

The Story of God and Us: Sin

Two important things happened when God created the world that allowed for both the natural evil and sin that are a part of our world today.

1. God calls creation good, not perfect (Genesis 1:31). God commanded Adam and Eve to subdue the earth, implying that it was not perfectly under control.¹ Even from the beginning, God was working through an evolutionary world, which is how we account for hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural evils. God can, of course, bring good out of these natural evils, but God **does not cause** evil.
2. God created humankind with free will and has never removed this capacity. This allows humans to choose to betray God's plan by sinning. Because humans have free will and can make their own choices, God is not culpable for the sin and evil that pervades the world. Sin is a result of the distortion of God's intention for humankind.

The free will that humans enjoy has given us the ability to sin, and every single human is culpable of sin. Paul writes in Roman 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (NRSV) **All** have sinned. None of us escape the temptation to sin.

The English word "sin" connotes various kinds of sin – individual sin, systemic sin, the state of sin. It also has multiple meanings based on the specific Hebrew or Greek word used. The words used for sin in scripture are:

1. *Hebrew: chatah* – this is the most commonly used word that is translated as sin in the Old Testament. It means "to miss the mark."
2. *Hebrew: avah* – this word means "to act wrongly" or "to commit iniquity." It is usually used when one of the commandments has been broken.
3. *Hebrew: pasha* – this word is translated as both "sin" and "transgression" and means "to rebel against God." It involves both turning one's back on God as well as making or imposing laws that violate God's children.
4. *Greek: hamartia* – from the Hebrew root *chatah*, this also means "to miss the mark."

The first act of sin, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, resulted in ancestral sin for the rest of humanity. This ancestral sin carries with it the transmission of consequences, as opposed to the transmission of guilt that would mar human nature, rendering it depraved. This transmission of consequence includes physical death and

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 31.

disease, not spiritual death – as John Wesley said, “I believe none ever did, or ever will, die eternally, merely for the sin of our first father.”²

In addition to the consequence of Adam and Eve’s sin, we experience consequences to our own sin. Paul writes, “the wages that sin pays are death.” (Romans 6:23 MSG) That death comes in many forms and we experience it in our lives here and now. If you cheat on your spouse, you may experience the death of your marriage. If you treat a friend poorly, you may experience the death of that relationship. If you are deceitful at work, you may experience the death of your career.

When we think about the state of our world, it is not just that we live in an evolutionary world (as mentioned at the beginning of this lesson) but that humankind’s sinfulness bears weight on creation that adds to natural evils. Pollution, carbon emissions, and abuse of natural resources all contribute to crises with the natural order. The resulting natural evils are not punishment from God, but natural consequences of reckless behavior.

Another consequence of sin is that the tendency to sin grows because it moves one away from God and leads to self-inflicted separation. This separation is so great that humans cannot overcome it.

Yet we have hope! God endows all of us, even before we know about God, with prevenient grace – the grace that goes before us. It woos humankind to God by helping us become aware of our sinful nature and deep need for God. *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* describes it as “divine love that... prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God’s will, and our ‘first slight transient conviction’ of having sinned against God.”³

Additionally, sin and the subsequent pain of its consequence is actually a canary in the coal mine that warns us that we are getting too far away from God. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopalian priest, writes, “the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken.”

So, what do we do about our sin? We confess, repent, and ask for God’s forgiveness. Both the Hebrew and Greek words used in scripture for repentance mean “to turn.” It implies a literal physical turning – not just a metaphorical turning of our hearts, but physically turning away from the sin by changing our behavior.

God has shown, from the very first occurrence of sin by Adam and Eve in the garden, that God forgives. Not only does God not cause Adam and Eve to die the moment they eat

² John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley: In Ten Volumes* (New York: Printed and Sold by J. & J. Harper, 1830), IX: 260.

³ United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), Kindle edition, Location 1802.

from the forbidden tree (as was promised in Genesis 2:17), but God offers protection to them by sewing a covering for them when they are sent out of the garden.

1. Read Genesis 2:17 and Genesis 3. God gave Adam and Eve a consequence for eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In what way did Adam and Eve die after eating from the tree?
2. Why didn't God accept Adam and Eve's excuses for disobeying God?
3. Why do we default to shifting blame when we get caught in sin?
4. The serpent twisted God's words to convince Adam and Eve that God did not have their best interests at heart. Have you ever been tempted to stray from the path of God because you felt that God didn't know what was best for you? Or that you had a better plan? How did that work out?
5. Have you seen the effects of distorting or distrusting God's word in your life or in the lives of people around you?
6. What does God expect from you when you have sinned? Is it enough to be sorry without changing our behavior?
7. Do you see the effects of systemic sin in the world around you? In your community? In your family?