

# The Emergence of Sin and Misery

by John Piper

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*The sermon explores the emergence of sin and misery in the world, tracing its origin to the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 3:5, Genesis 12:1, Mark 2:17, Acts 17:26, Romans 3:23, Romans 8:20, Ephesians 2:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:7, Hebrews 10:19

**Topics:** "Original Sin", "Redemption Through Christ"

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## Description

John Piper preaches on 'The Emergence of Sin and Misery,' emphasizing the foundational truths of God's creation and the doctrine of original sin. He explains how sin and misery have affected all humanity since the fall of Adam and Eve, leading to the necessity of redemption through Christ. Piper delves into the power of sin, its origin, nature, consequences, and the divine remedy provided by God, urging listeners to understand the depth of their sinfulness and the need for forgiveness and holiness through Christ.

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## Transcript

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THE EMERGENCE OF SIN AND MISERY Biblical history is unintelligible without the doctrine of creation. The record of events from Adam and Eve through the history of Israel, the coming of Christ, the rise of the church and the coming consummation make no sense apart from this truth: God the Father, through the agency of the Son, created out of nothing all that is not God by his word of command, and by this same word he so upholds all things that the emergence of every new being is his peculiar creation. The reason Biblical history does not make sense apart from this truth is that all Biblical history is a record of God acting in and over history as the owner of all that is. He subjects creation to futility (Rom 8:20); he disperses the nations over the whole face of the earth, determining their allotted Periods and boundaries (Acts 17:26); he chooses a people and makes an irrevocable promise to give them a land, and a great posterity (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:8); and sends famine or gives prosperity (2 Kings 8:1; Ps. 105:16); he gives life and takes it away (Job 1:21); he lifts up one king and casts down another (Dan. 2:21); he brings all time to its fullness, sends his Son to the world; brings him to the cross according to his own plan and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23; 4:28); raises him from the dead, builds his church; and will one day come in unimaginable splendor to save and to judge so that the knowledge of his glory will fill the earth like the waters fill the sea.

Biblical history is the record of a God who acts like an owner, who assumes absolute rights over the world and nations and individuals, who has a purpose and plan for the world and who will not be thwarted (Is. 46:9,10). Therefore, Biblical history makes no sense without the doctrine of creation. It is the story of a Creator whose aim is to display in history the many-faceted diamond glory of his wisdom (Eph. 3:10), power (Ex. 14:4), wrath (Rom. 9:22) and mercy (Rom. 11:32). That is why we laid the foundation of God's creator-power last week.

But now there is another reality, another doctrine without which the history of the world and God's work in it makes no sense. This is the reality of sin and misery, the truth which is often called the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine is this: all people, everywhere and in all times, since the fall of our first parents into sin, have an innate depravity of heart which leads us to sin as soon as we are able to sin; and this universal condition of mankind is owing to the disobedience of Adam and God's judgment upon it.

Two things are clear from history: one is that God is the Creator of the world and has the right and the power to use it for his glory; the other is that "all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). When these two truths are brought together, what emerges is redemptive history, the history of God's redeeming, reclaiming, renewing, saving work. The reality of sin and misery makes redemption necessary. The reality of God's power and rights over his creation makes redemption possible, even certain. When these two truths are seen clearly, then the mind is set for understanding the history of redemption. Last week we looked at creation. Today we look at the emergence of sin and misery. Not out of mere intellectual or psychological interest, but because, if what the Bible says is true, we have all so dishonored our creator by our sin that we stand under eternal condemnation unless we find forgiveness in the Redeemer and make it our vocation to resist sin by his power. To know the extent, origin, nature and consequences of sin not only helps make sense of history, but more importantly will cause us to flee with urgency to Christ (Heb. 10:19-22) and devote ourselves to the holiness without which no one will be saved (Heb. 12:14).

There are five things about sin that I want us to see from the Bible this morning: the power of sin over all people in their natural condition, the origin of sin in the world, the essence or nature of sin, the consequences of sin and finally (not wanting to make anyone wait till Christmas), the divine remedy for sin. We believe the Bible is the Word of God. It is the best diagnosis of the human condition that has ever been written. God help us to listen with our minds and hearts and to follow his redemptive therapy to the full.

The whole Bible witnesses implicitly or explicitly that every person is a sinner: 1 Kings 8:46, "There is no man who does not sin"; Eccl. 7:20, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth, who does good and never sins"; Psalm 143:1,2, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, ... Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee"; Romans 3:23, "There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Is it a fluke that all people everywhere sin? Or is this not compelling evidence that all people have an innate depravity of heart that inclines them to sin? On the editorial page of last Friday's Tribune Ellen Goodman pondered the poll that says 68% of Americans expect us to be in a war in the next few years. She wrote:

Like history students who study human saga using war as the highlight, the dateline, the climax of each era--peace seems sometimes, in our despair, like nothing more than the set-up for another war. So today we even wonder whether there is an intrinsic flaw in the human character, whether we are all like nursery school children who keep building towers and destroying them to build and destroy again.

She closed with a quote from Albert Einstein, "The splitting of the atom has changed everything save man's mode of thinking ... thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe ..." Whether Einstein thought this fatal "mode of thinking" was part of human nature or not, Ellen Goodman can only "wonder whether there is an intrinsic flaw in the human character." (Maybe with a name like Goodman that's as far as you can go.) But those who accept the witness of Scripture have ceased to wonder. There is most definitely an intrinsic flaw in all human character.

Not only do all men sin. They do so because they are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9). It is no fluke that the statistical probability of a person sinning is 100% and that there has been but one exception (Jesus). We sin because of who we are, because our nature is corrupt, our hearts are depraved. There is a fatal flaw in the human character. Here is the way Paul put it in Ephesians 2:1-3. He explains that apart from Christ all people are "dead through trespasses and sins"; they are "sons of disobedience." "Among these," he says, "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind." "By nature children of wrath." Every one of us has a depraved heart, a natural corruption of the will. Jeremiah meant everybody when he said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (17:9). And it was not poetic overstatement when David grieved over his own impurity with these words: "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). God testifies to us in his word, therefore, that all people sin and in doing so they act according to their corrupt nature. The heart of every man, woman and child is desperately corrupt. That's the first thing we need to see about sin. And what a heart-breaking, pride-shattering experience it should be. (As I was writing that sentence, an interruption came and I started to feel irritated and indignant. But then the truth of the sentence saved me. My conscience said, "Who do you think you are, Piper, to be indignant toward your fellowman at such a small irritation, when your own heart is so depraved that you have not only irritated, but also defamed the glory of God every day of your life? And yet you live!" Do you see the moral power of the doctrine of original sin when it humbles us before God and each other?)

The inevitable question in response to this truth is: Where did all this sin and depravity come from? How did we get to be this way? The Bible does not give us an ultimate answer. But it does give an answer: in the Old Testament, Genesis 1-3; in the New Testament, Romans 5. When God finished creating man and woman in his own image, it says: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). God made man good. He did not create a depraved man. In addition, the point of Gen. 2 is that God provided for man everything he needed to make his life rich and happy. He was bountiful to his creature, not begrudging. How then did man become depraved and the world become miserable? The Old Testament answer is Genesis 3. In a moment of catastrophic (and to my mind inexplicable) disobedience Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their innocence vanished, their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked (3:7). And then to make plain the awful magnitude of what happened the writer gives no exposition of doctrine; he simply tells the terrible story: the first lovers now blaming each other (Gen. 3:12), the curses of God falling on them, their first child a murderer and fugitive (Gen. 4), the arrogant vengeance of Lamech (Gen. 4:23f), the litany (in Gen. 5) of how the descendants of Adam died, the increase of wickedness everywhere until the flood dooms the world (Gen. 6-8), and even afterward the presumption of people to build a tower to heaven and make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:1-9).

It remained for the apostle Paul (in Romans 5:12-21) to give us the divinely inspired exposition of what happened in Genesis 3.

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned--sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We will study this passage together in detail some day. But now at least this much is clear: verse 12, "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin"; verse 15, "Many died through one man's trespass"; verse 16, "The judgment following one trespass brought condemnation"; verse 17, "Because of one man's trespass death reigned through that one man"; verse 18, "One man's trespass led to condemnation for all men"; verse 19, "By one man's disobedience many were made sinners." As far as it goes, the teaching is clear: the universality of sin and misery in the world is owing to the fall of our first parents into disobedience.

But now there are two reasons why I said the Bible does not give us an ultimate answer to the question of how sin came into the world. One is that even before the Fall we encounter an evil, lying tempter in the Garden of Eden, and not a word is said about where this serpent comes from. The New Testament identifies the tempter as Satan (Rev. 12:9) and refers in passing to angels who left their position (Jude 1:6) and fell under God's judgment (2 Peter 2:4); but we are told nothing about how the first actual sin of the universe occurred. And to me it is a great Mystery why any angelic being in the presence of God should ever cease to delight in God and instead seek joy in his own self-esteem. The ultimate origin of sin is shrouded in the darkness of eternity past. The second reason I said the Bible's answer is real but not ultimate is that it does not tell us how the sin of Adam is transmitted to his posterity. We are simply told that it is. And the Bible assumes that we will trust the justice of God. Whether it is just for God to subject all men to Adam's condition hangs on whether God as the creator has the right to establish a kind of unity between Adam and his posterity which results in that fatal flaw being passed on from generation to generation. We don't have time this morning to probe more deeply into the mysteries of moral accountability and God's subjection of humanity to sin and misery.

But at least two things I think should be said as pointers. First, God did not add to man an evil principle when Adam fell. The depravity of the human heart is not due to an addition, but to a privation. Concerning the source of depravity in the heart, John wrote: "The desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and the pride of life are not of the Father, but are of the world" (1 John 2:16). It seems to me that what happened in the Fall is that God took from man the light by which man could see the glorious desirability of God over all things. Without this light, man was left a merely natural being. And as such all his desires were swallowed up in darkness and went after things of the world: pleasure, power, esteem, status. God did not add these evil desires; he simply put a distance between man and the holy light of his glory.

The other pointer is this: our conscience witnesses unmistakably that we are accountable before God. And our experience witnesses unmistakably that we are corrupt before God. We know we are prone to wander from God due to some fatal flaw in our nature. But we know just as strongly that we are accountable before God not to wander. It may be that while we look through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12) we will not satisfy ourselves how these two truths fit together (our accountability and our innate natural depravity). That may have to wait. But when our experience, our conscience and the holy Word of God unite to teach these truths, we do well to believe and to be humbled. All people sin due to the depravity of their heart. And all people come into the world with this depraved heart because God established a unity between Adam and his posterity which results in that fatal flaw being passed on from generation to generation.

The third thing I want us to see about sin is its nature or essence. Something very important is overlooked when we simply say that the first sin was disobedience, the eating of the forbidden fruit. The forbidden tree was given a name because it stood for something. It was called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). That phrase, "the knowledge of good and evil," has a distinct meaning in the Old Testament. It refers to the ability to determine for one's self what is good and evil, what is helpful and harmful. In Gen. 3:5,22. God has this ability and right. In 1 Kings 3:9 Solomon prays for it so he can rule well. In Deut. 1:39 little children don't have it yet. In 2 Sam. 19:35 senile people have lost it. The "knowledge of good and evil" refers, therefore, to the capacity and the right to decide for one's self what is good and what is bad; what is helpful and what is harmful. Therefore, what God was forbidding was not an arbitrary fruit, but what the fruit symbolized. To eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" would mean to reject God as the all-wise, all-caring Father who knows what is good for us, and in his place to put ourselves. Therefore, what God forbade man to do was to exchange roles with him. He simply said: Don't try to dethrone me. Don't try to take my place. Trust me to fill your life with maximum joy and meaning.

And when the temptation came, Satan knew exactly what he had to do: "You will not die. God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). And it happened when they disobeyed, for God said in Gen. 3:22, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." Man has chosen the way of the prodigal son. He does not want to stay under his Father's authority. He wants to decide for himself what is good and bad. The essence of the Fall and the essence of our depraved heart and of all its sins is the desire not to be dependent on God. And the other side of the same coin is simply the desire to substitute ourselves for God and to get the flickering glory and the puny sense of power that comes from self-reliance, self-confidence and self-determination. All our sins flow from our in-born unwillingness to be like children and trust our heavenly Father to decide what is good for us and what is bad for us.

And now very briefly we should see the consequences of sin. Sin has brought great misery into human relations and sinners who do not repent will be punished forever in hell. Those are not the only consequences of sin, but perhaps they are enough to wake us up to our need for repentance and vigilance. Three human relationships were corrupted in the Fall. First, the relation to ourselves. "Thy eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together" (Gen. 3:7). Rebellion against God in the human heart is so contrary to the way man is designed to be, that he must constantly put on airs, clothes, make-up, poses to try to convince himself that he is not really a naked, helpless child.

Second, the relation to God was ruined. "They heard the sound of the Lord God ... and the man and his wife hid themselves (Gen. 3:8). And man has been running from God with his guilty conscience ever since. A youth who has said to his father, "I don't want your counsel, I don't want your authority, I don't

want your help," cannot bear to be in the presence of his dad. We are homeless fugitives, always on the run until we give it up and come home to God.

Third, our relations with other people have been ruined. "Have you eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.'" (Gen. 3:12). If anybody deserves to die, she does! Tender-hearted, loving, chivalrous husband! When the heart is in rebellion against God and is, therefore, wholly taken up with self-justification, other people turn into patsies. Therefore, all human relations--with ourselves, God and other people--are corrupted in the fall. And the misery that has resulted is untold.

The one other consequence of sin that I feel I should mention, because it is such a sobering and life-gripping warning, is found in 2 Thess. 1:7-10. I won't garnish it, but simply let it stand: "The Lord Jesus will (one day) be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at in all who have believed."

This message has not been good news. But it has been true news. And bad as it is, it is good for us. If we don't know that our diagnosis is terminal, we probably won't accept the doctor's remedy. "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick," Jesus said (Mark 2:17). And that is everybody. The good news, the remedy, is this: Out of his great love God sent Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sins and to rise again so that all who follow him in the obedience of faith will have peace for their conscience, purpose for their life and hope for the future, even to eternity. Give up running and come home, Adam. Come home, Eve.

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