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SIN'S ORIGINS: SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

IN THE BEGINNING

The origin of sin is a fascinating but deadly serious discussion that should not be ignored by anyone wishing to understand themselves, this world, God, and the life to come. Not only Christians, but many outside of the faith recognize evil in this world and want to know where evil came from.

The Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer (1903–96) observed regarding the presence of sin, “No real genius is needed to see life’s battered and mangled pieces before us, and no particular wisdom is required to appreciate how profoundly abnormal life can be.”¹ Who, with even a cursory knowledge of world news and history, could possibly say all is (and has been) well and good?

Those who believe in a purely materialistic universe naturally face the dilemma of whether we can even speak of objective good and evil. Christians, however, believe that God rightly called His completed work of creation “very good” (Gen. 1:31). We believe God righteously determines what is good and evil because He alone is truly good (Mark 10:18). When sin entered the world through Adam, creation became,

in a sense, “very bad.” Another Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), remarked, “Sin ruined the entire creation, converting its righteousness into guilt, its holiness into impurity, its glory into shame, its blessedness into misery, its harmony into disorder, and its light into darkness.”² When looking at the origin of sin we cannot appreciate its ruining effects unless contrasted with the original declaration by God Himself that what He had made was very good.

In discussing sin, we must ask two fundamental questions: Whether it be so? and What is it?

Sin is a human problem insofar as we are responsible for it. Yet the solution is not ours to produce, since, like the leopard unable to change his spots (Jer. 13:23), we cannot cleanse ourselves without God’s grace. The solution to the problem of sin thus falls to God, against whom sin is ultimately committed (Ps. 51:4). He alone possesses the wisdom to find a way to bring purity out of impurity, to make beautiful what is ugly, to make straight what is crooked.

God created the context for and possibility of sin. He created man and gave him His law, including a specific positive injunction Adam was to obey: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17).

God did not elevate our first parents to a place that ruled out the possibility of sin and death. As we find out, Adam and Eve sinned by failing to conform to God’s righteous requirements (Gen. 3:6). Yet in his state of integrity and innocence, Adam was able to not sin, but not infallibly or immutably so. God did not confirm Adam in a state of immutable goodness, as He does with us when we are united to His Son and possess the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 8:9–11), which will only be fully realized in glory.

Adam’s fall resulted from two major causes: one internal (his own free will) and one external (the devil). With the latter in mind, the origin of sin among humans must take into consideration the same

among the angelic host. There was an “Evil One” who tempted Adam and Eve into sin.

SATAN’S FALL

The serpent appears in Genesis 3 but without a background offered for his presence in the garden. The unfolding of God’s revelation gives us more information, but the snake plotting to deceive the woman into disobedience against God may take us by surprise at first. We find out later that the fall on earth among men was preceded by another fall in a spiritual realm among angels. Here we encounter one who took part in that fall and who arrives on the scene as the consummate enemy against God: “Satan” (Hebrew), also called “the devil” (Greek) (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8).

In the garden, the serpent not only murders, but lies in order to do so. Jude tells us of the angels who “did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling” (v. 6). In other words, before Adam and Eve sinned, sin originated among the angels. The issue seems to have been one of a struggle over authority, the very matter that led to Adam’s fall. In *On the Fall of Satan*, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) argued that the devil set his will against God as an attempt to be God’s equal. This, again, speaks to authority. Understanding something of the fall of Satan—though even Anselm’s explanation is not altogether fully satisfactory—helps us grasp the fall of man.

Paul seemed to suggest that pride was involved in the devil’s willing apostasy from God in 1 Timothy 3:6: “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The devil may have turned from his affectionate contemplation of the divine majesty and focused instead upon his own glory, which led to pride and rebellion. When Satan tempted our Lord to worship him, we may be witnessing his vain quest to snatch

the honor and glory that belongs to God alone. What better way than to have God Himself bow down to him? This was an incalculable evil desired by the devil, for he wanted Christ, filled with the Spirit, to deny Himself and His Father and affirm the devil as Lord of all.

Along with a third of the angels (Rev. 12:4), Satan fell, never to be the object of God's mercy but instead His holy wrath. The will of each angel was operative in their rebellion as they turned from good to evil of their own volition.

Satan is the "tempter" (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5; 2 Tim. 2:26), a conniving murderer full of "schemes" (Eph. 6:11), an opportunist (Eph. 4:27) who looks to devour (1 Peter 5:8), a prosecutor (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–5) who accuses (Zech. 3:1–2), and one who incites to sin (1 Chron. 21:1). But ultimately the "ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world," will be publicly defeated with his accusations against God's people coming to an end (Rev. 12:7–10).

Notwithstanding the risen Christ's conquest over him, we still read of a certain type of power exercised by Satan and his angels in this world, albeit weakened because of Christ's ascension (Eph. 4:8). The power of darkness (Luke 22:53) is no doubt tied to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12:31). Those outside of Christ belong to the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). He blinds the hearts and minds of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4), oppresses many (Acts 10:38), thwarts missionary activity (1 Thess. 2:18), and casts people into prison (Rev. 2:10). In the case of Judas, Satan put it into his heart to betray Christ (John 13:2), and even entered into him (John 13:27). No one can accuse the devil of laziness; he is a vicious and persistently hard worker, who throws "flaming darts" at God's people (Eph. 6:16).

ADAM'S TRANSGRESSION

Adam and Eve were up against a formidable foe. The serpent “was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made” (Gen. 3:1), and devotes his life to destruction of all that is good. If he despised God’s authority first, he cared even less for Adam’s authority in the garden later. He wanted Adam to reject God’s authority, and thus he urged him to doubt God’s word and threat (Gen. 3:1, 4). Pride arose out of Adam’s unbelief (Gen. 3:5). The man and the woman, by their subsequent actions, chose to believe a lie over God’s revealed truth. Like the devil, Adam in apostasy turned his thoughts away from God to himself and his own glory. In this manner, we see that the apostasies of the devil and Adam bear similarities.

Adam’s transgression was against the whole of God’s moral law, which was written on his heart as one made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). His unbelief and pride revealed self-love, self-seeking, and self-promotion, which are violations of the first commandment. As the prophet, priest, and king of God’s garden-temple, Adam was bound to worship God in a specific manner, which includes both what he should and should not do. By eating from the forbidden tree, he transgressed proper worship laws. In addition, he tolerated false religion in the temple and did not, as the guardian, destroy the works of the devil. In these ways he broke the second commandment. As God’s image-bearing son, Adam was obligated to bring honor upon his Father through holy living. Adam failed to revere the word not only engraved on his heart but also spoken to him directly. This rejection of God’s word constituted a dismissal of God’s name and so a violation of the third commandment. Adam’s disobedience also threatened his and his wife’s participation in the eternal Sabbath rest (see Heb. 4:11) as they sought rest outside of God. He thus transgressed the fourth commandment and placed the eternal state of his posterity in jeopardy.

As far as the so-called second table of the law is concerned,

Adam failed to honor his Father (against the fifth commandment) in the garden, forfeiting “long days.” Instead of providing life for his descendants, he brought death through sin as a murderer not unlike the devil (against the sixth commandment). Adam neglected to love and protect his wife with a proper sense of jealousy by allowing her to be entertained by the devil (against the seventh commandment). Eve subsequently stole from God in taking the forbidden fruit (against the eighth commandment) while Adam not only did nothing to prevent it but also took himself. Adam failed to counter the devil’s lies and Eve’s reception of them with the truth (against the ninth commandment), acting rather in the likeness of the father of lies (John 8:44). Finally, being discontent with his own estate and blessings from God, Adam coveted what did not belong to him (against the tenth commandment).

Thomas Watson offers a slightly different, but complementary, approach to Adam’s sin. Quoting Cicero on parricide (i.e., the killing of a parent), the person guilty of it commits multiple sins in one. So in Adam’s case, he was guilty of incredulity (disbelief), unthankfulness, discontentment, pride, disobedience, vain curiosity, wantonness, sacrilege, murder, and presumption.³

The above displays the evil in Adam’s transgression, which was ultimately a sin against God but in the particulars a rejection of the entire law of God (James 2:10–11). Or to put it as the old theologians used to, sin is an attempted murder on God (i.e., deicide). It was also a homicide against humanity, since it made his descendants guilty.

UNDE MALUM?

As mentioned earlier, many inquire about the origin of sin in line with the question, *Unde malum?* (Whence evil?). We begin with the simple recognition that we sin because we are sinners. But related to perfectly created angels and humans, we are left wondering how such beings could freely choose to do evil. Some heretics (e.g., Pelagians and

Socinians) and others (e.g., Remonstrants/Arminians) suggest that Adam possessed an inclination to vice before the fall, though not to the extent that we do afterward. This jeopardizes the legitimacy of God's "very good" creation. Adam, prior to the fall, possessed only a desire to love and worship his Father, which is incompatible with the opposite.

So how do we make sense of sin? We need to understand that God created Adam and Eve in a changeable (mutable) state with regard to both their being and their will. Adam's fall proves that somehow he could potentially sin in his state of righteousness and holiness.

The freedom of Adam's will was a gift from God, but as is often the case even now in our post-Fall context, many blessings can become curses. Adam was presented with a false theology and entertained it. By grace, God gave Adam an innate power to not sin. However, God did not grant what we sometimes call the "grace of perseverance" that would have prevented Adam from sinning. In this way, Adam possessed *the ability to not sin* but not *the inability to sin*. We can say that God's goodness toward Adam necessitated giving sufficient grace to not sin but not the grace of perseverance to keep him from sinning. God was just in His creation of Adam, not requiring of him beyond what he was bound to offer.

The internal cause of the Fall was Adam's free will; the external (instrumental) cause was Satan's temptation. Or, as Thomas Watson says, "the devil could not have forced him unless he had given consent. Satan was only a suitor to woo, not a king to compel."⁴

God could have granted Adam the gift of perseverance and kept him from sinning. God allowed sin, because He, according to Augustine (354–430), "judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist."⁵ Yet we still find ourselves groping in the dark concerning sin's origin. There seems to exist no logical or rational explanation for the origin of sin. The high-handed rebellion of Adam and Eve makes no sense to us. Perhaps this is why God does not reveal

to us the inner workings of why Adam did not simply cast the serpent out of the garden. Rather, we are told of the fact of the transgression and the effects that resulted thereon.

Should we conclude that sin occurred outside of God's control? Or that a sovereign God was the author of Adam's sin? Both of these are ideas we cannot tolerate. Indeed, we reject the idea of a disinterested or an impotent God, in favor of One who is not only sovereign but good and wise in His exercise of power.

The providence of God includes His works, which are "most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory" (Westminster Larger Catechism, A. 18). As is true of all things in this world, the fall occurred under the providence of God. He knew it would happen and ordained that it would. God declares "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10), yet He can never be held accountable for anyone's sin (James 1:13). But whatever we affirm about the freedom of Adam's will and the holy providence of God, we cannot ascribe to God even the tiniest hint of wrongdoing.

Someone will say, but how can we say God ordained sin and yet held Adam responsible? This is where we must content ourselves with not going beyond what is revealed in the Scriptures. God carries out everything "according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11), and yet He holds Adam and all others responsible for their sin. At this point, we must recognize that what we cannot comprehend in our finite minds can be resolved in the mind of God. For example, Peter has no problem affirming both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of men regarding the murder of Jesus on the cross. In the same sentence (Acts 2:23), Peter declares that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" yet "crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

As stated, God did not give Adam the grace of perseverance to prevent him from falling. God could have sovereignly willed Adam to

resist the devil. But, for reasons unknown to us, God did not do so, according to His permissive will. We have to affirm, however mysterious it sounds, that the Fall happened by providence of God while Adam bore moral responsibility for it. As noted earlier, although the devil is the external cause of Adam's sin, the will of Adam is the internal (principal efficient) cause. Without the latter, Adam cannot be blamed; without the former, it is hard to see how Adam could have sinned.

APPLICATION

Happy guilt (*felix culpa*) has been a response by some to the origin of evil. God has allowed sin into His good creation. As the sovereign, holy Lord, He governs evil. Sin does its worst, but God always does His best because He can do no other. The presence of sin brings to light the character of God. Without sin, perhaps some of God's attributes, as revealed to us, would have been hidden away in the depths of the Godhead. One immediately thinks of His mercy. John Owen says, "The greatest evil in the world is sin, and the greatest sin was the first; and yet Gregory feared not to cry . . . 'O happy fault, which found such a Redeemer!'"⁶ God draws out the highest good from sin, as only He can.

John Duncan (1796–1870) references Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) as saying something to the effect of, "The permission of sin is adorable, the actual fact of sin is abominable. As to the *permissio*, there would certainly have been no display of some of the Divine attributes had sin not been. They would have been conserved for ever in the depths of the adorable Godhead."⁷ What we have gained from God, in Christ, remains far better than what we would have gained if Adam had not fallen. Hence, we adore God and rejoice in His goodness and wisdom, for He alone is able to bring such blessing from such misery.

In this life, we may never fully understand why Adam decided to sin against God, why a good angel would turn from God in rebellion, or why a good God would allow it, much less ordain it. But we know

that both Adam and Satan are held fully responsible for their sin. In the case of Adam, while he was challenged by an external cause, he was nevertheless guilty himself and without excuse before God, though he tried to make excuse (Gen. 3:12). We can be quick to blame others for our own sins, for which we alone must accept responsibility. But God does not say to Adam, "I am sorry; that was a test too great for you; it isn't your fault." We, too, must resist the temptation to be blame-shifters whether assigned to people or circumstances in the past or present. For example, a man may blame his abusive parents for his explosive anger and parents may always blame their child's circumstances for their child's misbehavior. Indeed, we can point to shaping influences as external causes for or incitements to sin. Still, we must assign responsibility for the sin to the individual committing it. We can never claim innocence when we sin or excuse ourselves from it because of some forceful external factor involved, including Satan. Let us remove from our hearts and minds such phrases as "I could not help myself," "I was unable to resist," or "the devil made me do it."

The external forces may be great, but "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).