

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
G. Rebellion Against the Divine Order  
19. Sin and Its Consequences

A second major thematic focus of the Old Testament concerns rebellion against the divine order—rebellion, i.e. against God’s sovereignty and the worship due him by the assertion of human independence. First up in this discussion is the nature of sin and its consequences.

Scripture’s first mention of the word sin is in Genesis 4:7, in God’s warning to Cain. *If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.* God had previously rejected Cain’s offering to him while he accepted the offering of his brother Abel. The problem, the Bible implies, is that while Cain knew what God required, he decided to try to get by with less than his best, whereas Abel brought God the best offering he could muster. God told Cain that if he did what he knew to be right, his offering would be accepted as well. Then he went on to portray sin as a sort of crouching monster that threatened to destroy Cain if he did not deal with it appropriately.

Cain’s sin involved a decision to disregard or disobey what God had commanded regarding offerings made to him. And this concept of sin is reinforced in the rest of Scripture. Sin always disregards or disobeys what God wants. This tendency became the major plague of the human race already before Cain, starting with the disobedience of his parents in the Garden of Eden.

Right from the beginning God made clear that Adam and Eve could live and flourish in the world he had been so generous as to give them vast authority over, only as they lived in continuing dependence on their Creator. God’s prohibition against eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil reinforced this truth. Adam and Eve could enjoy life and freedom only within the boundaries God had established. That is, they were not designed to be autonomous, but to be dependent and image-bearing servants of the one and only God. Their mandate and authority regarding the development and oversight of all created things demanded close attention to God’s interests.

Adam and Eve’s subsequent disobedience of God’s command was therefore a denial of their God-given role in the world, and a play for independence from God. And their disobedience became the model for Cain’s decision to give God less than he demanded, and, for that matter, a model for every other sin of the human race. For every sin is an expression of the all too familiar human impulse not to submit to what God wants but to have our own way and strive to become what the serpent told Adam and Eve they could become—like God.

Sin can be expressed in many different ways; each part of God’s creation can become an object of inordinate and even addictive desire. The material gifts of God we love to possess, as well as the talents, abilities, and opportunities he gives—all of these—we can misuse to increase our own fame or power in preference to giving God the honor he deserves. Indeed, it seems that by nature people have more of an appetite for the gifts of God than we do for the God who gives them to help us serve him. And we can be very creative in finding ways to transgress the guidelines and boundaries God has established. We are fully as adept at rationalizing our sinful desires and actions as children are in making excuses for their disobedience.

We may focus on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it, or simply seek to justify our sin by comparing our own actions to those of others who have done worse. One way or another, in the face of Scripture's consistent warnings about the dangers and consequences associated with sin, the prevailing human tendency is to minimize or normalize sin. We can see this in the ignorance or outright rejection of God's instructions about how he wants people to relate to him and each other.

The best known of God's instructions about this are his Ten Commandments. I say "best known" but knowledge of them eludes more and more people in the wake of the continuing decrease in biblical literacy. Jesus summarized these commandments as: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." And "Love your neighbor as yourself." Obeying these is the key to any true and lasting success in life.

People know something of this truth even apart from the Ten Commandments or Jesus' summary of what God wants, by what we call conscience. We know, before we get too used to ignoring conscience, at least something of the difference between right and wrong. But some individuals and some cultures habitually suppress their consciences and go their own way. That's what Paul is speaking of in Rom 1:18-20. *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

Today, for example, in the homosexual community, and, for that matter, also in the minds of more and more heterosexuals, is the mantra that since homosexuals cannot choose their **orientation**, they are **not** under the obligation to shun homosexual **behavior**. But, of course, this way of thinking can extend to any sin. There is no one who has never experienced the sinful impulses to pride, lust, envy, greed, etc. That is our common orientation. But that does not mean we are free to act on these impulses. Jesus himself was tempted to sin, but successfully resisted each time. The temptation is not sin, but the self-indulgent and disobedient thought or action in response to it, is—just as there was no sin attributed to Adam and Eve before they actually ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.

By blurring the distinction between temptation and response to it, sinful actions become normalized and trivialized and consciences become dulled. This dulling of conscience happens in other ways too. For example, by action or even by simple neglect we may become so accustomed to oppressing the poor or stealing from the company, that we don't even realize what we are doing anymore. Or we excuse it: "Why shouldn't I spend all my money on myself and ignore the poor, or the church, etc.; everyone else does." "Why shouldn't I take some of my company's stuff home for myself; everybody else does." On the subject of our particular sin, we may even tell ourselves "It's just a little problem; I can change any time;" we may repeat that so often that we come to believe that sin is not that big a deal.

In the Garden of Eden Satan made it sound as if eating from the forbidden tree was not that big a deal after all – and that God was making a big fuss over something of no consequence. In fact, that remains one of Satan's favorite techniques in his war against humanity. In effect he says, "God is making a big deal about nothing."

Indeed, this is so often the rationale we use when we proceed to do the things we know God disapproves of. We say, or at least think: "What's the big fuss all about? The rules are just silly." Maybe we wouldn't actually say that to God; we're far too dutiful and polite. But that's really what we may think. Yes, we may still struggle to obey. We may still wish we were more obedient and disciplined. We'd like to please. But sin feels to us like violating some silly rules in the classroom of life. And what's more, keeping the rules feels dull and boring, while sin is fun and exciting – maybe even like a Carnival. It is freedom and self-expression, no curfew, nobody looking over your shoulder to judge you.

This idea of sin is captured in the expression, "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas." Or, better yet, in the spirit of Mardi Gras, that festival for which New Orleans is famous. "Gras" is French for fat and "Mardi" is French for Tuesday. So Mardi Gras is "Fat Tuesday," the day before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

Lent is historically a time of preparation for Easter, and is traditionally a time of fasting and self-sacrifice considered to be proper for encouraging our thought about the suffering Jesus underwent in his crucifixion and the events leading up to it. So, I guess I can understand the rationale that some people use: Get your partying done before Lent begins. But this last day before Lent (Mardi Gras) is often marked by excessive eating and drinking and wild partying. Behind such behavior is the pernicious idea that sin is the delightful stuff of life that we'll have to cut back on for a while, and righteousness is all seriousness and quietness and self-denial. .

Yet another view of sin is that it's a myth, something that people used to believe in but don't anymore. It's one of those things parents sometimes use to try to keep their children in line. "If you're not good, Santa Claus won't bring you what you want for Christmas." One of those things that used to work, but doesn't anymore, now that we're grown.

So here are three false views of sin to choose from. (1) Sin is breaking the rules, no matter how arbitrary or silly they are. Or (2) Sin is the fun things in life that God and self-righteous people don't want us to enjoy. Or (3) Sin is like the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus, mythical beliefs that people ought to outgrow.

We could probably think of other views of sin. But I'll mention just one more; it is perhaps the most popular one in our culture. If you do an internet search for something like "the most important rules of life" you'll find that most pundits forget about loving God above all and, while promoting some variation of loving your neighbor as yourself, focus more on the loving yourself part of that. One post lists as two of the five most important rules: "Define for yourself what success means" and "Play by your own rules." In this idea, sin is letting someone else define for you what's important; it is failing to honor your own desires. That's essentially what the serpent in the Garden of Eden got Adam and Eve to believe.

But, of course, the truth is that sin is whatever separates us from God who is the source of all life and enduring happiness. God created us to experience a lot of freedom. He doesn't like meaningless restrictions – anymore than parents get a kick out of telling their children "No" all the time. But look what happens when people fail to see their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. Look what happens when we pursue the complete freedom to indulge any and all appetites:

- In individuals you see meaningless lives, broken marriages, shallow relationships, wasted bodies, and spirits that alternate between rage and depression
- In society you see violence, distrust and racism that destroys communities. Everyone assumes corruption in politics. Our streets are not safe after dark anymore. The new morality kills families and violates children.
- Historically, you see civilizations that die from internal rot.

Many problems in our world could illustrate the downward spiral of sin. One is heroin addiction, a problem that the TV program *48 Hours* took on some time ago (9/12/96). The broadcast began with a police-surveillance video showing a contact between two people on an inner-city street, and one of them stuffing something into his jeans as he walked away. Next, the police moved in, and forced the man to hand over his little bag of heroin. He begged them, "Let me go, and I promise you'll never see me around here again. I'm starting treatment tomorrow morning; I've got to get clean; this stuff is killing me. Please let me go."

As it turned out, the guy did go into a heroin addiction treatment program, and although we don't know the long term results, he was still clean a couple of weeks later. This guy was trying to get his girlfriend off the stuff too. She had spoken about heroin in much the same way. She started on it because she'd seen other people using, and she thought she was missing out on something. At first she found it a good high, but it wasn't long before she was hooked; soon it didn't get her high anymore, but she needed it just to survive.

I thought, "How relevant for understanding sin. Drug addiction is not only one of many results of sin; it also gives some insight into its nature. The high-producing substance always looks so attractive, at first anyhow. It promises an easy way out of difficulty – forgetfulness or a thrill with no bad side effects. Sin has the face of an angel. It did to Adam and Eve in Paradise. They were offered a chance to expand their freedom and knowledge without cost, and it seemed an unreasonable self-denial to avoid or reject the offer.

But the thing that struck me about this guy's story was the way he spoke of his addiction as a person rather than a thing. He called it the devil. He said, "Heroin gets you and controls you and won't let you go. It drags you down and sucks you dry, and leaves you empty; it's the devil."

Like heroin, sin is not a big deal just because some Kill-Joy said it was, but because it undermines the character and saps the strength; it violates the very nature and purpose of mankind. It is the devil. And sin must be dealt with before we can hope to recapture the glory of the Creator's intention for us. This is not something we can do by ourselves, but only with God's help. Thankfully, God usually permits us to experience less severe consequences of sin so that we might be persuaded to abandon it before it kills us.

Just one of many biblical examples of this is found in 1 Kings chapters 16-21, which describe the interactions between the Lord's prophet Elijah, and Israel's King Ahab. Ahab certainly had access to the truth expressed, among other places, by the book of Deuteronomy, which deals extensively with the blessings that follow obedience and the curses that follow disobedience to God's commands.

Blessings for obedience included health and well-being for children, livestock, and crops, as well as prosperity, success in life, and protection from enemies. The curses were just the opposite; they spelled disaster for children, livestock, and crops, and resulted in exposure to enemies, poverty, failure, disease, slavery, sorrow, pain, scorn, etc. The curses that would result from disobedience to God's covenant commands promised to leave people terrorized and despairing.

Israel under Ahab's leadership, had forgotten or ignored the message of Deuteronomy. Contrary to what God wanted, Ahab wanted to have as many gods, and whatever gods, he chose. So God sent his faithful prophet Elijah, whose very name means "My God is Yahweh," to dispute with Ahab over the direction in which he was leading the country, and to press his claim in a way that would force Ahab and all Israel to listen. By the authority of the Lord God, Elijah told Ahab that the whole land would suffer drought. He said, "There will be no rain until I say so." "I'm going to make it so dry that you won't have any choice but to listen to me."

The Lord God struck right at the heart of Israel's false worship by cutting off the possibility of life and growth that their idol gods were supposed to produce. Without rain there could be no growth, no vegetation. God determined to show Israel how fruitless and not fruitful was the worship of their false gods.

Scripture doesn't say very much directly about the next few years without rain except to say (18:2) that the famine was severe. And so the nation staggered under the Lord's judgment, brought upon his covenant people for their covenant-breaking actions. Finally, after three long years, God sent Elijah to summon Ahab and his false prophets to a showdown on Mt. Carmel. There, with Israel's leaders as an audience, the false prophets and Elijah took turns preparing sacrifices and then praying to their respective gods and God for miraculous fire from heaven to light the sacrifice. Of course, only Elijah's prayer was successful for only his God was real. And after the peoples' repentance Elijah offered more prayers for the Lord to remove the curses and restore the blessings. God did just that and sent rain again to make the crops grow..

God's curses for sinful disobedience and blessings for obedience are not always as graphic as drought or rain. Nor do they always require what appears to be supernatural intervention. Many blessings and curses that people experience are simply natural consequences of obedience or disobedience. Of course, not every hardship is evidence of God's judgment. Nor is every blessing an evidence of godly living. But in subsequent generations, if not in our own lives, there is no escaping the bitter consequences of sin. It always leads to various forms of dysfunction and pain, which could, in part be avoided if we lived life as God intends.

But even the dysfunction and pain can be beneficial if it leads us to repentance and living the life to which God calls us. Our invitation to such a life remains open as long as we live. But, since no one knows how long that will be, we are wise to respond to God's call before death, failing which, our separation from God becomes final and irrevocable—the end for which Satan has been working since his original encounter with our first parents in Paradise..