

Sinful Religion

[previously entitled “Man, Sin and the Search for God”]

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translated from French by the author

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Note: All quotes of Biblical passages are my own version, based on the original texts as well as comparisons of various translations in modern languages.

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This work deals with the same subject matter as “Two Gospels” but goes at it from a different angle. The two essays are thus complementary, each one making the subject a little clearer than the other one alone, by its way of presenting the material. The basic theme in both of them is the difference between “man's gospel” and the gospel of Jesus Christ (to use the terms from the sub-title of “Two Gospels”). “Two Gospels” should be available from the same sources as this text. If it is not, it can be downloaded for free from www.davidshutes.com.

Introduction

Edmund Burke said “Man is a religious animal.” Mark Twain later said the same thing. Right or wrong, religion is and always has been a major feature of human life. As the 21st century gets under way, the percentage of people on earth who believe in some sort of divinity is on the rise, and has been for about thirty years. It is now getting close to 90% of the people of the whole world. Despite his sin, mankind is indeed very interested in God.

Religion has sometimes inspired people to achieve great things—magnificent works of art, doing one's very best because that is what glorifies God, or a lifetime of dedication to helping the poor. But religion has also been the source of much suffering, as it has led to wars, persecution, intolerance of the worst kind, exploitation of other, and centuries of ignorance. Why is religion, which in theory ought to be a force for good, so often a force for evil?

It is because man, in his sin, has a very distorted conception of God. Many atheists pretend that men have simply created God in their own image and, oddly enough, they are not completely wrong. That doesn't mean that God would not exist without man to imagine him, but that the God that man imagines is indeed a creation of man's own outlook. The God that sinful man imagines is “made to measure” for what we want him to be. Man, deformed by sin, imagines God in a twisted way as well. The religions that man invents are thoroughly imprinted with man's sinful nature and sinful conception of God.

The big question in this whole area, then, is how we can understand what God is *really* like, both in what he is and in what he wants for us. That is not an easy task, since we constantly distort even the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make it into a religion that suits our sinful nature. The goal of this essay is to try to explain just as clearly as possible in what ways we do that, in order to be able to recognize “the world's gospel” even when it is disguised with terms and practices borrowed from the Bible.

From the very beginning, God has always called on man to follow him personally, to love him above all else, and to live in holiness. But almost from the beginning of the Old Testament, man has been busy deforming in his own mind the concept of who God is. Instead of walking with God in holiness, man turns God's message into a religion that is supposed to provide protection, health, deliverance from problems, success, and prosperity. This is not a problem that is limited to Christianity, either. It is in Christianity, of course, that the world's gospel disguises itself as something that the most closely resembles God's true message for mankind, but the same fundamental goals are to be found in all the religions that man invents. This is a much greater problem than simple disputes between different forms of Christianity, and in any case it is much, much older than Christianity.

Because of that, we will look at the situation at the very source, right at the beginning of the human race, in Genesis chapters 3 and 4. That will allow us not only to see what caused the problem for mankind in the first place, but also how that changed man's mentality and distorted his outlook on religion. At any other period in history, one might be tempted to think that what happened to religion was the result of the pressure of society. But at the beginning of Genesis, there was no sin-sick society to influence people. Instead, people made society – and religion – into what they wanted it to be. We will see in these chapters that what sinful man wanted from religion so long ago is not really very different from what he expects from it to this day.

We will start out, in Genesis 3, with the nature of sin. If salvation in Christ is supposed to be the solution to the problem of sin, we need to understand that problem if we want to apply the solution. All those who claim to be Christians talk about sin, but its true nature and the effects it has in man's mentality are rarely very clear in our thinking. Genesis 3 is not just the story about the moment when man chose to sin. It also helps us understand just why sin is so harmful and what has to be done in order to eliminate its effects.

After that, we will look at Genesis 4 and the person of Cain, in order to see what sinful man wants from God. We will see that that is perfectly in line with the twisted nature of sinful man that is seen in the preceding chapter. It should become clear that, in the vast majority of cases, the God that sinful man imagines is indeed a God that he has created in his own image.

Nevertheless, we won't stop there. We will finish up our consideration of the subject with a look at what God's true message is, based on what he himself has revealed. Beyond that, it will be up to everyone to make his or her own choice: Do you want the God of the Bible, or the God that sinful man has invented?

The underlying issue: the nature of man

A careful examination of the nature of man reveals some curious facts:

Start out with the fact that man's very nature allows him to choose. It is very possible that that is exactly what the Bible means when it says God created man "in his own image." The "image of God" obviously is not a question of looking like him physically, since God is spiritual. Nevertheless, while animals seem to act (as far as we can know) entirely on the basis of instinct and conditioning, man seems to be the only physical creature that can really choose. He is able to examine a situation, take into account his own personal desires, and make true choices that will have a real effect in how his life goes.

On the surface, that does not seem particularly surprising. We are so used to choosing all the time that we don't see anything strange about it. Nevertheless, it *is* strange. The reason for that is a bit complicated, but it is important.

In order to understand the problem with choices, let us illustrate the situation with a machine. Someone knows this machine inside-out, in every detail. He knows just what each piece is for, what it can do and what it can't do, and how to use it. He has a total mastery of every part of the machine.

Except for one.

There is one piece he doesn't know. Just one. He doesn't know what it is for, what it can do, or what it can't do. He doesn't know anything about that part.

That implies something very important. For all those other parts, that he thinks he "knows perfectly well," there is nevertheless something lacking: He doesn't know what relationship it might have with that unknown part.

There might not be any relationship at all. Maybe the unknown part doesn't do anything. But maybe the unknown part is a bomb, that at some point is going to destroy all the rest and thus change everything else, for all the other parts. Sure, that's not very likely, but it is at least a possibility, since he has no idea what this unknown part does. It is at least in the realm of possibility that it could change in some important way what he thinks he knows about all the other parts.

It is even possible – again, it is not very likely but since he doesn't know he can't rule it out – that the unknown part is not only a bomb, but a bomb that is going to explode as soon as the machine is set a certain way, or set that way a certain number of times. It may be that this guy who "knows his machine inside-out" could end up wrecking everything even if he never touches that part he doesn't know about, just by working with the parts he thinks he knows.

This illustration brings out a strange but very important principle where choice is concerned: Unless you know everything – absolutely *everything* – you don't know anything with certainty. The things you don't know could in fact have a huge effect on the things you think you know.

For example, I may set out for work some bright morning, without even thinking about it. I go to work every day, why wouldn't I do it today? I know the way, I know my car, I know my work, I can handle all that. So there is no reason to hesitate about the choice: I will go to work just as I usually do.

What I don't know is that there is a part in my car that is wearing out and that will break on the way, causing

a serious accident that will leave me paralyzed for life. Since I won't be able to continue working and will have to count of what help is available from social services, the decrease in income will have important repercussions on my family. It will affect what my kids will be able to do, where we can live, and a host of other things.

We have all heard about the “butterfly effect” which means that the slightest little change somewhere can change everything. (The term comes from meteorology – the science of long-term weather prediction is incredibly difficult because, as someone once put it, “the beating of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon can lead to the formation of a hurricane weeks later.) My apparently simple choice to go to work that morning can, because of this “butterfly effect,” change everything for a large number of people.

Of course, if you know absolutely everything, if there is not one single unknown that could possible disturb the way “the machine” works, you could make good choices. But without that kind of omniscience, you can only make choices that are at least partly based on ignorance. The most carefully thought-out decision *might*, at least potentially, turn out to be disastrous. And there is no way to prevent that unless you know everything.

And yet it is in the very nature of man not to know everything. It is not a defect, it is not a failing of some system that really ought to work better. Our knowledge is stored in our brains and the human brain has a finite capacity. Even the most educated, intelligent and careful people don't know everything and can't know everything. The human brain simply is not capable of storing omniscience; that's all there is to it.

It is thus rather curious, when you think about it, that man is made for choosing – that being able to choose is a fundamental part of his nature – when it is also part of his physical makeup that he simply cannot have all the information necessary (omniscience) to be sure he is choosing correctly.

How can you make right choices without knowing everything?

Contrary to what how it might appear, though, it is actually possible to make correct choices – to make choices that you can be absolutely certain are correct – without knowing everything. But three conditions have to be met – all three at the same time – for that to be possible:

- First of all, it is necessary for omniscience to exist. Even if *I* don't have it, *someone* has to have it. Otherwise, every choice is just an attempt, based on insufficient information, to guess what is the best way to proceed.
- Then, the person who does not know everything needs to be able to communicate with that omniscience. That communication must be able to be done easily, clearly, and at any moment – every time information is needed in order to make a decision, even one that seems very trivial.
- Finally, there must be complete confidence in the relationship. That means that the omniscience must be perfectly trustworthy, and also that the person depending on that omniscience must know that it is trustworthy, without the slightest doubt. All the information in the world, even if it comes from someone who knows everything, is not useful if you can't be sure that information is correct.

When all of that is put together, it brings to light a few more curious facts about man's makeup. In particular, it shows that man, by his very nature, is made for counting on omniscience. He is not made for functioning autonomously and he cannot function correctly as an autonomous entity. If he tries to do it, he will often make wrong decisions and sometimes make absolutely catastrophic decisions.

In simple terms, that means that man was made for living in a close relationship with God, the only one who is truly omniscient. By nature, man is made to be dependent on God rather than independent from God. It also shows that man cannot really profit from a relationship with God unless he is really sure of God's goodness.

Though it is not really our point here, these considerations give us a fairly strong indication that God exists

and that he is perfectly good. It would be mighty strange if man, in order to function correctly, needed something that does not exist. That would be like a machine that, in order to run right, needs a kind of fuel that does not and cannot exist. If that was the case, the designers would change the machine so that it can run on some kind of fuel that actually exists.

Evolutionary theory teaches us that every species evolves to fit its environment and that those individuals that are the best adapted to the environment are favored by natural selection. According to this theory, then, one would expect that a being which absolutely needs something that doesn't exist in order to function correctly would be eliminated. How then can we explain that man – with his fundamental need of God, of communication with God and of trust in God – continues to exist if there is no God who is good and who wants to have a close personal relationship with us? Though we can not say that that constitutes any kind of proof of God's existence, it is at least a very strong indication that it is very reasonable to believe that God does indeed exist.

The root problem of sin: Genesis 3:1-5

It is not easy to understand man's fundamental motivation without understanding man's fundamental *nature*. And the most basic point of man's nature is that man is not a “normal” being. He is distorted by sin. Understanding what sin is, and how it affects man's nature and mentality, are the primary subjects of Genesis 3. We will be looking at the entire chapter, from one end to the other.

When Satan asks Eve, in verse 2, if they have the right to eat from all the trees, she responds by telling him that there is only one tree that is off limits, because if they eat from that tree, they will die. In saying that, she is stating that even when God forbids them something, he does so for their good. Protecting someone from death is a demonstration of good intentions toward them.

Satan, however, told her that that was all wrong. “You certainly will not die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'” (verses 4 and 5). Now in a certain sense, Adam and Eve already “knew good and evil.” They knew what was good, because God had told them what they could do, and they also knew what was bad, because God had told them what they must not do. But they didn't know good and evil “like God.” God doesn't have anyone over him to tell him what is good and what is bad. He discerns them himself. That is not the case for human beings.

Satan is thus telling them that human beings can “move up” by eating that fruit, and become like God. He will no longer be dominating them; they will be able to decide for themselves what they ought to do and what they ought not to do. According to what Satan says, God did not forbid them to eat from that tree because he cared about what was good for them, but in order to protect his own position of dominion over them.

What is at stake here is enormous: Should man trust God, and God's goodness, by choosing to believe that he acts for our good, or not trust him and, as a result of that, refuse to submit to his direction? Obedience flows from trust (or from threats – but if “obedience” is nothing more than doing what you must because you are afraid of being punished, that is not true obedience, not obedience from the heart). The ultimate question here is thus one of trust more than one of obedience.

What follows in the text shows what Adam and Eve chose: They “declared their independence” from God. They no longer wanted to submit to his direction, because they no longer trusted his goodness completely. This lack of confidence in his goodness, and this independence from God, will be transmitted from generation to generation among their descendants and affect the entire human race to this day, as it says in Romans 5:12.

The effects of sin in man's relationship with God: Genesis 3:6-8

The relationship with God is the first area of man's life that is affected by sin. This relationship is fundamental to man's well-being since man, by nature, needs to be able to count on God. As we have seen, even without sin man does not know everything and cannot know everything. He thus does not have the information that is necessary to choose correctly. Only omniscience can guarantee that all the consequences of all the possibilities have been taken into account. A human being, even a perfect human being, cannot be omniscient; the human brain just isn't big enough to hold that much information. So man cannot function correctly if he is not dependent on God who alone is omniscient.

If man trusted God perfectly and thus lived his life depending perfectly on God, God would do all that is necessary for the good of man. In his infinite love and her perfect wisdom, God would care about us, watch over us, protect us, direct us and give us our reason for being. We would live in fellowship with him. That was what God intended for us when he created us, since it is the only way a finite creature – a being which cannot, by nature, possess omniscience – can know and do what is truly good, for himself or for those around him.

When man let himself be convinced that God does not always act for his good, that he shouldn't trust him blindly in every case, he really had no choice but to separate himself from God. Every part of what should have been his relationship with God is affected by that choice. The text shows us at least four aspects of the effect sin has in the relationship between God and man:

- First of all, though the text does not say so explicitly, we saw that the real underlying question in Satan's temptation was whether or not man could trust God. Since Adam and Eve chose to sin, that shows what they decided on that issue: Sinful man does not trust God fully. There are of course quite a few variations among sinners about trust in God, ranging from total animosity which manifests itself as open revolt, to a strong desire to have God in our lives (we will see further on, in looking at Genesis 4, just what *role* a sinner wants God to have in his life) in order to help us with his problems. But it will never be a complete trust without any reservations. In some part of sinful man's thinking, perhaps even at an unconscious level, we just aren't really convinced that everything God does, everything he wants for us, is what is best for us. At the very best, he is seen as overall well-intentioned but sometimes wrong. At the worst, sinful man sees God as evil and rejects him openly, as justification for his own choices. But one way or another, that trust is no longer there. Not enough, at least, to follow God unhesitatingly.
- “...The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom...” (beginning of verse 6). That means that humans are already deciding, on their own, what is good for them and what is not. Since they no longer trust God's goodness completely, they will no longer be depending on God for guidance for such decisions. At times they might do what God wants, but it will either be out of fear of punishment or because they can see for themselves the good reasons for doing it. But it will never be simply because they trust God. When trust in God is gone, depending on God for leadership has to go as well. Man may still want God's help in his life, but he no longer really wants God to be *God* in his life.
- “She took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (end of verse 6). Disobedience, also, is a result of breaking fellowship with God. If man no longer trusts God, if he decides for himself what he ought to do or not do, there will necessarily be times when he will not do what God wanted him to do. Without God's perfect wisdom, without God's perfect love to guide him, there will sometimes be disobedience. It is important to note, however, that although disobedience shows man's sin very clearly, it is not the root of it, it is not the whole nature of sin. The most fundamental aspect of sin is the refusal to want God to really have his rightful place as God in our lives, because of lack of trust in his goodness. Disobedience is an inevitable consequence of this lack of confidence, but it is not the cause of it.

- Man hides from God (verses 7 and 8). Adam and Eve are bothered about being naked, but there is absolutely no problem with a married couple being naked together. They are bothered about their nudity, though, because they feel too exposed, without protection. In fact, they are not hiding from each other, but from God. Then, when they hear God's voice, they realize that their fig leaves are a pretty ridiculous attempt to hide themselves, so they try something else by hiding among the trees. They clearly do not want to have the close, open relationship with God that they had before.

The Bible speaks of man being composed of “body, soul and spirit.” Without going into the debate about whether or not that constitutes two or three basic parts of man, the breaking of trust in God, the refusal to submit to God's guidance, and the end of the intimate relationship with God, all affect most clearly the area that can be called man's “spirit.” Man has totally turned away from what he was supposed to experience in the spiritual realm. Sin will affect all the other aspects of man's person and life, as we will see in what follows, but it starts out in the spiritual realm. This needs to be noted very carefully, in order to understand the rest.

The effects of sin in man's mentality: Genesis 3:9-13

Sin starts out as a spiritual problem. At its most fundamental level, it is man's refusal to live the relationship with God for which he was created, because he doesn't trust God. The breaking of this relationship, in turn, will radically transform man's mentality for the worse. When man refuses this relationship with God, he refuses to let himself be guided by God, and in particular by God's perfect wisdom and love. As a result, he becomes a deformed being in a number of ways, of which we can identify at least six in this passage:

- First of all, he is not at ease with himself, he is ashamed of what he is. That's why he is bothered about being naked. Why does he want to cover himself up? Because he feels exposed, and he isn't proud of what he is. Henceforward, every human being will have a deep problem with what he is. He will be trying by every possible means to cover up or compensate for his profound feeling of insufficiency. He doesn't want others – not God and not other human beings – to know what he is in the depths of his being, because he knows he isn't what he would like to be.
- Add to that the clear fact that if he is hiding from God, it is because he knows he hasn't acted the way he should have. His problem is not just with what *is*, but also with what he *does*. In addition to his shame he also has a problem of guilt. No human being can be truly honest with himself and, at the same time, proud of everything he does. Guilt destabilizes man as much as shame.
- There is a third uncomfortable feeling that marks man's thinking, the only one that is explicitly mentioned in the text. In verse 10 Adam says “I was afraid.” Fear is not quite as much of a destabilizing factor to man as shame and guilt (which may be why he dared to mention it, though he doesn't mention either of the other two), but it is still a feeling that will plague mankind. He will never again experience the calm serenity that is possible only to a being who can really count, at every moment, on God's direction in his life. He knows he can be wrong, and that he won't be able to protect himself from the consequences of his errors. God has not yet put the curse on the world that is going to make life difficult and dangerous and, already, man is afraid. This, too, is an innate effect of sin on his mentality.
- Sinful man twists the truth as well, trying to make it into something that is better for him (because he is afraid, because he is ashamed, and because he feels guilty). In verse 9, when God asks Adam where he is (God, of course, knows full well where Adam is, but he wants Adam to admit out loud where he is). Adam says that he was afraid because he is naked. That's a lie. For one thing, he is no longer naked. Sure, he isn't very well dressed (he's only wearing a few fig leaves woven together), but he isn't naked. Much more than that, though, that isn't why he is afraid and he knows it. He is afraid because he disobeyed and he is afraid of being punished, probably punished by death. He is trying to hide the truth and, even more than that, he is trying to hide *from* the truth.

- The twisting of sinful man's mentality is seen also in the way he blames others for his own choices. That shows up four different times in these few verses. First of all, Adam initially claims that the reason he was afraid is because he is naked (verse 10). He brings up something that isn't his fault; God is the one who made him that way. So it's God's fault that there is a problem, not his own. Then, when God asks him if he ate the fruit he wasn't allowed to eat, he blames it on his wife (verse 12), which isn't entirely true, either. Eve gave it to him, but he is the one who chose to eat it. Furthermore, he comes back to blaming God, by reminding him that he is the one who gave him this wife. So it's Eve's fault *and* God's fault – but not Adam's! – that he ate the fruit. Eve reacts the same way, saying it was the serpent who deceived her (verse 13). Once again, that is not the whole truth. Sure, Satan lied, but Adam and Eve chose to believe him, even though God had demonstrated his goodness toward them in so many ways. They had absolutely no excuse for believing the serpent's lie.
- Finally, we note as another aspect of the twisting of man's mentality due to sin that the relationship between human beings is also very seriously damaged. When Adam tells God that what he did is because of his wife, he is afraid of being punished. God had said that if they ate from that fruit, they would die. Adam says that it is Eve's fault, not his own. The clear implication is that if God is going to kill someone over that, Adam says he should kill Eve rather than him. A man who is willing to sacrifice his wife in order to save his own skin is not a man who loves his wife. He is just a coward who thinks only about himself. Sin has thus destroyed the love that existed between Adam and Eve. Henceforward, people will be looking out for their own interests first of all, even if it hurts others. Human history shows us how profoundly our relations with each other are marked by this principle, to this day.

If we come back to the “body, soul and spirit” aspects of man's makeup, these deformations in our mentality are most closely related to the soul. Though the word “soul” is often used more or less as a synonym of “spirit” (sometimes even in the Bible), a careful analysis of Biblical usage in the original languages shows that it refers primarily to life, to the capacity to live. The soul is the center of motivation, the capacity to manipulate one's environment in order to meet one's needs. There is thus a certain distinction, at least as concerns function, between the soul and the spirit. The spirit is more concerned with the spiritual realm while the soul is more concerned with the “ordinary” aspects of life.

Man's soul includes his way of thinking, his feelings, his desires and his priorities. All of that should be under the direction of God's perfect love. Since man rejects this submission to God's direction, his “soul” is marked by selfishness (the last three points in the above list), as well as by feelings (shame, guilt and fear – the first three points of the list) that are caused by his selfishness and that incite him to even more selfishness. In the depths of his heart, man knows it isn't good to think and to react the way he does, but he really can't do anything else.

God's reaction to man's sin: Genesis 3:14-15

It is very important, in order to understand the last part of the chapter, to grasp what God is saying in these two verses. One could easily think that what follows – which will make life very difficult for mankind – describes an angry God punishing man for his disobedience, wanting to get revenge for the way sinful man has insulted him and turned away from him. But that is not at all the case. On the contrary, what God says to Satan in these two verses shows that God's attitude is diametrically opposed to anything that resembles vengeance.

In the first part of verse 15, God tells the serpent that he will put “enmity” between men and serpents. That means a mutual feeling of hostility, of aversion, of profound distrust. Sure, snakes as animals are not responsible for what Satan did when he took on the form of a snake. Nevertheless, the repugnance that people feel toward snakes is a reminder of the treacherous and totally dangerous character of Satan. That is

necessary for us: We need to understand that Satan is not looking out for our welfare, no matter what he says. He is extremely threatening and should be avoided completely.

Most importantly, God says in the last part of verse 15 that from “the offspring of the woman” will come someone who will “crush the serpent's head.” This person will be seriously hurt in doing so (“you will crush his heel”), but what Satan has done will be destroyed. This is a prophecy of Jesus coming to redeem man from sin, the first such prophecy in the Bible.

It is obvious that Adam and Eve cannot understand at all, at that point, just what God's promise entails. All they can know is that God has already planned for a deliverance from the harm they did by choosing to believe Satan instead of continuing to trust God. But even if they don't know any more than that, God knows exactly what it means. In order for “the offspring of the woman” to deliver man, it is God himself who must become a man, suffer in life, and die horribly. In other words, God is the one who is going to pay for sin, rather than man.

If God promises something like that, that means his perfect love for man is not decreased due to sin. He is still willing to pay any price so that man can know joy. Sinful man distrusts God's goodness, but he is wrong in doing so. God is still perfectly good and he still wants man's well-being, even if he has to suffer terribly himself in order for it to happen.

The effects of sin in the world in which man lives: Genesis 3:16-24

Since God's love for man has not been diminished despite man's sin, the various things God puts in place in these verses should not be seen as a “punishment” (the true punishment for sin is spiritual death, eternal separation from God – the physical suffering that man will have to face in this world is not the punishment for sin) but as a change in man's situation. The goal is to encourage man to understand his need for God, and to come back to him.

Man's primary need is spiritual; that is the area where sin does its worst damage. It is in the spiritual realm that a solution needs to be worked out. But by sinning, man turns his back on most spiritual values (first of all by hiding from God). Since man's need is first and foremost spiritual, but man has become insensitive to the most important aspects of the spiritual realm by rejecting any serious relationship with God, God gets man's attention in the only area where he is willing and able to recognize his need: the physical realm.

It will be very hard for man to recognize or admit his spiritual need. Adam and Eve's descendants will be independent of God from birth. They will not consciously realize any need for a personal relationship with God, based on trusting him perfectly, since they never will have known any such relationship. They will be more aware of problems in man's mentality, but since one of those problems is the fact of blaming others for everything that happens, it will be very hard for people to realize that *they* need to change, themselves. It is much harder, though, to ignore problems in the physical world. Since the fall, man lives primarily in the material realm, so it is in the material realm that God tries to show him that he is not sufficient unto himself, that he needs someone to direct him, to love him, to protect him.

There are several different areas in which we see the effect of sin in man's physical surroundings:

- First of all, there is pain and suffering. Women will bear children in pain (verse 16), men will work in difficult circumstances (verses 17-19). The world will no longer be a nice, comfortable place to live (verse 18). Danger (which is supposed to cause man to realize that he needs the direction of someone greater than any danger) cannot be avoided in this world.
- There will also be frustration and dissatisfaction. “In painful toil you will eat” (verse 17). Life will not always go the way we want. Man will not be able to accomplish everything he wants to do, despite his choice to go it alone without letting God direct him. The goal of these difficulties, of

course, is to try to help man see that he *can't* manage on his own.

- Man's lifespan will be limited and in the end he will die (verse 19). The world around us is not the only area where physical problems will show up; they will also be there in our own bodies. Illness, accidents and aging will all take their toll and the day will come for everyone to die. Man's inability to provide for himself will manifest itself even in his own body, and there is nothing he can do about it. No one can escape death, no matter how he tries. The grave awaits us all.
- God will not protect man from the sin of those around him. Adam was supposed to love his wife as himself, to seek her well-being before his own. That's the very nature of love. But when he turned to sin, he didn't do it any longer; he put his own well-being ahead of his wife, as we saw in verse 12. God says at the end of verse 16 that he is not going to intervene to change that: "Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you." The idea of the word "rule" here is to dominate; in this context it does not seem to be simply the loving direction that a husband ought to give his wife. This principle is mentioned here in the relationship between Adam and Eve (the only human relationship God speaks of because at that point in time it is the only human relationship they know), but it will be true in all human relationships. Everyone will try to dominate everyone else, people will hurt each other if they can get some advantage out of it, and God will not prevent it (or at least, he does not promise to do so in every case). Man needs to see, by the awful deeds that go on around him, just how bad sin is. It is man's mentality that needs to be changed, not just the difficult situations he faces. But when these difficult situations are the result of the sin of others, God allows them so that man can understand how urgently and profoundly his sinful mindset needs to be transformed.
- Man is expelled from paradise (verses 22-24). Henceforth, the ultimate solution for man's ills is not in this world. Man will do everything he can to live as long as possible, but what he really needs is to discover, in eternity, a fully reestablished relationship with God. Only in that way can he live in a new and better world, a world that is not marked by sin. Though sinful man wants to find as much happiness in this world as he can, God shows us that because of sin, true happiness is not to be found here. Paradise no longer exists in this world.

This section is mostly about the physical realm. It deals with the effects of sin on man's body, among other things. Our physical body has degenerated (that is why we grow old and die), and the difficulties and sufferings that God allows in the world affect our body as well. Sin is thus more than just a spiritual problem, even though it is rooted in the spiritual realm. It affects man – it *harms* man – in his whole being, body, soul and spirit. A sinner is not just someone who "does bad things." A sinner is a twisted, corrupt, depraved being, a being who suffers because of what he is and who causes others to suffer, because he doesn't know how to choose what is right, at least not consistently.

Summary of sin's effects on man

<u>In the spiritual realm</u> (this primarily affects the spirit)	<u>In man's mentality</u> (this primarily affects the soul)	<u>In the physical realm</u> (this primarily affects the body)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man no longer trusts God fully. • Man no longer seeks God's direction in order to know what he ought to do or not do. • Man (sometimes) disobeys God's commandments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man is ashamed of what he is. • Man feels guilty about what he does. • Man is afraid of what is going to happen to him. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man lives in a world marked by suffering and danger. • Man's life is marked by frustration and dissatisfaction. • Man's lifespan is limited, so that in the end he dies.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man has lost his intimate personal relationship with God. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man twists the truth. • Man blames others for his own choices. • Man seeks his own interests foremost, even when it hurts others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God does not (always) protect man from the sin of others. • Paradise no longer exists in this world.
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In the above table, it should be noted that the effects of sin in each column do not arise in the same way:

- The effects of sin in the spiritual realm flow directly from man's choice. It is man who no longer trusts God, who chooses instead to believe the serpent's lie. It is thus an integral part of his choice to no longer let himself be guided by God and to refuse the close personal relationship he had with God (since in any such relationship God cannot be other than what he is by nature – the God who reigns supreme).
- The effects of sin in man's mentality flow partially from man's choice not to trust God, but to a great extent they are simply the more or less unavoidable consequence of the breaking of the relationship with God. As we saw in looking at man's fundamental nature, he cannot function correctly without a relationship in which he trusts God and thus lets himself be guided by God. He does not have the capacity, in his own being, to consistently choose what is right, in order to guide his own life correctly.
- The effects of sin in the physical realm, however, flow from God's direct intervention rather than from man's choices or the innate consequences of his choices. These are not natural consequences, in the way that burning yourself is an innate consequence of choosing to put your hand in a fire, but something that God purposely put in place.

These different origins for the effects in each column show us that the effects in each column are not of the same nature either:

- The first column is pretty much the definition of sin. In its fundamental nature, sin is not so much a question of behavior as it is the inner disposition of a person with regard to God. Sin is the refusal to depend on God and thus of a close personal relationship with him, due to a lack of trust in his goodness towards us.
- Where the first column describes the *nature* of sin, the second column describes its *effects*. Sin, of course, has other effects (such as the harm that sinners do to each other and even to the world in which they live), but these points summarize fairly well the changes due to sin in our own makeup. The first three points describe how sinful man feels and the last three points describe how he acts. He is not at ease with himself, he panics, he despairs, he no longer enjoys the calm and happy existence he had before. That is why he lies, twists the truth, blames others... Man was created to depend on someone who knows everything, who is perfectly good and who would give us all the direction we need in order to live a perfectly satisfying life. Having rejected that relationship, man is completely messed up.
- The third column shows the setting that God puts in place for sinful man, in order to have the greatest chance of turning him away from sin. This column does not describe changes in man's makeup, so much as the situation in which he will live.

Man's priority and God's priority

The fundamental nature of sin, as we have seen, is the rejection of a close relationship with God, because we don't trust him enough. The effects of sin in man's mentality are thus not man's most basic problem, and the effects in the physical realm are even less the real problem. The effect of sin in man's mentality is indeed a

problem that is part of man's makeup, a part of himself, but since that is a problem that flows from another problem, that effect in man's mentality cannot be resolved without first resolving the initial problem that caused it. The effects of sin in the world around us are not even a problem that is part of our makeup (other than those harmful things that we as sinners do to those around us, and which God does not systematically prevent, as we saw). They are simply the setting in which God puts us in order to encourage us to admit – if possible – that we just can't handle things on our own, that we need to count on God.

It is very important to understand that even if God had not made the physical world a difficult and dangerous place, that would not reduce man's basic problem at all. We simply cannot function correctly without trusting God and letting ourselves be guided by him. Remember that even before God put a curse on the physical world, Adam had already betrayed Eve by accusing her before God in order to try to save his own skin.

Since the physical realm is what holds sinful man's attention the most, it is in that realm that God tries to show us our need for him. Because we don't trust him, we don't want this genuine personal relationship with God, so we simply are not inclined to recognize our spiritual need. We see our problems in our mental and emotional makeup a bit more but even there, we have a hard time admitting there are any problems in *us*. Since one of the most visible characteristics of the mindset of sinful man is the tendency to blame others for our own choices, the problem is never *me*, it's always someone else.

The physical realm is thus the area in which God tries to get our attention, because it is the realm to which we are the most responsive. It might not work for everybody, but it is still the best way to go about it. When someone is going as fast as possible on a route that leads to destruction, you don't help them by making the road easier. On the contrary, the worse the road is, the more chance they have of understanding that it might not be the right one. God is right to add immediate and physical consequences to all the rest of sin's effects, because man's biggest need is to understand that he has to come back to God before it is too late.

Nevertheless, all that shows us that man's priority and God's priority are not at all the same.

For sinful man, refusing to recognize his spiritual problem or even a problem in his own mindset, our priority is necessarily on the situation in which we live. We want to avoid difficulties, be successful, and live in prosperity. We want God to:

- eliminate all the sufferings in the world,
- prevent “bad people” (meaning other people, obviously, since we blame others for our choices – none of us include ourselves among the “bad people” even when we hurt others) from hurting him,
- give us a promise of paradise after death.

The physical conditions of our lives are incomparably more important to us, as sinners, than any kind of personal relationship with God. In terms of the table of the effects of sin, man's priority is clearly in the third column.

God, however, knows that the problems in the third column are necessary. He even knows that it isn't possible to fix the problems in the second column as long as the problems in the first column aren't straightened out, but that straightening out what is wrong in that first column will indeed fix what is wrong in the second column. That's the idea presented in Galatians 5:15-22. A person who lives on the basis of the natural inclinations of man will do all kinds of harm to everyone and won't be happy with himself, but a person who counts on God – the Holy Spirit is God inside of us – will do good to others and will have much more peace and joy in his life.

God's priority is thus to attempt to persuade us to understand that we need to trust him and truly let ourselves be guided by him, to come back to the relationship with him that was lost through sin. He also knows that, in order for that to happen, we need the problems in the third column. As long as our physical lives go reasonably well, it is incredibly hard for us to remember that we need to count on God. Thus, God will eliminate the problems in our lives only when they are no longer necessary, because the spiritual realm and our mindset will be completely straightened out for good.

In simple terms, that means that God is going to work primarily in the first two columns, while man wants

him to work primarily – or even entirely – in the third column. This difference in priority is what produces the difference between the salvation God offers us and the religion of sinful man that we will be looking at in what follows. God knows where the real source of our problems lies, and wants to give us a real solution by eliminating that problem at the root. Man, on the other hand, doesn't want to admit that that fundamental problem even exists, and just wants God to help him by eliminating the problems in his life. He is so convinced that his primary need is only in the elimination of physical suffering that he goes so far as to say that if God doesn't do that, then God either must not exist, or must not be good.

What it amounts to is that man wants God to work backwards, to eliminate the symptoms instead of curing the disease. But God is far too wise to do that and, especially, he loves us far too much to do it. It is thus to be expected that at a very fundamental level, the religions that man comes up with are so different from what God wants to do in us.

Cain, Abel, and religion: Genesis 4

Genesis 4 is an extremely old text. It describes an event that took place in the very next generation after Adam and Eve – the first generation that grew up entirely in sin. Usually, the text is read (if it is read at all...) as the story of a murder. That isn't wrong, because it is the story of a murder, but it is also the most ancient text we have about religion. We have no information on what religious practices Adam and Eve had (if they had any), so the oldest information we have on what can properly be called “religion” concerns two of their sons. Already here, we see two radically different approaches to religion.

We don't actually know all that much about these two brothers. We don't even know for sure that they were Adam and Eve's first two children; that is an extremely widespread interpretation, but the text doesn't actually say so. In the Old Testament, it is always difficult and risky to suppose that something didn't happen (such as the birth of children before Cain and Abel) simply because the text doesn't mention it. That comes from reading ancient oriental texts as if they were modern Indo-European texts with characteristics such as writing everything in chronological order, and including all the details even if they don't have any effect on what the text is presenting.

We don't know what the relationship was like between Cain and Abel before this incident, either. Genesis 4:25 seems to indicate that Adam and Eve somehow considered Seth as a “replacement” for Abel, and Genesis 5:3 shows that they were 130 years old when Seth was born. So if Cain and Abel *were* among the first children, we can suppose that they were probably 100 years old or more when Cain killed his brother. What did they do during all that time? We have no idea. But it is also possible they they had barely attained adulthood, if they weren't Adam and Eve's first children.

We do know however that Abel was “righteous” since Jesus himself says so in Matthew 23:35, that his works were righteous according to 1 John 3:12, and that he acted by faith, as Hebrews 11:4 shows. We can thus see that he truly wanted God to transform his heart, that his religion flows primarily from a heart that trusts God, that counts on him and obeys him, and that rejoices in a personal relationship with God.

This is all radically different from Cain. The first thing that jumps out at us about him as we read this text is that he was a murderer, which is not a minor fault. But that isn't all. Verses 6 and 7 show that God warned him about sin but that didn't seem to have any importance to him. Later on, when God confronted him about the murder of his brother, he doesn't show any sign of regret. He seems to be afraid of what is going to happen to him (which is why he lies about not knowing what has become of Abel), but that's all. Cain is thus a violent, unrepentant sinner, a sinner who has no desire whatsoever to turn from his sin, despite God's warnings and the terribleness of what he did.

These two men – one who is truly righteous and upstanding, while the other is violent and unconcerned about sin – are thus the first two people about whom we have any information concerning their religious practices. It is important – and fairly astonishing – to notice that *both* of them are religious. Religion is not just something that interests Abel; it interests Cain also. He appears to accomplish religious rituals (an

offering to God at the very least, and perhaps more) just as willingly as his brother does. We even get the impression, from verses 3 and 4, that he was the first of the two brothers to offer a sacrifice to God. But his approach to religion is very different from that of his brother.

Cain believed in God. And not just any God; he worshiped the Lord, the one true God. He didn't change gods. Too often, we suppose that those who worship the true God must necessarily be people who are righteous or, at least, who sincerely want to be righteous. But Genesis 4 shows us that already in the second generation of human beings, that was not the case. Sinful man, even a violent, unrepentant sinner like Cain, has no problem with religion. The widespread refusal of any and all religion is a modern attitude that only manifests itself in a very limited part of the world, and that is far from characterizing everyone even in those parts of the world. On the contrary, the history of mankind clearly shows that people want religions. They have invented so many of them that it isn't even possible to know all of them.

Man, even in sin, has thus always been seeking for God. But even though he willingly practices religion, he doesn't want just any religion. He wants *his* religion, a religion that suits him, a religion that fits in with his sinful mentality. We also see that religion suited to a sinful outlook is not some late invention that came about little by little with the degradation of society. On the contrary, this twisted concept of religion was there on the very first pages of the history of the human race.

Sinful man's religion

The kind of religion that suits sinful man is not at all what God wants, but it is very useful to look at it carefully, because it will influence human thinking about God throughout history. Already as far back as Cain, very shortly after the Fall, Cain's religion practices show the same ideas that will characterize all the religions that sinful man will invent later on. There is an enormous amount of religions out there, so much so that one might get that impression that every possible variation of religion exists, but that is not at all the case. Despite the bewildering diversity of religions that exist or that have existed in this world, there are a few characteristics that are always there. They have been there from the very beginning, as Genesis 4 shows us.

Nevertheless, before we look at the fundamental characteristics of the twisted religion that suits sinful man, it would be useful to take a look at something that is *not* the real problem. Genesis 4:3-5 says, "After a certain time, Cain brought some of the fruit of the soil as an offering to the Lord. Abel also brought an offering of fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but he did not look with favor on Cain and his offering."

There are those who think that Cain's offering was not acceptable to God because it wasn't the right kind of offering. He offered plants while his brother Abel offered animals. That would mean that Cain's approach to religion is wrong because its rituals are not done correctly, while Abel's religion is approved by God because its rituals are done the way God requires. But that analysis of what is going on here is wrong, in a number of ways.

First of all, this explanation of what is wrong with Cain is based on certain aspects of the law of Moses. But Cain is not responsible for obeying a law that won't be given until thousands of years later. There are no indications whatsoever in the Bible about what kind of instructions may or may not have been given at the time of Cain about what kind of offerings God required. Thus, we have no possible way of saying whether Cain's offering was "correct" or not, in terms of being in accordance with what God had revealed. The only slight indication in the text is in the wording, "Abel also brought an offering..." That phrasing seems to indicate that Abel's offering is in the same category as Cain's offering.

Furthermore, even if we do evaluate Cain's offering according to the law of Moses, we see clearly that such offerings *are* acceptable. They are even obligatory. All of Leviticus chapter 2, for example, is devoted to describing just how plant offerings are to be made. So if we insist on evaluating the validity of Cain's offering according to the law of Moses, it is just as valid as Abel's.

Most important of all, though, this understanding of why God did not approve of Cain's offering flows from a fundamentally wrong conception of religion, as we will see in more detail in what follows. In that conception, God gives his blessing to those who do the “right” acts, gestures, rituals or prayers. But according to the Bible, what God really wants is incomparably more concerned with the heart than with the specific form of the ritual. Psalm 51:17 says, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” The prophet Samuel said pretty much the same thing to Saul: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to pay attention is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). The prophet Hosea preached the same outlook: “For I delight in mercy, not sacrifice, and knowing God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Jesus himself quoted the passage from Hosea (in Matthew 9:13), giving his own personal endorsement to of this way of understanding sacrifices.

Cain's offering is not bad in itself. The reason God didn't approve of him or his offering has nothing to do with the form of the ritual, and everything to do with the state of his heart. His wicked heart is full of jealousy, he is violent, and he has a conception of God (as we will see shortly) that is seriously distorted. It is not because Cain didn't offer the “right” sacrifice that God does not accept his religion, but because Cain is not a righteous man.

However, even though the problem here is not one of offering plants to God, Cain's religion is still very wrong. There are in fact several characteristics of his outlook on religion that are contrary to what God reveals to us in his word about what he wants from us. These same characteristics are found in all the religions that man has ever invented (though sometimes with some interesting adaptations). If they are there in all of man's religions, it is because sinful man wants them to be there. They are what makes for a religion that is suitable to a sinner. A sinner, as we saw in examining man's mentality after the Fall in Genesis 3, does not want God to reign in his heart but he does want to be delivered from the problems he faces in life. He imagines religion on the basis of that outlook.

There are three of these characteristics of man's religion that we will look at here. The third one is present in Genesis 4 pretty much only by implication, but since it is widespread in all the religions that man invents, and since there are indications in the text that it was indeed part of Cain's motivation, it definitely has its place in the list.

1st characteristic: earning the right to God's blessing

The first characteristic of Cain's religion is seen in the fact that he brought an offering to God and, especially, in his idea about what the result of that offering should have been. It is his idea about the expected result that is the most important; there is nothing wrong in itself with the idea of offering a sacrifice since Abel, who is righteous, did the same thing. The difference between the two, though, is that Cain thinks he has the *right* to receive something because of what he did. This is a fundamental characteristic in all the religions man has ever created. We think that if we do what we ought to do, then in return we have the right to receive a blessing.

It might be worthwhile to note at this point that this is where most of the differences between religions are to be seen:

- What man is supposed to do in order to receive God's blessing varies enormously from one religion to another: You have to offer a sacrifice, recite a prayer, accomplish a ritual, believe something, experience something or other, deprive yourself of certain pleasures... there seem to be pretty much endless variations.
- The nature of the blessing that is sought varies greatly as well. It might be something as immediate and material as healing (the most sought-after blessing in religions down through history) or it might be something as esoteric as being able to dissolve oneself into the ultimate harmony of the universe.
- The conception of God – or of the gods, the spirits, the divine principle, or whatever other way the

spiritual realm is imagined – varies immensely as well, depending on the exact religion in question. But these differences, even though they give rise to an incalculable number of religions, should not hide the fundamental principle that is always there: If you do what you are supposed to do, you have the right to receive the blessing you are looking for. That is the first characteristic of sinful man's religion.

We should note very carefully that the expected blessing is seen as a “right.” Offering a sacrifice to God is not, in itself, a result of the erroneous desire to control God. Asking for God's help is not wrong, either. God himself invites us to do so, many times in the Bible. But thinking we *deserve* that blessing, because we did what we ought to do, *is* a problem. Abel brought an offering to God and God blessed him. Cain brought an offering to God as well, so he thinks he has a *right* to the same blessing as his brother. The fact that his heart is not at all right with God, the way his brother's is, has no importance in his mind. He did something for God, so he deserves to receive something in return. That is how Cain, already at the beginning of human history, thought of religion, and that is how sinful man will always think of religion.

It should also be carefully noted here, in order to understand the problem, that even if Cain's heart *had* been right with God, that does not mean at all that the result of his offering would have been the same as Abel's. For reasons of his own, God can and does act in very different ways towards people who are equally faithful to him. In Acts chapter 5, both the apostles James and Peter were arrested. Peter was delivered miraculously and James was killed. In the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, there are only two of them for which Jesus does not have any reprimands, Smyrna and Philadelphia. To the church in Philadelphia, Jesus promises that he will protect them during the time of persecution that is coming (Revelation 3:10), but to the church in Smyrna, which is just as faithful, Jesus says that the persecution will cause them to suffer and simply tells them: “Be faithful unto death” (Revelation 2:10). We could give as many examples as needed of this principle that is clearly taught in the Bible: God's blessing is not a right, not even for those who are righteous.

But in sinful man's religion, it is indeed a right. Cain becomes angry because he didn't receive the blessing he wanted, the blessing he “paid for” (in his thinking) by bringing an offering to God. This is the most fundamental description of religion as sinful man imagines it: Man must do what God (or whatever other conception of the divine principle he holds to) requires and, because he does it, he receives as a reward some kind of divine aid.

2nd characteristic: Sin itself is not the problem

We have already noted that Cain was not at all repentant with regard to his sin. When God warned him about sin, he didn't pay any attention. When God rebuked him for his sin, he didn't show any sign of regret. It was only when God told him what was going to happen to him because of his sin that he reacted. This is a second characteristic of the false approach to religion that suits sinful man: People are not really troubled about sin itself, but only about the *consequences* of sin. If a religion pays any attention to sin (which is not at all a universal trait among religions), the primary goal is only to show us how to escape the punishment that will come as a result of that sin. If there is an easy way to be forgiven, then sin is not actually all that serious. If there is no way to be forgiven, or if forgiveness is difficult or costly, then we should avoid sin, but only because of the punishment.

This characteristic of sinful man's religion is so deeply rooted in man's thinking, and is so widespread, that most people in modern, western countries can't even think of religion in any other terms. In their minds, the only point of religion is to avoid the punishment for sin in order to go to paradise. That is true for those who believe in some religion and it is also true for those who reject all religions. This latter group think (correctly) that this is an absolutely ridiculous idea, but are still convinced they have understood why those who practice religion do so. And in most cases, they are not wrong.

In ancient times, about the only religions that didn't see their rituals as a way for avoiding the punishment for sin were those religions that didn't pay much attention to sin one way or another. (Such religions definitely existed, but they have become much rarer today.) The end result was the same, though, whether or not a

given form of religion talks about sin: The root problem that religion is supposed to solve is not sin. At most, it is punishment for sin, but it is never sin itself.

There is actually a simple reason for this. Sin is part of our nature, part of our person. It is not something that comes from outside us, but something that is in us. And the last thing most sinners want to hear is that they are, themselves, the problem. As we saw, one of the characteristics of the sinful mentality is blaming others for what happens to us. It is extremely difficult to admit that *I* am wrong, that *I* am the problem, that *I* am the one who needs to change.

For the sinful heart, then, our biggest problem is what happens to us, what comes at us from the world around us or from other people, rather than what comes from our own nature. When a sinner comes to the point of thinking that he is, himself, the problem, that destabilizes and depresses him. He doesn't want anything to do with a religion that tells him that. The only real problem with sin, then, is having to face up to its consequences (which are, of course, part of "what happens to us").

Some religions teach very strongly that sin must be avoided (sometimes using a different term than "sin," but the idea is always what displeases God, or the gods, or spirits...). They put a heavy accent especially on the consequences of sin rather than on a true desire for holiness. The idea is not to avoid sin simply because sin is bad, or to do what is right simply because it is right, but to avoid the bad things that are liable to happen to us if we do what is wrong.

Other religions put the accent more on forgiveness, and teach what one has to do to receive it. (Since forgiveness is a blessing sought from God, there is of course something you have to do to receive it. That is the first characteristic of sinful man's religion). Once again, the goal is to avoid the consequences of sin rather than sin itself. Whether it's a question of avoiding sin or of being forgiven (or some of each), the primary goal is thus to protect oneself from the troublesome consequences of sin rather than seeking holiness as something that is good in and of itself.

For most sinners, even those who are faithful to some religion, if there was a way to guarantee that there would never be any negative consequences from sin, no matter how great the sin, that would be all they want. If we could be absolutely sure that there would never be any punishment, either in this life or after death, sin simply wouldn't be a problem any more in the thinking of the average sinner. It could be indulged in without restraint. Sin, after all, is what the sinner wants. If he has a promise of unlimited forgiveness, no matter how badly he sins, what more could he want? Why try to change your heart, if sin isn't going to be punished?

Let's be honest: If we could have such a guarantee, how many of us would not be tempted to "enjoy sin," as long as we could really be sure there would never be any adverse consequences to it in this life, and could also be sure of going to paradise after we die? Looking at the situation that way is enough to show how deeply rooted in the thinking of the sinful heart is that idea that sin itself just isn't a real problem for most of us.

3rd characteristic: a very materialistic "salvation"

The third major trait of the way sinful man seeks for God is very widespread, so much so that it seems obvious to just about everyone, but isn't very much developed in Genesis 4. It is implied, but isn't actually mentioned all that clearly. Nevertheless, it characterizes very much the outlook of sinful man where God is concerned.

Genesis 4:4-5 says, "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but he did not look with favor on Cain and his offering." This is what caused the problem between Cain and Abel. We do not know in just what way God "looked with favor" on Abel's offering since the text doesn't say anything more than that. It is obvious, though, that it was something that Cain, an unrepentant sinner, could notice. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been jealous. It is thus likely that it was something that concerned the material realm. It may have been

success in his work, for example, or better health perhaps. That doesn't mean that was Abel's priority, that it was what he was looking for, but it *was* Cain's priority. He wanted to receive the same thing.

When God confronted him with his sin and told him what was going to happen as a result, Cain seemed preoccupied, here also, by the physical aspect of his situation. He said, "You are driving me away from the fertile ground today, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me" (Genesis 4:14). Three of the four points he brings up are clearly concerns about his physical comfort and safety. Only "I shall be hidden from your face" seems to go in a different direction and even there, that is far from sure. Since he seems to believe that God is limited to one locality (he is the one who says he will be hidden from God's face; God didn't say anything at all about that), it is very likely that he also thinks of divine blessing as manifesting itself in one place more than in another. It may well be that even here he is concerned only about being in a place where he cannot receive that blessing. In any case, when God promises him physical protection (verse 15), that seems to satisfy him.

Even here in Genesis 4, then, we can see by implication what will become one of the most blatant characteristics of sinful man's religions down through human history: What mankind wants the most from religious practices is immediate, physical, personal well-being.

Years ago, I began studying ancient religions in order to find out what motivated people to accept those religions. What were they looking for? The number one reason I found, offered by almost all religions, was healing: People offer sacrifices, perform rituals, pronounce formulas (sometimes called prayers, sometimes not), all in the hope of having good health, or being delivered from poor health. The second advantage that people were looking for in religion was prosperity. The exact nature of that prosperity varied from one culture to another, because what counts as riches in one culture is not necessarily what makes a person rich in another culture, but the basic idea was always material prosperity. In agricultural-based societies, this prosperity often took the form of fertility, since wealth came from crops and animals which reproduced well. Among other sought-after blessings were military victories, protection from evil spirits, children and a bunch of other advantages; it is difficult to establish an order among them. But the two blessings proposed the most often by religion, from the most ancient times right down to our day, have always been healing and prosperity.

Here, also, this outlook is so deeply rooted in most people's thinking that they think religion is totally useless if you don't get these kinds of blessings. Even religious skeptics, even militant atheists who denounce every form of religion, speak in these same terms in order to claim (correctly, in very many cases) that practicing a religion does not give any better results, statistically speaking, than hard work and science. The idea that one could turn to God for some other reason doesn't even occur to them.

Man's religion and God's goal for us

There aren't really any religions that teach one of these three characteristics explicitly, and even less all three of them. If religions are analyzed in terms of beliefs and practices, one sees primarily the differences. A Christian goes to Mass, a Muslim observes Ramadan, an Animist appeases the spirits, a Buddhist practices mental disciplines in order to seek harmony with the universe... But when the fundamental motivations are examined, when you ask yourself *why* people do what they do in their religions, and not merely what they do, these three characteristics are seen so be pretty much universal.

In practice, common religion combines the three of them. It preaches that sin is one of the things that upsets God (or the gods, or the spirits, or the universal harmony...), who punishes us through suffering (illness, adversity, poverty, or any other kind of difficulty). Therefore, we have to avoid sin and/or do whatever is required in order to be forgiven, so that we can enjoy prosperity, healing, success and happiness. That ties the three characteristics all together, even when there are huge differences from one religion to another about what is considered sin or what must be done in order to be forgiven.

We see in all of that that the difficulties in which God placed man after the fall into sin are only partially

effective. Sinful man usually does manage to realize that he can't handle life alone, which is the reason for which most people who "believe in God" practice some religion. That is a step in the right direction, but an insufficient step in itself. As Genesis 3 shows us, man's fundamental problem is inside, in our refusal to trust God, live in fellowship with him, and let ourselves be guided by him. That is why the Bible never presents simple "religion" as a true solution for sinners. On the contrary, the Bible regularly denounces religious practices as twisted, insufficient and erroneous.

God thus has something else for us. Quite a few Biblical passages show what it is, but 1 Timothy 1:15 is one of the clearest on the subject: "It is a trustworthy statement that deserves full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost."

Paul solemnly affirms this summary of the gospel message by calling it a "trustworthy statement that deserves full acceptance." It is not just an opinion, it is not a secondary doctrine, it is not a simple hope. It is God's promise, it is *the* central reason for which Jesus came into this world. Sure, Jesus also gave us interesting and useful teaching, sure he inspires us by his example, and helped a lot of people around him by all kinds of miracles. But nothing in all that was his primary goal. The reason for his coming, as it is explained in this passage, must be accepted fully and without reservation by all those who believe the message of Jesus.

It is interesting that Paul ends the verse by saying that he himself is the foremost of sinners. Not that he means he is worse than anyone else ever was, but that any person who truly wants God's help – help that has as its primary goal to solve the problem of sin – needs to understand that he or she is the first person on the list who needs that help. Someone who thinks they are not seriously affected by sin, that there are people in the world who are a whole lot more in need of salvation, cannot consider sin as their biggest problem. Such a person will necessarily fall back into the outlook of sinful man: God's help should primarily deal with the problems of this life.

At the very heart of God's message to humanity is the coming of Jesus Christ came into this world as the only Savior of mankind. When we attempt to pin down in precisely what way he is our Savior, what exactly was his goal in coming to us, we always find this same principle: Jesus saves sinners.

This message contains three central truths, which respond perfectly to the three characteristics of sinful man's religion, and thus show us that God's message to man is completely different from the religious message that man comes up with himself:

- **Jesus** saves sinners; they cannot accomplish their own salvation.
- Jesus **saves** sinners; he doesn't just forgive them for being sinful.
- Jesus saves **sinners**; his priority is not the sick or the poor or those who are suffering.

We will look at each one of these principles in a bit more detail, in order to see just how different God's own outlook is from the way man's religions imagine God.

Salvation is entirely the work of Jesus

In man's religions, it is man who has to do what is necessary in order to obtain God's blessing. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jesus is the one who does it all. He said so himself, in fact, just moments before dying: "It is finished" (John 19:30). In the original text, the sense of this phrase is very positive. It means, "The goal has been achieved." The goal was to save sinners, and everything that is necessary in order to do it was done.

While man is busy with his religions, desperately trying to figure out what he has to do in order to obtain God's blessing, Jesus did it all and offers it as a free gift to all those who want it. That is what the Bible calls grace. Grace is God's work, based on his goodness and not on ours, which gives us something we can't ever deserve. He gives it to us simply because he loves us.

This is one of the most difficult aspects of the gospel for man to accept. It might seem that everyone would

want a free gift, especially when it is such an incredibly wonderful gift, but that is not at all the case. There are two primary reasons for which man does not want grace:

- First of all, we have a very hard time accepting it precisely because it is grace. Since it is an *undeserved* gift, grace constantly reminds us that we don't deserve it. It is extremely difficult for us to admit, the way Paul did, "I am the foremost of sinners." A sinner is ready to do almost anything so that he can say, "I may have done wrong, but I also did good things to redeem myself." That is why people accept the things religion requires them to do, things that are sometimes very difficult and even humiliating. The more salvation costs us, the more we can be proud of having done what it takes to save ourselves. But the grace of Jesus tells us that we don't need to do anything, because he did everything for us. He did what we couldn't do, and he gives it to us for free.
- Man also has a real problem with grace because you can't choose a free gift. When someone gives you a gift, it is what it is. But when you buy something, you can choose what you want. In Jesus Christ, God gives us as a free gift an unthinkably great salvation – salvation that delivers us from sin – but that is not what most people are looking for. They would rather "do what it takes" so they can dictate to God what he must give in return. As we saw, God's priority (eliminating sin in our hearts) and sinful man's priority (eliminating the sufferings of this life, as well as those which might be awaiting us after death) are not at all the same. Man wants to pay for his salvation, in order to receive what he wants instead of just accepting what God wants to give him.

Nevertheless, whether we want to accept it or not, salvation in Jesus is a free gift, in which there is absolutely no merit to the one who accepts it. It is *Jesus* who saves sinners; sinners are incapable of saving themselves. For man to be saved by his own efforts, he would have to completely stop sinning, he would have to become perfect. Otherwise he is still a sinner, even if he is "a little less bad." But no one can become perfect. That means that if salvation exists, it has to be based on grace. It is the work of Jesus, of Jesus alone. That is part of this central statement of the Christian message: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Salvation is not just forgiveness

Paul says that Jesus came to *save* sinners. The word "save" is very often misunderstood. "Save" means "deliver." To save a person from sin therefore means to deliver that person from sin. If someone is delivered from sin, he or she is no longer in sin.

This is not just an argument based on the sense of a word, that might have been used in this context in a way that is not its ordinary meaning. It is the clear teaching of a number of passages in the Bible. Without trying to do a complete study on the subject, let's look at some implications of what Jesus said about himself, in the upper room, at the Passover meal with his disciples.

The time had come for them to understand the true sense of Passover, to understand once and for all who is the true Lamb who delivers from death. Jesus said about the cup of wine that accompanied the meal, as well as about the bread that was part of the meal, that those elements were symbols of himself, prefiguring him and his work. He said in particular, about the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20; Matthew and Mark simply say "the blood of the covenant" which is quite enough in the Jewish context to make clear what he is talking about, but since Luke is not Jewish and is not writing for Jews he prefers to give the sense of what Jesus said more explicitly).

The "new covenant" that is put in place by the blood of Jesus refers to what the prophet Jeremiah wrote: "Behold, the time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, even though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they

will be my people. No man will teach his neighbor any longer, nor any man teach his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and I will no longer remember their sin" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The "covenant with their forefathers" that this text mentions, the one people did not keep, refers to the law of Moses. The principle of law is simple: You have to keep the whole law. An athlete who plays by the rules for almost the entire game, but who breaks them at one point, still committed a foul and there will still be consequences. The fact that he played right for all the rest of the game changes nothing. Where law is concerned, it is not enough to do "more right than wrong." You have to keep the whole law, all the time.

The principle with God's law is the same. If it is not kept entirely, you are guilty. Keeping most of it is not enough. You are still entirely guilty of breaking the law, because of the part you *didn't* keep.

But Jeremiah speaks of a "new covenant," a covenant that truly changes hearts, so much so that there is no need for anyone to preach God's message because everyone, without exception, will know God. Their sin will be erased and forgotten by God. That means, to come back to what we saw in Genesis 3, that all the effects of sin will be eliminated. In terms of the table we set up to summarize the results of sin, the "first column" will be put entirely in order. All those who benefit from this new covenant will trust God, will let themselves be guided by him, will obey him, and will live in fellowship with him. Since the effects in the second column flow directly from those in the first column, they will disappear as well. And since the problems in the physical world (the third column) had no other goal than to show us our need for God, they will no longer be useful, either. The new covenant that Jeremiah writes about is thus the complete solution for all the effects of sin. It is not limited to mere forgiveness for guilt and disobedience.

Jesus says it is this new covenant that is put in place by his blood. Jesus *delivers* us – completely and permanently – from sin. Everyone who admits, as Paul did, that they are "the foremost of sinners," everyone who realizes that sin is his or her greatest problem, can rejoice in knowing that that problem is entirely eliminated by the blood of Jesus. Accepting the salvation that is offered to us because of the death of Christ means entering into the new covenant, a covenant that changes our hearts in order to rid them of every trace of sin.

Salvation changes hearts but not always circumstances

Sinful man's religions promise to change the situations in which we live, for those who practice them. "If you do what is necessary, you will be rich, you will be healed, you will be victorious, you will be happy." The gospel of Jesus Christ deals first and foremost with another area altogether: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*."

We see that time and time again in the New Testament. From the very first chapter of Matthew (in Matthew 1:21, the angel told Joseph, "...you will call him Jesus, for he is the one who will save his people from their sins") to the last chapter of Revelation ("Blessed are those who wash their robes, so they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and all those who love and practice lying. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify these things to the churches," Revelation 22:14-16) the nature of the gospel message is clear. Jesus changes our hearts, Jesus makes us pure, Jesus delivers us from sin.

That does not mean that the death of Christ does not save us from the problems in our lives, but we have seen that that is not God's priority. Those problems will be eliminated once the problem of sin is dealt with. God said, through the prophet Isaiah, "They will not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). The day will indeed come when "harm and destruction" (the third column in the effects of sin) will no longer exist. But that day will only come when the perfect relationship with God, that was lost in Genesis 3, is completely reestablished. Those who say that Jesus delivers us from our problems are not entirely wrong, but they are in error about when that deliverance will happen (it will come when sin has been eliminated, and not before) and,

especially, they are wrong in thinking that is what the work of Jesus is primarily about.

That doesn't mean, either, that God never delivers us from problems in our lives here and now. He does it, when that is his will. That is why he himself invites us to come to him with such requests. He might do what we ask, but he does not promise that he will *always* do it. Even the Apostle Paul, who pleaded with God several times to be delivered from a problem, did not receive that deliverance, at least not in this life: "To keep me from being overcome with pride, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, lest I become proud. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to remove it, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

We should not be afraid or ashamed to come to God with our problems in this life, but we need to understand that they are not his priority. He might not deliver us from those difficulties, because he has a different priority for us. He wants to transform our hearts completely before changing all the difficult situations we face. The work of Christ is primarily about changing our hearts in order to deliver us from sin. Delivering us from sickness and suffering and even from death will come later on. In the meantime, he came into the world to save *sinners*. That is the formulation of the gospel that is "a trustworthy statement that deserves full acceptance."

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a message that comes from men

Many people think the message of Christ is just "one religion among so many others" and wonder how one is supposed to tell the difference. They end up saying, "All religions are invented by man, so they are all wrong." Is that a fair assessment?

Let's compare the characteristics of the religions that people invent and the message of Jesus Christ as the Bible presents it:

The work of God in man's religions	The work of God in the gospel of Christ
1) Man must do all that is necessary in order to earn the right to God's blessing.	1) Jesus did everything himself and gives it to us as a free gift that we do not deserve.
2) Sin is a problem for man only because of its adverse consequences in this life and after death.	2) Sin is a problem in and of itself, much worse than all of its consequences in this life.
3) The primary goal of religion is to deliver us from our personal problems in the physical world.	3) The primary goal of the gospel is to deliver us from sin by transforming our hearts completely.

The theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "The Bible ... is not such a book as man would write if he *could*, or could write if he *would*." The above comparison between the gospel of Jesus Christ and all the other religions of the world shows us the truth of that statement, especially its first affirmation:

- Man wants to hold his head high, proudly asserting that he did what was necessary in order to deserve what he receives from God, while Jesus tells us that he is the only one who can do what is necessary. We receive salvation entirely by grace, because we don't deserve it.
- Man is not particularly troubled by sin, as long as he can avoid the problems that come from it (in this life and after death), while the message of Jesus tells us that sin is, in and of itself, our greatest problem, the one that has to be dealt with first of all.
- Man wants God to change the things that bother him, the things that come from the world around him and cause him pain. God wants to change us from the inside, because that is the true source of our greatest problem.

You can accept or reject the gospel of Christ, but you can't honestly say it is just "one message among so

many others.” When a message is diametrically opposed to everything man always puts into his religions, it just isn't reasonable to say that it is a message that comes from man.

Can you be saved without understanding it all?

The comparison between the gospel as the Bible teaches it and what sinful man wants when he “seeks for God” forces us to face up to a dismal truth: What is called “Christianity” in this world is very often nothing other than the same old man-centered religion, disguised with terms and practices that refer to Jesus. This realization can be scary. Jesus said himself that all those who preach about him are not necessarily his disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast our demons, and in your name perform many miracles?' And I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice evil'” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Who then can be saved? Who can be sure that his way of understanding the gospel is not influenced by the outlook of sinful man?

The answer is not simple, and it is not all black and white. Not all those who call themselves “Christians” are saved (Jesus himself said so), but Jesus saves us by grace, which means that his blood is sufficient for all our sin, which includes the traces of sin in our way of understanding the gospel. Fortunately, it is not up to any of us to judge the state of another person, but a few considerations might help us to see more clearly what it means to be saved, even so.

First of all, we must remember that all those who come to salvation, without exception, do so at first for wrong reasons. It couldn't be otherwise, because those who come to salvation do so as sinners. A sinner, as we have seen, has other priorities and other ways of thinking about life than God does. I personally was interested in the gospel message at first only as a way of avoiding hell. Others come looking for meaning to their lives, for social acceptance in a group where people care about them, for healing, for deliverance from fear, or something else. None of these reasons are totally valid for coming to God, but *all* of them are in one sense: Since a sinner cannot have a better motivation than that, if they cause us to turn to Jesus, that is already a good thing.

But we mustn't stop there. We need to go on further, and discover that God wants to do much more in our lives and our hearts than our puny, immediate, materialistic ambitions at the outset. Little by little, we learn that God wants us to trust him, to let ourselves be led by him, to obey him, to rediscover the relationship with him that was lost by sin. We learn that that is what he wants for us more than anything else.

No one can really understand all of what God wants to do in our lives. If that was necessary in order to be saved, no one would be saved, period. But it is not actually all that complicated for each person to determine, for himself, whether or not he has committed himself to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or only to a human religion with Christian catchwords.

- If you are motivated by the discovery that God does not promise to solve all our personal problems but that he does guarantee us the possibility of a growing, intimate relationship with him, if that causes you to want to go ahead with him, then you have understood the fundamental message of salvation. You are on the right path; you just need to continue along it.
- If it seems unfair to you, however, that God lets you continue on with your difficulties, if you don't see how you can accept “No, my grace is sufficient for you” as an answer, if a personal relationship with God and a holy life do not seem as important to you as being delivered from illness, from poverty or from suffering, then that is a sign there could well be a problem.

Those who find themselves in the first category should not be excessively surprised to discover that some aspects of the gospel were not clear in their minds. That is normal. We are told to “grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). If we are supposed to advance in our knowledge, that means we haven't yet understood it all. There is therefore nothing at all surprising about discovering that we haven't understood it all...

Those who are afraid they may be in the second category should not despair either, but their situation is indeed a bit more disturbing. If that is the situation, you should have the courage to do what Paul exhorted the believers in Corinth to do: “Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). The best way to conduct this test is to compare the fundamental principles of the two spiritual outlooks in the table above, and ask yourself honestly which of them corresponds most closely to the desires of your heart. If you discover that your spiritual motivation has never been anything other than the quest for blessings, if you have never committed yourself to letting God teach you how to trust him, follow him, obey him and live in fellowship with him, it is never too late to do it.

No, we don't have to have understood everything in order to be saved. Fortunately, God's grace is sufficient for that, too. But that is no reason to continue on in our wrong ideas that try to reduce God to a simple giver of blessings for those who deserve them because they did what they were supposed to do. Let us continue on in understanding what God wants to do in our lives by the salvation he makes available to us in Jesus Christ.

Salvation: an unfinished work

If salvation is the solution to the problem of sin, it must change everything that appears in Genesis 3 as a result of sin. In the comparison between the effects of sin in different areas, the items in each column lead to those in the next column. A true solution must therefore deal with the problem of sin in order: first the spiritual problem, then our mentality, and last of all the situations of our lives.

Once we understand that, we see that salvation is a process that takes time. A whole life is not enough, in fact. As long as I am not in perfect fellowship with God, as long as I do not have perfect confidence in his goodness (a confidence which will be seen the most, in fact, by my attitude when he allows me to go through situations that I don't like – which brings us back to the trials in the third column so that I will grow in the grace that will help to restore what is wrong in the first column), the spiritual realm of my life is not completely straightened out. It is not enough just to “stop doing the bad things I used to do.” If all the effects of sin in the first two columns are not completely and permanently eliminated, salvation has not yet completed its work in me.

That is precisely what the Apostle Paul teaches in Philippians 3:12-14: “Not that I have already obtained it all, or already become perfect, but I press on so that I may take hold of that for which Christ Jesus also took hold of me. My brothers, I do not consider myself as having taken hold of it yet, but I do one thing: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to obtain the prize – the upward call from God, in Christ Jesus.” Paul had not yet attained perfection, so he continued to run towards the goal, which was still ahead of him.

We must not consider conversion as the totality of salvation. Too often, unfortunately, that is exactly what is done. It is very widespread among believers to think of being born again as the primary objective of the spiritual life. Once that occurs, we tend not to move on much further. But Paul compares the Christian life to a footrace, in which conversion is not the finish line but the starting line. A runner who stops as soon as he crosses the starting line has no idea what he is doing. It isn't enough to say, “I'm in the race, that's all that counts.” The “finish line” is not the moment of being born again, but the final perfection that awaits us in eternity, when we will be with the Lord. Until then, as long as the goal has not been reached, we must continue on with the race.

There are basically three parts to our salvation:

- At a given point of time, instantly, we experience what the Bible calls being born again (John 3:3-7), a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) or regeneration (Titus 3:5). All three of these terms refer to the same event, a new beginning that occurs through an act of God.
- After that, sanctification continues all throughout the Christian life. We learn more and more of what it means to live in holiness, we enjoy more and more a personal relationship with God, we become more and more what we ought to be.
- Finally, when we enter into eternity (usually at death, except for those who are still alive when the Lord returns), God completes the transformation in us, as 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 shows. This final transformation is called “glorification,” from the term Paul uses in Romans 8:30. That means that the perfect glory of God will be perfectly manifested in us. (The end of Romans 8:18, in the original text, says “...the coming glory that will be revealed *in* us.”)

In one way, since salvation is God's work from one end to the other, and since the God of eternity is not limited by time, it is appropriate to say, from the moment we are born again, that we are saved. There are passages in the Bible that use the term in this way. But in another sense, the full manifestation of salvation is still to come, as 1 Peter 1:5 shows. That is why Paul writes, in Romans 8:24, “For we have been saved in hope. But hope that is seen is not hope. Can we hope for what we already have?” No matter what glorious experiences we may have had, no matter how great our faith or our understanding of the Word, none of us have, here and now, the fullness of salvation. None of us are spiritually perfect.

All those who have understood that salvation is a work that delivers us completely from sin continue to move ahead, because they are necessarily aware that the goal has not yet been reached. They thus know that God wants to continue his work in us, and they are in full agreement with that work (otherwise, they wouldn't have accepted his salvation in the first place). Someone put it very well in saying, “God loves us just as we are, but he loves us too much to let us stay just as we are.”

The understanding that salvation has not yet resolved fully the problem of sin in us does not mean that salvation doesn't work, or that we are not God's children. It just means that “the job is not finished” or that “the race is not yet over.” We must continue moving ahead, not contenting ourselves with an incomplete salvation. By God's grace, salvation will one day be complete. Until then, we continue the race.

Is the majority right?

Most people don't want a salvation that transforms their hearts. Not even a majority of those who call themselves “Christians” want that. Let's be honest, those who proclaim healing, prosperity, a victorious life, personal happiness and all kinds of other forms of well-being in the name of Jesus Christ are much more numerous than those who humbly say: “Change my heart, Lord, so that I can be like you.” How does it happen that the true message of Jesus – the message that Jesus saves us from *sin* – characterizes only a small minority of those who claim to believe in Jesus?

The reason is simple: Since Christianity has become popular in a large part of the world, most “Christians” are a part of it simply because that's what most people do. They grew up with it; it is part of their culture, their family life, their traditions. But those who follow Jesus simply because Christianity is a widespread religion do so without changing their fundamental thinking about God. We have already seen what sinful man wants from God: He wants a God who eliminates the problems of those who have “proved their worth” by doing better than others. That way, not only do they avoid a lot of suffering, but they can also be proud of being among “the best.”

Because of this, sinful man changes Christianity so that it resembles all the other forms of religion that have been invented down through the course of history. It is thus normal that the “Christianity” that is nothing other than the same old religion of sinful man, just with a few words and rituals that refer to Jesus included, spreads so easily in this world. Man does not need a change of heart to accept that kind of message. He can continue on, comfortable in his ideas, while having “God's help in his life.”

At the time of the prophet Jeremiah, false prophets who said that God was going to deliver Israel from its enemies were much more numerous than those who proclaimed repentance and a return to God as the only hope of salvation. That is to be expected. The former message is suitable to sinners, while the latter message is acceptable only to those who truly want God to change their hearts. At pretty much every point in history, in fact, we see the same phenomenon. Those who prefer sin, and a religion that fits in with desires of the sinful heart, are always more numerous than those who want to be transformed in order to live in true holiness. Jesus said it himself, in Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

The majority of “Christians” want a message that is not that of Jesus. That doesn't actually matter much. In particular, it doesn't mean at all that the message of a salvation that changes hearts is false. The majority *isn't* always right and, in this case, an honest look at the teaching of the Bible clearly shows the majority to be wrong. We should not let ourselves be troubled by the fact that most so-called Christians believe and proclaim something other than the true gospel of Jesus.

Nevertheless, that should be a very solemn warning for all of us. Knowing that sinners will always want to twist the gospel into something that resembles the religion that suits the sinful heart, that means we need to be constantly on guard concerning the message of the gospel because *we are all sinners*. It is easy to say, “*They* deform the faith.” But who are “they”? “They” are sinners, which means “they” are each one of us.

The greatest danger comes from inside us: Every sinful heart – which includes every Christian heart, as long as the work of salvation is not finished in us – is at least open to a message that promises well-being and healing here and now, deliverance from trials, and the end of suffering. It is true that God *might* heal, that he *might* deliver from sorrow, that he *might* cause things to work out in a way that suits us. What we would like, though, is to be sure that he *will* do that, not just that he might. But when we look at what the Bible really teaches, we see that we have no assurance of that. And yet, it is extremely difficult for a sinner to admit that these difficulties might be part of God's plan for us, to show us our need to come back to him and count on him.

There is thus a constant danger to the gospel message. The outlook of sinful man is there at every turn, because it is there in our hearts as well. So many times in the history of Israel in the Bible, so many times in the history of the Church, righteous men and women took a stand against deformations to the message of God, sometimes risking their lives to do so, in order to return to the truth. And every time, after a few decades or a few centuries, the deformations came back, in a somewhat different form. We smile when we see in the book of Judges the incessant cycle of sin, repentance, and sin once again, but that is our history as well.

The defense of the purity of the gospel message, the return to the true teaching of the Bible, will always be our first order of business, our highest spiritual priority. A permanent and massive return to the true gospel of Jesus Christ will never happen, because the human heart will just want to deform it once again.

We need to keep ever before us the words of Jude, which apply to our situation today as much as to the situation when he wrote them, nineteen and a half centuries ago: “Beloved, as I desired eagerly to write to you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to do so, in order to urge you to contend for the faith that was delivered once for all to the saints. For certain men, whose condemnation was written long ago, have crept in among you. These ungodly men change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:3-4).

We must never stop “contending for the faith,” for the defense of the only message that delivers man from sin. The tares grow even faster than the good grain (see Matthew 13:24-30). Each new generation of believers has to win the battle anew, in order to remain faithful to the message of Jesus.

What sinful man wants from God is not entirely wrong

We have seen three principles that characterize what people want ordinarily from religion:

- They want to do what is required, in order to receive blessings.
- They don't want to admit that their twisted, sinful heart is the real problem.
- They want God to deliver them from all the difficulties in their lives.

This, of course, is a totally man-centered outlook. Man does what he must in order to produce his own salvation, man receives all the benefits, man lives in the happiness that he deserves. The only problem with that outlook is that it is impossible – God doesn't work that way.

And yet, this way of looking at things is not completely wrong, as surprising as that may seem. If man had not chosen sin, he would have experienced something that is actually fairly similar to that:

- He would have done what God wanted, and he would have received plenty of blessings from God. (The fundamental difference, of course, is that the blessings would not have been a reward for what he did, but rather a manifestation of God's goodness.)
- Sin *wouldn't* have been a problem, since the human heart wouldn't have been twisted.
- God, in his goodness, would indeed have made sure there was no suffering, illness, death, or any other such problems for man.

The major error in sinful man's outlook concerning religion, then, is in thinking that he still has a right to all of what God can do for him, despite having refused to trust God, to submit to him, and to live in personal fellowship with him. Like the prodigal son who didn't want to stay around home because he didn't like the way his father ran things, but who wanted his father's riches so he could run his life the way he wanted, sinful man thinks God should shower him with blessings without him coming back to the relationship of confidence and submission that was lost at the beginning of human history.

The outlook that sinful man incorporates into religion is thus not a total invention, but a sort of trace of what we were originally made for, rooted in our hearts despite our choice to be independent of God. It is wrong, because it doesn't take into account the reality of sin, but it nevertheless corresponds, in general, to what God wants for us.

That is important. It shows that, despite sin, man has not completely forgotten from where he has fallen. He even desires still, though in a way that is twisted by sin into something selfish that still refuses to let God reign in his life, to come back to it. That is where the gospel is truly good news: It *is* possible to come back to it. Man can come back to the relationship of trust and submission to his Creator that was lost by sin. Christ delivers from sin, and gives us the hope of rediscovering fully what was lost in Eden. Jesus did indeed come to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

The dream of sinful man is to have a God who obeys him. That isn't possible – and it wouldn't be a good thing even if it *was* possible – because we don't have the wisdom to know what we really need. But it is possible for man to obey God, not with an obedience that comes from fear of punishment, or as a mere duty, but an obedience that flows from true confidence in God's goodness. That alone is what makes it possible to come back to a full relationship with God. What a sinner is looking for when he seeks for God is just a remnant of that, a vague memory that has been distorted by our self-centered desires. The reality that God offers us is incomparably better, a true solution for the true problem of mankind.

Don't settle for a pale shadow, with a little God who rewards us with blessings because we did what was necessary to get him to act. Seek for the great Creator God who reigns in the universe and who wants to reign in our hearts. That is the true blessing we need and that is what God offers to us in Jesus Christ. He loves us too much to give us anything less. To him alone be all the glory.