

CHAPTER 4

OUR PROBLEM



In the previous chapter, we examined God's self-disclosure to man in the form of the Bible and most fully in the person of Jesus. We covered the most important aspect of the person of Jesus: his claim to deity. The evidence points from multiple angles to the conclusion that Jesus is the Lord of history, the Son of God.

The focus of the gospels, however, is not so much his identity as his mission, i.e., what he came to do. His message was that we are sinners under the wrath of God who need to repent of our sins; his mission was to die in our place, and so offer us forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

At the end of Chapter 2 we left off with a stark picture of how our rejection of God has resulted in idolatry, moral relativism, and enmity toward others.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Rejection of God's authority does not remain stagnant but sets in motion a relentless downward journey.

Romans 1 charts the progression of sin in human spiritual history.



Romans 1:18–24; 28–32

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[...]

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

ROOT AND FRUIT

According to this passage, what is at the root of human sin is an issue of the will: "They did not see fit to acknowledge God" (Romans 1:28), "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18), "although they knew God, they did not honor him as God" (Romans 1:21). Human pride finds it humiliating to acknowledge God or honor him as God. Thus, thoughts of God and the idea of God as someone to honor is "suppressed." Thomas Nagel, celebrated professor of philosophy, writes:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.

My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.¹

— Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*

Or, in the words of an atheist from a previous generation:

For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom... There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves

in our political and erotic revolt: We could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever.²

– Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means*

Whenever we find ourselves irritated by the possibility of a divine authority figure, we are experiencing the spiritual hostility innate to Adam's children.

But as Romans 1 lays out (and as we saw in Genesis 3 and 4 in Chapter 2), this is only the first move in the journey of sin. Like the taking of the fruit, it hardly seems terrible. But once we have removed God from the picture, chaos is unleashed upon our lives.

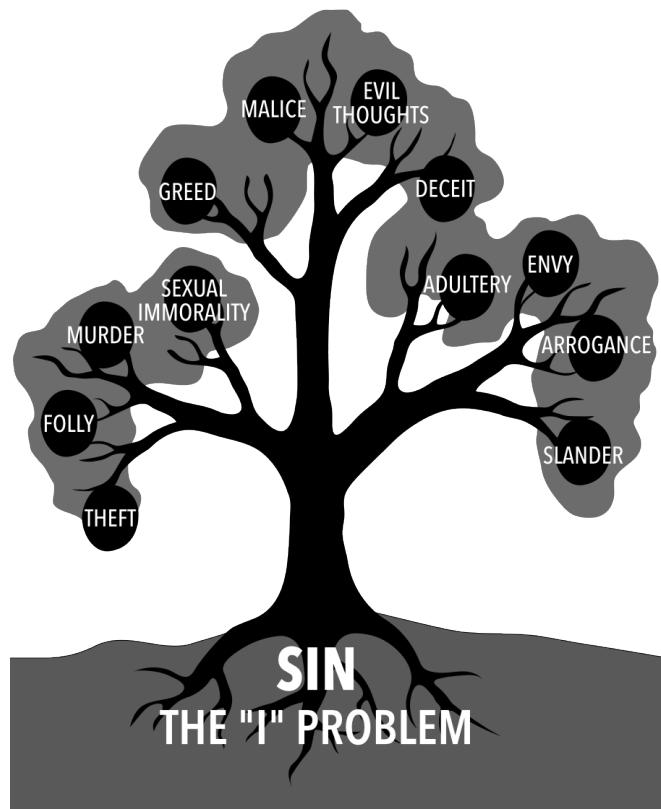
The list of corruption, immorality and crimes that follow (Romans 1:28-31) are but the fruit of this root hostility toward God. It's a list that makes us cringe just to read it.



Romans 1:28-31

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Explain how removing God from our lives could naturally lead to the commission of other sins (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, murder, etc.)



Of all the sins that man could possibly commit, which sin should we be primarily concerned with?

GUILT AND SHAME

 "Man is the only animal that blushes—or has any reason to."

— Mark Twain

 "Man's greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness."

— Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

Charles Darwin once remarked that mankind is the only animal that blushes. "Or has any reason to," Mark Twain later added. This observation that while man is immoral, he also recognizes the shame of it affirms the biblical portrait of the Fall. We are conflicted in our corruption; the traces of God's image that remain inside us groan over the sins we have committed. The blushing face may be the truest reflection of our current reality: sinners fallen from God's original will.

Thus, the Fall of Adam and Eve is personal to each of us. It is not general "humanity" that is afflicted with the deadly cancer of sin. It infects every human life, including ours. At its root, it's a move away from God; its many fruits wreak harm and destruction upon us and those closest to us.

However, because we are loath to blush, we come up with many ways to evade indictment.

I'M NOT THAT BAD...

One way we avoid conviction of sin is by comparing ourselves only against those obviously more wicked. We employ sentiments such as, "It may not have been acceptable 20 years ago, but it's normal today," or "I'm not as bad as _____ (insert name of terrorist, genocidal dictator or school thug)." Or, we take comfort in statistics, "I am only one among a large percentage of people who drink and drive." "Everybody does it." Like a man who tries to blunt the evil of an adulterous affair by citing the high percentage of marital unfaithfulness (around 50% in America), we make pathetic attempts to dodge guilt, but this only further reveals the twistedness of the human heart.

Although we are quick to recognize sin in others, each of us is quick to deny any suggestion of our own personal guilt. When confronted with an example of our sinfulness, we excuse it away—"I was

just having a bad day...I was stressed...anyone in my situation would have done the same." Or, we admit it but characterize it as a rare exception, a minor blemish in an otherwise admirable character.

We assert that our occasional moments of good deeds and kind thoughts are our normal, characteristic conduct while we dismiss, or actually do not remember, our more typical selfish and sinful behavior. In this way, we edge toward a dangerous precipice: complete lostness to ourselves.

Do you remember a time when someone denied doing anything wrong to you when in fact he actually did? How did you feel?

How do you usually respond when you're confronted with your sinfulness?

IT'S JUST A PSYCHOLOGICAL HANG-UP...

Another way of avoiding our sin is to simply dismiss the entire idea of sin as a mere psychological hang-up or a holdover from archaic, repressive ethical systems. We have been told that the truly "mature" person can shake off guilt and assert his or her own morality about promiscuity, greed, truth-telling, etc. However, our attempts at "liberating" humanity from the bondage of the supposedly outdated idea of sin have proven to be a colossal failure.

Hobart Mowrer, renowned professor of psychology at Harvard and Yale and president of the American Psychological Association, a man who was not religious, wrote, to the shock of his colleagues:

For several decades we psychologists looked upon the whole matter of sin and moral accountability as a great incubus and acclaimed our liberation from it as epoch making. But at length we have discovered that to be free in this sense, that is, to have the excuse of being sick rather than sinful, is to court the danger of also becoming lost...In becoming amoral, ethically

neutral and free, we have cut the very roots of our being, lost our deepest sense of selfhood and identity, and with neurotics themselves, we find ourselves asking, "Who am I, what is my deepest destiny, what does living mean?"³

– Hobart Mowrer,
"Sin": The Lesser of Two Evils"

Sin is real, and our guilt and shame are much more fundamental than just unpleasant emotions. Sin captures the very core of our true condition.

MORALITY AS PURELY PERSONAL

The very notion of sin immediately suggests an accountability to some higher being. An individual can no more claim independence from a higher moral law than a nation can. However, sinful man, ever jealous to guard his autonomy, goes to great lengths to base morality on purely personal, subjective grounds. This is the world of "my morality" and "your morality."

There is no one who has higher morals than anyone else (this makes any claims to moral progress meaningless). We all simply need to look into ourselves and act from our personal desires.

Some go further and try to ennable this absurd point-of-view by claiming that it alone involves being honest to oneself. Thus, our society applauds the guy who is "true to himself" (whatever that means). Often this turns out to be an open-ended justification to surrender to our basest instincts. Under this insane system, every unfaithful husband, criminal, molester and racist (and even Hitler) becomes an "honest" person who acted in a way "true to his deepest self."

Bertrand Russell, the philosopher and mathematician, a well-known atheist, admitted that as much as he wanted to hold to the subjectivity of ethics, he found it hard to believe that the only thing he could say against murder was that he happened to not like it. Even this famous atheist had to admit that certain things are wrong in an absolute sense, and that personal preference could not be the final arbiter of good and evil.

Do you agree that it is inadequate to explain sin as a psychological hang-up or a matter of a personal interpretation? How would you feel if someone who has wronged you treated sin in this way?

CONFRONTING THE TRUTH

**1 John 1:8-10**

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

As the Bible states in 1 John 1:8-10, we subtly “claim we have not sinned.” We use a wide range of strategies designed to minimize, deny, dismiss, excuse, blame, beautify, and/or rationalize, everything but admit our sin. **Honest admission of personal guilt and taking responsibility** is nearly nonexistent in our culture.

Often this state of numbness to our sinfulness is accomplished in complete passivity – we simply don’t think about it. An unreflective life is the surest guarantee that we will never confront our true nature. Rarely engaging in self-reflection, we remain strangers to ourselves, so that when God calls out to sinners, we respond with, “Who? Me?”

How has lack of “honest admission of personal guilt and taking responsibility” led to the break of relationships in the world?

We may be tempted to sidestep the truth of our sinfulness, thinking that such an admission can only lead to a sense of dejection. However, in sweeping our sinfulness under the rug, we end up missing out on surprising news from God: an invitation to forgiveness and salvation.

Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of his to be true, though we are part of the world he came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom his words are addressed.⁴

– C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Although we live in a culture bent on denying, normalizing, or even glamorizing sin, this resilient sense that there is something fundamentally wrong, even corrupt, within each of us must not be suppressed. Any person who seeks self-understanding must begin with an affirmation of the reality of sin.

THE “GOOD” PERSON

Ironically, the recognition of one’s sinfulness may be most difficult for those who are conventionally considered “good” and “nice.”

Being accustomed to measuring ourselves only outwardly, we can easily believe that as long as we keep a clean record in the eyes of others—i.e., we don’t commit crimes, do what’s expected of us, pay our taxes—we are cleared from the label “sinner.” The biblical assertion of human sinfulness sounds like it’s for other people.

During Jesus’ time, there was a group of religious elites called Pharisees who had a very similar problem. They were quite good at keeping a clean external image and complying with all the rules. So they had a hard time relating with Jesus’ invitation for all sinners to come to him. In response to them, Jesus said that the true source of uncleanness does not depend on the outside but rather comes from within. Jesus warned them:



Mark 7:20–23

²⁰ [...] “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Jesus pointed to the heart. That’s the question that we must ask ourselves: Who am I inside? Who am I when no one is looking? What will emerge when there are no negative consequences to my actions?

If our secret actions, motivations and thoughts were somehow known to others, we probably would not have a hard time feeling convicted of our sinfulness. It turns out, then, that our “difficulty” in embracing our identity as sinners is a fiction that can only be maintained as long as our sinful hearts remain unknown to others. Take away that secrecy, and we immediately recognize ourselves as sinners. But God, who knows us perfectly, tells us that the secret is out. He refuses to play along with our fiction. He wants to address us as who we really are inside.

That is why the Bible characterizes mankind in such unambiguous terms:



Mark 7:21–23

²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

Though we may cringe at this description of our hearts, it is a painfully true picture of ourselves.

None of us is an exception. In Romans chapter 3, we read these words:



Romans 3:10-12, 23

¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, [...] ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**

If only we take an honest look within, we would be confronted by this ugly truth. We generally manage to maintain an image of civility in the presence of others, but there are dark forces underneath that we can barely keep a lid on.

Right underneath the façade of politeness, how many of us truly care about anyone other than ourselves? Even in the midst of talking with our friends, how often are our thoughts just about ourselves? We envy our closest friends and cannot rejoice at their good fortune. Behind pretended interest in other people, we find ourselves asking, "What do the others think of me? Are they impressed with me? Why are they not paying attention to me?" How many of us have a clear conscience with nothing to be ashamed of in the past, with nothing to hide today?



How much do you agree with the Bible's assessment of mankind that "all have sinned"? Explain.

OFFENDED BY SIN

Now at the moment when a man feels real guilt—moments too rare in our lives—all these blasphemies vanish away. At such a moment we really do know that our character, as revealed in this action, is, and ought to be, hateful to all good men, and, if there are powers above man, to them.

A God who did not regard this with unappeasable distaste would not be a good being. We cannot even wish for such a God—it is like wishing that every nose in the universe were abolished, that the smell of hay or roses or the sea should never again delight any creature, because our own breath happens to stink.

When we merely say that we are bad, the “wrath” of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we perceive our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God’s goodness.⁵

– C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

We must remember that one consequence of God’s love is His wrath. When we speak of the “wrath of God,” it is not some emotional outburst or capricious reaction. It refers to God’s just response to sin.

[...] all loving persons are sometimes filled with wrath, not just despite of but because of their love. If you love a person and you see someone ruining them—even they themselves—you get angry... The Bible says that God’s wrath flows from his love and delight in his creation. He is angry at evil and injustice because it is destroying its peace and integrity.⁶

– Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

Wrath and justice are undeniable necessities to anyone who has personally experienced real brutalities. The indignation and the cry for justice doesn’t come from vindictiveness but from a virtuous love for the good.

It is telling that the idea of a God without wrath comes from armchair theologians in comfortably prosperous nations. As a good, just God who created us in His image, God cannot ignore our sin, nor could (or should) He turn a blind eye towards our sin.

 “[There is a] huge solace of thinking that our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders are not going to be judged...[but] all religions recognize that our deeds are imperishable.”⁷

– Czeslaw Milosz,
The Discreet Charm of Nihilism

Another way to understand the idea of God’s wrath toward sin is through recognizing that our conduct matters. Our sins matter to God because we matter to God. In other words, we are taken seriously.

We instinctively grasp that our moral choices must be taken seriously if our lives are to matter at all. The struggle to choose to be virtuous rather than immoral, to choose to tell the truth rather than lie, to sacrifice for a friend rather than to be selfish – these are the things that make up the drama of human life. Without moral accountability, we lose human dignity, and we would be no different from beasts who live by appetites and instinct. The greatest insult to our existence would be to have absolutely no consequences to the choices we made, whether good or bad.

Imagine working hard on a difficult paper on a topic that’s very meaningful to you. You stay up many nights, struggle with the readings, and present some of your ideas in a carefully crafted paper,

poring over each word in order to convey the precise shade of meaning you desire. You turn it in when you have each paragraph expressing exactly what you want. Imagine receiving the paper back two weeks later with an average grade, and you later learn that the teacher didn't even read the paper; everyone automatically got the same grade.

What would be your response?

When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God loves man: not that He has some "disinterested," ...indifferent concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God: you have one. The Great Spirit you so lightly invoked...is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds ...

If God is love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. And it appears, from all the records, that though He has often rebuked us and condemned us, He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.

[...]

We may wish, indeed, that we were of so little account to God that He left us alone to follow our natural impulses—that He would give over trying to train us into something so unlike our natural selves: but once again, we are asking not for more Love, but for less.⁸

— C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Is it good news or bad news that our conduct matters? Explain.

In saying "Thou shalt not..." and "Thou shalt..." God is expressing his highest love for man. The Bible affirms that our conduct matters and that our lives count; what we choose to do with our life – our bodies, talents, time – matter in the highest courts of heaven. God treats each human life as highly significant and charged with great stakes because each person's decisions have ultimate consequences.

IF GOD IS SO LOVING, THEN WHY HELL?

Before we talk about the biblical understanding of hell, let's first dispel the prevalent notions about hell that so often come to mind, e.g., a fiery cavern ruled by a red, horned creature eternally torturing hapless souls with his pitchfork. This picture, derived primarily from European medieval art and literature and popularized by the media, is not quite the description of hell found in the Bible.

The Bible's depiction of hell is not so much a specific place as it is a state of permanent being – an existence that is utterly and eternally excluded from the presence and life of God. Images of hell used in the Bible are darkness (symbolizing isolation), gnashing of teeth (regret), and fire (torment). The most prominent imagery of hell that Jesus used was being "outside" (exclusion). Hell is not a giant torture chamber; it is a condition where one is finally removed from God's presence. For those who all their lives have known nothing other than self-assertion, hell is the continuation of a godless existence.

As C.S. Lewis has said, in the end there are two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "O.K., your will be done."⁹

If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself, and he may refuse [...] The problem is not simply that of a God who consigns some of His creatures to final ruin. That would be the problem if we were Mohametans. Christianity, true, as always, to the complexity of the real, presents us with something knottier and more ambiguous—a God so full of mercy that He becomes man and dies by torture to avert that final ruin for His creatures, and who yet, where that heroic remedy fails, seems unwilling, or even unable, to arrest the ruin by an act of mere power [...] And here is the real problem: so much mercy, yet still there is Hell.

Picture yourself a man who has risen to wealth or power by a continued course of treachery and cruelty, by exploiting for purely selfish ends the noble motions of his victims, laughing the while at their simplicity; who, having thus attained success, uses it for the gratification of lust and hatred and finally parts with the last rag of honor among thieves by betraying his own accomplices and jeering at their last moments of bewildered disillusionment. Suppose further, that he does all this, not (as we like to imagine) tormented by remorse or even misgiving, but eating like a schoolboy and sleeping like a healthy infant—unshakably confident to the very end that he alone has found the answer to the riddle of life, that God and man are fools whom he has got the better of, that his way of life is utterly successful, satisfactory, unassailible.

We must be careful at this point. The least indulgence of the passion for revenge is very deadly sin. Christian charity counsels us to make every effort for the conversion of such a man; to prefer his conversion, at the peril of our own lives...

But that is not the question. Supposing he will not be converted, what destiny in the eternal world can you regard as proper for him? Can you really desire that such a man, remaining what he is (and he must be able to do that if he has free will) should be confirmed forever in his present happiness—should continue, for all eternity, to be perfectly convinced that the laugh is on his side? And if you cannot regard this as tolerable, is it only your wickedness—only spite—that prevents you from doing so? Or do you find that conflict between Justice and Mercy, which has sometimes seemed to you such an outmoded piece of theology, now actually at work in your own mind, and feeling very much as if it came to you from above, not from below? You are moved, not by a desire for the wretched creature's pain as such, but by a truly ethical demand that, soon or late, the right should be asserted, the flag planted in this horribly rebellious soul, even if no fuller and better conquest is to follow. In a sense, it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good, that it should know itself a failure, a mistake. Even mercy can hardly wish to such a man his eternal, contented continuance in such ghastly illusion.

I have begun with the conception of Hell as positive retributive punishment inflicted by God because that is the form in which the doctrine is most repellent, and I wished to tackle the strongest objection. But, of course, though Our Lord often speaks of Hell as a sentence inflicted by a tribunal, He also says elsewhere that the judgment consists in the very fact that men prefer darkness to light, and that not He, but His "word," judges men. We are therefore at liberty—since the two conceptions, in the long run, mean the same thing—to think of this bad man's perdition not as a sentence imposed on him but as the mere fact of being what he is.¹⁰

— C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

What popular misconception about hell does this dispel?

Hell is the point in an unrepentant sinner's history where all restraints will be removed, and all of man's monstrous depravity will be unleashed. Think about all the downward spiral of self-destruction that sin has brought into your life, even in the midst of many restraining forces of civilization. What would it look like for that downward spiral to continue on and on? Lawless, formless, and without boundaries, separated from God, who is the only source of light, love, and peace – this is what the Bible calls hell.



"Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice."¹¹

– Cliff Knechtle, *Give Me an Answer*

How could a loving God allow such an existence? Because God will not force anyone to repent and turn from his or her ways. He will not force anyone to be his. Love, when refused, must ultimately concede defeat. Hell is the ultimate affirmation that God takes us, and our decisions, seriously.

GOD'S HEART

What is God's heart toward our rebellion and ultimate fate? The Bible uniformly reports that God is grieved by unrepentant sinners headed toward an eternity separated from him.



Matthew 23:37

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"



Ezekiel 18:23

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?



2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

OUR TERRIBLE SITUATION

Universally, we acknowledge the basic moral codes and recognize them as noble, honorable and beautiful. In our better moments we even wish, with a deep sigh, that everyone lived like this. We see the precious value of honesty, authenticity, generosity, sacrifice, loyalty, kindness, sexual fidelity, contentment and peace. But when we move to embrace this beautiful moral order, we become aware of a serious problem. We are often dishonest; we wear masks and abandon authenticity and integrity when it suits us; we are not generous; we have come far based on others' sacrifice, but we are loath to engage in sacrifice ourselves—we ask, what's in it for me? Where is the payoff? We are not loyal, are often unkind—depending on our mood, how much sleep we got the night before—and the fidelity we expect from our spouses seems sharply in discord with our own sexual morality.

For the trouble is that one part of you is on God's side and really agrees with His disapproval of human greed and trickery and exploitation. You may want Him to make an exception in your own case, to let you off this one time; but you know at bottom that unless the power behind the world really and unalterably detests that sort of behavior, then He cannot be good. On the other hand, we know that if there does exist an absolute goodness it must hate most of what we do. That is the terrible fix we are in. If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long run hopeless. But if it is, then we are making ourselves enemies to that goodness every day, and are not in the least likely to do any better tomorrow, and so our case is hopeless again. We cannot do without it, and we cannot do with it. God is the only comfort, He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. He is our only possible ally, and we have made ourselves His enemies.¹²

— C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

We find ourselves on the other side of the judge's stand, trying to offer a defense for our actions and for what we have become. But there is no defense. What can we do? The very good we embrace slays us; the very standards we affirm condemn us.

The Apostle Paul expresses our predicament in Romans 7:12-24.



Romans 7:12-24

¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. ¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Reflect on the fact that we are a walking paradox. We love good but are evil. We are free but imprisoned.

WE NEED A SAVIOR

The cry of our hearts echoes the cry found in Romans 7:24:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Have you ever been so disgusted at yourself that you wanted to just disappear? If so, then have you ever experienced a general desire to be rid of your bad self? If someone could rescue you from yourself, in what ways would that be an attractive offer?

We know that we cannot stand under God's judgment. The just response to our sin is death. We look for hope from within, and we find emptiness. We look to others, but they offer no satisfying solutions. All options are inadequate. The guilt remains. The condemnation is too hard to bear.

Where can we go? What can we do? Should we grit our teeth and say, “I'll just take the punishment”?

Should we lie to ourselves and say, “It doesn't matter, I don't matter, nothing matters”? Is there some hope for our cure? Is there some stream where we can wash and be clean? Is there someone who can save us from our sad predicament?

What is your personal response to this week's material?

ENDNOTES

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- 5 Ibid.
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- 7 Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Discreet Charm of Nihilism*. New York Review of Books. Nov. 19, 1998.
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