

Sin and the Fall

Reddit Andrews III

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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

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

What exactly is wrong with humans?

Answering the Human Predicament

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blaise Pascal writes:

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

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

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

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

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

The Entrance of Sin

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

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

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

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not

counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. (Rom. 5:12–14)

Satan approached Adam through Eve his wife.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. (Gen. 3:6–7b)

Original Righteousness

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

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

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

Evil and the Will of God

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

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

yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1)

Many people question whether God was wise and just to ordain evil. God, who is holy and not the author of evil, did not merely “permit” evil. It is not as though God did not ordain evil but allowed it to occur. The view that God merely permits evil fails to provide an answer that removes the tension that comes from affirming that God ordains evil, because in both cases God is ordering the entrance of sin. Bavinck observes:

He [God] did not fear its [sin and evil] existence and power. He willed it so that in it and against it He might bring to light His divine attributes. If He had not allowed it to exist, there would always have been a rationale for the idea that He was not in all His attributes superior to a power whose possibility was inherent in creation itself. For all rational creatures as creatures, as finite, limited, changeable beings, have the possibility of apostatizing. But God, because He is God, never feared the way of freedom, the reality of sin, the eruption of wickedness, or the power of Satan. So, both in its origin and development, God always exercises His rule over sin. He does not force it, nor does He block it with violence but rather allows it to reach its full dynamic potential. He remains king yet still gives it free rein in His kingdom. He allows it to have everything—His world, His creatures, even His Anointed—for evils cannot exist without goods. He allows it to use all that is His; He gives it opportunity to show what it can do in order, in the end, as King of kings, to leave the theater of battle. For sin is of such a nature that it destroys itself by the very freedom granted it; it dies of its own diseases; it dooms itself to death. At the apex of its power, it is, by the cross alone, publicly shown up in its powerlessness (Col. 2:15).⁹

The First Sin and Its Outworking

The effects of Adam’s sin are profound. And they affect every one of us.

Sin Is Lawlessness, Which Brings Judgment

Sin is breaking the law of God, king of heaven and earth.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3:4)

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

In response to Adam’s rebellion, God cursed both humans and their world (Gen. 3:16–19). Physical and spiritual death set in. And with an eye toward the ultimate redemption of the created order, God cursed the world: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21). This explains natural evil, because there would be no earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, or hurricanes apart from the fall.

Sin Results in Alienation from God

Adam’s sin broke the fellowship he had enjoyed with God. An individual sin may seem insignificant to humans, but not to the holy God, who is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). So God “drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).

Humans are God’s enemies, but when Jesus saves people, he reconciles them to God: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).

Sin Is Universal

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. . . . Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:12, 18–19)

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:21–22)

Christ and Adam inhabit parallel representative roles.

Christians disagree on the manner in which Adam's guilt and corruption were transmitted to humans. Some don't think we can know. Others believe that Adam is organically connected to all humans, who were present in Adam when he sinned (see Heb. 7:9–10). More persuasive is that Adam is humanity's federal representative.¹⁰ His sin was imputed to all his physical posterity.

Sin Is Depravity

Sin pervasively penetrates and radically corrupts people. Some people call this "total depravity," a term easily misunderstood. It doesn't mean that people are as wicked as they could possibly be or that they can't do any sort of good. It means that sin affects the total person: "All human beings are alienated from God, corrupted in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually)."¹¹

When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately experienced a sense of shame and attempted to cover their nakedness. They also felt guilty, since they hid themselves. They had never felt this way before, but now they would never rid themselves of guilt, shame, and corruption (see Gen. 3:8–13). Satan promised that they would gain knowledge of good and evil, but he didn't tell them that they couldn't handle it. Bavink notes:

According to contemporary science, illness is not a particular substance of matter, but rather a living in changed circumstances, in such a way, in fact, that the laws of life do indeed remain the same as they are in a healthy body but the organs and functions of that life are disturbed in their normal activity. Even in the dead body the functioning does not cease, but the activity that begins then is of a destructive, disintegrating kind. In this same sense, sin is not a substance in itself, but that sort of disturbance of all the gifts and energies given to man which makes them work in another direction, not towards God but away from Him. Reason, will, interests, emotions, passions, psychological and physical abilities of one

kind or another—these all were once weapons of righteousness but they have now by the mysterious operation of sin been converted into weapons of unrighteousness. The image of God which man received at his creation was not a substance, but it was nevertheless so really proper to his nature that he, losing it, became wholly misshapen and deformed.¹²

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). Dabney explains:

The seat of this vicious moral *habitus* is of course strictly speaking, in the moral propensities. But since these give active direction to all the faculties and parts of soul and body, in actions that have any moral quality, it may be said that, by accommodation of language, they are all morally defiled. The conscience (the highest department of rational intuitions) is not indeed destroyed; but its accuracy of verdict is greatly disturbed by evil desire, and the instinctive moral emotions which should accompany those verdicts, are so seared by neglect, as to seem practically feeble, or dead for the time. The views of the understanding concerning all moral subjects are perverted by wrong propensions of the heart, so as to call good evil, and evil good. Thus “blindness of mind” on all moral subjects results. The memory becomes a store of corrupt images and recollections and this furnishes material for the imagination; defiling both. The corporeal appetites, being stimulated by the lusts of the soul, by a defiled memory or imagination, and by unbridled indulgence, become tyrannical and inordinate. And the bodily limbs and organs of sense are made servants of unrighteousness. Thus, what cannot be literally unholy is put to unholy uses.¹³

Sin Results in Inability

Total depravity describes the universal human condition. Total inability describes the result of that condition: apart from God’s own gracious intervention, humans are unable to remedy their condition. Dabney explains:

Every moral act has some tendency to foster the propensity which it indulges. Do you say it must be a very slight strength produced by

one act; a very light bond of habit, consisting of one strand! Not always. But the scale, if slightly turned, is turned: the downhill career is begun, by at least one step, and the increase of momentum will surely occur, though gradually. Inordinate self-love has now become a principle of action, and it will go on to assert its dominion. . . .

Native depravity is total, in this sense; that it is, so far as man's self-recuperation is concerned, decisive and final. Original sin institutes a direct tendency to progressive, and at last, to utter depravity. In a word: it is spiritual death. Corporeal death may leave its victim more or less ghastly. A corpse may be little emaciated, still warm, still supple; it may still have a tinge of colour in the cheek and a smile on its lips: it may be still precious and beautiful in the eyes of those that loved it. But it is dead, and a loathsome putrefaction approaches, sooner or later. It is only a question of time. ¹⁴

It's not like humans want to submit to God but can't. Their will is corrupt so that they don't want to do what's right. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom. 8:7). Humans continue to resist God—which is exactly what they want to do—until God changes their will so that they want to submit to God.

Sin Results in Satanic Bondage

When Adam sinned, the dominion of the earth transferred from Adam to Satan. Satan leads a vast, organized, powerful force of demons opposed to God and committed to destroying God's people. He accuses and tempts humans (see Job 1; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zechariah 3).

The title Satan means "adversary." He is also called the Devil (which means "slanderer"), the Evil One, the accuser, the tempter, Belial (which means "worthlessness"), Beelzebub (a name given to the fly-god in Ekron), the prince of the devils, the prince of the power of the air, the prince of this world, the god of this age, the great dragon, and that old Serpent. He is the god of this world, blinding the minds of unbelievers until God shines the liberating light of Christ into their hearts (2 Cor. 4:1–6). "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). This is why Paul writes:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of

the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

Bavinck observes:

[An] organic view is applicable also to the sins, which manifest themselves in particular areas of human life. There are personal and individual sins, but there are also common, social sins, the sins of particular families, nation and the like. . . . As it happens we take notice of only a very small portion of the sins of our limited group, and of that only superficially. But if we could penetrate through the essence of appearances, and trace out the root of sins in the hearts of people, we should very probably come to the conclusion that in sin too, there is oneness, idea, plan, pattern—in a word, that in sin too there is system. . . . In principle and essence it is nothing less than enmity against God, and in the world it aims at nothing less than sovereign dominion. And every sin, also the smallest, being as it is a transgression of the divine law, serves this final objective in connection with the whole system. The history of the world is not a blindly operating evolutionary process, but an awful drama, a spiritual struggle, centuries long in duration, a warfare between the Spirit from above and the spirit from below, between Christ and anti-Christ, between God and Satan.¹⁵

How Then Shall We Live?

Modern politicians, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, and sociologists often propose remedies for the ills of our world. But remedies that don't take into account this understanding of sin are mere child's play because they have not begun to understand the depth of the human predicament. Humans can't solve their deep, universal problem of sin. Only God can.

Such is the problem with which we are confronted. There is in us, in man, this terrible, mighty power called "sin" which alienates us from God and leads us to hate Him, and at the same time debases us and leads to conduct which can only be described as disgusting. How idle it is to think of these matters and to discuss them theoretically. How criminal to look at life through rose-coloured spectacles. It is

only as we face the facts, and realize the true nature of the problem, that we shall come to see that one power alone is sufficient and adequate to deal with it—the power of God.¹⁶

We are entirely at God's mercy.

When we understand that our need is this extreme, we better appreciate God's great love, compassionate mercy, and glorious grace that delivers us from sin. This compels us to worship God for so great a salvation.

Sin's capacity to destroy is as close to infinite as is possible for the finite. We must dread and detest it. It's so great that only the death of God's Son could deliver us from it. So let us remember:

If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26–31)

Notes

1. Matthew White, "Deaths by Mass Unpleasantness: Estimated Totals for the Entire 20th Century," <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat8.htm>.
2. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 433–34.
3. Quoted in Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 61.
4. Harold G. Coward, *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 83.
5. Jonathan Edwards, *The Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, repr. 1995), 1:145.
6. Quoted in Blocher, *Original Sin*, 83–84.
7. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 221.
8. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 2:69.
9. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 3:64–65.
10. See Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), 436–39.
11. The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement.
12. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 229.
13. R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 323.
14. *Ibid.*, 313, 324.
15. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 248.
16. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Plight of Man and the Power of God* (Ada, MI: Baker, 1982), 57.

The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission

is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“While humans in the modern era have achieved massive technological and medical breakthroughs, they have also created a terrible mess. An estimated 188 million people died by war and oppression alone in the twentieth century, and many of them were raped, mutilated, or tortured before dying. . . . What exactly is wrong with [the human race]? . . . Christianity analyzes evil by placing it under two interrelated categories: sin and the fall. Evil exists because of sin, and sin exists because of the fall that occurred in early human history. . . . Sin’s capacity to destroy is as close to infinite as is possible for the finite. We must dread and detest it.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

Reddit Andrews III (M.Div., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is senior pastor of Soaring Oaks Presbyterian Church in Elk Grove, California, and adjunct professor of pastoral theology at City Seminary in Sacramento, California.