The Original Sin Revisited

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Author Note

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Abstract

Rather than examine and discuss the concept of original sin as set forth by Augustine and others, this paper looks at what sin is and what was the first or original sin in the Garden (Genesis 3). Using Scripture, narrative, personal experience and the gift of human reasoning, we find that the original sin in the Garden was not what many suppose and/or propose: disobedience. In fact, the first sin is much deeper and more destructive, and it remains the first sin of all humankind.
The Psalmist declares, or laments, “Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the
time my mother conceived me” (Ps.51:5). Those are words that don’t settle well with our 21st
Century, “enlightened” view of the world. Rather, we prefer to believe that we are all born
innocent, that humankind once existed as some “noble savage” possessed of an innate goodness.¹
I wonder if Rousseau ever had a three-year-old in the house. Whitehouse notes that various
“worldviews, whether from old Babylon, Greece (Plato’s Republic), or modern naturalism
generally assume that man [sic] is innately good or at least neutral, and is evolving progressing
in virtue.”² Scripture counters saying that “every inclination of the human heart is evil from
childhood” (Gen. 8:21). We’re just a bad lot!

From my earliest memories, I was selfish and conniving. By age five, I was stealing from
friends’ houses. By early elementary school, I was shop-lifting candies, toys and cigarettes, and
still trying to lie to my parents. A age seven, I did cruel, blood-shedding violence (albeit,
somewhat accidental) to another human being. At age eight, I helped a friend steal cigarettes
from his mom so we could go smoking. I figured out how to cheat in school early on. Passing on
any gossip—verified or not—was second nature. As one of the biggest children in my class, I
had no compunction using my size to my advantage, to bully others. Making classmates the butt
of my jokes, embarrassing others, ignoring others’ pain was all part and parcel of my day. Some
of my Christian brothers would say that I had yet to reach the ‘age of accountability.’

¹ These ideas were perhaps and most forcefully set forth in Rousseau's Confessions (1765-1770) and Emile, or
On Education (1762)…and thoroughly contradicted in the horrifically violent French Revolution of 1789-1799.
² Thomas Whitehouse, “The Importance of the Old Testament for our Worldview Today.” Address, VII
National Congress of the National Union of Church Teachers, Querétaro, Mexico, accessed March 10, 2017,
http://www.edinburgseminary.org/resources/Library/Our-Professors/ImportanceOT.pdf.
thing, because I was a rotten kid who managed to come out ‘smelling like a rose’ for family and teachers. However, I was sinful to the core.

**What is Sin?**

“Sinful” in what sense? What is sin? Bromley defines sin “primarily in relationship to God. It is disobedience, unbelief . . . the positive assertion of usurped autonomy, and the wicked deviation from, or violation of, God’s righteous will and law.” He goes on to assert that our relationship to God necessarily impacts or affects our relationship with others, and we would suggest it impacts our own interior lives. If the greatest commandment, as defined by Jesus, is to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (see Matt.22:37ff), and if we cannot love neighbor without loving God (see I John 4:20ff), then the very connection of God, neighbor and self would surely stand with regard to sin: To sin is to impact all of our relationships.

Why do we have sin? Where is sin born? Genesis tells us the story.

The stage is set in Genesis 2: “. . . The Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die’” (v.16-17). In literature class, we call this “foreshadowing”—we know something is going to happen. Whenever a human being is given limits, parameters, it seems that the natural reaction is to push the boundaries, and that’s exactly what we find in Genesis 3. Here, we run in to the ‘first sin.’

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I’ve been in church most of my life, and from the time I was very small, I can remember Sunday School teachers, preachers, youth leaders and many others pointing out that the original sin (not to be confused with the questionable concept of ‘original sin’ first put forth by Augustine) that the original sin of humankind was ‘disobedience.’ They went on, faithful to their own logic, to say that if we would simply obey, life would be different, better. We were to obey God, obey our parents, and obey people in authority. We sang the church anthem, “Trust and Obey,” certain that disobedience had been humankind’s failure since the Garden. Interestingly, the words “disobey” and “disobedience” do not appear in this narrative, and the suggestion that it was an act of ‘disobedience’ appears only once in the New Testament where Paul writes, “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). For the vast majority of our theological stances, we search diligently for internal verification, multiple witnesses, for those important places wherein Scripture supports Scripture. ‘Footwashing’ appears only once (John 13), so most orthodox Christians recognize its value, but none of them make it an ordinance or sacrament. How did ‘disobedience’ win out as the first sin?

**Disobedience?**

In any case, I went along with this idea until I really began to study and meditate (I think the meditation part was crucial!) on these Scriptures when I was teaching at the John Wesley Methodist Seminary in Monterrey. As I thought about this passage and as I recalled the many times I had heard this passage taught, preached, presented, I came to a realization about disobedience: 99.9% of the time, people don’t decide to disobey; they are not intentionally and overtly disobedient. What do I mean? Allow me to tell you story.
When my family lived and served in Grenada (West Indies) in mission work, the circumstances of that world at that time allowed me to get a driver’s license when I was just 14-years-old (that’s yet another story!), and Dad was comfortable loaning me the car for short trips by the time I was 15-years-old. I had met Claudia, daughter of the Bolivian ambassador, and she had agreed to go with me on a date to the Red Crab Pub & Restaurant (now, if a lot of this seems completely out of order, just understand that in our context, there was nothing questionable going on, but I do begin to realize that I need to write a book about my experiences as a ‘missionary kid’!) As kids our age did, we slipped into the darts room where we sipped on ‘lime squash’ (a non-alcoholic drink made of fresh-squeezed lime juice, mineral water, nutmeg syrup and a dash of Angostura bitters served in a beer mug. Oh, we felt grown up!) Anyway, we threw darts, drank squash, and had a good time with our friends. Dad had told me to be home by 11pm. I had a watch, and I could read it. But, but, I was with Claudia! And, we were having a lot of fun. And, I didn’t want to be a spoil-sport. At 11:10pm, I finally told Claudia that I needed to take her home and get home myself. I dropped her at her house and pulled into my driveway around 11:30pm.

At first glance, I was simply and obviously disobedient. And, it is true—I did not obey. But, disobedience was in this case—as in the Garden—a secondary sin. A secondary sin? Perhaps we should call it a ‘symptomatic sin.’ When we get a cold virus, we have a runny nose, sneezing, etc. Those irritating symptoms are not the root problem. We can take some meds that ease the symptoms, but the symptoms only completely go away when the virus is finally flushed from our system. I suggest that disobedience is simply a symptomatic sin in most cases. In my case, I did not sit there in the pub and say to myself, “Ha! I’m going to disobey my father.” In
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fact, I did not want to disobey my father. I wanted him to be happy with me. But, I also wanted Claudia to be happy with me.

Jesus teaches us clearly and unambiguously that sin begins deep within us. “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts . . .” (Matthew 15:17-19, NIV). So, the sins of others that we see and hear and experience—violence, war, lies . . . disobedience—these are all symptomatic or secondary sins. They are symptoms of selfishness, arrogance, pride, egotism, fear, envy and all the other ‘evil thoughts’ that go on inside our hearts and minds.

My sin, my truly original sin, in the pub situation was not disobedience; my sins were pride and fear: pride in thinking myself and my wishes more important that my father’s, and fear in worrying what my date might think of me having to be home so ‘early’ when others were clearly staying until closing time. I had no desire to disobey my father. My internal sins of pride and fear resulted in the external sin of disobedience.

So, what about Adam and Eve in the Garden? Yes, they did disobey. But, disobedience was not the original, first sin of humankind. There was something going on inside, and that ‘something’ going on inside—I’m convinced—IS the original, human sin.

The REAL Original Sin

Often times in my English classes at the local community college, we get around to discussing those questions that deal with ‘worldview’ and ‘ultimate reality.’ The questions usually begin to surface when I suggest that our perspectives and understandings of the world are built on the foundation of our ‘presuppositions’—those underlying beliefs that we bring to every
situations or question. For instance, we have all have presuppositions and assumptions about the goodness or badness of humanity. I ask my students, “Are people, humans, basically good or basically bad?”

How we answer this question will inform how we deal with others, what we expect of people, how we raise our children, etc. If I presume humanity to be basically good, then I’m horrified at the Columbines, Auroras, Newtowsns and city buses of New Delhi; if I presume humanity to be basically bad, then I’m not terribly surprised by the horrors of humanity (or at least I shouldn’t be!)

But, is there another option? (When will we learn that the world does not revolve around “A or B” options?!) After we have debated and fleshed out the good or bad perspectives in my classes, I raise a third perspective (presupposition)—humanity is not good or bad; people, rather, are selfish, self-centered and often driven by fear, and that this is true from birth. At first, I get blank stares. Then, I can almost begin to see in their eyes the connections happening in their minds.

Anyone who has ever had children will recognize it in a moment. Children—little ones—really aren’t morally good or bad until they are old enough to make conscious decisions regarding themselves in relation to others. However, from the moment they are born, they are absolutely self-absorbed, self-centered, selfish. They want to eat . . . and they want it now. Then, they want attention. They want praise. They want . . . want . . . want. The children don’t just ‘grow out of it’ – just take a three-year-old up and down the toy aisles of a store and you’ll hear it—“But I want . . . ! Waaaaaaaaa!” I even hear it from teenagers . . . and, lamentably, from adults as well . . .
If we were born bad, that would explain the horrors we see in the world—the violence, the wars, the greed, the theft, the abuse…but it would not explain the good we see. If we were born good, then the world should certainly be a much better place than it is—but how would we explain the bad that is so prevalent? But, if we are born selfish, if we are ‘naturally’ self-centered, egotistical . . . then, well, that would explain a lot about the world—the good and the bad.

If individuals are selfish, then groups of individuals would develop a “group selfishness”—something we see as corporations seek total market control, as political parties push for their party line above common sense or common good, as governments push for extremes of patriotism and nationalism. In fact, if we look at many of the problems today—from the small and local to the big and national, we can trace the origins of the problems back to good, old-fashioned selfishness and egoism.

The Scriptures recognize self-worship and self-importance as the greatest problem with humanity . . . and we are called, as a response to this nature, to self-emptying as the highest act of faith. Jesus taught his followers, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, NIV) and again, “If anyone wishes to be my disciples, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:22ff NIV). The very greatest love one can have is to commit a selfless act. Jesus even ‘walked the talk,’ right up to an agonizing death on the Cross. If that is the greatest love, then the opposite—the worst thing one can do—is to pursue selfishness.

So, if we embrace this idea—humanity is first and foremost selfish—what does that mean for us? It means that before or as we teach our children to be ‘good,’ we have to teach them to
think of others, to act on behalf of others, to live for the benefit of others . . . and not just unto themselves. It means that as adults we must be willing to set aside the pursuit of our personal gain and recognize that we must help others to achieve and gain as well. It means that our institutions, companies and corporations must look beyond themselves and the bottom-line profits. It means that our nation and all the other nations must do more than simply help themselves.

Are people basically good or basically bad? No—we are basically selfish, and the great human task is to train the coming generation—and move ourselves—to look beyond ourselves, to think of others.

Adam and Eve were selfish and perhaps afraid—afraid of missing out on an opportunity. Borgman argues that the original sin of Adam and Eve was fear, “fear of being less than that someone over there,” terrified that someone might have something they did not possess. They worry that they’ll miss an opportunity, a chance to be something more, greater. Perhaps it was that need to ‘keep up with the Joneses’—and God was the one to keep up with: “. . . You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen.3:5b). Never did they think in their own minds, “Hey, let’s disobey God by eating fruit!” No. Their sin—like all our sins—began deep inside, and spilled “out of the heart.”

Reality of Evil

However, we cannot ignore that there was another force in play throughout the narrative. Adam and Eve did not just jump into their situation of their own accord.

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Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” (Genesis 3:1, NIV)

The primordial couple did not come up with the idea—the doubts, the possibilities—on their own. The serpent raises his head—a representative of the power and force of evil, any force contrary to God that exists in our world. Wenham writes:

> Early Jewish and Christian commentators identified the snake with Satan or the devil, but since there is no other trace of a personal devil in early parts of the OT, modern writers doubt whether this is the view of our narrator. It is often asserted that the serpent is the symbol of the Canaanite fertility cults, and that therefore Genesis 3 illustrates the choice before Israel—should they obey Yahweh or follow Baal?\(^5\)

Whether representative of Satan/the Devil or a Canaanite god/goddess, this creature stands contrary to God and God’s will for humankind. Also, we need to keep in mind that if anything, this creature is merely representative at best. Sailhamer points out that “the serpent is said to be one of the ‘beasts of the field’ which the Lord God had made . . . the purpose of this statement is to exclude the notion that the serpent was supernatural being. ‘The serpent is none other than a serpent.’”\(^6\) Of course, this serpent is not just a serpent, unless serpents have since lost their voice. This crafty, talking serpent certainly stands (until cursed to go on his belly) as a voice contrary to God. We see here that the world around us is not completely neutral—there are forces contrary to God, and those forces attempt to convince others to join the rebellion.

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In other places, I’ve argued that we build our faith on the ‘foundation stones’ that we find first in Genesis 1 – 12. So, here in Genesis 3, we must grasp these foundational ideas—sin begins within us and there are malevolent forces in this world. We begin to see the actions of others as symptoms of something deeper. If we see ourselves as central, most important—that is, if we are self-absorbed, selfish—our actions will flow out of that understanding. If the Good News of God in Jesus is central, our actions will flow out of that. The original sin, the first sin we see in the Bible—disobedience—flows out of a deeper, internal sin: selfishness, fear or arrogance.
References


http://www.edinburgseminary.org/resources/Library/Our-Professors/ImportanceOT.pdf.