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# Seven Faces of Sin: A Study Guide to Biblical Models for How Evil Originates and How it can be Overcome

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Seven Faces of Sin:

A study guide to biblical models for how evil originates and how it can be overcome

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

## Acknowledgments

This book began as a series of classes that I gave to the monks at New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, California. The monks encouraged me to publish the material. Later when I was teaching a course on the New Testament at the School for Deacons in Berkeley, I remarked that every preacher should preach on "sin" at least twice a year. My students seemed surprised and intrigued and asked me to explain. I attempted to do so briefly, but the explanation was not adequate. Later another member of the faculty heard that I thought that deacons should at least occasionally preach on sin, and she was horrified. Apparently she thought, as I also do, that many sermons on sin are destructive, even sinful! This book is a longer and, I hope, more satisfactory explanation of why I feel the Church needs more sermons on sin, what those sermons should say, and what the biblical basis for that preaching might be. I am posting this book on line in the hope that my students, both past and present, and anyone else who might be interested may have access without cost to my more considered reflections.

Dr. Caroline Summer read a draft of the book and corrected many mistakes and made many helpful suggestions.

The biblical quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

Dedicated to my students at the School for Deacons, Berkeley, California, who asked me to explain why I felt that every preacher should give at least two sermons on sin each year.

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## Preface: The Present Crisis and the Need to Take Another Look at the Bible

We may basically define "sin" as destructive attitudes and behaviors that can be recognized and overcome. Thus, for something to be sinful it must hurt someone. There can be legitimate disagreement over the limits of who that is. Is it a sin to choose to harm oneself? Is it a sin to inflict suffering on others to punish them for inappropriate behavior? But clearly sin must involve doing harm. "Sin" must also be voluntary. Sinners must know, or at least be able to know, that what they are doing is destructive. And they must be able to change. Here too the limits are controversial. What does it mean to "know" that something is harmful and that one can produce meaningful change? Were German civilians sinners during the Nazi era when they did little about the Holocaust? Were they completely ignorant? If they should at least have suspected that something terrible was happening, were they able to do anything about it? Here there can be legitimate disagreement. But at least we can agree that attitudes and actions that harm others and can be known and changed are "sinful."

In recent times many Christians have become reluctant to talk about "sin." In a previous era, an era still well within living memory, "sin" was a major topic in most churches. Many sermons were devoted to condemning sin; much Christian education was concerned with classifying sins and warning students against them. The confession of sin, both in private to a priest or in public prayer, was a major part of religious discipline and liturgy. With some exaggeration, the atheist, Richard Dawkins, writes, "The Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life" (quoted in Portmann vi). Today—despite Dawkin's comment--things are different. In many

denominations priests and pastors hesitate to preach on sin. Sermons seldom explicitly condemn public or private immorality. In worship the confession of sin has become optional. In the old liturgy in my denomination at every Eucharist we had to say, "We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1928, p. 75). In the rubrics of the new liturgy we read, "The confession of sin may be omitted" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 359). Indeed, the Church's silence on sin has become so pervasive that it is the subject of scholarly comment. Joseph Pieper's profound book, *The Concept of Sin*," begins with the words, "We don't hear the word 'sin' much any more" (p. 1). In *A History of Sin*, John Portmann writes, "Sin is . . . passe in America" (p. 3). The title of Karl A. Menninger's book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, speaks for itself.

One reason for the Church's present reluctance to talk about sin is an awareness that the old emphasis on sin did not seem to make people behave much better. Despite all the condemnation of extra-marital sex, drunkenness, failure to attend church, and so forth, all these sins seem to have continued unabated. Worse, the Church's condemnation of sin may have led to an increase in sin. The condemnation of sinful behavior encouraged non-conformists, and perhaps male adolescents in general, to demonstrate their independence by sinning. The condemnation of sinning may have led to more sin even among those who attempted to live by the Church's guidelines. Those who were able to abide by the standards for righteous behavior faced the temptation to become smug, and pride is itself a sin. Indeed, classical theologians considered pride the most serious sin of all. Those who took their Christianity seriously and yet could not live up to standards felt burdened by self-condemnation, and this self-condemnation produced spiritual weakness that could lead to further sin. In Saint-Exupery's fairy tale, *The Little Prince*, the protagonist encounters a



drunkard. The Little Prince, who is always curious, inquires why the drunkard continues to drink. The drunkard replies that he drinks to forget. The Prince asks what the drunkard is trying to forget, and the latter replies that he is trying to forget his shame. When the Prince asks what the drunkard is ashamed of, the latter replies that he is ashamed that he is a drunkard (ch. 12). Underlying this superficially amusing story is the sad truth that merely condemning sin makes sin more powerful. We will have to return to this truth when we discuss St. Paul's theology of sin.

In retrospect we realize now that the older condemnation of sin in church history usually focused too much on personal sin and too little on corporate sin. In perhaps most times and places "sin" meant individual irresponsibility, especially in sex and alcohol. However, in most times and places corporate irresponsibility—including by the Church itself—was even more destructive. Governmental decree and exploitative economic systems condemned vast numbers of people to slavery or starvation. Christian nations engaged in wars of aggression and committed genocide. Sometimes the Church even actively supported the policies that produced horrific suffering. The Church itself concentrated on amassing power and wealth for its own institutional advancement at the expense of the poor. Surely these were the sins that sensitive Christians needed to focus on. Indeed, these greater corporate sins were often the root cause of much of the personal sin which the Church preferred to condemn.

Drunkenness or sexual irresponsibility among the exploited were a response to the misery and hopelessness of their lot—a lot that resulted from injustice. Yet much of the time the Church was silent about corporate sin. Today critics of the Church even charge that the Church used the older emphasis on personal sin to control people to the Church's own advantage. By making people feel guilty about their personal sins (and in some denominations making them

dependent on a priest for absolution of those sins), the Church gained additional power over the faithful and made it more difficult for them to criticize the sins of the Church itself.

An additional problem with the older condemnation of sin, was that it could easily degenerate into a focus on evil rather than a focus on God's love. The center of the Christian proclamation is—or, at least, should be—the love of God. Christianity is about God's love for us. "God so loved the world that . . . " (John 3:16) Christianity is about our need to love God. Jesus insisted that the first and greatest commandment was to love God with all the heart (Mark 12:29-30). But when the Church concentrated on condemning sin, the centrality of God and his love often became in practice lost. As Dawkins notes, Christianity became focused on a "nasty little preoccupation."

The focus on sin even led to alienation from God. As people concentrated on their own moral inadequacy, they saw God primarily as someone who was disappointed and angry with them. God planned to send even the faithful to hell unless they speedily confessed their sins and reformed. Consequently, people cowered before God--and resented him. Rather than embrace God as the Redeemer who has poured his love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), people kept their psychological distance from a stern taskmaster and judge.

With the focus on sin there inevitably followed a loss in self-esteem. As long as one sees oneself primarily as a child of God, one has a positive self image. If we are creations of God, made in the divine image, our deepest nature must be fundamentally good. Sin may warp us, but it cannot make us evil. Hence, if we focus on God and see ourselves as derivative from him, we will have an appreciation for who we essentially are. However, once people began to

focus on sin, then they started to think of themselves primarily as sinners rather than as children of God. The result was a debilitating loss of self-respect, the consequences of which we noted above in discussing the Little Prince and the drunkard. I myself suffered from a profound loss of self-esteem in my own youth due in part to a liturgical tradition which overemphasized each person's sinfulness. Indeed, one of the prayers my church said most Sundays included the phrase, "There is no health in us" (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1928, p. 6), virtually a contradiction in terms, since by definition someone in whom there is no health would be dead.<sup>1</sup>

The Church's present silence on sin panders to an increasing consensus in America that most of someone's life is no one else's business. A disturbing change has come over American society. The United States is post-puritanical in a destructive way. If the Puritans erred by insisting too much on enforcing morality through religious sanction backed by penal legislation, we today in reaction have gone to the opposite extreme. Now an ever larger section of human life is considered to be "personal" and, therefore immune from criticism. One's sexual activity is personal; one's political opinions are personal; one's lifestyle (virtually everything?) is personal. Any Christian preacher or teacher who dares to point out that irresponsible sex, baseless political opinions, and materialistic self-indulgence cause enormous social harm risks rejection.

The Church's hesitation to confront sin may be in part due to an awareness that much of what the Church previously condemned does not appear in retrospect to have been sinful. In the

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<sup>1</sup> If it be objected that "no health" only refers to a total lack of spiritual health, would someone who had no spiritual health be saying a prayer?

past, the Church, along with society in general, condemned such things as inter-racial marriage and homosexual sexual activity. Today an increasing number of people (including me) see nothing wrong with these. The lack of previous discernment in a number of moral issues has weakened the credibility of the Church's ethical teaching as a whole. Large sections of society no longer take Church pronouncements seriously. The Church even receives condemnation (sometimes rightly) for judging people in the past who did not deserve such treatment. In the face of past errors and present skepticism, Christians are hesitant to talk about personal and communal sin.

Finally, it may be that the Church's own increasingly well publicized sins have made it difficult for the Church to confront the sins of others. I doubt that the sins of the Church today are greater than in former times. But the publicity given to them has mushroomed. There is more publicity for the Church's sexual and financial transgressions. It used to be that, out of respect for the Church, victims of ecclesiastical abuse often did not come forward, and the media was reluctant to pursue the complaints that did arise. Such is not the case today! The media loves to pillory the Church. Stories about the financial offenses and sexual misdeeds of prominent church leaders, whether Protestant television evangelists or Catholic bishops, fill the newspapers and the airwaves and the internet. Consequently, the public increasingly sees the Church itself as fundamentally corrupt. There is also more publicity for religion's contribution to international intolerance and violence. In this area too, I doubt that the sins of the Church are greater now than previously. In fact, they are probably far less. In previous centuries various religions, including Christianity, were far more willing to label other faiths as evil and far more enthusiastic about military crusades than presently. Nevertheless, especially the continuing tensions in Israel and the contemporary popularity of terrorism in

the name of God have become big news. Consequently, there seems to be a growing perception that organized religion in general promotes hatred and violence. Because the sins of the Church have become so well known, the Church may be reluctant to point out the sins of others, lest the Church itself be seen as engaging in extravagant hypocrisy, a charge that critics increasingly make.

As the Church has remained mostly silent, the amount of sin seems, if anything, to be increasing. Conservatives tend to notice the lack of personal morality in sex and in alcohol and drugs and the enormous suffering that results. Mainline American society as a whole increasingly regards any sexual behavior as permissible as long as it is between “consenting adults.” The predictable consequences, divorce, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, single parent families, have reached epidemic proportions. There also seems to be a growing moral tolerance for the use of drugs. The abuse of alcohol continues unabated, as does the abuse of traditional narcotics and stimulants. Meanwhile, all sorts of new drugs have appeared, some legal and some not. Addiction to these, whether they are bought from a pharmacy or from a pusher, seems to be an increasing problem. Since I myself am the son and grandson of alcoholics, I may overestimate the amount of collateral damage that the inappropriate use of our most pervasive drug causes. But it is sobering (pun intended) to read, "An estimated 43% of US adults have had someone related to them who is presently, or was, an alcoholic" ([www.treatment-centers.net/alcoholism-statistics.html](http://www.treatment-centers.net/alcoholism-statistics.html)).

If conservatives notice the lack of personal morality, liberals tend to notice the lack of economic and political morality and a lack of commitment to international prosperity, peace, and justice. As the rich have gotten richer, they have used their increased political power to

lower taxation on upper income brackets and block environmental regulations which might reduce corporate profits. As a result, the most basic public services and social safety nets are under attack; America is increasingly in the danger of national bankruptcy; our environment threatens our health; and we are gravely compromising the ecological future of the planet as a whole. The United States spends much more money on defense than any other nation. Yet we are unwilling to devote even a fraction of those funds to foreign aid to alleviate the crushing economic conditions which foster war and terrorism. The idea that the United States as a wealthy nation has a moral obligation to help poor countries seems quaint. No politician today dares to run on the platform that America should spend more on foreign aid.

The contemporary United States appears to be in a state of moral paralysis. The increasingly disastrous effects of our personal and collective sinfulness are there for all to see, and yet, for the most part, we do not acknowledge them and repent.

As the Church has become increasingly silent about sin, we have heard even less about hell. In the past the Church felt that one of its primary responsibilities was to warn people that their misdeeds in this life would have consequences after death. Hell used to be a topic of sermons and other presentations in mainline Christianity. In my own denomination it was once customary in the season of Advent (the four Sundays before Christmas) to preach one sermon each on the subjects of death, judgment, heaven, and hell. But today in mainline Christianity one does not hear sermons on hell anymore, and having a sermon on hell during the Christmas shopping rush would be unthinkable. Now for most Americans "damnation" and "hell" are only swear words!

Yet, the doctrine of hell is obviously necessary and true. The existence of hell is part of the biblical witness. Jesus himself talked not infrequently about hell or, to use his own term, "Gehenna," where the "worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:47-48). Hell was a theme of Christian teaching and preaching and literature and art down through the ages. The two greatest Christian epic poems, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, have sections placed in hell. The other great world religions, including Buddhism and Islam, have their own hells. If we believe in eternal life at all and believe that our moral deeds have enduring consequences, then logically there must be something at least analogous to hell. Can we survey the enormous suffering that sin causes and honestly conclude that the perpetrators will face no reckoning in the next life? With the growing frequency of out-of-body experiences, some people even tell us they have temporarily gone to a state that we may reasonably label as hell. They report "negative experiences such as utter darkness, a spinning void, hellish visions, or fear of punishment" (Dell'Olio 116). In my own ministry a woman who attempted suicide told me that she went to a place that was "cold" and that she was grateful to be able to escape from there and return to this life.

Satan and his angels have also disappeared from sermons and theology in mainline denominations. One never hears about them in church or seminary anymore. One only hears about them in extravagant movies. Jesus in the gospels speaks about "the Devil and his angels" (e.g., Matt 25:41). Classical theology developed doctrines about them. Down through the centuries Christians experienced the Prince of Darkness and his fiends and struggled against them. But now the Devil and his angels only have gigs in the entertainment industry.

In view of the present situation it is imperative that mainline Christianity--both for the

nation's sake and for its own--begin to talk about sin again. There is little hope that the United States will face the epidemic of its personal and collective sinfulness if the nation's largest religion does not address the issue. Moreover, as long as the Church ignores the moral vacuum in America, the Church will remain largely irrelevant. That irrelevance has already contributed to the steady decline of mainline denominations both in attendance and financial health. Moreover, the Church too faces the prospect of condemnation at the last judgment. In the Bible God tells the prophet Ezekiel that if Ezekiel warns people of the coming judgment and the people do not listen, the people will die but Ezekiel will be innocent. But if Ezekiel does not warn people, they will still die, but Ezekiel will himself be accountable for their blood (Ezek 3:16-21).

However, the Church must not simply return to moralistic preaching but must give a more thoughtful presentation of how sin originates and how sin is overcome. The moralistic preaching of the past failed. Indeed, that failure has helped lead to the present impasse. Instead of simply condemning sin, we must tell people what the deeper causes of sinful thought and behavior are. And we must point out what are the deeper solutions.

Any serious Christian reconsideration of sin should begin with an examination of what the Bible has to say. The Bible is the oldest Christian book, much of it even older than Christianity itself. The Jewish and Christian communities canonized the Bible, because they saw that it was especially profound and helpful. Subsequently, the Bible provided the foundation on which Christian thought and practice have been built. Often a mistake in Christian theology or ethics has been the result of an earlier error in interpreting the Bible. An erroneous or at least one-sided interpretation of some biblical text(s) skewed subsequent



Christian reflection leading to disastrous consequences. Of course, the Bible has a unique authority as the primary witness to Jesus. For Christians Jesus is the definitive Word of God, and we know that Word only through the words of scripture. The Bible is the book that Jesus himself read and regarded as divinely inspired. The Bible molded the culture in which Jesus himself lived and to which he responded. In addition, like any book written in another time and place, the Bible offers a different perspective on human existence. That perspective invites us to reconsider our own. Hence, if we are going to reflect on what Christianity should teach about sin, we must begin with what the Bible says on the subject.

However, we must look at the Bible with a modern awareness of its original context. The Bible is a record of what people concluded as they struggled to discern and apply God's will in another time and place. We must be aware of that context. The Bible is also a literary work, and often to discover what it says we must do a literary analysis.

In this present book we will concentrate on seven biblical models for how sin originates and how it can be overcome. We will begin by briefly reviewing some non-Christian viewpoints on how evil originates and how it can be eliminated. We will see that these viewpoints have some validity but on the whole do not solve the problem. Then we will do a systematic look at the biblical perspectives. In our examination of what the Bible has to say, we will begin at the beginning with Genesis. What does the first book of the Bible tell us about sin? Then we will go on to the covenant at Sinai and the priestly and prophetic writings. What did Moses and the priests and the prophets have to say about sin? Next we will consider the Wisdom books and their viewpoints on sin. Then we will go on to the apocalyptic books. Daniel and Revelation look forward to an outburst of evil followed by a final judgment and the definitive

triumph of good. What are the implications of this perspective for a Christian understanding of sin? Of course, we must consider what Jesus' words and actions state or, at least, imply about sin. Then we will go on to the two greatest theologians of the New Testament, Paul and John. We will conclude with some general reflections about what these different sections of the Bible share in their analysis and condemnation of sin and how we can learn from the areas of agreement and the areas of diversity. In each chapter we will carefully review what the biblical material literally says.

Of course, in formulating a Christian understanding of sin, we cannot rely solely on the Bible but must do additional study and reflection. The Bible was not written for today but for a different culture, or rather several different cultures, since the books of the Bible were composed over many centuries. Hence, we must ask what remains relevant now. The biblical authors were human beings like ourselves and made mistakes. We must recognize these errors and not mindlessly repeat them. Jesus was sinless according to Christian doctrine. The authors of the Bible were not, and we must face the fact that some things in the Bible itself are due to sinfulness. Certain passages of the Bible long for a vengeance incompatible with Jesus' message of loving enemies, or advocate a violence incompatible with Jesus' teaching of turning the other cheek, or manifest an aggressive nationalism incompatible with the vision in the Letter to the Ephesians of an end to the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:14). We must not perpetuate the sin of the biblical authors by uncritically appropriating it. Of course, today we know many things, thanks to the modern physical and social sciences, that the biblical authors could not have known. We must take that new knowledge into account. Discovering what the Bible has to say about sin is only the beginning of a responsible attempt to discover what Christians should believe about sin now.

Consequently, as we go through what various sections of the Bible have to say about sin, I will make some suggestions of my own about what remains relevant and useful today. In these suggestions I will take into account such things as evolution and the contemporary state of American culture and Christianity.

To help readers contribute their own wisdom and allow the Spirit to lead them into additional truth, I have included sample questions for reflection at the end of each section of this brief book. These questions are an effort to encourage each reader to add his or her own thoughts about sin. The questions would also provide a church group with subjects for collective consideration. Jesus in Matthew's Gospel teaches that whenever two or three are gathered in his name, he will be in their midst (18:20). I believe that the truth that matters—that is the truth that is immediately applicable to our daily lives--normally emerges in a dialogue between what God has taught in the past to others and what God is teaching us today by the Spirit speaking through one another.

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Questions for reflection: Is it a sin to choose to harm oneself? Is it a sin to neglect religion as long as we do not hurt anyone? How can we distinguish innocent moral ignorance from culpable denial? In practice does preaching against sin make people improve their behavior? Should the Church in its preaching place more emphasis on personal sin or institutional sin? Do people who are most concerned about sin lose their focus on God, and what are the consequences of this loss? Is it true that our "personal" lives are not anyone else's business?

Why in the past did the Church condemn such things as inter-racial marriage that today we consider to be morally acceptable? How can the Church regain its moral credibility given the mistakes that we have made in previous ethical teaching and the Church's own moral lapses? Do you believe in hell or Satan, and, if so, how can the Church make them credible to the modern world? How can Christians acknowledge the many defects and limited applicability of the Bible and still regard it as the “word of God”?

## Chapter 1: The Theological Problem of Sin

We live in a world of dazzling beauty. There is the physical beauty of the rose and the sunset. There is the emotional beauty of the love of a mother for a newborn child. There is the moral beauty of the self-sacrifice of so many for the welfare of the needy.

Yet in the midst of such magnificence there is evil. Some of the evil is apparently due to unethical human behavior. Human beings sin by killing one another, exploiting one another, hating one another. Other evil seems to exist without anyone causing it. We have various names for it: Natural evil, accident, "just the way it is." There are earthquakes and tornadoes, cancer and arthritis. Some evil looks like a complicated combination of the "way things are" and unethical behavior, and it is difficult to separate the two even in theoretical analysis. Relations between children and parents become embittered leading to psychological cruelty or even physical violence, but no one is sure what went wrong and who, if anyone, is morally responsible. Nations end up at war and inflict incalculable loss of life and property. But each nation claims--perhaps even sincerely claims--that it was only trying to defend itself. Terrorism and torture abound, but the terrorists and torturers insist that their actions are necessary to serve some higher purpose.

The existence of evil in the midst of so much good is puzzling. A world in which there was only good or only evil would at least be consistent. But a world in which great good and vast evil coexist calls for some explanation.

One possible explanation for the existence of evil is that the gods themselves are evil as well as good. Like human beings they have both virtues and flaws, and just as they have filled with world with their good deeds, they have also corrupted it by their wickedness.

We can see an example of this explanation for evil in the mythology of ancient Greece. For the Greeks the primeval human tragedy was the Trojan War, and the ultimate cause of the war was the pettiness of their deities. According to the story, the gods had a banquet to celebrate a wedding, and they did not invite the Goddess of Discord. When she arrived anyway, they did not admit her. She responded by throwing a golden apple into the midst of the assembly. The apple had the inscription, "To the most beautiful." Three goddesses, Hera, the queen of the gods, Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, and Aphrodite, the goddess of sensual love claimed the apple. Zeus, the king of the gods, refused to get involved in this spat by being the judge and instead recommended a shepherd prince of Troy named Paris. The goddesses then each tried to bribe Paris, Hera offering him universal rule, Athena offering him victory and wisdom, and Aphrodite offering him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris, perhaps due to an excess of testosterone, gave the apple to Aphrodite. To fulfill her promise, Aphrodite had to entice the wife of a Greek king to leave her husband and marry Paris thus leading to war between the Greeks and Troy. In the conflict Hera and Athena, angered over losing the beauty contest, fought against Troy. In the war great heroes of both sides died and ultimately Troy was destroyed. Whatever may have been the failings of Paris, clearly he and his city and his human enemies were primarily victims of the vanity and arbitrariness of the gods themselves.

If the gods are primarily responsible for evil, there is no way to eliminate it, and we must

accept our fate. We can attempt to appease petty deities by bribing them with liturgical flattery and lavish animal sacrifices; much religion has done so. But clearly if the gods are basically arbitrary, our paltry efforts at manipulation will not usually succeed. The gods are bigger than we are, and we will not be able to change them fundamentally. Much of Greek mythology features divine fate. Fate decrees that someone will commit or suffer great evil, and even though the person in question and everyone else concerned tries to avoid it, the evil occurs. Oedipus is a famous example.<sup>2</sup> Oedipus's father learned from an oracle that his son would kill him. The infant was left to die, but a shepherd adopted him. When Oedipus had grown up, an oracle told him that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. To avoid this supreme evil, he fled from his home, and ironically a series of events occurred which fulfilled the prophecy. By his very attempt to escape fate, Oedipus and his father unwittingly brought it about. The end result of blaming the gods is fatalism. What will be will be. There is no point trying to make our lives or the world fundamentally better.

In my opinion there is an intellectual flaw in making the gods responsible for evil, but the flaw is theological rather than logical. Blaming the gods for evil is logically possible. In human society the most gifted and the most fortunate people sometimes use their great power for evil. Hence, there is no logical reason why the gods could not do the same. But if the gods are evil as well as good, they do not deserve to be worshiped, at least, worshiped without reservation. And to the extent that they do not deserve to be worshiped, they forfeit their claim to be divine. A human being who is supremely powerful and yet evil may command respect but cannot command admiration. The early Christians ridiculed the gods of the

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am analyzing the myth, not the famous play of Sophocles which emphasizes Oedipus's hubris. Sophocles's need to emphasize the failings of Oedipus reminds us of how disturbing it is to believe that the Divine could force a totally innocent man to murder his father and marry his mother.

Greeks and Romans for immoral behavior, and ultimately the Christians won. The Pagans abandoned gods who could not be admired and became Christians.

Because of the dangers of moral fatalism and of having gods that cannot be worshiped, the high religions have insisted that the Ultimate is purely good and that whatever evil spirits may exist they are not divine. We may use Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Taoism as examples. In many respects Islam and Buddhism are opposites, as are Christianity and Taoism. Yet all these religions would insist that the Ultimate, the One Personal God of Islam and Christianity, the heavenly Buddha of the Mahayana school, the impersonal laws of Karma, the ways of the Tao, is wholly beneficent. There is no darkness in the Ultimate. Demons there are, but the demons do not run the universe and are not the Final Reality.

But if the Ultimate is purely good, we can not blame it for evil, and we cannot place most of the blame on the demons. No doubt, the demons are a cause of evil. But if they are not the Ultimate, then the evil they do has to be very limited. The existence of so much evil in the world must have a different explanation.

One such explanation is that nature and environment are to blame. Evil does not arise from the gods, but from who we as human beings essentially are as a product of the natural world and our social surroundings.

In ancient times Gnostics thought that the physical world was inherently evil, and this evil was responsible for human misery. The material realm was not the creation of a good and wise god. Instead, it was the creation of an incompetent lesser spiritual being. Unfortunately,



spiritual sparks had become imprisoned in material bodies. Humans are a combination of a pure spiritual core and a bodily dungeon. This sad condition is the explanation for our sense of alienation, of not belonging in this wicked world which we should never accept as our home.

In modern times the conditions which fuel biological evolution have often been seen as the cause of evil. Instead of being made in the image of God, human beings are the product of billions of years of chaotic development which produced evil as well as good. Life began as a microscopic organism and slowly evolved. The evolution was due to the natural selection of random mutations. Occasionally, an organism was born with a mutation that made it genetically distinct from its ancestors. Most mutations were dysfunctional guaranteeing that the new creature would be less likely to survive. A few mutations were advantageous. Creatures that had these were more likely to survive and produce offspring. These offspring became dominant, and life evolved. According to evolutionary theory, the driving force of evolutionary “progress” (defined as greater complexity and intelligence) was not the ethics of a creator but the ability to survive. Sometimes the ability to survive depended on cooperation and mutual support, and we may label that ability as morally good. A group of creatures had to work together, and evolution favored such virtues as love, self-sacrifice, and concern for the vulnerable. But sometimes the ability to survive depended on defeating others. If we define “evil” as at least including inflicting physical harm or death on others, then evil is part of our nature as molded by evolution. Our nature includes a drive to conquer and destroy. According to evolutionary theory, even constructive adaptations to an environment can become destructive if a new environment arises. Diet is a notorious example. In prehistoric times most people had difficulty obtaining enough calories and salt for optimal health.

Consequently, natural selection programmed the brain so that fat and sugar taste wonderful and anything without salt tastes bland. This programming was ideal in its original context. But today in the United States most people live in a very different context in which much food is available. The negative effects of our fondness for calories and sodium in this present environment are too well known to require further comment.

Of course, in addition to evolution all the social conditioning of more recent times can lead to sin. Some of that social conditioning is the big events and continuing patterns of history that mold whole societies: war, economic depression, racism, sexism, and the rest. Then there is the social conditioning that comes from the unique structure of each individual's personal world, for example, the behavior of one's father or mother or older siblings or classmates. All of these have a profound affect on human life, and all can be a cause evil.

If evil is due to nature or environment, then we must either accept it or attempt to overcome it through technological or social progress. We can either accept violence or selfishness as being “human” and make no effort to improve. Or we can try to change our inherited nature by natural means and change our environment by social engineering. We can alter our chemistry or our organizational charts or take children away from destructive situations. Perhaps we can find a drug which will suppress some violent impulse. Perhaps we can produce an environment in which violence is good. People can enjoy (supposedly) harmless violence by attending boxing matches or massacring the enemy in video games. In any case, if evil is due to nature and environment, we should not expect that turning to God will eliminate it.

Unfortunately, our efforts to overcome evil by changing our chemistry or surroundings have

had limited success. Medications have done some good, but they have not proven to be a panacea. They have certainly helped people with extreme problems lead more "normal" and constructive lives. But the drugs to improve attitude and behavior seem always to have undesirable side effects. And people who take them certainly continue to have moral defects. Moreover, medications only help people who have extraordinary problems. There is no pill that makes "normal, healthy" people behave better. Changing the social environment too has done some good, but it has not solved everything. It is only common sense to take a children away from older friends who are corrupting them. But after we give children a more positive environment, they continue to sin. Groups like the American Pilgrims have attempted to isolate themselves entirely from a wicked larger society by going to a New World where there would be no negative outside influences. But then sin continued to appear from within the group itself. There have even been movements that tried to eliminate entirely the supposed environmental or cultural basis of sin. Communism, for example, believed that private property was the cause of all destructive behavior. The Communists produced a society in which there was no private property. But unfortunately, there was sin--and lots of it. Such Communist leaders as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot perpetrated unspeakable crimes.

The failure to overcome sin by technological or social engineering strongly suggests that sin is not primarily due to nature or environment and that a comprehensive solution to sin must lie elsewhere. Of course, nature is responsible for some sin. Clearly the prehistoric conditions under which humans evolved have programmed us to do things that are no longer constructive. Of course, social environment is also responsible for some sin. But the consistent failure of human efforts to eliminate sin by attempting to alter our chemistry or our organizations strongly suggests that sin must have a different and deeper cause. And if there

is a deeper cause, there must be a deeper solution, if any solution is to be found.

Another possible explanation of the origin of sin and evil is that sin arises from selfishness which in turn produces evil. According to this hypothesis, sin arises from our own self-interest and is rational. Groups or individuals sin by choosing to gain some small benefit for themselves at the price of causing much greater harm to others. A corporation realizes a small increase in profit by degrading the environment, producing widespread sickness. To gain a few dollars, a mugger inflicts major injuries on a victim. Evil does not primarily arise from elsewhere, whether the gods or nature or society. Evil is the consequence of self-interest.

If sin is due to selfishness, the solution is to arrange life so that selfishness redounds to the common good, and most societies have attempted to make things work this way. The state has always provided money and honor to entice its citizens to do what is to the benefit of all. The genius of capitalism is that it makes individual selfishness produce a higher standard of living for the collective. To gain selfish profit in a free market, each individual or corporation must produce goods and services which are helpful to the rest of us. Religion too attempts to use selfish interest to promote virtue. Religion preaches that self-sacrifice for others in material things gives us the spiritual benefit of feeling good inside, and religion claims that virtuous sacrifices in this earthly life will lead to a vast reward after death.

Nevertheless, in practice it has never been possible to arrange a system that makes selfishness consistently promote the common good or to convince most people that what appears to be severe self-sacrifice is in fact in their selfish interest. Capitalism is a notorious example of the failure of making selfishness consistently work for the benefit of the whole. To some extent

competition aids the common good. But investors and corporations find innumerable ways to make profits at the expense of society's overall welfare. One can make a product that is superficially attractive but wears out the day after the warranty expires. One can make a product that appears to be safe but is not. One can reduce the cost of production by increasing air pollution. One can escape needed governmental regulation by making lavish contributions to political candidates. Religion's efforts to show that virtue is in one's selfish interest have also had limited success. It is hard to convince people that feeling good about doing what is in the interest for all is ample compensation for the loss of more tangible material benefits. The promises of heaven and the threats of hell have made some people act better. But not surprisingly it is difficult to persuade people to forgo present pleasures which appear to be certain on the mere hope of future rewards. As Omar Khayyam advises in Edward FitzGerald's famous translation of the Rubaiyat, "Ah, take the cash, and let the credit go,/ nor heed the rumble of a distant drum" (XIII).

An even worse problem with trying to overcome sin by making selfishness promote the common good, is that selfishness is not the cause of much sin, perhaps the greater part. Much sin is totally irrational. It not only harms the victims but obviously harms the perpetrator. Two nations fight a long war which is causing enormous damage to both. Each side knows that even if it is eventually victorious, the victory will not be worth the cost. The only rational solution is to make peace. Yet, each side refuses to do so. Toward the end of the Second World War when Germany was facing enemies on every side, the Nazis diverted resources desperately needed at the front in order to slaughter Jews. Obviously this supreme evil was drastically contrary to the self-interest of the perpetrators. We see the same phenomenon among individuals. People sin by acting against their selfish interest. In ancient

times Augustine of Hippo in his autobiography reflected on why as a youth he and his friends stole pears. The pears in question were not good, and Augustine and his friends threw them away. Augustine came to the disturbing conclusion that they committed the theft only for the love of evil itself (*The Confessions*, book 2). Can there be a rational explanation for sadism? And even if we find one, how can masochism be rational? By definition, masochism is contrary to self-interest. Yet, we see it everywhere, including if we are honest and perceptive, in our own selves.

A different approach to understanding sin and evil is to attribute both to allowing our appetites and emotions to overrule our reason. Here we have the perspective of philosophers down through the ages. Reason is always good when it is left without interference. Unfortunately, our appetites and emotions are always trying to subvert the virtuous guidance of our minds. Hence, the intellect using the "will" must keep emotions and appetites under strict control. We must not let our "lower" nature dominate us. Our reason tells us that racism is ridiculous. It is our inherited emotions that are the problem. Our appetites constantly entice us to have too much ice cream. We must let our mind remind us of the consequences for our cholesterol and our waistline. "Think before you act!" If one likes, one can add an evolutionary twist to this classical position. One can note that our appetites and emotions are far older than at least our present advanced ability to think. Therefore, one can see reason as the decisive factor that makes us human and superior to other species.

Nevertheless, the claim that the solution to evil and sin is rationality has problems. One we have seen already: Sin is often rational. But there is a far deeper problem. Frequently, it is our instincts and emotions which save us from sin and the evil it produces. Here one is

reminded of the famous quote from G. K. Chesterton, "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. He is the man who has lost everything except his reason" (*Orthodoxy*, ch. 2, para. 7). Often it is our appetites that save us. A person may be making money by wicked means, and it may seem reasonable to continue. Nevertheless, he or she may not feel good. The person may not be able to "stomach" the evil. One of my classmates in seminary told me that he had had a lucrative but unethical job. He only quit when his health deteriorated and he hated the pills that his doctor prescribed. Similarly, it is often our emotions that force us to do what is right. It may be reasonable to ignore the pleas of the unfortunate and pursue other agendas, but our "hearts" will not allow us to do so.

The most radical solution to the problem of sin and evil is to hold that both are illusions due to limited knowledge, and, therefore, the solution is to change our way of thinking. As human beings we only see a slice of reality. From this restricted perspective certain things seem to be destructive and those who perpetrate them seem to be sinful. However, from a larger perspective everything fits into a wholesome pattern. We might use forest fires as an example. When I was a child, forest fires were thought to be wholly destructive, and those who caused them were at best gravely irresponsible. Subsequently it was discovered that periodic fires are necessary for the continuing health of a forest, and now sometimes public officials deliberately set them. Evil then is a mirage caused by ignorance, or to use Hamlet's famous words, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.250). Consequently, the solution to evil and sin is to recognize that in the final analysis they do not exist.

It is undeniable that to some extent we mistakenly identify certain things as evil and mistakenly identify those who commit them as sinful. Human beings always judge with

limited knowledge, and many of our judgments turn out to be erroneous. Occasionally we even discover that in retrospect something which appeared to be a disaster was a blessing in disguise, and someone who appeared to be a villain was in actuality a saint. The major religions of the world warn us against assuming that what appears to be evil must actually be so. Islam insists that everything which happens is God's will. When an apparent tragedy occurs, it is part of a much larger divine plan of which human beings are ignorant. Hinduism and Buddhism teach that what seems to be a tragic birth is actually just. Someone who is born disabled is paying the price for misdeeds in a previous incarnation. Taoism claims that everything that occurs naturally is ultimately for the good. Evil arises only when people interfere. Even Christianity holds that the supreme injustice, the crucifixion of Jesus, was God's way of overcoming human sin.

A benefit of believing that evil and sin are illusions is tranquility. The idea that ultimately everything is all right is reassuring. The assumption that there is real tragedy and real wrongdoing is not. Consequently, we often attempt to convince ourselves that whatever happens is ultimately for the best, and that everyone basically means well. Max Ehrmann's famous desiderata has comforted many with its words, "Whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should." Lao Tsu gives us a similar reassurance, "The universe is sacred. You cannot improve it" (Tao Te Ching 29). A famous quotation of Nietzsche has helped many get through times of tribulation. "What does not kill me makes me stronger" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Arrows," 8).

However, taken to an extreme, the view that evil and sin are mere illusions is absurd and makes life impossible. Anyone who has watched children die of painful diseases knows that



the universe can be improved, and medical advances are needed. Every society depends on the moral assumption that at least some actions are sinful. A society that held that murder, kidnapping, and rape are morally acceptable could not endure. All religions and ethical systems condemn them. It is patently obvious that some actions are overwhelmingly destructive, genocide, for example. And we must not exaggerate the good that arises from evil. Sometimes tribulation makes people stronger. Perhaps more often, tribulation leaves survivors permanently disabled and depressed.

Moreover, the view that there is no evil invites people to ignore the terrible injustices that exist and thereby causes more evil. The view that evil is an illusion not only gives tranquility. It also invites moral laziness. If we believe that a disabled child is suffering justly for the sins of a previous incarnation, we have little incentive to help. If everything that occurs naturally is ultimately for the good, why should we spend time and money preparing for earthquakes in an attempt to limit the number of deaths and injuries?

And so we seem to be at an impasse. Every explanation for the origin of evil appears to fail. Evil does not come from the gods nor primarily from nature and environment nor from self interest nor from our appetites and emotions. These may contribute to the problem, but they do not appear to be the primary cause. Yet we cannot reasonably deny that evil--horrible evil--exists. Human beings murder and torture and sexually exploit, thereby hurting not only their victims but even their own selves, and we cannot explain why. And if we cannot explain how evil originates, will we be able to figure out how to eliminate it or at least ameliorate its terrible effects?

Let us then turn to the Bible and see if it can give us some ideas about how sin originates and how sin can be overcome and whether, upon consideration, those ideas seem to be helpful today.

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Questions for reflection: Do we find the existence of sin puzzling? Why or why not? How would life be different if we thought that God was sinful and the evil in the world was the result of that sinfulness? Can we accept that we are the end result of millions of years of evolution and also claim that we are made in the image of God? Is it “natural” to sin? To what extent can we overcome sin by technological progress, and to what extent does such progress increase sin? How successful have medications to improve attitude and behavior been in your experience? What problems have they solved? What problems have they caused? When can we make people better by transferring them to a more constructive community? What are the limitations of trying to improve people by changing their environment? Is most sin due to the selfishness of individuals and groups? How do we explain the sin which is contrary to the self-interest of the perpetrators? How often do we think that someone is acting wickedly only to discover later that they were being virtuous? Can we think of times when our reason was leading us into sin and only our appetites or our hearts made us do what is right? When we learn of terrible evil, do we try to obtain peace by seeing something "positive" in it? Does such peace encourage us to do nothing about the evil? When has tribulation in our own lives made us stronger? When has it left us debilitated?

## Chapter 2: Evil--and how to overcome it--in Genesis

The first eleven chapters of Genesis contain a series of stories about how God created the world and about how subsequently evil arose. The Bible begins with the famous account of God creating the universe in six days and resting on the seventh. A second creation story follows. In it God makes the first man, Adam, creates the garden of Eden for him to live in, creates animals to be Adam's companions, and finally creates Eve to be Adam's partner. Thereafter, evil enters. The snake tempts Eve to eat from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, even though God commanded them not to and warned that the consequence would be death. Eve succumbs to the snake's wiles and eats the fruit and gets Adam to eat it also. The first human couple realize that they are naked and try to hide from God. God confronts them and ascertains their disobedience. God then decrees the punishment. Snakes and humans will be enemies. Eve will suffer pain in childbirth and will serve Adam. Adam's work will be drudgery, since the earth will now produce thorns and thistles. Adam and Eve and their descendants will ultimately die. The next generation things grow worse. Adam and Eve's two sons, Cain and Abel, both bring offerings to God, but God prefers Abel's, and Cain becomes jealous. God warns Cain to overcome his jealousy and insists that if Cain chooses to do what is right, he will be accepted. Cain murders Abel. In subsequent generations the earth becomes totally corrupt, and God sees no alternative but to send a flood to destroy all sentient beings except for Noah and his family and samples of every animal species who survive in an ark. Finally we have the story of how human beings sinfully try to build a great tower which will reach into heaven. God disrupts the work by giving the builders different languages, and the builders scatter.

In these stories a limited solution to evil is proportional retaliation. As violence escalates, human beings attempt to defend themselves by threatening revenge. At first the threatened revenge is disproportionate. A character named Lamech says that when someone struck him he responded by killing the offender. Lamech boasts that his moral principle is to be avenged "seventy-seven fold" (Gen 4:24). But since disproportionate retaliation is obviously unjust and encourages escalating violence, God later decrees proportionate vengeance. "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed" (Gen 9:6). Today we call this approach to limiting evil "criminal justice." But Genesis makes it clear that criminal justice is only a concession to the continuing wickedness of human beings. God decrees limited vengeance after he discovers that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Gen 8:21). Retaliation, no matter how "just," is a concession to humankind's sinfulness, and it does not bring us back to the perfection of Eden.

The two creation stories which open Genesis make it clear that evil does not originate from the natural world. Both stories insist that the world--at least as God created it--was unambiguously "good." At each stage of the first story God sees that what he has just made is good. God sees that the light is "good" (Genesis 1:4), that the earth and the seas are "good" (1:10), that the plants are "good" (1:12), that the sun, moon, and stars are "good" (1:18), that the aquatic animals and the birds are "good" (1:21), that the land animals are "good" (1:25). Then after God creates humans, he sees that the entire creation is "very good" (1:31). It is hard to imagine a more emphatic celebration of the goodness of the natural world. Similarly, the second creation story insists on the perfection of the natural world which God made. God plants a garden full of fruit trees and water. He creates the animals to be Adam's companions.

The animals are all vegetarians. As of yet there are no thorns or carnivores. The name of the ideal garden is "Eden" which means "delight."

Similarly, the two creation stories make it clear that evil does not originate from human nature--at least as God created it and apparently intended it to remain. In the first creation story God makes humans in his own image and gives them dominion over the earth. Humans are vegetarians. In the second story God himself molds Adam and breathes life into him. God makes Eve from Adam's side, and she is his partner. As of yet, there is no gender subordination, and Adam and Eve live together in pristine innocence, naked and without shame.

Of course, God is not the source of evil either. As we have seen, everything that God makes is perfect and testifies to God's own beneficence. Later when humans repeatedly sin, God justly punishes them. However, in each case God shows exemplary mercy. When Adam and Eve disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, they realize they are naked and try to make garments out of leaves. God punishes them by expelling them from Eden, but before he does so, he gives them clothes of skin. When Cain murders Abel, God punishes him by making him a wanderer, but God places a mark on Cain to keep anyone from killing him. When the whole earth becomes corrupt, God sends an annihilating flood. But he spares Noah and his family and provides for the survival of representatives of every species, by warning Noah to make the ark and put animals on it. Moreover, at the end of the story God even gives humans permission to eat meat.

In these opening stories of Genesis evil comes from trying to surpass the natural limits of

being human and usurping the privileges that belong to God alone. We see this theme especially in the sin of Adam and Eve. God commands the couple not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and warns that the consequence will be death. The snake in the garden counters that if they eat from the forbidden fruit they will become like God. Later after they have eaten the fruit, God himself verifies that in some sense the couple have become like him. To prevent them from becoming fully divine, God keeps them from eating from the "Tree of Life" and living forever. The theme that the ultimate source of evil is trying to usurp the privileges that belong uniquely to God reappears in other stories in Genesis 1-11. Cain refuses to accept God's right to prefer Abel's sacrifice to his own, and he does not heed God's warning to overcome his sinful impulses. God alone has the right to give life and take it away, but Cain murders his brother. Just before the story of Noah begins, we have a strange tale of angels mating with human women and thereby breaking the distinction between the human and divine realms. Finally, in the story of the great tower, human beings attempt to invade heaven which is God's exclusive domain.

The desire to try to seize what belongs to God alone seems to arise from distrust of God, though the causes of that distrust vary. It is not clear why Adam and Eve choose to believe the serpent when it insists that they will not die for eating of the forbidden fruit. God has given them every blessing. Apparently, Eve finds the tree itself to be attractive. Cain's distrust apparently arises from jealousy. He cannot acknowledge either that God has the right to prefer someone to him or that Cain's own sin might be the reason why God prefers his brother's offering.

In the stories distrust leads to a triple alienation. First there is alienation from God. After

Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden fruit, they try to hide from God. At the end of the story of Cain we read the haunting words, "Cain went away from the presence of the LORD" (Gen. 4:16). There is also alienation from one another. After God confronts Adam by asking if he disobeyed the command not to eat from the fruit, Adam blames Eve. God punishes Eve by giving Adam domination over her. After God warns Cain to master his sinful impulses, Cain murders his brother. The end result of the sin of building the great tower is that human beings speak different languages, cannot understand each other, and scatter. Finally, there is alienation from the natural world. The sin of Adam and Eve leads to the enmity between snakes and humans, and the ground will now produce thorns. The punishment of Cain is to be alienated from the soil, and the sin of angels and humans mating leads to the great flood.

A further result is death. God tells Adam and Eve that if they disregard his command and eat the fruit, they will die. When they disregard this warning, God decrees that they and apparently all their descendants will ultimately perish. Subsequent stories narrate more immediate deaths. Cain kills Abel. In the great flood every living thing, except for what is in the ark, dies.

Because of its literary placement, a special importance must attach to the mysterious "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," the fruit of which makes people become like God himself. This is the center of the first story of the origin of evil. Normally, we expect introductions to preview the major points. Moreover, the following stories in Genesis emphasize how sin increased, and it is in this first story that sin enters the world.

It is easy to think of various explanations of what this "fruit" symbolizes and, therefore, how

evil originates. Here are a few which in my opinion are especially suggestive. One possibility is that the fruit represents the total knowledge, and the power which total knowledge brings, that belong to God alone. In the Bible "good and evil" can be a poetic expression for everything (cf. 2 Sam. 14:17-20). Evil begins when we think we know (or should know) everything. Another possible interpretation is that the fruit represents the allure that we can have something that even God does not possess. All that God makes is good. Hence, there is no evil to be known. The illusion that there is something wonderful that God will not or cannot give us but that we can gain on our own entices us to stupid and arrogant acts. Still another conceivable interpretation is that the fruit represents sexual knowledge. Adam and Eve become sexually aware, and this awareness leads to the birth of all humankind and the sin that results. In ancient times Augustine argued that the knowledge that the fruit bestowed was the awareness of the sin we commit when we disobey God's commandments. More recently in criticizing Augustine Joseph Fitzpatrick has argued that the knowledge of good and evil is the ability to distinguish good and evil and is a sign of wisdom and maturity.

It is probably a mistake to try to limit symbolism in story/myth, and, hence, the Tree of Knowledge in some way represents all of these things and more. Story has the opposite purpose from dogma. The purpose of dogma is to limit acceptable belief. Dogma decrees what must be believed and what cannot be believed if someone is to find fulfillment or, at least, be a member of a certain faith community. By contrast, the purpose of story is to stimulate creative reflection. Story invites people to explore different dimensions of experience and ultimate reality.

Time is ambiguous in a story, and this ambiguity gives a great richness to the story of Adam



and Eve and the forbidden fruit. A story, almost by definition, is both about the past and the present. It is about the past because it is a text which has already been written. The story itself already exists, even if it claims to be about the future! As an artifact of the past a story invites the reader to remember at least something concerning how life used to be. A story is about the present because people experience it as present whenever they read it, even if the story itself claims to be about some other time. Myths about primordial events tell us how things came to be and perhaps even why they must always remain as they presently are. The story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit tells us why there is death, why men rule over women, and why snakes and humans are enemies. Yet, a story may also tell us what always happens. A character in a story may represent a certain type of human being or humanity as a whole. In the case of the story we are presently considering, Adam is every human being. Indeed, "Adam" means "human being," and the temptation that Adam faces and to which he succumbs is the temptation that besets us all. Hence, eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolizes both that our present world has been corrupted by previous sin, a sin which is as old as humanity, and that as humans we are all tempted to act as if we are God.

Perhaps the ambiguity of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is deliberate. The story teller realized that evil has many sources, perhaps even more than he knew. It is striking that the Hebrew grammar of the phrase "the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" is odd.

Perhaps the author deliberately tried to sound strange. He could not specify the source of evil. Therefore, he needed an ambiguous symbol to explain evil's origin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to B.S. Childs, "Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol. R-Z, pp. 695-697 for some of the insights above, especially for the insight that the author may

Whatever the fruit may be, an implication of the story is that accurate self-knowledge can be destructive if it is gained in defiance of God. After God has forbidden eating the fruit of knowledge and Adam and Eve eat it anyway, they discover correctly that they are naked. However, this discovery immediately leads to shame and attempting to hide. An implication is that human beings can only understand themselves constructively when they are in proper relationship with God. Self-knowledge purchased at the price of violating one's relationship with the Divine will lead to disaster.

Although the forbidden fruit represents many things, the context should indicate which is the most central. The fact that a symbol has many meanings does not imply that all of these are of equal weight. An important way to determine which meaning is most relevant is to see which meaning best fits the story as a whole.

In my opinion the primary meaning of the fruit must explain several things. First, the primary meaning must cohere with the goodness of God. Both creation stories clearly assume that God himself is morally upright. God is not depriving Adam and Eve of something that would be helpful to them when he commands them not to eat the fruit. Thus, the fruit cannot primarily symbolize the spiritual maturity of being able to distinguish good from evil. Second, the primary meaning must explain why Adam and Eve could in theory become like God by eating the fruit. The temptation is that they will become like God knowing good and evil, and later God himself declares that in some sense they have become like him (3:22). Thus, the fruit cannot primarily be knowing everything, because Adam and Eve do not gain

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have deliberately chosen to be ambiguous.

omniscience. Nor can the fruit symbolize sexual awareness. Sex, romantic poetry to the contrary notwithstanding, does not make us divine. Moreover, in Genesis God has already commanded humans to be "fruitful and multiply" (1:28), and Adam and Eve are already "one flesh" (1:24). The primary meaning of the fruit must also explain why Adam and Eve become ashamed of being naked after eating it. Thus, the primary meaning cannot be an awareness of moral culpability. After they eat, Adam and Eve are not ashamed of their sin, but of their nature, a nature which the reader knows to be good. The primary meaning must explain how every other form of evil could result from choosing this form. In Genesis the consumption of the fruit is the beginning of all sin. Finally, the meaning of the fruit must explain why death was the appropriate outcome for eating it.

I would suggest that the forbidden fruit primarily represents the ability arbitrarily to decide for ourselves what is good and evil.<sup>4</sup> There are two types of knowledge. There is the knowledge of discovery by which we learn how things actually are. There is also the knowledge of classification by which we arbitrarily assign labels to things. I believe that the knowledge of good and evil is the ability to classify arbitrarily what is good and what is evil rather than respect God's perspective. In the Bible God decides what is good and what is evil and makes that decision known through his commandments. God also decrees that choosing what is good will lead to life and choosing what is evil will lead to death. Since God creates the universe, choosing good naturally leads to life. The snake tempts Adam and Eve to become like God by deciding for themselves what will be best for them. By their disobedience Adam and Eve choose to believe that they can decide what is good. The first result is their

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4 This interpretation sometimes appears in classical theology. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The first man sinned chiefly by coveting God's likeness, as regards knowledge of good and evil, according to the serpent's instigation, namely by his own natural power he might decide what was good, and what was evil for him to do." Summa II-II, 163, 2.

conclusion that it is wrong to be naked. Earlier the story assumed that living in innocent nakedness was part of the primordial blessings of Eden. When people call evil good and good evil, they frequently set off a chain of events that ultimately leads to death. In the story God punishes Adam and Eve by decreeing that they will die.

The stories about Abraham and his descendants immediately follow the stories about how sin originated. After eleven chapters about the creation of the world and the various ways in which human beings chose to sin and thereby disrupt the harmony that God originally produced, we have stories about a single family. We begin with a series of stories about Abraham and his nephew Lot. Then we go on to stories about Abraham's son, Isaac, and Isaac's son, Jacob. Finally, we have stories about Jacob's twelve sons, especially Joseph, who is the focus of a saga of suffering, triumph, and redemption.

The structure of Genesis suggests that the stories of Abraham must somehow contain a mitigation of the effects of the previous story of the sin of constructing the great tower. In each of the stories about the coming of sin and disaster, God mitigates the punishment which he imposes. In the story of Adam and Eve, after they sew leaves together to hide their nakedness, God gives them the more durable covering of clothes of skins. In the story of Cain, after he murders his brother and God decrees that Cain must be a wanderer, God puts a mark on Cain so that no one will take advantage of his vulnerability and kill him. In the story of Noah and the great flood, God preserves the lives of the people and the animals in the ark and after the flood is over promises never again to destroy the world. Accordingly, in the story of human beings building a great tower to invade heaven and God responding by giving them different languages and causing people to scatter, there should be some mitigation of the

punishment. Presumably that mitigation occurs in the stories of Abraham which follow.

The stories about Abraham suggest that the beginning to overcoming evil is God calling certain people and the people responding in ignorant trust. At the start of the Abraham saga, God tells Abraham to go to a land that God will show him and God promises to make Abraham's descendants a great nation. In response Abraham obeys and leaves his home. Implicit in the introduction of the saga is that Abraham trusted that God could fulfill his promise despite its seeming improbability and that through such trust God can overcome evil. What is implicit in the beginning of the story becomes explicit as the story continues and also as the story is interpreted in the New Testament. Later in Genesis, God promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numberless as the stars, and we read, Abraham "believed the LORD and the LORD reckoned it at him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). In the New Testament Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of someone who is justified by faith, and claims that justification by faith is the primary way that God brings salvation (e.g., Rom 4). The Letter to the Hebrews makes the same point. In faith Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, and through Abraham God even illustrated the profound truth that dying for God leads to resurrection (Heb 11:8-19).

Nevertheless, as the stories in Genesis about Abraham and his descendants continue, the characters engage in more and more evil behavior. For his own selfish benefit Abraham repeatedly lies about his wife, claiming that she is only his sister. Jacob disguises himself as his older brother Esau and tricks their father into giving him the blessing which Jacob intended to give to his first-born. Most disturbing of all, Joseph's brothers throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery.

Yet, God is able even to use sin to accomplish his saving purposes. God enriches Abraham through his misrepresentation of his wife. Pharaoh temporarily takes her into his harem and rewards Abraham. Later the king of Gerar also takes her into his harem and gives Abraham vast sums of money. Though Jacob's deceit God accomplishes part of his divine plan. Before Jacob and his older brother are even born, God tells their mother that her younger son will end up being the greater. By using deceit to obtain the blessing of the first-born Jacob furthers divine providence. When Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, they set off a series of events through which God saves the entire family. Joseph is taken to Egypt. There divinely guided incidents raise him to a position of great power. He then uses that power to preserve his brothers and the rest of the family when they otherwise would have perished in a famine. Indeed, at the end of the story Joseph explicitly tells his brothers that even though they intended to do evil, God intended through their evil to accomplish good (Gen 50:20).

However, in the stories God only uses sin to accomplish good after the sinner has recognized his fault. When Abraham tries to pass off his wife as his sister, both Pharaoh and the King of Gerar discover the deception and confront Abraham with his sin. After Jacob defrauds his brother of his birthright, Jacob wrestles with an angel and becomes a new person with the new name of Israel. Then he has to receive his older brother's undeserved forgiveness. Jacob is afraid that his older brother will kill him, but instead his older brother is gracious toward him. Finally, at the end of the story of Joseph his brothers beg for his forgiveness and even offer to serve him as slaves, and Joseph forgives them completely.

Hence, Genesis suggests that human beings must not decide for themselves what is good and

evil but instead recognize both their own evil and the possibility that God has the power even to use evil for good. We must recognize our own evil choices and not pretend that they are virtuous. When we sin, we must admit our fault and ask for forgiveness. But we must also recognize that God can accomplish his purposes even through our evil once we have recognized it and asked for pardon. The snake tempted Adam and Eve to eat from the fruit which would allow them to decide arbitrarily what was good and what was evil. The snake tempted the couple to become God. We must learn from their mistake. We must not call evil good, but we must also recognize that God has the power that we lack and can bring good out of evil.

What Genesis illustrates becomes the central message of the New Testament and of Christianity. The world committed the supreme evil when it crucified God's son who came to save it. But God used that evil to demonstrate his infinite love and forgiveness for sinners. However, sinners can only benefit from that supreme gift when they recognize their failings and ask for pardon. In the Acts of the Apostles after God gives the Holy Spirit to the Church, Peter tells the crowds that they are guilty of crucifying God's savior. They are "pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:37) and ask what they must do now. Peter tells them to repent, and when they do, they receive salvation. Paul argues that the salvation that Christ brought cannot be compared to the salvation that Adam lost. What Christ gave us was infinitely greater. On the basis of such reflections classical theology insisted that Adam's fall was, at least in retrospect, a *felix culpa*, a happy fall. Adam's sin was the precondition of a final and glorious salvation.

Today we can no longer maintain that the world was originally good, but as Christians we can continue to hope that God can bring good out of all the evil there has been. We now know,

unlike the author of Genesis, that there never was a perfect world. Ever since the origin of life, there has been suffering in some sense. Certainly since the beginning of human consciousness there have always been physical pain and emotional heartache. Moreover, only some of this suffering can be blamed on sinful choices. If we are going to have a completely optimistic view of the ultimate future, we will have to believe that God can use even all of this past evil for good. And that is the Christian hope.

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Reflection and discussion questions: From a Christian perspective is criminal justice desirable? What are the benefits and the problems of punishing people for crime? Do we agree with the biblical view that evil does not arise from human nature as God intended it to be? Would humans still do evil if we opened ourselves fully to his love and trusted him completely? Can we think of examples of people sinning because they believe that they know everything or, at least, that they should know everything? Can we think of examples of people sinning because they believe that there is something exquisitely wonderful that they can only experience through violence, exploitative sex, illegal drugs, or some other form of evil? Does evil appear to be more exciting than good from the outside? Is it in reality more exciting when we experience it from the inside? What are the strengths and weaknesses of teaching religious ideas and values through stories? Have there been times in our own lives when to overcome evil we had to trust God even though we did not know how things would turn out? Are individuals always tempted to redefine good and evil to suit their own selfish agendas? Do groups do the same? What happens when they do? What would it be like to live in a world where even God could not bring good out of evil? Can we think of occasions in our own past



lives, whether as individuals or communities, when we recognized our sin, repented of it, and then something good came even out of the evil we committed? How does it change our attitude toward life if we believe that ultimately God will bring good out of all the evil that has occurred?

### Chapter 3: Evil--and how to overcome it--in the Priestly and Prophetic Traditions

The heart of the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament is the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Genesis looks forward to these events. In Genesis we have an explicit foretelling of the great event of Exodus, namely God delivering the Israelites from slavery. In chapter 15 of Genesis Abraham experiences a horrifying darkness. God explains that Abraham's descendants will be in bondage in an alien nation for hundreds of years, but then God will pass judgment on that nation and bring the Israelites back to the homeland which God will give them (Gen 15:12-16). Genesis ends with Joseph reminding his brothers that God will bring them out of Egypt in order to give their descendants the promised land (Gen 50:24). The biblical books after Exodus frequently look back on God delivering the Israelites from slavery and giving them the law. Sometimes the Old Testament retells the story (e.g., Psalm 136:10-15). More often the Old Testament condemns the Israelites for forgetting all that God did for them and for disregarding the commandments that he gave.

In Exodus we get the two central ideas of the Old Testament, namely monotheism and the choosing of Israel. Genesis often presupposes that there is only one God, but it never explicitly says so, and Genesis never outlaws worshipping other deities. By contrast, when God gives the commandments in Exodus, the first is to worship no other deity (Exod 20:3). A refrain in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons is that God will make their descendants a great nation. It is in Exodus that the Israelites become a people, rather than only an extended family. And it is in Exodus that God and the Israelites make a solemn covenant in which he will be their exclusive god, and they will be his special people.

In the biblical account, both monotheism and the choosing of Israel are intimately related to being ethical. The God of Israel differs from other deities because he is righteous. A theme in the Bible is that the God of Israel especially is the patron of the marginal, the poor, the orphan, the widow, the resident alien. The gods of other nations do not seem to share such concerns. Within the biblical narrative the worship of other gods leads to the crushing of the poor. Historically the demand that the Israelites worship only their god may have originated from the experience of slavery and liberation. When some of the ancestors of the Israelites<sup>5</sup> were in Egypt, the Egyptian gods supported their oppressors. Indeed, the ruler of Egypt himself was understood to be a god. Only the God of the Israelites supported the slaves. Later the fact that God supported the Israelites when they were in slavery became an explicit justification for supporting the marginal in Israel itself. For example, we read, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 22:21).

In the Exodus tradition, evil occurs because the chosen people do not obey God's Law. As part of the covenant between God and Israel, God gives to the Israelites a legal code. The code is extensive, filling the later chapters of Exodus and much of the next three biblical books. These long texts make it clear that following the law leads to good--both because of the inherent righteousness of God's commandments and because God gives to those who obey him such blessings as health and bountiful harvests. By contrast, disobeying the commandments is evil in itself and it leads to divine punishment which encompasses every

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5 Probably only a few of the ancestors of Israel actually were slaves in Egypt. When other groups joined Israel later, they accepted the national story as their own story. We have a parallel in American history. Only a small percentage of Americans today are descended from the English colonists who successfully rebelled against the British monarchy and produced a constitution guaranteeing individual rights. However, when vast numbers of immigrants became Americans, they accepted the story of the English colonists as their own story.

sort of disaster.

Nevertheless, the Israelites often disobey the law. Indeed, the disobedience begins as soon as the Law itself is given. Just after God gives the law that the Israelites must not worship any image (Exod 20:4-5, 23), the Israelites make a golden calf and worship it (Exod 32).

As the story of the golden calf already makes clear, the cause of the disobedience in the biblical account is arrogance and lack of faith. After the Israelites make the golden calf, God condemns them as "stiff-necked" (Exod 32:9), and the metaphor of the disobedient Israelites being "stiff-necked" recurs often in the Bible thereafter. Stiff-necked implies an unwillingness to bow, an unwillingness humbly to accept God's leadership. That unwillingness seems to have a double causation. On the one hand, the Israelites are unwilling to submit. They stubbornly want to do things their own way. On the other hand, the Israelites do not trust. They do not believe God's promise that he will bless them if they do his will and punish them if they do not.

According to the biblical account, in the Exodus God showed both his love for Israel and his consuming wrath toward those who disobey him. God had compassion on the Israelites when they were in slavery, even though they were not a great nation. He divided the sea so the Israelites could escape from the armies of Pharaoh. He worked miracles to provide the Israelites with water and food in the desert. God also demonstrated how he severely he punishes those who refuse to obey him. When the Pharaoh did not heed God's call to let his chosen people go, God rained down terrifying plagues on the Egyptians, culminating in the slaughter of the firstborn. When Pharaoh's armies pursued the fleeing Israelites, God

drowned Egypt's troops in the sea. Later when the Israelites themselves railed against God in the desert, God repeatedly punished them. For example, he sent poisonous snakes among them.

Consequently, the Exodus challenges the Israelites to keep God's laws both because of love and of fear. Because of all the compassion God showed toward his people in the Exodus, his people should love him, and that love should lead to obedience to his laws. The preface to the Ten Commandments reads, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). Later in Deuteronomy Moses in recalling the events of the Exodus tells the Israelites that they are to love the LORD their God with all their "heart," "soul," and "might" (Deut 6:4) and show this love by keeping God's decrees. Moses also reminds the Israelites that they should fear God, for God will surely punish Israel for disobedience. If God did not spare the Egyptians for defying him when they had no special relationship with him, how much less will God spare the Israelites for disobedience after they have become his chosen people by making a binding covenant with him? God himself warns, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight . . . I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians (Exod 15:26).

Therefore, according to the Exodus tradition, the solution to evil is humbly remembering all that God has done for Israel and obeying his laws so that he will continue to bless the nation. Faithful remembering is the key to salvation. Consequently, in connection with the Exodus God commands the Israelites to celebrate the Passover as a perpetual remembrance. In generations to come when the Israelites celebrate the Passover and their children inquire as to

its meaning, their parents are to explain that God struck down the Egyptians but passed over (spared) the Israelites. Similarly in Exodus God commands the Israelites to preserve a jar of manna to be kept as a lasting reminder.

In the biblical tradition as a whole, memory is especially important in times when God seems to have deserted his people. The covenant tradition stresses that when Israel forgets the commandments and worships other gods, he will severely punish the Israelites so that they will remember and return to him. Therefore, disaster is not an invitation to forget God who seems to have forgotten us. Instead, disaster is an invitation to remember and repent. Of course, a weakness of covenantal theology in general is that it assumes that disaster only occurs because of sin. In reality, sometimes disaster befalls Israel or the Church or the individual when they have in fact been faithful to God. When undeserved disaster strikes it can seem like God no longer cares or no longer is able to help. In such times, God's people must recall that there have been better times in the past and, therefore, there can be better times in the future. Memory is the basis for hope. This theme appears especially in the Psalms of lament. The Psalmist laments the present individual or national catastrophe. Then the Psalmist remembers a better time when God was obviously present and gave victory and prosperity and good health, and all was well. And the Psalmist looks forward to future salvation.

Today we might especially emphasize the important of remembering during times when we no longer have an inner sense of God's presence. The covenantal tradition focused on the outward signs. God primarily showed his approval by giving such tangible blessings as good harvests. Today we realize that such things often have little to do with one's religious life.

Hence, in the modern world our sense of God's presence depends more on an inner awareness. That inner awareness ebbs and flows. Probably in the life of every Christian individual and community there are periods when we do not sense the love and inner peace which for us are the primary signs of God presence. God seems totally absent. During such times Christian individuals and communities must live by memory and hope. We must remember the joy and security we experienced when God seemed wonderfully near, and this memory will inspire the hope that in due time we will feel the presence of God again.

Much of biblical law consists of basic ethical principles and special regulations to protect the vulnerable. The commandments, of course, forbid crimes which make harmonious social interaction impossible and are outlawed in all societies: murder, adultery, stealing, and the like. The commandments also have special requirements designed to help those in greatest need. For example, the agricultural laws forbid harvesters to return to gather a forgotten sheaf of grain or pick olives that did not fall when the trees were beaten. These remnants are to be left "for the alien, the orphan, and the widow" (Deut 24:20).

Today we have the obligation to maintain the spirit of these laws, but may have to make some cultural adjustments. Naturally, we must continue to forbid crimes that make harmonious social interaction impossible and must have regulations to protect the vulnerable. However, we should now forbid crimes that were unknown in the biblical period. The Mosaic code knows nothing about painting swastikas on synagogues or taunting homosexuals as "fags," but today we recognize (or, at least, should recognize) that such actions are hate crimes and need to be illegal. Similarly, the laws about gleaning may not be appropriate in modern society where most farming is mechanized. However, we need to make some provision to

enable the poor to have at least bare necessities.

Much of the Mosaic Law dictates an ethnic lifestyle. Every culture has its distinctive dress, cuisine, and other customs. For example, Americans have the ethnic custom of eating cows and sheep but not dogs and cats. The divine law in the Hebrew Scriptures has regulations concerning how to dress, what not to eat, and so forth. These regulations only apply to Israelites and are to make them a distinctive ("holy") people.

Today we can appreciate these laws for two reasons. First, they encourage Jews to maintain their own cultural heritage. Second, by implication, they endorse cultural diversity in general as part of God's will. The world would be a much poorer place if all people observed the same customs. The differences between cultural traditions add immeasurably to the quality of our common life as human beings. For example, the different national cuisines making eating in a multi-cultural world so much more interesting! The ethnic regulations in the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that such diversity, which is so pleasing to us today, is also pleasing to God.

Much of the divine law concerns the technicalities of worship and historically was passed on by priests. The Bible gives long and minute instructions about a shrine consisting of a sacred chest, called an ark, the tent in which it dwells, and various accouterments. There are detailed regulations about priests and sacrifices and the observances of Holy Days, especially the Day of Atonement. There are many rules about how one gets into a state of ritual purity to be fit to enter the sacred spaces in which the most solemn types of worship occur. Historically, it was primarily the priests who kept these detailed cultic rules and taught them to lay people.



In the subsequent stories, God sometimes punishes violations of the cultic law unmercifully. In Leviticus 10:1-3 two priests offer incense without preparing the fire according to the prescribed procedures, and God burns them alive. In 2 Samuel 6:6-7 an attendant tries to steady the ark, and because he is not a priest and is not authorized to touch it, God kills him.

The cultic law in the Hebrew Scriptures did instill a reverence for God in people of ancient times and still should instill such reverence today. For the ancient Hebrews, God was so great that an ordinary person ought not presume to approach his sacred space. The restriction of access to the ark to priests instilled a sense of the otherness and fearfulness of God. The required gold and incense and sacred vestments and so forth certainly produced in the ancient worshiper--and should produce in the modern reader--a sense of the supreme value of God. God is so precious that no amount of honor could be excessive.

Especially the prohibition of images and God's mysterious name makes the wondrous otherness of God dramatically evident. God is so unlike anything in heaven or earth that it would be misleading--it would be blasphemous--to portray him with a physical representation. Hence, the ten greatest commandments begin by forbidding the making of any divine image. God is so unlike anyone that the Bible uses the verb "to be" to explain the meaning of his proper name YHWH. When Moses asks God to reveal his divine name, God replies, "I am what I am" (Exod 3:13-15). God cannot be limited. In subsequent tradition the original divine name became so sacred that it ceased to be pronounced, and we can no longer be certain what the vowels in it were!

Nevertheless, from a modern Christian perspective the cultic regulations in the Hebrew

Scriptures are problematic for scholarly, confessional, and pastoral reasons. Critical scholarship suggests that much of the cultic law did not come from a special divine revelation to Moses but instead reflected the religious customs of the era. Perhaps something does go back to Moses's unique religious experience. I suspect that the prohibition of making images ultimately stems from Moses's own encounter with God--a God who was too "other" to be likened to something in the natural world. However, most of what we read about sacrifices, sacred objects, and so forth is probably what was typical in contemporary religion. For example, modern scholarship has compared the sacred tent and the ark respectively to divine tents and divine thrones/footstools in other ancient Near Eastern cultures (Seow 388-389).

Some of what the cultic law in the Hebrew Bible dictates seems superstitious to us. The divinely appointed priestly attire included a pouch and two lots for divination. The priest would determine God's answer to a question by somehow randomly selecting a lot or by tossing the lots like dice.

Modern scholarship suggests that much of the material about the cult reflects power struggles among the ancient clergy rather than God's will. The laws or stories about God choosing certain lineages to have priestly authority and rejecting others or choosing certain groups (e.g., the House of Aaron) to have supreme authority seem to be subsequent justifications for institutional status gained through political victory rather than divine selection.

The New Testament, and, especially, Hebrews, insists that the coming of Christ has done away with the old cult. Christ is the One Priest, who offers the One Sacrifice, in the One Temple, the heavenly one. The Old Testament cultic law was a temporary measure that is no longer in

force for Christians.

In recent times we have become much more aware of the importance of not enslaving the liturgy to meticulous performance. It was not that long ago that exactly following the rubrics was the most important thing in the liturgy of various denominations. For example, in the Catholic Church, prior to Vatican II, if a priest made a serious mistake in the Mass, he committed a mortal sin. Consequently, the emphasis was on correct performance. The most important thing was to do the rites properly so that there would be no question that the sacrament was "valid." We now realize that this punctiliousness made the liturgy seem stilted and got in the way of a deep encounter with a loving and forgiving God.

Finally, beginning already with St. Paul there has been a continuing awareness in church history that what matters most in worship is the intention that rites express rather than the specific rites themselves. In writing to the Romans Paul notes that some Christians in that church observe special holy days, whereas other Christians do not. And Paul insists that both groups are worshipping properly, because both intend to honor God. Down through the ages many Christians have agreed with Paul's perspective that in liturgy intentions are more important than outward correctness.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that with caution we can affirm the following about the continuing validity of ceremonial law (whether in the Old Testament or in some more recent school of ritual). We can only meet God as we are. Culture determines most of who we are, whether as individuals or as communities. If a child in the contemporary United States was taken at birth to the Amazon jungle and given to a stone-age tribe, the infant would remain

biologically the same but in all other respects would become completely different than if raised at home. Because culture determines most of who human beings are, we must express our relationship with God in cultural forms. Different cultures have distinctive customs and meanings. For example, in my own tradition as an Episcopalian, white is the color which symbolizes joy, and, therefore, it is customary to use white vestments and altar hangings for such triumphant festivals as Christmas and Easter. In traditional Chinese culture white is the color of mourning. Consequently, each culture will have its own forms of worship which incarnate its special history and how that history has colored its encounter with the Holy. A culture in which white symbolizes mourning might choose a different color to express the joy of Jesus's birth or resurrection. Of course, it is necessary to cleanse each cultural tradition from superstition and selfish interests. The Old Testament is not the only liturgical guide which reflects spiritual ignorance and political rationalization! Nevertheless, we must respect cultural traditions both because they express the wisdom of the past and its spiritual depth and because they make people who they presently are. And so we should retain as much of liturgical tradition as is compatible with sound theology and present pastoral needs.

When cultic practices are a sincere expression of a genuine spiritual commitment, they have great power. Recently, I presided at a wedding. As is customary in my church, the bride and the groom both placed a ring on the other's hand and said in front of everyone, "I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you in the Name of God." As this was going on, I felt how solemn and important this simple ceremony was. It bound the couple to each other and to God in a deep and (one hopes) lasting way.

Much of the power of cultic practices comes from their trappings. For example, at a wedding

the formal attire, the often elaborate music, the slow procession of the bride, the flowers, and all the prior preparations necessary for these things give to the proceedings a solemnity, a weight which is impressive.

Hence, we may agree with the biblical witness that a source of evil is the failure to instill a reverence for God and justice by means of formal ceremonies. I suspect that a lack of regular liturgy is one cause of the decadence of secular American culture. In the contemporary United States, people feel free to live together without having a wedding or to dispose of a loved one's remains without having a formal funeral. I fear that something fundamental is lost and that there may be large unseen consequences.

The prophetic tradition in the Bible especially condemns two related sins: worshipping other gods and oppressing the poor. The prophets never tire of condemning the Israelites for worshipping Baal (the Canaanite god of thunder, rain, and fertility) and Asherah (a fertility goddess)<sup>6</sup> and other deities. For example, Hosea speaking for God constantly berates Israel for forsaking her true husband YHWH and whoring after Baal. At the same time, the prophets condemn the Israelites for oppressing the helpless. For example, Amos in the name of God blasts the Israelites for crushing the poor and turning aside the afflicted (Amos 2:7). Of course, as we have already seen, these types of sin are closely connected. Since YHWH is the patron of the poor, whereas other deities have little concern for social injustice, worshipping other gods tends to reinforce the exploitation of the marginal.

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<sup>6</sup> Often in the Hebrew Bible "Asherah" refers not to the goddess herself but to her chief symbol, a wooden pole used in worship.

In much of the prophetic tradition the neglect of monotheism and social justice is due to the false conviction that engaging in the proper worship of YHWH is enough to satisfy him. The prophets do not claim that the Israelites are failing to worship YHWH. Historically, it is likely that the Israelites never stopped worshipping their national god, no matter how much devotion they lavished on other deities. Indeed, sometimes one gets the impression that the worship of YHWH was almost excessive. Amos speaks sarcastically about God's weariness with the Israelites' celebration of his festivals and solemn assemblies, Israel's sacrifices and offerings, and the sacred music (Amos 5:21-23). Apparently, most people felt that as long as they were giving YHWH the proper religious rites, he had no grounds for complaint.

The conviction that YHWH is primarily concerned with proper worship also led to the popular notion that he would never allow his temple to be destroyed, and, therefore, the prophetic tradition had to question this notion. If what YHWH primarily wishes is grand worship, popular opinion reasoned that he would never allow that worship to diminish. Most assuredly, he would protect the great temple at Jerusalem where his worship was most lavish. Hence, a prophet like Jeremiah had to attack the notion that God would defend the temple regardless. Instead, Jeremiah insisted that God was primarily concerned about social justice and exclusive devotion to him. Only if the Israelites stopped oppressing the widow and the orphan and stopped worshipping Baal, would God defend the temple. If the Israelites continued to sin, God would destroy his house at Jerusalem, just as he had destroyed his shrines elsewhere in the past.

Underlying the popular opinion seems to be a theology that God is analogous to a selfish human being. Just as selfish human beings are content as long as we give them ample money,

flattery, and so forth, and selfish humans do not care about how we treat others, so God is content as long as we satisfy his selfish agenda.

Consequently, the prophetic tradition assumes that evil results from substituting an egoistic image of God for the righteous and holy God who actually is. Sinful people assume that God is satisfied with flattery and mechanical devotions. Sinful people assume that God does not notice or care about their wicked desertion of this laws. Sinful people assume that God does not mind if they make something else more important than he is and that he will not respond by handing them over to the destructive consequences of their sin. People heedlessly do wrong because they do not know who God truly is.

In response to the righteousness of God, the covenant tradition insists that the solution to sin is proportional punishment. A principle of covenantal law was that the punishment should fit the crime as closely as possible. We see that principle clearly expressed in the words from Deuteronomy, "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deut 19:21). Ideally, human courts would set things right by administering such stern justice. By doing so they would show no favoritism and impose the equal justice which a righteous God demanded.

However, equal justice seldom occurred in a society where there was vast social inequality, and in practice the system often fostered injustice in the name of God. The powerful and the wealthy were able to impose severe penalties on the weak, whereas the weak seldom could defend any of the their rights. The judicial system which was supposed to impose God's justice became itself an instrument of injustice. The elite appealed to God's laws to justify

wickedness. Amos complains, "In the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed" (2:8).

Since the nation was not administering justice, the prophets predicted that God would himself punish the nation as a whole. In response to injustice perpetrated in God's own name, God would have to defend his holiness by bring calamity on society as a whole.

Unfortunately, the idea that God is supremely righteous and holy and must punish sin became itself a source of sin once God had handed his people over to destruction. When the people of Israel refused to repent, God responded by taking away their independence and sending them into exile. Then they realized their mistake. However, when they recognized how grievously they had sinned and how holy God was, they despaired. They feared that there was no hope of restoration. The sins of their ancestors and their own sins were too grave and so difficult to give up that a restoration of the covenant was impossible. To use the picturesque language of the day, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek 18:2).

Consequently, the prophets in response had to insist that God was even greater than the covenant he made. God could make a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). God was not bound by what the Israelites deserved. God was not like the Israelites either in his justice or his mercy. He was bound by his own infinite compassion. We read in the later chapters of Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:9). Nor was God bound by the weakness of the Israelites. So



powerful was God that he would transform the hearts of the Israelites and the Israelites would keep his Law. So powerful was God that he would make Israel "a light to the nations" and through Israel bring salvation "to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6).

We may now say in summary that in both the priestly and prophetic traditions the source of sin is disobedience. The priestly and prophetic traditions look back to the commandments that in the Bible God gives to Moses as part of the Covenant between YHWH and Israel. The priestly tradition focuses on the commandments concerning the details of worship. The prophetic tradition focuses on the commandments that God gave to protect the marginal and also focuses on the spirit of compassion for the vulnerable that underlies these commandments. Both traditions assume that sin begins with disobedience to God's Law.

Moreover, both traditions assume that Israel can choose to obey. Here the words of God in Deuteronomy are especially instructive: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30:11,14).

Disobedience comes from forgetting who the God of Israel actually is, and the antidote to sin is remembering. People forget the otherness of God. They attempt to reduce him to a visible image or they attempt to combine worship of him with the worship of other deities. The Israelites forget that YHWH fills heaven and earth, cannot be compared with other deities, and is a jealous God. People forget God's compassion for the marginal and assume that mere rituals will satisfy YHWH. In reality without justice and compassion nothing will placate God. However, when the Israelites experience God's righteous wrath and realize their sin and

despair, they forget God's infinite forgiveness. Hence, the solution to sin is remembering who God is and that the God of our limited imaginations is not the Supreme God who actually exists.

The Covenantal tradition assumes that Israel will go through cycles of forgetting and remembering. God's holy people will forget. Then God will punish them. After he does, the people will remember and repent, and God will restore the blessings that he took away.

Although much of what we have seen above continues to be important, from a Christian perspective two correctives are needed. First, for Christians the central revelation of God is not the Exodus and the giving of the law on Sinai. Instead, for us the central revelation of God is the death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of his Spirit. Second, a Christian might have reservations about whether obedience--even obedience to what God commands in the Bible--is necessarily a virtue. At the Nuremberg Trials, Nazi murderers tried to defend themselves by pleading that they were only following orders. No doubt it is normally ethical to follow orders, but some orders are so unethical that no one should follow them. Instead, human beings must have some higher moral standard and recognize that sometimes orders are themselves the source of evil. In the Old Testament even some of the orders that God himself gives must from a Christian perspective be considered evil. For example, in Deuteronomy God through Moses orders the Israelites to slaughter all the native peoples of Canaan in order to avoid being corrupted by their religion (e.g., Deut 7:1-4). Today we clearly realize that slaughtering the aborigines simply because they follow a different religion which might attract Christians is surely wrong. We are also relieved that modern scholarship has concluded that the accounts of the Israelites slaughtering the aborigines in Canaan in

response to God's commandment are not historical. The stories of God ordering the Israelites to slaughter Pagans arose at a later time as a warning to the orthodox. The orthodox must not give up their faith and adopt the polytheism and lack of concern for the marginal that characterized other religion.

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Reflection and discussion questions: What is the continuing significance of God revealing himself by liberating slaves in the Exodus story? How should Christians view the Mosaic Law today? What has God done for us that should cause us to obey him in thanksgiving? Should we be afraid of disobeying God? How can we respect the "otherness" of God and not reduce him to something which is a product of the limitations of our own culture, social class, or personal preference? Can we think of anything in contemporary worship that is merely due to superstition or the selfish interests of church leaders rather than a genuine openness to God? How can we allow different groups to worship in their own cultural style and still preserve the unity of the larger Church? Do people in secular American culture suffer from a lack of ritual, and, if so, what are the consequences? Are there committed Christians today who are zealous in worshiping God but show no concern for the needs of the poor or even support political positions which harm the marginal? How do such Christians justify their lack of concern for social justice? What is their vision of God, and does it honor both the universality of God and his "otherness"? In our society do vast inequalities in power and wealth sometimes cause the legal system to impose injustice on the marginal, and is that injustice then defended in the Name of God? Do some people today become so overwhelmed in their awareness of their guilt that they can not accept God's forgiveness? What should we say to such people? When

is obedience a virtue, and when is it not?

## Chapter 4: Evil--and how to overcome it--in the Wisdom Books of the Bible

For the ancient Israelites, a major source of knowledge was "wisdom," perspectives that came from ethical reflection on actual experience. The authors of Israelite wisdom texts were passionately concerned with ethics. Wisdom texts constantly reflect on what is right and what is wrong. Frequently, they advise the reader to do what is right. Nevertheless, these same texts study what actually happens to people (rather than what should happen). On the basis of such observation, the wisdom writings struggle with the question of whether in actual fact being ethical leads to a reward.

We may conveniently divide the biblical wisdom tradition into three categories which are roughly sequential. The earliest wisdom mostly asserts that ethical conduct naturally leads to earthly rewards, such as prosperity, public approval, good health, and a long life. The largest collection of this early optimistic ("orthodox") wisdom is Proverbs. The next phase of wisdom literature in the Bible questions whether in fact virtue leads to an earthly reward. This skeptical wisdom is especially found in Ecclesiastes and Job. Then there is late wisdom, especially as found in Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. These books did not become part of the Jewish Bible, but did enter the Bible that the early Church used. Subsequently, they have remained canonical for Catholics and Eastern Christians, but in Protestantism were consigned to the Apocrypha. These late wisdom books assert that virtue leads to a reward, but the reward is not necessarily in the general world but instead in a closed society or in a heavenly realm.

Proverbs boldly asserts that folly is the origin of both sin and misery. When we sin against others, we not only hurt them. We also set in motion a series of events which inevitably bring disaster on ourselves. Sinners "set an ambush--for their own lives!" (1:18). When we act without reflection even if we do not sin, we end up hurting ourselves. "Fools die for lack of sense" (10:21). Therefore, no sensible person would act without reflection, and certainly no sensible person would sin.

To avoid acting foolishly, we must study the tested wisdom of the past. For Proverbs the great intellectual temptation is to trust one's own limited insight. In our ignorance we assume that our own judgment is reliable. Unfortunately, this judgment is based only on the experience of a single person. The accumulated wisdom of the past is far more reliable. Hence, we must have the humility to acknowledge the greater understanding of those who have studied and recorded the insights of previous generations and of people who have lived longer than we have and have greater experience. We must devote ourselves to the study of this treasury of knowledge. Of course, Proverbs itself is such a treasury. Indeed, sometimes it appeals to the antiquity and authority of specific figures in the past. In chapter 25, for example, a collection of wisdom has the preface, "These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied." Here it is to be noted that at least in tradition Solomon was supremely wise, and King Hezekiah was especially righteous.

To avoid acting foolishly, we must not allow our impulses to overrule our reason. Proverbs assumes that once we know what action is wise we can certainly do it. But the impulse to do something else can be strong. Self-discipline is essential.

To keep our destructive impulses under control, we must reflect on the consequences of giving in to them. Proverbs frequently warns us of the results of laziness. We must not be lazy because experience teaches that sloth inevitably results in financial ruin. "A little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber" (6:11). Proverbs warns even more frequently and emphatically of the disaster that adultery produces. Proverbs notes that adultery can be tempting. The book contains entertaining passages (e.g., 7:6-27) that portray the loose woman attempting to seduce someone. She may assure him that her husband will never know and she has already perfumed her bed with spices. However, Proverbs insists that giving in to such blandishments will lead to catastrophe. The husband will surely find out. He will be absolutely implacable. The adulterer will come to complete ruin. To avoid the catastrophic results that adultery will lead to, we should reflect on them before giving in to the allure of the promiscuous woman. Unfortunately, the patriarchal perspective of Proverbs keeps it from reflecting on the disaster that can result from giving in to the allure of the promiscuous man!

To avoid acting foolishly we must also revere God who rewards those who obey him and punishes those who do not. A refrain in Proverbs is that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (e.g., 1:7). Here "fear" includes a respect that leads to obedience. We should "fear" God because ultimately he is in control. To the ignorant it appears that they can achieve success and avoid failure solely by their own efforts. However, the wise know that how things actually turn out--as opposed to how we plan for them to turn out--depends on God. "The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps" (16:9).

Since God wishes for us to worship him faithfully and to be just and merciful to others, it is in

our self interest to do so. Although Proverbs, unlike the priestly and the prophetic writings, does not appeal to the Exodus tradition, the ethics of that tradition are still apparent. Proverbs never ceases to admonish us to fulfill our vows to God and to be generous to the poor and needy. God will reward us for doing so. "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD and will be repaid in full" (19:17).

Finally, to avoid acting foolishly and coming to disaster, we must focus on the long term and patiently wait for the vindication of virtue. Proverbs tacitly admits that in the short run sin can be more pleasant than virtue. The wicked may have brief prosperity, and the adulterer, brief bliss. But again and again Proverbs emphasizes that the happiness of the wicked does not last. In almost no time the wicked will come to utter ruin and the righteous will receive an exemplary reward. "When the tempest passes, the wicked are no more, but the righteous are established forever" (10:25). Therefore, as we consider how we are going to behave, we should reflect on the ultimate consequences of our actions and have the self-discipline to defer pleasure in the immediate future if that is the result of our virtuous--and wise--decisions.

While (as we will now see) the wisdom of Proverbs has its limitations, respect for the experience of others, self-discipline, faithfulness to God, and patience in awaiting one's reward remain vital. I believe that the relative scarcity of these virtues explains much of our contemporary social problems in the United States. We live in a society that on the whole does the opposite of what Proverbs advocates. At least it appears that many people assume that they can do the things that led to disaster for others and get away with it. We lack self-discipline, and demand instant gratification. We give in to momentary impulses and enter into sexual relationships with no commitment. We go from one religious fad to the next



without making the sustained effort that is necessary for serious spiritual progress. The predictable results, estranged relationships, neglected children, social diseases, meaninglessness, and depression are always with us. The advice of Proverbs may seem old fashioned, but I believe it is the advice that we need to follow to create a new and better society.

In response to orthodox wisdom, heterodox wisdom points out that in practice often virtuous and wise individuals suffer permanent disaster and often the wicked prosper even in the long run. If we abandon the fairy-tale mentality that justice always occurs and look at the way the world actually works, we discover that there is no necessary correlation between virtue and well being. As Ecclesiastes notes, "There are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing" (7:15). Indeed, sometimes there is a reverse correlation between goodness and happiness. "There are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous" (8:14). Of course, for Christians the supreme illustration of this sad reversal is the suffering and ridicule that Jesus experienced on the cross.

In response to the unpredictability of the rewards of virtue and vice Ecclesiastes emphasizes the importance of enjoying present pleasures as God's gift. Ecclesiastes never descends to advocating that the reader should sin even if the reader is only concerned about selfish gain. Sometimes sin does lead to an earthly reward, but sometimes it does not. Ultimately, God decides, and we cannot fathom what he does and why. What we do know is that God has created many innocent opportunities for enjoyment and human beings should take advantage

of them. "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart" (Eccl. 9:7). And we should take advantage of legitimate pleasure soon. Old age will bring misery and decay. Death will end everything. Therefore, Ecclesiastes advises, "Let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth" (11:9).

From a Christian perspective a weakness of Ecclesiastes is that it does not appeal to eternal life in its discussion of whether virtue is ultimately rewarded and wickedness ultimately punished. Of course, a Christian can agree that in this present earthly life there is no necessary correlation between virtue and reward. Indeed, people are especially virtuous if they do what is right knowing that the result will be earthly suffering. But Christian faith insists that we can know about eternal life. It is certain that there will be a final judgment and goodness will have its reward and evil its recompense.

Nevertheless, a Christian can agree with Ecclesiastes about the importance of enjoying present pleasure as God's gift. Jesus himself warned us that we have little control of what will happen tomorrow and that, therefore, we must concentrate on today. He himself was famous for enjoying dinner parties, so much so that his critics dismissed him as a glutton and a drunk. Condemning innocent pleasure is not in keeping with Christ's example. Virtue may be more important than pleasure, but pleasure too is God's gift.

Even more stridently than Ecclesiastes the Book of Job insists that sometimes the righteous suffer. Indeed, in the book it is precisely Job's exemplary goodness that leads to his exemplary agony. When the book begins, God boasts to Satan that no one on earth is as righteous as Job. In response Satan insists that Job is only righteous because righteousness

has led to so many earthly rewards for him. If God takes away Job's blessings, Job will curse God. God gives Satan permission to test Job by seeing if Job will remain faithful in the midst of suffering. Satan then crushes Job with horrifying calamity, including the loss of all of his property, the death of his children, and a consuming skin disease.

The Book of Job makes the important point that much evil comes from blaming the victim, and that, therefore, orthodox wisdom uncritically applied can in practice become an origin for evil. In line with orthodox wisdom Job's friends believe that virtue always leads to earthly happiness and wickedness always leads to earthly sorrow. Since Job is experiencing sorrow in its most extreme form, his friends urge him to repent assuring him that if he does his fortunes will improve. When Job insists that he is innocent--which the reader knows to be the case--his friends refuse to reconsider their theology. Instead, they blame Job for lurid crimes and even claim that he is suffering less than his wickedness deserves. Of course, such assaults on Job's character increase his suffering.

In response to the undeserved blame, Job himself appeals against orthodox wisdom to God to vindicate him, and in the end God does. Job dismisses the claim of Orthodox wisdom that the righteous receive a reward and the wicked suffer. Instead, Job insists that experience teaches the opposite. The wicked live in prosperity and security and die in old age, and Job paints a moving picture of how the poor and defenseless suffer at their hands. In response to his friends' objection that Job is blasphemously calling the justice of God into question, Job increasingly appeals to God himself. At first his appeals are tentative. He has no referee to make God play fair and answer his questions. Later he becomes convinced that God will side with him and that God is angry with his friends for lying. In the end, God does appear and

declares that Job has spoken the truth and that his friends have not. Job's friends must offer a sacrifice, and Job must pray for them so that God will not punish them for their sin.

Hence, from a larger perspective Job implies that in a world in which evil is sometimes rewarded and goodness punished, we must appeal to God for ultimate vindication. Once again we have the theme that we have already seen in connection with other biblical books that evil results from substituting a limited concept of God for the wonderful and paradoxical God that actually is. We must not reduce our vision of God to make sense of an unjust world. Instead, we must respond to an unjust world by appealing to the majestic otherness of God. Though making this appeal our vindication comes.

However, at least in the Book of Job, it is not clear what this vindication consists of and what the theological implications of that vindication are. Is Job's reward only the knowledge that he has done what is right? Throughout the book Job insists on his own integrity, and in the end God confirms it. Is the book claiming then that those who suffer for their righteousness have at least the consolation of knowing that they have acted with justice and integrity? Is Job's reward a deeper inner relationship with God? At the climax of the book Job has a direct encounter with YHWH. Job responds with awe. Job's own words to God emphasize the transition from merely knowing something about God to encountering him directly: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). Is the book claiming that those who suffer for righteousness will at least have the blessing of experiencing God more deeply, of having what classical Christian theology called the beatific vision? Or should we take seriously the book's own conclusion in which Job gets tangible earthly rewards. At the end of the book God restores Job's worldly fortunes giving him "twice as much as he had

before" (42:10). Of course, this ending does not fit well with the rest of the book. It almost seems like a return to orthodox wisdom which always insisted that if the righteous were patient God would ultimately reward them. It also does not deal with the obvious objection that many of the righteous die in their sufferings before any earthly vindication comes. Should a Christian try to salvage this ending by appealing to the pleasures stored up in heaven for the righteous?

On the origin of horrendous evil the Book of Job tentatively moves in a new direction: Ultimate evil may be due to a superhuman demonic agent. In Job "Satan" incites God to question Job's motives, and after God gives him permission to test Job, Satan is the one who actually imposes the sufferings. Moreover, God subsequently complains that Satan acted without reasonable cause (2:3). In this early invocation of Satan, Satan is merely an overzealous prosecuting attorney in heaven and is not yet the Devil. We should note that "Satan" in Hebrew means something like the "Adversary" and may be a title rather than a personal name. Nevertheless, we seem to be moving in the direction that evil in this world may result from the malevolence of some heavenly being who, though not divine, has much greater power and knowledge than humans do.

Like Job the Wisdom of Solomon also faces the problem that in this life the wise and the virtuous can suffer--and, indeed, suffer precisely because they are wise and virtuous. The book poses the problem in its most extreme form. Near the beginning of the work, the "ungodly" reason, much like Ecclesiastes, that their lives are short and uncertain and, therefore, they should hedonistically concentrate on having a good time now. However, here the ungodly go much further than Ecclesiastes would advise. Part of their good time is had by

oppressing the poor, the aged, and the widow. Moreover, since the "righteous man" condemns their actions as base, the ungodly find him a burden. They then torture and kill him.

It appears that the Wisdom of Solomon holds that even in this life where they suffer for their goodness, the righteous have some inner consolation. The righteous condemn the wicked as base. Hence, the reader assumes that the righteous have some inner sense of being morally superior. Moreover, the Wisdom of Solomon lauds the beauty of Wisdom and insists that Wisdom resides with the righteous. The book proclaims that Wisdom is "radiant and unfading" (6:12), "more beautiful than the sun" (7:29), and "friendship with her" is "pure delight" (8:18). She makes her home in righteous souls, and the reader assumes that even in the midst of the undeserved suffering of the virtuous they have the supreme pleasure of knowing Her. Moreover, with Wisdom comes an inner relationship with God himself. Wisdom is "a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (7:25), and "God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom" (7:28).

Nevertheless, the Wisdom of Solomon stresses that the primary reward for virtue and the primary punishment for vice come in a final judgment after death. Prior to the third century B.C.E. the Jews did not believe in personal survival after death, and, consequently, none of the writings we have previously dealt with appeal to it. The Wisdom of Solomon,<sup>7</sup> by contrast, clearly teaches that the soul leaves the body at death and goes to some final reckoning. The book dramatically describes the confidence of the righteous souls in their post-mortem state

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<sup>7</sup> The date of the Wisdom of Solomon is controversial, but it cannot be earlier than the third century B.C.E. and may well be the beginning of the first century C.E.

as they await their reward and the terror and remorse of the wicked as they grimly recognize their past errors and coming doom (5:1-13).

In discussing the origins of sin, the Wisdom of Solomon places a special emphasis on idolatry. Of course, the Old Testament as a whole condemns idolatry as egregious. Nevertheless, in earlier books idolatry is only one sin among others. By contrast, the Wisdom of Solomon attempts to trace the origin of all sin to Idolatry: "The worship of idols . . . is the beginning and cause of every evil" (14:27). Because people who worship idols do not fear a final judgment, they have nothing to deter them from sin. Moreover the rites that Pagans engage in while worshiping idols are degrading.

We may now summarize the perspective of the Wisdom of Solomon on how evil originates and how evil is overcome. Evil comes from the foolishness that does not recognize the presence of God. Such foolishness invites people to choose superficial happiness rather than a deeper peace. It causes people to focus only on the passing pleasures of this life and ignore the certainty of God's final judgment and the eternal rewards and punishments that will follow. Of course, wisdom that focuses on true consolation and eternal rewards overcomes evil, and this wisdom in turn is grounded in an inner relationship with the Divine.

Compared to Job and the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach is backward looking. Whereas Job boldly critiques the older optimistic wisdom in Proverbs, and the Wisdom of Solomon whole heartedly embraces the new idea of personal survival after death, Sirach is self-consciously conservative. The author was a scribe who spent his life studying the older scriptures, and he did not see himself as an innovator. He calls himself a

"gleaner following the grape-pickers" (33:16). The book emphasizes traditional Israelite morality, decorum, and belief. The wise are merciful and just, polite and self-disciplined, humble, faithful in worship and the study of the scriptures, loyal to Israel's God. Sirach places a special emphasis on the traditional virtue of being generous in helping the poor.

Perhaps because of the author's conservatism, the book affirms the older wisdom theology that virtue has an earthly reward and does not consider the skepticism of Ecclesiastes and Job. Sirach insists that virtue leads to well-being in this life and to a lasting remembrance. Sirach does not believe in life after death and does reply to Job and Ecclesiastes's claim that there is no reason to believe that there is any correlation between goodness and worldly success. The furthest Sirach seems to go is to insist that the righteous must be patient in suffering, because earthly vindication may take time. Just before death God can set things right. The righteous will have a "happy end" (1:13), whereas someone who has prospered through wickedness all of life may be more than paid back by unbearable pain in the hours before death. "At the close of one's life one's deeds are revealed" (11:27). Unfortunately, Sirach does not provide any empirical evidence to substantiate this confident claim.

What is new in Sirach is the explicit equation of wisdom with Israel's Law (e.g., ch. 24). Wisdom comes from God, and he has embodied this wisdom in the Law. He gave the Law to Israel. Those who desire wisdom must study the Law and live by it. The supremely wise heroes of the past were the righteous leaders of Israel. The best of all professions is the scribe, since he "devotes himself to the study of the Law of the Most High" (38:34).

One goal that Sirach had in writing his book was probably to keep his students from adopting



Greek ideas and customs. In the early second century when Sirach was writing, Israel was part of a Greek empire. Sirach had traveled (34:12) and surely was acutely aware of Greek culture and what he considered to be its evils. When Sirach was writing, some upper class Jews in Jerusalem were beginning to follow Greek ways. 1 & 2 Maccabees record that some even adopted Greek dress, tried to hide their circumcision, and attended a gymnasium. Sirach's admonition to concentrate on the Law was an implicit warning against excessive openness to Greek lifestyle and thought.

Perhaps Sirach was trying to produce an alternative social reality in which justice prevails. In the oppressive public world of Greek rule, justice (at least as Jews understood it) did not prevail. The faithful did not prosper. Those who abandoned the covenant and followed Pagan ways received wealth and honor, whereas those who were faithful to the Law suffered. But when the Jewish people as a whole keep the Law, there is an alternative environment where justice does prevail. In the holy home and ghetto, those who do what the scriptures command receive praise and material success. If there is anything to this analysis, Sirach's response to the skepticism of Job and Ecclesiastes is institutional rather than theological. In the face of an unjust world which rewards the wicked, God's people must produce an alternate society which rewards the righteous.

Historically this institutional response allowed the Jewish people to survive. A couple of centuries after Sirach's time, the Romans expelled the Jews from Palestine. Thereafter, the Jews lived for almost two millennia in exile and often suffered discrimination and persecution. What allowed them to preserve their religious and cultural identity was fidelity to the Mosaic Law which in turn produced as alternative social reality. Even if the faithful Jew

suffered in contacts with outsiders, he or she received psychological and material honor in the Jewish community itself and, as Sirach would emphasize, a lasting memorial.

Accordingly, Sirach assumes that an important source of evil is openness to influences from outside the Holy Community, and evil is overcome by focusing attention inward. Evil comes when the Holy Community neglects its own traditions and values and instead embraces the mores of the outside world, especially if this outside world has great wealth and power. To overcome evil, people must concentrate on the Holy Community's past, study the doctrines and behavior of yore, and ignore as much as possible the larger environment of the present.

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Reflection and discussion questions: When we reflect on what leads to success in life, do we concentrate on ethics, claiming that doing what is right leads to worldly success, or do we concentrate on our actual experience? In actual experience is it normally the case that ethical behavior leads to worldly success? In making decisions about our own life, when should we trust tested guidelines from the past or the advice of experts, and when should we trust our own intelligence? Do you think that in the contemporary United States there is a widespread need for instant gratification, and if so, what problems has instant gratification caused? On the other hand, is it wise to spend enormous effort to insure future well being, when the future may turn out far differently than we suppose? Should we enjoy present pleasure rather than toil for uncertain earthly rewards? Should we regard pleasure as primarily a temptation or as a gift from God? Has the Church sometimes condemned innocent pleasure, and what has been the effect of this condemnation on the Church's and Christianity's reputation? Can we

maintain that God himself is just, but the world that he made is not? Do we sometimes blame victims in order to assure ourselves that the world or even God must be just? Do we use the conviction that someone's suffering must be deserved to avoid having to sympathize and help victims? What are the inner rewards for doing what is right, and are these rewards sufficient compensation? Has the church been corrupted by the perspectives and values of the outside world? If so, should we respond by inviting Christians to distance themselves from the larger culture and focus on traditional Christian teaching? What are the benefits and dangers of urging people to disengage from the larger culture and form an inward looking community?

## Chapter 5: Evil--and how to overcome it--in Daniel and Revelation<sup>8</sup>

If later wisdom books struggle with the problem of catastrophic, undeserved individual suffering, the books of Daniel and Revelation arose out of the experience of catastrophic collective suffering or the anticipation of it. Daniel was a direct response to the persecution of the Jews by the Greek king Antiochus IV who took the title "Epiphanes," God "manifest." Antiochus was the ancient version of Hitler. He was mentally deranged and a fanatical nationalist. For personal and political reasons he wished to unify his empire culturally, and he attempted to destroy Judaism. He made it illegal to possess copies of the Hebrew scriptures or to circumcise one's son, and he turned the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem into a temple of Zeus. To destroy Jewish morale, he even sacrificed swine there, and he required all Jews to participate in the sacrifice of unclean animals to Pagan gods. Jews who resisted and clung to the traditional practices were subject to torture and execution. The book of Daniel was written in this horrifying period and frequently refers to it. We read, for example, of the coming of a king who "shall speak words against the Most High, shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law" (7:25). If Daniel responds to the grim reality of a present persecution, Revelation responds to the fear of a future one. When John was writing Revelation, there had already been some persecution. John mentions the martyrdom of a certain Antipas (2:13). John himself was already in exile on the desolate island of Patmos (1:9). Presumably, he was an early victim of a government crackdown. However, the suffering so far was nothing compared to the crisis which John foresees and repeatedly predicts. In chapter 13, for example, we read that there will arise a

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<sup>8</sup> Much of the material in this chapter comes from my earlier book, *Revelation: A book for the rest of us*.

Beast who will "make war on the Saints" and conquer them (13:7) and whoever does not worship an idolatrous image will be killed. Since, of course, Christians could not in good conscience participate in an idolatrous rite, all the faithful will be in danger of death.

With Daniel and Revelation we get the insistence that the ultimate source of evil is the demonic. Behind human folly and sin there is a superhuman tempter. In Daniel we learn that each nation has an angelic champion. The struggles between nations take place on two levels. As there are military struggles on earth, there are struggles in a heavenly realm between the corresponding angels. Thus, in chapter 10, Daniel learns that the angelic champions of Israel, Gabriel and Michael, struggle first against the angelic prince of Persia and then the angelic prince of Greece. In chapter 11 we have a review of the corresponding earthly history, the Persian rule of Israel, the Greek conquest, and, of course, the terrifying period in which Antiochus IV defiles the temple and the faithful "fall by sword and flame" (11:33).

The demonic tempter willfully tries to destroy the faithful both individually and collectively. He entices individuals to give up their loyalty to God and worship other deities. And he attempts to destroy Israel or the Church as a whole.

In the biblical tradition, Revelation offers us the most detailed portrait of Satan (who has various other names, e.g., the "Devil"). The vague heavenly prosecutor in Job has now become a complex, sinister monster. According to Revelation, Satan originally was an evil angel in heaven who brought accusations against God's people. He then incited a third of the angels to rebel against God. With Christ's death and resurrection, Satan, along with his angels, was cast out of heaven. Full of wrath he incites the Roman authorities to persecute the

church. In the end Christ will first imprison and then destroy him.

A striking and pervasive feature in Revelation is the literary parallelism between the descriptions of God and Jesus and those of Satan and the Beast (the oppressive Roman Empire). There are parallels in structure. For example, Revelation has two Trinities. The good Trinity is, of course, God, Jesus (the Lamb), and the Spirit. The evil Trinity is Satan, the Beast from the Sea (who symbolizes the Roman Empire, especially its emperors) and the Beast from the Land (who symbolizes the local authorities who enforce the emperors' will). There are also verbal parallels. For example, God is he "who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4), whereas the Beast "was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction" (17:8). Revelation also draws many parallels between "Babylon," the Whore, who symbolizes the city of Rome, and the New Jerusalem, the Bride, who is the coming paradise. The introductions and conclusions of the sections on the two cities have striking literary similarities. For example, near the beginning of the section devoted to the city of Rome an angel says, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great Whore" (17:1), and near the beginning of the section devoted to the New Jerusalem an angel says, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). The descriptions of the two cities have many common features. Both cities are filled with gold and jewels.

The extensive literary parallelism between the forces of good and evil is unprecedented in the Bible. Other biblical books emphasize the absolute difference in appearance between virtue and wickedness. The prophets love to exalt the majesty of the One God and dismiss idols as helpless blocks of wood. Proverbs loves to contrast the virtuous wise person who is obviously superior with the headstrong, babbling fool.

This unprecedented parallelism between good and evil in Revelation suggests that evil attempts to appear good and becomes most evil when the attempt comes closest to success. Evil is rebellion against God and is an attempt to replace him with something else—normally oneself. Evil which clearly appears to be evil is at least relatively harmless. It is easy for human beings to reject what is obviously destructive. To avoid rejection, evil tries to appear to be good. No politician, regardless of how corrupt, boasts of being corrupt. No nation, regardless of how wicked, proclaims its wickedness. The contrary is closer to the truth: The more corrupt politicians are, the more they insist on their virtue; the more wicked a nation is, the more it insists on its innocence. Of course, such evil politicians and nations become especially dangerous when their lies are believed.

Revelation's parallelism between the forces of good and evil reflects the fact that in John's social situation the emperor did appear to be the Almighty, and Rome did appear to be the Heavenly City. The Roman emperor claimed to be descended from the gods and actually received worship. Many emperors were declared to be gods after death. A few emperors even insisted on their divinity during their own lifetimes. Regardless of the truth of such claims, the emperors exercised vast political and financial power, a power which elevated them far above anyone else in John's world. Political power produces a sense of the numinous, of being more than human. The Roman government produced extensive "propaganda" to convince people both of its incomparable might—and its incomparable virtues. There were triumphal arches and beautiful statues of the reigning emperor and inscriptions of the supposedly beneficent laws of the Empire. The City of Rome was not only the largest and wealthiest city in John's world, not only the center of political power, not only the patron of

the arts and of philosophy, not only ancient even then. Rome or rather Roma was also a goddess who actually had temples dedicated to her.

Revelation suggests that Satan especially masquerades through political and social manipulation. In Revelation Satan rouses up the Beast from the Sea (the Roman Empire). Satan also inspires a system in which authority is delegated downward in exchange for worship which is promoted upward. Satan gives his authority to the Beast from the Sea (i.e., the emperors;13:4), and the Beast from the Sea gives his authority to the Beast from the Land (the local authorities in Asia Minor; 13:12). In return, the Beast from the Land makes everyone worship the Beast from the Sea (3:12), and, when people worship the Beast from the Sea, they also worship Satan (13:4). The Beast from the Land as the bottommost member in the hierarchy deceives people, because it appears to be innocent and trustworthy. It has two horns like a lamb even though it speaks like a dragon (13:11). The Beast from the Land apparently includes not just local officials but even Christian leaders who promote compromise. Revelation also calls the Beast from the Land the "false prophet" (Rev. 16:13, 19:20, 20:10), and the only other false prophet in Revelation is "Jezebel" who is a Christian leader who apparently favors accommodation with the government (2:20).

The structures of oppression that Revelation identifies in the Roman Empire seem to reappear in every tyranny. The closest that Satan comes to ruling—or if one prefers, the greatest evil that human societies seem to experience—occurs when rulers act as if they are god and their pretensions to deity are widely accepted. Then there are no limits to the crimes that a ruler can commit. We repeatedly saw such evil in the twentieth century. Hitler, Stalin, Mao received what can only be described as divine honors, and each of these men were responsible



for the deaths of millions of people. To achieve divine honor, rulers much delude their subjects, and the way they do so is just as Revelation describes: Authority is passed downward in exchange for worship. The regime gives to someone the authority to be a school teacher or a journalist. In exchange the teacher or journalist tells the students or the readers to worship the tyrant. And, as Revelation insists, when nations worship tyrants, the nations are also worshipping Satan. A major reason that the populace believes what the school teachers and journalists say is that they appear to be good. To use the imagery of Revelation, they have two horns like a Lamb. Of course, as Revelation sadly suggests, in many times and places the Christian Church in exchange for authority has taught its members to obey unethical regimes without question. The results have been catastrophic.

Ultimately, the only reason that the local authorities and others worship the Beast is because it exercises tyrannical power. In Revelation the multitudes proclaim, "Who is like the Beast? Who can fight against it?" (13:4). Behind the veil of legitimacy that law and custom give to evil regimes, beneath the trappings of parades and monuments, beyond the propaganda and showy benefactions, lies naked force.

Revelation admits that outwardly Rome appears attractive because of its great wealth. The Whore (Rome) has garments of purple and scarlet, and she wears jewelry of gold and pearls. In less figurative language John's characters ask what city "is like the Great City" (18:18), and the merchants of the world recount all the luxury goods that it was their privilege to supply to Rome, "gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet . . ." (18:12).

However, this wealth is corrupting and based on oppression. The Whore thirsts for frivolous

luxuries. Revelation summarizes these with two alliterative Greek words, *lipara* and *lampra* (18:14). *Lipara* refers to food that is tasty, because it is rich in oil or fat, or, as we might say today, high in calories. *Lampra* refers to things that are bright and shiny. Perhaps the best way to render the phrase *lipara* and *lampra* in English while preserving the alliteration is “gross and gaudy.” Rome’s outward splendor is tacky. But far more disturbing than the shallowness of Rome’s trappings is the fact that its splendor depends on the ruthless exploitation of human beings. The list of luxury goods that I began to quote above climaxes with a phrase that is difficult to render in English. The last two items in the list are “*somata*” and “*psychas anthropon*.” *Somata* literally means “bodies,” but it was also a demeaning word for slaves. It implies that slaves are mere bodies. By contrast “*psychas anthropon*” literally means “human lives,” but *psychas* has the implication of life as a spiritual quality. It can even mean “souls.” Hence, I would translate the phrase, “slaves, even human souls.” Revelation reminds us that Rome’s luxuries are purchased at the price of enslaving spiritual beings and treating them like bodies.

To supply its luxuries, Rome has spawned a huge economic network and thereby corrupted the whole world. In a theatrical scene John pictures the sailors of the world lamenting as they see the Great City that was the source of their trade go up in flames. The sailors cry out that everyone who had ships depended on the Great City for their wealth. If we expressed this thought in modern terms, we might say that Rome organized the international economic system so that everyone’s livelihood depended on enriching Rome itself. Indeed, Revelation proclaims that the kings of the world committed fornication with her; in other words, local rulers economically benefited by ignoring the economic interests of their own subjects and promoting those of Rome.

In modern times other countries have behaved much like Rome. For frivolous luxuries, furs, diamonds, gold, they have produced huge economic networks which have contributed little to the countries from which these resources came but greatly enriched people in the dominant country. The dominant country has often bought off local officials who sell out their own subjects. Many analysts have accused contemporary Western nations--including the United States--of indulging in such behavior still today.

Of course, one way that Revelation attempts to overcome evil is by exposing the structures which mask it. The sophisticated analysis of how authority is passed downward in exchange for worship that is passed upward, the graphic language of extravagant luxury, prostitution, and slavery strip the Whore naked (to use John's own metaphor) for the reader to see. Once we see Rome for what it really is, we are no longer seduced by its propaganda and its tawdry bribes. We are prepared to reject the temptations of the Whore.

With Apocalyptic we get for the first time in biblical tradition the idea that, since evil is ultimately due to Satan, God can and will eliminate it forever. God will destroy Satan, and we will have a new heaven and earth in which there is no injustice or misery. Prior to apocalyptic the Bible assumes that human sin and its destructive consequences will always be with us. Human beings will always sin. At the end of the story of Noah and the Ark, God realizes that the thoughts of human beings are evil from childhood on. Therefore, God vows never to destroy the world again in the futile attempt to make people better. Revelation, by contrast, sees human sin as derivative from the sin of Satan and his angels. Humans sin because they give in to temptations from demons. Consequently, if God destroys Satan and his demonic

horde, then sin and all its dreadful consequences will be no more. In Revelation God does destroy Satan, and thereafter we read that the nations are healed and there is no longer anything "accursed" (22:3) and even "death will be no more" (21:4).

With Daniel and Revelation we get the biblical belief in meaningful life after death. Daniel is probably the latest book in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is only with Daniel that we have the undeniable confession of true life after death. Earlier biblical books assume that at death the body and mind decay together in Sheol (roughly the grave). By contrast, Daniel climaxes with the resurrection and the final judgment of the dead, with the wicked receiving "everlasting contempt," and the righteous shining "like the brightness of the sky" (Dan 12:2-3).

In Revelation God destroys the power of Satan in three stages. First God casts Satan out of heaven where Satan had been bringing unjustified accusations against the saints (12:7-12). Then God binds Satan for a thousand years (20:1-3). Finally, God hurls Satan to final destruction in a lake of fire (20:10).

Corresponding to the three stages of Satan's destruction, salvation in Revelation comes in three stages. Complete freedom from sin and its evil consequences comes to individuals when they have served God faithfully and die (which in Revelation usually occurs through martyrdom) and go to heaven. There to use Revelation's poetic imagery the redeemed wear spotless white robes and rest (6:11). However, terrible evil continues on earth. Then God intervenes and we have the destruction of Rome and the coming of a fundamentally better era of history. Finally, we have the end of history, as human beings have always experienced it, and the coming of a new heaven and earth where all will be well and the righteous will reign

forever.

Of course, the hope for individual salvation at death and the hope for a better era in history inspired the original readers of Revelation to resist evil and continued to inspire such resistance subsequently. By portraying the immediate individual salvation of those who die for the faith, Revelation encouraged its first readers not to sin by worshiping the emperor to save their earthly lives. In subsequent history doubtless the hope of immediate entrance into heavenly glory gave countless Christians the strength to die for their faithfulness to God. By portraying the coming of a better era in history Revelation encouraged its original readers to remain steadfast in the assurance that Roman persecution would be brief. So too the hope that an evil regime will be short lived has allowed innumerable people to resist oppression in subsequent times.

Nevertheless, Revelation does not dwell on individual salvation at death or the hope of a better era of earthly history. The references to the present heavenly blessings of the martyrs are few and brief. The references to a thousand years of improved earthly history take up only six verses (20:1-6).

Instead Revelation focuses the reader's attention on the glorious culmination of God's triumph over all evil. The literary climax of Revelation is the magnificent description of the New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5). Earlier passages point forward to it. For example, in chapter 2 we have the promise that those who are faithful will "eat from the tree of life" (2:7), and at the end of Revelation we see the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit and its healing leaves in the New Jerusalem. The passage about the New Jerusalem with its crystalline water of life, its

gold which is transparent as glass, and its gates composed of single pearls is the last sustained passage in Revelation and surpasses all others in power. Indeed, it is so powerful that it has provided the metaphors for heavenly glory that have been the basis for countless poems and hymns down through the Christian centuries. Revelation places further emphasis on this section by finally having God himself speak. In the earlier chapters of Revelation there are a myriad of heavenly voices but with the possible section of a verse in the preface (1:8) none of them is God's own. By contrast, at the beginning of the section on the New Jerusalem God himself declares, "See, I am making all things new" (21:5).

Theologically, the section (and the material in Revelation that anticipates it) stresses that if we are faithful, our reward will be true life. If we are faithless we will inherit the "second death" which is destruction in the lake of fire (21:8). By contrast, the New Jerusalem is where the faithful will drink from the water of life and eat from the tree of life (22:1-2).

This true life has many dimensions. The ancient, unfulfilled longings of God's people will finally be definitively realized. All that had been lost will be restored. The Tree of Life which our first ancestors forfeited by their disobedience is in the middle of the City. The tribes of ancient Israel who disappeared in exile and disgrace because of their sin are now in the City. Indeed, their names are over the gates. Everything that is painful or degrading will be gone. God will wipe away every tear, and "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (21:4). Nevertheless, the past spiritual achievements in the midst of that previous pain are remembered. To use the symbolic language of Revelation, the Bride (the Church) is clothed with the fine linen which "is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). Although it does not emphasize it, Revelation seems to assume the redemption and wonderful transformation of

the natural world. According to Genesis, the natural world that God created was perfect. It was only after Adam and Eve's sin that thorns and thistles appeared and animals began to eat one another. Revelation looks forward to the undoing of nature's corruption, to a new heaven and earth. In that recreated universe, God's glory will transfigure all things. Everything will shine with the Divine. John pictures God's glory as light. The City has no sun or moon. Instead, God's glory gives it light, "and its Lamp is the Lamb" (21:23). Everything in the city is either transparent or shiny. The gold of the city is as clear as glass; the gates of the city are pearls; the foundations of the city are gem stones. In the City there will be perfect fellowship between people of every culture. John stresses that the redeemed come from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9). "The kings of the earth will bring their glory into" (21:24) the City, and there will be no more divisions. Nevertheless, the greatest part of the amazing vitality of the City will be final ecstatic fellowship with God. God himself will dwell in the City. His people will praise him. "His name will be on their foreheads" (22:4). This true life in communion with God will last forever.

In giving this description, Revelation's goal is for us to experience this life so vividly that we will affirm that this--not the earthly glory of Rome--is our ultimate hope. Rome tries to convince Revelation's readers that its political peace, its wealth is the best that the world can hope for. Have exposed the shallowness of that hope by showing its basis in oppression, Revelation now exposes the shallowness of that hope by contrasting it with the ultimate salvation that a loving and all powerful God can and, Revelation insists, will give. Revelation wants its readers to realize that what they, and perhaps all people, most deeply desire is communion with God and one another in a world transformed by God's presence. Revelation paints a moving picture of that hope and invites us to assent to it. If we do, we will reject

Babylon and willingly suffer for the New Jerusalem.

As we read Revelation today, the text challenges us to experience that final fulfillment so vividly that we too will affirm that this--not the narcissistic materialism of our own time--is our ultimate hope. As in the case of Roman propaganda, so today the manipulators hawk a counterfeit salvation. The advertisements promise that through material possessions we will gain love, a sense of self-worth, and every other blessing. Revelation invites us to compare that promise with its vision of union with God and decide which vision is our ultimate hope. If we recognize that our deepest hope is union with God in a transformed world, then we can turn our backs on shallow, transitory material pleasures of our hedonistic society and struggle for a new earth.

It is striking in view of the long treatment of the New Jerusalem that Revelation spends so little space on final damnation. Subsequent preachers and painters have appealed to our fear and sadism with long and lurid depictions of the unending tortures of hell. Revelation exercises exemplary restraint. Before devoting nearly two chapters to a detailed description of the coming paradise, Revelation only spends a few words on "the lake of fire and sulfur where . . . they [the Devil and all who serve him] will be tormented" (20:10).

Instead, Revelation focuses on the sufferings that the wicked will face already in this life due to their sin. In describing the imminent woes of evil doers, Revelation gives us some of the most famous and gripping scenes in world literature. There are the well known four horses which bring war, slaughter, famine, and pestilence. There are the demonic locusts with their iron breastplates and scorpion tails. And there are the demonic cavalry whose horses have



lion's heads and breathe out fire. There horrifying plagues are punishments from God for the violence and decadence of the world and for the persecution of the Church.

For Revelation final damnation is the culmination of the sufferings that we already experience on earth and, therefore, is supremely frightening. People cannot relate to a picture of hell which makes it totally unlike anything they have experienced. People can relate to a hell which is the culmination of the miseries that they know. If those miseries clearly result from sin, they are surely harbingers of the punishment that is to come.

In Revelation the sufferings on earth are a challenge to repent before it is too late. It must be admitted that in Revelation the wicked do not repent. But the invitation is there for the reader to accept. After the fearsome seven trumpets with their demonic locusts and cavalry we read that the survivors "did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts" (9:21). After the even more fearsome plagues of the seven bowls, the wicked still do not repent but instead curse God. The characters in Revelation stubbornly refuse to heed the warnings that precede final destruction in the lake of fire. However, the readers of Revelation are free to do otherwise.

For Revelation final damnation is being cut off from the presence of God and his people. Because Revelation says so little about hell and because virtually everything in the book is figurative, we do not have to conclude that Revelation views final damnation as literally roasting in a fiery lake. But Revelation also pictures damnation as separation from God and his redeemed people, and apparently this picture is to be taken literally. Revelation insists that the "fornicators and murderers and idolaters" (22:15) remain outside the New Jerusalem.

Two thousand years after the writing of Revelation, the hope of Christ returning soon to end evil on earth has lost credibility. Revelation predicted that Christ would come quickly. He did not. Thanks to modern science, we now know that the earth is billions of years old and has survived various cataclysms over the eons. In light of all this it seems fanciful to hold that Christ will come again quickly enough to be relevant to our lives.

Nevertheless, Revelation's threats of hell remain most relevant, and we can make those threats credible by emphasizing the continuity between God's judgment on earth and the final judgment. Earlier in this book, I argued that hell is a necessary doctrine and noted that out-of-body experiences dramatically confirm the existence of something we may reasonably label damnation. The question remains how we can make the danger of damnation convincing. Certainly, the older images of devils with pitchforks no longer have any impact. I would suggest that Revelation's strategy works. We can point to the sufferings that sinful actions are causing on earth both to others and to the sinners themselves. Then we can ask what those sufferings portend for life after death. Some time ago I was impressed with a bumper sticker which read approximately as follows, "If we don't change course, we will get where we are going."

To summarize, according to apocalyptic, God in the future will overcome evil, and in the present we can resist evil by reflecting on the glory and the judgment that are to come. The coming glory of the New Jerusalem unmask the present pleasures that evil offers. The sufferings that the wicked experience in this world for their sins point to an even more terrible penalty that awaits at the final judgment. True wisdom is making decisions in the present

based on the final outcome of all things.

A controversial question is whether Satan does lie behind evil and whether recognizing the reality of the demonic helps us resist evil. Satan seems to have disappeared from modern, liberal theology. At most among liberal theologians the demonic is merely a symbol for the collective spirit of evil organizations. Presumably the reason for this disappearance is that liberal theologians do not think that belief in Satan is helpful, and they do not experience a personal, transcendent source of temptation.

I do agree that a simplistic belief in the demonic can cause problems. Belief in the demonic can make people focus on evil rather than on God. And belief in a personal tempter can reinforce the American temptation to concentrate on personal sin and ignore corporate wrongdoing.

Nevertheless, like Revelation I believe that properly handled a belief in Satan can be helpful and true to experience. As long as we do not lose our focus on God and recognize that demonic evil especially manifests itself in social structures, belief in a transcendent personal source of temptation can be useful. Belief in Satan allows us to be more generous to human beings who do evil. If we recognize that they are merely giving in to a temptation from elsewhere, we can be more understanding and forgiving. I feel that I have experienced the personal presence of Satan. What struck me most about it was the depth of Satan's hatred for me and the superhuman power that Satan wields as a spiritual being. I believe this experience has made me more dependent on the infinitely greater divine love for me and the infinitely greater divine power that protects me--and all who rely on it--from the demonic.

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Reflection and discussion questions: How as Christians do we respond theologically to massive collective suffering? How should we respond? Does evil continue to try to masquerade as good? Can we think of some examples? Where today do we see authority delegated downward in exchange for worship passed upward? To what extent does vast power and wealth today make some people appear to be more than human? Is there wealth today that seems to be based primarily on manipulation and oppression? What is our conception of heaven, and why would someone want to go there? Can we believe that there will be a fundamentally better era on earth in the future? How would we picture hell, and how can we make hell credible to others? Do we believe in Satan? Is this belief based on experience, theological principles, common sense? How would our lives be different if we changed our beliefs about the existence of Satan?

## Chapter 6: Evil--and how to overcome it--in the Teaching of Jesus.

It is unclear how much we can know about the "historical" Jesus--that is what Jesus literally said and did and what it meant at the time. For information about Jesus we must rely primarily on the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's Gospel, as we will see in chapter 8, presents the author's understanding of what God was doing through Jesus rather than an objective account. Consequently, John is only of limited value for a historically "unbiased" reconstruction. Unfortunately, even Matthew, Mark, and Luke are problematic as historical sources. These books were written decades after the death of Jesus. We do not know to what extent these evangelists based their accounts on eyewitness memory or only on third hand tradition. In any case, after so many years memories had become clouded, and later interpretation and legendary material had surely crept in. Consequently, there has been continuing scholarly debate about how much of the material that Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us about Jesus is factually accurate.

I take a relatively optimistic view of the accuracy of the first three gospels, and, therefore, will make relatively free use of them in this chapter. Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to reproduce faithfully the rural culture of Jesus's native Galilee, rather than the urban environments in which the evangelists probably lived. These gospels do not, for the most part, deal with the great church controversies of the decades in which the evangelists wrote. For example, we hear nothing about the debate over whether Gentiles could become disciples of Jesus without also becoming Jewish and the males receiving circumcision. We hear little about whether Jesus was Divine. Hence, it does not appear that subsequent perspectives distorted the gospel

accounts fundamentally. Of course, it is true that the gospels, like historical accounts in general, are interpretations of the past. But I think that we should assume that the gospels' interpretations are reasonable. Consequently, here I will assume that anything that Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us about Jesus is basically accurate unless there is strong specific evidence to the contrary.

As an heir to Old Testament wisdom, Jesus believed that a major source of evil was putting temporary pleasure ahead of more lasting rewards. He cautioned against laying up treasures on earth which were vulnerable to moth and rust and thieves. He told the story of a rich fool who decided to build larger barns to store his goods and enjoy a long and carefree life and died that very night. Jesus insisted that people should focus on heavenly treasures, since these were certain and would last.

Yet, like Ecclesiastes Jesus believed in enjoying the innocent pleasures of the present. He loved dinner parties—so much so that his enemies dismissed him as a "glutton and a drunkard" (Matt 11:19). He told his followers not to worry about tomorrow.

As an heir to the prophetic tradition, Jesus believed that lack of concern for the poor was a major sin and a major source of human suffering. He told a parable of a rich man who feasted daily while a diseased poor man lay outside desperate for crumbs. According to Luke's account, Jesus began his public ministry by reading a prophecy about proclaiming good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, and healing for the blind and declared that his own ministry would fulfill the prophetic imperative (Luke 4:16-21).

Jesus also believed that behind human evil lay the demonic. He regarded the existence of Satan as an unquestionable fact and saw Satan as the ultimate source of temptation. Indeed, in the gospels Satan tempts Jesus himself and claims to have authority to bestow on those who worship him the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:1-13). Under Satan were lesser demons who could even take control of people's lives (see below).

What was new in the proclamation of Jesus was his claim that he was himself beginning the ultimate defeat of evil or, to use his own language, that he was inaugurating the "kingdom of God." Most of the Old Testament assumes that temptation, sin, and evil will always be problems. The apocalyptic tradition proclaimed that at some point in the future God would intervene and destroy evil. Jesus apparently agreed, since he too proclaimed a coming final judgment and warned people of the necessity to prepare for it. But he also believed that he was now spearheading the final assault on evil. Once when he had just performed an exorcism, he claimed that he drove out the demon by the "finger of God" (Luke 11:20) and thereby proved that God's rule had already come.

In his apocalyptic assault on evil Jesus frequently did several things which previously had been rare in the biblical tradition. First, Jesus often performed exorcisms. Earlier in the Bible exorcisms almost never occur. Second, Jesus confronted the hidden core of people's hearts and demanded inner transformation. Earlier the biblical tradition mostly concentrates on eliminating visible sins—especially, oppressing the poor, worshiping idols, and neglecting cultic regulations. Of course, the Old Testament recognizes that visible sins are symptoms of a rebellious heart, but it assumes that someone who is keeping all of the visible stipulations of the covenant has an obedient heart. Jesus, on the other hand, believed that someone could

follow the rules in detail and yet be fundamentally evil. Jesus concentrated on attacking inner evil. Next, Jesus rejected responding to violence with violence, even in the name of justice. Whereas the covenantal law of the Hebrew scriptures insisted on an "eye for an eye," Jesus advocated not striking back at an evildoer. Finally, Jesus envisioned a future in which there would be social equality. The earlier biblical tradition counsels the rich and powerful to be merciful and generous, but there is no demand that they surrender their privileges completely. Jesus, by contrast, insisted that whoever aspired to be great must "be slave of all" (Mark 10:44), and that it was "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25).

Underlying these innovations were new understandings of the origin of sin. First, Jesus believed that sin often resulted from being possessed, that is losing control of one's own self and becoming a prey to an alien power. The earlier biblical tradition assumed that people were free to follow God; they could choose to do so. At worst, people were too weak to change their behavior without God's special help. But God's merciful assistance was available. By contrast, Jesus thought that demons could take control of a person so that it was the demon who spoke and acted, and the victim was helpless. Second, Jesus believed that many people who were not possessed were nevertheless out of touch with the core of their own being. Such people could not normally recognize the sinfulness hidden in their own speech and actions. They were spiritually blind and deaf. Third, evil often originates from reactive violence. Responding to injury by causing injury merely produces more harm and can easily escalate. Finally, Jesus believed that social divisions between rich and poor, respectable and not respectable, men and women necessarily lead to sin.



The cultural distance between first-century Galilee and the twenty-first century United States concerning the subject of exorcism is so vast that today we probably cannot fully understand what Jesus was doing when he “drove out demons.” In Jesus’s time and place, exorcisms seem to have been part of normal experience. When his enemies tried to explain away his exorcisms by claiming that he was in league with the Devil, Jesus asked them to explain how their own people did exorcisms (Matt 12:27). In contemporary America most educated people do not believe in exorcisms, and the only exorcisms that the majority of people see are in fantastic horror motion pictures. What human beings believe affects both what they perceive and even what occurs. Today possession and exorcisms remain common in traditional cultures, but "possession behavior often conforms to patterns particular to the cultures where it appears" (Keener 4). We should not assume without further evidence that demon possession and exorcisms today correspond closely to what they were in ancient Galilee. Consequently, we may not be in a position to appreciate, or even completely understand, what exorcisms were in the world of Jesus and what Jesus himself was doing when he cast out "demons."

An additional problem is that the gospels give only a fuzzy picture of exorcism. The gospels are not consistent concerning what symptoms indicated that someone was possessed. For example, Matthew 9:32-33 assumes that someone’s inability to speak was due to a demon, but Mark 7:32-35 treats deafness and a speech impairment as a disability with no indication that it was caused by possession. Such inconsistency doubtless reflects popular uncertainty about when someone had a demon, but it does not help us today in understanding what an exorcism might have been. In describing actual exorcisms the gospels sometimes give details that do not appear to be historical. In Mark 5:1-20 the possessed man has not one but a legion of

demons and (consequently?) can even pull apart chains. When Jesus expels the demons, they migrate into a herd of pigs who then immediately throw themselves over a cliff. Today we have difficulty accepting such details as literally true. At best, they describe the sorts of things that popular superstition believed. Often in the gospels the demons express the theology of the evangelist by acknowledging the identity of Jesus as God's Son when human beings have not yet discovered who Jesus is. The demons become a kind of literary commentator.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the ancient diagnosis of possession especially applied to states in which people lost control of their behavior. Not all illnesses were attributed to possession. Possession indicated that something other than the victim's rational self was in control. The unfortunate man in Mark 5:1-20 was possessed because he wandered around in the tombs naked and was "howling and bruising himself with stones" (vs. 5). The boy in Mark 9:14-28 was possessed when he would fall down, foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid. Consequently, most ancient "possession" would today fall into the category of insanity or physiological seizures. Perhaps extremely compulsive behavior and sudden, irrational changes in mood would also qualify.<sup>9</sup>

Ancient exorcists attempted to expel "demons" through magic (Meier II:545-551). There are surviving spells that consist of long series of nonsense syllables that were supposed to be effective against unclean spirits. Another verbal technique was to go through dozens of possible names attempting to find the right one for the evil spirit in question. Once the

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<sup>9</sup> Here I do not intend to rule out the possibility that sometimes an illness may be due to an actual demon. All I am arguing is that in the majority of cases what some ancients diagnosed as demon possession would rightly be seen today as problems due to psychological and physiological factors. For a sober defense of the thesis that demon infestation still occurs today and that exorcisms are still needed, see, Francis MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A practical manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

magician addressed the demon by the correct name, the demon would have to obey. In the New Testament we have a story about some people who were not followers of Jesus trying to cast out demons using his name as a magic formula. According to the Acts of the Apostles, seven sons of a high priest attempted to exorcise a demon by saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims" (19:13). The attempt was not successful. There were (to us) other fanciful ways of casting out demons. In the book of Tobit found in the Catholic Bible (or in the Protestant Apocrypha) the protagonist uses the repulsive odor of a burning fish's liver and heart to drive away a demon (Tobit 8:2-3).

It is striking that Jesus did not use magic in his exorcisms. Never in the gospels does Jesus use a spell. Nor does he try to use various alternative names for a demon. Indeed, in Mark 5:1-20 he forces the demon to reveal its name.

Instead, Jesus cast out demons by his own personal authority and by the faith that victims had in that authority. The gospels emphasize that Jesus had a unique "authority" in everything he did. Whereas the scribes derived what authority they had from being interpreters of the divine Law revealed to Moses, Jesus exercised authority directly. He could declare what God's will was without appealing to Moses. That same authority was at work in Jesus's exorcisms. People commented on it. We read in Mark's Gospel, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (1:27). Yet, it seems that this unique authority was not sufficient by itself. Those seeking the exorcism had to trust in Jesus. Without this "faith" Jesus sometimes had difficulty performing an exorcism. In Mark 9:14-29 Jesus's disciples are unable to cast out an "unclean spirit," and Jesus himself has the utmost difficulty doing so. On Jesus's first attempt the boy collapses and appears to

be dead. Only on the second try does the exorcism succeed. The problem is lack of faith in the boy's father who requests the miracle. Even with Jesus's demand that he have faith, the best the father can come up with is, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

The "faith" that Jesus demanded seems to have at least two elements. First and most obviously, faith was confidence in the power of God working through Jesus. The person seeking an exorcism had to believe that God through Jesus could drive out the demon. But the faith apparently also had to include some belief in the basic message of Jesus, such as God's love for the marginal and forgiveness of sinners. Here we may note that Jesus did not want to be known as a mere miracle worker. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus refused to work a miracle just to bear witness to himself (Mark 8:11-12). Sometimes he even tried to keep his miracles from becoming public knowledge. According to John's Gospel, Jesus regarded his miracles as signs of his larger message. For Jesus faith meant belief in the coming of God's kingdom.

Jesus taught that the permanence of his exorcisms might depend on spiritual growth. In a startling saying Jesus insisted that an exorcised person was like a vacant house waiting for the demon to return. If the person did not fill up that emptiness, presumably with God's spirit, the demon would return taking along its friends. The victim's final state would be even worse than the initial one (Matt 12:43-45).

Jesus gave to his disciples the power to perform exorcisms, and they had some success. Mark records that Jesus gave the twelve apostles "authority over the unclean spirits," and the apostles went and "cast out many demons" (Mark 6:7-13). Luke tells us that Jesus appointed

seventy and sent them out, and on their return they boasted, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" (10:17).

Nevertheless, we have a story in which the disciples were unable to cast out a demon, and Jesus said the difficulty was due to an insufficient spiritual life. More prayer would have solved the problem (Mark 9:14-29).

Jesus sometimes invited people whom he had exorcised to join his movement. Of course, often Jesus just healed the demon possessed and sent them away. In Mark's Gospel after Jesus expels a "legion" of demons, the man who has been liberated asks permission to accompany Jesus, but Jesus refuses and instead tells him to report to his family and friends how much God has done for him (Mark 5:18-20). But apparently in other cases those whose evil spirits Jesus cast out did become his committed disciples. Luke tells us that Mary Magdalene, perhaps Jesus's leading female disciple, had suffered from seven demons and Jesus had cured her (8:2).

Mental illness in the first century often was the result of (and resulted in more of) social disgrace and isolation. Even today rejection by others can put severe psychological stress on people and drive them into mental dysfunction. The mental illness itself may then repel people further resulting in an even more serious condition. But in the first century, popular rejection was especially degrading. Today in the United States, we urge people to be independent and not to care overly much about what others think of them. By contrast, the world of Jesus taught people to be sensitive to public opinion. In such a cultural context "shame" was debilitating and surely drove many people into insanity. The resulting diagnosis

of demon possession must then have exacerbated the situation. Surely, others would have especially feared and avoided someone thought to be possessed by a superhuman evil power. The victims who themselves believed that an evil power controlled them must have suffered from an extreme lack of self-esteem.

We may now attempt to give at least a partial explanation of how Jesus (and his disciples) successfully performed their exorcisms. Even if the cultural gap between the modern Western world and the ancient Israelite one is too great for us to have a complete explanation, at least the following must be true. Many people in the time of Jesus suffered from mental problems that were due to or complicated by social rejection, loneliness, and a lack of self-worth. When these people were in a state of mental dysfunction, it seemed like an alien power had taken control of them, and Jesus regarded this power as evil (i.e., destructive to a person's physical and spiritual health). Jesus would rebuke that alien power. Through his love and forgiveness, which in turn came from his intimate relationship with his Heavenly Father, he was then able to restore people to their right mind. However, he could only help if there was confidence in him and belief in his message of God's power and compassion. And his cures would only be permanent if the people he exorcised subsequently grew spiritually. Sometimes being part of the community that Jesus was calling into being allowed people to keep from relapsing. Jesus told his disciples that they could do what he did, but that sometimes they would themselves have to grow spiritually in order to deal with severe cases. And his disciples discovered that this was true.

Jesus frequently attacked people for hypocrisy. In the gospels Jesus labels people who ostentatiously give alms and pray in public as "hypocrites" (Matt 6:2-6). He regards people

who try to correct minor faults in others while ignoring greater faults in themselves as "hypocrites" (Luke 6:42). He blasts people who discern the signs of the weather but misinterpret the signs of the times as "hypocrites" (Luke 12:56). He reprimands people who strictly observe ceremonial purity while neglecting to see and correct their inner "greed and self-indulgence" for being "hypocrites" (Matt 23:25). Even when the actual words "hypocrisy" or "hypocrite" do not appear in Jesus's condemnations, the implication of hypocrisy is often obviously present. When, for example, Jesus lashes out at those who "devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers" (Mark 12:40), the charge clearly includes hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy in the teaching of Jesus means pretending to be better than one actually is. The word "hypocrisy" derives from ancient Greek theater and means to play a role. Since in Greek theater actors wore masks, hypocrisy includes masking one's true identity in order to appear to be someone else. Since Jesus primarily spoke Aramaic, it is not certain that he knew the Greek term. But he clearly knew the "hypocrisy" of pretending to be better than one is.

Jesus seems to have assumed that most hypocrisy was due to a blindness to the evil in the core of one's own being. It is, of course, possible for people to be consciously hypocritical. People can knowingly pretend to be better than they are. But Jesus does not appear to have been especially concerned about people who realized their own sinfulness. Instead, he was concerned about moral blindness. He constantly focused on the heart, which in the biblical tradition does not mean the emotional side of the personality, but the hidden core of who a person is. Jesus claimed that hypocrites did not know the evil that was lurking in their deepest selves.

Jesus concentrated on unconscious hypocrisy, because it allows radical evil to exist. People who see their own faults either begin to improve, or at least become humble and patient with the weaknesses of others. By contrast, people who are blind to their own faults become proud and impatient. Total blindness to one's own sinfulness makes radical wickedness possible. The morally blind can rationalize anything, and even claim that genocide is a virtue! Jesus issued this stern warning, "If your [moral] eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt 6:23).

It is noteworthy that in the gospels Jesus does not attack hypocrisy in people who are disadvantaged. Experience teaches that the poor, the disabled, and the morally despised can be as hypocritical as anyone else. The poor may pretend that they are eager for work, when in fact they do not desire it. The handicapped can pretend to be more helpless than they are. The despised can falsely insist that they are "misunderstood." Jesus was apparently aware that the marginal often are hypocrites. In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the owner of the vineyard comes to the market place at daybreak, nine o'clock in the morning, noon, and three o'clock in the afternoon, and hires everyone who is available. When he finally comes at 5:00 in the evening, he sees people waiting to be hired and asks them why they have been idle all day. Their reply that no one has hired them is hypocritical. They were too lazy to seek employment earlier. Nevertheless, Jesus never attacks people who are disadvantaged for hypocrisy.

Instead, he attacks hypocrisy in people who are spiritually privileged. In the gospels Jesus especially levels his charge of hypocrisy against the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes



were people who were literate and could study the biblical commandments and, therefore, observe them more completely. The Pharisees were ultra Jews who specialized in spelling out in detail the requirements of the law so that a person could exactly do what God required in every aspect of life. Jesus also leveled the charge of hypocrisy against his own disciples. He criticized them for not taking seriously his central teaching that in the kingdom the leaders must act as servants.

It seems unlikely that Jesus believed that the spiritually privileged--let alone his own disciples--were more hypocritical than other people. We have already noted that Jesus was aware that the disadvantaged can be hypocritical. The gospels tend to exaggerate the sinfulness of the Pharisees. When the gospels were written, the Pharisees were the primary opponents of the early Christian movement. We may recall that St. Paul before his conversion was a Pharisee and a persecutor of the Church. Naturally, the gospels place the primary enemies of the Church in a negative light! The gospels often exaggerate the failings of the disciples in order to instruct the Christian reader. The Christian reader naturally identifies with the disciples. Therefore, in order to warn the reader of potential dangers, the gospels underline the mistakes of Jesus's disciples and the sometimes disastrous results.

Consequently, we should not assume that the Pharisees or the leading disciples of Jesus were noticeably more hypocritical than everyone else or that Jesus thought that they were.

I suspect that Jesus concentrated his criticism on the Pharisees and his own disciples for two reasons. First, hypocrisy in spiritual leaders corrupts society as a whole, since they shape communal values. The Pharisees were acknowledged spiritual guides in first-century Judaism. They challenged others to imitate them. Therefore, their own blindness engendered

blindness in the larger Jewish community. Jesus's disciples were to guide others in the movement that he was beginning. If the disciples themselves were modeling sinfulness, what hope was there that the Christian community as a whole would embody God's will? Perhaps the second reason that Jesus concentrated his criticism on the Pharisees and his own disciples was that spiritual leaders because of their socially secure status are in a better position to accept criticism and benefit from it. People who already suffer from crushing criticism will not benefit from more of it. Jesus did not attack the morality of the prostitutes and corrupt tax collectors that he reached out to. They already suffered from debilitating shame, and probably had become hardened to the rejection of their behavior. To them, Jesus emphasized God's forgiveness. By contrast the Pharisees in first-century Judaism and the disciples of Jesus in his own movement were used to being admired. They were sensitive to criticism and had the self-confidence to be able to respond positively to it.

Jesus held that moral blindness in spiritual leaders manifests itself in several types of behavior. First, when spiritual leaders do not see their own sinfulness, they tend to emphasize religious fine points and neglect more fundamental issues. Jesus complained that the Pharisees paid tithes on herbs but neglected "justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23). Next spiritual leaders who ignore their own sinfulness tend to become hypercritical of the sins of others. Jesus complained about people who attempt to remove the splinter from someone else's eye even though there was a log in their own (Matt 7:3-5). Finally, spiritual leaders who ignore their own sinfulness will be intolerant of ministries which reach out toward the excluded and despised and will not be able to see God at work there. Jesus complained that his critics dismissed him as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt 11:19) rather than having the wisdom to see God at work among the marginal. Jesus also pointed out that even

when the marginal responded to John the Baptist's preaching and repented, the supposedly righteous did not learn from them (Matt 21:32).

Jesus attempted to overcome hypocrisy, especially among religious leaders, in three ways. First, he directly confronted people and groups with their sinfulness. Often in the gospels Jesus's attacks are specific and severe. Apparently, he felt that when people are willfully blind to their faults, mild criticism is not effective. Jesus also attempted to get past people's defenses through subversive stories. He would tell a strange tale which would lead his hearers to make a judgment in accordance with their unacknowledged prejudices, and then the story itself would undermine that judgment exposing the prejudices. The famous parable of the Good Samaritan is a classic example. The vast majority of Jesus's audience must have been Jewish lay people who were at least somewhat critical of the priests and had deep ethnic prejudices against Samaritans whom Jews in general considered to be immoral. In the parable, first a priest and then an assistant priest neglect to help the wounded traveler. The audience confidently expects that the third person--the one who will be righteous and help the traveler--will be a Jewish layman, and in advance they prepare to approve of him. But in the story it is a hated Samaritan who in fact renders the needed aid. By this switch Jesus exposes the prejudices against Samaritans and invites the audience to consider whether Samaritans actually behave worse than Jews. The third way that Jesus tried to overcome hypocrisy was by insisting that God's primary requirement was to love others. As we have noted above, hypocrisy in spiritual leaders was leading to overemphasis on legal fine points, being overly critical of the sins of others, and being intolerant of associating with the despised. By emphasizing that the primary commandments are to love God and neighbor and even one's enemy, Jesus undercut these distortions. Love--not adherence to regulations and the

maintenance of social boundaries--was what God primarily required.

Underlying Jesus's attempt to overcome hypocrisy was the faith that with him a new power of love was present. As we have seen, the center of Jesus message was that the kingdom of God was coming and in a hidden way it was already present in Jesus's own ministry. In his preaching Jesus especially emphasized love and forgiveness. He taught his followers that God loved and forgave them and they must in turn love and forgive others, even enemies. Psychologically, hypocrisy is a defense. We cannot face our own sinfulness and, therefore, we do not see it. Ripping away the masks and forcing people to look at their faults is destructive unless enough spiritual support is available for people to be confident that they are still loved and they can improve. Jesus felt that this confidence was fully justified because the kingdom of God was both already quietly present in his ministry and soon would come in power.

Jesus's insistence that people must not respond to violence with violence presupposed spiritual resistance--a resistance that he believed could overcome violence. In advocating "turning the other cheek" Jesus was not recommending mere acquiescence to evil. Instead, the refusal to respond in kind made the original evil more obvious and deprived the perpetrator of any excuse for its continuance. Jesus often aggressively pointed out the sinfulness of those who attacked him. For example, in Luke's Gospel Jesus berates the people who have shackled him by pointing out that they are treating him like a "bandit" and had not dared to arrest him when he was teaching in the temple (Luke 22:52-53). Even Jesus's silence before the governor at the Roman trial was not passive; instead, it was a refusal to recognize the governor's right to continue to interrogate him about charges that the governor knew to be baseless.

As we briefly noted above, a striking feature of Jesus's preaching was his insistence on equality. In God's kingdom there must be equality. The first would be as the last and the last as the first. There must be financial equality. Jesus told a rich man who wanted to become his disciple that he first had to sell his property and "give the money to the poor" and only then come and follow Jesus (Mark 10:21). Jesus insisted that it was "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). There also had to be spiritual equality. Of course, Jesus recognized that some actions are good, and some, evil, and, therefore, some people are morally better than others. But in the kingdom people do not rely on their moral superiority for salvation, and they do not despise others. Salvation comes as God's gracious gift, and God is especially generous to those most in need. We see this theology in the strange parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). The master (God) hires people at different times of the day, and some people work twelve hours and others work only one. The master pays each of them the same. When those who worked all day complain, the master replies that they received their due and should not begrudge the master's generosity toward others. If God is so generous to the less virtuous, the followers of Jesus must be also. Jesus taught them that when they ask God for forgiveness for their sins, they must declare their own forgiveness for the sins of others. Those who are morally superior are those who are most selfless.

Underlying Jesus's insistence on equality is the theology that inequality necessarily leads to sin. Great differences in wealth or social respectability inevitably lead to jealousy and condescension.

To help overcome inequality Jesus especially reached out to the morally despised and apparently encouraged his disciples to do the same. He spent so much time with the despised that respectable people dismissed him as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). But Jesus insisted that concentrating on the morally needy was both his own vocation and the continuing obligation of his followers. Jesus told his critics that he came "to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17). The healthy do not need the attention of a spiritual physician; the sick do. And Jesus told his disciples not to preach to the rich and the powerful of their nation but instead to go to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:6).

In reaching out to sinners, Jesus emphasized that their sin could become a gift after repentance. Jesus insisted that a debtor who is forgiven a large debt will love the creditor more than a debtor who is forgiven a small one. Those to whom God forgives much will for that very reason have a deeper love for him (Luke 7:36-50).

According to Jesus, an important way to overcome jealousy and condescension is to regard the salvation of others as part of one's own salvation. In the teaching of Jesus there is no separate salvation for individuals. Salvation is communal; it is being part of the kingdom. The loss of anyone's salvation is a tragedy for all. Hence, in the famous parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd is especially concerned about the one sheep who went astray. Without it the flock is incomplete. We see the same theology in the dramatic conclusion to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When the father (God) in the story throws a party for his wayward son who now has repented and come home, the older virtuous brother at first refuses to attend. When the father pleads with him to come, the older brother complains to the father about the unworthiness of "this son of yours." The father replies that the person in question is in fact

"this brother of yours" (Luke 15:30-32). The family cannot be whole without one of its members. So it is that Jesus can insist that there is "more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). If the repentance and reinclusion of sinners brings great joy to God and completeness to the common salvation of everyone, then the righteous will reach out to sinners rather than despise and exclude them. There is no place for jealousy and condescension if the salvation of any person contributes to the salvation of every person.

In line with his emphasis that salvation is inclusion in the communal kingdom, Jesus threatens his enemies with final exclusion. Jesus sometimes speaks of hell or, to use his own term, "Gehenna" and employs conventional imagery of fire and worms to describe it. These images appear to be metaphors for suffering in general and probably should not be taken literally. But it is striking how often in his parables the punishment for sinners is exclusion. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son the older brother is tempted to exclude himself from the party. In the Parable of the Great Supper the rich guests refuse to attend the feast at the last moment. In the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids only the wise get to go into the wedding banquet. Then the door is shut and locked. Whatever else final damnation may be in the teaching of Jesus, it is primarily not to be part of the community of those who accept God's love and forgiveness and extend them to others. The threat which should make any sinner repent is the threat of being left forever outside.

Being left outside follows the revelation of one's guilt. In a number of Jesus's parables about the final judgment the punishment takes place after moral exposure. The guilty are confronted with their faults before being penalized. Thus, in Matthew's version of the Parable

of the Great Supper (22:1-14), the story ends with the king (God) noticing that one of the wedding guests did not bother to dress up. When the king demands an explanation, the guest has no reply, and the king excludes him. Similarly, in the parable of the talents, when the slave who did not invest the money makes the excuse that he knew that the master was a demanding man, the master replies that, therefore, the slave had all the more reason to invest the money. We have a milder version of the same theme in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. As we noted above, when the older brother justifies his anger by describing his sibling as "this son of yours," the Father points out that the person in question is "this brother of yours" (Luke 15:31-32). Jesus proclaimed, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered" (Matt 10:26).

Toward the end of his life Jesus at least began to suspect that his own death might be part of God's way to overcome sin. After Jesus decided to leave the relative safety of rural Galilee and confront the authorities in Jerusalem with his message, it was extremely likely that they would kill him. The likeliness became a virtual certainty once Jesus took the extreme step of staging a semi-violent demonstration in the temple. Consequently, the gospels' claim that Jesus increasingly spoke of his coming death is inherently likely. Since Jesus saw himself as the inaugurator of God's kingdom, he would have struggled with how his own death could be part of a larger divine plan. Earlier Jewish writings had sometimes claimed that the suffering and death of martyrs, real or legendary, could make up for the sins of others and lead to collective salvation. We read in the book of Isaiah about a mysterious "Servant" who "was wounded for our transgressions" (Isa 53:5) and "bore the sin of many" (53:12). 2 Maccabees in the Catholic Bible (and in the Protestant Apocrypha) tells us that the sufferings of the Maccabean martyrs would placate God's just wrath against Israel and save the nation (2 Macc 7:37-38). Hence, it



is reasonable to suppose that Jesus would have thought that his own death would make up for the sins of others. Hence, the saying in Mark's Gospel that Jesus was giving "his life a ransom for many" (10:45) is at least a plausible interpretation of what Jesus believed, regardless of whether or not Jesus actually said these words.

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Reflection and discussion questions: How do we feel about exorcisms? Does the entertainment industry sensationalize them and give us a misleading idea of what they are? Can we find positive things in Jesus's own practice of exorcism? Do disturbed people sometimes become temporarily better when we confront them with their inappropriate behavior, extend loving support, remind them of God's power and compassion, and include them in a healing community? Will such people probably relapse if they do not grow psychologically and spiritually? Do most people who are being hypocritical (i.e., pretending to be more virtuous than they truly are) realize what they are doing? If not, why not? How do we feel about Jesus not criticizing the down and out but aggressively criticizing the socially and psychologically secure? Can people be radically evil and fully realize the damage they are doing, or is radical evil only possible through spiritual blindness? Are many of the social and political leaders of our society hypocritical, and if so, how is their hypocrisy affecting the society as a whole? In our experience, how does blindness in spiritual leaders manifest itself? Are some of the symptoms placing too much emphasis on minor points and too little on major ones, being overly critical of the sins of others, and being hostile toward ministries to the despised? Should we confront people directly with their hypocrisy or use subversive comments? Will we be helpful exposing people's hypocrisy if we do not love them? When is

spiritual resistance to violence (rather than meeting violence with violence) effective and when it is not? Should there be equality in the Church? For example, should all clergy be paid the same? Does great inequality in money or prestige inevitably lead to sin? Do we see salvation as being part of a redeemed world, and the salvation of others as our salvation? How do we feel about hell being a place that is outside the community of the saved? Do the sufferings of martyrs atone for the sins of others, and if so, how?

## Chapter 7: Evil--and how to overcome it--in Paul's Theology

We have more information about Paul than about any other early Christian. Luke's Acts of the Apostles gives us something like a biography of him. Luke provides us with a detailed account of Paul conversion to Christianity and subsequent missionary work, and in that account there are occasional references to Paul's earlier life. We also have letters that Paul himself wrote, and these give us detailed information about what was happening to Paul and his churches when he was writing and how he responded.

Nevertheless, there are grave difficulties in reconstructing Paul's thought. The Acts of the Apostles was written at least two decades after Paul's death. Today we cannot know how much reliable information about Paul was still available then. Luke tells us little about Paul's ideas but instead concentrates on his deeds. It is true that Luke does record sermons that purportedly Paul gave. However, these appear to be primarily by Luke himself. Like other ancient historians Luke wrote speeches which he felt would have been appropriate for a past figure to have given. Paul's letters themselves address specific situations. Like pastors in general, Paul underlines the principles and practices that will resolve the present problems rather than give a comprehensive and balanced discussion. Since Paul presents contrasting theological perspectives in different letters, it is probable that his thought evolved. Perhaps he never arrived at a conclusive and consistent theology.

Consequently, here I will not present Paul's theology of evil but only *a* pauline theology of evil. Probably there will never be a definitive presentation of Paul's theology or a definitive

presentation of any major topic in it. When one surveys the great Pauline scholars of recent times, such as Rudolf Bultmann, E.P. Sanders, J.C. Beker, James Dunn, one is struck by the great differences in their interpretations. Perhaps the best that anyone can do is present one perspective on Paul, and that is all that I attempt to do here in discussing Paul's view of how evil originates and how evil can be overcome.

Paul remained a committed Jew throughout his life. According to his own testimony, he was a "Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5) which probably means that he not only was born a Jew but that his first language was Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek, the language of his letters. He tells us that he "advanced in Judaism" beyond many of his contemporaries (Gal 1:14) and became a Pharisee (Phil 3:5-6), an ultra Jew. Paul's subsequent conversion to Christianity did relativize his commitment to Judaism. Paul could write that compared to the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus," he regarded "all things" as "rubbish," including his Judaism (Phil 3:8). Because loyalty to Christ was paramount, Paul could temporarily set aside Jewish customs to accommodate Gentile Christians when he was with them. When he was among Greeks, he could live like a Greek. Nevertheless, a committed Jew Paul remained. He proudly proclaims in his introductory letter to the church in Rome, "I myself am an Israelite" (Rom 11:1) and calls the Jews "my brothers" (Rom 9:1-3). He tells the Corinthian Church that when he is among the Jews he lives like a Jew (1 Cor 9:20). In his letter to the Christians of Galatia, Paul even goes so far as to write, "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" (Gal 2:15). The Acts of the Apostles confirms Paul's own testimony by recording that Paul's final arrest took place when he was worshiping in the temple at Jerusalem.

As a committed Jew, Paul always believed in the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law is the

foundation of Judaism, and Paul remained loyal to it. Paul tells us that before his conversion he was "blameless" (!) in observing the Mosaic Law (Phil 3:6). Even after his conversion he was committed to the Law. He insisted that Christian Jews should continue to observe the Law (1 Cor 7:17-18). When he was among Jews, Paul himself kept the Mosaic Law (1 Cor 9:20). He cited the Law as an unquestionable authority for Christian doctrine. For example, he wrote to the Corinthians, "Do I say this on human authority? Does not the Law also say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses . . ." (1 Cor 9:8-9). In his Letter to the Romans Paul insists that the Mosaic Law is "holy and just and good" (7:12). Acts records that even after becoming a Christian Paul would "observe and guard the Law" (21:24).

Yet, it was his loyalty to the Law that drove Paul before his conversion to persecute the Christian Church. It is noteworthy that Paul apparently never persecuted Jewish Christians who kept the Mosaic Code but only those who did not. The first we hear about Paul in the Acts of the Apostles is his presence at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58, 8:1). Acts tells us that the legal charge against Stephen was that he was speaking against observing the Mosaic Law (Acts 6:13-14). Subsequently, Paul pursued Greek speaking Christians who apparently were making Gentile converts without requiring them to live by the mosaic regulations. Paul himself writes that it was his zeal, as one who was blameless under the Law, which led him to persecute the Church (Phil 3:6).

Paul may even have concluded the the Mosaic Law was responsible for Jesus's crucifixion or at least that in some way the Law condemned Jesus. The gospels record that the high priest and the Council found Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy (Mark 14:64). At least part of that

blasphemy was the supposed claim<sup>10</sup> that he would replace the temple, a claim that witnesses against Jesus brought up at the Jewish hearing (Mark 14:57-58). The Law provides that there must be a temple (already, Exod 15:17), and so Jesus was accused of undermining the Law itself. As an early persecutor of the Church Paul surely knew about Jesus's Jewish hearing and condemnation. Paul himself in his Letter to the Galatians quotes the legal text, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23) and states that the Law cursed Jesus when he was crucified.

By contrast, the early church was proclaiming that the crucifixion was the way that God had overcome sin. Unfortunately, we are not able to reconstruct the teachings of earliest Christianity in any detail. The gospels tell us about the life of Jesus and about the beliefs of the evangelists who lived two generations later. But we have no documents from the period between the crucifixion and Paul's own letters. Nevertheless, the bits of evidence that we do have suggest that the resurrection experiences led the earliest Christians to conclude that the crucifixion defeated the power of evil. The resurrection experiences not only convinced the earliest Christians that Jesus was alive again but also that he was Lord of the universe. Meeting Jesus risen from the dead was definitely not the same as meeting a resuscitated human being. The risen Christ possessed the mystery and authority of God himself. If the risen Christ had such authority, then in some sense he must already have conquered the powers of evil through his death and resurrection. Therefore, the death of Jesus could not have been an accident or a temporary defeat for Jesus. It must have been part of God's eternal plan to redeem the world from sin. We see the conviction that Jesus's death broke the power

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<sup>10</sup> Historically, it is at least clear that Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple (e.g., Mark 13:1-2) and never said that the temple would be rebuilt.

of sin in a creed that Paul himself quotes as something that he received from earlier Christian tradition. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3).

With his conversion to Christianity Paul became convinced that the primary way that God saved the world was through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of Christ's Spirit. Formerly as a Pharisee he must have believed that the primary way that God brought salvation was by giving the Law to Moses for the Israelites to observe for all time. However, then the risen Christ himself appeared to Paul, and Paul acknowledged his Lordship and accepted a commission to preach Christianity to the Gentiles. Significantly, the Christianity he would preach was that of the very group that he had previously persecuted--namely, the Christianity of Greek-speaking Jews that Gentiles could become members of a single Christian community without accepting the Mosaic Law. Hence, the Christian Paul concluded that salvation could not be through the Mosaic code. Instead, salvation must be through the risen Christ who had revealed himself to Paul. And this was the Christ who had been crucified and the Christ who gives his Spirit to all who are baptized and makes them part of the "new creation" in which Jewish circumcision makes no difference (Gal 6:15). Of course, these ideas were the foundation of Gentile Christianity in general, a Christianity that Paul himself now proclaimed in his missionary work as an apostle to the Gentile world.

Consequently, to come up with a consistent Christian theology of how sin originates and how sin can be overcome, Paul had to maintain several fundamental ideas and explain how they all could be simultaneously true. First, he had to insist that the Law--which was God's gift to Israel--was in no way sinful and had always been part of the divine plan to save the world. Nevertheless, he also had to insist that salvation was through Christ, especially through his

crucifixion, resurrection, and Spirit. And Paul had to admit that the Law could inspire sin, since it was Paul's own zeal for the Law that drove him to commit the supreme sin of persecuting the Church. But these ideas are in severe tension. If the Mosaic Law could drive someone to sin, how could it be part of God's plan?

It was pastorally urgent for Paul to be able to articulate a consistent Christian theology, including how sin originates and how sin can be overcome. Explaining how the Mosaic Law could inspire sin without itself being sinful was essential to justify Paul's ministry--a ministry that continually suffered criticism. If Paul could not defend the Law as righteous, he would lose the support of Jewish Christians, and since the leadership of the Church was Jewish, he would lose all credibility. Indeed, in his letters Paul continually defends himself against the charge that he was not faithful to early Christian tradition and insists that what he preaches is what the other apostles preach. Yet, if Paul could not explain why the Law caused spiritual problems, he could not justify his mission to convert Gentiles to Christ without requiring them to adopt the Law. And in his letters Paul constantly has to emphasize that Gentiles should not be required to observe the Mosaic regulations.

Drawing on Apocalyptic thought, Paul assumed that human sin and the evil that results from it are ultimately due to demonic powers. Paul believed in Satan and his assistants. Paul writes about Satan, (and other evil angels) fairly often, and insists that ultimately the Christian struggle is against them. We read in Paul's epistles that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14), that he tries to tempt people through their "lack of self-control" (1 Cor 7:5), that he is ultimately behind a debilitating medical problem from which Paul himself suffers (2 Cor 12:7), that he prevented Paul from returning to Thessalonica to



help the congregation there (1 Thes 2:18), that no angel can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39), that if the Roman Christians are "wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil," God will crush Satan under their feet (Rom 16:19-20).

Paul also believed that human sin is a monstrous power loose in history. For Paul human sins are not merely mistaken choices that individuals freely make. Instead, sin is a power that passes down through history and enslaves. Sin began with the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and their sin warped everyone who came after. So did the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin. Paul wrote, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). This primordial sin even is responsible for the degradation of the natural world. Paul remembered that in Genesis Adam's sin leads to thorns and thistles, and Paul noted that the creation is in bondage to decay.

Nevertheless, God continued to be visible in the world he made, and even people who did not have the Mosaic revelation could to a limited degree recognize God's will and even do it. In Romans we read God's "eternal power and divine nature" are "seen through the things he has made" (1:20). Consequently, at least sometimes the "Gentiles, who do not possess the Law, do instinctively what the Law requires" (Rom 2:14).

Nevertheless, because of the demonic and the previous sin of Adam and Eve and their descendants, there was a evil dynamic that caused sin to multiply and lead to idolatry and further degradation. Human beings did not wish to glorify and praise God. They were self-centered and wanted to be independent. They engaged in frivolous speculation and lost their

awareness of the One True God. They worshiped a multitude of images representing deities (Rom 1:21-23). From idolatry came degrading passions and destructive actions. People who are enslaved to these know that God's judgment awaits. To shield themselves from this knowledge they encourage one another in their sinfulness (Rom 1:32).

We can feel the force of Paul's claim the idolatry leads to degradation, if we realize that an idol can be an obsessive desire that results from not being centered in God. Literally, an idol is an image of a god, usually one god among many. Since most people in the United States do not worship such a image, Paul's argumentation seems strange to us and unconvincing.

Consequently, we must further explore idolatry and how Paul understands it. An image reduces God to something limited. Whereas the One True God transcends time and space and cannot be represented, an idol makes a deity seem confined by time and space and in some measure subject to our control. We can put an idol on a shelf. In Paul's Greco-Roman world the gods which the idols represented were the personifications of natural, political, and psychological forces. There was a god of the sea and a goddess of the City of Rome. The Roman emperor could be a god. There was a goddess of sex and a god of wine. Paul assumes this equation of deities with such natural, political, and psychological realities. The Letter to the Colossians specifically labels greediness as a idol (Col. 3:5).<sup>11</sup> Paul even equates idols with demons (1 Cor 10:19-21), and to some extent this equation remains convincing. A demon, by definition, is an angel who is in rebellion against God. When we worship natural, political, and psychological forces, we no longer regard them as subject to some higher authority-- including a higher moral authority. Hence, in practice they become for us dominating forces

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<sup>11</sup> There is scholarly debate over whether Paul actually wrote Colossians. Some scholars feel that someone else wrote in Paul's name. The practice of people (ideally students) writing in the name of deceased heroes was a widespread, though controversial, practice in antiquity. Whether or not Colossians was literally written by Paul, it was at least written by someone who had absorbed Paul's thought and was in a position to interpret it faithfully.

in opposition to God. Of course, when people make something such as money the primary goal of life, they are in effect worshiping it. Worshiping idols distorts desires and degrades, because it is an attempt to replace the fulfillment that can only come from God's love with something beneath us, such as political power, sexual pleasure, or wine. Consequently, these desires become insatiable. No amount of political power, sexual pleasure, or wine can replace God's love. These distorted desires drive people to concrete destructive acts. People begin by making sex or money the goal of life; desire for these things become obsessive; people do whatever is necessary to obtain their obsession. Those who act destructively because of their distorted desire know that they deserve God's punishment and that judgment awaits. To insulate themselves from this knowledge, they praise each other's sinfulness and thus encourage one another to sin even more. Such commendation of evil even becomes a basis for community life. How many college fraternities have been held together by a common commitment to sexual irresponsibility and the overuse of alcohol? Of course, such communal approval will not protect people from condemnation at the last judgment.

God gave the Mosaic Law to the Jews, and, Paul insists that in many respects the Law was a great benefit. The Law revealed God's will with a clarity and concreteness that far exceeded the vague awareness of right and wrong that the Gentiles had by instinct. The Jews knew what God required. They recognized the righteousness of the Law's moral demands. That righteousness allowed Jews to perceive their sins, repent of them, and attempt to do better. Speaking as a representative Jew, Paul insists that he would not have known that he should not covet unless the law had informed him (Rom 7:7). Consequently, his inner self rejoices in the Law's demands (Rom 7:22). Moreover, the Law had a positive historical role to play. In his Letter to the Galatians Paul says that the Law was the temporary guardian (3:23-24) for

the Jewish people. Unfortunately, Paul did not explain what he meant. However, we may speculate that Paul was remembering that the Mosaic code prevented the Jews from descending to the theological ignorance and moral depravity of the surrounding Pagan cultures and thereby prepared for the coming of Jesus. Paul specifically notes that Jesus himself was "born under the Law" (Gal 4:4). In modern language we might say that the Mosaic Law preserved Jewish religious identity--an identity without which the mission of Jesus would have been impossible.

Nevertheless, the Law which so helpfully specified what Jews must do to fulfill God's righteous will did not in practice give them the power to do it. Paul, speaking as a representative Jew, insists that in his innermost self he chooses to do what the Law requires. However, the rest of his being resists, and in the end he does not do the good that he chooses but the evil that he hates (Rom 7:15-19).

Consequently, the Law by itself produces inner division within an individual and makes sin more powerful. By telling people what they must do and not giving them the power to do it, the Law tempts people to try to save themselves. To the extent that they succeed, they are inclined to become proud and not be dependent on God. Of course, such pride is itself a sin. But as we noted above, Paul assumes that to a large degree people fail in their attempts to keep the Law. It is especially difficult to control evil thoughts, such as coveting which Paul uses as an example of law breaking. The failure to keep the Law leads to self-alienation. We feel overwhelmed by sin and suffer shame. That debility makes sin even more powerful. Consequently, Paul argues that the Law made sin abound (Rom 5:20). That a former Pharisee could make a statement so shocking to Jewish sensitivity shows how far the Christian Paul

had come from his past!

The Law also caused sinful division between Jews and Gentiles. God gave the Law only to the Jews, and the purpose of the Law was to make the Jews a holy people. Consequently, the Law was inherently divisive. Much of the Law consisted of ethnic customs which had no moral basis and necessarily made the Jews culturally distinct and limited contact with Gentiles. For example, the Law contained detailed regulations about what food could not be eaten, and these regulations made it difficult for Jews and Gentiles to dine together. The Letter to the Ephesians<sup>12</sup> pictures the Mosaic code as a "dividing wall" which split humanity into two groups, Jews and Gentiles, and necessarily led to hostility (2:14-15). Worse, the high moral standards of the Mosaic Law tempted Jews to think of themselves as ethically superior, even when they themselves were not living up to these standards. In Romans Paul, addressing an imaginary "Jew," notes the smugness that the possession of the Law could produce: "You are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and truth" (2:19-20). But Paul suggests that in practice this hypothetical Jew is not actually abiding by these exalted standards. "In passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (2:1). Such hypocrisy causes the Gentiles to despise Judaism as a whole. Paul, citing the Hebrew Scriptures, writes, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Rom 2:24). Of course, Paul in his own pre-Christian life had experienced the Mosaic Law as a "dividing wall." Because of his zeal for the Mosaic code, he had persecuted radical Jewish Christians who were inviting Gentiles to join

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the majority of critical scholars doubt that Paul himself actually wrote Ephesians. However, it seems likely that if he did not, a student who knew him and was loyal to his thought did. In citing Ephesians I am only assuming that it accurately reflects Paul's basic theology.

their movement without adopting the Mosaic regulations.

Paul believed that the Law pointed forward to Jesus who fulfilled it. By challenging people to keep high moral standards and not giving them the power to do it, the Law prepared people to receive Jesus who, as we will now see, empowers people to do God's will. Moreover, the Law actually predicted the coming of Jesus and the salvation he would bring. For Paul, as for Jews in general, the "Law" not only referred to the regulations that traditionally God gave to Moses. The Law also referred to the first five books of the Bible that according to tradition Moses wrote, and by extension the Law referred to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole. Paul believed passionately that these scriptures had prophesied the coming of Jesus. They even prophesied that Jesus would save the Gentiles and make the Jews and Gentiles into a single Christian community, as Paul attempts to show by a string of quotations in Romans (15:7-12).

Only Jesus could break the power of sin because he alone was not corrupted by Adam's fall. As we noted above, Paul believed that sin was a superhuman power loose in history. That power took over with Adam's trespass and has affected everyone who came after. Paul allows no exception: "All have sinned and fall short" (Rom 3:23). Christ, however, came down from heaven (e.g., Rom 10:6) or, to use later more theological language, became incarnate.<sup>13</sup> Hence, he alone could be a second Adam who was himself free from sin. Through Christ, righteousness became a superhuman power in history and more than overcomes the consequences of Adam's sin.

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<sup>13</sup> A minority of scholars claim that Paul did not believe in the personal pre-existence of Christ. In my opinion, several texts in Paul's letters (Phil 2:6-7, 2 Cor 8:9, Rom 10:6, etc.) clearly indicate that Paul did believe in the incarnation, and this belief is necessary to make Paul's larger theology of sin and redemption coherent, as I try to show above.

Paul proclaimed that Christ broke the power of sin primarily through the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of course, Paul regarded the teaching of Jesus as significant and occasionally refers to it in his letters. However, the crucifixion and resurrection are the primary way that God through Jesus overcame sin. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that it was a matter of "first importance" to believe that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3) "and that he was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4). He wrote to the Romans, that Jesus was "handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Scarcely less important is the gift of the Spirit. Paul insists, "The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin" (Rom 8:2).

The crucifixion sets people free from the power of sin by demonstrating God's love and delivering us from self-preoccupation. The death of Jesus demonstrates definitively God's love for sinners. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person." "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8). As noted above, sin becomes invincible when people try to do good, fail, and then condemn themselves. At that point people are helpless. However, when God demonstrates his love and forgiveness for sinners, then people no longer condemn themselves. They accept God's pardon. That acceptance delivers them from self-preoccupation and centers them in God. Paul could write that in his case he had become so centered in Jesus that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This openness to God then allows God's power to transform Christians and make them "a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17).

The cross also sets Christians free from slavery to debased conventional values and behavior. The cross demonstrates the ignorance and wickedness of the fallen world--perhaps especially

its structures of power and wealth. It was the conventional world--especially its leaders and the demonic powers they unwittingly served--who crucified Jesus. Paul writes that "none of the rulers of this age understood." "If they had, they would not have crucified the Lord" (1 Cor 2:8). By demonstrating the wickedness of the world, the cross challenges people to be critical of the beliefs and actions of the larger society and not mindlessly conform to them. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God" (12:2).

Christ's resurrection sets people free from the allure of sin by giving us hope for final deliverance. The resurrection demonstrates that God is more powerful than the rulers of this age, including death, and is now defeating them. Consequently, the resurrection of Jesus proves both that followers of Jesus who die now will immediately join him in heavenly glory and that ultimately God will redeem the whole creation. Paul believed in a two-stage resurrection. At the death of an individual, the self leaves the body and goes to a preliminary salvation or punishment. Paul at one point expected this preliminary salvation for himself. As he was in prison and awaiting a trial which might result in his execution, Paul wrote to the Philippians that he would rather "depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil 1:23). But there is a second stage. Ultimately, Christ will return and save the righteous and transform the creation. As we noted already, Paul even believed that the natural world would be delivered "from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21). When Paul wrote these words, meaningful survival after death was controversial in Judaism. The Pharisees believed in resurrection but the Sadducees (who as the high priestly party were the leaders of society!) did not (Mark 12:18-23). Of course, neither side had definitive proof for its position. Paul believed that he had proof of the resurrection. God raised Jesus from the dead and made him



lord of the universe. Therefore, if we live like Jesus, God will raise us from the dead; we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ and share in his heavenly glory (1 Cor 15) and will always be with him (1 Thes 4:17). This supreme hope delivers us from the allure of sin. If we have no hope, we are tempted to adopt the philosophy, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32). But if we have hope for final resurrection, we can patiently do good.

The presence of the Holy Spirit sets us free from sin by powerfully beginning our final transformation and giving us the mind of Christ. Of course, our outer transformation must wait. We are still in this present fallen world, still subject to suffering and death. However, thanks to the gift of Christ's Spirit, our inner transformation has already begun. "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16). Part of this inner transformation is thinking the way that Jesus did. Paul wrote, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

Because of the presence of the Spirit we can be content even with our weaknesses. Our weaknesses force us to rely on the power of the Spirit and center us in God. When we are centered in God, he can do remarkable things through us, for, as Paul wrote, "God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). Indeed, God's power working through us puts the strong to shame. Consequently, Paul even boasts of his weakness.

The presence of the Holy Spirit overcomes ethnic divisions by unifying people despite their different laws and customs. Every ethnic group can receive the Spirit. And the Spirit creates a communal love that is sufficiently strong that diversity is not a barrier to union. Paul did not ask Jews or Gentiles to give up their differing cultural practices. On the contrary, he

recommended that each group retain its ethnic identity. Jews should continue to observe their special holy days and special diets; Gentiles should not adopt Jewish customs. Nevertheless, in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal 3:28), because all who are baptized share in the bond of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Spirit Christians realize that what is essential is to love one another, and this realization allows diverse peoples to live in peace. Paul insisted that the whole law is fulfilled in the commandment to "love your neighbor" (Rom 13:9). Therefore, love takes precedence over every custom and regulation and allows for accommodation and mutual respect. Paul's critics accused him of hypocrisy because he lived like a Jew when he was among Jews and lived like a Gentile when he was among Gentiles. Paul's response was that he was fully consistent. In all circumstances he followed the law of love. And he insisted that Jesus called other Christians to do the same.

In practice, divided communities overcome sin by having the strong and sophisticated defer to the consciences of the weak. Those who know that love fulfills the whole law can accommodate the moral scruples of those who do not. Therefore, in the various controversies that divided his communities, Paul consistently maintained that the theologically informed were correct in theory, but in practice they should defer to those who were not. Tempting the weak to do what they believe is wrong is tempting them to act against their own conscience. And acting against one's own conscience is always sinful and always produces self-alienation.

For those who have the Spirit, moral exhortation is helpful. In his discussion of the power of sin, Paul emphasized that without the Spirit, law can make sin more powerful. Law makes sin

abound. However, because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5), we are no longer enslaved by shame and fear. Christians focus on God's transforming power and see virtues as fruits of the Spirit. To those who have this perspective, moral exhortation can be life giving. And Paul loved to edify his Christian readers by giving them lists of virtues to adopt. For example, in Galatians we read, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22).

Among Paul's most forceful exhortations is his insistence that Christians must do good to their enemies. Here Paul shares Jesus's perspective that God calls people to love their enemies. Such love challenges one's enemies to change. In his Letter to the Romans Paul insists, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:20-21).

Much of the power of the Spirit that enables virtue comes from being in the Christian community. Paul did not believe that a Christian could be saved apart from participation in the Church. It is the Church which is Christ's body. In the Church the Spirit gives to each person particular gifts which are for the benefit of the community as a whole. By all persons exercising their individual gifts to support one another, the transforming power of the Spirit becomes fully available to every member. That communal Spirit makes every virtue possible.

To benefit from the transforming power of Jesus's cross, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit, we must have faith. Faith is the key to overcoming the power of sin. Unless we believe that Jesus died *for us* and rose from the dead, his death and resurrection will not convey God's

love to us and will not give us the hope of final deliverance from evil. Without trust in God we will not be open to receiving the transforming presence of Christ's Spirit. It is faith which reorients our lives and "justifies us," that is, sets us right.

The faith that is the foundation for overcoming sin is a gift which comes through listening to the Christian proclamation and being open to transformation. We cannot come to faith on our own. Someone must tell us about Jesus. Consequently, the Christian evangelist is indispensable. In Romans, Paul, quoting Isaiah, exclaims, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:15). Yet, not all evangelism bears fruit. It is not enough for people to hear Christian preaching. They must be open to its transforming power. Such openness comes from God's grace. Faith is a gift.

For those who do not have faith and do not live by the love of Christ, Paul accepts that criminal justice is a necessity and is God's way to limit sin. In a famous (infamous?) passage Paul insists that all government officials derive their power from God. Their god-given role is to "execute wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). Sinful people who do not obey just laws because of conscience at least will obey them out of fear. And Paul recognizes that even some of his Christian readers may fulfill their minimum social obligations only from fear. Therefore, he warns, "If you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!" (Rom 13:4).

In his analysis of sin Paul came the closest of any biblical author to sharing the modern view that self-alienation is a cause of sin. In the modern world we often say that we have to feel better about ourselves before we can treat others better. We have to love ourselves more.

Except for Paul biblical authors did not mention self-alienation. They only dealt with one's alienation from other humans and God. Paul, by contrast, at least wrote about the frustrating condition of choosing to do good and yet in practice doing evil. Paul could at least note that sinners know that they "deserve to die" (Rom 1:31) and yet continue to sin. And as we saw above, Paul seemed to believe that self-alienation does make sin more powerful.

Yet, it is noteworthy that Paul's solution to self-alienation is not being kinder to one's own self but surrendering more completely to God. Paul was far from the modern view that the solution to self-alienation is self-commendation. For him self-commendation smacked of sinful pride. Instead, we must allow God's Spirit to transform us so that our entire self is centered in God. In the modern world people assume that they have autonomy and that self-alienation only involves the self. Paul, by contrast, regarded human autonomy as an illusion. Humans cannot be independent. We can only choose whom we will serve. Hence, for Paul self-alienation consists of part of the self obeying God and part of the self obeying sin. "With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin" (Rom 7:25). Indeed, Paul could even write, "it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:20). We cannot overcome this division by ourselves. We overcome it by surrendering to the Spirit. The Spirit takes over and brings our entire self into subjection to Christ. Hence, the Christian Paul could even claim that he no longer lived; Christ lived in him (Gal 2:20). When Paul willingly boasted, he boasted of what God is doing through him--not what Paul could do on his own.

In his insistence that we must surrender our entire selves to God, Paul moved tentatively in the new direction of claiming that hurting ourselves is sinful, because it harms what rightly

belongs to God. The Bible usually does not consider harming one's own self as sinful. For the Bible sin is the violation of a relationship. We sin when we hurt someone else. Of course, hurting oneself is foolish, and Proverbs warns against all sorts of self-destructive behavior. But foolishness is not immoral. The biblical attitude becomes clear in its ethical treatment of sexual behavior. The Bible has endless condemnations of adultery as sinful, because the adulterer hurts someone's spouse. The Bible never condemns masturbation.<sup>14</sup> As Paul emphasizes that Christians have given themselves fully to Christ, however, he suggests that we must treat ourselves as someone else's property. We are temples of the Holy Spirit and must act accordingly. It is sinful to harm what belongs to Jesus. In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "You are not your own. For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (6:19-20).

A key to avoid hurting ourselves is focusing on who we are becoming through God's grace rather than on who we have been. For Paul the essential self is who we are becoming. Consequently, Paul counsels people to forget the mistakes of the past and instead focus on how God is transforming us now--and how God will transform us in the fulness of time. We can see Paul attitude in his description of how he views his own past and future, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal" (Phil 3:13-14). Here as often Paul uses his own life as an example for his readers to imitate.

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<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, the Church appealed to the sin of Onan to find a biblical justification for condemning masturbation, but the appeal had no basis in the text (Gen 38:8-10). Because of this appeal "onanism" is a synonym for masturbation. However, in the actual story it seems more likely that Onan engaged in interrupted intercourse. Regardless of what Onan's sexual acts may have been, his sin consisted in his refusal to perform his sacred obligation to procreate an heir for his deceased brother.

Reflection and discussion questions: Can we think of Paul and Jesus as being Jewish? How do we respond when we realize that our loyalty to our own community (family, congregation, nation, religion) is causing us to do evil? Do we believe that the primary way that God saved the world was through Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, and the gift of his Spirit? Do we think of sin primarily as a set of destructive individual choices or as a monstrous, superhuman force in history warping everyone? How have we been warped by sins that occurred even before we were born? Can people who have no religion still recognize God's will and do it? How do they recognize God's will? How does living primarily for money or popularity or sexual pleasure or alcohol affect people? How are detailed ethical guidelines (like the Law of Moses) helpful? How do they cause problems? What happens to us spiritually when we exceed our own standards? What happens when we fail to live up to them? How does Jesus liberate us from the negative aspects of trying to live ethically? Do we live in the hope of entering heaven when we die and the hope of ultimately being part of a renewed creation? If so, what is that hope based on? Is the Church in fact a place where different ethnic groups can live together in love and peace? What must happen for the Church to become more effective in its mission to be a unifier? How did our own faith begin, and what sustains it now? When we feel estranged from our own selves, do we concentrate more on loving ourselves or on being more open to God's love for us? Can we begin to see ourselves as God's possession and treat ourselves accordingly?

## Chapter 8: Evil--and how to overcome in--in John's Gospel

John's Gospel attempts to present the past from God's perspective. The Gospel does not tell us what appeared to be happening when Jesus was alive. Instead, the book tells us what was actually taking place, that is what God was accomplishing through Jesus and why it remains significant for the reader. A scene in chapter 11 will serve as an illustration. In John 11:46-52 the leaders of the Jewish community gather to respond to a threat. Jesus has just raised a person from the dead, and there is the apparent danger that Jesus will become the catalyst of a rebellion against the occupying Roman forces. The high priest notes that such a rebellion will incite Rome to destroy the Jewish nation. To prevent this potential catastrophe, the high priest states that it is necessary to kill Jesus. "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (11:50). So far the scene is historically credible. In a nation under hated foreign occupation any charismatic figure can become a focus for violent resistance, but such violent resistance can easily provoke greater repression. Hence, even a patriot could reluctantly advise that it is necessary to eliminate such a person. But then John's Gospel tells us something unexpected. The high priest was not simply giving sage political advice. He was prophesying that Jesus was about to die to save the nation, and, the gospels adds, "to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (11:52). Here the gospel claims that apparently unbeknownst to the high priest himself God was speaking through him by bearing witness to Jesus's mission to bring salvation.

John's Gospel makes it clear that its understanding of God's perspective on the past only originated after the resurrection as a result of the working of the Spirit. In chapter 2 the



gospel records that Jesus made a puzzling comment about the temple being destroyed and raised up in three days, and his enemies did not understand. However, the gospel adds that Jesus was actually speaking of the temple of his own body, and "after he was raised from the dead" (2:22) his disciples understood what he meant. In chapter 12 Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds, and the Gospel insists that he did so to fulfill a biblical prophecy that the Messiah would come on a "donkey's colt" (12:14). However, the Gospel tells us that the disciples did not realize the implications of what Jesus was doing until "Jesus was glorified" (i.e., rose from the dead; John 12:16). In the Gospel Jesus promises that later the Spirit will reveal new knowledge to the disciples and lead them "into all the truth" (16:12-13). Presumably, the author of the Gospel felt that he had received this new, saving knowledge.

Of course, the new understanding that originated after the resurrection was in part a response to contemporary historical events. Religious discoveries never take place in a vacuum. They always occur as the Church is struggling with social issues, and those issues contribute to the theological discussion. John's Gospel itself mentions events that occurred after the resurrection. It especially emphasizes the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues (9:22, 12:42, 16:2), and it is clear that this tragic polarization affected the Gospel's presentation of Jesus and of his Jewish critics.

Unfortunately, the persecution of Christians caused the Gospel to make stark contrasts between good and evil and to claim that the enemies of Jesus and the Church were simply wicked. The Gospel makes it clear that, when it was written, Jewish opponents of the Church were even killing Christians in the conviction that such violence was pleasing to God (16:2). Naturally, under the circumstances, people who believed in Christianity were not able to have

an appreciation for religious diversity! Instead, the Gospel leaves little room for moral ambiguity and legitimate differences of opinion. This polarization is then read back into the life of Jesus. In the Gospel Jesus tells his critics, "You are from below, I am from above" (8:23). Jesus tells his disciples, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire" (15:6).

A challenge for a contemporary Christian in reading John's theology of sin is to appropriate its many insights and incorporate them into a more tolerant theological whole. As we will now see, John's Gospel has much to teach us today about sin and, especially, how Jesus can help people overcome it. But we must combine that teaching with a greater appreciation of the goodness of so many non-Christians and how God can be present in them.

John's Gospel concentrates on a single theme, namely that in Jesus God himself became human and revealed definitively who he is and those who believe this revelation gain salvation. Thus, John's Gospel does not deal with most of the message of Jesus himself. We do not hear much about the kingdom of God or the need for social and spiritual equality. There are no exorcisms in this Gospel. Instead, everything revolves around God becoming incarnate in Jesus and bringing salvation to those who respond with faith and obedience. This theme emphatically appears in the opening verses (1:1-18). There we read that in Jesus the Eternal Word who is God became flesh and lived in the world, and all who received him saw God's glory and gained the power to become God's children. And the theme comes up often in the subsequent narrative. For example, in chapter 10 Jesus solemnly declares, "The Father and I are one" (10:30). "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life" (10:27).

In line with this theme, for John's Gospel the primary sin is rejecting God's revelation of himself in Jesus. If salvation comes from recognizing God's presence in Jesus, then refusing to recognize it and rejecting Jesus's claims to be divine is to reject God himself and forfeit any hope of eternal life. The opening verses of the Gospel stress that the eternal Word which became incarnate as Jesus was the One through whom God made all creation. This Word is the light which enlightens everyone. Therefore, those who reject Jesus reject the source of their own existence and awareness. To use the Gospel's own imagery, "the Light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5). Later in the Gospel Jesus explicitly declares, "You will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM" (8:24). Here I AM is a clear claim to divinity. In Exodus, when Moses asks God to reveal his name, God responds, "I AM who I AM" (Exod 3:13-14), and in Isaiah God emphasizes, "I, I am he" (Isa 43:25).

In John's Gospel God primarily reveals himself through Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. Of course, as we have already noted, in his previous teaching Jesus already reveals God's presence in him. But that earlier revelation is preliminary and has little success. Most people reject Jesus. However, the first eleven chapters of John's Gospel look forward to the coming of a glorious hour. For example, in chapter 2 Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). Then beginning in chapter 12 we read, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23). That hour is the time of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit.

Through his crucifixion Jesus definitively reveals different dimensions of God's love. Jesus's suffering and death on the cross reveal the Divine Son's love for the Father. In John's Gospel

Jesus dies in obedience to the Father's will. Jesus knows and chooses his passion "so that the world may know that I love the Father" (14:31). The cross also reveals the Father's love for the world. Here we may cite the beginning of the most famous quote in the entire Bible, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . ." (John 3:16). This divine love especially embraces those who accept Jesus and become his disciples. Indeed, Jesus insists that no love is greater than laying down one's life for one's friends and those who do God's will are his friends (15:13-14).

Jesus also reveals what a human being can become through receiving that love, namely like Jesus himself. Despite the fact that Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal Word has a totally different origin from any other human being, his life is the pattern for what other human beings can become through him. Jesus is a moral pattern. He washes his disciples' feet and commands them to wash each other's feet (13:14). The disciples are to love one another as Jesus loved them (13:34). Jesus is also an ontological pattern. He is divine, and through him others can share in divinity. Those "to whom the Word of God [i.e., Jesus] came" are rightly called "gods" (10:34-35).

John's Gospel emphasizes that human beings can only become like Jesus after Jesus himself has suffered and died. Before the crucifixion it is impossible to love as Jesus loved. Just prior to his arrest, Jesus tells Peter that Peter cannot follow him now but will be able to do so "afterward" (13:36; i.e., after the crucifixion). When Peter insists on trying to follow Jesus immediately, he ends up denying him. Once Jesus has shown God's supreme love by suffering on the cross, the disciples are now capable of showing the same depth of love to each other. When Jesus is dying, he tells his mother and the "disciple whom he loved" to replace him in

each other's life. The Beloved Disciple is to take Jesus's place in Mary's life by becoming her son, and significantly the Beloved Disciple takes her into his own home (John 19:26-27). Then as Jesus dies, he "hands over" his Spirit (19:30<sup>15</sup>), the Spirit which will enable his disciples to do the works that Jesus did and even greater ones (14:12).

The crucifixion also reveals how desperately wicked the world is. Precisely because Jesus definitively reveals the love of God for the world, the crucifixion shows how evil the world is in rejecting that love. Just before his arrest Jesus tells the disciples that the world no longer has any excuse for its sin. He has done the miracles that no one else did. He has spoken the truth that no one previously heard. Yet the world has responded with hatred. If the world has hated and persecuted even Jesus, then the world will surely persecute his followers (15:18-25). The cross exposes the world and, especially, its structures of power for what they are.

By revealing the wickedness of the world, the crucifixion enables Christians to reject the world's values. The world condemns those who call its values into question. That condemnation might otherwise tempt Christians to wonder whether they themselves are in the wrong when their beliefs and morals differ from those of the larger society. The crucifixion enables the faithful to resist that temptation. The total rejection of Jesus by the world shows that those who are loyal to God may expect a similar rejection. Jesus insists, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you" (15:18).

We may note in passing that in John's Gospel God does not ask humans to suffer anything

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the NRSV translation "gave up his spirit" does not adequately convey the double meaning that Jesus not only died but also passed on the Spirit.

which he has not already suffered. Jesus as the incarnation of God endures hatred before asking his disciples to; he is crucified for them before they have to die for loyalty to him.

Behind the world's wickedness, and particularly the wickedness of the crucifixion, lies the demonic. Those who reject Jesus and then torture and kill him do so at the behest of Satan. The gospel stresses that the human enemies of Jesus are tools of the Devil. In chapter 8 Jesus and his critics have a bitter confrontation in which they dismiss him as demon possessed. But Jesus insists that it is they who are children of the Devil and do the Devil's will (8:44). The Devil is especially responsible for the actions of the people who crucify Jesus. At the beginning of chapter 13 we read that the Devil had already decided that Judas would betray Jesus (13:2). A few verses later "Satan" enters into Judas (13:27) who immediately departs to get an armed guard to seize Jesus. Jesus then announces that the "ruler of this world is coming" (14:30). Here the "ruler" is not primarily any earthly authority, but the Devil who works through people and institutions.

Yet, ironically, it is through the crucifixion that Jesus overcomes the Devil. The Devil tempts Jesus to recoil in the face of the coming ordeal and abandon his mission. In chapter 12 Jesus momentarily expresses an inner struggle, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'?" (12:27). But then Jesus goes on to proclaim that through the cross he will destroy Satan's power. "Now the ruler of this world [i.e., the Devil] will be driven out" (12:31).

By overcoming the Devil and demonstrating God's love, the crucifixion will make possible the unification of different ethnic groups in the Church. In John's Gospel Jesus first converts

many Jews. Then in chapter 4 he converts a village of Samaritans. Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that the old dispute between Samaritans and the Jews about the proper location of the temple is no longer relevant. A new era has come in which people "will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (4:23). Finally, in chapter 12 some Greeks seek to meet with Jesus. Jesus does not actually speak with them. Instead, he insists that his hour of glory has come, and when he is lifted up he "will draw all people" (12:32) to himself. Through the crucifixion Jesus will demonstrate the love that can overcome all ethnic division and strife. And those who perceive that love and accept it can live as one in the Church despite being ethnically diverse.

Despite its pervasive emphasis that it is the crucifixion that demonstrates the wickedness of the world and overcomes evil, John's Gospel assumes that before the coming of Jesus some people were at least relatively good and relatively bad. Jesus himself comments that Nathaniel even before his conversion is "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit"(1:47) and Jesus exposes the sleazy sexual past of the Woman at the Well (4:16-18).

Such relative virtue or lack of it helps explain why some people are open to acknowledging Jesus and other people are not. In John's Gospel Jesus exposes people for who they are. Consequently, good people are more open to conversion, because they are happy to have their goodness revealed, whereas evil people flee from Jesus (3:18-21). We read in chapter 9 that the man born blind has not sinned, and that after Jesus miraculously heals him, the man goes on to insist to hostile authorities that Jesus is a prophet from God. At the end of the story the man even worships Jesus. By contrast, the paralyzed man in chapter 5 whom Jesus heals has sinned before meeting Jesus. Then even though Jesus heals him and warns him not to sin again, he does so--and grievously: He betrays Jesus to the authorities.

Consequently, the coming of Jesus makes good people better and for the most part evil people worse. Those who already are righteous become Jesus's disciples and grow spiritually. Those who are already sinful reject Jesus and retreat into the darkness.

Because evil people are trying to avoid having their sins exposed by Jesus, their stated reasons for rejecting Jesus are false and hypocritical. In John's Gospel the enemies of Jesus find many reasons for why he cannot be who he claims to be. But the reasons are specious. Sometimes they are contradictory. The enemies of Jesus claim he cannot be the Messiah, because they know where Jesus comes from, and no one will know where the Messiah will come from (7:27). He cannot be the Messiah, because the Messiah must come from Bethlehem and Jesus comes from Galilee (7:41-42). He cannot be the Messiah, because they do not know where he comes from (9:29). More often, the objections to Jesus contain far more truth than the enemies of Jesus perceive. In response to Jesus's repeated statements that he is going away and his enemies will not be able to find him, his enemies sarcastically ask whether he plans to go overseas to teach the Greeks or whether he plans to kill himself. But in fact the message of Jesus will reach the Greeks, and Jesus will die. Both will happen because the enemies of Jesus will themselves obtain his execution. Jesus's enemies know far more of the truth than they think they do, because they are deliberately trying to hide from it.

From a modern perspective a particularly attractive feature of the Gospel's theology of evil is the insistence that people who are honestly ignorant of the truth cannot be blamed. In John's Gospel Jesus insists that those who are genuinely blind (rather than those who know the truth and are fleeing from it) are not sinful (9:41). For the Gospel ignorance especially excuses



anyone who has not heard the Christian message. Jesus himself in condemning those who have heard him and rejected him comments, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin" (15:22). The implication is clear: God does not condemn those who have no knowledge of Christianity, and neither should the Gospel's readers. Today as we strive to live together peacefully in the global village, we can heartily endorse such sentiments. Perhaps today we would add that God does not even condemn those who have sincerely considered the Christian message and concluded that it is not the best path for them.

John's Gospel outlines the stages of growth through which a Christian disciple ideally passes. L. William Countryman in a pioneering work<sup>16</sup> argued that the stages of Christian growth provide an outline for most of John's Gospel. The Gospel first has a section on conversion, then a section on baptism, and so forth. In my own books I developed Countryman's thesis.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not Countryman and I have proven our case that the stages of Christian growth provide an outline for the Gospel, it is clear that John's Gospel does have sections that deal with conversion, baptism, and other milestones in the life of believers.

Each stage of growth requires overcoming some temptation. Conversion requires overcoming the temptation of dismissing testimony about Jesus without actually investigating it for oneself. The authorities in chapter 7 succumb to this temptation. When the police report that no person has ever spoken like Jesus, the authorities accuse the police of being misled. Then when Nicodemus points out that the Law requires giving people a hearing before condemning them, the authorities refuse to do so but instead berate Nicodemus (7:45-52). By contrast,

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16 L. William Countryman, *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing over into God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

17 Scott Gambrill Sinclair, *The Past from God's Perspective: A commentary on John's Gospel* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, c. 2004); *The Road and the Truth: The editing of John's Gospel* (Vallejo, CA: BIBAL, c. 1994).

Nathaniel overcomes the temptation to dismiss testimony about Jesus and goes to see him. When Philip reports that Jesus of Nazareth is the person about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Nathaniel skeptically asks if anything worthy of confidence could come from backward Nazareth. Philip challenges him to come and see. In spite of his prejudices, Nathaniel does so, and when he actually meets Jesus, Nathaniel is impressed and proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, "the King of Israel" (1:49).

To go from initial belief in Jesus to receiving baptism, one must overcome the temptation to reject the sacrament as too paradoxical and overcome the temptation to keep one's Christian identity a secret. In chapter 3 Nicodemus illustrates someone who gives in to both temptations. He comes to Jesus by night, presumably in order that no one will know that he believes that Jesus is "a teacher who has come from God" (3:2). Then when Jesus challenges him to be "born by water and the Spirit" (3:5) in baptism, Nicodemus can make no sense of this requirement and protests that he cannot re-enter his mother's womb. It appears that some of the Gospel's original readers succumbed to similar temptations. We read elsewhere in the Gospel that many Jews believed in Jesus, but would not admit it, because such an admission would lead to expulsion from the Jewish community (12:42). They were not willing to come forward for baptism and become publicly known as Christians. Perhaps they reasoned that baptism was only a mere rite and did not grasp the paradoxical importance of sacramental acts.

To receive the Eucharist, one overcome the temptation to reject the truth that the Eternal Word became flesh. In John's Gospel the Eucharist is the sacramental sign of the incarnation. Jesus speaks about the sacrament almost as if it were cannibalism. He stresses that people

must "munch"<sup>18</sup> on his flesh and drink his blood (6:54-58). Of course, the Bible strictly forbids drinking blood (e.g., already Genesis 9:4). Jesus's words cannot be understood literally. Instead, they express the doctrine that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are sacramental signs that in Jesus God literally did take on flesh and blood. In the gospel when people hear that they must eat Christ's flesh, they desert him (6:60-66). These deserters apparently symbolize people who left the church because they could not confess the incarnation. The Epistles of John, which seem to come from the same community as the Gospel, tell us that many people left that Christian community because they could not believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (1 John 2:19, 4:2-3; 2 John 7).

To go from one's baptism and first Eucharist to a life of committed discipleship, one must admit one is still in ignorance and slavery and be willing to grow and also accept rejection from a world which rejects Jesus. It is tempting, when one has converted and sacramentally joined the Church through baptism and Eucharist, to assume that nothing more needs to be done. John's Gospel rejects this assumption and claims that it makes committed discipleship impossible. In chapter 8 Jesus tells people who now believe in him that they will only learn the truth and become free if they remain in his word. Unfortunately, they refuse to acknowledge that they are in slavery and attempt to kill Jesus for suggesting that they are! In chapter 9 the Pharisees cannot admit their own blindness, and Jesus comments that it is not a sin to be blind. What is a sin is being blind and claiming to be able to see. Without the willingness to admit ignorance, committed discipleship is impossible. Of course, to become a committed disciple one must also be willing to suffer for being a Christian. The man born

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<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the NRSV does not distinguish two Greek words which appear in 6:52-58. One Greek verb is the normal term for "eat," whereas the other verb emphasizes the physical act of chewing.

blind illustrates this willingness. Jesus first cures the man's blindness by having him wash in a pool, and this washing symbolizes baptism. But the man then has to go beyond baptism. The authorities investigate the miracle and challenge the man to disown Jesus. The man refuses to do so but instead confesses Jesus with increasing fervor. The authorities accuse him of being Jesus's "disciple" rather than being faithful to Moses (9:28). In response the man insists that Jesus's miracle of healing a man born blind is unprecedented and proves that Jesus is from God. The authorities throw the man out. This expulsion symbolizes the excommunication from the synagogues that committed Jewish Christians suffered for believing in the incarnation when the Gospel of John was written.

To go from committed discipleship to martyrdom one must overcome the temptation to cling to earthly life, and one overcomes this temptation by focusing on eternal life. Jesus solemnly declares that those who love their lives in this world too much will forfeit eternal life. By contrast those who "hate" (here as often in the Bible, "hate" only means like less) their earthly lives will have an eternal reward (12:25).

There is, however, another Christian self-sacrifice that is at least as great as martyrdom, and the final temptation is to stop growing before reaching this supreme goal. That goal is daily loving others with the same commitment that Jesus showed in his love. God does not call everyone to die for Jesus. God does call everyone to keep growing until they love like Jesus. Jesus commands his disciples, "Love one another as I have loved you"(15:13). Such love can be shown by martyrdom. But such love can also be shown by humble service. Jesus commands us to wash one another's feet, as he once washed the feet of his disciples.

It is this love by Jesus's followers which will overcome Satan and conquer the world. In John's Gospel Jesus himself has only moderate success in converting people. Most people reject him. Indeed, at the end of Jesus's public ministry the Gospel underlines the relative failure of Jesus's efforts and claims that this failure even fulfills a prophecy. Isaiah had predicted that God would blind the eyes of those who would hear the Messiah, and such in fact happened when Jesus preached (12:36-41). But God's triumphant plan continues to move forward. After the crucifixion the disciples of Jesus will love one another. By that love all people will recognize the disciples of Jesus. Through that love the disciples will do even greater works than Jesus did and draw the whole world to him.

After the crucifixion, it is primarily the Spirit who overcomes evil by leading people to perceive and acknowledge the truth about Jesus. Of course, in most of the Gospel Jesus himself is declaring who he is, and people respond by believing or disbelieving his own words. But after the crucifixion, Jesus returns to heavenly glory. One can no longer react to Jesus in the flesh. Instead, all that remains is the testimony of Jesus's own followers--and the text of John's Gospel. By itself such testimony only indicates what Christians believe and why. It does not lead people to conversion. Conversion only comes when the Holy Spirit mediates the loving presence of God to those who listen to the testimony. Jesus remarks in the Gospel, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father" (6:44). While Jesus is on earth, he mediates the presence of the Father. After that, the Spirit does.

The Spirit is also what allows people to persevere in resisting evil, and such perseverance is the Gospel's primary concern. Of course, the Gospel aims to convert non-Christian readers. However, originally the book primarily addressed Christians who, as we have seen, were

suffering persecution for the faith. As they suffered, they were no doubted tempted to wonder whether they might be mistaken in their belief that Jesus was the incarnation of God. Perhaps they were the one who were sinning by believing a lie. To them John's Gospel insists that the Holy Spirit "will prove the world wrong about sin . . . because they do not believe in me" (16:9).

An important way that the Spirit enables people to persevere is by giving them an inner peace and joy that more than compensate for suffering. The righteous may suffer physically; perhaps they even suffer psychologically. However, Jesus promises them a supreme inner reward. Jesus gives them his own peace, a peace which the world cannot give and cannot take away. Jesus gives them joy. Through the Spirit Jesus himself comes to dwell in the believer, and the believer experiences divine love. Jesus acknowledges that in the world his disciples will have persecution, but he assures them, "I have conquered the world!" (16:33).

An important implication of John's Gospel is that people become morally accountable only as new opportunities appear. Those who are truly blind do not sin when they fail to see, but those who have sight, do. As each possibility for growth arises, a person must make a decision whether to take advantage of it, and declining the opportunity is sinful.

John's Gospel seems to teach that the eternal reward of the righteous will be abiding in the presence of Jesus and God the Father, and the eternal punishment of the wicked will be separation from that presence. The Gospel clearly teaches that there will be a final judgment. We read that the dead will come out of their graves and the good will receive the "resurrection of life" and the wicked, the "resurrection of condemnation" (5:29). Clearly salvation is being

forever in the presence of Jesus and the Father. In chapter 17 Jesus prays that those who remained with him on earth may be with him in eternity and see the glory that he had at the Father's side from "before the foundation of the world" (17:24). Presumably then condemnation is not being in the divine presence.

It may not be going too far to assert that according to the theology of John's Gospel the condemned prefer their eternal exclusion. The Gospel repeatedly insists that Jesus did not come to "condemn the world" (3:17), only to save it. Jesus does "not judge anyone" (12:47). On earth people judge themselves by how they respond to Jesus revealing the truth about their lives. We read that the wicked refuse to come to the light, because their deeds will be exposed. Jesus insists that such people "are condemned already" (3:18). Presumably, the final judgment is similar. Jesus reveals the truth, and the wicked depart. Perhaps those who end up in "hell" prefer to be there.

John's Gospel seems to suggest that as one grows spiritually one naturally goes from obeying God out of fear to obeying God out of love. Certainly John's Gospel warns that those who disobey God have reason to be afraid. We read that there will be a "resurrection of condemnation" (5:29). At that resurrection the deeds of the wicked will be fully exposed. Jesus tells his enemies, "I have much to say about you and much to condemn" (8:26). However, as one follows Jesus, one's love for him grows, and that love inspires better conduct. As Jesus remarks, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (14:15).

Consequently, the righteous look forward to the final judgment. The final judgment will bring to light all the good that the righteous have done, and it will be clearly seen that "their deeds

have been done in God" (3:21). Perhaps it is not going too far to say that those who have grown spiritually even look forward to the exposure of their past sins. The righteous know that Christ did not come to judge the world but to save it. It is Christ's love which causes him to expose people's sinfulness. People must see their faults in order to be able to improve. The righteous know that God's judgment is an expression of his love, and the righteous love and trust Jesus. Consequently, they are not afraid of Christ's judgment, for as the Epistles of John point out, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).<sup>19</sup>

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Reflection and discussion questions: To what extent can we see our own past from God's perspective? In looking back at our previous life do we sometime notice something that God was doing which we did not realize at the time? Do we feel that this new perspective on our past is due to God's Spirit? Is theology always affected by contemporary social events? How have recent social trends influenced our contemporary understanding of Christianity? Does persecution normally lead to polarization? How should we who live in a relatively religiously tolerant society respond to the claim in John's Gospel that salvation only comes through faith in Jesus? Is God's revelation of himself in Jesus definitive in a way that other divine revelations are not? What can we learn from Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection that we cannot learn elsewhere? Who is the most spiritual person that you have known personally? In what ways was he or she like Jesus? If what ways, different? Can a human being love without having received love at some point? Can we be fully loving without having known

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<sup>19</sup> 1 John is closely related to the Gospel and with caution can be used to explicate it. Traditionally the Church taught that the same person wrote both books. Many modern scholars doubt this claim, but all agree that the documents share obvious similarities and at least come from a community that had a common theology.



love from God? Why do so many people today reject the Christian message? Is this rejection due to their own sinfulness, their own invincible ignorance, or the lack of love in the Church itself? Do you agree that there are stages in the ideal Christian life? If so, would you say that these stages are conversion, baptism, first Communion, committed discipleship, and then either dying for Jesus or loving others as deeply as he did? What temptations do we face at different stages? What do we learn at each stage? Do you think that people who end up in "hell" prefer to be there than to be in heaven? Are we afraid of the eternal consequences if we do evil? When we obey God at some cost to ourselves, do we do so from fear of punishment or from love of him?

## Chapter 9: Some General Observations about Evil and How It Is Overcome in the Biblical Traditions

It would be foolhardy to try to combine everything we have seen into some grand coherent system because the Bible is diverse. Part of that diversity is due to the fact that some parts of the Bible are attempts to correct others. For example, Ecclesiastes and Job critique the optimistic claim of Proverbs that virtue leads to worldly benefits. Part of that diversity is due to the fact that different parts of the Bible address different social situations. The prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures before the Exile address a nation that is self-satisfied and warn it to repent; then in the Exile the prophets address a nation that is crushed and encourage it to have hope. Perhaps no possible theology can be relevant to every possible situation. Be that as it may, it is clear from what we have surveyed that the Bible does not offer such a universally applicable theology of sin.

I would argue that the diverse theologies of the Bible are a great resource, because they allow the reader to select the ones that are most relevant to the situation at hand. We may use Wisdom Literature as an illustration. Proverbs claims that righteousness leads to worldly success, whereas Job and Ecclesiastes deny this claim. In my opinion which perspective is correct generally depends on the social situation. A well functioning society has mechanisms that all but guarantee that the just will thrive and criminals will be punished. A society in which the drug lords or the mafia have taken over all but guarantees the opposite. In the first kind of society one can helpfully appeal to the optimism of Proverbs at least much of the time. In the second kind of society one must be content with the pessimism of Job and Ecclesiastes.

The lack of a systematic theology of sin in the Bible should encourage us today to identify new causes of sin and new solutions to it. If some parts of the Bible correct other parts, and if the Bible addresses different social situations differently, then we today should feel free to correct and supplement biblical perspectives. We need to come up with new understandings of sin as we address situations that the biblical authors could not have imagined. For example, a major crisis of modern times is the degradation of the ecology due to new technology. Many people have tried to find a biblical basis for identifying where the sin lies in this crisis and how this sin can be overcome. No doubt there is something in the Bible that is relevant to understanding and solving ecological degradation and we need to consider it. But we also should recognize that the Bible could not address a crisis that did not exist in the ancient world, and we should have the confidence to formulate and embrace new perspectives.

Because different situations necessitate different theologies, a particular theology may be extraordinarily valuable even if it only appears in a single biblical book. For example, only Revelation gives us a careful analysis of the structures of oppression and how the Church becomes an accomplice in them. It is in Revelation alone that we read that in a tyranny authority is passed downward in exchange for worship that is passed upward, and the Church in exchange for privileges is tempted to endorse political idolatry. But this theology which only appears in one book is extraordinarily insightful and tremendously important when Christians are facing a political situation that resembles the one Revelation so aptly describes.

Nevertheless, there are continuing themes in the biblical presentations of how sin originates and how sin can be overcome, and these themes must be taken especially seriously. Precisely

because the Bible is diverse and does not try to produce an artificial unity, if the Bible repeatedly highlights certain ideas, these must be widely applicable.

One continuing biblical theme is that abstinence is not normally the solution to the threat of sinful overindulgence. Modern Puritans may condemn all drinking on the grounds that it can lead to drunkenness or condemn dancing on the grounds that it can lead to promiscuous sex. Scripture does not do so. It condemns drunkenness and promiscuity without recommending abstinence as the solution. Drinking and dancing and feasting are acceptable. As we have noted, Ecclesiastes and Jesus both endorse having a good time. Sirach presents the biblical attitude well. After commenting that "wine has destroyed many" (31:25), he quickly adds, "Wine is very life to human beings if taken in moderation" (31:27). The Islamic tradition responds to the dangers of drinking excessively by forbidding alcohol altogether; the biblical tradition does not.

In my opinion, demanding abstinence from something which is harmless in moderation does more to promote sin than diminish it. When people engage in an activity, they learn both its benefits and its potential liabilities. If overindulgence is harmful, people fairly quickly discover where the danger point is. At least, the vast majority behave sensibly, perhaps after making a few initial mistakes. Most important, there is no psychological thrill in breaking the rules, and no questioning of rules in general. By contrast, when something is forbidden, people do not know its benefits and potential liabilities until they "sin." The unknown is supremely attractive, and sin, instead of being rightly seen as boring, is fascinating. The temptation to break the rules becomes almost irresistible. Then when people sin, they either discover that the activity is harmless in moderation or they harm themselves by

overindulgence. In the first case, they may become suspicious of moral rules in general. In the second case, people feel guilty. As we saw earlier, guilt weakens people spiritually and makes them more likely to sin again. The futility of demanding abstinence to prevent overindulgence is clear from American history. The United States passed Prohibition to end the abuse of alcohol, and the result was an apparent increase in alcoholic consumption and of organized crime.

The Bible does not for the most part share the modern emphasis that harming ourselves is sinful. In the contemporary United States we are especially judgmental toward people who are not taking good care of themselves. Indeed, in my experience, the "sin" that Americans condemn most frequently is being overweight. The Bible does not regard harming ourselves as sinful, but merely as stupid. Sin, by definition, means harming someone else.

Nevertheless, Paul begins to move in the direction that harming ourselves is sinful because it also harms God. Since God created us, and, especially, since Christ has redeemed us, we belong to them. It is sinful to destroy someone's else's property. God loves us. Consequently, it hurts God when we hurt ourselves. Hurting the beloved always hurts the lover. St. Bernard taught that we must love ourselves for God's sake. I believe Paul would have agreed.

The Bible does not endorse the modern view that self-condemnation is a major source of sin and people must struggle to view themselves more positively. The Bible sometimes recommends enjoying life. It sometimes presupposes that we do love ourselves, as in the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (e.g., Mark 12:31). But the Bible does not suggest that we need to improve our self image. The reason for this silence is that the Bible

views a person's worth as an objective fact stemming from one's relationships. We have worth, because God made us and loves us. We have worth because Christ died for us. We have worth, because we are making helpful contributions to the community of faith and to the larger world. If we were totally isolated (which is impossible), we would be worthless. When we are suffering from a poor self-image, or as the Bible would say, when we are ashamed, the solution lies primarily in changing our relationships with others. We feel ashamed, because God or some human group is calling our worth into question. The solution to this communal problem is not to view oneself more positively. If the disapproval of others is merited, the solution is to behave better and thereby gain more social approval. If the disapproval of others is not merited, the solution is to rely on God's approval and the approval of a community which shares God's values. When Job was suffering unjust condemnation from his well meaning but wrong headed friends, he did not work to improve his self-image. Instead, Job appealed to God for vindication, and God gave it. If we need to change our self-image, we do so by reminding ourselves of who we actually are by considering how God and the redeemed community see us.

In my opinion, loving ourselves is only psychologically helpful when we share the biblical understanding of what the self is. If we have the modern view that the self is an autonomous unit and we decide for ourselves whether we are good or bad, self-congratulation will degenerate into egoism and selfishness. Moreover, we will always be aware that the self-congratulation is not based on anything. Hence, it will not accomplish much. If we have the biblical perspective that God made us and through God's grace we can always grow, then we will have a positive self-image. By our very nature as created and redeemed beings we are good. But this self-image will not invite us to egoism but to ever greater love for God and

readiness to do his will.

The Bible does not endorse the modern notion that all sin is individual sin. In modern America we see the individual as the primary social unit. The group is secondary and is formed by individuals. Consequently, we find it difficult to say that the United States sinned or the state of California sinned. Instead, we tend to say that the president sinned or the governor sinned. The Bible, by contrast, views the community as the primary social unit. A person is largely defined by the community to which one belongs. Indeed, one's name often indicates the community from which one comes, as in the case of *Jesus of Nazareth*. In keeping with this communal perspective, the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures have no difficulty condemning Israel for its sins, and the Book of Revelation has no difficulty viewing the Roman Empire as a tool of Satan.

I believe that the Bible is clearly correct that there is collective sin. A group has a personality, and that personality can overwhelm the moral judgment of each individual member. No person in a mob might ever resort to violence in isolation, but the group becomes inflamed by a collective desire to kill and loot, and each individual goes along.

I believe that the realization that communities sin--not just the individuals that compose them--helps overcome sin. It must be admitted that sometimes individuals shirk their personal responsibility by blaming society. People rationalize their own refusal to do what is necessary for improvement by blaming the social disadvantages they suffered because they belonged to a certain group. Nevertheless, individuals also shirk their personal responsibility by refusing to admit their complicity in collective sin. When we blame the president, we are

tempted to think that we do not need to do anything. That sin is the president's moral problem. When we realize that the group that we belong to and love is sinning, we have a greater motivation to restore our collective moral stature. If, as Americans, we are embarrassed by OUR misdeeds, we will struggle harder to change the nation's ways. We also are more realistic in our struggle against collective sin when we recognize that we are not battling individuals but a shared way of thinking and acting, a way of thinking and acting that even is imprinted in us.

The Bible does not teach that meditation is the solution to sin. Especially in Eastern religion, the solution to destructive impulses is to cultivate an inner silence through special techniques. By sitting in certain positions and focusing on one's breathing or staring at a point, the mind becomes empty. That emptiness allows hidden impulses to emerge. The meditator observes the destructive ones but does not embrace them, and the destructive impulses dissipate. Obviously, this solution to sin is helpful. However, the biblical solution differs. The Bible never recommends meditation. The Bible does stress the importance of prayer. However, biblical prayer always addresses God. In response to prayer God gives additional power to overcome sin and evil.

The Bible teaches that self-knowledge does not help overcome sin unless there is also an awareness of God's love and mercy. Many people, including many philosophers, agree with Socrates's dictum to know yourself. The Bible concurs that an awareness of one's failings can be helpful. Jesus especially challenged religious leaders to recognize their hypocrisy. But the Bible makes the striking observation that without an awareness of God's love and forgiveness, learning about one's defects can be destructive. Adam and Eve learned that they were naked,



and that truth led to embarrassment and an attempt to hide. Jesus's challenge to acknowledge hypocrisy took place in the context of his larger message of God's mercy toward sinners. Paul stresses that without the revelation of God's love in Christ, the demands of the law make sin more powerful. By itself the law is good. But when the law teaches us that we are sinners and does not give us the power to change, we become alienated from our own selves, and we sin even more.

The Bible does accept the popular notion that criminal penalties are necessary to restrain the worst sin, but the Bible stresses that Christians are called to a higher standard than seeking retribution. Genesis insists that the law of limited vengeance came from God himself. "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed" (Gen 9:6). In the Covenantal Tradition God gives the Israelites many laws which have severe criminal penalties. Paul insists that God gives to government authorities the power to wield the sword to punish evil doers so that people will be afraid to break the law. However, retribution is a grim necessity, not an ideal. God allowed limited vengeance only after human evil had become totally unmanageable without it. Paul insists that Christians should resist evil not by avenging themselves, but by loving their enemies. That love will challenge the enemies to repent, and good will overcome evil. In giving this challenge, Paul was echoing Jesus who rejected "an eye for an eye."

The Bible repeatedly teaches that sin inevitably arises when we forget that love must take precedence over rules. The commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself already appears in the Old Testament (Lev 19:18) and seems to be a summary of many detailed regulations that immediately precede it in the text. In the New Testament Jesus says that the

commandment to love one's neighbor is one of the two great commandments, and Jesus even insists that we must love our enemies. Paul emphasizes that love fulfills every commandment. Jesus notes that sin arises when people concentrate on minor regulations and neglect the fundamental ones. Paul points out that in an ethnically divided congregation sin arises when people forget that love is more important than ethnic rules.

Here is where Christians in American culture went astray in the past, and, therefore, need to be more careful in the future. In the past Christians condemned inter-racial marriage and homosexual and lesbian relationships. The condemnation was based on cultural mores and biological considerations. People forgot to ask whether these relationships expressed genuine love and forgot that love takes moral precedence over everything else. This amnesia led to wholesale persecution. African American males who courted white females were lynched; homosexuals were imprisoned. In view of the terrible mistakes of the past, Christians today must be especially careful not to condemn any practice without asking whether it can express mature, committed, live-giving love.

Another continuing theme that we find in the Bible about the origin of sin is that human beings have a universal orientation to evil, not just to good. In Genesis Adam is every human being; we are all tempted to act as if we are God. The covenantal tradition assumes that Israel will repeatedly desert God and need to repent. Proverbs presupposes that we will all be tempted by laziness and sexual irresponsibility. Paul assumes that without God's special intervention human beings fall into idolatry and obsessive desires. All go astray.

This universal orientation to evil is partly due to history. Only Adam and Eve started with a

clean slate. Everyone else inherits the consequences of previous sin. Sin begets sin. The opening chapters of Genesis tell how after Adam and Eve's disobedience humankind sinned more and more. Finally, even God conceded that "the inclination of the human heart is evil" (Gen 8:21). The prophets must respond to the popular lament that the sins of previous generations are so grievous that now restoration is impossible. Paul stresses that everyone bears the punishment resulting from Adam's sin.

Today we might expand the Bible's horizons by observing that much of human sin has its origins in prehistoric times. The necessities of prehistoric survival have programmed us to be violent. They have even programmed us to love fat, sugar, and salt, since these things were rarely available and supplied the calories and minerals necessary for survival. But as we know, our love for these things today makes us overindulge and harms our health.

The universal orientation to sin especially tempts people and groups to exploit the vulnerable. Of course, no one has a monopoly on sin, and no one is invulnerable to being sinned against. The poor sin as well as the rich; kidnappers attack the wealthy and powerful who are able to pay ransoms. Nevertheless, it is especially easy to trample on the weak. The Hebrew Scriptures lament how the rich oppress the poor. Jesus points out how the moral leaders of society demean social outcasts.

Consequently, the Bible insists throughout that there must be special provision for the vulnerable. There needs to be special laws to protect the indigent. Legal equality can be oppressive in a society where there are otherwise vast inequalities. The Hebrew Scriptures have laws which were specifically designed to help the desperate. The poor have the legal

right to glean in someone else's field. There also needs to be special concern for the spiritual problems of the sinful and of those whose consciences are weak. Jesus insisted that he did not come primarily to help the righteous but to save sinners. Paul insisted that the theologically sophisticated should accommodate the consciences of those who are not.

One implication of the Bible's insistence that there must be special provision for the vulnerable is that the Church should be less critical of the sins of the despised than of the respectable, including the Church's own leadership. The despised are already burdened with excessive condemnation. The respectable have more inner strength to benefit from criticism. And the respectable do more to mold the values of society as a whole. Jesus concentrated his moral attacks on the Pharisees and his own disciples. One clear implication is that the Church should be especially critical of the sins of its own leadership. When the official representatives of the Church condemn the sins of others but ignore their own, the Church not only forfeits credibility. The Church also disregards the example of Jesus.

The Church should emphasize that past sin can become a gift after the sinner repents.

Genesis insists that God used the sin of Joseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery to save the entire family. After being sold Joseph became the lord of Egypt and was in a position to help his relatives. But they had to recognize and regret their wickedness first. Jesus points out one way that God can use past sin for good. Those to whom much is forgiven love much. Sinners who receive great mercy can have great love for God and great patience with the weaknesses of others.

The universal human orientation to sin is partly due to the demonic. Once the concept of

Satan appears in the Bible, it never leaves. After the book of Job introduces Satan as a character, he becomes a continuing biblical presence. He is the ultimate source of evil in apocalyptic, in the teaching of Jesus, in Paul's Letters, in John's Gospel. All human sin results from surrendering to temptations that ultimately derive from Satan. Because Satan has superhuman power and intelligence, temptation is universal. Even Jesus had to deal with it.

The universal orientation to sin constantly tempts people to idolatry--replacing the true God with something else. In Genesis the snake tempts Adam and Eve to replace God with themselves. They can become like God by knowing good and evil, by deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. In the covenantal tradition idolatry may be literally worshiping other gods. Or idolatry may be limiting YHWH by reducing him to an image. For Paul idolatry can be an obsessive desire, such as coveting. Idolatry in the Bible, therefore, can take various forms, but the temptation to engage in idolatry seems to be universal.

Idolatry leads to other sins. In the covenantal tradition idolatry leads to social injustice. YHWH is the patron of the poor and the oppressed. As long as the nation is faithful to him, there is justice. However, when the nation worships other gods or assumes that YHWH no longer cares about ethics but is satisfied with liturgical rites, then injustice inevitably follows. Much of the Bible goes further and claims that idolatry is the source of all sin. Sin began when Adam and Eve attempted to replace God with themselves. The Wisdom of Solomon explicitly teaches that idolatry is the beginning of every sin. Paul seems to agree.

To some extent people can overcome evil by their own unaided efforts. According to the Bible, God is the creator of all things, and he is wholly good. God made humans in his own image.

In contrast to some later pessimistic theologians, the Bible holds that humans did not lose the divine image when Adam sinned. Part of that image is moral freedom. Moreover, it is daily experience in all times and places that people often choose to do good without any special "grace." Therefore, the Bible always assumes that humans have some natural orientation toward the good, and even some capacity to do it. The stipulations of the covenant between God and Israel presuppose that Israel can choose to obey God's Law. Proverbs assumes that its male readers have the ability to resist the wiles of the loose woman. Paul, despite all his emphasis on Jesus as the solution to sin, admits that God reveals himself in creation. A Pagan who knows nothing of the biblical revelation can know God, distinguish right from wrong, and perhaps choose to do right and be found innocent at the last judgment. John's Gospel, despite its insistence that salvation is through the incarnation and crucifixion, knows that when Jesus came into the world some people were at least relatively good, and, therefore, open to receiving him.

When people can overcome evil by their own unaided efforts, moral exhortation may be helpful and the Bible often gives it. The prophets blast Israel for its disregard for the needs and rights of the poor. Proverbs advises its readers to be humble, industrious, and sexually faithful. When people have the ability to act on what is right, encouraging them to do so may be what is needed.

Nevertheless, there is a radical dimension to evil that human beings cannot overcome on their own. The prophets knew that guilt for past sins could be so debilitating that people could no longer see any point to trying to do better. The book of Job emphasizes that conventional wisdom can make people condemn innocent victims. Jesus had to face people who were

"possessed" by demons and had lost control of their own lives. Paul stresses that the Mosaic Law--the very law that God gave--can make sin abound. John's Gospel notices that some people who are persecuting and even killing Christians think that they are serving God.

Radical evil becomes especially insidious when it masquerades as good. The Bible seems at least relatively unconcerned about evil that is consciously admitted. Individuals or groups that perceive their own sinfulness are not a grave threat. They may be able to respond to exhortation and improve. Even if they do not improve, their awareness of their own faults will produce humility and greater patience with the failings of others. By contrast, when evil appears to be good, there are no limits to the damage that it can do. Consequently, Jesus was much less concerned about the admitted sins of prostitutes and tax collectors than about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and his own disciples. Their disguised sins could corrupt society or the Church as a whole. Revelation expresses alarm over the supposed goodness of the Whore and the Beast, since that goodness has enabled the Roman Empire to seduce the world and enslave it.

When radical evil is present, moral exhortation is at best useless and may even be destructive. When people are "possessed" and have lost control of their behavior, ethical advice is pointless. When people are already crushed with shame, remonstrating them for their sin only makes them more debilitated. When people think that evil is good, and good is evil, it is better not to encourage them to strive for what is right.

In the face of radical evil, people only become morally accountable when opportunities for growth arise. As long as there is no one who can drive out a demon, the people who are

possessed and their families and friends cannot be blamed. But when Jesus appears, it becomes the moral responsibility of everyone to take advantage of God's grace. In Mark's Gospel we read that on seeing Jesus a man who had a legion of demons immediately ran and fell down before him (5:6), and that a father brought his possessed son to Jesus for healing. John's Gospel insists that those who cannot know anything about Jesus are not sinful. However, when Jesus appears, people at least have a moral responsibility to consider his message. Refusing to give Jesus a hearing is sinful.

The Bible holds that radical evil can be overcome by recognizing that God is fundamentally more powerful, more loving, more gracious than human beings are. Genesis insists that humans produce great evil when they try to call evil good, but God can even bring good out of evil. In response to the despair of the Israelites that their past wickedness makes it unlikely that God will ever restore his favor, the prophets insist that God's ways are higher than human ones, and he will restore the nation. When Job appeals to God to vindicate him against the accusations of his orthodox friends, God does so and then even forgives Job's friends. Revelation can oppose the overwhelming power and glory of Rome by appealing to the greater power of God's coming intervention and the greater glory of the New Jerusalem. Jesus can helpfully expose the sins of others, because he is preaching that God is so powerful and merciful that fundamental transformation is possible.

One way to remind ourselves of the surpassing greatness of God is to remember his past acts of redemption. The Old Testament challenges the reader to remember how God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. God had compassion on them even though they were "the fewest of all peoples" (Deut 7:7). God delivered them through mighty miracles. He crushed



the armies of Pharaoh and humiliated the gods of the Egyptians. The New Testament challenges the reader to remember how Jesus died for the sins of humanity and how he triumphantly rose from the dead, thus demonstrating that God is mightier even than death. In addition to the great historical acts when God revealed his power and love to the world, there are also the smaller acts of redemption in each individual's life. These we must also call to mind. The Psalmist in the midst of disaster recalls a previous time when God provided health and prosperity.

A major way that God motivates humans to overcome evil is by the promise of eternal rewards and punishments. In the covenantal tradition God motivates humans to be righteous by promising to bestow earthly blessings on the righteous and earthly sanctions on the wicked. The righteous will have prosperity, good health, and a long life; the wicked will not. But beginning with the radical wisdom of Ecclesiastes and Job, the Bible admits that in this earthly life there can be a negative correlation between virtue and outward well-being. The righteous can suffer for their goodness; the evil can prosper because of their wickedness. Of course, the possibility that goodness will be punished and wickedness rewarded makes the allure of sin almost irresistible. In response, the Bible increasingly emphasizes that there is life after death and a final judgment. Ultimately, the righteous will receive a reward in the next life, and the wicked will receive their due. These rewards will be everlasting and vast and justify any amount of earthly suffering for doing what is right.

The pictures of eternal rewards vary, but a constant is that the righteous will live forever in the glorious presence of God and this presence is the greatest possible blessing. Revelation can picture paradise as a city adorned with jewels and transparent gold. Jesus can picture

paradise as a great banquet. But both Revelation and Jesus assume that God will be there. His throne will be in the City. The Groom will be at the wedding feast. Paul assures his readers that they will "be with the Lord forever" (1 Thes 4:17). In John's Gospel Jesus prays that his disciples may be with him in heaven to see the glory that he had with the Father before the creation of the world.

By contrast, the sufferings of hell include the curse of separation from God. In the parables of Jesus those who refuse to do what is right remain outside the banquet hall. The book of Revelation tells us that the "fornicators and murderers and idolaters" (Rev. 22:15) remain outside the New Jerusalem.

The separation from God comes after God exposes the sins of the condemned. In Jesus's parables the king or the master or the father (all symbols of God) points out that the accused knew what to do and did not do it. In John's Gospel Jesus insists that the wicked flee from the Divine Light, because it reveals their evil deeds.

Nevertheless, the Bible increasingly emphasizes that even in earthly life the righteous have an inner reward which at least partially compensates for undeserved suffering. Perhaps already with Job and certainly with the Wisdom of Solomon, we find the emphasis that the righteous have the consolation of knowing that they have done what is right. They also have the consolation of experiencing the presence of God. Job sees God with his own eyes. The righteous person in the Wisdom of Solomon perceives the splendor of the Divine Wisdom and rejoices in it. John's Gospel speaks often about the peace and joy that the Spirit gives to those who love God and do his will.

The threat of hell and the promise of heaven become most effective when people realize that our state after death is the culmination of the blessings or disasters that we already experience in this life. People find it difficult to fear or desire something that is totally different from anything they have known. However, it is easy to fear or desire more of something of which we have had a preliminary taste. It is easy to fear great pain if we have known moderate pain or desire much love when we have known a little. Here the wisdom of Revelation is manifest. Revelation details the terrible sufferings that are about to come on the wicked in this life but only briefly describes final destruction after death. The preliminary sufferings should be enough to warn people about the ultimate one. So too the inner spiritual joys that the righteous experience in this life make the promise of final fulfillment after death both credible and alluring.

From the biblical perspective it is acceptable to do God's will solely out of fear, but the ideal is to do God's will out of love for him. The threats of earthly disaster for disobedience in the Covenantal Tradition or the threat of damnation in later books are intended to instill fear. The Covenantal Tradition insists that everyone should fear God, and this fear should make us all hesitate to violate God's will. Moses remarks that he has taught the Israelites "so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD . . . and keep all his decrees" (Deut 6:2). Nevertheless, obeying God solely out of fear is not the ideal. The ideal is to obey God primarily out of love. God only gives the Law to the Israelites after he has graciously delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites are to be grateful and filled with love for him, and that love should inspire them to do whatever God commands. John's Gospel also reminds us that we should be afraid to do evil. For the wicked there will be a

"resurrection of condemnation" (5:29). Nevertheless, the spiritually mature do God's will out of love for him. Jesus remarks, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (14:15). Indeed, 1 John goes further and insists that the spiritually mature do God's will solely out of love. "Fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." "Perfect love casts out fear" (4:18).

The New Testament insists that God shows the greatness of his love by becoming incarnate in human history and suffering with and for us. Paul points out that hardly any human being would even go so far as to die for a righteous person. God, however, commends his love for us by sending his Son to die for sinners! John's Gospel insists that no one has greater love than to die willingly for his friends, and the Divine Son did just that.

It is this supreme love which can transform human beings so completely that they become like Jesus himself. Paul insists that the love of Christ delivers people from the shame of failing to live up to the law and centers them in Jesus. The Spirit then enters them and makes them a new creation. Paul can even write that in his own case he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him. With the coming of Christ, a new power of righteousness enters human history which more than reverses the evil that humans inherit from the past. John's Gospel even outlines in some detail the stages of Christian growth and insists that through Christ's love a Christian can ultimately show the same self-sacrifice that Jesus did and even do greater works than he.

Nevertheless, this supreme love can only now be realized in the context of a Christian community. Jesus himself has risen from the dead and returned to heavenly glory. Only his Spirit remains on earth. That Spirit is present where people gather in Christ's name. No New

Testament author allows for the possibility of individual salvation. The love which Christians are to have for one another calls them into community. In that community each person contributes a unique gift, and it is through the totality of the gifts that the power of God becomes fully present. Indeed, salvation is itself inherently communal; it is being part of a community with Christ and everyone else who is open to his transforming love. The salvation of each person is part of the salvation of every person.

In a Christian community that incarnates this love, ethnic hostility disappears. Each of the New Testament authors we have looked at insists that through the love of Jesus there can be ethnic diversity in the Church and yet unity. Revelation has a vision of the nations of the world entering the New Jerusalem, and people of all races and languages worshiping the Lamb who was slain and now rules the universe. Paul insists that in the crucified and risen Jesus there is no Jew or Greek. John's Gospel proclaims that through the crucifixion Jesus will draw all people to himself.

In history the Church despite its many failings has at least partially fulfilled its mission to overcome ethnic division through the love of Christ. It must be admitted that sometimes the Church has failed to integrate different groups. Sometimes the Church has even encouraged one nation or race to attack another. The Church's launching of the crusades against the Arab Muslims is a notorious example. Nevertheless, the high missionary religions--Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity--are the largest international organizations and have done more than any other groups to promote a vision of the unity of humanity. Of these huge organizations Christianity is the most numerous and I would argue has done the most to foster a respect for the rights of all nations and ethnic communities.

It remains for the Church today to continue its mission to overcome personal and group sinfulness. The Church's past has sometimes been glorious and sometimes bitterly disappointing. The challenge of God's love shown in Christ continues. The torch has passed to us, and God calls us to become a new creation and to challenge all people to become a new creation also.

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Reflection and discussion questions: Is the theological diversity of the Bible helpful or problematic or both? Is total abstinence from something that becomes sinful in excess normally the solution to temptation? When is total abstinence appropriate? When we love ourselves, who is the self that "we" are loving? Do we see ourselves as God's property and treat ourselves accordingly? Can we name some examples of collective sin that we as members of the Church or of our nation participate in? How does our motivation to oppose this sin change depending on whether we view it only as the sins of other individuals or as a collective way of thinking and acting? To what extent does human evil come from prehistoric conditions? To what extent from the more recent past? How far should the law go in giving special protection to the vulnerable, rather than treating everyone equally? How far should the Church go in being especially concerned about the morally despised? When can human beings overcome evil without knowing God? When does an awareness of God's love and forgiveness become indispensable in the struggle against evil? How often are we aware of an inner peace and joy which come from knowing God and doing his will? Is the Church today doing a better job in fostering ethnic inclusiveness than in the past? What are some of the

specific things that we can do now to make the Church a better unifier of diverse cultures and a greater force for the rights of every ethnic community?

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