

OUR SIN
AND
THE SAVIOR

COMPACT EXPOSITORY PULPIT COMMENTARY SERIES

OUR SIN
AND
THE SAVIOR

Understanding the Need for Renewing
and Sanctifying Grace

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ISBN 978-1-7343452-0-9

Great Writing Publications, 425 Roberts Road, Taylors,
SC 29687 www.greatwriting.org

Shepherd's Fire 5245 Highway 41-A Joelton, TN 37080
www.shepherdsfire.com

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Shepherd's Fire exists to proclaim the unsearchable
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with a special emphasis in encouraging and strength-
ening pastors and church leaders.

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Books in this Series

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The Miracle of Spiritual Sight: Affirming the Transforming Doctrine of Regeneration

1

Sin: Nature or Nurture?

The phone rang just after lunch. All I heard was, “Pastor . . .” Then uncontrollable sobs. When the woman gained composure, I recognized that she was one of mine—one of the precious sheep in my flock, along with her husband and four children. In between long periods of gut-wrenching anguish, she began to tell me what had happened. Her husband of many years had been arrested on drug-related charges and soliciting a prostitute who just happened to be an undercover policewoman. Obviously, she was devastated. As though she was trapped in a nightmare, she was unable to function. Fearing she may be suicidal, I immediately made arrangements with some key people to meet my wife and me at her home. I’ll never forget the look

on the face of the children. All any of us could do was cry. Like football players in a giant huddle, we all hugged, wept, and prayed. It was worse than a death.

Within hours, we discovered that what she told me was just the tip of the iceberg, which is almost always the case in such situations. Gambling debts, financial ruin, drug abuse, deceit, religious hypocrisy, years of pornography, immorality, physical abuse—the list went on. Now the husband faced prison time, while the humiliated and grief-stricken wife and children faced the unknown, asking questions such as, “Why?” “What happened?” and “How can this be?”

As a pastor, I have encountered tragedies like this more times than I care to remember. That’s why I utterly loathe soap operas and reality shows. But every day, we witness human beings doing things that seemingly have no explanation. Shocking images of human brutality and lawlessness bombard our senses every time we turn on the news. From the disgraceful antics in the political arena to everyday road rage, no quarter is exempt from the degradation caused by human selfishness, greed, and deviancy. As if man is constantly doing battle with some kind of primal instinct that drives him to do evil, wickedness abounds. At every turn, people

betray a deep dissatisfaction with themselves and the world in which they live, fueling an insatiable appetite for satisfaction at all costs. Man never has enough. Contentment is an illusion. Even those who are wealthy and have all the pleasures of the world available to them at the snap of their fingers can still lead miserable lives and commit horrible crimes.

But why? Why would the man in my example do what he did? Why would his wife conceal all that wickedness until it finally exploded? Why do the vast majority of people consistently act in their best interests despite the harm they cause to themselves and to others? Why are we all seemingly incapable of restraining ourselves from impulses that we know will bring misery? Why will we deliberately choose a certain course of action, knowing full well it is wrong? Why are we so prone to immorality, greed, slander, lying, violence, and war? Would anyone dare to argue that an individual's capacity for evil has no boundary? We need not look at the atrocities of Auschwitz to be convinced of this; we see this destructive force in our own life. And what is this force? *Sin*.

In 1887, one of the most compelling and powerful descriptions of sin that I have ever read was published:

It is a debt, a burden, a thief, a sickness, a leprosy, a plague, poison, a serpent, a sting; everything that man hates it is; a load of curses, and calamities beneath whose crushing most intolerable pressure, the whole creation groaneth . . .

Who is the hoary sexton that digs man a grave? Who is the painted temptress that steals his virtue? Who is the murderess that destroys his life? Who is this sorceress that first deceives, and then damns his soul?—Sin. Who, with icy breath, blights the fair blossoms of youth? Who breaks the hearts of parents? Who brings old men's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave?—Sin.

Who, by a more hideous metamorphosis than Ovid even fancied, changes gentle children into vipers, tender mothers into monsters and their fathers into worse than Herods, the murderers of their own innocents?—Sin.

Who casts the apple of discord on household hearts? Who lights the torch of war, and bears it blazing over trembling lands? Who, by divisions in the church, rends Christ's seamless robe?—Sin.

Who is this Delilah that sings the Nazirite asleep and delivers up the strength of God

into the hands of the uncircumcised? Who, with winning smiles on her face, honey flattery on her tongue, stands in the door to offer the sacred rites of hospitality and, when suspicion sleeps, treacherously pierces our temples with a nail? What fair siren is this who, seated on a rock by the deadly pool, smiles to deceive, sings to lure, kisses to betray, and flings her arm around our neck to leap with us into perdition? — Sin.

Who turns the soft and gentlest heart to stone? Who hurls reason from her lofty throne, and impels sinners, mad as Gadarene swine, down the precipice, into a lake of fire? — Sin.¹

So we must ask, is it merely ignorance and immaturity that causes people to be self-willed and cruel? Has their environment predisposed them to sin? If so, you would think with the level of sophistication humanity has achieved by now, we would be able to properly address these issues and train people to at least obey the elusive golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But obviously this is not the case.

Why is it that as every infant matures, without any training or influence, he naturally develops a frightening attitude of selfishness that demands sat-

isfaction of his every desire, no matter how foolish? Every honest parent will admit that, left unchecked, a child would destroy himself and anyone else who failed to meet his demands were he able to do so. No one needs to teach a child to be ill-tempered, impatient, demanding, selfish, jealous, violent, and utterly ruled by his lusts and emotions; he comes by it naturally. But why? Why is it that within every precious infant there exist the seeds of every imaginable form of evil—seeds of sins for which the damned are now tormented? Is it *nature*, or *nurture*? Are we *depraved*, or *deprived*?

Thankfully, our Creator answers this in great detail in His revelation to man in His inspired and infallible Word, the Bible. And as we examine the Scriptures, we learn very quickly that man does not act wickedly because of *nurture*, but because *his very nature is evil*. This is not to say that nurturing has no impact. It does. We see this principle in Proverbs 22:6 where we are admonished to “train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.” The apostle Paul also warned, “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33). But the consistent theme of Scripture is that although other forces will constantly exert themselves upon us, we will naturally be ruled by “the lusts of our flesh, indulging the de-

sires of the flesh and of the mind, and [are] by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3); we are "dead in our transgressions" (v. 5) and in desperate need of the mercy of God, who alone can make us "alive together with Christ" (v. 5).

God has revealed to us a stunning reality. One event radically altered the very nature of man and the planet on which he would live. That event was the deliberate rebellion of the first man He created, Adam. Because of Adam's sin in the garden, the entire human race was plunged into sin (Rom. 5:12) and every child is conceived in a state of sin and depravity. The Psalmist put it this way: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). Sin has penetrated and corrupted the whole of man's being (Isa. 1:6; Eph. 4:17-19), including his body (Rom. 8:10), his mind (Rom. 8:6; 1 Cor. 2:14; 4:4; Titus 1:15), his will (John 8:34; Jer. 13:23; Rom. 7:18), and his heart (Jer. 17:9).

Every person is capable of committing the very worst sins (Rom. 1:18ff; 3:10-18); and apart from the transforming grace of God in salvation, even when the unsaved individual does right, it is for motivations other than to glorify God, making such actions displeasing to Him (Matt. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:4). Worse yet, the unsaved are utterly bereft of that love for God necessary to fulfill the most basic requirement

of God's moral law to love Him supremely (Deut. 6:4; 1 John 4:7-10). God has made it clear that the unregenerate will continue to spiral downward in morality (2 Tim. 3:13; Rom. 7:23) and they have no possible means of salvation or recovery within themselves (Matt. 19:25,26; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 2:1,8).

Sin is therefore *man's innate inability to conform to the moral character and desires of God*. John says, "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4), which is not only a failure to obey God's moral law, but living as if it does not exist. It is a violation of the foremost commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37, *cf.* v. 38).

Sin is manifested primarily in human self-will—the root cause of all sin—fueled by the cherished lies of justified rebellion against God. People prefer to obey their wills rather than God's will. This is portrayed in Scripture as "the deeds of the flesh" and it includes things like, "immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these . . . those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21). Because man is innately a slave to his sin (Rom. 6:16-20), he rejects his Creator, causing God to gradually

abandon him to pursue the lusts of his heart and experience the devastating consequences of his iniquities, bringing him either to ruin or repentance (Rom. 1:24-32).

It is therefore the purpose of this book to examine these matters in the light of divine revelation and view them through the lens of humble faith, that we might better understand the marvelous mystery of the cross and deepen our love for the Lover of our souls.

2

The Spin on Sin

Many modern-day pastors bent on attracting “seekers” tend to define sin in such a way that virtually no one could be offended. The essence of their definition is that *sin includes all those things we think and do that rob us of fellowship with God and steal away the happiness He wants us to enjoy*. The good news of the gospel is then reduced to nothing more than God loving us so much that *He sent His Son to save us from our unhappiness*. Describing sin apart from the offended righteousness of God is not just irresponsible; it is heretical. Apart from an understanding of man’s condemnation that evokes the wrath of God, the gospel is no gospel at all.

Most “seekers” are not told that sin is the defining characteristic of their very nature and that it is their innate inability to conform to God’s moral character and desires. They are not told that all they *are*

and *do* is fundamentally offensive to a holy God, rendering them guilty before His bar of justice and damned to an eternal hell; that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and that we must be “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (vv. 24-25). They are not warned that because of their innate corruption, they are not only alienated from God and subject to His wrath, but are also utterly unable to save themselves.

We learn much about a man’s theology at his funeral. And there is perhaps no greater example of a person’s self-willed rebellion against God than found in the lyrics of the most popular funeral song, *My Way*.

*And now, the end is near;
And so I face the final curtain.
My friend, I’ll say it clear,
I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain.*

*I’ve lived a life that’s full.
I’ve traveled each and ev’ry highway;
But more, much more than this,
I did it my way.*

*Regrets, I've had a few;
But then again, too few to mention.
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption.*

*I planned each charted course;
Each careful step along the byway,
But more, much more than this,
I did it my way.*

*Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew
When I bit off more than I could chew.
But through it all, when there was doubt,
I ate it up and spit it out.
I faced it all and I stood tall;
And did it my way.*

*I've loved, I've laughed and cried.
I've had my fill; my share of losing.
And now, as tears subside,
I find it all so amusing.*

*To think I did all that;
And may I say—not in a shy way,
“No, oh no not me,
I did it my way.”*

*For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught.
To say the things he truly feels;
And not the words of one who kneels.
The record shows I took the blows—
And did it my way!*²

Such a blasphemous eulogy illustrates Solomon's ancient analysis of man's depraved condition when he declared, "The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives" (Eccl. 9:3). An honest evaluation of our own character and conduct gives further evidence of how self-will is hopelessly prone to evil. But because of our depraved nature, we believe just the opposite. It is axiomatic for man to perceive himself as being innately *selfless*, not *selfish*, and *good*, not *evil*. If you challenge this self-righteous evaluation, you will start a fight every time. It is for this reason many evangelical churchmen have opted for a less incendiary theology—one that is more positive, more religiously and politically correct.

While the biblical doctrine of sin can be heard in some religious circles, it is altogether unheard of in the public forum. Imagine the outrage if a Christian politician were to suggest that college curricula for public educators include a biblical course explain-

ing our children's sinful nature and the myriad of ways it can manifest itself? The reaction would be violent. Apoplectic with rage, objectors would scream, "Every child's relentless quest for self-esteem must be guarded against such Christian lunacy." They would argue that to suggest a child's human nature is so depraved that he lives under the sentence of divine wrath is the very worst kind of child abuse; such a cruel doctrine, they would say, does irreparable damage to his fragile self-image and produces unnecessary guilt and debilitation in the human psyche.

While such a reaction is expected among non-Christians with no capacity to discern spiritual realities (1 Cor. 2:14), it is appalling to think that many professing Christians also resent these inspired truths. *There is perhaps no greater example of beguiling deceit in the church today than the distortions surrounding the doctrine of sin and the power of the gospel to save.* Unfortunately, when sin is whitewashed, the Savior becomes irrelevant. Why take an antibiotic if you have no reason to believe you have an infection, especially if the doctor you trust says you're healthy? Given the increasingly shallow definitions of sin in our modern era of evangelical apostasy, especially as they relate to the presentation of the gospel message and issues relevant to Christian liv-