

15 January 2023

**Stumbling Blocks: Original Sin
“In Adam’s Fall, We Sinned All”**

Romans 5:12-17

We read today from Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 12-17:

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

The “one man” Paul refers to first is Adam. In Genesis chapters 2 and 3 we read how the first man and woman were placed in a garden of earthly delights, but with one stipulation. They were not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the middle of the garden “lest you die.” But one of the other creatures of the garden, a wily serpent, tells the woman that God is being selfish and has only banned them from that tree because it will make them like gods. They break God’s command. Immediately, they realize for the first time that they are naked and they know shame. Then they hide from God and try to blame each other for their disobedience. As a punishment, the man and woman are cursed to have pain in their different labors, and the snake is cursed to crawl on his belly. They are banished from the garden, and soon we see that everything goes sour. One disobedience leads to another until, by Genesis 6, “every thought of the human heart was only evil always.”

That’s the story. What Paul does with that story is to offer Jesus as a redeeming parallel: through the first act of disobedience, the floodgates of sin were opened, but through a second Adam, Jesus Christ, who faced all human temptations but did not sin, another door was opened, through which grace came flooding in. As the first Adam inaugurated death; the second restored life. Now all theology is contextual, written for a particular time and place, presenting God in terms that will be meaningful for a particular audience, and as contextual theology, this is brilliant. Writing to the church at Rome, made up partly of Jews and partly of Gentiles, Paul reassures the Jews that Jesus is the fulfillment of their inherited faith and communicates to the Gentiles that Christ has set them free both from sin and from the demands of the Jewish law.

Paul was not the last one to deal with this story of the origin of sin, though. In the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo, a bishop in Northern Africa added some details. Augustine said that when Adam and Eve sinned, they effectively erased the image of God from humanity. They and their descendants were now cursed with an intrinsically evil nature, with no trace of goodness remaining. Every human is born into that curse and, simply by being a descendant of

Adam and Eve, is doomed to sin and death and hell. That's why Jesus had to come to earth; being wholly evil, we were unable to save ourselves from our own sin. Or rather, from Adam's sin, because that by itself condemns us. In the words of the New England Primer – used in Puritan schools to teach reading – “In Adam's fall, we sinnéd all.” This is called the doctrine of Original Sin.

Augustine added some further details to this doctrine. He noticed the role of nakedness in the Genesis story – that before sin the man and woman were naked and unashamed, but that shame came with sin – and nakedness made Augustine think of sex. To be fair, a lot of things made Augustine think of sex. So, although this is neither in Genesis nor in Paul, Augustine bequeathed to the church the idea that somehow sex itself was part of the original sin. Thanks, Augie.

Now this last part is easy to dismiss; it clearly says more about Augustine than anything in Scripture. But it's possible that some of you are also feeling a little skeptical about the rest of the doctrine. If you grew up in a church, you've surely heard some presentations of the idea of Original Sin, but when you hear it all laid out together, even as briefly as I've done it, it's hard not to have some questions. First of all, there's that story in Genesis, the one with the Earthly Paradise and the tree with magical fruit and the cunning talking serpent. It feels . . . well, a bit like mythology, doesn't it? That doesn't mean it's bad. Mythology is a way to express deep truth, and I know of no story that bears greater depth, insight, and truth. But are we supposed to believe it's a factual account of events? Among other things, science has given us other ways to think of the origin of our species, supported by genetic analysis and fossil evidence. It feels as if we should regard this biblical story as a parable conveying deep theological and psychological truth, but not as historiography. But if that's so, that scuttles the whole doctrine, doesn't it? How do the characters in a parable transmit sin to future generations?

Even if you accept the Genesis story as literal history – as many feel compelled to do – that notion of transmitted sin is problematic. Bluntly, how is it just for a newborn infant today to be inherently sinful and deserving of death and hell because Adam stole fruit? This is the plan of a just and compassionate God? To our minds, this feels absurd. Why would anyone, ever, think that makes sense? One reason that we struggle with this where generations before us apparently didn't is that our worldview has changed. For the writers of the Hebrew Bible, and for Paul and Augustine, as for most generations since then, the notion of a “curse” was taken very seriously. To the pre-scientific mind, it was a matter of common belief that words spoken in formal blessing or curse held power and that that power could extend to future generations. In the Bible we see the reverence given to the patriarchs' blessings in Genesis; they weren't just good wishes for the future but were believed to determine that future. In Numbers, we read how the king of Moab tried to hire the prophet Balaam to curse the nation of Israel. The descendants of Ham were cursed by Noah, and the descendants of Esau by Isaac. From that perspective, the idea of a universal curse on Adam that is transmitted to all his descendants was not a difficult concept.

But it is to us. We simply don't think that way. We live in an era in which so many things that were once seen as the result of curses have been explained scientifically – birth defects, inherited illnesses, and so on – so our culture tends to think of the “curse” idea as so much mumbo-jumbo, having nothing to do with reality. No wonder that the traditional notion of Original Sin falls with a clunk for people today. Maybe it's time to just ditch it entirely.

Before doing that, though, we should recognize that for all its flaws the doctrine does contain some things that feel valid, some observations that still feel true and need to be dealt with. First, we all sin. And somehow we *know* that we are sinning. In every age and every culture humans have been aware that there is a right way for us to live, so that when we don't live that way, we are aware of it. Second, despite a universal consensus in every major religion that compassion, courage, generosity, self-sacrifice, and community are good; we do consistently and irrationally choose the exact opposite. We seem to feel compelled to choose our own misery. Indeed, it sometimes feels as if we *can't* choose the right. As Paul says just a couple of chapters after our reading today, in Romans 7, "The good that I want to do is exactly what I don't do; the evil that I *don't* want to do, that's what I keep on doing! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" There *is* something weird about our compulsion to sin. And finally, sin begets sin. The picture in Genesis of the sin in the garden snowballing and becoming worldwide evil is not an unfamiliar idea to us. Think slavery.

So, while I am perfectly willing to scrap the term "Original Sin" and all its connections to Augustine and the old worldview of universal curses, I don't want to do it until we have another way to talk about these realities of human existence. The Augustinian model has, I think, outlived its usefulness, but the realities of sin that it was constructed to deal with are still with us. We can't just deny the fact of sin; that's just self-delusion. What we need is a new way to think about it, a new story, a new model.

May I make a humble suggestion, one I've already hinted at? It seems to me that we already have a new way to talk about this sort of thing, but using the language of science instead of the language of witchcraft. Rather than speaking of a generational curse, we can speak of an inherited trait. The science of genetics has taught us that sometimes we *are* subject to tendencies that come to us without our control or choice. These include physical traits – height, color, hair, nose size, and so on – but also predispositions to certain cancers, a family history of mental illnesses, or vulnerability to addiction. Indeed, some recent research has indicated that our genetic makeup can be influenced by environmental factors or even trauma, and that choices we make today and things that happen to us now can be handed down to our descendants in our DNA. Now, hear what I'm saying. I am *not* saying that there is a genetic basis for sin or that scientists need to get busy identifying the "sin gene." Would it were that easy. All I'm suggesting is that this picture of inheritance can work as a metaphor for us, replacing the old metaphor of the magical curse.

And it does work as a metaphor. Whatever the ideal human specimen might be, none of us are it. We have all inherited this mutation, this design glitch, that predisposes us to certain irrational and self-destructive behaviors. Maybe think of sin as a species-wide mental illness. But it is a predisposition, not an inevitability. We can be sure it will show itself at times, but there are also measures that we can take to minimize its effect and soften its influence. First among these is admitting that it's there. Denying that it exists only allows it to grow unchecked. Like denying addiction or avoiding checkups because you don't want to know if something's wrong. We start by admitting that we've got it. Second, since we have this inherited tendency, regular self-examination is necessary. In the case of sin, self-examination requires confessional prayer. And third, since all of us are dealing with the same diagnosis, we can all benefit from a support group – like an AA meeting or an Alzheimer's group – a gathering of people who share our problem and are trying to find a way to live well under that condition. I mean, seriously, someone should invent a sin support group.

Oh, wait. Somebody did. It's called the church.

Hi. My name is Jerry, and I'm a sinner.

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I said earlier that all theology is contextual. Paul took the story of Genesis 3 and applied it to the context of the church at Rome in the 1st century. Four hundred years later, Augustine took Paul and gave it some new twists to work in his own context. And however we may feel about those twists, we have to admit that it must have been effective, because it certainly took. But it doesn't work for us anymore, unless our goal is to create stumbling blocks for 21st century humans who are looking for faith or meaning. Fortunately, we're not required to hold on to Augustine's 5th century model. We can find new ways to tell our core story, which begins like this: we are not who we're supposed to be; something has gone wrong; but there is a way forward with hope. More on that next week.