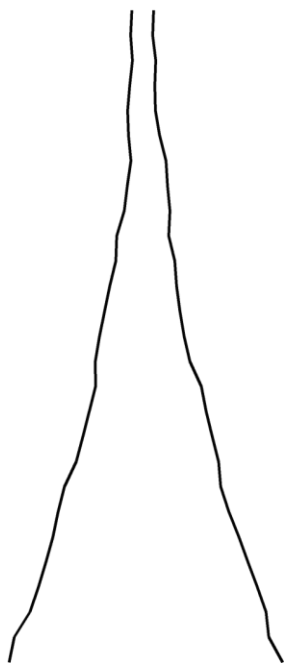


What Is Sin?

A SHORT, CLEAR, BIBLICAL ANSWER



J Q B O T E S

What Is Sin?: A Short, Clear, Biblical Answer

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ISBN (paperback): 9798199729055

ISBN (hardcover): 9798199733700

Published by JP Botes Publishing

First edition

Contents

What Sin Is	6
The Wrong Measure	6
God Is Love.....	8
The Two Commandments That Carry the Law.....	9
Sin Is the Absence of Love	10
Where the Book Is Going	11
Where We Are	12
The First Sin.....	13
Why There Was a Tree at All.....	14
The Shape of the First Sin	15
What Was Actually Broken	18
The Death God Warned About	19
The Pattern Set	20
Where We Are	21
The Inheritance of Sin	22
One Man, and the World He Left Behind.....	23
Why the Doctrine Matters.....	24
Inherited Guilt and Personal Guilt Held Together	26
The Direction of the Argument	27
Where We Are	28
Sin in the Heart	30
Jesus on the Heart	30
The Word Goes Where No One Else Can	31
Words Show What the Heart Holds.....	33

The Heart Is Deceitful	34
Where We Are.....	35
Indwelling Sin	36
What Paul Names	37
Owen on What Indwelling Sin Is.....	38
Its Seat Is the Heart.....	39
What This Does Not Mean	40
Where We Are.....	42
The Deceit and Power of Sin	43
Why Deceit Comes First.....	43
How Sin Deceives	45
Sin Works by Degrees	46
The Power, Once Deceit Has Done Its Work.....	47
What This Looks Like in Practice.....	48
What This Calls For	49
Where We Are.....	50
The Weight of Sin	52
Against Whom?	52
The Wages of Sin	54
Why a Creature Could Not Pay	55
What This Should Do to Us	56
Where We Are.....	57
The Cross	58
The Lamb God Provided	59
He Was Pierced for Our Transgressions	60
While We Were Still Sinners	61
What the Cross Did	63

What You Do With It	64
Where We Are	65
Repentance.....	67
What Repentance Is.....	67
What Repentance Is Not	70
What Repentance Looks Like	71
The Connection to the Lens of This Book.....	72
Where We Are	73
Mortification	74
What Paul Said	75
What Mortification Is Not.....	75
What Mortification Is	77
The Spirit Does the Work	79
Without Despair, Without Delay	80
Where We Have Come	81
Thank You	82
Sources	84
John Owen, <i>Of the Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the</i> <i>Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers</i> (1668)	84
John Owen, <i>Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers</i> (1656)	85
Stephen Charnock, <i>Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes</i> <i>of God</i> (1682)	86
Athanasius of Alexandria, <i>On the Incarnation of the Word of God</i> (c. AD 318)	86
Further reading	87
Scripture references by chapter	88

Chapter 1

What Sin Is

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

This book is built on one question. What does the Bible mean when it uses the word *sin*?

It is a fair question to ask, because the answer is not what the surrounding culture assumes. The culture's answer is small: sin is the bad things people do, the obviously wrong actions, the visible failures everyone agrees ought to be avoided. Measured by that answer, the average person can sit comfortably with themselves. They have not killed anyone. They have not stolen. They are, on most days, a reasonably decent person.

Scripture says the answer goes deeper than that.

The Wrong Measure

The first thing to put down is the measure that judges sin by visible behavior alone.

That measure shows you a list of obvious wrongs, asks how many of them you have done lately, and gives you a passing grade if the number is low. By it, a person who has stayed out of the headlines, kept their reputation intact, and managed not to do anything dramatic is doing fine. There is nothing more to discuss.

Scripture's measure is different.

Scripture measures sin not by the absence of dramatic wrongdoing but by the standard of who God is. That standard is love. Active, costly love, turned toward God and toward the people around us. And anything that falls short of that standard, no matter how respectable it looks from the outside, is what Scripture calls sin.

Comparing yourself to the person beside you is no comfort here. Being less bad than someone else is not the same thing as being good. Less bad is a relative measurement; goodness, in Scripture's sense, is measured against the One who made you, the only One who is truly good. The right comparison is not your neighbor. It is the God whose nature is love, the Christ who loved His Father and His neighbor perfectly all the way to a cross.

Revelation 21 shows that Scripture's measure is wider than the list of dramatic sins.

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Revelation 21:8

Read the whole list. The *cowardly* and the *faithless* are there alongside murderers. The *liars* close the list. John was writing to churches under real persecution, and the *cowardly* he names first are people who shrank from confessing Christ when their lives were on the line. The disposition John was naming runs deeper than first-century persecution, though. The same heart that flinches when faithfulness costs something is the heart Scripture diagnoses. It shows up in countless smaller forms in any age. Every sin is a

departure from the love God requires, and every departure puts a soul under judgment apart from Christ.

God Is Love

Behind the standard stands the God who set it.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:8

The words are John's, written near the end of his life. He had walked with Jesus, watched Him die, watched Him rise, and watched the Spirit He sent build a Church across the Roman world. After all of that, he states it from both sides at once. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. Not that God loves. Not that He is loving alongside His other qualities. That He is love. Love is the substance of His being.

This is the line that sets the doctrine of sin in place. If love is what God is, then sin, at its root, must be defined in relation to love. To move away from love is to move away from God. The doctrine of sin is downstream of the doctrine of God.

This does not soften God into sentiment. The love that God is includes everything else Scripture says about His nature. His holiness. His justice. His judgment. His wrath against what destroys what He has made. These are not departures from His love. They are expressions of it. A love that did not act against what destroys its beloved would not be love at all. It would be indulgence. God's love and God's wrath are not opposites. His wrath is love acting in holy opposition to the sin that ruins His creatures.

The full register of His character holds together in one being. He is the God whose holiness is His crown and whose mercy is His treasure. Both are real. Both flow from the same nature. Both bear on what sin is and what He will do about it.

The Two Commandments That Carry the Law

When the question of the right standard was put to Jesus directly, He gave the answer this book will keep returning to.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 22:37-40

All the Law and the Prophets. Every commandment, every instruction, every prohibition Scripture contains hangs on these two. Which means every sin, traced to its root, is a violation of one or both of them. Either something has been placed above love for God: comfort, reputation, desire, fear, the self. Or something has been placed above love for the person in front of you: judgment of them, indifference to their need, an unwillingness to lay anything down for them. Often it is both at once.

This is the right measure. Love for God above all. Love for neighbor as for yourself. Measured against it, no human being comes out clean.

Sin Is the Absence of Love

There is another way of saying this, and it is the framing this book will keep coming back to.

Sin is the absence of love.

Not the absence of any kind of love. Plenty of sin is done in the name of one love over another. The absence specifically of *godly* love, the love defined by who God is and named in the two great commandments. Where that love is missing, sin is what fills the space.

James puts it plainly in a sentence that widens the definition past what visible behavior alone can reveal.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James 4:17

Sin is not only doing the wrong thing. Sin is also knowing the right thing and failing to do it. Knowing love was required and not loving. Knowing the call and ignoring it. Knowing the person in front of you needed something only you could give and walking past anyway. That, in James's words, is sin.

This is a wider definition than a list of behaviors can hold. Such a list measures what was done. James, with the rest of Scripture behind him, also measures what was left undone. The love that was withheld. The kindness that was not offered. The honesty that was not spoken. The forgiveness that was not extended. God who was not honored. All of these are sin.

If sin is the absence of godly love, then the diagnosis of sin is not just a question of what is on the surface. It is a question of what is missing underneath. The heart turned inward instead of outward toward God and the people God has placed in our lives. That inward turn is the shape sin takes long before any visible act.

Where the Book Is Going

This first chapter has put one idea in your hands. Sin is the absence of godly love, measured by the God who is love, named in the two commandments that carry the whole of Scripture's instruction. Everything that follows turns that idea over and looks at it from another side.

The book moves outward from here. It goes back to the beginning, to Genesis 3, to see what kind of thing the first sin was and how its shape has marked every sin since. It follows the line Paul draws from Adam's fall down to ours, the inheritance none of us asked for and none of us escaped. Then it turns inward, to the heart, because Jesus said that is where sin lives long before it ever reaches the surface. From there it stays a while with the sin that remains even in those who belong to Christ, across two chapters shaped by John Owen, who watched the workings of indwelling sin closely.

Then the ground tilts toward the cross. One chapter weighs how serious sin is, with Stephen Charnock, whose sense of the eternity of God gives the right weight to what every offense against Him costs. The next stands at the cross itself, where Athanasius and the apostles speak together of the only answer to sin that has ever existed. After the cross comes the turning it calls for, repentance, the letting go of sin to receive what Christ has done. And the book closes where the

Christian lives, in the daily fight Owen called *mortification*, the slow killing of sin by the Spirit.

Underneath every one of these chapters runs the same conviction. Sin is the absence of godly love. Each chapter is one more way of learning to see it clearly.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Scripture does not measure sin by the absence of dramatic wrongdoing. It measures sin against the standard of the God who is love. By that measure, no human being comes out clean.
2. Sin is the absence of godly love. The two great commandments, love God above all, love neighbor as yourself, are the diagnostic. Every sin, traced to its root, is a violation of one or both.
3. The diagnosis is wider than visible behavior. James says the love we knew to give and did not give is also sin. The heart turned inward instead of outward toward God and others is the shape sin takes before any visible act.

Next, the first sin. Genesis 3. The pattern set there has been the shape of every sin since.

Chapter 2

The First Sin

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Genesis 3:2-3

To understand what sin is, it helps to look at what it looked like the first time.

Genesis 3 records the first sin. The whole rest of the Bible is shaped by what happened there. Adam and Eve are in a garden made for them. They have direct fellowship with the God who walks with them in the cool of the day. They have meaningful work. They have each other. They have only one prohibition.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Genesis 2:16-17

Eat freely from every tree, God says. Only this one is off limits. The freedom is wide and the restriction is single. That is the command the serpent is about to twist.

Then the serpent arrives.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

Genesis 3:1

The first move in the first temptation is a question about what God said. The serpent does not deny God. He does not attack God's existence. He puts a question mark over God's word. *Did God actually say...?*

And he does not even ask it honestly. God had given them the whole garden, every tree but one. The serpent twists that into its opposite. *Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?* He takes a God who gave them nearly everything and makes Him sound like a God who forbade them everything. The single restriction is blown up until it hides all the gifts around it. That is how the lie works. It hands you a distorted picture of God, generosity made to look like stinginess, and invites you to resent Him for it.

Every sin since has come through the same crack.

Why There Was a Tree at All

Why was it there at all? God did not make Adam and Eve to obey Him the way a machine runs a program. He made them able to love Him, and love is never coerced. The single prohibition gave that love something to rest on: a real command, a real choice, a real chance to honor Him by trusting His word.

This does not mean the fall caught God off guard, or that the outcome slipped out of His hands. Scripture never lets us think sin surprised Him or escaped His purposes. What it does mean is that the choice was genuinely theirs. They were not pushed. The tree was not a trap

laid to catch them. It was the place where creatures made in God's image could trust Him or turn from Him, and they turned. We still live on that same ground. God made us able to love Him, and that means able to turn away.

The Shape of the First Sin

The conversation in Genesis 3 is brief, and every line matters. Eve answers the serpent. She tells him what God had said. She adds a small embellishment, that they were not to *touch* the tree, which God had not said. The serpent presses harder.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:4-5

Two claims. First, God is lying to you. *You will not surely die*. God said you would. He was wrong, or worse, He was deceiving you. Second, God is holding out on you. *God knows that when you eat of it... you will be like God*. He is keeping you small because He wants the power for Himself.

This is the entire psychology of sin, set out in two verses. Sin starts with a doubt about God's word. It moves to a suspicion of God's character. It ends with a decision that the creature knows better than the Creator, that the creature can handle its own life, that the creature will define good and evil for itself.

Both claims were lies, and both were aimed at God's character. The truth ran the other way. God was not holding out on them. He was protecting them. The prohibition was a fence around the one thing that would ruin them, the way a parent keeps a child back from what

the child cannot yet see is deadly. The serpent took that protection and made it look like deprivation, a good Father painted as a jealous rival. It is the oldest move there is, and it still works on us. Sin almost always begins by convincing us that God's no is robbing us of something we were owed, when in truth it is guarding us from something we would have lost.

And they were not in the dark about right and wrong. The serpent offered them knowledge, as though they were missing something, but they already knew the one thing that mattered. God had said no. They knew that obeying Him was good and that disobeying Him was wrong, because He had told them and they repeated it back to the serpent. The problem was never a fact they lacked. Knowing, in itself, is not sin. What the tree of the knowledge of good and evil gave them was a deeper and darker kind of knowing, the knowing that only comes from taking part. Before, they knew good and evil the way an innocent person knows them, from the outside, by being told. After, they knew evil the way the guilty know it, from the inside, by having done it. That was the knowledge that changed them. Not the godlike wisdom the serpent had promised, but a ruinous new share in the evil itself. The first sin was not a mistake made in ignorance. It was a choice made with open eyes.

Then the act.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to

make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:6

Read what she sees. The tree was *good for food, a delight to the eyes, desired to make one wise*. Three desires, one for the body, one for the eyes, one for the pride of being wise. The apostle John would later trace a strikingly similar pattern in the way the world tempts every generation.

For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

1 John 2:16

The fruit looked good. It promised wisdom. They believed the serpent over God. They ate.

And their eyes were opened, exactly as the serpent had said they would be.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Genesis 3:7

So they did gain knowledge. That much of the serpent's word came true. But notice what their opened eyes first showed them. Not the wisdom of God. Their own nakedness. They had been naked before and felt no shame. Now they saw themselves and could not bear to be seen. The first gift of their new knowledge was not power but exposure, the self-knowledge of the guilty. The promise that they

would be like God ended with two people sewing leaves together to hide their nakedness.

What Was Actually Broken

If you ask what sin Adam and Eve committed, the easy answer is: they ate the forbidden fruit. They broke the one rule they had been given. They disobeyed.

That answer is true, but it does not go deep enough. The Bible never treats the first sin as a small infraction over a piece of fruit. It treats it as the moment the human race set itself against the very God who made it. Disobedience was the surface act. What was actually broken was love.

The two greatest commandments had not been spoken yet, but they were already true. Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. Adam and Eve broke both in one moment.

They broke the first by preferring their own judgment to God's. They were told what was good for them. They concluded they knew better. They placed their own wisdom, their own desire, their own assessment of what would make them happy, above the word of the God who is love. In one act they unseated Him from the center of their love and put themselves there.

They broke the second by what they did to each other. Look again at the verse. *She also gave some to her husband who was with her.* Adam was there. He was not away in some other corner of the garden, unaware of what was happening. He stood beside his wife through the whole exchange with the serpent, and he said nothing. He had been given to her to love her, to lead, to guard her from exactly this. Instead he stood by, let the deceit work on him too, and took the fruit from her

hand. He failed to protect her. Then he failed her a second time. When God came looking and asked him what had happened, Adam did not cover for her or own his part. He blamed her.

The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.

Genesis 3:12

In one sentence he turns on both his wife and his God. *The woman whom you gave to be with me.* Her fault, and underneath it, Yours. The marriage that had been one flesh on the morning of creation was now a marriage where the husband stood across the garden from his wife and pointed at her as the cause of his sin. The man who should have protected her used her instead as his shield. Love for the other was already cracked.

The shape of what happened in the heart is simple enough to name. Unbelief of the word of God. The heart preferring its own way before God's. The creature putting its judgment above the love of its Creator. Every sin since has the same shape, even when it does not look like fruit on a tree.

The Death God Warned About

The serpent had promised they would not die. They ate, and they did not fall down dead. So was he right after all?

He was not. Death came, exactly as God had said, and it came in two ways. The first was immediate. The moment they ate, something died that had been alive that morning. Their fellowship with God. They heard Him in the garden and hid. The closeness was gone, replaced by fear and shame and blame. That is death in its first and deepest

sense, separation from the God who is the source of life. They were dead in their relationship to Him the instant they turned away.

The second kind of death was certain, though slower, and Scripture is careful to tell us exactly how it came.

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

Genesis 3:22-23

They lost the tree of life. From the day they were sent out of the garden, their days were numbered. Cut off from the source that would have sustained them, the body began its long walk toward the grave. God had not exaggerated and the serpent had not outwitted Him. God told the plain truth. They began to die the day they ate. And every human being since has been born on the far side of that same separation, already dying, already shut out from the tree of life, until Christ opens the way back to it.

The Pattern Set

What Genesis 3 names is not just a one-time event. It is the pattern Scripture is going to keep showing us in different forms.

Cain killed Abel because he preferred his own anger to God's instruction (Genesis 4). The people in Noah's day filled the earth with violence because they preferred their own desires to God's design (Genesis 6). The builders of Babel built their tower because they preferred their own glory to God's calling (Genesis 11). Israel made the golden calf because they preferred a god they could see to the

God who had brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32). David took Bathsheba because he preferred his own desire to the marriage he was looking at (2 Samuel 11). Peter denied Christ because he preferred his own safety to the Lord he loved (Luke 22).

The pattern is consistent. Sin is the heart's preferring of self to God. The forms change. The disposition is the same.

This connects directly to the lens of the first chapter. If sin is the absence of godly love, then the first sin is the first instance of love going missing. Adam and Eve, made by a God who is love, made to walk with Him, made to love Him with all their heart and each other as themselves, withdrew their love from God and turned it inward. The fruit was the visible act. The withdrawal of love was the substance.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. The first sin was not primarily about a piece of fruit. The surface act was disobedience. The deep act was love misdirected, the creature placing its own judgment above the God who made it.
2. The pattern set in Genesis 3 has been the shape of every sin since. The forms change. The shape of the heart behind them is the same. Self placed above God. Self placed above neighbor. Love withdrawn from where it belongs.
3. The first sin connects directly to the diagnosis of chapter 1. Sin is the absence of godly love. Genesis 3 is the first moment that absence appears in the world.

Next, what Adam's fall did to the rest of the human race. Paul writes about it in Romans 5. The story is not just Adam's.

Chapter 3

The Inheritance of Sin

The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.

Genesis 8:21

The story of sin is not only Adam's story.

Genesis 3 names the first sin and shows its shape. What it does not yet make explicit is what Paul will spend a chapter of Romans showing. One man's sin did not stay one man's sin. It entered the world through Adam and then, by a kind of inheritance no one chose, became the condition of every person born from him.

This chapter is about that inheritance. About why Scripture treats sin not just as a list of things people do but as a condition people are in. And about why an honest reading of one's own heart eventually shows the problem to be older and deeper than any particular wrong act that can be named.

One Man, and the World He Left Behind

Paul opens the doctrine with one sentence that has shaped Christian thought for two thousand years.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.

Romans 5:12

Read what Paul is saying. Sin came into the world through one man. Death came through sin. Death then spread to all men. Not because each individual repeated Adam's choice in the garden, but because something Adam did opened a door that has never been closed.

What came through that door was not just a behavior pattern. It was a condition. A bent in the human heart that Paul will later call *the flesh*, that James will call *desire*, that John will call *the world*. A working principle of self-preference, distrust of God, and inward turning that has been part of the human inheritance from Adam onward.

Paul presses the point a few verses later.

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:19

Made sinners. Paul uses an extraordinary verb. The many *were made* sinners. Not chose to become sinners by their own first act. Were made sinners by Adam's act. Paul holds the two together in one sentence: by Adam's disobedience the many were made sinners, by

Christ's obedience the many will be made righteous. The grammar is the same. The mechanism, in both directions, is one man acting on behalf of many.

This is what older Christians have called *original sin*. The doctrine that Adam was not just the first sinner but the representative of the human race, and that his fall became our fall, his nature now ours by inheritance. Scripture holds two things together under that one phrase. A corrupted nature passed down from Adam to every person born of him. And a guilt reckoned to the race in Adam as its head. Both are real. Both are part of the inheritance.

Why the Doctrine Matters

A doctrine like this can sound abstract. It is not.

The reason it matters is that without it, the diagnosis of sin is too small. Without original sin, sin is just a list of bad things people happen to do, an unfortunate behavioral tendency, a regrettable habit that better education or stronger discipline could correct. With original sin, sin is a condition the human heart is in from the start, and no amount of education or discipline reaches the level where it lives.

The Bible never reads the human problem as merely behavioral. David, after his sin with Bathsheba, did not write a psalm of behavioral regret. He wrote this:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Psalms 51:5

David is not blaming his mother. He is naming a condition that was true of him from before he was born. He was conceived already inside

a fallen human family. The sin he had just committed was not an aberration. It was an expression of a condition he had carried his whole life. The visible sin came from a deeper place than his particular character.

Paul says the same in Ephesians.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians 2:1-3

Dead in trespasses and sins. Not weak, not struggling, not partly compromised. *Dead.* *By nature children of wrath.* *By nature.* Paul names the condition, not just the conduct. The conduct flows from the condition. The condition is what every human being inherits from Adam.

This is the inheritance at its starkest. The last chapter watched Adam and Eve die the death God had warned of, cut off from His presence and shut out from the tree of life. That separation is the very state we are born into. Not neutral, not innocent, not waiting to make our own clean start. We arrive already on the far side of the distance Adam opened, born of him, sharing his nature, separated from God before we have done anything at all. The condition Adam ended his garden life in is the condition every child of Adam begins life in.

Inherited Guilt and Personal Guilt Held Together

Two truths sit alongside each other here, and Scripture holds them both.

The first is that guilt comes through Adam. His fall was the human race's fall. His nature is now ours. *By one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.* That is real. That is what original sin means.

The second is that each person ratifies Adam's fall in their own life. Romans 3 makes the personal indictment plain.

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

Romans 3:10-12

All have turned aside. Not only Adam. Each person, with their own will, in their own moments of decision, has chosen the same self-preference Adam chose, and has done so countless times. The guilt that came through Adam is also a guilt each person has earned themselves, by their own choices, in their own lives.

Scripture holds both together. Guilt by inheritance. Guilt by personal ratification. The first explains the universality of the condition. The second explains the personal accountability that comes with it. Neither cancels the other. Both are real. Both are part of what it means to be a fallen human being.

This matters pastorally as well as doctrinally. Anyone who has tried hard to be better and has failed knows, in their honest moments, that the problem is older than any particular wrong choice. There is something in the heart that keeps producing wrong choices even when the person genuinely wants better. That something is what

Scripture is naming when it talks about the condition Adam left behind. Recognizing it for what it is, the inheritance of a fallen humanity, is the first step toward needing the kind of help that only Christ can give.

The Direction of the Argument

What Romans 5 holds out in the same breath as the bad news is the good news. The one man whose act ruined the human race is matched by the one man whose act saves it. The pattern of the problem, one man standing for many, is the very pattern of the answer.

For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

Romans 5:15

Much more. Paul puts the weight on the side of the gift. Adam's fall brought death to many; Christ's gift brought grace to many *much more*. The mechanism of salvation answers the mechanism of the fall. The book will get to this when it gets to the cross. For now, hold the half of the picture this chapter has put in place. The fall is real. The inheritance is real. The condition is the human inheritance from Adam, and every honest reading of one's own heart confirms it.

Chapter 1 said sin is the absence of godly love. This chapter says that absence was inherited. The heart that does not love God as it should and does not love its neighbor as itself was not made that way at creation. It was made for love. Adam's fall is what turned it inward. From him forward, every human heart has been born with the same inward turn already in place.

But the God who is love did not leave the story there. From the day the gates of Eden closed behind Adam, He has been at work to bring His people back to Himself. He did not abandon the race that abandoned Him. The same chapter that records the curse records the first promise of a deliverer.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15

That promise of one who would crush the serpent was only the beginning. Everything that follows, the covenant with Abraham, the rescue out of Egypt, the law, the prophets, the long wait for a King, is God moving toward us across the distance our sin had opened. Read from Genesis 3 onward, the whole Bible is the account of a God coming after the people who walked away from Him. Sin is the separation we are born into. Grace is God crossing it to get us back.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Sin is not just a behavior the individual happens to do. It is a condition the human race is in. Paul roots this in Adam, whose fall became the human race's fall by a representative act that brought a corrupted nature into every person born of him.
2. Scripture holds inherited guilt and personal guilt together. Adam's fall is real, and each person ratifies it in their own life by their own choices. Both matter. Both are part of being a fallen human being.

3. The doctrine matters because it sets the right size for the problem. Without it, sin is a behavioral issue that better effort could fix. With it, sin is a condition no creature can fix from inside itself. That is the diagnosis Christ came to answer.

Next, the heart. Jesus said it is where sin really lives. Outward behavior is the symptom; the heart is the seat of the disease.

Chapter 4

Sin in the Heart

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 4:23

The inheritance Adam left behind is not just a behavioral tendency. It lives somewhere. The Bible names the place. The heart.

This chapter is about the heart. About what Jesus taught about where sin actually lives. And about why surface-level moral effort, no matter how disciplined, cannot reach the place sin is operating from.

Jesus on the Heart

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took the commandments of the Old Testament and pressed them to the level of the heart, where those who read only the surface of the Law had stopped looking.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Matthew 5:21-22

Notice what Jesus is doing. He is not raising the bar arbitrarily. He is showing where the bar had stood all along. The commandment against murder was never just about not killing people. It was about the disposition of the heart that, given time and opportunity,

eventually produces murder. The anger. The contempt. The wish that the other person were dead. All of that, Jesus says, is where murder begins. The full act is the fruit of the heart attitude that nurses it.

A few verses later, He does the same with adultery.

*You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."
But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful
intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Matthew 5:27-28

Again, not arbitrary. The commandment against adultery was never just about not doing the act. It was about not feeding the heart that produces the act. Lust is adultery in seed. The body has not done what the heart has already done.

This is one of the most uncomfortable teachings in Scripture, and it is uncomfortable because it works. Actions can be managed if a person tries hard enough. The heart goes where it goes, often without the person's permission. And Jesus says what the heart does in the dark is what God sees.

The Word Goes Where No One Else Can

Hebrews names what Scripture does to the heart when it is read honestly.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints

and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

Read what the word does. It pierces. It divides soul from spirit. It discerns thoughts and intentions. The Greek word translated *discerning* is *kritikos*, meaning able to judge or sift. The word of God sifts and judges what is going on inside the human heart, in places the person themselves cannot see clearly.

The next verse follows naturally.

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:13

The heart is naked before God. Not the public-facing self. The actual self. The heart with all its hidden motives, its quiet preferences, its secret resentments, its undisclosed lusts. Nothing is hidden. Every thought, every attitude, every motive is open before God.

This is sobering. It is also clarifying. It means God cannot be managed by managing a reputation. He cannot be fooled by outside behavior. He cannot be earned by performing the role of a good person. The performance does not reach where He looks. He looks at the heart. And He has to be dealt with there, not at the surface.

Words Show What the Heart Holds

If you want to know what is actually in your heart, Jesus says listen to your own mouth.

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

Matthew 12:34-35

Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Your speech is never only speech. It carries up whatever your heart is full of. Let a heart be full of love, gratitude, and trust in God, and the words will show it. Let a heart be full of bitterness, pride, and self-interest, and the words will show that too, however carefully the person tries to keep it hidden.

This is why managing your words will never be enough on its own. You can guard them for a while, but sooner or later the heart says what it holds. A tree is known by its fruit, and the fruit only changes for good when something changes in the root.

Listen to your own words over the coming days. Not to police them, but to learn from them. What are they telling you about what your heart is actually full of? The complaints. The criticisms. The way you talk about other people when they are not in the room. The way you talk about yourself. The way you talk about God. Each is a window. Each shows something true about the disposition underneath.

The Heart Is Deceitful

The heart is not a safe witness about itself. Jeremiah's blunt phrase still stands.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17:9

Deceitful above all things. And the deceit cuts both ways. It deceives others, and it deceives the heart about itself.

This means that the question *am I doing well spiritually?* asked of the heart alone is asked of the worst possible witness. The heart will report back what the person wants to hear. It will minimize real sins and magnify the sins of others. It will explain why this particular pride is not really pride, why this anger was justified, why this unkindness was the other person's fault. It will give a confident answer that is mostly wrong.

This is why Scripture and the Spirit are needed to do the work the heart cannot. The word, read honestly, names sins the heart was hiding. The Spirit, given to believers, presses into the conscience and surfaces what was being kept quiet. Without these, a person can live a whole life inside a story about themselves, one the heart has shaped to be kinder than the truth would have been.

David, who knew his own heart's capacity for self-deception, prayed for the only kind of self-knowledge that ever works.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalms 139:23-24

This is the prayer of a man who knew he could not trust his own assessment of himself. He asked God to search. To try. To see. To lead. The work has to come from outside the heart, because the heart is not safe to leave in charge of evaluating itself.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Sin lives in the heart, not just in behavior. Jesus said murder begins as anger and adultery begins as lust. The body acts out what the heart has already done.
2. The word of God reaches places no human evaluation can. It pierces, divides, and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Reputation does not reach where God looks. Only honest exposure to His word does.
3. The heart cannot be trusted as a witness about itself. It is deceitful above all things. The kind of self-knowledge a person actually needs comes from God's word and God's Spirit, not from a confident sense that everything is fine.

Next, we look at a particular form of sin in the heart that has confused Christians since the first generation. Even after conversion, sin still resides in the believer. John Owen wrote a whole treatise on it. The chapter that follows works from his diagnosis.

Chapter 5

Indwelling Sin

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

Romans 7:14

There is a sentence in Paul's letter to the Romans that has confused and clarified Christians in equal measure for two thousand years.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Romans 7:19

Paul is writing as a Christian. He is not describing what his life was like before Christ. He is describing what his life is like now, as an apostle, as a man indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as someone who has known the Lord and walked with Him for years. He writes it in the present tense, and he means the present. And what he says is this: there is something in me that keeps doing what I do not want, and not doing what I do want.

This chapter is about that something. About what Paul says it is. About what John Owen, who wrote more carefully about indwelling sin, said it was. And about why understanding it is essential to staying sane in the Christian life.

What Paul Names

Paul does not soften the diagnosis.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

Romans 7:21

A law. Not a single act. Not an occasional slip. A working principle, a recurring pattern, an internal force that comes back the moment a believer tries to walk forward. Paul does not say sin is gone in the believer. He says it has become a law inside the believer, a law of sin, that pushes against the new desire of the renewed heart.

A few verses earlier he had been even sharper.

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.

Romans 7:18

Read the careful wording. Paul does not say there is nothing good in him at all. In the same sentence he says he has the desire to do what is right, and that desire is real, and it is his. What he says has no good in it is his flesh. *Nothing good dwells in my flesh.* Not *not much*. Nothing. He is simply telling the truth about what he finds when he looks inside. The indwelling sin that was born of Adam, and is not yet undone in him, offers him nothing good to work with. Whatever good he does comes from somewhere else, from the new nature, the Spirit's work, the renewed heart. The flesh contributes nothing.

Owen on What Indwelling Sin Is

John Owen's treatise on indwelling sin is one of the great pastoral works of the Christian tradition. He spent years on it. He read his own heart with brutal honesty and named what he found there with a clarity that has stayed with believers for three hundred and fifty years.

His core claim is that indwelling sin is not just a flaw to be edited around. It is a *law*, an active working principle inside the believer.

It is a powerful and effectual indwelling principle, inclining and pressing to actions agreeable and suitable to its nature.

— John Owen

Read what Owen is saying. Indwelling sin is *powerful*. It is *effectual*, meaning it actually works, it actually accomplishes what it inclines toward. It is *inclining and pressing*. It does not sit quietly. It is constantly pressing the believer toward actions that match its own nature. And its nature is set against God.

Owen pressed the diagnosis further. The character of the principle Paul calls a law of sin, Owen said, is one thing above all. Enmity.

It is not only an enemy, for so possibly some reconciliation of it unto God might be made, but it is enmity itself, and not capable of accepting any terms of peace.

— John Owen

This is sober. An enemy is something a person could possibly come to terms with. Negotiate with. Find a compromise with. Owen says indwelling sin is not an enemy in that sense. It is *enmity itself*. The thing that opposes God at the deepest level of what it is. There is no peace treaty to be made with it. There is no point in the Christian life

at which sin in the believer becomes friendly with God or even neutral toward Him. Until the day the believer dies, the thing inside them that Paul calls *the flesh* is, by its very nature, at war with the God they love.

Owen pressed even further. Even when sin is mortified, even when it is being put to death by the Spirit, its nature does not change.

*Mortification abates of its force, but does not change its nature.
Grace changes the nature of man, but nothing can change the
nature of sin.*

— John Owen

Grace remakes the believer. The believer is a new creature, born of God, given a new heart, given the Spirit, set free from sin's reign. All of that is true. But the residual flesh in the believer, the indwelling sin Paul names in Romans 7, is not transformed by grace into something better. It is fought against, weakened, mortified. Its force is abated. Its nature is the same. Until glory.

Its Seat Is the Heart

Where does indwelling sin live? Owen's answer is the same as chapter 4 of this book. In the heart.

This goes further than chapter 4 did, though. Owen names the heart not just as a place where sin sometimes shows up. He names it as the *seat* of indwelling sin, the place it occupies and operates from. Until the heart is fully renewed in glory, it is where the principle of sin still has a home.

This is why surface management does not work for the believer any more than it works for anyone else. A believer does not have a sin problem only in their behavior. A believer has a sin problem in the

place behavior comes from. Until the heart itself is dealt with, the surface will keep showing what the heart is full of.

Paul cries out at the end of Romans 7 with the question every believer eventually asks.

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

Romans 7:24

Then he answers it.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 7:25

The deliverance is real. The deliverance is Christ. The deliverance has begun and will not be finished until the believer sees Him. In the meantime, the war continues. Owen wrote about it because Paul wrote about it. Both refused to pretend it was over.

What This Does Not Mean

Three guardrails before this chapter closes.

It does not mean that nothing has changed for the believer. It has. Paul is just as clear about this. The old self has been crucified with Christ.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

Romans 6:6

And sin's reign over the believer has been broken.

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:14

Sin no longer reigns. The believer is not under sin the way the unbeliever is.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

The verdict has changed.

It does not mean that sin is now harmless. It is still sin. It still grieves God. It still damages the believer and the people around the believer. Believers do not get a pass on their indwelling sin. The call is to put it to death, by the Spirit, every day. Romans 8:13 is unflinching: *if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*. The fight is real, and the fight is required.

It does not mean despair. Owen, of all people, was not in despair when he wrote about indwelling sin. He was honest. He named the enemy. He charted its tactics so believers could fight it with their eyes open instead of being defeated by what they did not understand.

Hold the distinction Owen drew. Sin indwells the believer, but it does not reign over the believer. That distinction is the difference between Romans 7 and Romans 6. The believer struggles. The believer does not lose.

This is the residue of what Chapter 1 named. The lens of the whole book is that sin is the absence of godly love. Indwelling sin is that absence still operating in a heart God has begun to remake. The fight

is the fight to love rightly in a soul that still carries the old pull toward not loving.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Sin remains in the believer after conversion. It does not reign, but it indwells. Paul wrote Romans 7 about his own present experience as an apostle. The believer who still struggles is not less Christian for the struggle.

2. Indwelling sin is, in Owen's diagnosis, a *law*. An active working principle. And its character is *enmity itself*, not negotiable, not capable of peace with God. Even mortified, its nature does not change.

3. The seat of indwelling sin is the heart. Surface management does not reach it. Only the Spirit, given to believers, can put the deeds of the body to death. The next chapter looks at how indwelling sin actually operates, the tactics Owen identified, the deceit and power by which it works against the soul.

Chapter 6

The Deceit and Power of Sin

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 3:13

The last chapter named what indwelling sin is. This one is about how it works.

Indwelling sin is not passive. It is not a regrettable inclination that sits quietly waiting for a stronger believer to come along. It operates. It has tactics. It has a method. And the method Owen kept coming back to, the one he said sin uses above all others, is deceit.

This chapter follows Owen's analysis. Two parts. The deceit, first. And then the power, which only takes hold once the deceit has done its work.

Why Deceit Comes First

Owen made a careful distinction. Sin in the believer operates in two ways. By *power*, meaning straightforward force, pushing the soul toward what it does not want. And by *deceit*, meaning misrepresentation, hiding the truth, making sin look like something it is not.

Between the two, deceit is the more dangerous. Power can be resisted once it is named. A believer who knows they are being pulled toward a particular sin can stand against it, call on the Spirit, run from

the temptation. Deceit is different. Deceit works by getting the mind to misread the situation in the first place. Before the believer even knows there is a fight to win, the ground has been ceded.

Owen put the principle starkly.

The life of temptation lies in deceit. So that in the business of sin, to be effectually tempted, and to be beguiled or deceived, are the same.

— John Owen

To be effectually tempted and to be deceived are, in the sin's actual operation, the same thing. The moment sin succeeds in pulling a believer toward what is wrong, deceit has already done its work. The believer has been made to see the situation in a way that makes sin look reasonable, harmless, justified, or worth the cost. The deceit always runs ahead of the act.

This goes back to Genesis 3. The serpent did not overpower Eve. He talked to her. He put a question in her mind about what God had said. He suggested God was holding out on her. By the time she reached for the fruit, she was already deceived. The act was the visible step. The deception was the foundation underneath it.

How Sin Deceives

Owen broke the mechanics of deceit down into a sequence. Sin, he said, follows the pattern James names in his letter.

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James 1:14-15

Lured. Enticed. Conceived. Born. Finished in death. James names a process. Owen mapped sin's tactics onto each stage.

The first step is the mind. Owen kept saying that the mind is the eye of the soul, and that whatever takes the mind will eventually take the will and the affections. Sin's first move is to draw the mind away. To present the situation in a particular light. To make the consequences smaller than they are. To make the rewards larger than they are. To put God further from the picture so the situation can be evaluated as if His word and His character were not in the room.

It consists in presenting to the soul, or mind, things otherwise than they are, either in their nature, causes, effects, or present respect to the soul.

— John Owen

Read what Owen is saying sin does. The act looks smaller than it is. The cost looks farther off than it is. The pleasure looks more satisfying than it will turn out to be. The God it is offending looks less attentive than He actually is. None of this is overt. It is a quiet adjustment of the picture, made just before the decision, that makes sin look like the reasonable thing to do.

Then the affections engage. The mind has been moved; now the heart wants the thing the mind has misread. The desire that was vague becomes specific. The thing being considered becomes the thing being craved. Owen called this the enticing.

Then the will consents. What the mind has been deceived into seeing and the affections have been drawn toward, the will agrees to. Conception. Sin is now committed in the inner person. The visible act is only a step away.

Then the act. Then, as James said, when sin is fully grown, death.

Notice how much of this happens before the visible sin. By the time anyone could see the believer doing something wrong, the deceit has already moved through three faculties of the soul. Mind. Affections. Will. The visible act is the last step in a chain that began far earlier, in a place no one else could see.

Sin Works by Degrees

Owen made another observation that has saved many believers from despair. Sin does not usually try to take the whole thing at once. It works by degrees.

To hide and conceal ends, to proceed by steps and degrees, to make use of what is obtained, and thence to press on to further effects, is the true nature of deceit.

— John Owen

Sin hides its ends. It does not show you, on the first day, where the path it is putting you on will end. It shows you one small step. Then, once you have taken that step, it uses the ground it has gained to ask

for the next step. Each step looks small on its own. The cumulative direction is what does the damage.

This is why the small compromises matter. Not because the small compromise is the great sin. Because the small compromise is the foothold from which the next thing is asked, and the next, and the next, until a believer who would never have gone the whole way at the start has gone the whole way without ever feeling like they crossed a clear line.

A believer awake to this can spot it early. The first small ask is the place to stop. Not the fifth. The fifth was always the goal, but the fifth was reached because the first was conceded.

The Power, Once Deceit Has Done Its Work

What about Owen's other category? The *power* of sin?

Owen used the word *power* to describe what happens once the deceit has run its course. Once the mind has been drawn off, the affections engaged, the will consented, sin no longer has to persuade. It compels. The believer at that point can feel the pull toward sin as something pressing on them with real force, not as a quiet suggestion. This is what Paul names when he speaks of the law of sin at work in him.

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.

Romans 7:23

The captivity is what deceit has built up to.

The right response to indwelling sin's power is not just to fight harder at the point of the act. By the time sin is pulling with full power, the believer is already in serious trouble. The right response is to fight earlier. To fight where the deceit was working. To recognize the first move sin makes on the mind, and to refuse the misreading of the situation before it has moved into the affections.

This is the practical importance of Owen's diagnosis. Believers who learn to recognize the deceit can intercept sin before its power gathers. Believers who only ever notice sin once it is already pulling with full force are fighting at the worst possible point. The Spirit, the word, prayer, and honest community all serve the same end. They are the means by which the believer's mind is kept clear so deceit cannot succeed.

What This Looks Like in Practice

You wake up tired. Before you have done anything else, your mind is already drifting toward a private thought, a quiet resentment, a justification for something you intend to do later. That is the first move of the deceit. Catch it there. Name it for what it is. Pray.

Or: a colleague says something at work that lands wrong. Your mind starts building a case against them in the background of the day, replaying the slight, sharpening the resentment, rehearsing what you would say if you ever said it. That is sin presenting things otherwise than they are. The colleague becomes a caricature. The slight becomes an injustice. The case builds. Catch it before it hardens. The longer you let it run, the more power it gathers.

Or: there is someone you keep finding reasons to talk to, someone who is not your spouse. A message from them comes in, and before you have typed a word, your mind has already told you it is innocent.

Just friendly. Just a little warmth in a long day. No one is being hurt. That is the first move, and it is not the flirtatious reply you are about to send. It is the quiet verdict that the reply would be harmless. That is the moment to refuse the misreading. Once the affections engage, the will follows. Once the will consents, the reply is sent, and the line you said you would never cross is a little closer.

The pattern across all three is the same. The fight is on the mind first. The mind is where deceit lays its first foothold. Believers who can recognize the early moves are believers who win more battles than they lose. Believers who only fight at the visible act are usually fighting too late.

This does not require an elaborate practice. It requires honest attention. The mind has to be watched. The day has to be prayed through. The word has to be in the heart so the Spirit has something to bring to mind in the moment of pressure. None of this is dramatic. All of it is real.

What This Calls For

Indwelling sin is real. Its method is deceit followed by power. The believer's task is not to defeat sin once and for all in this life, which Scripture says will not happen until glory. The believer's task is to be awake. To watch the mind. To notice the first small misreadings sin tries to plant. To stay close to the word that exposes them. To stay close to the Spirit who illuminates them. To stay close to other believers who can see what the deceived mind cannot.

This is exhausting work. Owen never pretended otherwise. He wrote about indwelling sin precisely because he knew honest believers would be exhausted by it and would benefit from understanding what

they were actually fighting. To know the enemy is a real form of strength.

It is also worth holding the book's lens here. If sin is the absence of godly love, then deceit is the mechanism by which love is pulled off course. The mind is talked into a misreading. The misreading makes self-love look like reasonable judgment. The reasonable judgment becomes the act. Watching the mind is, finally, the watchfulness of a love that wants to stay where it belongs.

The next two chapters set up what does the deeper work. The seriousness of sin against an eternal God. And the cross of the eternal Son, the only thing that has ever finally answered it.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Indwelling sin operates by deceit before it operates by power. Sin's first move is to misread the situation, hide the cost, shrink the offense, put God out of the frame. By the time the visible act happens, the deceit has already done most of the work.
2. Sin works by degrees. It does not ask for the whole thing on day one. It asks for one small step, then uses that step to ask for the next. The first concession is the foothold for everything that follows.
3. The right response is to fight where the deceit is working, not where the power has gathered. Watch the mind. Stay close to the word, the Spirit, and other believers who can see what a deceived heart cannot. The Spirit gives the strength; the believer applies the watchfulness.

Next, the weight of what sin actually is. The cost of an offense is set by the One offended. And every sin, traced honestly, is committed against the eternal God.

Chapter 7

The Weight of Sin

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:23

The question of how serious any particular sin is gets answered, in everyday thinking, by looking at the sin.

That sin was small. This one was big. That one hurt one person. This one hurt many. Sin gets weighed by visible damage, public consequences, its place on the list of things named as wrong. By those measures, plenty of sins look manageable. Plenty of them, evaluated by their visible cost alone, do not seem so bad.

This chapter is about why that way of measuring sin is exactly upside down.

The weight of an offense is not determined by the offense. It is determined by the One who has been offended. And every sin, traced honestly, is committed against the eternal God.

Against Whom?

When David sinned with Bathsheba, he wrote a psalm about it afterward. The psalm has been prayed by every generation of

Christians since. The line that stops me every time is the one where David names who his sin was really against.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Psalm 51:4

Against you only. This is striking. David's sin had clearly hurt other people. He had committed adultery with another man's wife. He had arranged that man's death in battle. He had used his position as king to abuse a household that trusted him. There were many victims. Bathsheba. Uriah. The soldiers under Uriah's command. The unborn child. The kingdom that watched its king sin in private and learned to do the same.

And yet David says *against you, you only*. Why?

Not because the other victims did not matter. They did. The harm was real. David is not denying that Bathsheba and Uriah were wronged. He is naming the deepest stratum of any wrong, the offense against the God whose image both the wronged and the wronger bear. The harm to others is real and serious. The offense to God is what gives the sin its full weight.

This is uncomfortable to absorb in a culture that thinks of sin mostly horizontally. Sin gets treated as only a thing done to other people. The Bible will not let it shrink that far. Every sin is also, and most deeply, a thing done to God. That is the dimension a horizontal-only account leaves out, and it is the dimension that gives sin its full weight.

The Wages of Sin

If sin is committed against an eternal God, what does an eternal God say sin earns?

Paul puts it in one sentence.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:23

The wages of sin is death. Not just physical death, though that is part of it. The death the verse names is the deeper, more total separation that comes when a creature persists in turning away from the source of its own life. To turn from the God who is love is to turn from the only source of true life there is. The wage that comes with that turning is the death of being separated from Him.

This is what God had told Adam in advance.

In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Genesis 2:17

And after Adam ate, what unfolded was not just physical death across the generations. It was a spiritual separation, an estrangement from the God Adam had walked with in the garden, a death that began on the day of the sin and worked its way out through every part of the human experience.

The wages of sin is death. Every sin earns this wage. Some sins seem small. The wage is the same. Because the offense, in the end, is against the same eternal God.

Why a Creature Could Not Pay

Once it is clear that sin is committed against an eternal God, it becomes clear why no creature could ever pay for it.

A creature lives a finite life. A creature can suffer finitely. A creature, even in death, can only give a finite thing, its own bounded life, bounded sufferings, bounded existence. None of that is enough to pay a debt sized by the eternity of the One offended.

This is what Charnock saw when he wrote about why only Christ could be our Savior.

Could our sins be perfectly expiated had he not an eternal divinity to answer for the offences committed against an eternal God? Temporary sufferings had been of little validity, without an infiniteness and eternity in his person to add weight to his passion.

— *Stephen Charnock*

Read it slowly. *Offences committed against an eternal God.* That is the size of the debt. *Temporary sufferings had been of little validity.* No finite suffering, no creature's death, no merely human sacrifice, would have been able to cover what an eternal God had been offended by. *An infiniteness and eternity in his person to add weight to his passion.* The only sacrifice that could have paid the debt was a sacrifice that came from someone whose own being was infinite and eternal. Only God Himself, in flesh, could have done what the cross did.

This is why the doctrine of sin is inseparable from the doctrine of Christ. The Christ Christians worship is not a teacher who happened to die. He is the eternal Son who took flesh in order to bear the eternal

weight of human sin against an eternal Father, in a sacrifice whose value was sized by the infinity of His own Person.

Strip the eternity of Christ and the cross becomes a sad story about a good man's death. Hold the eternity of Christ and the cross becomes the only possible answer to the problem this chapter is naming.

What This Should Do to Us

Three things this chapter should do.

First, it should sober any small view of sin. Scripture treats sin as a problem so large it required the eternal Son's life to settle. If God paid that much to deal with sin, sin is that much of a problem. The price tells the reader what the offense was.

Second, it should magnify what the cross actually is. The cross is not a generic religious symbol. The cross is the place where the eternal weight of sin was carried by the only Person who could carry it. Whatever familiarity has built up around the word *cross*, this chapter should clear away. The cross has eternity in it. It always has.

Third, it should make the next chapter feel urgent. This book has spent six chapters naming a problem. The problem is real. The problem is large. The problem is, by any human resource, completely unfixable. What is needed is a Savior who can do what no creature can do. The next chapter is about Him.

And it should sharpen the lens of the whole book. Sin is the absence of godly love. That absence is an offense against the God who is love. The weight of the offense is set by the weight of the love withheld, multiplied by the worth of the One owed that love. An eternal God is owed an eternal love. To withhold it is to incur a debt only an eternal Savior can pay.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. The weight of an offense is determined by the One offended. Every sin, no matter how small it looks, is finally an offense against the eternal God.

2. The wages of sin is death. Not just physical. The total separation that comes from turning away from the source of life itself.

3. A creature could not pay this debt. Only an eternal Savior could carry the weight of sin against an eternal God. That is why the cross had to be what it was.

Next, the cross. The only answer to sin that has ever existed.

Chapter 8

The Cross

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Seven chapters have named the problem. This chapter is the answer.

The problem, as Scripture has laid it out, is that sin is the absence of godly love, inherited from Adam, indwelling the human heart, operating by deceit and power, committed against the eternal God, with a wage no creature can pay. The answer to that problem is not self-improvement. It is not better discipline. It is not religion, more rules, harder effort. None of those reach where sin lives, and none of them can pay what sin earns.

The answer is a cross.

This chapter is about what happened there. About why a Roman execution outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago is the only answer the human race has ever been given to its sin. About why Christians have called it good news for two thousand years and will call it that for two thousand more.

The Lamb God Provided

Long before the cross, the Bible was pointing at it.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was told to sacrifice his son Isaac. He walked three days to the mountain. He built the altar. He bound Isaac. He raised the knife. And at the last moment, the angel of the Lord stopped him. Abraham looked up. Behind him, caught in a thicket, was a ram. A substitute. He sacrificed the ram in place of his son and gave the place a name.

So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

Genesis 22:14

That was a picture. A picture of what would happen on a mountain not far from there, two thousand years later. This time there was no ram caught in a thicket, and no angel to call out and stop it. This time the Father did not spare His own Son. The Lamb God provided for Himself, this time, was His Son. The substitute had arrived. The substitute was Christ.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking toward him at the Jordan, the first thing he said about Him was the line Genesis 22 had been waiting to be answered.

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

John 1:29

The Lamb of God. The Lamb God Himself provided. The Lamb whose death would take away the sin Genesis 3 had introduced. John knew.

The whole Old Testament had been pointing at this moment, and the moment had arrived.

He Was Pierced for Our Transgressions

The clearest Old Testament picture of what the cross would actually accomplish is in Isaiah 53. Written seven hundred years before Christ. Describing a Servant of the Lord who would come and suffer in the place of others.

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:5-6

Read every clause. *He was pierced for our transgressions.* Not for His own. He had none. He was pierced for ours. *He was crushed for our iniquities.* The weight of our wrongdoing came down on Him. *Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.* The punishment that should have fallen on us fell on Him, and our peace with God was bought by His suffering. *With his wounds we are healed.* What broke His body restored ours.

Then the verse the whole chapter turns on. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Every one of us. Gone our own way. And the Lord, the God who is wronged by our wandering, laid the iniquity on the One who was willing to bear it.

This is substitution. The Servant takes what we deserved. We get what He earned. The wounds belong to Him. The healing comes to us. The iniquity is ours. The chastisement is His. The peace is ours. He paid for it.

Peter, writing his first letter, picked up Isaiah 53 directly and applied it to Christ.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:24

He himself bore our sins. In His body. On the tree. The Savior Isaiah had seen was the One who hung on the wood for us. The substitution was real. The sins were real. The transfer was real. By His wounds, anyone who would receive Him would be healed.

While We Were Still Sinners

The most extraordinary thing about the cross is who Christ died for.

A human being, asked honestly, would only lay down their life for someone they loved deeply. A child. A spouse. A parent. The list of people anyone would actually take a bullet for is short, even on a good day, and almost everyone on it is someone who has loved them back. That is the limit of natural human love. It moves toward those who move toward it.

Paul says Christ did not die for that kind of person.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God

shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6-8

While we were still sinners. Not after we had cleaned up our act. Not after we had earned the favor. While we were still in the rebellion the previous chapters of this book have been describing. While we were still the kind of people who had gone our own way, loved ourselves more than God, broken both great commandments thousands of times. That is when Christ died for us.

This is the heart of the gospel. The love of God did not wait for us to make ourselves worthy. It came to us where we were. It found us in our rebellion. It died for us in our sin.

Athanasius, writing in the fourth century to a Church that was still working out what the cross meant, named the logic of it with a clarity that has never been improved on.

The Word, since it was not possible for him to die, as he was immortal, took to himself a body such as could die, that he might offer it as his own in the stead of all, and as suffering, through his union with it, on behalf of all.

— *Athanasius*

Read the argument. The Word, the eternal Son of God, in His divine nature could not die. He was immortal. Death had no claim on Him. But death had claim on us. The wages of sin is death, and we owed those wages. So the Word took to Himself a body, a real human body, a real human nature that could die. He did not set aside His divinity. He took on a humanity in addition to it. And in that human nature, He offered Himself in our place. *In the stead of all.* For us. The cross was

an act of substitution by the One whose divine nature could not die, but who took on a human nature that could, in order to die for us.

This is why the cross has the weight it has. The Person on it was eternal. The body on it was real. The substitution was actual. The sins it carried were yours and mine.

What the Cross Did

What did the cross actually do?

It paid the wages of sin. The death that the human race had earned by going its own way was paid by the One who had not earned it. Hebrews puts it this way:

He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Hebrews 9:26

The sin was *put away*. Not managed. Not minimised. Put away. Carried off. Removed from the believer's account.

It made peace with God. The relationship that had been broken since Eden, the estrangement between a holy God and a fallen people, was repaired by the blood of Christ. Paul writes:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1

The peace is real. The peace is permanent for those who receive it.

It opened the door to a new life. As Peter wrote, Christ bore our sins *that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*. The cross was not

just the answer to sin's penalty. It was the beginning of sin's defeat in the believer's life. Paul unpacks this at length in Romans 6:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Romans 6:5

The new life is real. The freedom is real. The struggle continues, but the dominion has been broken.

What You Do With It

The cross is not an automatic transaction.

It is received by faith. The Bible is clear about this. The sacrifice is sufficient for any sinner who will come to Christ, and its saving benefit is received by those who actually take Christ as their Savior.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:12

Receiving. Believing. Taking the substitute as your substitute.

If you have already done this, the cross is yours. The sin you have spent the last seven chapters reading about is, in Christ, already covered. You stand before God not in the righteousness you could never produce but in the righteousness Christ gave you when you received Him. Sin's wages have been paid. The verdict has been entered.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

If you have not yet done this, the offer is still open. The Lamb God provided is the Lamb who can be received. The substitute is waiting to be taken as a substitute. You do not have to fix yourself first. The cross is for sinners. That is the only kind of person it has ever been for. *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Hold the lens of the whole book at the cross. Sin is the absence of godly love. The cross is what godly love does when its object has stopped loving back. The God whose nature is love did not match our withdrawal with His own. He sent His Son. He poured the wages of unlove onto the only One who had never failed to love. He bought us back at His own cost. The cross is not just the answer to sin. It is the love of God spent in the open, for people who had stopped loving back.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. The cross is the only answer to sin that has ever existed. Self-improvement does not reach where sin lives. Better discipline does not pay what sin earned. Only Christ in our place could do both.
2. The cross was real substitution. Christ bore our sins in His body on the tree. The iniquity that was ours was laid on Him. By His wounds, those who receive Him are healed.

3. The cross is sufficient for any sinner who comes to Christ, and is received by faith. Receiving Christ is the way the sacrifice becomes yours. The offer is open to anyone, today.

Next, two chapters on what the cross asks of the person who receives it. First, repentance, the turning that receives Christ and the posture that stays. Second, mortification, the daily fight against the sin that still indwells, drawn from John Owen's treatise on putting sin to death by the Spirit.

Chapter 9

Repentance

Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.

Acts 3:19

The cross is what God did. Repentance is the human turning that receives it.

This chapter is short, because the call is short. The eternal Son paid for sin in His own body. The offer is held out to every person who will take it. The way you take it is repentance and faith. This chapter is about the first of those two, the turning.

Repentance is one of the most misunderstood words in Christian vocabulary. It gets reduced to feeling bad. It gets confused with religious guilt. It gets treated as the price you pay before God will accept you. None of those are what Scripture means.

What Repentance Is

The Greek word translated *repent* through the New Testament is *metanoia*. It is built from two roots. *Meta*, after or beyond. *Noia*, mind. A change of mind. But Scripture fills the word out well past its roots. It carries the Old Testament picture of turning back to God, so it always means more than a private mental adjustment. It is a change

of mind that turns into a change of life, a reorientation that starts in the heart and works out through the whole person.

Paul names the same thing when he tells believers how the new life is carried on.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

Repentance is where that renewal begins, the mind turning from the world's way of seeing to God's. And it does not stop at conversion. The mind goes on being renewed, day after day, as the believer keeps turning back. The change of mind that *metanoia* names is both the first turn and the lifelong reshaping that follows it.

John the Baptist preached repentance before Jesus began His public ministry. Jesus began His own preaching with the same word.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

Mark 1:15

Repent. Believe. Two acts, named together. Repentance is the turning. Faith is the receiving. The two are inseparable. A person who repents without believing is just guilty. A person who claims to believe without repenting has not actually believed. Scripture holds the two together as the one response to the gospel.

Paul preached the same thing to the Athenians on Mars Hill.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Acts 17:30

Commands. Not invites. Not suggests. *Commands.* Repentance is not optional for those who hear the gospel. It is the only response that fits what the gospel is. The eternal Son has died for your sin. The Father has accepted the sacrifice. The Spirit is offering the grace. The only fitting response is to turn from the sin and turn to the Christ who paid for it.

When the first hearers of the gospel asked Peter what they should do, his answer joined repentance to baptism.

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:38

Baptism is the God-appointed sign that belongs with that turning. Peter put it this way.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 3:21

In the New Testament, repentance, faith, and baptism belong together; baptism is the normal, commanded response of those who come to Christ. And the turning does not stop there. Those who have come to Him go on believing and repenting for the rest of their lives.

What Repentance Is Not

Three things repentance is not.

First, repentance is not just feeling bad. Many people feel bad about their sin without ever turning from it. Felt bad about the lying, then lied again. Felt bad about the bitterness, then nursed it back to full strength. Felt bad about the betrayal, then continued in the pattern that produced it. Feelings without turning are not repentance. They are remorse, which is a real thing but a different thing.

Paul makes the distinction sharply in his second letter to the Corinthians.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Two kinds of grief. Worldly grief is the grief of being caught, the grief of consequences, the grief of feeling exposed. It does not produce repentance. It produces self-protection and despair. Godly grief is the grief of having grieved God. It produces the kind of repentance that turns the heart toward the Savior and stays turned. The two feelings can look identical from the outside. The fruit shows which one is which.

Second, repentance is not earning forgiveness. It does not pay for the sin. The cross has already paid for the sin. Repentance is not a price the human side adds to make the cross sufficient. The cross was sufficient before the human did anything. Repentance is the empty-handed receiving of what the cross has already accomplished. It is the act of letting go of the sin so the gift can be taken with both hands.

Third, repentance is not a one-time event for the believer. The initial turn at conversion is real. Scripture also describes repentance as the ongoing posture of the Christian life. Believers go on repenting, daily, for the indwelling sin that chapters 5 and 6 named. Every time a believer notices the heart drifting and turns back, that is repentance. Every time the Spirit shows the conscience something it had been hiding and the believer agrees with God about it, that is repentance. Initial repentance brings a person into the Christian life. Ongoing repentance is how the Christian life is walked.

What Repentance Looks Like

In one sense the substance of repentance is simple. The heart agrees with God about its sin. It says what God says about it. It calls it what He calls it. It stops defending it.

David's psalm after Bathsheba is the model.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my
sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

Psalms 51:1-3

Read what David does. He asks for mercy on the basis of God's *steadfast love*. He asks for the transgressions to be blotted out. He owns the sin. *My transgressions. My sin.* He does not blame Bathsheba. He does not blame the situation. He does not blame the position of king that put the temptation in his way. He owns what he did. He stops defending it. He throws himself on the mercy of the God he has offended.

That is the posture of repentance. Honesty about the sin. Trust in the mercy. Turning from the one toward the other.

It usually involves three things at once. A recognition of what was done and what it was: not a small thing, not a justifiable thing, but a sin against God. A genuine grief that the sin grieved Him: not just the grief of consequences, but the grief named in 2 Corinthians 7. A turning away from the sin and toward the Savior: not just a vow to do better, but a deliberate handing of the sin to the only One who can deal with it.

The Connection to the Lens of This Book

If sin is the absence of godly love, then repentance is the turning back toward the love that was missing. The heart that was turned in on itself turns out toward God. The heart that had stopped loving turns to receive the One who never stopped loving it. Repentance is, in its substance, the act of love coming back into its proper place.

This is why repentance and faith always go together. Faith is the receiving of the Savior as Savior. Repentance is the abandoning of everything that has been preferred to Him. The two motions are one motion in two directions. Turn from. Turn to. You cannot do one without the other. A believer turning from sin is, in the same act, turning toward Christ. A believer turning toward Christ is, in the same act, turning from the sin that had been preferred.

This is why God commands repentance everywhere. He is not commanding misery. He is commanding the return of the heart to its true home. The God who is love calls His people back to love. Repentance is how they come.

Where We Are

Three things from this chapter matter for what comes next.

1. Repentance is the human turning that receives the cross, the repentance and faith that Jesus joined together in Mark 1:15. The two motions are inseparable.

2. Repentance is not feeling bad, earning forgiveness, or a one-time event. It is the turning of the heart away from sin and toward God. It happens at conversion and continues for the rest of the Christian life.

3. In the lens of this book, repentance is the heart's love returning to where it belongs. Sin is the absence of godly love. Repentance is the turning that brings love back to its right object.

Next, the final chapter. The believer who has repented and believed lives the rest of their life in a daily fight against the sin that still indwells. John Owen called it *mortification*. The closing chapter is about how it is done.

Chapter 10

Mortification

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.

Colossians 3:5

This is the last chapter, and it is about the believer's daily work.

The cross has been received. Repentance, the turning of the heart, has begun and continues. What remains is the fight with the sin that still indwells, the law inside that Romans 7 named, the deceit and power that chapter 6 charted. Scripture's command for that fight is to put sin to death, the killing of sin in the believer by the Spirit. It has long been called *mortification*.

John Owen wrote a whole book on this, the famous treatise from 1656 whose opening line has carried through three hundred and fifty years of Christian reading.

Be killing sin or it will be killing you.

— *John Owen*

There are no neutral days in the Christian life. Either sin is being killed, or sin is killing. There is no third option of leaving sin alone and getting on with life. Sin is a law. Sin is a working principle. Sin is at war with God in the believer's heart. The believer is called to fight back.

What Paul Said

Owen's treatise was an exposition of one verse.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:13

The Greek verb for *put to death* is the source of the older English word *mortify*. To mortify sin is to kill it. Not just resist it. Not just ignore it. Kill it. The image is violent because the task is real.

Notice the means. *If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body*. By the Spirit. Not by willpower. Not by gritted teeth. Not by religious effort. By the Spirit who lives in the believer. Mortification is the Spirit's work in the believer, applied through the believer's active cooperation. The Spirit works the killing. The believer cooperates by faith, prayer, the word, and the ordinary ways God has given for a Christian to walk with Him.

This is critical. A believer who fights sin in their own strength will lose. A believer who fights sin in the Spirit's strength, with the means God has given, will not.

What Mortification Is Not

Owen spent a whole chapter of his treatise on what mortification is *not*, before he would say what it is. The negatives matter. A great deal of well-meaning Christian effort goes into things Owen would not have called mortification at all.

First, mortification is not the utter destruction of a particular sin in this life. Owen wrote it directly.

To mortify a sin is not utterly to kill, root it out, and destroy it, that it should have no more hold at all nor residence in our hearts. It is true this is that which is aimed at; but this is not in this life to be accomplished.

— John Owen

The believer aims at the total destruction of sin. The believer does not, in this life, achieve it. The aim is the right aim. The achievement, in time, is partial. The total destruction waits for glory.

Second, mortification is not external conformity that leaves the principle unchanged. Owen had pastoral patience for the man who, under the eye of others, simply stopped doing the sin he had been doing while leaving the heart that produced it untouched. Patience, but no illusion about what had happened. A believer who hides a sin without killing it has not mortified it. They have hidden it. To his former iniquity, Owen said, the man has only added the new iniquity of hypocrisy.

Third, mortification is not an improved natural temper. Some people are by nature calm. Some are by nature gentle. Some are by nature steady. None of these natural traits, however admirable, is mortification. The phlegmatic man who has never been tempted to outbursts of anger has not mortified anger. He never had to. He has a different lust to mortify, perhaps spiritual pride at how steady he is, perhaps unbelief in the form of cold indifference. The work of mortification is required of every believer, in the specific sins each one's heart actually produces.

Fourth, mortification is not the diversion of one lust into another. Owen put it plainly.

A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted.

— John Owen

A man who used to give way to anger and now gives way to bitter sarcasm has not mortified anger. He has redirected it. A woman who used to give way to lust and now gives way to covetousness has not mortified lust. She has changed its object. The heart will find a new outlet for an unmortified disposition. Real mortification reaches the disposition, not just the particular expression.

Fifth, mortification is not occasional conquest in a moment of crisis. A believer who has just been frightened by some consequence of their sin will often resolve, in the heat of the moment, to be done with it. Owen had seen too many such resolutions to be impressed. The resolution that holds while the fear is fresh and collapses when the pressure lifts is not mortification. It is panic. Mortification is the work of long days, not the work of one frightened evening.

What Mortification Is

After the negatives, Owen put the positives in three parts. Mortification, he said, consists in three things.

The first is the habitual weakening of sin's power. The work of mortification is not to deal with sin once but to weaken its grip across time. *That it shall not, with that violence, earnestness, frequency, rise up, conceive, tumultuate, provoke, entice, disquiet, as naturally it is apt to do.* That is Owen's own catalogue of what sin does when it is strong in the heart. Rises up. Conceives. Tumultuates. Provokes. Entices. Disquiets. The work of mortification is to weaken each of those motions, day by day, until what once rose with violence rises

with less force, and what once came easily comes with more resistance.

Owen used an image worth holding. Sin in the believer, he said, is like a man nailed to the cross. At first the man struggles and strives and cries out with great strength. But as his blood and spirits waste, his strivings are faint and seldom, his cries low and hoarse, scarce to be heard. That is what mortification does to indwelling sin. It does not pretend to remove it. It nails it. Day by day, by the Spirit, the strivings get fainter.

The second is constant fighting and contending against sin. Mortification is not a single act. It is a daily war. Owen kept hammering on this. The believer who fights sin once and considers the matter settled is not a believer who mortifies sin. The believer who fights sin every day, who watches for it, who recognizes its first motions and refuses them, who keeps the conflict open and active, is the believer Paul is describing in Romans 8:13.

This means mortification involves the mind as much as the will. The believer has to know their own heart well enough to see where sin tries to begin. The analysis of sin's deceit and power in chapter 6 is the practical preparation for this. The believer who has learned what indwelling sin's tactics look like can see them earlier and meet them with prayer, with Scripture, with the Spirit's help, before they gather power.

The third is frequent success and conquest over particular sins. The visible result. Not the absence of struggle, but the visible weakening of particular sins over time. Owen called this *success*.

Frequent success against any lust is another part and evidence of mortification. By success I understand not a mere

disappointment of sin, that it be not brought forth nor accomplished, but a victory over it, and pursuit of it to a complete conquest.

— John Owen

Not just preventing the visible act, then. Pursuing the sin to a complete conquest. Hunting it. Cornering it. Refusing to leave it alive in the heart even after the immediate temptation has passed. The believer who walks this way will, over years, see real change. Sins that once dominated will weaken. Sins that once felt invincible will start to lose their grip. The change is not complete. The change is real.

The Spirit Does the Work

Owen's pastoral concern through the whole treatise was that believers not turn mortification into a self-effort program. Owen names the Spirit as the principal efficient cause of mortification, and he means it strictly.

All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit.

— John Owen

The Spirit is the principal cause. Not the helper. The cause. Without His work, every mortification scheme a believer might design will fail. With His work, even the most stubborn sin can be brought, in time, to a place of real weakness.

What the Spirit does, in mortification, includes opening the believer's eyes to the ugliness of the particular sin, holding the cross before the believer's heart so the price of sin stays visible, strengthening the believer's love of God so the alternative to sin is not just refusal but a

positive desire for what is better, and giving the believer the actual power to resist when the moment comes. None of that is the believer's own resource. All of it is the Spirit's.

The believer's part is cooperation. To stay close to the means the Spirit uses. To read Scripture honestly so the Spirit can apply it. To pray, because prayer is one of the means by which the Spirit's work reaches into the conscience. To stay in honest community with other believers who can see and name what the deceived heart cannot. To stop feeding what needs to die.

Without Despair, Without Delay

Two final guards.

The first is against despair. The work is slow. The work is long. The work is not complete in this life. None of that is grounds for despair. Romans 8:1 is still in force. The believer fighting sin is not fighting to earn standing. The standing was given at the cross, received by faith, settled. Mortification is the fight of a son in the Father's house, not the fight of a stranger trying to become a son. The verdict is already in. The work proceeds from grace, not toward it.

The second is against delay. Indwelling sin does not wait. It works while it can. Every day a believer leaves an unmortified sin alone is a day that sin grows stronger by being fed. Owen's opening line is not rhetoric. *Be killing sin or it will be killing you.* The fight is now. Not next week. Not after the next big decision. The first move of sin against the heart today is the place mortification starts.

Where We Have Come

This book began with a question. What is sin?

The answer, by Scripture's own diagnosis, is that sin is the absence of godly love. The condition was inherited from Adam, sits in the heart, indwells even believers, operates by deceit and power, weighs as an offense against the eternal God, and has only one answer in the whole history of the world. The eternal Son took flesh, bore the weight of sin in His body on the tree, and made peace with God for everyone who would receive Him. The reception is by repentance and faith, confessed in baptism. The believer who has received Him is free from condemnation, and is called, by the Spirit, to spend the rest of their life killing the sin that still indwells, while pursuing the love of the God who first loved them.

That is the diagnosis. That is the answer. That is the call.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

No condemnation. None. The believer is not under wrath. The believer is not on probation. The believer is not earning standing by their mortification. The standing was given freely, at the cross. The fight proceeds from there.

May the God who made you for love teach you to love Him with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself, in the strong, settled, everlasting grace of the only Savior who could ever deal with sin, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank You

If anything in this book helped you, the help did not come from me. It came from Scripture, from the older Christian voices I have leaned on, and ultimately from the Spirit of God who teaches His people through His word. I would be honored if this book has been part of that teaching for you. The works that shaped what I wrote are listed on the pages that follow.

If this book helped you, please leave a short honest review. It is what tells another reader, scrolling past a cover they have never seen before, that the book might be for them. You can leave that review at jqbotes.com/books/what-is-sin/review, or scan the code below.



And if you have not yet received the Savior this book has been talking about, the offer of Chapter 8 is still open.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:12

That includes you.

Yours in Christ, JQ Botes

Notes and References

This short section names the sources I drew on as I wrote and credits the older Christian authors whose work shaped much of my own thinking. Where I have quoted an author directly, the line is in italics and attributed in the chapter. Where I have built on an author's argument without quoting verbatim, I have named them in the chapter so you can follow up if you want to read more. Scripture quotations throughout the book are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

This book stands on the work of older Christians. None of the doctrine in it is original to me. The work of John Owen runs underneath the whole second half of the book; Stephen Charnock underwrites the chapter on the weight of sin; Athanasius of Alexandria underwrites the chapter on the cross. If anything here helps you, the credit belongs to them, the apostles, and the God who keeps preserving His word and His witnesses across the centuries.

The works listed below are all in the public domain and freely available from libraries, the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org), Project Gutenberg, and Internet Archive (archive.org). If you want to go deeper into any chapter, the works named here are where I would start.

Sources

John Owen, *Of the Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1668)

The Puritan classic on what sin still does in the believer's heart and how it operates. Chapters 5 and 6 of this book draw directly on Owen's analysis. Owen's treatises are widely reprinted under various titles; the Banner of Truth edition is the most accessible modern set.

Quotations used in this book:

- *"It is a powerful and effectual indwelling principle, inclining and pressing to actions agreeable and suitable to its nature."* — Chapter I. Quoted in Chapter 5.

- *"It is not only an enemy, for so possibly some reconciliation of it unto God might be made, but it is enmity itself, and not capable of accepting any terms of peace."* — Chapter IV. Quoted in Chapter 5.

- *"Mortification abates of its force, but does not change its nature. Grace changes the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of sin."* — Chapter IV. Quoted in Chapter 5.

- *"The life of temptation lies in deceit. So that in the business of sin, to be effectually tempted, and to be beguiled or deceived, are the same."* — Chapter VIII. Quoted in Chapter 6.

- *"It consists in presenting to the soul, or mind, things otherwise than they are, either in their nature, causes, effects, or present respect to the soul."* — Chapter VIII. Quoted in Chapter 6.

- *"To hide and conceal ends, to proceed by steps and degrees, to make use of what is obtained, and thence to press on to further*

effects, is the true nature of deceit." — Chapter VIII. Quoted in Chapter 6.

John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656)

Owen's earlier and shorter work on putting sin to death by the Spirit. Chapter 10 of this book follows Owen's three-part structure: what mortification is NOT, what it IS, and the role of the Spirit. The treatise runs under 100 pages in most editions and is worth the time. Banner of Truth or any reliable modern reprint will work.

Quotations used in this book:

- *"Be killing sin, or it will be killing you."* — Chapter II. The line for which the treatise is most often remembered. Quoted in Chapter 10.

- *"To mortify a sin is not utterly to kill, root it out, and destroy it, that it should have no more hold at all nor residence in our hearts. It is true this is that which is aimed at; but this is not in this life to be accomplished."* — Chapter V. Quoted in Chapter 10.

- *"A sin is not mortified when it is only diverted."* — Chapter V. Quoted in Chapter 10.

- *"Frequent success against any lust is another part and evidence of mortification. By success I understand not a mere disappointment of sin, that it be not brought forth nor accomplished, but a victory over it, and pursuit of it to a complete conquest."* — Chapter VI. Quoted in Chapter 10.

- *"All other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit."* — Chapter I. Quoted in Chapter 10.

Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (1682)

Two volumes. Each Discourse a sustained pastoral treatment of one attribute of God. Best modern reprint: Banner of Truth (2 volumes). For Chapter 7 of this book, see especially Discourse V (On the Eternity of God), Use 1, where Charnock makes the argument that an offense against an eternal God required an eternal Savior to settle it.

Quotation used in this book:

- *"Could our sins be perfectly expiated had he not an eternal divinity to answer for the offences committed against an eternal God? Temporary sufferings had been of little validity, without an infiniteness and eternity in his person to add weight to his passion."* — Discourse V, Use 1. Quoted in Chapter 7.

Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (c. AD 318)

The foundational Christian text on what it meant for the Word to take flesh and why the cross was the only possible answer to human sin. The translation quoted in this book is from the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. IV (Schaff/Wace, 1891), which is in the public domain. The C.S. Lewis-introduced modern translation (Penguin Classics) is in copyright but very readable; either edition will serve.

Quotation used in this book:

- *"The Word, since it was not possible for him to die, as he was immortal, took to himself a body such as could die, that he might offer*

it as his own in the stead of all, and as suffering, through his union with it, on behalf of all." — §20. Quoted in Chapter 8.

Further reading

If this book has been helpful and you want to go further on any of its chapters:

- For *Chapter 1 (What Sin Is) and the doctrine of God*: A.W. Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy* is a short, accessible modern treatment (still in copyright, but widely available).
- For *Chapter 3 (The Inheritance of Sin)*: Anselm's writings on original sin, and the relevant passages of Augustine, are the classical sources behind the doctrine as it has come down to the present.
- For *Chapter 4 (Sin in the Heart)*: read alongside the Sermon on the Mount itself (Matthew 5-7), preferably in one sitting.
- For *Chapter 7 (The Weight of Sin)*: Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why God Became Man," c. 1098) walks the same logic about why only an infinite Savior could pay for human sin against an infinite God.
- For *Chapter 8 (The Cross)*: beyond Athanasius (above), John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* and John Murray's *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* are widely regarded as the best modern treatments.
- For *Chapter 9 (Repentance)*: Thomas Watson's *The Doctrine of Repentance* (1668) is the classical Puritan treatment, short and warm.

Scripture references by chapter

All ESV.

- *Chapter 1, What Sin Is:* 1 Samuel 16:7; Revelation 21:8; 1 John 4:8; Matthew 22:37-40; James 4:17.

- *Chapter 2, The First Sin:* Genesis 2:16-17; Genesis 3:1-7; Genesis 3:12; Genesis 3:22-23; 1 John 2:16.

- *Chapter 3, The Inheritance of Sin:* Genesis 8:21; Genesis 3:15; Romans 5:12; Romans 5:19; Romans 5:15; Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 3:10-12.

- *Chapter 4, Sin in the Heart:* Proverbs 4:23; Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 5:21-22; Matthew 5:27-28; Hebrews 4:12-13; Matthew 12:34-35; Psalm 139:23-24.

- *Chapter 5, Indwelling Sin:* Romans 7:14; Romans 7:18-25; Romans 8:1; Romans 8:13; Romans 6:6; Romans 6:14.

- *Chapter 6, The Deceit and Power of Sin:* Hebrews 3:13; James 1:14-15; Romans 7:23.

- *Chapter 7, The Weight of Sin:* Romans 3:23; Psalm 51:4; Romans 6:23; Genesis 2:17.

- *Chapter 8, The Cross:* 2 Corinthians 5:21; Genesis 22:14; John 1:29; Isaiah 53:5-6; 1 Peter 2:24; Romans 5:6-8; Hebrews 9:26; Romans 5:1; Romans 6:5; John 1:12; Romans 8:1.

- *Chapter 9, Repentance:* Acts 3:19; Romans 12:2; Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Psalm 51:1-3.

- *Chapter 10, Mortification:* Colossians 3:5; Romans 8:13; Romans 8:1; Romans 7; Romans 6.