, in some sense, have a "zeal for God," but it is inevitably misdirected. Paul wrote of unsaved Jews, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (10:2-3). Such a person may take great comfort, even delight, in the Law while refusing to subject himself or herself to the One to whom it points (John 5:46). One may have an inner agreement with the law and a desire to obey it, but if that zeal is misguided, or the stated desire for obedience is not reflected in the decisions of one's heart, the whole effort is futile. If written from that perspective, as seems to be the case, Romans 7 may be more an autobiographical than an "Everyman" account. Paul himself had faithfully studied the Law and zealously applied the commandments, considering himself a defender of the faith and a righteous man (Phil. 3:5-6). But on the Damascus Road he found himself on the wrong side. As a persecutor of the church, he stood opposed to Christ (Acts 9:4). That is the sort of person A. W. Pink had in mind when writing about the moral unbeliever.

If all men alike are totally depraved, then how is it that some lead less vicious lives than others? In examining this question it is necessary to revert to our definition of terms, and bear in mind that total depravity does not consist in what a man *does*, but what he *is* in himself. It also consists in a man's relation and attitude *to God*. Because particular persons are not swearers, morally unclean, drunkards or thieves, they are very apt to imagine they are far from being wholly corrupt; in fact, they consider themselves good and respectable people. These are described in Proverbs 30:12: "There is a generation that are

pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness." However irreproachable may be the walk of the natural man, his nature is polluted and his heart thoroughly defiled. And the very fact that he is quite unaware of his vileness is sad proof of the binding power of indwelling sin.<sup>31</sup>

Indwelling sin twists the motives of apparently good acts and consistently produces a selfish bent toward evil. Several biblical passages regard it as a universal problem, one that begins at birth. "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). "The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). "The wicked are estranged from the womb; those who speak lies go astray from birth" (Ps. 58:3). We "were by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). People may become enslaved to particular sins by practice, but they are enslaved to sin itself by nature.

### *The Bondage of the Will*

In Romans 8 Paul described the freedom experienced by those who are in Christ. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (8:1-2). Christ delivered us from the penalty of sin, so there is no more condemnation. He has fulfilled the requirements of the Law on our behalf, so it no longer declares us guilty (8:3-4; 10:4). His death, resurrection, and exaltation resulted in the sending of the life-giving Holy Spirit, who transforms (indeed, re-creates) us, delivering us from the power of sin.

This continues to follow the pattern we have seen in other passages. People have a natural bent toward evil, but God counters it with the gift of His Spirit. Here Paul described unbelievers as those who "walk according to the flesh" and "set their minds on the things of the flesh." Believers "walk according to the Spirit" and "set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (8:4-5). The "mind set on the flesh" yields death, but the "mind set on the Spirit" yields life and peace. "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (8:7-8). By contrast, those who are in the Spirit "are putting to death the deeds of the body" (8:13), and are "being led by the Spirit of God" (8:14).

The changed lifestyle experienced by believers is attributed to the Spirit. It is "by the Spirit" that Christians are "putting to death the deeds of the body," and it is the Spirit who enables us to call God, "Abba! Father!" (8:15). Those "in the flesh," devoid of the Spirit, cannot subject themselves to God's law or know Him as Father. Martin Luther wrote, "The elect, who fear God, will be reformed by the Holy Spirit; the rest will perish unreformed."<sup>32</sup>

But if unbelievers cannot truly reform themselves, if they are unable to subject themselves to God's Law, how could they still be liable for their sin? John Taylor, an eighteenth-century English clergyman, stated the problem this way: "'If we come into the World infected and depraved with sinful Dispositions, then Sin must be *natural* to us; and if *natural*, then *necessary*;

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<sup>31</sup>Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures: Man's Total Depravity* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 133.

<sup>32</sup>Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (New York: Revell, 1957), 99.

and if *necessary*, then no Sin.”<sup>33</sup> Sin is natural to those born outside of Eden, and that does make it inevitable. However, sin is inevitable because our depraved wills desire it, not because we have been compelled to choose it. Within the constraints of our humanity, we are free to do what we desire. Our problem lies in the fact that we apparently do not really desire to do good; otherwise we would do it. We would rather sin. As Luther wrote, “A man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief . . . being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily.”<sup>34</sup> Reflecting that perspective, Jonathan Edwards answered Taylor by saying that sin may be “morally necessary” in that morally depraved people will certainly choose it, but it is not “naturally necessary,” for nothing outside of oneself compels anyone to choose sin.<sup>35</sup> People are not forced to do it; they want to do it. And for that reason they are responsible.

Edwards reinforced the point by distinguishing between natural and moral inability. We’re naturally unable to fly by simply flapping our arms. We couldn’t get airborne even if we chose to try. Unbelievers are naturally able to obey God, for His commands are not impossible for humans to follow, but they are morally unable to obey Him, because their twisted wills do not allow them to submit to His authority. We cannot be blamed for natural inability, but we are responsible for moral inability. Sam Storms suggested the following example:

If it is placed upon a person as a duty to give money to the poor and yet, through no fault of his own, he has no money to give, he is not blameworthy for not giving. He labors under a *natural inability*. But if he has the money and does not *want* to give, he labors under a *moral inability*, namely, a lack of the required disposition and inclination of heart, and thus is to be blamed.<sup>36</sup>

When we sin, we have nobody to blame but ourselves. We sin because we choose to do so. However, as slaves of sin, we will not choose to do righteousness unless God intervenes. Apart from Him, we will continue to choose sin. Augustine said, in a statement later quoted by John Calvin, “To will is of nature, but to will aright is of grace.”<sup>37</sup> In the same way, Luther argued that the unbeliever’s willingness to sin “is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain, or alter.”<sup>38</sup> The will is in bondage to sin, and it will not be released except through the outside intervention of the Spirit of God. Luther stated, “Let all the ‘free-will’ in the world do all it can with all its strength; it will never give rise to a single instance of ability to

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<sup>33</sup>John Taylor, “The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience,” in H. Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 18.

<sup>34</sup>Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

<sup>35</sup>C. Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 170–71.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>37</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.5.14, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:335.

<sup>38</sup>Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

avoid being hardened if God does not give the Spirit, or of meriting mercy if it is left to its own strength."<sup>39</sup>

Like the concept of inherited guilt, this perspective on what Luther called "the bondage of the will" does not set very well with many modern readers, who would prefer a stronger emphasis on human freedom. We must remember, however, that people are always free to do what they *choose* to do, within the constraints of their nature and their circumstances. I am not free to fly unassisted, for that would violate human nature. Nor am I free to walk on the moon, for I am constrained to earth by my circumstances. Here in my home, however, I am free to get out of my chair and walk wherever I wish. It is humanly possible for anyone to worship God, and one can worship in any setting, so there are no outward constraints preventing anyone from adoring the Savior. However, the inward constraint brought by a heart that is "more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9) prevents unbelievers from genuine worship. We are free to do what we *wish*, but because our choices demonstrate the orientation of our hearts, *we will inevitably choose evil* when left to ourselves.

The concept of depravity helps explain why unbelievers continue to sin, but why does sin remain such a problem for Christians? Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have the capacity to conduct ourselves in a way that is pleasing to God. Why do we continue to fail?

#### *The Christian's Struggle with Indwelling Sin*

We have seen that Adam's sin left all humanity in a state of spiritual death. We have also seen that those who are thus alienated from God will not produce works of righteousness on their own, for they follow the desires of their sinful hearts and continually rebel against God. That self-centered orientation is overcome by the Spirit of God, who brings enlightenment to those who had been blinded in unbelief, life to those who were spiritually dead, and the love of God to those who had been His enemies. His presence enables believers to obey as they "put to death the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13) and are conformed to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

However, all these operations are progressive. The elect are enlightened enough through the Spirit's effectual calling<sup>40</sup> that they embrace the gospel (Acts 16:14; Rom. 8:30), but He continues to provide insight into the love of Christ, enabling us to grow in our devotion to Him (Eph. 3:14-19; Phil. 1:9-11). When we finally see Him, we will know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12). In the same way, we have been made alive in Christ (Eph. 2:5), but we still look forward to the resurrection (Rom. 8:11, 23). While we wait, we find that suffering and obedience progressively manifest His life in us (2 Cor. 3:11-12, 16). Paul's references to putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), being led by the Spirit of God (8:14), and becoming conformed to Christ's image (2 Cor. 3:18) are all in the present tense, describing ongoing action. We are *being* changed, and the Spirit's presence in us constitutes the firstfruits, not the fullness, of the life to come (Rom. 8:23).

That incomplete conformity to the image of Christ means that even Christians continue to demonstrate the consequences of Adam's sin. All people share in Adam's guilt, for he sinned

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>40</sup>Some would prefer to describe this as regeneration, but for a defense of this terminology, see Robert A. Pyne, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Conversion," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (April-June 1993): 203-18.

as our appointed representative. That guilt, along with more that was incurred through our own actions, has been forgiven for those who are in Christ. Everyone experiences alienation from God as a consequence of the Fall, but that, too, has been overcome for believers. We have been reconciled to God and indwelt by the Spirit. However, as noted above, guilt and alienation are not our only problems. We are also born with a natural bent toward evil. Apparently that leaning has been countered, but not yet fully corrected.

God promised a “new heart” as part of the New Covenant (Ezek. 36:26), and some Christians think they have already received it in its fullness. Believing that to be the case, they attribute a believer’s sinful actions to something other than his true self—old habits, poor instruction, or even demonic oppression. However, we have already seen that there is no “real me” other than the one that thinks and acts day after day. I am being changed by the presence of the Spirit, but I am not becoming the real me, nor is the real me revealing his true colors. Instead, the real me has an inconsistent heart, and my choices evidence both a God-given love for the Savior and a continuing love for myself. We as Christians must continually “put on a heart of compassion, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Col. 3:12) and be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). The re-creation work of the Spirit has begun, but it is not yet complete.

Many Christians locate sin in a particular “part” of their being, which they label the “flesh,” attempting to follow Paul’s usage of the term in Galatians 5. I prefer not to describe indwelling sin in that way, because Paul’s primary point in contrasting the flesh and the Spirit is more complex. In Philippians, Paul wrote that he did not want to “place confidence in the flesh” but to glory in Christ instead (3:3). He then described how he might have trusted in the flesh. “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (3:4–6). Some of Paul’s Jewish opponents believed one usually entered into a right relationship with God by being born into the covenant as a descendant of Abraham, and they thought one maintained that relationship by obeying the Law.<sup>41</sup> Circumcision served as the sign of both membership in the covenant and conformity to the Law. In his brief testimony here in Philippians the apostle described trust in that system as trust “in the flesh.” He had once followed that pattern, trusting in his inheritance and his zeal for the Law, but it had left him opposed to Christ, and he forsook it “in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8).

Paul feared that the Galatians were going the opposite direction. His opponents wanted the Gentile converts there to be circumcised, demonstrating their adoption of the Mosaic Law and their desire to keep it. Paul was convinced that such action would constitute an abandonment of the gospel (Gal. 5:2–4). He told his readers he was confident they would not really do that (5:10), but he had no such confidence in the false teachers. “They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” (6:13). Indeed, they would have been able to point to the physical bodies of the converts, which would bear the sign of the covenant. Paul knew that circumcision itself did not really matter (5:6; 6:15), but it mattered greatly when it symbolized a different gospel. Believers, he argued, were not under the Law and had no need for the symbol.

In that context Paul argued that the flesh and the Spirit are opposed to one another as competing ways of salvation. He highlighted their incompatibility by personifying the flesh as having “desires” that oppose those of the Spirit (5:17). The flesh could never bring salvation, because righteousness does not come through the Law (2:21). The Law simply shows all people

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<sup>41</sup>Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).

where they are guilty, thus helping preparing them for the gospel of Christ (3:22-24). Those who pursue righteousness through the Law will end up in rebellion, pursuing the same kinds of sin as the Gentiles (e.g., idolatry), and they will not inherit the kingdom of God (5:19-21). By contrast, those who find salvation by genuinely embracing the gospel will actually fulfill the intent of God's Law as they walk by the Spirit (5:22-23).

In Galatians, Paul used the term "flesh" to describe a Spirit-less attempt at righteousness (represented most prominently by circumcision), and he described unbelievers as "in the flesh" in Romans 8:9. His use of the term in these other contexts helps explain why Paul could say in Romans 7:18 that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." Apart from the Spirit, unbelievers are, so to speak, nothing more than unanimated, dead flesh. Nothing is good about that condition. They experience only depravity and service to sin (7:25).

This perspective on the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit argues that sin is not located in a particular part of our person known as the flesh. The physical connotations of the term should always have rendered that view suspect. After all, how could "flesh" denote something essentially immaterial? But when those physical connotations were retained, the term was occasionally used to support an unbiblical dualism in which the body, the physical flesh, is inherently evil. Such efforts to locate sin in a single aspect of our being seem inappropriate. We are fallen, and are being redeemed, as whole and complex persons. That reality suggests the first major implication of this discussion on depravity. We continue to sin, but we cannot blame our struggle on a particular part of ourselves, nor can we blame it on others. To do so would be to avoid full responsibility for our behavior, and that avoidance would only compound the problem.

#### *Implications*

Some believers respond to their continuing struggle with sinful desires by punishing or cursing themselves. For example, a thirteenth-century Franciscan, Giacomino di Verona, wrote,

In a very dirty and vile workroom you were made out of slime, so foul and so wretched that my lips cannot bring themselves to tell you about it. But if you have a bit of sense, you will know that the fragile body in which you lived, where you were tormented eight months and more, was made of rotting and corrupt excrement. . . . Other creatures have some use; meat and bone, wool and leather; but you, stinking man, you are worse than dung: from you, man, comes only pus.<sup>42</sup>

A "pious" French woman a few centuries later continually afflicted her body in order to remind herself of her depravity. As Jean Delumeau recounted her story,

This woman engaged in extended discipline, wore studded belts, burned herself with candles, let molten wax drip all over her body, wrapped herself in nettles, extracted her own healthy teeth, walked with pebbles in her shoes, and ate filth. At one point she put her lips and tongue on a hideous lump of spit.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>In Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), 17.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 308.

That attitude is not biblical. The New Testament expects us to be less preoccupied with ourselves and more oriented toward serving one another in the name of Christ. Further, Christ loved us and died for us even in the midst of our depravity, and He is now transforming us, producing good in us by the work of the Spirit. The doctrine of depravity should not drive us toward self-loathing, but toward confession, compassion, faithfulness, and prayer.

### *Confession*

We have no one to blame for our sin other than ourselves. We sin because we choose to sin, not because we are forced into it by the devil or any other external power. As Berkouwer put it, "We may never trace back our guilt to causes other than *our guilt*."<sup>44</sup> As a result, our first response to the doctrine of depravity ought to be confession. In that act we acknowledge our sinfulness before God, embracing His free offer of forgiveness in Christ. Forsaking any attempt to justify ourselves or blame others, we admit that we are without excuse and humbly ask for mercy. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

This habit ought to be particularly characteristic of believers. Since we are always liable to sin, always prone to wander, we must acknowledge our weakness. Still, having been enabled by the Spirit to act differently, we are no longer constrained by the dictates of our old master, and we must acknowledge our power. Knowing our weakness, we should never be surprised at our own potential for evil. Knowing our power, we should always be scandalized by our performance of evil. We are expected to be people who obey God (1 John 2:4). When we continue to sin, we must admit that we are fully responsible.

### *Compassion*

Most of us are relatively forgiving toward those who share our own struggles. Unfortunately our attitude in such cases may be a form of self-justification as we tell ourselves that the sin in view is really not so bad. To avoid the danger of denying our guilt, we must acknowledge the seriousness of our own sin in confession before attempting to correct or encourage others. Only those who have confessed their own sins and have experienced forgiveness are prepared to forgive others and lead them to grace in Christ. On the other hand, if we remain revengeful or condemning, it means that we probably have not yet come to an understanding of our own sinfulness and forgiveness. As the master told the unforgiving slave in Jesus' parable, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32-33). In the same way, Paul wrote, "Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

### *Faithfulness*

When a car's front end is out of alignment, the driver has to maintain a firm hand on the wheel to keep the car from drifting into another lane. That often takes a conscious effort, especially on long trips, when boredom makes it easy to relax one's grip. In our incessant

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<sup>44</sup>Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin*, 116.

inclination to sin, our hearts are out of alignment, and they will stay that way until we are glorified with Christ. The problem remains with us; it won't be fixed by a quick visit to some spiritual mechanic. Therefore, if we are to stay on course for a lifetime, we must keep a steady hand on the habits and relationships that encourage us toward righteousness. Even more, we must continually rely on the Spirit of God, who enables us to live holy lives. Such reliance finds expression in continual prayer and faithful obedience. By contrast, an independent spirit leads to prayerlessness and hardness of heart.

### *Prayer*

The doctrine of human depravity gives us realistic expectations both for ourselves and for others. We expect unbelievers to act like unbelievers. We do not expect them to be kind or loving, and we do not place much faith in social reforms that demand unselfish behavior on a widespread scale. As Niebuhr put it, "a just society is not going to be built by a little more education and a few more sermons on love."<sup>45</sup> It will come only through the transforming grace of God. We recognize that even believers will frequently act according to their own interests, and any good that is produced through us will come through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore we must pray. We must ask God to do what only He can do. Persuasive sermons, passionate appeals, and endless books will accomplish good only if they are so used by the Spirit of God. Without His intervention, such endeavors will yield nothing more than hardness of heart in those who hear. This doctrine has a direct impact on our approach to evangelism. Preachers who believe conversion is their responsibility have historically employed more high-pressure tactics than those who think the job belongs to God. The Spirit has graciously worked through a variety of approaches, but evangelists should never take personal credit for the faith of others. All glory goes to God, who alone brings change to the human heart. We acknowledge that fact when we pray.

### *The Universal Need for Salvation*

This chapter has argued that all persons enter this life in a state of spiritual death. Already bearing the consequences of Adam's sin, they quickly compound the problem with their own rebellious choices. As a result, everyone has a need for salvation.

Further, because of the sinfulness of our hearts, we tend to run from God rather than to Him. We cannot produce works of righteousness apart from His Spirit, for we act in accordance with our own desires, and our desires are evil. Even if we could fulfill God's Law, we could never overcome the guilt already incurred by our sinful acts in the past. As a result, we cannot save ourselves.

Everyone has a need for salvation, but we cannot save ourselves. But, "while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

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<sup>45</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1957), 33.

To God alone be glory!