

# The Nature of Sin

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MINISTRIES

## Definition of Sin

There are many expressions in the Bible that define sin. Some include: missing the mark or aim, overpassing or trespassing of a line (to transgress), disobedience to a voice, falling where one should have stood upright, ignorance of what one ought to have known, diminishing of that which should have been rendered in full measure, non-observance of a law, lawless or anarchy (complete disregard for the law), and debt, failure in duty, and not meeting one's obligation to God.<sup>i</sup> The Bible also uses iniquity, godlessness, wickedness, unbelief, unrighteousness, injustice, and unholiness to define sin.<sup>ii</sup>

The Westminster Larger Catechism defines sin as "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God given as a rule to the reasonable creature."<sup>iii</sup> Other scholars substitute "law" for "character." In other words, they say anything that contradicts or diverts us from God's holy nature, given that we were created in His perfect divine image.<sup>iv</sup> If we consider the deviation from God's "law" and "character," then sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the character or law of God given as a rule to the reasonable creature.<sup>v</sup>

Sin is considered a specific type of evil, and more; the sinner is not just one who does not obey God's law. They have become a force of moral evil in the world. Moral evil differs from physical calamities, such as floods, earthquakes, and drought. We read, "*I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things*" (Isaiah 45:7). The Hebrew word used here for calamity (some translate as evil) is *rah*, but it is not defined as "sin." It denotes a calamity or adversity rendered as a judgment of God, and indeed, He uses calamity to bring righteous judgments and chastisement to the earth. We read, "*For when Your judgments are in the earth, The inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*" (Isaiah 26:9, NKJV).<sup>vi</sup>

There are distinct types of sin; one sin makes us guilty for every kind of sin.<sup>vii</sup> We read, "*Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all*" (James 2:10). There are sins of commission and omission, i.e., doing what is wrong or not doing what is right.<sup>viii</sup> There are sins of unbelief and those for breaking God's commandments, even out of ignorance.<sup>ix</sup> The rabbis categorize God's commandments as positive to act (*mitzvot aseh*) and negative to abstain from an action (*mitzvot lo taaseh*). The first positive commandment is to remember the Lord, "*I am the Lord your God*" (Exodus 20:2), and the first negative one is to refrain from having other ones, "*You shall have no other gods before Me*" (Exodus 20:3).

## God's Law

God communicated His Law and instruction (called the *Torah*) through Moses to Israel, revealing His knowledge, wisdom, and, more importantly, His perfect and holy nature. Everything concerning God's law and the prophets was and is to be fulfilled in Christ, for it is written: *"These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me"* (Luke 24:44). Jesus said, *"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled"* (Matthew 5:18).

All scripture points to Christ, who is not only the one who would exclusively fulfill the commandments and ordinances of God's Law but is solely the embodiment of the Law itself.<sup>x</sup> As John said, the *words* of scripture became flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>xi</sup> Therefore, we make no distinction between sins against God's law or His character; they are the same. Sin is a transgression of God's law, and sinning against His law is the same as sinning against His nature. We read, *"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; 9 but if you [a]show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors"* (James 2:8-9).<sup>xii</sup>

There is a misconception that the Law of Moses is either flawed or inferior to the New Covenant. No, God's law is perfect. As the Psalmist declared: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul..."* (Psalm 19:7). And Paul said: *"The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good"* (Romans 7:12). It is man who is flawed and incapable of becoming unblemished and sanctified through any actions of our own, even our obedience to the law. However, what man could not accomplish in following God's law because of his sinful nature, Jesus, the Son of God, coming in the likeness of sinful flesh on account of sin, has fulfilled perfectly for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.<sup>xiii</sup>

But God did not give His law to Israel arbitrarily, even saying to them, *"For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off... But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it"* (Deuteronomy 30:11 & 14). The Lord had a purpose knowing that Israel would fail in keeping His law. It revealed God's holiness and provided for the knowledge of sin, and allowed the Israelites to attempt to do what was right and offer atonement through animal sacrifices when they failed.<sup>xiv</sup> Paul said, *"Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet'"* (Romans 7:7).

In Judaism, the Books of Moses (Pentateuch/*Chumash*), called the *Torah*, provide the foundation for all Jewish Law, called *Halacha*. The word "*Torah*" comes from the Hebrew *hora'ah* and means "teaching" or "instruction," as the Lord commanded the Israelites. Paul said: *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16).

In Greek, the law is called the *paidagogos*, which means "schoolmaster." There is no exact translation in the English language. However, a *paidagogos* was usually a trusted enslaved person in a wealthy Roman family who was responsible for superintending the general care of a son from about the age of six through sixteen. Hence we see Israel's temporary and provisional arrangement under the Law until the child matures to an age worthy of receiving his father's inheritance. We see a beautiful picture of this in Ezekiel:

*"Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite... And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare."*

*"When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine, says the Lord GOD."*

*"Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head."*

*"Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty. Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you, says the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 16:3-14).*

If the Lord knew that Israel would fail in keeping the Law, why would He say He expected them to do so? Because not doing what is right when we know what God expects of us holds us liable. Hence, Israel is judged according to the law. We read, *"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20)*. Once we learn through the law that sin is any deviation from God's holy nature, sin now takes on the form of transgression. Transgression is imputed sin, as we read, *"For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Romans 5:13)*.<sup>xv</sup>

But what about the Gentiles who were never given the written law? Paul said, *"For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law" (Romans 2:12)*. In the end, our fate is the same. Judgment by the law brings death, and those without it also perish. As it is written: *"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NO, NOT ONE" (Romans 3:10)*. Hence, the final purpose of the law was to bring Israel, and

subsequently, all humanity, to repentance and the recognition of our need for a Savior. Jesus is the one who, by His sacrifice, can justify us before a righteous God.

While demonstrating God's grace, the Law of Moses, its priesthood, and sacrificial offerings could only temporarily cover sin. Hence we read, *"If perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law... For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God."* (Hebrews 7:11-12 & 18-19).

The Law made nothing perfect, not because there was something wrong with God's law, but because imperfect men cannot remove the pollution of sin on their souls by attempting to follow God's perfect standard. We can certainly learn how to act according to God's law, but we cannot remove the sinful nature inherited from Adam.<sup>xvi</sup> Sin does not only consist of outward actions; it is a principle of the corrupted nature within the sinner. And we are sinners by nature before we sin in practice. Jesus said, *"Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit"* (Matthew 7:17-18).

Notice that Jesus was inclined to cut down the evil tree rather than discard the rotten fruit.<sup>xvii</sup> His analogy shows us that our sinful nature is more than external. Every part of our body is sick and infected with this incurable metastasized disease. Hence, Jesus said that an adulterous look was the same as adultery, and anger was akin to murder.<sup>xviii</sup> Temptation is not sin; the continual longing or desire to perpetrate the act is sinful. As the Lord told Cane, *"Sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it"* (Genesis 4:7). Over time, these desires become a condition of the heart, which is as deadly as the wicked act itself. James said, *"Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death"* (James 1:14-15).

God inscribed the Law of Moses on stone tablets, indicating that our hearts were hard and cold. But in Christ, the Lord said: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh"* (Ezekiel 36:26). In Christ, we are not only delivered from the curse and penalty of the Law, which is death, but He cleanses us and makes us a new creation in Him without a sinful nature.<sup>xix</sup>

Our flesh still sins, but God has promised now to write His law, meaning His essence and nature, on our hearts and transform us day by day into the perfect image of Christ.<sup>xx</sup> We are forever covered by the blood of the Lamb, living in God's permanent grace. Yet, we are reminded of what Paul said: *"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!"* (Romans 6:15). God's grace gives us the comfort in knowing that if we fall short of God's perfection, we are never condemned.<sup>xxi</sup>

## The New Covenant

The Bible refers to Christ as the “everlasting covenant.”<sup>xxii</sup> We read, *“All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him” (John 1:10).* Because creation was made through Christ, all humanity is born with the natural law of Christ on their hearts.<sup>xxiii</sup> However, God further gave Israel His written law—the Torah. Because we have all fallen short of God’s natural and written law, He declared: *“The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, Because they have transgressed the laws, Changed the ordinance, Broken the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:5).*<sup>xxiv</sup> The earth has broken the everlasting covenant, who is Christ, *“The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).*

Therefore, the Lord has declared that He will make a new everlasting covenant with all His creation. To the Jews, He declared, *“For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth, And will make with them [Israel] an everlasting covenant. Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, And their offspring among the people. All who see them shall acknowledge them, That they are the posterity whom the Lord has blessed” (Isaiah 61:8-9).*

And to the Gentiles, the Lord declared, *“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price... Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—The sure mercies of David. Indeed I have given him as a witness to the people, A leader and commander for the people. Surely you shall call a nation you do not know, And nations who do not know you shall run to you, Because of the Lord your God, And the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you” (Isaiah 55:1-5).*

The everlasting covenant, Christ, is the same and equal covenant promised through Abraham to both Jew and Gentile, allowing God to establish this covenant independently with each. We read: *“As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you [Abraham], and you shall be a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4); “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, In you all the nations shall be blessed” (Galatians 3:8).*

In other words, the covenant with the Gentiles does not have to be administered through the nation of Israel, nor does it make the Jewish people intermediaries to God’s covenant with the Gentiles.<sup>xxv</sup> No, God has made his everlasting covenant with each—His sovereign work of salvation amongst the nations. And for this reason, there is now full equality between Jews and Gentiles.

It also does not require the Gentiles to become Jewish to enter the covenant, and certainly, does not require the Jews to relinquish their unique identity either. We have each been uniquely created in the image of Christ, one people of God comprised of every tongue, tribe, nation, and

people on the face of the earth, to worship Him with the diversity of culture, language, and ethnicity He has given each of us. The early Apostles recognized this uniqueness at the Council of Jerusalem and did not put a yoke on the neck of the Gentiles, which our Jewish fathers could not bear.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Christ is the mediator of this new everlasting covenant to both Jew and Gentile. However, because the Jewish people were under the bondage of an Old Covenant, the Lord had to officiate a New Covenant with Israel to free us from the condemnation of the old. As we read, *"Your covenant with death will be annulled" (Isaiah 28:18); "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).*

And so, to the Jew, we are under the *new* everlasting covenant (emphasis on new), free from the condemnation and judgment of the Old Covenant—the written law. And to the Gentiles, you are under the new *everlasting* covenant (emphasis on everlasting), free from the condemnation of the natural—unwritten law of sin and death. As we read: *"Foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'" (Galatians 3:8); "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29); "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Romans 4:16).*

Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 3:23. 1 Timothy 2:14. Hebrews 2:2-3, 9:7. Galatians 6:1. 1 Corinthians 6:7. Acts 5:1-10. James 4:17. 1 John 3:4. Matthew 6:12.

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 26:40. 1 Peter 4:18. Proverbs 11:31. Romans 11:20. 1 John 1:9. Deuteronomy 25:15-16. 1 Timothy 1:9.

<sup>iii</sup> Assembly of Divine, larger Catechism. Westminster, England: 1723.

<sup>iv</sup> Chafer, 227.

<sup>v</sup> Duffield, Guy P. and Van Cleave, Nathaniel M. *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. Foursquare Media. 1910.

<sup>vi</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

<sup>vii</sup> Galatians 3:10.

<sup>viii</sup> James 4:17.

<sup>ix</sup> John 16:8-9. Romans 14:23. Numbers 15:27-28. Leviticus 5:17. Luke 12:47-48.

<sup>x</sup> John 5:39. Luke 24:27.

<sup>xi</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>xii</sup> Isaiah 6:5. Job 42:5-6. Luke 5:8. Romans 7:7. Galatians 3:19. Revelation 1:17.

<sup>xiii</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21. Romans 8:3.

<sup>xiv</sup> Romans 3:19-20.

<sup>xv</sup> Romans 7:13.

<sup>xvi</sup> Genesis 17:1. Proverbs 28:18.

<sup>xvii</sup> Matthew 3:10.

<sup>xviii</sup> Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28.

<sup>xix</sup> Psalm 51:2, 7. 1 John 1:7. John 3:7. Galatians 3:13, 5:18. Romans 6:14, 7:4. Ephesians 2:15. Colossians 2:14.

<sup>xx</sup> Jeremiah 31:33. 2 Corinthians 3:7-1, 11. Hebrews 8:10, 16.

<sup>xxi</sup> Romans 8:1.

<sup>xxii</sup> Isaiah 42:6.

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xxiii Romans 2:14.

xxiv Romans 3:10.

xxv Acts 10:44.

xxvi Acts 15:10.