

Bible Basics: Essential Doctrines of the Bible

Part 3B

Hamartiology: The Study of Sin (also available on-line at ichthys.com) by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

Man's initial failure and ultimate triumph through Christ.

For just as all die in Adam, so also shall all be made alive in Christ.

1st Corinthians 15:22

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Introduction: A proper understanding of the biblical teachings about sin is crucial for every believer in Jesus Christ. Sin is a subject that while it is generally understood by Christians in the broad sense, is often not properly comprehended in its particulars. We must understand that Christ died for our sins and that our sins have been washed away by the "blood of Christ" (i.e., His sacrifice for us on the cross: Rom.5:8; 1Cor.6:11; Rev.7:14). We must also understand that personal sin separates us from God, and that, as long as we occupy these bodies of flesh, sin will always be "crouching at the door" in ambush for us (Gen.4:7). The failure to strike a proper balance between these two critically important realities, of sin forgiven *positionally* in Christ on the one hand, but, on the other hand, remaining an *experiential* problem for believers as long we remain in this world, is at the heart of many incorrect opinions about the biblical subject of sin.

Given the intensely personal nature of this subject and the potentially devastating effect of sin and sinfulness on faith and faithfulness, such false impressions are doubly dangerous, and alone justify a detailed examination of the doctrine of sin. Over-focusing upon the threat and consequences of personal sin to the neglect of the mercy and forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of His Son our Lord Jesus Christ can cause serious disruptions in the spiritual life and has led many into a variety of false doctrines and spiritually counterproductive practices. On the other hand, assuming that forgiveness and mercy relieve the believer of the responsibility of pursuing personal sanctification is an equally dangerous misapplication of scripture. It is precisely because sin is such an emotional subject that it is important for Christians to have an exact appreciation of it, being neither paralyzed by it from a failure to appreciate God's mercy, nor complacent about it from a failure to appreciate God's holiness. As Christians, we have been forgiven our sins for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but we are also charged with pursuing sanctification (Heb.12:1-14), and need to seek God's forgiveness for the sins we continue to commit in time (1Jn.1:5-9). As we strive to draw closer to Him, denying our sins (out of a self-righteous desire to be seen as perfect) or ignoring our sins (out of a misplaced sense of security) are equally devastating to the Christian walk (1Jn.1:10; Rom.6:23). As Christians, we have been made holy in Jesus in principle, and we will be forever holy before Him in resurrection. While we are in these mortal bodies of sin, however, we must continue our struggle against sin in a right and righteous way as we pursue the holiness, the sanctification, to which we have been called to the glory of our Lord (Heb.12:14; cf. Rom.6:22; 1Thes.4:3-7; 1Pet.1:13-16; 1Jn.2:1; 3:2-3).

We who have put our faith in Jesus Christ have been made righteous through that faith in God's eyes on account of the sacrifice of our Lord (Rom.4:1-5:1; 6:7), but shall we then continue to sin (Rom.6:15)? Through Jesus, we have been granted the forgiveness of our sins and so stand justified before God on the basis of what He has done for us (Acts 13:38-39); we have been forgiven all our transgressions and have been made holy as those who believe in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross (Acts 26:17b-18). We have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son in whom we have been redeemed from all our sins (Col.1:13-14). Yet the fact that we have been called *to* sanctification is a clear indication that the problem and challenge of sin does not disappear the moment we embrace Jesus as our Savior (1Thes.4:3-7; Heb.12:14). For while we have been called *to* sinlessness (1Jn.2:1), yet we still have need of post-salvation forgiveness when we fail this perfect standard (1Jn.2:2; cf. 1Jn.1:9). All who do not believe are still in their sins (Jn.16:9), so that a life of sin is unacceptable for those who have chosen for Jesus Christ (1Jn.3:6).

As believers, we need to understand and embrace the forgiveness of sins we have received by faith in Christ, and we also need to understand that even as we strive to turn away from sin, we will, in this life, ever have need of God's continuing mercy in the forgiveness of the transgressions we commit after salvation – and we need to embrace that forgiveness. For the unbeliever, the issue is simple: forgiveness of sins – without which condemnation is assured – can come only through faith in the One who died for those sins. For the believer, the issue is more complex: having been redeemed from sin by the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are called to walk in the newness of life which rejects sin, but because we still inhabit the same bodies of sin we had before salvation, we will stumble from time to time (even though we have been called to holiness which, by definition, eschews sin: 1Pet.1:13-19). Therefore believers need to have a thorough understanding of the issue of sin, for on the one hand we must accept the fact of our imperfection without ceasing to strive for perfection, and on the other hand we must rejoice over the continued forgiveness available to us when we sin without at the same time ever becoming complacent about sin. As Christians, we need to learn to be truly repentant for our sins without at the same time being wracked with inordinate guilt about them, overlooking the love and mercy of God in the forgiveness He promises (God *does* love us; He *does*, forgive us; Jesus died for us; and the discipline we experience as a result of straying from Him merely proves His immense care and concern for our welfare). At the same time, while we are confident in the continued forgiveness of our sins, we need to learn to avoid allowing that confidence to build into apathy or arrogance, overlooking God's righteous character and the godly fear it should engender for all who have accepted the call to holiness and sanctification as believers in Jesus Christ (just as we would never have assumed that the love of our earthly fathers meant that we could do whatever we might wish, no matter how disobedient, without any consequences). This two-edged principle embodies a high standard, one which is impossible to fulfill without a solid grounding in what the Bible has to say about all aspects of sin. It will be the purpose of this study to provide that basic understanding.

I. The Fall and Human Sinfulness

God is perfect and incapable of sin (Matt.5:48; 1Pet.1:15-16). Being perfect, moreover, the universe He originally created was also perfect, filled with light and holy in every way (Is.45:18; see part 2 of The Satanic Rebellion series, “The Genesis Gap”). Since sin is, in its essence, the act of opposing God’s will, by definition sin could not come into being before the creation of finite creatures who possessed a will of their own. God, in all three Persons, existed in perfect divine bliss before He brought the finite universe into being, and just as He had no need to create the world, so also He was under no necessity to make finite creatures to populate it.

Nevertheless, God in His infinite wisdom, love, and mercy, did bring into being an entire host of creatures to fill His universe, angelic creatures who, in a finite but significant way, all possessed the means of self-determination. At its base, free will is the ability to choose for God (or to refuse to do so), and there came a point in the primordial past when all angelic kind was compelled to make this choice, to continue to choose to worship and serve the one true God, or to throw in their lot with one who had already decided to oppose and replace Him. This creature, whom we know as Satan and the devil, was the preeminent angel, the “covering cherub” entrusted with a position more prestigious and honorable than any other creature in the universe (Is.14:12; Ezek.28:12-16). But in the arrogance he conceived in his heart by his own will and by his own choice, first place among creatures was not enough. And so he devised a plan to lead a rebellion against the Lord and become the new head of all creation. Thus it is that sin began with a creature, a previously perfect creature who misused the free will given him by God not to worship and serve Him, but to rebel against Him, having first replaced God with self in his heart (see part 1 of The Satanic Rebellion series, “Satan’s Rebellion and Fall”). In short order, Satan was joined in his revolt by one third of angelic kind (Rev.12:4; cf. Dan.8:10), and just as his own sin of arrogance soon grew into active opposition to God, so the sinfulness of this one creature soon radiated out through all angelic creation, leading many others also into sin. Thus it is the devil who is the originator of sin, not God (cf. Jn.8:44), and having staked his future on rebellion from God, it is also the devil who has been the prime promoter of temptation to sin, not only among his angelic fellows, but for mankind as well (Gen.3; Mt.6:13; Lk.4:1-13; 1Cor.7:5; Eph.6:11; 1Thes.3:5; 1Tim.3:7; 1Pet.5:8; Rev.20:10). Nevertheless, since every single one of God’s moral creatures, men and angels both, possesses genuine free will, every single act of disobedience to God, every sin, falls to the charge of the sinner, regardless of any prior temptation. God is holy. God is righteous. God cannot sin and does not tempt to sin (Jas.1:13-15), and God is thus not in any way responsible for sin. On the contrary, all sin, whether Satan’s first sin or the sins of every creature since, originates entirely with and is entirely the responsibility of him who commits it.

1. The Three Aspects of Death

As we saw in the previous installment of this series, the serpent’s lie to Eve, “You shall not surely die” (Gen.3:4), was only marginally true in the very limited sense that, after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, physical death did not ensue immediately. On the other hand, the Lord’s warning, “on the day you eat of it you shall surely die” was entirely true

(Gen.2:17). Adam and Eve had been created perfect, but became “dead” to God immediately following their sin of disobedience. These verses in Genesis which, along with many other scriptures in the New Testament, proclaim the living as being dead to God show unequivocally that in biblical terms “death” means much more than the mere cessation of physical life (e.g., Rom.5:12; 5:14; 5:17; 5:21; 7:5; 7:10; 7:13; 7:24; 8:2). All who live are bound to die physically – this much is obvious to all. But even though we human beings are preeminently concerned with *physical* death, from God’s point of view, this is the least significant of death’s three aspects. The serpent was able to alleviate Eve’s concerns through the half-truth that the physical death she feared would not instantly follow her act of disobedience, but it was truly the immediately ensuing *spiritual* death that was of the greatest significance.

From the true, biblical perspective, physical death is merely the transition from our current to our eternal state. We believers in Jesus Christ transition from our walk of faith with our Lord here in this life unto an eternal life with Him by passing through the barrier of physical death. For unbelievers, however, physical death means transitioning from the state of being spiritually dead to God here in time to the eternal or second death which follows their earthly demise (Rev.21:8; cf. Rev.2:11; 20:6; 20:11-15). In biblical terms, death is thus a unity possessing three aspects, with *spiritual death* ending in *eternal death* on the other side of the transitional event of *physical death* for all who refuse Jesus Christ in this life. Eve was indeed “dead” the moment she ate the forbidden fruit, spiritually dead, that is, and from that point on having an unavoidable appointment with physical death, on the other side of which loomed eternal death (absent saving faith).

Believers, however, are no longer spiritually dead to God but spiritually alive in Jesus Christ, for by grace through faith we have passed from death to life (Jn.5:24; 1Jn.3:14; cf. Acts 5:20). In contrast to unbelievers who may think they are alive but are really in the grip of death, believers in Jesus Christ are truly not even any longer subject to death (in its threefold totality) when the issue is correctly evaluated from God’s point of view (cf. 2Cor.2:16; Heb.2:14-15):

Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will not see death forevermore.
John 8:51

And I am giving them eternal life, and they will not perish forevermore, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. John 10:28

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even if he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in Me will surely not die forevermore.” John 11:25-26

For this reason, physical death is no longer a thing to be feared by us who have placed our trust in the Son of God (Heb.2:15; cf. Phil.1:21; 1Jn.4:18). Death in its true threefold totality no longer rules over us (Heb.2:14-15). Being spiritually alive, we are now not only no longer spiritually dead, but are also no longer subject to the second death (Rev.2:11; 21:8), making physical death, the least theologically significant of death’s three aspects, now no more than a transition for us

from our present life in this transient world unto a glorious eternity wherein we shall enjoy our eternal life with our Savior forevermore (Jn.12:25).

For, indeed, we who are in this tent (i.e., the earthly body) do groan being weighed down [by the pressures of life] – not that it is our desire to put off [the present body] but to put on [the future one], in order that that which is **bound to die** (i.e., our present body) may be swallowed up by [eternal] **life**. 2nd Corinthians 5:4

To return to Adam and Eve, once our first parents were **spiritually dead**, expelled from the garden of Eden, and cut off from the tree of life, it was only a matter of time before the certain coming of **physical death** to be followed (in the absence of God's as yet unforeseen merciful intervention in the Person and work of Jesus Christ) by a last judgment that would result in **eternal death**.

1. The Consequences of Sin for Adam and Eve: When Adam and Eve sinned, therefore, this **threefold death** became the new reality of their lives:

1) Spiritual Death: As soon as they sinned, Adam and Eve instantly experienced **spiritual death**, that status where, because of our sin and unrighteousness, we are accounted dead by a righteous and holy God who can in His perfection no longer have any direct contact with us (except on His own grace terms of salvation through our acceptance on a non-meritorious faith-basis of Christ's saving work on the cross). Eating the forbidden fruit contrary to the explicit prohibition of the Lord God destroyed our first parents' relationship with Him (sin resulting in spiritual death), leaving them helpless to alter or remove this alienation on their own (as their fig leaf experiment demonstrated very clearly). Reconciliation would come, but on God's terms, as Adam and Eve both accepted and trusted in the Lord God's promise of the Seed.

2) Physical Death: Their bodies were also instantly rendered mortal. The process of decay and degeneration began immediately upon partaking of the fruit. Under the conditions that pertained in this antediluvian world, Adam and Eve and many of their children had, by our standards, exceptionally long lives, but even living a thousand years seems infinitesimal when compared to immortality. Eating the forbidden fruit contrary to the explicit prohibition of the Lord God also eventually destroyed their bodies (**physical death**). Even the restoration of their relationship with God through their faith in His promised Messiah would not erase this appointment with physical death (Heb.9:27), but God had promised them the Seed who would save them from eternal condemnation (**eternal death**) through the sacrifice of Himself on their behalf. The "coats of skin" with which the Lord God clothed them (Gen.3:21) in preference to their own fig-leaf creations are a clear foreshadowing of Christ's work on the cross. In contradistinction to our own pitiful acts of what we would call good (fig leaves), God will only accept the blood of Christ as payment for our sins. The animals slain, their blood spilt to clothe us in our need, are pictures of Christ's death in our place (and such animal sacrifices would remain the dominant symbol for His death on the cross until the day of its fulfilment). As our first parents did, we too must stop relying on the arrogant acts of our own tainted "goodness" and

trust instead in God's solution, Jesus Christ, if we are to live beyond physical death through the resurrection to eternal life (Heb.2:14-15).

3) Eternal Death: As a consequence of their spiritual death, Adam and Eve were alienated from the life of God (Eph.4:18; cf. Rom.5:10; Eph.2:12). As a result of their impending physical death, they would not be able to abide forever in this world (Heb.9:27). In effect, they were, for all practical purposes, already condemned, since they were facing a future judgment they could not endure without Christ (Jn.3:18). Having sinned, and facing the inevitable end of temporal life, *eternal death* (or "the second death") was the inescapable sentence now hanging over their heads (Rev.21:8; cf. Rev.2:11; 20:6; 20:11-15), an outcome inevitably and inexorably approaching – except for their acceptance in faith of God's solution in the Person of the promised Seed.

2. The Consequences for the Human Race: Through their disobedience, Adam and Eve effectively decided matters for their entire progeny. For the sin nature and the ensuing threefold death has as a consequence been passed on ever since to all mankind through the process of normal human procreation (with the sole exception of the virgin-born Messiah; see the following section). For this reason, every other human being is steeped in sin at birth (i.e., is born with a sinful nature: Rom.7:13-24). With the exception of Jesus Christ, therefore, we are all spiritually dead at birth, under the power of sin and thus doomed to commit our own personal sins (Rom.7:15; Gal.3:22), all of which are equally condemnatory even though they may seem to bear little similarity to those of Adam and Eve (Rom.5:14).

Behold, I was born in sinfulness, and in sin my mother conceived me. Psalm 51:5

This reality of our universal sinfulness from the point of birth, along with our consequent mortality and intrinsic unfitness for eternal life, are in truth the most essential facts of human life, facts which eventually impinge upon the consciousness of every human being, since God's law is "written in the hearts" and consciences of us all (Rom.2:15; cf. Rom.1:18-32 and Eccl.3:11). Indeed, one of the primary functions of the Law of Moses is to expose human sin and guilt as a stimulus for seeking God's solution in Jesus Christ to this universal human dilemma:

Therefore no flesh shall be considered righteous before Him through the works of the Law, for it is through the Law that we come to acknowledge [our] sin. Romans 3:20

So the Law acts as a guardian to us [who leads us] to Christ so that we might be justified by faith. Galatians 3:24

For in spite of the Law's best efforts (and our best efforts to keep the Law), the "law of sin and death" is at work within us as soon as we enter this world (Rom.8:2; cf. Rom.7:24), with that very status quo of spiritual death responsible for the inevitable production of personal sins (Rom.5:12). This is the "stinger of death" spoken of by Paul in 1st Corinthians, namely, the production of personal sin by each individual's inherent sin nature, that tangible, material

counterpart of our common status of being spiritually dead at birth, made obvious through the Law by means of the very sins it produces:

And when this corruptible [body] puts on incorruption and this mortal [body] puts on immortality, then will be fulfilled this prophecy which has been written:

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where is your victory, O death? Where is your stinger, O death?

Now the stinger of death is the sin [nature] (i.e., it produces our sin), and the power of sin is the Law (i.e., it reveals our sin). But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! 1st Corinthians 15:54-57

1) Spiritual Death: Even our own consciences teach us just how deficient we human beings are in terms of the standard of perfect holiness which a perfect God demands (Rom.2:14-16). We are natural born sinners (Rom.5:12), and we all fall far short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23). We are therefore by our very nature “children of wrath” (Eph.2:3), alienated from God (Eph.4:18; Col.1:21), and facing condemnation at the last judgment from the day we are born (Rom.5:16-18; cf. Jn.5:24; 1Jn.3:14). Perfect, holy God cannot have direct contact with anything or anyone impure, so that the natural impurity of the human body, steeped in sin and sinful from birth (Ps.51:5; cf. Lev.5:2), inevitably separates every human being from Him by the unavoidable enmity that exists between righteousness and unrighteousness, a barrier which can only be removed through the saving work of Jesus Christ (Eph.2:14-16; cf. Rom.8:7). For all of us who are born of the flesh, the sin nature is passed down from our human fathers to every single one of us, their human offspring, and has been ever since Adam, thus guaranteeing universally inherent sinfulness (i.e., the possession of a sin nature or “flesh”, as the Bible often calls it) along with the penalty that results from that inherent sinfulness, namely, spiritual death (cf. Jn.5:24; Rom.6:12; 6:21; 7:5; 7:24; 8:6; 8:11; 1Cor.15:21-22; 1Jn.3:14):

So just as through one man (i.e., Adam whose antitype is Christ) sin came into the world and, through sin, death, and thus (i.e., Adam physically passing on his sin nature resulting in universal spiritual death) death spread to all mankind – for [obviously] everyone sins (i.e., universal sinning proves the fact of universal spiritual death), . . . Romans 5:12

The parallel case used by Paul in the extended context (Rom.5:12-21) is the provision of life by the Lord of life, our Savior Jesus Christ, to all who believe. Through Him we have spiritual life through spiritual rebirth. In contrast to the spiritual life we have in Christ, it should thus come as no surprise that Adam, who sinned and died spiritually, could only be the source of sin and death for his progeny, spiritual death and a sin nature producing personal sins. As described in the verse above, Adam’s act of sin produced the entrance of sin into the world – not just in principle, but in a physical and tangible way. Adam’s body was immediately corrupted by his act, and he and his male offspring have since passed down this corruption to all of their descendants. Thus the “sin which entered the world” is the sin nature, the corruption of human flesh, and it is this corruption (a reality at birth for all but the virgin born Messiah) which produces death at the

point of birth, spiritual death that is, a state of being separated from the life of God by virtue of inherent corruption. “In this way” sin spread from Adam to all his offspring. For since the fall through the process of procreation the sin nature has been passed down from every father to all of his offspring in exactly the same way, resulting in spiritual death at birth on account of the possession of a sinful nature. Thus it is that “death spread to all mankind”: universal spiritual death at birth on account of inherent corruption, followed in time by physical death on account of this same corruption, and, in the absence of spiritual rebirth, eternal death on the other side of this transitory period of physical life. Finally, acting as indicator and a proof of the status of spiritual death we occupy, the sin nature produces personal sins in every human being: “for everyone sins”.

Spiritual death is thus the absence of the spiritual life which comes by way of rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ. Spiritual death is the natural state of all human beings from birth, the virgin born Son of God being the sole exception. Spiritual death is the result of the inherent physical corruption that is our common human legacy (i.e., the sin nature or “flesh” with which we all contend). Thus spiritual death and the sin nature are essential counterparts of each other, so that we may define spiritual death as the possession of a sin nature by all who remain in an unregenerate status (that is, all who are not saved are spiritually dead, for all have a sin nature). Passages which teach these principles abound in scripture:

So just as through one man (i.e., Adam whose antitype is Christ) sin came into the world and, through sin, death, and thus (i.e., Adam physically passing on his sin nature resulting in universal spiritual death) death spread to all mankind – for [obviously] everyone sins (i.e., universal sinning proves universal spiritual death), . . . Romans 5:12

Comment: Romans 5:12 initially refers to Adam and his original violation of the Lord’s commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (i.e., he is the “one man” through whom sin and death entered the world). Adam’s act was a willful violation of an express prohibition given to him personally by God Himself. One of the first consequences of this action was an immediate transformation of his body which now became corrupt (i.e., now the subject and object of temptation by its very nature) and mortal (i.e., subject to inevitable physical death). Adam’s transgression was the beginning of sin and sinfulness for mankind in that his new nature, his “sin nature”, would now be passed down from him to the entire human race through the process of procreation (the only exception being Jesus Christ; see below). The fact that every true human being is born with a corrupt body (again, our Lord excepted) has two main theological consequences addressed by Paul in Romans 5:12: 1) physical death “spread” thereby to all mankind (i.e., if you are born with a corrupt body, you will in fact die physically at some point); 2) possessing a body thus “indwelt by sin” (cf. Rom.7:17-20) guarantees that we will commit personal sins (see below section II.3 on the universality of sin). What is generally misunderstood about this passage (at least partly on the basis of the near universal mistranslation of the last clause of Romans 5:12 above) is that personal sins are *a result* of having a sinful nature, *not* the other way around, and that death is likewise *a result* of birth in corrupt bodily form, *not* of personal sins committed after birth. From the true, scriptural point of view, we are

separated from God at birth because of our corrupt nature, and the personal sins which we later commit demonstrate this innate corruption. It matters little when or how or to what degree we commit or possibly even refrain from committing personal sins (though, as we shall see below, because of the insidious and all pervasive nature of sin we are far more guilty than even the most objective of us may be aware). The fact is that because of our corruption at birth we *will* die physically, and since we must at the very least acknowledge that we are not completely pure, holy and righteous, we can have no reasonable expectation of anything good beyond physical death (absent salvation by means of divine grace). And it is not just that God is under no moral obligation to provide after death for creatures who are intrinsically corrupt, unholy, and impure – without the propitiation of all sin through the sacrifice of His Son, His intrinsic incorruptibility, holiness and purity would forbid Him by nature from anything like eternal fellowship with creatures so disposed (let alone the issue of the divine judgment on our personal sins which His divine justice must in that case demand). From the biblical perspective, it is not the point at which we may theoretically become guilty as individuals through the commission of personal sins which is really at issue. That is an unnecessary hypothetical, since all of us can plainly see that we are mortal, and all of us should understand that we are sinful. Therefore the connection between *spiritual death* (our separation from God because of this corrupt and sinful state we all find ourselves in from physical birth) and *physical death* is so close as to make them inextricable for all practical purposes. It is no doubt for this very reason that the divine command to Adam stressed “death” as the penalty for eating from the tree, even though physical death would linger many years in the future. Adam’s new state of corruption guaranteed physical death precisely because he was now physically corrupt and therefore dead in the sense of his newfound separation from God – “spiritual death”. From the perspective of scripture, the issue, therefore, is not the point of or the means of our future condemnation – these are clear and palpable realities easily gleaned from observation of the world (Rom.1:18-32) – but rather the point of and the means of justification, the deliverance from death that came through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our place (1Cor.15:21-22).

For since death [came] through a man, resurrection of the dead also [had to come] through a man. For just as in Adam, all die, so also in Christ, shall all be made alive.

1st Corinthians 15:21-22

Comment: There are two possible states for human beings: that of being spiritually dead (our original position “in Adam”), and that of being spiritually alive (our new position “in Christ” as a result of the new birth by grace through faith). In Adam, death leads to death (spiritual leading to physical followed by the second death), but in Christ we are now spiritually alive, and await the day when this new life we already possess will be revealed in its full glory.

And you [too were once spiritually] dead in the transgressions and sins in which you then lived your life, after the fashion of this temporal world, after the pattern of the ruler who holds sway in the air [around us (i.e., the devil)], that spirit who is now at work in those who have chosen disobedience. In company with these [unbelievers] we too all conducted our lives in the lusts of our flesh (i.e., sin nature), carrying out the will of our

flesh and its desires. For we were [all thus] children of wrath by nature just like the rest [of the human race]. But God, being rich in mercy on account of the great love with which He loved us, even as we were dead in our sins, made us alive with Christ – you are saved by grace! – and raised and seated us together with Christ in the heavenly places (i.e., positionally). Ephesians 2:1-6

Comment: Here we see again the former state we once occupied in company with the rest of unregenerate mankind, with spiritual death going hand in hand with the commission of personal sins. But now that we have been made alive in Christ, we have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life by means of that new birth.

Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Romans 7:24

Comment: By birth, our physical nature is a “body of death” from which we must be rescued if we are to escape the inevitable progression of spiritual-physical-eternal death. The connection of “body” and “death” also shows clearly that spiritual death is inextricably linked to the possession of a sin nature (our present “flesh”).

Then the Lord God gave orders to the Man as follows: “You may certainly eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – from it you may not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die”. Genesis 2:16-17

Comment: For Adam, the first personal sin produced a sin nature and its immediate counterpart, spiritual death. For his progeny, this state of spiritual death exists from birth, independent of the personal sins we will necessarily later commit on account of our possession of the sin nature.

And though you were dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcised state of your flesh, [God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ], having forgiven you all your transgressions. Colossians 2:13

Comment: The status of being “un-circumcised of flesh”, in addition to referring to gentiles as opposed to Jews, also suggests the possession of a sin nature, coupled here as it is with the personal sins our “un-circumcised” flesh produces. The opposite of this condition of what amounts to spiritual death is the new life in Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of our sins.

And there are many other passages of scripture where the death in question is clearly spiritual rather than physical, as, for example, the (spiritually) dead who are to bury their own dead (Matt.8:22; Lk.9:60), the woman who is (spiritually) dead even though (physically) alive (1Tim.5:6), and the (spiritually) dead who have the gospel preached to them (1Pet.4:6). Even after physical death, that the status of spiritual death (or, alternatively, regenerate life) is really the determining factor in the future fate of everyone is abundantly clear from scripture (cf. our Lord’s future judgment of “the living and the dead”: Acts 10:42; cf. Rom.14:9; 2Tim.4:1; 1Pet.4:5). So while for the unbelieving world, the death of the body is the event that claims

attention, the Bible leaves us in no doubt that it is spiritual death, separation from God on account of inherent sinfulness, that should be the focus of attention for all who would wish to be liberated from the consequences of physical death. For the true consequence of physical death for those who are spiritually dead is an eternity apart from God. But, for all those who have passed from death to life through saving faith in the Son of God, physical death is simply a transition from this world of sorrow and tears into the full realization and enjoyment of the new life we now possess in Jesus.

2) Physical Death: Absent salvation, being physically alive but spiritually dead and facing an inevitable future sentence of divine condemnation, mankind therefore faces not one, but two future “deaths”, the first of which is the end of our earthly physical life:

And inasmuch as it is ordained for mankind *to die once* (i.e., the first, “physical” death), and after this [face] judgment (i.e., “the second death”; cf. Rev.2:11; 20:6; 20:14-15)
Hebrews 9:27

In addition to the universal reality and realization of our common human sinfulness (and the spiritual death that attends it), we are all also only too well aware of the inevitable briefness of our earthly lives. Physical death is our universal human heritage, and our mortality is a fact that cannot be denied or completely ignored: “in Adam, all die” (1Cor.15:22). Because of the corruption that resides within us from birth (with the sole exception of Jesus Christ), all human beings are born mortal, subject to physical death, and possessing by virtue of our inherent carnality an appointment with that inevitable end of earthly life right from the point of our birth. In many respects, this is a wonderful blessing from God, because it is in no small measure the terror of the inevitably approaching end of life which moves us to seek God’s solution to death, namely, new life, eternal life, through faith in Jesus Christ.

3) Eternal Death: The fear and the terror that human beings feel in regard to death is sufficient evidence that on some very basic level we understand that through our own devices no good result awaits on the other side of life. Since no one can stand before the perfect, holy God on their own merits, the final judgment of God upon all who have failed to avail themselves in this life of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ inevitably results in damnation or eternal death, the “second death” (Rev.21:8; cf. Rev.2:11; 20:6; 20:11-15; cf. Jn.5:22; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 24:25; Rom.2:16; 1Cor.4:5; 2Tim.4:1; 1Pet.4:5):

And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is *the second death*, [namely] the lake of fire. And if anyone was not found written in the book of life (i.e., all unbelievers), he was thrown into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:14-15

4) Positional Death: Believers in Jesus Christ are no longer spiritually dead – the “old things” have passed away, and “new things” have come (2Cor.5:17b). We are now new creations “in Christ” (1Cor.15:22; 2Cor.5:17a), made alive together with Him (Eph.2:5; Col.2:13). Being “in Christ”, however, we are now “positionally” *dead* to our old selves, to sin, and to this corrupt world (Rom.6:2-14; 2Cor.5:14; Gal.6:14; Col.3:3-4). Even though we still possess a sin nature

(which continues to tempt us to commit personal sins) and are still destined to die physically, by turning to Christ we have turned our backs on the sin nature with all its lusts and evil desires (Rom.6:6; 1Cor.5:7-8; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.4:22; Col.3:9). We have, so to speak, “died” to this “old” life in a “positional” sense (i.e., with our new “position” or status now that of being “in Christ”).

For you are already *dead*, and your [eternal] *life* has been hidden away with Christ in God. When Christ - your [eternal] life - is revealed, then you too (i.e., with your new eternal life) will be revealed in glory with Him. Colossians 3:3-4

And if Christ is in you, although your *body* is *dead* because of sin (i.e., because it is still sinful by natural birth), the Spirit is *life* because of righteousness (i.e., the Holy Spirit is your pledge that you have passed from death to life through the righteousness which comes by faith). Romans 8:10

Being “in Christ”, our new life, which is both spiritual and eternal, is not of this world. We have been “crucified with Christ” to this present world (Gal.6:14; cf. Rom.6:8), and the eternal life we shall live with Him forever will not be in this present “body of death” (Rom.7:24), but in a new, resurrected body that comports with the eternal life we shall enjoy with Him forever (1Cor.15:35-58; 2Cor.5:1-10; 1Thes.4:13-18). So while we live in this world, we are not “of it” (Jn.15:19; 17:6; 17:14-16), having died to it (Col.3:3-4), ever looking forward to the better things to come beyond it (Rom.8:22-25).

To one way of thinking then, this positional “death” is a metaphor, drawing on the analogy of physical death to exemplify our newfound alienation to the world, to our sinful nature, and to personal sin, an estrangement that comes about as a counterpart of our newfound orientation as believers to Jesus Christ and to God’s truth. But in another sense, this death we have now died to the world and the flesh through our faith in Jesus Christ is *even more real* than the physical death which is our common human lot. Certainly, the *consequences* of our positional death in Christ are more significant than those of physical death, both eternally *and* temporally. In eternal terms, while it is physical death that captures the attention of the world, as those who believe God’s truth we understand that physical death is merely a transition to what lies beyond, an eternal state which will either be blessed beyond description for all who put their faith in Jesus, or horrendous beyond contemplation for all who refuse to do so. Furthermore, by dying to the world through our new position in Christ, we believers have been made spiritually alive with Christ here and now as well as forevermore. We have been justified through our faith in Him, have received His righteousness through our faith by God’s grace, and have thus been positionally absolutely (and experientially potentially) liberated from the forces of sin and sinfulness that dominate the rest of the human race (Rom.6:7). In temporal terms as well, therefore, the consequences of our positional death in Christ are enormous, for being now liberated from sin in principle, we have thus been given a tremendous opportunity to grow spiritually in Christ, and then to serve our Lord’s Church in holiness and sanctification right here in this corrupt world, with the potential for earning eternal rewards which cannot even be properly comprehended during this present earthly life.

In the same way [that Christ did], consider yourselves as well to be [positionally] **dead** to sin, but [spiritually] **alive** to God in Christ Jesus our Lord! So do not let sin reign in your mortal body so as to obey its lusts, and do not offer up your [bodily] members to sin as weapons of unrighteousness. But rather offer yourselves up to God as those now **alive** from the **dead**, and [offer up] your [bodily] members to God as weapons of righteousness.
Romans 6:11-13

It is for this reason too that scripture often describes the believer's new relationship to the Law of Moses in terms of this positional death, for by being made alive "in Christ", we have conversely "died" to the sentence of death for sin which is writ so large in the Law (cf. 2Cor.3:6).

So then, my brothers, you also (i.e., like a woman free to remarry on account of her husband's death) have been put to death in respect to the Law through the body of Christ in order to belong to Another, even to One who has been raised from the dead, so that you may bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh (i.e., spiritually dead and subject to the sin nature), the passions of those sins [awakened] through the Law were at work in our [bodily] members, so that we were [ever] bearing fruit to death. But now we have been freed from the Law by having died to that ["first husband"] by which we were being constrained, so that we may [now] serve [the Lord] in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written [code] (i.e., the Law). Romans 7:4-6

So now, there [awaits] no judgment of condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the Law of sin and death. Romans 8:1-2

The Law is the instrument whose purpose it is to demonstrate sin as being thoroughly sinful (Rom.7:13; cf. Rom.3:20; Gal.3:19-22), that is, to convict all who consider it of their innate sinfulness (and so lead them to understand their need for Christ: Gal.3:23-25). As believers "in Christ", cleansed from sin and made righteous through faith in Jesus (Rom.3:21-26; 4:22-25; 6:7), we are now said to have "died to the law" (Rom.7:4; Gal.2:19-20), to be no longer under the Law, but under grace (Rom.6:14; cf. Gal.5:18), to have been delivered from the curse of the Law (Gal.3:13), and to have been released from this "ministry of death" into the custody of the "ministry of the Spirit" instead (2Cor.3:7; cf. Gal.5:18). Therefore we now serve under a "New" covenant (1Cor.11:25), the "Old" one having been made obsolete through the reality of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross (Heb.8:13).

Being thus freed from the Law through our positional death to it in Jesus Christ does not, however, mean that we are to use our newfound freedom for fleshly self-indulgence (Rom.6:1-2; 6:15). Indeed, the very purpose of the liberty we now enjoy is to give us an unprecedented opportunity to serve our new husband, our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in this newness of spiritual life. Because we have "died" to personal sin and to the flesh which produces it (i.e., the sin nature), along with the instrument of condemnation for all such sin (i.e., the Law), we are now free to walk in the light of our new spiritual life in the footsteps of the One who freed us through His death on our behalf.

It is for this freedom that Christ has set us free. So stand fast [in it], and do not again encumber yourselves with the yolk of slavery (i.e., the Law). Galatians 5:1

For you were called unto freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but be slaves to one another through love. Galatians 5:13

It is therefore both our opportunity and our obligation to *put into practice* our new orientation of being alive to God and dead to the world. Being positionally dead to sin, we are now called upon to die to it experientially as well, and to serve our Savior in this newness of life:

So put to death your [bodily] members which are of the earth. Colossians 3:5a

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its lusts and desires. If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by means of the Spirit. Galatians 5:24-25

For it is the love of Christ that constrains us, having brought us to this conclusion: One died for [us] all; so then we all have died [in Him]. And He died on behalf of all so that those who are [now] alive might no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised [from the dead]. 2nd Corinthians 5:14-15

For thus it is the will of God for you by doing good to silence the ignorance of the ignorant. [Do so] as free people, and not as those using your freedom as a cloak for evil, but as servants of God. 1st Peter 2:15-16

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, in order that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wound you are healed. 1st Peter 2:24

Experientially following up our positional death to sin by means of sanctification and spiritual growth is thus of the utmost importance for every Christian. For, if having been made alive in Christ we should turn back to those things to which we have died in Him, then we run the risk of the end being worse than the beginning.

For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ they should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than - once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ] committed to them - to *turn their backs on it* now. And so in their case this proverb is true: "The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow, though washed, to her muddy sty". 2nd Peter 2:20-22

(16) Don't you understand that if you give your allegiance to anyone to obey them as servants, then you truly are their servants when you obey them? [And that this is true]

whether [you give yourselves] to sin, which results in [spiritual] death, or whether [you give yourselves] to obedience [to Christ], which results in righteousness? (17) But thanks be to God that when you were servants of sin you became obedient from the heart to the content of [the] teaching entrusted to you. (18) So having been freed from sin, you became subservient to righteousness. (19) I [am going to] put this in human terms because your flesh is [still] weak: just as you [once] presented your [bodily] members as servants to impurity and to lawlessness in the service of lawlessness, so now present your [bodily members] as servants to righteousness in the service of sanctification! (20) For when you were servants of sin, you were free from righteousness. (21) So what fruit were you bearing then? [Only] things of which you are now ashamed! And the end result of all those things is [spiritual] death. (22) But as it is now, having been liberated from sin and made subservient to God, the fruit [you bear] is in the service of sanctification, and the end result of this is eternal life. (23) For the salary paid by sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 6:16-23

For the thought-pattern of the flesh results in death, but the thought-pattern of the Spirit results in life and peace. Romans 8:6

So then, brothers, we are under obligation – but not to the flesh to live by its rules. For if you are living by the rules of the flesh, you are destined to die. But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. Romans 8:12-13

Everyone is tempted by his own lust, being dragged away [by it] and enticed [by it]. Then, should lust conceive (i.e., should the person give in to it), it gives birth to sin. And sin, should it be fully carried out to the end (i.e., should the person give in to a life of sin), produces death (i.e., spiritual death, the death of faith). James 1:14-15

If anyone sees his brother engaged in a pattern of sinfulness which does not lead to [spiritual] death (i.e., is a deviation rather than a complete turning away), let him ask [forgiveness on his brother's behalf], and life will be given to him (i.e., forgiveness and deliverance will result), that is, in those cases where those sinning are not [sinning] unto death. There is sin which leads to death – I am not telling you to pray in that case. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin which does not lead to death (i.e., temporary deviation, confessed and repented does not result in spiritual death). 1st John 5:16-17

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, we have new, spiritual life which leads to eternal life on the other side of physical death, but for those who are dead even while they live, this spiritual death of theirs is destined to yield a permanent, second death on the other side of physical death. Our Lord who knew no sin was made sin for us (2Cor.5:21), and hung upon a tree of cursing (1Pet.2:24), that we might evermore have access to the tree of life in the New Jerusalem to come (Rev.2:7; 22:2; 22:14; 22:19). Through His death we who have put our faith in Him and in His work on our behalf will share the eternal life He now leads in resurrection forever (1Jn.3:2). This destiny of ours is real, far more real than what we can presently see with our eyes of flesh

(2Cor.4:18; 5:7; Heb.11:1). From the divine point of view, therefore, the status of being physically “alive” is somewhat deceptive, because those who are not saved are truly “dead”, whereas those who have accepted Jesus Christ are truly alive even after this preliminary body has died (Rom.11:15; cf. 2Tim.1:10):

But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you never read what was said by God, when He said, “I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”? He is not the God of the dead but of the living. Matthew 22:31-32 (cf. Lk.20:38)

Let us therefore resolve to put aside “works that lead to death” (Heb.6:1; 9:14), and instead hold fast to the eternal life we now possess in Jesus Christ (1Tim.6:12; 6:19), a life that for good reason we should prize far beyond this present, earthly life.

2. The Sin Nature

1. Definition and description: By the term “sin nature” is meant the inherent, innate, indwelling sinfulness possessed by all of Adam’s descendants (with the sole exception of the virgin born Son of God; see below), which leads to the committing of personal sins. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their bodies immediately underwent a drastic physical change, one fraught with dire consequences both for themselves and for the human race that would soon spring from their loins. For Adam has passed down this same inherent sin through the process of procreation to all but Christ ever since. Apart from the virgin born Jesus Christ, everyone who shares Adam’s genes shares Adam’s essential corruption:

That which is born from the flesh is flesh, and that which is born from the Spirit is spirit.
John3:6

Behold, I was brought forth with iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.
Psalm 51:5

The wicked go wrong as soon as they leave the womb. Those who speak lies err as soon as they are born. Psalm 58:3

What is man that he could be pure, or one born of woman that he could be righteous?
Behold, [God] puts no trust in His holy [angels], and the heavens are not pure in His eyes.
How much less man who is detestable and corrupt, who drinks up [what is] wrong as if it were water! Job 15:14-16

Who can make something clean from something unclean? No one! Job 14:4

And you [too were once spiritually] dead in the transgressions and sins in which you then lived your life, after the fashion of this temporal world, after the pattern of the ruler who holds sway in the air [around us (i.e., the devil)], that spirit who is now at work in those who have chosen disobedience. In company with these we too all conducted our lives in

the lusts of our flesh (i.e., sin nature), carrying out the will of our flesh and its desires. For we were [all thus] children of wrath **by nature** (Greek: φύσις, *physis*; cf. “physical”) just like the rest [of the human race]. Ephesians 2:1-3

So just as through one man (i.e., Adam whose antitype is Christ) sin came into the world and, through sin, death, and thus (i.e., Adam physically passing on his sin nature resulting in universal spiritual death) death spread to all mankind – for [obviously] everyone sins (i.e., universal sinning proves universal spiritual death), . . . Romans 5:12

For just as through the disobedience of the [first] man the human race found itself sinful (i.e., through the passing on of the sin nature by birth), so through the obedience of the One the human race will find itself [accounted as] righteous (i.e., justified by faith via the new birth). Romans 5:19

For since death [came] through a man, resurrection of the dead also [had to come] through a man. For just as in Adam, all die, so also in Christ, shall all be made alive. 1st Corinthians 15:21-22

God had told Adam “on the day you eat [from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall certainly die” (Gen.2:17). This instant death was clearly not physical but spiritual, although it guaranteed the inevitability of physical death. Thus, as we have demonstrated above, the acquisition of the sin nature (received instantaneously by our first parents upon their eating of the forbidden fruit, and through procreation by their progeny) and the status of spiritual death are inseparable complements of one another, with the bonds of spiritual death broken only by the work of Christ on the cross for those who put their faith in Him and receive new spiritual life.

The term “sin nature” itself is our short-hand for the corrupted physical body we now occupy. Scripture, however, uses a variety of terms and expressions to express this same reality of sin indwelling the physical “tent” we now occupy. For example:

1) “**sin**” (Rom.3:9; 3:20; 6:12; 7:14; 8:4; 8:10; 1Cor.15:56; Heb.3:13; 1Jn.3:5): When used in the singular, this is one of the most common scriptural designation used to indicate sin as the principle at work in our corrupt flesh which produces sin.

If we say that we do not possess **sin** (i.e., a sin nature which is producing personal sins), we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1st John 1:8

2) “**the body**”: The Bible’s description of the human body often demonstrates that the scriptural view of it includes a recognition of the sin and sinfulness resident in it from birth. The body is described in scripture as a body of sin (Rom.6:6), of death (Rom.7:24), as dead (Rom.8:10), as mortal (i.e., subject to death: Rom.6:12), as responsible for evil practices (Rom.8:13), as requiring careful scrutiny in regard to sin (1Cor.11:29), as earthly as opposed to heavenly (1Cor.15:40), as non-spiritual as opposed to spiritual (1Cor.15:44), as of lowly estate (Phil.3:21),

as needing to be circumcised away (Col.2:11), and as needing to be washed from sin (Heb.10:22).

And if Christ is in you, although ***your body is dead because of sin***, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. Romans 8:10

3) “**flesh/fleshly**” (Jn.3:6; 6:63; Rm.6:19; 7:14; 7:18; 8:2-13; 1Cor.3:3; 2Cor.10:2-3; Gal.2:16; 5:13-19; 5:24; 6:8; Eph.2:3; Col.2:13; 2:23; Heb.9:13; 1Pet.1:24; 4:6; 2Pet.2:10; 2:18; Jude 1:23): The words "flesh" and “fleshly” have, if anything, even more consistently negative connotations in scripture than the word "body", most likely because they call attention to the present condition of the human body which while created perfect was corrupted through the original sin.

I know that nothing good dwells in me – that is, in my flesh. For to will what is good lies in my power, but to carry it out does not. Romans 7:18

The spirit is eager (i.e., to do God’s will), but the flesh is weak (i.e., so as not to follow through). Matthew 26:41

But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for. For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit’s will, and the Spirit is opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose. Galatians 5:16-17

4) “**corrupt/corruption**” (Rom.1:23; 1Cor.15:50; Gal.6:8; Eph.4:22; 2Pet.1:4; 2:12; 2:19): These terms emphasize the ephemeral nature of our present body and its incompatibility with eternity, both of which conditions come about as a result of inherent sin.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. The body sown is corruptible, the one raised incorruptible. The body sown is dishonorable, the one raised glorious. The body sown is weak, the one raised powerful. The body sown is suited [only] to physical life, the one raised to spiritual life. 1st Corinthians 15:42-44

5) “**mortal/mortality**” (Rom.6:12; 8:11; 2Cor.4:11; 5:4): As with corruption, mortality emphasizes our appointment with death on account of the sin-tainted flesh in which we live.

For this corruption must put on incorruption, and this mortality must put on immortality (i.e., in order to live forever with our Lord). 1st Corinthians 15:53

6) “**old man**” (Rom.6:6; Eph.4:22): Emphasizes our flesh’s natural conformity to our original position in Adam (i.e., our “former person”) in contrast to our new position in Christ (i.e., our “new person”).

Stop lying to each other, having put aside your “former person” (i.e., don’t obey your “old” person/man, that is, your sin nature) and having put on the “new” one which is being renewed to obedient knowledge according to the pattern of the One who created it. Colossians 3:9-10

7) “**nature**” (cf. 2Pet.2:12; Jude 1:10): Ephesians 2:3 is an important passage in this regard because it demonstrates so clearly that our current condition is an integral part of our nature, that is, the sin nature comes by way of birth, not after birth.

In company with these [disobedient unbelievers] we all once lived our lives in the lusts of our flesh (i.e., sin nature), carrying out the will of the flesh and its desires. For we were [all thus] children of wrath *by nature* (i.e., by physical birth) just like the rest [of mankind]. Ephesians 2:3

8) “**indwelling sin**” (Gen.6:5, 8:21): This description of the sin nature taken from Romans chapter seven very vividly and analytically describes a physical presence in literal residence within the flesh of us all. This is perhaps the plainest representation of what the sin nature actually is, namely, an inherent and innate corruption resident in and largely inseparable from our present earthly frame.

(17) But now it is no longer I [who] does it (i.e., commits sin), but the *sin dwelling in me*. (18) For I know that nothing good dwells in me – that is, in my flesh. For to will what is good lies in my power, but to carry it out does not. (19) For I do not do the good I want to, but the evil I do not want to do, this is what I do. (20) And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who am doing it but the *sin dwelling in me*. Romans 7:17-20

9) “**subject to lust**” (Gal.5:16-17; cf. Mk.4:19; Rom.1:24; 6:12; 7:8; 13:14; Gal.5:24; Eph.2:3; 4:22; Col.3:5; 1Thes.4:5; 1Tim.6:9; 2Tim.2:22; 3:6; 4:3; Tit.2:12; Jas.1:14-15; 2Pet.2:10; 2:18; 3:3; Jude 1:16-18; Rev.18:14): We shall have more to say about the nature of lust below. As a symptom of the presence of the sin nature, however, lust, to which we are all subject in one form or another and to one degree or another, is an unmistakable proof that “sin dwells in our bodies”. Indeed, it is precisely this point that forms the basis for Paul’s argument in Romans chapter seven designed to prove the existence of indwelling sin. The tenth commandment prohibiting “lusting” (i.e., “covetousness”: Ex.20:17; Deut.5:21; cf. Matt.5:28) is, after all, the final, decisive argument used by Paul in proving universal sinfulness for anyone who honestly listens to the Law of Moses (cf. Rom.7:7).

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not [even] make any plans for carrying out the lusts of the flesh. Romans 13:14

(1) Where do these conflicts, where do these fights [that are being waged] among you come from? Isn’t it from your [desire for] pleasures which do battle in your [bodily] members? (2) You lust [for things], and yet you do not have [them]; you commit murder

[in your hearts]; you are filled with envy, and yet you are not able to obtain [what you are envious for]; you fight and wage war – yet you do not get [what you want] because you’re not asking [for it]. (3) And when you do ask [for it], you don’t receive [it] because you are asking with evil intent with the purpose of squandering [what you ask for] in your pleasures (i.e., under the control and in the service of lust). James 4:1-3

[It is] through these [divine blessings] that the great and honorable promises have been granted to us, so that through them we might become partakers of the divine nature (i.e., in contrast with our earthly sinful nature), having [through salvation] escaped earthly corruption and its lust. 2nd Peter 1:4

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its lust are passing away, but the one who does the will of God abides forever. 1st John 2:16-17

10) **“in slavery to sin”** (Jn.8:34; Rom.3:9; 6:20; 8:8; Gal.3:22): In this analogy, sin is compared to a slave master whose bidding we are compelled to do, whether we like it or not.

For we know that the Law is spiritual. But I am fleshly, sold [into bondage] under [the power of] sin. Romans 7:14

11) **“earthly members”** (Rom.6:13; 6:19; 7:5; 7:23; Jas.3:5-6; 4:1): Whereas “body” emphasizes the whole and “flesh” the substance of our corrupt and temporary earthly tent, “members” suggests the variety of lusts that are associated with different parts of our anatomy (e.g., the tongue and eye have their own particular sins; compare Jas.3:5-6 with 1Jn.2:16).

(5) So put to death your [bodily] members which are of the earth, [for it is they that produce] sexual sinning, impurity, passion, evil lusting, and greed, which is [effectively the same thing as] idolatry. (6) Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon those who are [wilfully] disobedient. (7) You too once walked in these ways when your life was defined by them. (8) But now, see to it that you put away all these things, anger, wrath, wickedness, slander, [and all] foul talk from your mouth. Colossians 3:5-8

2. The Sin Nature’s Method of Operation: Throughout the passages quoted above, the sin nature’s method of operation is clear to behold. It is in fact such a powerful influence upon all human beings that it is often described in terms which seem to attribute to it a mind and a will of its own, as if it were an active agent under whose power we all find ourselves.

Truly I am telling you the truth: Everyone who is committing sin is sin’s slave. John 8:34

(17) But now it is no longer I [who] does it (i.e., commits sin), but the sin dwelling in me. (18) For I know that nothing good dwells in me – that is, in my flesh. For to will what is good lies in my power, but to carry it out does not. (19) For I do not do the good I want

to, but the evil I do not want to do, this is what I do. (20) And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who am doing it but the sin dwelling in me. (21) So in respect to the Law I find that, even as I wish to do good, evil has me in its power. (22) For I delight in the Law of God in my inner person. (23) But I perceive a different law [at work] in my bodily members, waging war against the Law in my mind and taking me prisoner – [a prisoner to] this law of sin that dwells in my body. (24) Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Romans 7:17-24

In practical terms, this automatic acquiescence to the power of the sin nature at work in our flesh is indeed all too often the case for the majority of the human race (except where they find themselves restrained by fear of consequences). Even believers are, of course, not immune to the powerful influence of the sin nature. But as believers, we are called upon to resist the power of sin:

Beloved, I entreat you as fellow sojourners and temporary residents [on this earth] to refrain from the fleshly lusts which are waging war against your [very] lives.
1st Peter 2:11

As Peter tells us, we find ourselves in a war against the impulses of our flesh, and, as in any war, even the most successful campaign has its casualties. Given the descriptions above, the battle would be impossible to fight at all without the direct support of our chief ally in this struggle, the Holy Spirit. Believers of the past had the benefit of His help as well (Jn.14:16-17), but we who have put our faith in Jesus after His resurrection are beneficiaries of the blessed gift of the *indwelling* presence of His Holy Spirit (Jn.16:12-14; Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-39; Eph.1:13; 1:17; 2:22; 4:4-5), a benefit which gives us all the means we require in order to resist effectively:

(15) But if you bite and devour each other, take care that you are not consumed by each other. (16) But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for. (17) For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit's will, and the Spirit is opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (20) idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; (21) drunkenness, orgies – and whatever is similar to all these things. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, uprightness, faith, (23) humility, self-control. Against such things, there is no Law. (24) Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its weaknesses and its lusts. (25) If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by means of the Spirit. Galatians 5:15-25

- Verses 15-16: Believers, too, are subject to sin. As verse 15 indicates, unless we “take care”, sin will dominate, sin will control our walk on this earth. But as verse 16 shows us, for all of us who have the unction of the Holy Spirit, that indwelling presence which

comes to all believers at the point of faith in Christ (i.e., the “baptism of the Spirit”), there is a better way, a way commanded by this and other scriptures, namely a giving of ourselves over to the power and control of the Spirit which by definition trumps sin. This is described here as “walking” by means of the Spirit, with the metaphor of “walking” a very common one in scripture used to denote our course of life as it is consciously chosen step by step. It should be noted that we do not have to “walk” in the flesh for the flesh to control us since, being its slaves by birth, following sin is automatic for the whole human race. It is resistance to sin that takes conscious effort, namely, a step by step “walk” of following where the Spirit leads us.

- Verse 17: In this verse we see that even for believers indwelt by the Spirit there is still tension between what the Spirit wills and what the flesh wills. In fact, not only are these two diametrically opposed in what they will, our only effective choice is to turn our will over to one or the other. At all times, we will either be doing what the Spirit wills or what the flesh wills. The same is true in principle even of unbelievers who may follow God’s natural truth through conscience, obedience to law, or basic prudence and self-interest. It takes no effort to do the will of the flesh, but it takes concerted effort to resist sin. But believers have an empowerment from the Spirit which makes all resistance not only possible but also always victorious, whenever we truly do give our will over to Him instead of to sin.
- Verse 18: Listening to what the Spirit tells us through our conscience and through our knowledge of the truth (which grows day by day as we grow in the Lord through His Word) and walking in the way we are commanded to do is called in verse 18 “being led” by the Spirit. As we grow, we get better about seeing where we are being led, and, ideally, walk more and more closely in the footsteps of the One leading us. As the following verses show, we have to learn scripture to do this. Truth in our hearts, heard, understood, believed and applied, is the capital or leverage used by the Spirit. Law is all about prohibiting us from walking in certain places we should not, but if we are being led straight ahead on the right path, and if we are following as we should, then we will never have to worry about getting off the right path.
- Verses 19-21: This long list of behavior patterns which indicate control by the sin nature shows unequivocally that control by the Spirit is definitely not an automatic thing. We have to learn and apply God’s truth to our lives, following in the right way where the Spirit leads. Otherwise, the sin nature, a tyrant rather than a leader, will take command and dominate our walk. It is also important to note here that this list, while long and covering many sins of thought, word, and deed, is not meant to be complete: the phrase “and whatever is similar to all these things” indicates that we are given here only a few examples of the multifarious manifestations of the sin nature whose reach is broad and deep, penetrating into every aspect of human life.
- Verses 22-23: The Spirit produces fruit in contrast to (dead) works. By comparing these two lists we can easily tell 1) whether our walk is characterized generally by “walking by means of the Spirit” or by “fulfilling the lust of the flesh” (v.16), and also 2) whether it is only in some areas of our walk that we are “in the right”. We may do so by reflecting on both the positive and the negative examples given in the passage above. The true

challenge of “walking in the Spirit” is to learn how to embrace that walk in its entirety. Doing right entirely means that we are entirely out from under doing wrong. If and when through spiritual growth and the diligent practice of following the Spirit this becomes entirely true of us, then there will be no further need to worry about fulfilling the Law (a main concern of the Galatians because of those who were troubling them through false teaching about that very issue: cf. Gal.4:21).

- Verse 24: We have died with Christ and have transferred from death to life. We thus share in His life – an eternal life beyond this world – and in His death, death to sin and to the things of this world. We have embraced His crucifixion and the death He died to sin by dying to sin ourselves through our faith and obedience to Him (cf. Rom.6:10). What is thus true in principle should also be (or be becoming) true for us in practice. This takes spiritual growth and diligent application to our lives of the truth we learn and believe. The flesh is weak, in that we have a hard time controlling and resisting it, and so we fail, sin, lapse. The flesh is strong in that its lusts are easily translated into action when we fail to resist it effectively. Without the help of the Spirit, it would take extraordinary effort to prevent our being dominated by the flesh (and it is in fact impossible without the Spirit not to be dominated in some area or other). But with the Spirit, victory is possible if we give ourselves over to following His lead wholeheartedly, coming ever closer to walking precisely in the footsteps of our Lord as we grow spiritually in Jesus Christ day by day.
- Verse 25: Since through the Spirit we have been saved, through the Spirit we ought also to live our lives. In doing so, we will be able to bear the fruit that God wants us to bear, and avoid doing instead what the sin nature desires. In fact, it is only by closely following the Spirit’s lead that we will ever make significant progress in our battle against sin.

There are many other passages of scripture which demonstrate this same essential principle of the sin in our flesh taking over our will and leading us into sinful behavior whenever and wherever the resistance we offer is insufficient or ineffective (e.g., Rom.5:20-21; 6:6; Col.3:5-9; Tit.3:3; Jas.4:1-5; 1Pet.1:18; 4:1-2; 2Pet.1:4; 2:10; 1Jn.2:16). The precise mechanics of our sin nature’s influence upon us can best be summed up by quoting Jesus’ own words: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt.26:41; Mk.14:38). As we saw in the previous installment of this series, man is a dichotomous being, composed of a human spirit which is non-material and given by God at birth (and therefore not itself infected by sin), and a fleshly body (corrupted by sin ever since the fall). It is the combination of these two elements that makes man “a living being” (Gen.2:7). But while we are thus dichotomous by nature, we function, live, and think as unified persons. The place where the now sinful fleshly body and the spirit interface is variously described in biblical terms as the “heart”, the “soul”, and the “mind” (see part 3A Anthropology, section II, “The Creation of Man”). For this reason, the struggle between the sin nature and our human spirit (evident in all the passages discussed above) is described in scripture as an internal and mental one:

Now the Lord saw that Man’s evil had spread abundantly on the earth – indeed, the underlying intent of all his innermost thoughts was invariably evil. Genesis 6:5

Comment: Here we have a common scriptural case of God's behavior being described in human terms for our enlightenment. For God, who knew all of history before the creation of the world, the degeneracy of mankind did not come as some "revelation". Instead, this observation is put here in these terms entirely for our benefit. Before the human family was divided by nation and language, and during a period of earth's history far more environmentally benign than would be the case after the flood, mankind nevertheless proved through an extensive period of testing that, apart from God's influence, it was sinful through and through. It is extremely significant that the presence of universal evil is ascribed to the "evil thinking" that dominated mankind in those days (and, of course, it continues to do so to this day, except where God's truth is accepted as a countervailing force through the Spirit's ministry).

For the heart is more inscrutable than anything else and beyond curing [of its duplicity]. Who [among men] can [really] know [what] it [is thinking]? "I am the Lord, the One who probes the heart and tests [a man's] motives, to repay everyone according to the path he [walks], in fitting recompense for [all] he does". Jeremiah 17:9-10

Comment: The heart, the interface between the human spirit (who we really are) and the sinful flesh we now possess, is described above as subtle and duplicitous by nature. This reflects the sin nature's dominance over the interface. In practical terms this means that all of our thoughts and attitudes are either directed, influenced, or challenged by the sin nature, and that the only escape from this dominance is by giving our will over to the Holy Spirit and the truth of God instead of to the flesh. We are all entirely responsible for how we fight this war with the flesh: God probes our hearts and tests our motives, then repays us in accordance with how we walk, whether under sin's control or after the leadership of the Spirit illuminated through the Word of God.

The body sown is weak, the one raised powerful. The body sown is suited to physical life, the one raised to spiritual life. 1st Corinthians 15:43b-44a

Comment: The resurrected body (i.e., the "resurrection body") will be holy and unaffected by sin in any way. It will not resist our spirit's leadership like our present "weak flesh", and is therefore described here as "suited to spiritual life" (*pneumatikos*), that is, attuned to our human spirit, in contrast to our present sinful flesh which is "soul-ish" (*psychikos*), that is, dominated in the soul or interface between spirit and flesh by the flesh.

You were once alienated from God - your very thoughts were hostile towards Him and your deeds were evil. Colossians 1:21

Comment: The mind or "thinking" (*dianoia*) of the flesh is here described as hostile towards God, demonstrating clearly the dominance of the flesh where it interfaces with the human spirit, especially in the state of unbelief where there is no countervailing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Now the thought-pattern of the flesh is [one of] enmity towards God, for it does not obey God's law, nor is it [even] able [to do so]. And [so] those who are under the control of the flesh (i.e., unbelievers enslaved to the sin nature) are not able to please God. But you are not under the control of the flesh, but under the control of the Spirit – if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Him. Romans 8:7-9

Comment: Our “position” as believers in Jesus Christ is no longer one of being “in” or “under the control of” the sin nature, but rather of being “in” or “under the control of” the Spirit. In principle (or “by position”), this status is absolute. In practice, we fall short of flawless obedience. However, we only fail to be under the Spirit's control when we revert to following the flesh's influence. On the other hand, whenever we do yield our will to the indwelling leadership of the Spirit (as we are called to do by God in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ and as our consciences are told to do by the Spirit), then we are free from the sin nature's previous dominance and control.

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. And having once lost all sensitivity [for what is right], they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. This is not how you learned to follow Christ. Ephesians 4:17-20

Comment: Paul here describes the unbelieving mind-set as one naturally disposed to futility, pointless anti-God thought and purpose which over time inevitably produces an acceleration of the rejection of God's truth, ever darkening one's openness to the Lord, alienating the person more and more from God, and producing hardness of heart that finally stiffens unbelief to an impenetrable point. This progressive domination by the sin nature over the mind-heart-soul of the individual, eventually brings about a correspondingly greater indulgence in the lusts of the flesh.

(21) [For you have learned the truth] – if, at any rate, you have truly heard Him (i.e., Jesus) and have been instructed in Him according to what is [definitely] true in Jesus – (22) that in respect to your previous behavior you have put off the old Man, the one that is being destroyed by deceptive lusts, (23) and that instead you are being re-made in the spirit of your mind, (24) and that you have put on the new Man, the one created in righteousness and sanctity of the truth according to God's standards. Ephesians 4:21-24

Comment: The “old man”, as we have seen, is a synonym for the sin nature. Corrupt from birth, it is in the process of “being destroyed” and the lusts it engenders are both a symptom and a contributing cause of its demise. But believers are, by position, “new creatures”, and we are commanded here to be “re-made in the spirit of the mind”. That is to say, the mind is where our

spirit meets the flesh “face to face”, as it were, and it is there, in the mind (or “heart”), that we are to embrace the new creation (that we are in principle) by resisting and overcoming the influence of the sin nature, the old man, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the very power through which we will be raised up on that day of days to come. This is the “new man” that we are to “put on”. That is to say, we are to look forward to the day when sin will no longer dwell within us, and we are to begin now to act in practice just as we are in principle, just as we shall be in practice at Christ’s return, holy and sanctified before Him in every way.

3. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ: The physical birth of our Savior presents a unique case. Unlike any other human being before or since, the engendering of our Lord’s human body came about not through the agency of any created thing, not through any man or any angel, but through the Creator Himself, specifically, the Holy Spirit.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ happened in this way. While His mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, [and] before the two of them had come together [as man and wife], she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18

The reason given in Matthew for this miraculous pregnancy which would result in the only virgin birth in human history is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of Immanuel (Matt.1:23; cf. Is.7:14). The miraculous sign that Jesus’ unquestionably divine conception and birth provided and continues to provide is an important part of the reason for the virgin birth, but there is another highly significant aspect to this ineffably momentous event that brought the Savior of the world into the world: only a pure and sinless Jesus Christ would be qualified to bear our sins and so atone for them on the cross (2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:22-24; Heb.2:14-18; 4:15; 7:26; 1Jn.3:5; cf. Is.53:9). Without a human or angelic father (Heb.1-2; cf. Jn.19:34-35; 1Jn.5:6-8), the potential problem of the passing down of the sin nature through the line of Adam could be and was thus avoided. Indeed, since the sin nature is universally passed down from Adam through the male line, a virgin birth was the only way in which our Lord could be at the same time truly and completely human, and yet be born without a sin nature. For it was Adam who “brought sin into the world”, even though Eve too had sinned, and it was Adam who caused “death to spread to all mankind”, not Eve:

So just as through *one man* sin came into the world and, through sin, death, and *thus* (i.e., Adam physically passing on his sin nature resulting in universal spiritual death) *death spread to all mankind* – for [obviously] everyone sins, . . . Romans 5:12

The key phrase “and thus” above provides a critical qualification to the later words “all mankind”. Jesus, in addition to being God, is indeed truly and completely human, but unlike every other truly human member of the human race since Adam and Eve was born without a sin nature, because corruption is passed down through the male, not the female. We find a hint of the reason why it is the male who passes on sin in Paul’s explanation of male authority in 1st Timothy:

For Adam was molded first, then Eve. And while Adam was not deceived [when he sinned], Eve found herself in violation [of God's command] because she had been deceived. 1st Timothy 2:13-14

In the divine judgment of Genesis 3:13-19, each of the principles, Adam, Eve, and the serpent, receive additional punishments that are appropriate to their actions. The serpent was used by Satan, and suffers a symbolic penalty (crawling on his belly and eating dirt). Eve, though guilty, was deceived, and suffers the curse of pain in childbirth along with that of desiring a husband. Adam, on the other hand, knew what he was doing. Being thus fully responsible and culpable, it is upon the man that God laid the responsibility for passing down the sin nature (1Tim.2:11-14):

(13) Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And she replied, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate". (14) So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are accursed, more than any beast or wild animal. You shall go on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. (15) And I shall place hostility between you and the woman, that is, between your seed and *her Seed*. He will attack you head-on, but you will attack Him from behind". Genesis 3:13-15

The Seed of the woman who will vanquish Satan and his antichrist is our Lord, Jesus Christ, and it is important for this part of the discussion to understand that Jesus is the *only* "Seed of the *woman*" (Gal.3:16). The rest of us have our "position" in Adam, sharing in his sin nature passed down through the male line, and are only transferred from this sinful natural state through faith in the One Seed who died for us:

For just as all die in Adam, so also shall all be made alive in Christ. 1st Corinthians 15:22

Scripture leaves us in absolutely no doubt about the fact that our Lord Jesus, while truly and completely God, is also truly and completely human (Rom.1:3-4; Phil.2:7). Yet scripture also makes clear beyond any dispute that our Lord was without sin in any way (2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:22-24; Heb.2:14-18; 4:15; 7:26; 1Jn.3:5; cf. Is.53:9), having no sin nature (as the rest of us universally have), and committing no personal sins (as the rest of us universally do). Our Lord Jesus lived a life of perfect, disciplined sanctification and total obedience to God the Father. But, without the virgin birth, this would have done you and I no good by itself. For our Lord had to be sinlessly perfect in every way in order to be qualified as our sin bearer (compare the flawlessness necessary for sacrificial animals under the Mosaic Law: Lev.22:18-25). Jesus is our Passover "lamb without spot or blemish" (1Pet.1:19; cf. Ex.12:5; 1Cor.5:7; Heb.9:14), a sacrifice acceptable to the Father because of His complete sinlessness. Only by being virgin born was our Lord spared the internal corruption of His earthly flesh which is otherwise universal in the human race – but this was so that He could die for us in order that we might be spared unto life eternal through faith in His sacrificial death for our sins on the cross.

4. The so-called "imputation of Adam's sin": The foregoing discussion is important for this last issue in our consideration of the sin nature, namely "original sin", or "the imputation of Adam's

sin”. As we have shown above, the sin nature is passed down by birth through the male line. This innate corruption has two major consequences (uniquely avoided in all of human history only in the case of our Lord by virtue of His virgin birth): 1) separation from God at birth (i.e., “spiritual death”), and 2) the commission of personal sins. Misunderstanding of Paul’s admittedly difficult Greek in Romans 5:12-14 coupled with a desire in some cases to advance specific denominational agendas has led to a theological fallacy commonly termed the “imputation of Adam’s sin”.

Essentially, this “doctrine” proclaims that, apart from Christ, all mankind was “corporately” and positionally “in Adam” at the time Adam sinned. Therefore we all, apart from Christ, shared in Adam’s sin when he sinned, and are thus held guilty for Adam’s sin even though it was not we who committed that particular sin. At birth, according to this theory, God “imputes” Adam’s sin to us, reckoning his sin to our account, and considering us guilty thereby (cf. Rom.5:13).

While it is true that Adam has passed along his sin nature to us his progeny, there is simply no scripture which directly supports the idea that our condemnation is “reckoned to us” corporately on account of *Adam’s* sin at the fall. In fact, condemnation comes to all the unsaved individually at the last judgment (Matt.12:36; Jn.5:29; Acts 24:25; Heb.6:2; 9:27; Rev.20:11-15). Abraham’s faith was indeed “imputed” to Abraham “as righteousness”, just as Romans 4:22-24 teaches, but this judicial “crediting” of faith to Abraham’s account comes about in response to an action *by Abraham*, that is, his belief in the Lord (non-meritorious on his part though it was), and occurred on an *individual*, not a corporate basis. That is to say, we who believe all share this same crediting of righteousness on account of *our own* faith – Abraham sets the pattern, but does not “believe for us”. Therefore Romans 4:22-24, beyond failing to draw any direct parallel of “imputation” between Abraham’s faith and Adam’s sin, also fails to provide any logical parallel to a supposed pre-eternity, corporate condemnation of the human race based upon the single sin of one man, Adam.

Without an understanding of the history of this issue, it may very well appear odd to the reader that such an erroneous teaching ever gained credence at all. Time and space do not allow a detailed revisiting of the story behind it, but suffice it to say that “the imputation of Adam’s sin” was a theory developed to combat a particularly pernicious heresy (Pelagianism), which claimed, based upon these same verses in Romans chapter 5, that no one is considered guilty by God until they themselves commit a personal sin. While the problems which such a doctrine could (and did) cause for the community of faith might not be readily apparent, they are in fact both serious and numerous. If we are all sinless until we sin, then there is the theoretical possibility that we might somehow avoid sinning altogether. It might then be the case that some people might not need a Savior, since they had never sinned. Accepting such a notion not only empties the virgin birth of significance but also allows for the possibility that the sacrifice of Christ was unnecessary (at least for a particularly holy few)! This idea has dangers both for those themselves who assume (and proclaim) that they are still in such a sinless state, as well as for those who recognize their own sinfulness, but assume (and accept) that there are others who are not sinful. The potential for cults led by “perfect” leaders, and for self-deception about the nature

and power of sin generally is enormous, once one accepts this heretical theory. Given the devastating potential of the notion that we are only sinful after we first sin, it is completely understandable that an alternative interpretation of Romans chapter 5 which proclaimed everyone sinful at birth should be sought. This is indeed the truth, but it is true because of the corruption of our flesh passed down by Adam through our physical birth (a condition which we have seen necessarily leads to personal sin), **not** because of some judicial “imputation” by God to all at birth. Such an action has never been necessary – we are born in corruption, and that is what separates us from God.

One final exegetical note is unfortunately necessary at this point. It is true that in Romans 5:13, Paul uses a Greek verb, *ellogeo* (ελλογεω) which is similar in form and meaning to the word used for “imputing” righteousness to Abraham in Romans 4:22-24. However, 1) the verbs are not, in fact, the same; 2) Abraham’s imputation comes, as we have just shown, as a result of his own action and individually so; 3) this particular verse, while it may seem to provide a basis for the imputation theory, in reality does not. For the agent behind the verb “was being imputed” (the correct text has the imperfect, not the present tense: *enelogeito*; ενελογειτο) is **not** God, but mankind in general. Before the existence of the Mosaic Law, there **was** sin in the world (exactly as is said in the first part of the verse), but sin was not being **considered** (or recognized) in the absence of the Law which delineated it. Mankind was generally aware of their sinfulness even without the Law (cf. Rom.2:14-16), but it was the Law that shined the bright light of truth upon our collective depravity, one so bright that it could no longer be denied by any objective party (cf. Rom.3:20). The fact that this verse, Romans 5:13, by any interpretation is drawing a distinction between the situation before and the situation after the giving of the Mosaic Law should be reason enough to dispense with the flawed theory of imputed sin. For the whole concept of the “imputation of Adam’s sin” rests upon this being a judicial procedure applied by God to **all** of Adam’s progeny, even to those who lived before the giving of the Law, yet this verse clearly states that there was **no** imputation of sin (however defined), before the Law was given.

3. The Conscience

The conscience is that aspect of our inner person which compares our behavior to the standards which we claim to profess, and “notifies us” when we fall short. In Greek, the word for this facet of our heart is, according to its etymology, the thing we “know with” (*synedesis*, συνειδησις), that is, the moral “organ” that informs our mental process. There is no such specific word for this internal faculty in biblical Hebrew (although the words employed for the concept in Modern Hebrew are most revealing: *dayuth*, תּוֹדָה [“the known”], *pinimith*, תּוֹמֵת [“the innermost thing”], *hachoreh*, חֹרֵה [“the searcher”], *matspon*, מְצֻפֵּה [“the hidden treasure”]). Thus, one sees the word “conscience” frequently in translations of the New Testament, but rarely if at all in translations of the Old Testament. Yet conscience is everywhere in the Bible, even where it is not mentioned by name:

But afterwards, David’s heart smote him on account of the fact that he had cut off the hem of Saul’s robe. 1st Samuel 24:5

Indeed, this internal “sentinel” which alerts us after the fact as in the example above, or (ideally) before we violate the standards we claim to approve, is a common property of all mankind, whether or not we choose to follow its lead. In the garden of Eden, the role of this morally evaluative aspect of our human spirit was minimal. In paradise, there was only one prohibition: “From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat” (Gen.2:17). Since they did not yet possess a sin nature, Adam and Eve were not naturally inclined to sin, and with nothing else prohibited, there was little opportunity to do anything to provoke the conscience in any case. For us their progeny, on the other hand, living in a world of sin and evil as we do, it is clear that our consciences are essential tools, absolutely necessary for navigating the dark waters of the devil’s *kosmos* which we now ply. All Adam and Eve had to know was to stay away from the forbidden fruit because God said to do so. For them, conscience was a simple matter of understanding that what God said was “good”, and “good for them”, since, if they disobeyed, they faced a clear penalty: “you shall surely die”. In other words, in the garden, there was no subtlety requiring a weighing out of what was good and what was evil – there was only one proper choice: follow God’s crystal clear will to refrain from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or suffer the dramatically negative consequences. In our world, evil is by definition subtle, and much that passes for good is truly evil under a shiny and deceptive veneer. To negotiate a world run not by God but by the devil (and this is the devil’s world: see the series, The Satanic Rebellion), Adam and Eve and all of their later offspring would need something more; they would need exactly what ironically the forbidden fruit provided, namely, an expanded ability to distinguish between good and evil. In this connection, it is important to remember that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was planted (and thus created) by God Himself:

Now the Lord God caused to spring up from the ground every sort of tree which was pleasant to behold and good for food, and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2:9

This is essential to understand, because this famous tree, stemming from God’s creative hand, was *not* evil in any way. Rather, eating from it (in violation of God’s specific and unequivocal commandment) gave the partaker an expanded ability to distinguish between good and evil; it gave the ability to be “knowing good and evil”. The noun generally translated “knowledge” here is *dha’ath* (תִּד). Properly, this is the Hebrew infinitive construct form of the verb “to know” so that the noun has a clear verbal aspect, best brought out in English by rendering *dha’ath* as a gerund: i.e., “the tree of the **knowing** of good and evil” (cf. BDB 395 c-d). While this creates an admittedly clumsy phrase in English, the alternative “knowledge of good and evil” is incredibly deceptive. For Adam and Eve most certainly did *not* receive “**knowledge** of good and evil” by eating the forbidden fruit, but an expanded **capacity** for **distinguishing** between the two instead.

Conscience has always been a part of the essential makeup of the human heart. Adam and Eve most certainly did understand the principle of authority in the garden and their obligation to follow the command of the Lord “not to eat from the tree of the knowing of good and evil” (Gen.2:17). They were morally responsible in every way, and understood that eating from that

tree would be “wrong”. But in their perfect state, they had no need (and no possibility) of understanding “good” in the context of “evil”. Everything around them in this perfect place of God’s blessing was good, and nothing was evil. In such a place, there was no need for an expanded capacity for learning to weigh all manner of complex situations and behaviors, for in Eden everything was lawful and good (with one exception). The Hebrew verb translated “knowing” above is much more tactile and earthy than its English counterpart and speaks of practical, experiential “knowledge” (rather than what is abstract and theoretical: cf. Gen.4:1; etc.). Adam and Eve “knew” only good in the garden (for that is all there was), and had no need whatsoever to be able to distinguish it from evil. Immediately after the fall, however, they and we their offspring would very much need to be able to tell the two apart.

And the two of them, the man and his wife, were naked, but they felt no shame.
Genesis 2:25

This verse demonstrates definitively that Adam and Eve’s consciences originally operated differently from ours in that they did not feel shame in a situation where all of their progeny would (or at least ought to), namely, public nudity. This is not to say that the conscience each of our first parents possessed was intrinsically different from ours (they knew not to eat of the forbidden fruit), but its capacity was limited and was without any concept of evil for no such conception was necessary: in the garden, public nudity among sinless people was no sin. God put in what they needed to know in terms of right and wrong, and that was all. There was no need for Adam and Eve to weigh feelings of guilt and shame in endless introspection – there was nothing to feel guilty about or ashamed of so long as they abstained from the tree of the knowing of good and evil. But this situation changed instantly as a result of their sin. After eating the forbidden fruit they immediately demonstrated feelings of shame and guilt – not about their rebellion from God, but about their nakedness.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, so they sewed together fig leaves and made garments for themselves. Genesis 3:7

Like all other facets of the heart (that place where the spirit and the body intersect as we have seen in the previous installment of this series), in regard to the conscience too the sin nature has a profound influence, especially in the absence of God’s truth. As a result of eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve have an expanded capacity to distinguish between good and evil, but, like little children, they have not yet learned to do so in even the most basic ways. For they lack information from God, truth that was not necessary for them to consider in their uncorrupted state, but which in the world of corruption they were about to enter would be of the utmost necessity in order to distinguish good from evil. The construction of the garments made of fig leaves and all of their actions which follow reveal their newly acquired sin natures provoking their now “activated” consciences into misguided behavior in the absence of the truth of the Word of God. For while clothing is an appropriate remedy for the nakedness which caused their shame, they exhibit no shame regarding the sin for which they were truly guilty, disobeying God’s command.

Then they heard the voice of the Lord God [as He was] walking about in the garden at the [time of] day when the evening breeze [came up]. So Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God in the midst of the garden's trees. Then the Lord God called out for Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" And Adam responded, "I heard your voice in the garden and was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid myself". Then He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree from which I told you not to eat?" Genesis 3:8-11

Here we see another important aspect of the conscience bereft of truth and under control of the sin nature. Adam is "afraid" of God's punishment – for his nakedness. Not only does the conscience under the control of sin operate on the level of fear, fear of *getting caught*, but it also casts aside shame and guilt in those cases where it feels that it has avoided detection. In the absence of truth and controlled by sin, the conscience follows in the devil's footsteps, looking only to what it can "get away with" in the service of the sin nature's will rather than seeking out God's will. That is to say, whether through initial ignorance (in the case of Adam and Eve), or after the conscience has been defiled (in the case of all those who willfully turn away from the truth of God), the conscience in rebellion inverts spiritual reality, seeing evil as good (for evil selfishly benefits the sin nature's desires in the short run), and good as evil (for good hinders what the sin nature desires from a short-sighted anti-God point of view). Adam and Eve seem to have assumed that God would never find out about their eating the forbidden fruit, but were clearly concerned that He not find them walking about naked. They try to hide their guilt in regard to minor things of which they feel ashamed, but they feel no need to hide the things of which they are horribly guilty, since they feel they will not be caught out. This is, of course, what the world still does today, at least in the case of all who refuse to respond to God and seek His deliverance from sin through faith in the gracious offer of His Son our Lord Jesus Christ, failing to understand that nothing can be hidden from God and that all things will eventually come to light (Eccl.12:14; Rom.2:16; 1Cor.4:5; cf. Is.48:9; Acts 17:31; Heb.4:12-13; 2Pet.3:10; Rev.20:13).

Even as believers, our consciences only give us the potential of effectively knowing and distinguishing between good and evil (Rom.12:1-2; Eph.6:5-8; Phil.1:9-11). It is still our responsibility to train them up to maturity by feeding them on the milk of the Word of God that they may come to function at a truly mature level. As imperfect creatures with an understanding of God's truth which is not entirely perfect and complete, we find that our sin natures have, as in the case of Adam and Eve and the fig leaves, a tendency to emphasize small things which have been exposed over large things which have not, so that it is up to us to develop the godly ability to use our consciences properly:

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have *trained* their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] distinguish between good and evil. Hebrews 5:14

The training up of the conscience through the taking in, accepting, believing, and applying of God's **biblical** truth inevitably builds upon the foundation laid down since birth from the observation of God's **natural** truth (i.e., nature itself teaches certain principles of truth and does so by divine design; cf. Job 12:7-12, and see Peter lesson #11, "Natural and Special Revelation"):

For whenever the gentiles who do not have the Law do **by nature** the things [written in] the Law, these who have no Law are a Law for themselves. For they demonstrate that the essence of the Law has been written in their hearts when **their conscience** testifies against them, and their [mental] deliberations [based on conscience] alternatively either condemn them or acquit them. Romans 2:14-15

Therefore it is necessary to be subject [to authority] not only because of this severity, but also **for conscience' sake** (i.e., everyone's conscience teaches them "by [observation of] nature" to obey legitimate authority). Romans 13:5

Judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with an uncovered head? Does not even **nature itself teach you** that a man suffers dishonor if he prays with long hair, but that long hair (i.e., God's "head covering") is her glory? For her long hair has been given to her in the place of a veil. 1st Corinthians 11:13-14

As one wag commenting upon business ethics recently remarked, "everyone knows that lying, stealing, and cheating are wrong". But, given that in spite of such universal "knowledge" of good and evil at the most basic level there is still no lack of such activities, we can safely say that obedience to the guidance conscience provides is far from universal. The conscience, even when filled to the brim with true standards, still takes second place to the will. Except in the case of the most completely blinded hearts, we are all aware that we are essentially sinful creatures. No matter how "good" we may earnestly try to be, we realize that we have not been 100% "good" in our lives. This realization of the conscience, coupled with the awareness of our mortality, predisposes everyone at some point in their lives at least to consider being open to God and His solution to sin and death in the gift of His Son our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom.1:18-20):

I have seen all the work that God has given Man to occupy himself with. [God] has made everything beautiful in its [limited] time; but He has also placed **[the notion of] eternity in the hearts of mankind** – and [He has done this], moreover, without Man being able to discover the work which God has done from the beginning unto the end. Ecclesiastes 3:10-11

And it is this true baptism [of the Spirit] which saves you (lit. as an "antitype" or analogy to the ark's bringing of "salvation through water"). Not any [literal] washing away of filth from your flesh, but an appeal to God for a **clean conscience** through [faith in] the resurrection of Jesus Christ [resulting in Spirit baptism]. 1st Peter 3:21

For the Law, being a [mere] shadow of the good things to come, not an exact representation of the [actual] events [of Christ's work represented therein], in company

with the sacrifices themselves which they offer continually year by year cannot bring perfection to those who approach [God] thereby. For [if they could], would they not have stopped offering [them], since the worshipers would no longer have *a conscience* [plagued by] *sins*, having once been purified [by such shadow sacrifices]?

Hebrews 10:1-2

But whether it is entering into Christ or following Him after salvation, responding to the dictates of conscience still requires will, conscious decisions on our part to restrain or adapt our behavior to the guidance of our conscience. Not all who are made aware of the path of salvation take it: many are called, but few are chosen because only the few put their faith in Christ (Matt.22:14). And what is true of the basic truth of salvation is equally true of all of God's truths. We are counseled by our conscience, so to speak, but it is we our true selves who are responsible for making the decisions day by day of whether or not to behave in keeping with what we know and believe to be right and good. Clearly, by the time we are adults we have all learned much simply through listening to our parents, our teachers, our legal authorities, and by generally imbibing the principles of "right and wrong" as they are taught in any normal society and clearly discernible in nature itself through observation of the divine design. While it may well be that not everything we have come to incorporate into our consciences through such learning and observation is truly in accord (or completely in accord) with God's true standards, nevertheless, at the outset of our turning to God we have to begin with the conscience we have, and trust that through His Spirit He will give us the guidance we need in the interim (cf. 1Jn.5:20; see Peter lesson #26, section 2.c, "a fresh start for the heart"), until we all achieve through the process of spiritual growth the spiritual maturity that cannot be separated from a healthy, well-informed, and highly functional conscience.

Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, until we all reach that unifying goal of *believing what is right* and of giving our complete allegiance to the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that *standard of maturity* whose "attainment" is defined by Christ; that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, but rather that we may, *by embracing the truth* in love, grow up in all respects, with Christ who is the head of the Church as our model. In this way, the entire body of the Church, fitted and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

The conscience, therefore, is inseparable from faith and from truth. Truth must be believed to be incorporated into the heart through the proper and normal process of spiritual growth (the subject of the Peter series and slated to be covered in part 6A of this present series). Once we reach spiritual maturity through this process, it is the conscience which keeps us apprized of how our behavior is measuring up to the standards of truth we have accepted and believed. Training the

conscience thus involves understanding God's truth first and foremost, for the Bible and what it truly teaches must be our ultimate standard, since it is the very Word of God.

The objective of this command [to refrain from false teaching and cleave to the truth] is love from a pure heart, *a good conscience*, and an un-hypocritical faith – it is by rejecting these things that some have missed the mark and turned aside to pointless false teaching.

1st Timothy 1:5-6

In the verses above, a “good conscience” is not only one which does not condemn its possessor's behavior, but one which has the correct standards, standards which conform to the truth of the Word of God believed in faith and put into place through a diligent process of spiritual growth. None of us, of course, will ever achieve perfection in this life, nor ever possess a flawless understanding of the entire Word of God. Experience in the application of God's truth to life situations which are far from “black and white” where our knowledge will necessarily always be incomplete is also a factor in the practical use of conscience (Heb.5:14; cf. Job 11:6 and Peter lesson #17, section 4, “Poles of Application”). In such instances, reliance upon the guidance of the Spirit and prayer should never be underestimated (Rom.14:22-23; 1Cor.4:4-5; 11:29-31; Heb.5:14):

And if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from God who gives freely and without reproach to all and it shall be granted to him. James 1:5

When it comes to complex situations, unbelievers too must occasionally engage in a process of internal deliberation of weighing facts and standards to determine the right path in consultation with their conscience:

For whenever the gentiles who do not have the Law do by nature the things [written in] the Law, these who have no Law are a Law for themselves. For they demonstrate that the essence of the Law has been written in their hearts when *their conscience testifies against them*, and their [mental] *deliberations* [based on conscience] alternatively either *condemn or acquit* them. Romans 2:14-15

The principle of distinguishing between correct biblical standards in the heart and the complications that sometimes arise when applying them to real life is illuminated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:16-18. In addition to telling us not to be overly wicked and foolish, this passage also tells us not to be either over-righteous or over-wise. For while the former behavior causes an early death (as we would well expect wickedness and foolishness to do), the latter causes a person to “ruin himself”.

Do not be overly righteous, and do not be overly wise – why should you ruin yourself?
Do not be overly wicked and do not be a fool – why should you die before your time?
The best thing for you [to do] is to lay firm hold on the former (i.e., wisdom and

righteousness), while not completely releasing your hand from the latter, for the man who fears God will escape both [extremes]. Ecclesiastes 7:16-18

Far from encouraging, allowing, or rationalizing sin, these verses underscore the fact that the conscience is the repository of *absolute* standards of right and wrong. In life, however, there are many subtleties which make absolute behavior problematic, since many of life's choices may be less than 100% right or 100% wrong. Indeed, even if we do possess a "good conscience", it is sometimes difficult to know for certain that we are being absolutely honest in the evaluation of our own motivations, the one area where things should be clearer to us than anywhere else (cf. 1Cor.4:4-5). The same is equally true when it comes to our interpretation of events outside of ourselves, as in the case of the "weak" and "strong" believers cited by Paul (Rom.14:1-23; 1Cor.8:1-13; 10:23-33). Both the weak who judge and the strong who indulge are "right" in an abstract, absolute sense, yet "wrong" in the way they are applying their standards to life. This is also the main point of the verses from Ecclesiastes quoted above. Extremism either in the implementation of an overly legalistic interpretation of what constitutes right and wrong on the one hand, or an overly permissive attitude when it comes to heeding the conscience on the other are equally destructive courses of action (so that one should be careful not to "grab hold" of one or the other to such an extreme degree).

Since the present study concerns the biblical subject of Hamartiology, we are naturally focused here on the issue of defining, recognizing, avoiding and dealing with sin. But it is good at the outset to keep all of Solomon's words in mind. For as believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to walk in love, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Against such behavior "there is no law" (Gal.5:23), and it is only by walking in a loving, Spirit-filled way that we can hope to approach the true standard of behavior that God would have us emulate (Gal.5:16-18). We cannot hope to avoid sin by following the detailed prohibitions of the Law (Rom.8:3-4). We can only hope to grow in sanctification by following in the footsteps of our Savior through the Spirit's help (Rom.7:4-6). It is possible to have either an overactive or an underactive response to the conscience and each is equally problematic. For the former leads to hyper-introspection, but God has called us to peace (1Cor.7:15; cf. Rom.14:17-19), while the latter leads to a careless attitude about our behavior, and God has called us to sanctification (1Thes.4:3; Heb.12:14). Since, as Ecclesiastes states, "the man who fears God" avoids both such extremes, it is important to point out that both extremes involve arrogance. The arrogance of setting up one's own standards and ignoring the conscience entirely is well-known, for that is clearly "folly" and "evil". But the arrogance of assuming that one's *application* of God's standards is perfect in every respect, that one is capable of interpreting every one of life's situations with complete accuracy, and that a life of what amounts to "sinless perfection" is thus possible, can be even more dangerous. For the fool and villain know, at least on some level, that they have rejected what is right, but those who are blinded by self-righteousness erroneously assume that they are on God's side even when they have taken up arms against Him (cf. the apostle Paul's pre-salvation experience: Acts 9:4-6). Ultimately, conscience is responsible to respond to God and His truth (Acts 23:1; 24:16). And conscience is, in fact, a reminder of His truth about what is right and what is wrong, functioning to its true capacity only when empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom.9:1) in the case of those who

have attained that measure of good judgment that comes with spiritual maturity (Eph.4:11-16; Heb.5:14).

As far as sin, the subject of this treatise, is concerned, before we can let our “conscience be our guide” we need to understand its and our own limitations, so as never to allow hyper-rationalization to excuse behavior we ought to realize is wrong (resulting in a dangerously false sense of peace), nor to allow inordinate and misplaced feelings of guilt, shame or fear fill us with doubt about things we should know from scripture are good and right (and thus steal away the legitimate peace we ought to be enjoying). Further, we must recognize that with knowledge comes responsibility vis-a-vis our brothers and sisters in Christ whose consciences may be pure in terms of obedience yet weak in terms of knowledge, and understand that walking in Christian love sometimes entails refraining even from behavior that is not in fact sinful or wrong in the abstract for the sake of those who in ignorance believe that it is (Rom.14:1-23; 1Cor.8:1-13; 10:23-33).

Ultimately, then, we want to know what is right, believe what is right, do what is right, and have our hearts and consciences at peace in the comfort of this right knowledge, belief, and action. If we are diligent in our quest for spiritual growth, in our responsiveness to the guidance of the Spirit, and in our step by step walk with Christ and work for Christ, then sanctification will follow as a matter of course, and our consciences will be well able to provide excellent guidance as we cope with the temptations that are inevitable in this world and with this sin nature. And since we are imperfect, while we are growing spiritually and putting our faith in all of the principles of God’s truth, we will also need to remember and embrace those which relate to God’s mercy and to His forgiveness of our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, understanding that inordinate guilt over sin long since past and confessed is both inappropriate and counterproductive:

By this we know that we are of the truth, and before Him we persuade our heart, that [even] if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows everything.
1st John 3:19-20

To sum up, like Adam and Eve after the fall, everyone is born with a conscience, a capacity for understanding the difference between what is genuinely good and what is truly evil. But this capacity must be developed (Deut.1:39; Is.7:16), these consciences of ours must be “calibrated”, so to speak, to the true standards of what is right and wrong from the only correct point of view, namely, from God’s point of view. Nature itself teaches us certain things (1Cor.11:13-14), so that even unbelieving gentiles who have never heard the standards contained in the Law of God can develop passably good consciences from their observation of the world as God has constructed it, and from learning the lessons of life as He has ordered it (Rom.2:14-16).

For believers in Jesus Christ, developing a “good conscience” and keeping it “pure” is critical (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1Tim.1:5; 1:19; 3:9; 2Tim.1:3; Heb.13:18; 1Pet.3:16; 3:21), and it takes understanding of the truth of the Word to develop a mature conscience which does indeed correspond to God’s true standards (Heb.5:14). For while those with “weak consciences”, that is,

believers who have not yet learned the truth of the Word as they should and, ideally, soon will, are to be accorded special consideration by those who are spiritually mature (Rom.14:1-23; 1Cor.8:1-13; 10:23-33), weakness in the understanding of the truth of the Bible is an incredibly dangerous liability which is commanded to be offset by spiritual growth with all due speed and diligence (Eph.4:11-16).

Finally, it is not, of course, only the calibration of the conscience through a deep understanding of the Word that is important and at issue. Believers must also learn to correctly interpret and *obey* the prompting of their conscience. For to the extent that the conscience is indeed, through the intake of the truth of the Word of God, calibrated to the standards which God has ordained, and to the extent that the conscience in company with the Spirit is indeed directing a certain course of action (or dissuading from one) with this direction being correctly understood and interpreted by the believer, to that extent the conscience is essentially acting in the place of God as the voice of God (cf. Rom.9:1), so that disobedience under such circumstances is tantamount to the arrogant substitution of one's own false standard for God's true standard in order to carry out some selfish purpose. Such activity, especially when engaged in knowingly, repeatedly, and willfully, can cause the most profound spiritual difficulties (1Tim.1:19-20). Repeated flouting of the conscience has the potential of "searing it" (1Tim.4:2), "befouling it" (Tit.1:15), and, in general, "darkening it" (Rom.1:21; Eph.4:17-19; cf. Matt.6:22-23) to the point where it no longer functions as it ought to. The conscience by its very nature is open to what is true, right, and good, and resists by nature what is false, wrong, and evil. But while everyone is born with an equally functional capacity for feeding the conscience's desire for truth, when one gives oneself over to the service of sin and evil the conscience becomes progressively ever more damaged until it finally arrives at the point of calling evil good and good evil (cf. Is.5:20; Mic.3:2), despite the natural inclination to the contrary instilled in it by its Maker.

Our consciences have been "cleansed" through faith in the work of the Son of God on the cross in our behalf (1Pet.3:16; Heb.9:14; 10:22). We must not, therefore, go backward in this regard, but only ever forward. The process of building up the conscience and listening to it carefully in the Spirit and in careful consultation with the Word of God and through prayer must be a daily one which is diligently and carefully pursued. We must learn to distinguish between its true voice on the one hand and inordinate guilt and misplaced shame on the other (and there are times when, like our Lord, we have to "despise the shame" in order to truly do His will: Heb.12:2; cf. 1Pet.2:19; Heb.11:26). All believers in Jesus Christ need to make it a top priority to have and to maintain a "good conscience" which rightly appreciates and evaluates our actions yet does not condemn us in what we do (Rom. 9:1; 2Cor.1:12; 4:2; 5:11; 1Tim.1:5; 1:19; 3:9; 2Tim.1:3; Heb.13:18). If such is the case, we shall ever have a valuable ally in our struggle against sin, but, to that end, a sound and detailed biblical knowledge of what sin is and what it entails is also crucial. For, ultimately, it is with the scriptures that we must fill the conscience, until we arrive at that blessed place where there is little distinction between the Word and our conscience:

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the

marrow from its bones; [for] *it* (i.e., the Word when resident in our conscience) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.

Hebrews 4:12

II. The Nature of Sin

1. The Essence of Sin

The Bible defines sin in a number of ways. Sin is lawlessness (1Jn.3:4). Sin is failing to do right when one knows what is good (Jas.4:17). Sin is falling short of God's righteousness (Rm.3:23). Sin is everything which is not of faith (Rom.14:23). In all of these general definitions, sin is action which is deficient when compared to some standard, namely, law, good, righteousness, and faith respectively. And in each of these cases the standard comes from God: i.e., sin is falling short of God's Law, what God has established as the good, God's righteousness, and the principles of God's truth in which a person believes. Sin, therefore, is an action a person takes which is contrary to the will of God, so that all sin is necessarily directed *against God* (cf. 1Sam.15:24):

Against You and You alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your eyes.
Psalm 51:4a

Sin is thus at its base the substitution of our own false standards for God's true standards, and our own will for God's will. This is true whether we sin in full knowledge of the wrongness of our actions or do so out of complete ignorance that what we are doing is wrong (see section II.8 below). This is an extremely important concept for all believers to grasp, because what it means is that our feelings about the matter count for nothing. If an act is sinful, it is so whether or not we think so (cf. Prov.14:12; 16:2; 16:25). We may be unaware that a certain action is a sin, or we may feel that some behaviors are so innocuous as to be inconsequential. Make no mistake: any action which violates God's will and God's perfect standards is sin, regardless of our ignorance or lack of concern. Failure to understand this critical point has caused many heresies, much apostasy, and countless spiritual crises, wherever and whenever believers begin to operate on the basis of their own standards instead of subordinating themselves to the will of God. For whether one assumes one's perfection (or near perfection) by failing to account for sins of ignorance, or adopts a false sense of security by developing one's own set of standards about what ought to constitute sin, or plunges into inordinate guilt by giving undue weight to one category of sin as opposed to all the others, spiritual health and growth depends upon acceptance of the fact that *all* violations of God's perfect standards constitute sin. As we saw in the previous section, conscience may alert us to the fact that an action contemplated or committed is sinful. But we are no less guilty if it does not (Lev.4:2; 4:13; 4:27; 5:15-18; 22:14; Num.15:22-29):

For [even] before the Law [was handed down], there was [indeed] sin in the world, but, when there was no Law, sin was not being taken into account [by us as it was after the Law]. Romans 5:13

The Mosaic Law, while by no means delineating all sinful activity in a comprehensive way (as the tenth commandment shows), exposed many aspects of human behavior as truly sinful which were not generally understood as such before its arrival on the scene. But, as the verse above makes clear, “sin was in the world” to the exact same degree before these divine revelations, even before it was being recognized as such. The same principle applies today. Ignorance of sin does not render a sinful action any less sinful.

The essential nature of sin being the violation of God’s will and standards, whether or not we are aware of the fact, is evident in the etymology of the biblical words used for sin and sinning. While there are a number of synonyms in both Greek and Hebrew for this anti-God activity, two verbs and their corresponding nouns stand out in each language as the primary terminology used to designate sin: in Hebrew, *chata`* and *chete`* (aux, aux), and in Greek, *hamartano* and *hamartia* (ἁμαρτανω, ἁμαρτια). It is striking that the underlying etymology of the roots in both languages is the same, namely, “to miss”. The Greek words originally refer to the missing of a target at which one is shooting, while the Hebrew words refer to taking a wrong road. In each case, however, the essential idea is that one has fallen short of the right goal and, by definition, pursued a wrong one in its place. Even in the essential meanings of the biblical words for sin, therefore, we see the principle that sin at its most basic is a failure to conform to the divine standard of behavior, to “miss the mark” and to “go astray”, regardless of what circumstances or motivation may have caused the “error”.

2. The Universality of Sin

The biblical definitions and etymologies given above point inescapably to the fact that it is only by perfectly following divine standards that a person can be without sin. This fact alone should be sufficient to convince us, even if we have but a dimly objective picture of ourselves and our behavior, that we have, are, and will continue to commit sin as long as we inhabit this body that is by nature sinful. For in many respects, sin is a “symptom” of the sin nature:

If we say that we do not possess sin (i.e., a sin nature which is producing personal sins), we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say, that we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word is not in us.

1st John 1:8-10

When one takes into consideration the universal sin nature on the one hand and the fact that sin is any violation of God’s perfect standards on the other, the principle taught in the verses above that all of us are sinners should come easy enough, and is in fact a common theme in scripture (cf. Jer.17:9; Rom.5:12; Eph.2:3):

When they sin against You – for there is no man who does not sin

1st Kings 8:46a (2Chron.6:36a)

What is Man that he could be pure (i.e., innocent), or that one born of woman could be righteous? Job 15:14

If You, O Lord, kept a close watch on [our] iniquities, then who, O Lord, could stand? Psalm 130:3

Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living can be righteous before You. Psalm 143:2

For there is no man on earth who is [so] righteous that he [always] does what is good and [never] sins. Ecclesiastes 7:20

What then? Do we [Israelites] have an advantage? Not at all. For we have already brought forth the charge that both Jews and gentiles, all [of us], are under sin's control. Romans 3:9

For all sin and fall short of God's glory. Romans 3:23

For we know that the Law is spiritual. But I am fleshly, sold [into bondage] under [the power of] sin. Romans 7:14

But I perceive a different law [at work] in my bodily members, waging war against the Law in my mind and taking me prisoner – [a prisoner to] this law of sin that dwells in my body. Romans 7:23

But scripture has locked everything up under [the power of] sin, so that the promise which is fulfilled through faith in Christ might be given to those who believe. Galatians 3:22

For we all stumble (i.e., sin) in many ways. James 3:2a

Although most objective human beings understand their sinfulness at least on some level, what is less commonly understood is that sin is much more comprehensive in nature than many people realize. In addition to the fact that the Bible denounces one sin or another on virtually every page, one need only to peruse the many lists of sins in the Old and New Testament to garner some idea of the all-pervading nature of sin and its multifarious manifestations in every conceivable realm of human behavior (e.g., Ex.20-23; Lev.18-20; Prov.6:16-19; Rom.1:18-32; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.5:3-5; 1Tim.1:8-10; 2Tim.3:1-5; cf. 2Thess.2:8-12). Sin is in fact so all pervasive that it is folly to think that we could even ever come up with a complete catalog that would list every possible sin (or that, even if we could, we would ever be able to avoid everything in the catalog even with the most energetic and sincere approach). At the conclusion of the list given in Galatians chapter 3, the apostle Paul is quick to add the following rider to the list of sins he has just related as being obviously works of the flesh as opposed to works of the Spirit: "and whatever is similar to all these things" (Gal.5:21). This plastic "other sin clause" is

reminiscent of the 10th commandment which describes all lust as sin (thus obviating any possible human claim to sinlessness: Rom.7:7-8).

This is an evil thing in everything which is being done under the sun, namely that there is one outcome for everyone, and moreover that the hearts of the sons of Man are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts during their lives, and afterwards they [go to join] the dead.

Ecclesiastes 9:3

We live for the Lord and through the Lord and it is only what we do for the Lord and through the Lord that really has any true point or value here in this world of “evil and madness”. But because of indwelling sin we believers also have this same “evil and madness” in our hearts (cf. Jer.17:9). It is easy, all too easy, even for believers who have attained a measure of spiritual growth to give in to the madness and the evil, being swept up by the emotion of indwelling sin and the pressures of an essentially evil world which fails to see the hand of God at work and refuses to revere and acknowledge Him and His truth (and that is the very definition of madness). Under such circumstances, it is hardly necessary to prove the universality of sin as if it were a surprising premise (see Peter lesson #15: “The Myth of Sinless Perfection”). What truly *is* surprising is that universal “evil and madness” have not by now led to the complete annihilation of the human race (and that has only been the case because of God’s gracious restraint of human sinfulness through the power of His Holy Spirit: 2Thes.2:6-7).

While our Lord faced all of life’s temptations without error of any kind (Heb.4:15), the rest of us, indwelt by sin as we are, necessarily fall far short of that perfect mark. And it is well to consider that Satan’s influence was enough to lead Adam and Eve into temptation even though at the time they had no indwelling sin. Inasmuch as we their progeny all do possess sin natures, it is folly to assume that we have the capability of resisting temptation by our own fleshly efforts. It is only by “walking in love” that we can hope to refrain from sin to any meaningful degree. Only when we are following the positive guidance of the Spirit of God in the power of the Spirit is it possible to avoid some of sin’s many pitfalls, and that is especially true when the sin in question comes as a result of ignorance rather than willfulness. For if sin is essentially selfish preference for our own will and arrogant disobedience to the will of God, we should not find it surprising that our sinful nature tends to choose what it feels to be in its own interests especially in those cases where, because of ignorance, it is not obvious that such an action is contrary to God’s will.

3. The Results of Sin

Sin, as we have defined it, is an act, a willful disobeying of the will of God (regardless of whether the perpetrator knows so or thinks so). Sin commonly has three results, namely, an external “ethical” result which is generally termed “evil” (i.e., the effect of one’s sin outside of oneself), an internal “judicial” result which is generally termed “guilt” (i.e., the effect of one’s sin upon oneself), and a dispositive “practical” result, which we have termed above “spiritual death” and “separation from God” (i.e., the effect of one’s sin upon one’s relationship with God).

1. Evil: In our use of the word “evil” in contemporary English, we generally mean something far worse than sin. Biblically speaking, however, sin and evil are synonyms (although it is true that the word “evil” is often used for the results or effects of sin rather than for the process of sinning itself). Nevertheless, sin and evil are two inseparable sides of the same coin, and it is in fact impossible to have one without the other. We find this point reflected in the etymology of the word “evil”: in both Hebrew and Greek, it is also commonly and correctly translated “bad”. For “badness” is at the root of the word and the concept, and to a certain degree the technical connotations of the word evil which now restrict its use in English to exceptional malevolence are misleading. The most one can say from a biblical standpoint is that, as mentioned above, the word evil (bad/badness), being a noun/adjective, focuses more on the result of the action implied in “sin” (whether that word is being used as a pure verb or as a verbal noun).

But as it is you are boasting in your braggart arrogance. Every such boast is *evil*. Since for him who knows how to do good and does not do it, for him it is *sin*. James 4:16-17

In terms of these effects of sin which we are here calling “evil”, they radiate out from the person who commits the sin, and are clearly “bad” as opposed to being “good” in terms of the ultimate true standard, namely, in the eyes of the Lord. This “badness” while primarily moral is in truth bad in every sense, for sin has all manner of consequences both for the sinner and for those who are affected by his or her sin, and all of them are negative. So while a sin is most assuredly a “bad action”, what we are discussing here are its “bad effects”, that is, the bad or “evil” results it produces for the sinner him or herself (and sin always has negative personal consequences) and for the wider world as a whole (and sin frequently does negatively affect others besides just the sinner).

It is worth emphasizing here that the evil or “badness” that sin produces is objective, rather than subjective, and that the source of this definitive categorization lies entirely in God’s truth rather than in Man’s opinion. For example, Adam and Eve became mortal, were cursed, and were expelled from paradise for eating of the forbidden fruit, an act which does not seem particularly immoral, sinful, bad, or evil in and of itself, but which was a clear and willful rejection of God’s authority (Gen.2:16-17). Actions prohibited by God, even if they may seem innocuous or even defensible to us, are not for that reason any less sinful, or any less productive of evil. God is the righteous judge and we are but clay. What right do we have to question our Maker? Sin is therefore always sin, and inevitably produces evil of varying magnitude and consequence. But however small the sin and minimal the consequence, as in the case of the contemporary proverb that “nothing good ever happens after midnight”, so also nothing good ever comes of sin. And while it is certainly true that through the grace and mercy of God sometimes good comes *in spite* of sin (i.e., David and Bathsheba becoming the parents of Solomon), we must acknowledge the fact that the evil produced in each and every case will always make such experiences a bad bargain. With sin comes evil, and to take David again as an example, the loss to him personally and to Israel generally which resulted from his sin was chronic and immense – and unnecessary: obviously, if God provides blessing in spite of sin, how much more will He not provide blessing *without* that sin?

We need to realize, therefore, that we are most definitely not “missing out on something” by refraining from sin – except, of course, for the evil it produces (including the personal suffering and divine discipline which must inevitably follow as we shall see below). Even in cases where by prior sinful behavior we have put ourselves in a box so as to suffer consequences if we do not continue to follow a sinful course, it is still always better to turn to God – He is quite capable of saving us even from ourselves and our past mistakes, and He is also quite capable of making us regret every decision to trust in our own guile and might whenever we fail to throw ourselves on His mercy whether out of fear or arrogance.

2. Guilt: As in the case of sin and evil above, the “guiltiness” we are discussing here is objective, based upon divine rather than human standards. If we are guilty in God’s eyes, then we are guilty indeed, no matter how we may feel, and, on the other hand, guilty feelings do not automatically make us guilty (as we saw in our discussion of the conscience above). We are or are not guilty based upon God’s appreciation of our condition independent of any human evaluation, even our own.

Guilt, like evil, is a result of sin that cannot be separated from sin anymore than evil can be. This is clearly evident from the vocabulary of the Old Testament where we find on the one hand a distinction between the primary words for sin and guilt respectively (i.e., *aux*, *chatha`*, and *]vi*, *’avon*), with the former focusing on the act and the latter the consequence of sin. And yet, on the other hand, we frequently see the cause and effect of sin and guilt described as essentially inseparable, especially where they are considered in conjunction (cf. Is.6:7):

. . . . [until] I said, “I will make my sin known to You, and I will not cover [over] my guilt. I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”, and You forgave the guilt of my sin.
Selah. Psalm 32:5

Guilt adheres to all sin, whether or not we are aware that what we are doing is sin. Under the Mosaic Law, there was an entire category of sacrifice devoted to “sins of ignorance” (i.e., the so-called “sin” and “guilt” offerings: Lev.4:1 - 6:7), and even these could only be atoned for through the “shedding of blood” (Heb.9:22). Indeed, the procedure for making atonement for the guilt inherent in sins of ignorance is so austere and onerous relative to anything we can imagine today (cf. Lev.7:1-10), that this part of the Law has the effect of making every honest person admit to him or herself that lasting and complete atonement of the guilt of sin by one’s own devices is so impossible as to make even its contemplation pointless. How much more then is this not true for the guilt which attaches to deliberate sins!

There will be [but] one [and the same] law [of forgiveness through sacrifice (vv.22-28)] for both the native born of the sons of Israel and for the resident alien who resides among you, for [every] one who sins out of ignorance. But as for the person who acts with a high hand (i.e., in arrogance), be he native born or resident alien, it is the Lord whom he has blasphemed, and that person must be cut off from the midst of his people (i.e.,

executed). For he has despised the Word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment. That person must definitely be cut off. His *guilt* [remains] in him.
Numbers 15:29-31

A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses.
Hebrews 10:28 RSV

While there may be much middle ground between complete ignorance and absolute arrogance in our human experience and from our relativistic point of view, in God's perfect way of looking at things there is no gray area at all. Either we are essentially deceived in our sinning as Eve was (i.e., sins of ignorance), or we sin in full knowledge that what we are doing is wrong as Adam did (i.e., sins of arrogance). In *either* case, guilt results. The main lesson from the regime of sacrifice contained in the Mosaic Law is that in *either* case, the consequences of sin are so severe as to be avoided at all costs, but the consequences of sinning defiantly, arrogantly, in premeditated full-knowledge of the sinfulness of one's intended actions are so dire that no one can bear up under them. Provision is made for ignorant sinning, although the forgiveness for such sins comes at the cost of considerable sacrifice. But no provision is made for defiant, arrogant, cognizant sinning (the exception being the Day of Atonement representing Christ's sacrifice on the cross where "all sins" are forgiven, i.e., the positional forgiveness all believers enjoy: Lev.16:16; 16:21; 16:30; 16:34).

For if we continue to sin willfully (i.e., arrogantly) after having received full knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains any sacrifice applicable to [such] sins, but [only] the terrifying expectation of judgment and fiery retribution waiting to devour those who oppose [the Lord].
Hebrews 10:26-27

The "full knowledge" mentioned here is the Greek *epignosis* (ἐπιγνώσις), a word which indicates not only full understanding but ready acceptance. Along with its corresponding verb, this noun is sometimes used for acceptance of the gospel message to indicate not only an understanding of the principle of the gospel but the ready acceptance of it in faith (Eph.4:13; Col.1:9-10; 2:2; 1Tim.2:4; 4:3; 2Tim.2:25; 3:7; Tit.1:1; 2Pet.2:20-21; cf. Rom.1:28; 10:2; Eph.1:17; Phil.1:9; Col.1:6; 3:10; 2Pet.1:2-3; 1:8). The Judean believers addressed here had truly accepted Jesus, but were now turning back to the rituals of the Mosaic Law under the severe social, political and economic pressures and persecutions to which they found themselves subjected. But to engage in ritual sacrifice was, in effect, to "crucify the Son of God anew" (Heb.6:6), to proclaim by one's actions that Jesus' death for our sins (which these sacrifices represented and which they foreshadowed) had not been effective! Since these Jewish believers did indeed have "full knowledge" of the truth, that is to say, had understood and *believed* the truth, their actions in participation in such sacrifices from whatever motivation were not only sinful but *defiantly* so, and Paul adroitly uses the very Law at issue regarding sacrifices to remind them of the penalty for such arrogant and blasphemous sin.

The net effect of this chilling reality that *all* sin incurs guilt and that *defiant* sin incurs a guilt for which no legal remedy exists is (or should be) to make every human being receptive to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For there never has been and never will be a human being who has never sinned in arrogance, not to mention ignorance. We all sin, therefore we are all guilty. Thus the Bible proclaims the guilt of all mankind in every place where sin is discussed and described, and that is especially true of the Law, whose very purpose it is to reveal our guiltiness to us, that is, the guilt that comes through the commission of sin (Rom.7:7-25; Gal.3:22-25; cf. 2Cor.3:9; Gal.3:10):

Therefore no flesh shall be considered righteous before Him through the works of the Law, for it is through the Law that we come to acknowledge [our] sin. Romans 3:20

Guilt, and guilt worthy of death at that, is thus a universal human reality. Had not our God in His matchless grace made provision for our sins, the stain of guilt would remain forever, and we would have nothing to look forward to beyond this life but that “terrifying expectation of judgment and fiery retribution waiting to devour those who oppose” Him (Heb.10:27). Thanks be to God for His ineffable mercy in overlooking our sins until the day He judged them and washed them away through the blood of His own Son, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

For the salary paid by sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Romans 6:23

3. Separation from God: Sin is the source of all death, whether spiritual, physical, or eternal (Gen.2:17; Prov.1:31-32; Ezek.3:16-19; Rm.6:23; Jas.1:15; 1Jn.5:16; cf. 2Cor.7:9-10). As descendants of Adam, we are all heirs to the threefold death occasioned by his sin and corroborated by our own. Without God’s gracious intervention, our spiritual death at birth would all too soon pass through the medium of physical death into the eternal death awaiting us on the other side of this life, that is to say, from temporal separation from God to eternal separation from God. For as Adam was warned in the garden with the words “dying thou shalt die” (Gen.2:17), death is the ultimate separation from God, and the ultimate form of death is eternal death or “the second death” (Rev.20:6; 20:14; 21:8), that is, relegation to the lake of fire apart from the presence of God forever (Matt.25:41; Rev.14:10 [where “before” is used in the sense of appearing in front of God for judgment, so that the separation of holiness from sin is maintained]; Rev.19:20; 20:14-15; cf. Matt.7:23; 25:12; Lk.13:25-28).

As believers in Jesus Christ, however, we are all blessed to be “positionally dead”, that is, we have died to the world and to sin by having been made one with Jesus Christ and by thus sharing in His death to sin – for we now share in Him in every way (Rom.6:2-14; 2Cor.5:14; Gal.6:14; Col.3:3-4). For us, therefore, the chain of temporal death through sin followed by physical death and in turn by eternal death has been broken. Being already dead to the world and to sin by being united to Jesus, physical death does not bring a transition from separation in this life to separation in eternity, but to full eternal and experiential unification with the One we love, which is the fulfillment of the relationship we now enjoy and experience, albeit in a way that is

necessarily limited now because of our mortal and sinful frames. For unbelievers, however, the separation from God that remains their status in this life will eventually be parlayed via physical death into eternal death, the ultimate separation from God, if they persist in their unbelief (cf. Rom.11:23).

Being part and parcel of death, separation from God is thus the worst penalty that could ever be inflicted upon one of His creatures, and the worst of the worst is to be separated from Him for all eternity. It is well to remember that unbelievers enter into this state of separation-condemnation entirely by their own choice. They are separated from Him in eternity because in life they did not wish to have anything to do with Him. We are condemned because of our refusal to accept Jesus Christ (Jn.3:18), so that this eternal, separation-death is something that we choose for ourselves, **not** something that God would ever wish for us (Ezek.18:23; Matt.18:14; Jn.12:47; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9).

It will be recalled that the reason for mankind's initial separation from God was Adam's sin, and the consequent reception of a sin nature which precluded any further direct contact on the part of Holy God with sinful Man – short of God's merciful overlooking of sin in anticipation of its expiation on the cross through the blood of Christ (foreshadowed in the coats of skin of Gen.3:21; cf. Rom.3:25; 2Pet.3:9). Along with our brothers and sisters who embraced the promise of the suffering Messiah before the cross, we who have put our trust and hope in the Son of God who suffered for us on the cross have been redeemed from the power of sin, and the barrier of enmity which had separated us from the holiness of God has now been removed through the blood of Christ, that is, by His death for us on that tree (Eph.2:14-22; 1Pet.2:24-25).

But while through our positional death we Christians are assured of deliverance from eternal death (making physical death a transition not from separation to greater separation, but from fellowship to greater fellowship with Him), we must still be concerned about one aspect of the problem of separation: personal sin still separates us from God, and as long as we are in these mortal bodies we will continue to commit personal sins.

But saying that we **will** sin is certainly not to say either that we **should** sin or that the Lord is any way tolerant of our sinning (cf. Rom.6:1-4). Quite to the contrary, as we saw in the preceding section, defiant sin is met with the expectation of “terrifying judgment” (Heb.10:26-27). And it is not only the Law of Moses that puts matters in this completely black-and-white way. Our Lord was emphatic in His exposition of the perfect standard to which believers must adhere (cf. especially Matthew chapters 5-7). We are to be “perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt.5:48), and “holy because I am holy” (1Pet.1:15-16), both of which standards include, by definition, the state of being completely separated from sin. Scripture is moreover replete with calls to walk in sinlessness (cf. 1Pet.1:17) and to perfect sanctification, that is, the process of becoming holy (e.g., Heb.12:14; 1Pet.1:22-23; cf. 2Pet.3:14). And perhaps no one is more emphatic than the apostle John, who tells us that “everyone who abides in Him is not sinning” (1Jn.3:6), and “everyone who has been born of God is not committing sin” (1Jn.3:9). Now John is the same servant of the Lord who has described for us in the most specific detail the mechanics

of confession for those occasions when we, as believers, **do** sin (1Jn.1:9; cf. vv.5-10), and he also states that he wrote this same epistle “so that you **may not** sin” (completely unnecessary were it impossible for believers to sin), and further comforts us with the knowledge that Jesus is our advocate **when we do** sin (1Jn.2:1).

There is no contradiction here. As believers, we are **not** to sin – that is something completely out of keeping with our position in Jesus Christ and the forgiveness and new life we have received. As mortal human beings still residing in this sinful flesh, however, it is a simple fact that we are definitely not going to be able to avoid sin entirely, even though as believers we ought to do so. Given this uncomfortable combination of facts, it is important for us as believers to recognize that one of the results of sin is separation from God. Now unless we give in to sin completely to the point where it swamps our faith (i.e., the “sin unto death”; see section IV.6 below), the direct consequences of our sinning as believers will be primarily limited to this life (although indirectly every step backwards hinders our growth and production and thus cannot help but have some negative impact on our production and therefore on our eternal rewards). But these consequences can be severe indeed as we shall see (sections IV.3-5 below), and, in any case, we ought to want to be vigilant in the extreme against anything that can damage or sour our relationship with the One we claim to love more than life itself, our Savior Jesus Christ.

Indeed, your iniquities have begun to cause separation between you and God. And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not listen [to you]. Isaiah 59:2

God is our Father, and scripture makes liberal use of the deliberate and divinely constructed analogy to the human parents He has provided for us (cf. Heb.12:4-13). As children, even when we understood full well the reasons for the punishment we received, we nevertheless felt pain not only from the chastening itself, but also from the temporary rift in the relationship between us and our parents, from the stern attitude and demeanor our foul behavior occasioned, and in every such instance did we not look forward eagerly to the time when this cloud would pass and the joy of our mutual love for one another would replace all ill-feeling and regret? When we sin, we are most decidedly **not** eternally separated from the love of God (cf. Rom.8:39). But we do push Him away with our sinning, and the more we sin, and the more arrogantly we sin, and the more often we sin, the more we force His hand not only to discipline us, but also to provide a period when we feel the negative effects of our rebellion in every aspect of the texture of our relationship with Him – similar to what we would expect in **any** relationship where our actions had been censurable.

Thus there is a standard to which we have been called, namely, sinlessness, and our normal relationship with God proceeds on the basis of the expectation that we are going to behave in accord with this standard (and that as we mature we will become progressively more willing and able to do so). We love our Lord Jesus more than anything in this fleeting world of dust and pain. Why would we ever want to push Him away or damage our relationship with Him even for a moment, even if the long-term ramifications could be demonstrated to be entirely negligible? We would not and should not, and it is the normal status quo for all who have put their faith in

Jesus Christ that we *will* not – everything else (i.e., sinfulness) is an anomaly in the Christian life, and is not without its consequences (i.e., divine discipline and etc.; see sections IV.4-5 below). We cannot be perfect in this life, in these bodies. God knows this better than we do and has provided the means for repairing the fellowship broken through our mistakes and willful disobedience (cf. 1Jn.1:9; 2:1). But that does not mean that we are not *completely responsible* not only to try to be perfect and perfectly holy, but to be so in fact as well.

We shall have much to say below on the mechanics of discipline and confession, but from a practical point of view it is important to point out here that Christians often have these matters completely backwards when it comes to balancing the twin truths of our experiential sinfulness and positional perfection. We have a tendency as believers to look back at our sins and mistakes and to wrack ourselves with guilt about what we have done in the past, while at the same time being more forgiving of our conduct going forward. This is exactly the opposite of the tack we should take. Rather than being preoccupied with the past and disregarding the present, we ought to rest in God’s forgiveness about what is done and cannot be changed (Phil.3:13-14; cf. Lk.9:62), and instead be diligent about avoiding similar mistakes and outrages now and from here on forward (1Thes.4:11-12; Tit.2:12; 1Pet.1:17; 2:11; 2Pet.1:9). For what is done is done and cannot be undone, and, while all the discipline we have merited as a result is a fact with which we must deal (and a good source of motivation to avoid such misconduct in the future), we have for all that been forgiven whatever we have confessed and have indeed been restored to fellowship with our Lord, with any degree of separation or temporary “death” which our relationship incurred in the process now removed:

For this son of mine was dead, but now he has come back to life. He was lost, but he has [now] been found. Luke 15:24

And if we make it a habit to learn from our mistakes, we will quickly see the value in “working out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil.2:12):

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not [even] make any plans for carrying out the lusts of the flesh. Romans 13:14

Like the recipients of the book of Hebrews, we need to learn to take our *present* struggle against sin “to the point of blood” (i.e., see it as something deadly serious rather than incidental: Heb.12:4), while at the same time we learn to put our *past* defeats into the proper perspective of “fatherly discipline” (i.e., focusing on the positive purpose and outcome: Heb.12:7-11). Only in this way will the path before us become level, and injury give way to healing (Heb.12:12-13). For our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ our dear Lord (1Jn.1:3), and personal sin only serves to alienate us from that fellowship, separating us however briefly from the full joy in which we should ever wish to rejoice (Zech.1:3; cf. 1Jn.1:4).

4. The Distinction between Sin and Evil

As we saw above, the word evil is often used for the results or effects of sin rather than for the process of sinning itself, yet the two are inextricably linked as cause and effect often are. It is also helpful to understand that just as on the qualitative side of things there is a distinction to be made between a sinful act and its evil result, so on the quantitative side we would wish to distinguish between a pattern of sinning and a pattern of evil. For a single sin may represent an anomaly, but there comes a point in repetitive sinfulness where we are clearly dealing with a willful commitment to a life of sin rather than ignorance, aberration from the norm, or even a series of bad decisions from which a person may later repent. In such cases the “badness” or evil which is embraced is not merely personal but comes to intersect with and partake of the methodology of “badness” or evil that constitutes the devil’s policy for administering his present kingdom of this world.

Since it is in the above sense that the word “evil” is often understood, especially in theological contexts, a few words about the relationship between sin and evil in this sense are not out of place. It should not be surprising that sin may lead to involvement in evil in the broader, satanic sense, since as we have affirmed many times in the past no human being is a free agent in any absolute sense. We get to pick the “team” we play for, so to speak, but ultimately we cannot opt out of the “game”: either we follow God or we will end up following the devil, with only the degree of our involvement in his machinations being at issue. Therefore while any given sin is the act of an individual, and evil is at its most essential the divine characterization of any such action as “not good”, repetitive sin inevitably involves the individual in *systematic* evil, that is, evil in the sense of Satan’s methodology, and does so in a progressive way. This may be seen most perspicuously by linking up this distinction between an isolated sin and a pattern of sinfulness to the devil’s system of propaganda and his three progressive lies whose adoption distances the individual progressively farther from God and His truth while at the same time making him or her ever more useful to the devil (see part 2A of this series, Angelology, section II.7.4. “Satan’s System of Propaganda”):

- **lie #1:** “I don’t need God”.
- **lie #2:** “I am like God”.
- **lie #3:** “God needs me”.

Inasmuch as sin is the violation of divine standards, a pattern of repeated, un-repented, habitual sin necessarily leads to rationalization, desensitizing of the conscience, and, finally, justification of one’s behavior. This sequence can be seen in the system of the three satanic lies above, where first the person declares his or her independence from divine standards (rationalization ignoring divine authority), second, the person frees him or herself mentally from feelings of guilt (re-programming the conscience according to one’s own standards on the basis of putative equality with God), and third, the person begins to justify his or her acts by claiming that his or her standards are superior to God’s (so that he or she is actually “helping” God through this pattern of godless behavior). All three of these progressively devolving behavior patterns consist of a web of sins whose effects, individual and collective, are evil, but there is a clear, qualitative distinction to be found in the quantitative progression described above. The more decisively a

person turns away from God, the more useful he or she becomes to Satan (even as he or she more and more comes to reflect the devil's perverse thinking and duplicate his own moral degeneration), and the more measurably and progressively wicked the evil produced becomes as well. So that while all effects of all sin are, technically speaking, "bad" in the divine sense and therefore "evil", it is also certainly true that there are degrees of evil, and that giving oneself up to sin in an unrestrained way has the potential of ultimately involving the person who does so in evil of the most distilled and undiluted sort, that is, the very thinking and policy of the devil, the ultimate "bad" (in contrast to the other extreme, the very thinking and policy of God, the ultimate "good").

5. The Distinction between Sin and Crime

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord", will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but [only] the one 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 throw out demons, and in your Name do many miracles?" And I will say to them then, "I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of *lawlessness*". Matthew 7:21-23

Everyone who does sin also does lawlessness. Indeed, sin is lawlessness. 1st John 3:4

While sin and crime share many aspects in common, there are, of course, many sins which are not crimes. This is a fairly obvious proposition. For example, telling a lie about what you did yesterday is a sin, but would generally speaking only be a crime if done under oath. On the other hand, there are acts which can only be considered sinful *because* they are illegal (i.e., misdemeanors of various sorts). For example, under most circumstances traveling at a particular speed along a country road may only be sinful because one is violating a posted limit. Neither speeding nor spitting on the sidewalk, both of which may well be prohibited by legal ordinance, is likely to be a serious offense in most cases, and, in most cases, neither action would be considered a crime (and in the latter case may not even be actively enforced). Nevertheless, we are called as Christians to set an example at all times. Therefore it behooves all of us who bear that title to keep the general biblical guidance we are given on this subject very firmly in mind:

Let every person be subject to [all] superior authorities. For no authority exists which has not [been established] by God. And those that exist are [in turn] subject to God. Therefore whoever opposes [established] authority has taken a stand against God's [ordered] arrangement, and those who have done so will receive judgment upon themselves. For rulers do not exist to discourage good deeds through the fear they inspire, but rather evil ones. So do you wish to have no fear of the authorities? Then do what is good, and you will have praise from them. For they are ministering to God on your behalf for your [own] good. But if you do evil, beware, for they have not been invested with the power of punishment (lit., "the sword") for nothing. For they are ministering to God in the severe vengeance [they bring down] upon those who do evil.

Therefore it is necessary to be subject [to authority] not only because of this severity, but also *for conscience' sake*. Romans 13:1-5

Submit yourselves to every established human [authority] for the Lord's sake, whether to a king, as being sovereign, or to [other] executives, as being sent through Him for the purpose of reproofing evil doers but for praising those who do good. For this is the will of God, namely, for you to muzzle the ignorance of foolish men by doing good, as free men, yet not using your freedom as a cloak for evil but as servants of God. Give respect to everyone, love the brotherhood [of believers], fear God, honor the king. 1st Peter 2:13-17

Given the vast body of laws and ordinances in most modern societies, complete, technical compliance with every single aspect of legitimate human authority may well seem even more daunting than trying to carry out the Mosaic Law to perfection, especially when one considers the well-known principle that “ignorance of the law is no excuse” as far as the civil authorities are concerned. But if, in addition to actively and consciously submitting ourselves to the rule of law in every legitimate way, we truly do make it a point to “walk in love” through the power of the Spirit and the guidance that obedience to the Lord and the principle of love provide, then we have little to fear in respect to sinful behavior arising from violation of the principle stated by Paul and Peter above (cf. Gal.5:16-23).

There are occasionally extreme circumstances, usually in particularly lawless societies, where law is essentially hijacked by a ruling elite, and where strict obedience might very well require believers to engage in sinful and evil practices. One thinks of the “law” which forbid Daniel to pray to God and required him to pray to the king instead (Dan.6:1-9). God's miraculous deliverance of him shows unequivocally that Daniel was justified in breaking this particular law, even though in doing so he would have lost his life apart from direct divine intervention (cf. Dan.6:21-23). It is safe to say and important to point out that such circumstances are *extremely rare*, and that in the history of the Church there have been far more cases where individuals have *claimed* the “Daniel exception” and intruded upon state authority, thus violating the law without similarly clear and convincing justification (and generally without, one might add, a similar divine deliverance). It should be pointed out that while these verses quoted from Romans and 1st Peter above are and were meant to be universally applicable, the contemporary situation to which both Paul and Peter were referring was far from perfect. For the Roman empire, while in many respects more tolerant than many pagan societies before or since, fell far short of the “freedom of religion” that many of us prize and enjoy today. For this reason, these strict statements issued under a regime that itself was much farther away from the perfect divine standard than what many of us are presently experiencing, should, if anything, make us all the more wary of claiming Christian principles as a basis for excusing ourselves from following state authority. It will also be remembered that both Paul and Peter were unjustly treated by human authority on numerous occasions, often in very severe ways (e.g., Acts 5:40; 16:16-24). If anyone had reason to equivocate about the degree of respect that human authority should receive, these two apostles certainly did, so that their emphatic words on the subject gain all the more in emphasis because of their experiences.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that human authority is secondary rather than primary, and that, since human beings are imperfect, human law and its administration are also imperfect under the best of circumstances. While we do want to set the best possible example for conscience' sake (as well as on account of the consequences of disobedience: Rom.13:5), we must be careful not to automatically cede our Christian judgment to the state. There are certainly times, even in the case of what would otherwise be misdemeanors, where technical violation of legal ordinances is not only permissible but preferable, and in such instances we are right to expect that the Lord understands this, and that the governing authority would as well if informed of all the facts (e.g., temporarily speeding up past the limit to avoid an accident, or breaking the limit to save a person's life by getting them to an emergency room in time).

There may, however, be times when human authority is requiring us to do something which is strictly contrary to what we may legitimately do as Christians, or to refrain from doing something which we are required to do. This is equivalent in military terms to a person of superior rank giving an illegal order – the authority may be legitimate, but what is being demanded is not. In the example cited above, Daniel apparently did not even consider for a moment ceasing to pray to God, and that is more than a little revealing when one considers the seemingly reasonable temptation to take a few days off from prayer when the alternative was to be thrown into the lion's den. After all, we might reason, it is not as if Daniel were being told to *do* something immoral or blasphemous. He was merely required to refrain from something that we often think of as optional (but cf. 1Sam.12:23). But Daniel clearly saw that failing to give to God what was God's due because of an illegal human ordinance was wrong.

In spite of the emphatic biblical commands to respect and obey human authority, therefore, it should come as no surprise to us that the apostles readily disobeyed authoritative commands to refrain from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, and gladly suffered for their righteous and godly disobedience (Acts 4:19; 5:29). During the coming Tribulation, moreover, acting under the authority of antichrist, the false prophet will put the entire population of the earth under compulsion to take the "mark of the beast" (Rev.13:16-17). Scripture leaves no doubt whatsoever that genuine believers must refuse this command, even at the cost of their lives (Rev.14:9-11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). In such situations, it is imperative for believers to be both mature enough to appreciate the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate law, and at the same time courageous enough (i.e., fearing God rather than Man) to continue to do what God has called them to do and to refrain from what He has expressly forbidden (such as taking the "mark"), regardless of the consequences. For the one thing that such cases all have in common, whether we take Daniel, the apostles, the early martyrs of the Church, or tribulational believers as our model, is that all who confront authority in this way, whether right or wrong, are bound to suffer severely for it.

For this is pleasing [in God's sight], [namely] if for conscience' sake someone bears up under afflictions when unjustly [subjected to] suffering. But what sort of glory [is yours] if you endure punishment for having sinned? But if you endure suffering for doing what is good, this is pleasing to God. For it is to this [sharing in the sufferings of Christ] that

you have been called, for Christ also died on your behalf, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His footsteps. 1st Peter 2:19-21

Thus even when human law and authority cause us pain and suffering on account of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ, this is not by any means a justification for disobeying that law and authority. Instances in which we must disobey Man in order to obey God are, historically speaking, relatively rare, and when they do occur, the consequences of disobedience are almost always severe. Therefore on the one hand we believers must be wise enough to be able to tell the difference, so as not be drawn into political activism and cult activity where the claim is all too frequently and erroneously made that violating the law is justified and permissible on Christian grounds, and on the other hand be ever willing to suffer and sacrifice on behalf of our Lord and His Church should it ever truly be a matter of choosing between His will and the will of Man.

6. The Distinction between Expressly Prohibited and Non-Expressly Prohibited Sin

As mentioned in section II.2 above, nowhere in the Bible does one find a definitive catalog of sins, and it is a dangerous fallacy to assume that *only* actions specifically named in scripture and recorded as sinful are so. Just as the collective thoughts, utterances, and actions of mankind from creation to the end of the world are nigh limitless, so also are the potential varieties of sin, however classified (cf. Gal.5:21: “and whatever is similar to all these things”). We are steeped in sin at birth, so that everything we think or say or do has the potential of being sinful, whenever we are being motivated by our sin nature rather than being led by the Spirit of God.

The major distinction between sins which are expressly prohibited by scripture and those which are not is therefore only in the degree of ignorance that people have about them, and *not* in the actual fact of what is and is not sin: the Bible does not have to prohibit an action explicitly for it to be sinful. Paul tells us that, in effect, “the Law killed him” (Rom.7:9), because through the Law he became conscious of just how sinful he was, even though he had hoped actually to be and to be proved to be sinless and righteous through the Law (Phil.3:6). Unlike most human law, sin is sin, with or without its express, written prohibition, so that by studying the Law it was only Paul’s perception of himself that changed, not the reality of who and what he was. He had assumed that he was sinlessly following the Law, but as he studied further he became aware of his shortcomings through that same Law (Rom.7:7-8). Indeed, that is the true and primary purpose of the Law (Rom.3:20; Gal.3:24). That is, the purpose of the Law is really not to provide a perfect standard to which we are to adhere – although it *is* a perfect standard, and although we *are* supposed to adhere to it, no one can, and that is the real point. First and foremost, therefore, the purpose of the Law is to prove to us beyond any shadow of a doubt that we are sinful and in need of a Savior to redeem us from the curse of the Law which seals us all up under sin (Gal.3:22).

Therefore no flesh shall be considered righteous before Him through the works of the Law, for it is through the Law that we come to acknowledge [our] sin. Romans 3:20

So whether one has the Law or not, knows the Law or not, is trying to fulfill the Law or not, sin is still exactly the same. It is only our perception of it and its scope which varies.

For [even] *before* the Law [was handed down], there was [indeed] sin in the world, but, when there was no Law, sin was not being taken into account [by us as it was after the Law]. Romans 5:13

As we saw in section II.1, the meaning in the verse above of the phrase “not being taken into account” is almost universally mistranslated and misunderstood. The Greek words *ouk enelogeito* (οὐκ ἐνελογεῖτο) do not refer to any sort of theological imputation, nor would they likely ever have been thought to do so absent the erroneous theory of “the imputation of Adam’s sin”. If we take this phrase as plain language (which it most definitely is), then the reference is clearly to humanity’s perceptions regarding sin before the giving of the Law (cf. the use of *logizomai* at Rom.8:36). Without the standard of the Law to apply, much that was sinful was not being recognized as sinful. But that does not mean that mankind’s failure to appreciate the extent of sin before the Mosaic Law made sin any less sinful as Paul points out in the very next verse:

Nevertheless, sin *did* reign [over mankind during the period] from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in a manner similar to Adam (i.e., by violating a clearly stated divine prohibition), who is a type of the One [destined] to come (i.e., Christ, the Last Adam). Romans 5:14

Despite humanity’s general ignorance about the particulars of sin, before Moses sin nevertheless held sway over human action generally. The fact that mankind after Adam and Eve did not to the same degree receive direct, specific revelation from God telling them not to do things that were sinful (as Adam and Eve did in respect to the only possible sin in the garden: “thou shalt not eat”) did not mean that they were innocent of any guilt just because much of their sinning may have been done in ignorance: sin still “reigned”, because sin is sin, whether or not the sinner is cognizant of that fact (and whether or not it is spelled out in scripture).

This principle of sin as sin even apart from Law or individual awareness should be obvious from a consideration of God’s natural laws. As we have seen, these are reflected in the collective conscience of mankind, and are made manifest in personal ethics, societal norms, and in the governance of nations internally and externally (cf. Acts 17:26-27; Rom.2:12-16). Specific prohibition merely serves to “open the eyes” of those who may have felt largely innocent to the underlying reality of their inherent sinfulness. That is the true purpose of the revelation of sins specifically and specially in scripture, not an attempt to define all that is sin (cf. Rom.14:23; Jas.4:17). In this context, it is somewhat astonishing to consider how many of Jesus’ and Paul’s countrymen persisted in using the Law for exactly the opposite purpose of establishing their own righteousness. Such folly inevitably results in “straining out the gnat and swallowing down the camel” (Matt.23:24). The Law, like all scripture, is a wonderful gift from God when used

correctly (1Tim.1:8). Although it could never catalog all possible sin, the Law guides us to our need for a Savior (since perfectly following the Law is impossible), while at the same time providing a framework for understanding what sin is and warning us against the most common and most deadly varieties of sin. To use an analogy, it is certainly a good idea to be on the lookout for and careful around snakes when hiking in the desert, and to be particularly wary of rattlesnakes and coral snakes. Along with a few other pointers about particularly dangerous flora and fauna, a trail guide containing this sort of information would give us a useful idea of the general sort of situations and circumstances where cautious behavior is prudent. With a basic primer of this sort, we would be “good to hike”. That is, we would know about the poisonous animals in the area and would probably think twice about reaching out to touch a very large unidentified lizard even if it had not been specifically called to our attention as a potential danger. As we hike the high road to Zion here in the devil’s world, scripture has likewise given us wonderful guidance about the sorts of thing we are to avoid as sinful, so that if we are responding to its guidance we will truly be under no real illusion about potential sinful behavior, even in the absence of specific prohibition. And we have another advantage as well: the trail to Zion is “well-marked”. If we are walking in love, walking in the Spirit, doing the positive things which scripture calls us to do in imitation of our Lord, then we will also know from a *positive* point of view what we should be doing as well as from a negative point of view what we should not: if we are careful to “stay on the trail”, we will be in little danger of falling into serious trouble with sin.

7. The Three Types of Sin

Just as human behavior can be roughly divided into thoughts, words, and deeds, the same is true of sin. Anything we think, say, or do, while not necessarily sinful, does have the potential of being so. That is because our heart, our tongue, and our bodies generally are the key areas where we exercise our free will. We choose what to think, what to say, and what to do, and whenever we exercise our will there is a possibility that we will exercise it contrary to the will of God, contrary to faith, contrary to love, and therefore in a sinful fashion.

1. Sins of the heart: What we think may indeed be sinful, and the fact that the devil’s original sin was one of arrogance, a sin which came straight from his heart, is very instructive on this point:

For you said *in your heart*, “I will ascend heavenward. I will set my throne above the stars of God. And I will take my seat on the mount of assembly on the sides of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will be like the Most High God.

Isaiah 14:13-14

Your *heart* became haughty because of your beauty, [and so] you destroyed your wisdom on account of your splendor. Ezekiel 28:17a

What is true of angelic creatures is likewise true of mankind, and it is most telling that the tenth commandment, the one which convinced Paul of the impossibility of keeping the Law, is entirely a mental sin, that is, the sin of lust (cf. Job 31:1; Ezek.14:3-5; Mt.5:27-28):

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I *did not come to know* sin except through the Law. For I *did not know* [what] lust [was] except that the Law was telling [me], “You shall not lust”. Then sin grabbed the opportunity [offered] by the commandment and produced in me every [sort of] lust. So without the Law, sin is dead (i.e., to our “knowledge”). Romans 7:7-8

2. Sins of the tongue: Slandering, lying, blaspheming, bearing false witness and more share in common the fact that they are discretely verbal. The virtual impossibility of “taming the tongue” shows beyond doubt that, along with mental sinning, this area of sin is worthy of more personal attention than we sometimes give it:

(2) For we all make many [sinful] mistakes (lit., “stumble much”, i.e., sin somewhat inadvertently). If anyone avoids [sinful] mistakes in what he says, this person is perfect [in behavior and thus] able to bridle his whole body. (3) Consider how we put bridles into the mouths of horses so that they will obey us, and [thus we are able to] maneuver their entire bodies around. (4) Consider also what large things ships are and how they are driven by strong winds, and yet they are maneuvered around by an extremely small tiller wherever the helmsman intends. (5) In this same way the tongue, though it is a small member, makes great boasts. See how small a fire it takes to start a great conflagration. (6) The tongue is [just such] a fire too, and as it dwells among our other members the tongue embraces the entire system of wickedness, polluting the entire body, setting aflame every aspect of human existence, and in turn being set aflame by hell. (7) For every species of bird and beast, of things that creep and of things that swim, can and has been tamed by humanity. (8) But no man is able to tame the tongue. It is an implacable evil, filled with deadly poison. (9) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse our [fellow] man, born in the likeness of God. (10) From the same mouth comes forth blessing and cursing. It should not be that way, brothers. James 3:2-10

Everyone speaks vanity with his neighbor. With lips of [malicious] flattery they speak in double-minded [deception]. May the Lord cut off all the lips of [malicious] flattery, [even] the tongue which makes great boasts! – of [all] those who say, “With our tongue we will conquer! Our lips are with us. Who is Lord over us?” Psalm 12:2-4

3. Sins of action: Overt sins of actions, “deeds” which are clearly contrary to God’s will and God’s law, are what most people have in mind when they use the word “sin”. There is certainly no shortage of overt sins prohibited in scripture, and it is certainly true that some of the more gross and horrific sins tend to be of this “active” nature. The three passages quoted immediately below, although parallel to the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments, are not taken from the Law per se, and it is no accident that murder, sexual immorality, and theft are the subject of legal prohibition in nearly every human code of law ever devised:

He who sheds Man’s blood shall have his blood shed by Man. For in the image of God He made Man. Genesis 9:6

(3) Now this is God's will, namely, your sanctification (i.e., separation from sin). [He desires you] to keep away from immorality, (4) and for each of you to know how to keep his [or her] own vessel (i.e., body) under control in sanctification and honorable conduct, (6) not [giving in] to the passions of lust as do the gentiles (i.e., unbelievers) who do not know God, (7) so that you may not transgress and thereby take advantage of your brother/sister [in Christ]. For the Lord is an Avenger of all these sins as I have warned and have born solemn witness to you before. For God did not call you to uncleanness but in sanctification.

1st Thessalonians 4:3-7

Now let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or a meddler, but if [anyone should suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed of it. Let him rather glorify God under that name. 1st Peter 4:15-16

Although overt sins, especially the exceptionally damaging and deadly ones, tend to attract most of the attention when the subject of sin comes up, we should not for that reason make the mistake of assuming that mental and verbal sins are somehow of a lesser variety – they may be of a slightly different categorical type, but sin is sin, and holy God keeps all sin at arm's length. Jesus died for every sin of whatever size or type, and without His work on the cross *for every sin ever committed*, we would still be facing eternal condemnation instead of anticipating eternal life.

Finally, although for purposes of discussion we have differentiated between mental, verbal, and overt sins, we would not want to leave the impression that they are for that reason unrelated, or that they can somehow be separated out in practice, for they usually cannot be. When Jesus tells us that a man who looks upon a woman to lust after her has already “committed adultery in his heart” (Matt.5:27-28), it is clear in our Lord's view the distance between lustful thoughts, seductive words, and immoral acts is so small as to be non-existent for all practical purposes.

Despite the fact that this particular passage, Matthew 5:27-28, is very well-known, the degree to which thinking, speaking, and acting are inextricably inter-connected from the biblical point of view is often underappreciated. In truth, our deeds reflect our thoughts, our thinking motivates our words, and our words are so significant that they will form the basis for our future justification or condemnation (cf. Prov.23:7; Is.14:13).

You offspring of vipers! How can you say what is good when you are evil? For the mouth speaks what fills the heart. A good person brings good things out of the good he has stored up, while the evil person brings forth evil things out of the evil he has stored up. I tell you that on the day of judgment everyone will give an account for every idle word they have spoken. So it is by your words that you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. Matthew 12:34-37

Hatred, anger and arrogance may produce harsh words of slander, threats and reproaches, and these in turn are often followed by acts of violence, so that the continuum of sinful thoughts engendering sinful words and producing sinful deeds is easy enough for anyone to see. For

example, kidnaping, motivated by gain and assisted by lies and conspiracy, sexual immorality originating in lust and facilitated by verbal seduction, or idolatry born of abandoning God in one's heart and accompanied by blasphemy, all clearly show that thoughts, words and deeds are essentially inseparable in practice. For deeds are seldom really ever undertaken in the absence of thoughts (be they ever so visceral and fleeting) and words (be they expressed or unexpressed):

The things that come out of a person's mouth come out of the heart, and these are the things that defile a person. For out of the heart come evil designs, acts of murder, of adultery, of sexual immorality, of theft, of false witness, [and] of blasphemy.
Matthew 15:18-19

From a purely biblical point of view, therefore, it is better to have the idea of sin as a three-headed monster rather than three separate beasts, for splitting up sinful thoughts and words and deeds is in truth impossible. In reality, they form a continuum of evil that is inevitably always of a piece. Final proof of this is to be found in the numerous biblical catalogs of sin where all three types are always intermingled as equally dangerous and equally sinful:

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush to evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers. Proverbs 6:16-19 NIV

(24) Therefore God abandoned them to self-defilement in the lusts of their hearts bent upon uncleanness. (25) For they exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and they honored and served the creature over the Creator who is blessed forever, amen! (26) For this reason God abandoned them to dishonorable passions. Their females even exchanged natural [sexual] practice for that which is contrary to nature. (27) Likewise also the males abandoned natural [sexual] practice with females and became inflamed in their lust for one another – males with males – consummating their shameful and receiving upon themselves [as a result] the penalty their error deserved. (28) And just as they did not see fit to keep God in their hearts, God abandoned them to their unfit minds, to do things which are not fitting. (29) [For they are] filled with all [manner of] unrighteousness, evil, wickedness, greed, full of envy, murder, strife, guile, malevolence, they are rumormongers, (30) slanderers, haters of God, presumptuous, arrogant, braggarts, devisers of evil, inconsiderate of their parents, (31) unthinking, unreconcilable, uncaring, unmerciful, men who though they had full knowledge of God's righteous decree, namely, that those who do such things are worthy of death, not only did [such] things themselves, but even commended those who made it their practice [to do them]. Romans 1:24-32

As it is written [in scripture]: "There is no one righteous, not a single person. There is no one who understands. There is no one who diligently seeks God. All have turned away, [and] have become worthless. There is no one who is doing what is good – there is no one, not even a single person. Their throat is an open grave, they deal craftily with their tongues, [and] vipers' venom hides behind their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and

bitterness. Their feet [take them] swift[ly] to spill blood. In their ways are found calamity and misery, and they are not acquainted with the way of peace. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Romans 3:10-18

Don't you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practitioners of homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1st Corinthians 6:9-10

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies – and whatever is similar to all these things. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Galatians 5:19-21

But among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse jesting – things that have no place [among you]. Thanksgiving [is what ought to be heard coming from you] instead. For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure, or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Ephesians 5:3-5

So be aware of this, that in the last days there will be difficult times. For [in those times] there will be men (i.e., false teachers; cf. chap.2) concerned only for themselves, devoted to money, egotistic, arrogant, blasphemous, not concerned for their parents, ungrateful, irreverent, implacable, slanderers, uninhibited, savage, despising the good, betrayers, impetuous, megalomaniacal, devotees of pleasure rather than lovers of God, possessing an [outward] appearance of godliness, but [in reality] having rejected its [true] power. From such men turn away. 2nd Timothy 3:1-5

Outside (i.e., of the gates of New Jerusalem) are the dogs (i.e., unclean and worthless), and those who indulge in witchcraft, and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and makes use of the lie. Revelation 22:15

The more we read and pay attention to scripture, the better we become acquainted not only with what the Bible has to say in the way of specific prohibition, but also – and just as importantly – what it teaches us about our behavior in general, both in terms of what it is expedient for a follower of Jesus Christ to do as well as what it is best to avoid (see II.9 below, “The Ten Commandments”). We are called to the highest of standards, namely, holiness (1Pet.1:15-16), and not even an encyclopedic knowledge of overt biblical prohibitions is capable of bringing us anywhere near the attainment of that standard until, instead of walking in the flesh (Rom.8:4), we are truly walking in love, walking in the Spirit, and walking in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph.5:2; Gal.5:25; 1Jn.2:6). Against such things there is no law (Gal.5:23).

8. Relative Accountability for Sin

Every sin we have ever committed or ever will commit is, by definition, wrong, evil, and contrary to the will of God. Furthermore, we are all completely and fully responsible for every sin we have ever committed or ever will commit, regardless of the circumstances. Moreover, the penalty for all sin, for any sin, is death, namely, the threefold spiritual, temporal and eternal death we have described above. No human being who has ever committed even a single, solitary sin (and that includes us all) could possibly aspire to eternal life except for the sacrifice of our Savior on the cross for us. So we praise our merciful God and Father that we are most assuredly *not* absent that sacrifice, but have embraced Jesus Christ in faith and faithfulness and will continue to do so until we shall be united with our Lord Jesus after death! Without Him and His work on the cross, there would not have been the slightest diminution of our eternal responsibility and culpability for even the least of our transgressions, but, as it is, our sins *have* been atoned for by Jesus Christ.

Jesus *did* die for the sins of all mankind (Rom.3:24-26; 1Tim.2:5-6; Heb.2:9; 1Jn.2:2). Thus eternal forgiveness is universally available to all, being appropriated by grace through faith in Him, His Person and His work (cf. Rom.10:9; Eph.2:8-9; 1Jn.4:2). But while we believers have had our “bath” and have been cleansed from sin as an issue in determining our eternal future, that does not mean that in this world of sin and evil we will not continue to get our feet dirty (Jn.13:1-10). Even when we do sin, God has graciously provided a means for instant forgiveness and complete restoration to fellowship with Him and with our Lord (i.e., confession: cf. 1Jn.1:9 and see section V.1 below). Therefore not only have guilt and fear about the eternal consequences of sin been removed for us in Jesus Christ, but we also have been given complete assurance that no matter how grave our transgressions may seem to us, our gracious Father and loving Savior ever have their arms open wide to receive us back from the “far country” of sin, whenever we are but willing to turn our backs on our prodigal ways and return to them (Lk.15:11-32).

But while we are no longer eternally culpable for sin (that price having been paid by our Lord with His own blood), and while we are to have confidence in the continuing forgiveness that is our birth-right as believers in Jesus Christ (through repentance and confession), we should most assuredly *not* draw the conclusion that we can sin with impunity. There are consequences for sin, natural and divine, and there is punishment for sin in this life. It is important to understand, however, that this divine discipline which comes our way as the result of sin is in *no way* “paying” for sin: not only is whatever price we might be able to pay insufficient (God only accepts perfect sacrifices and we are not perfect: cf. Ps.49:7-9), but the price has already been paid by our Lord. Therefore it is the height of blasphemy for us even to consider that we could or somehow should “make up” or “atone” for our own sins – only Jesus *could* do that and He *has* already done so.

Therefore the relative “accountability” for sin being discussed here is not the absolute, eternal atonement for all of our sins – for that is a price which has already been paid for one and all through the blood of Jesus Christ – but rather the distinctions which the Bible does make

regarding the relative responsibility or “accountability” for individual acts of sin which we commit here in time. That is to say, the divine consequences or discipline for sin which our Lord metes out to us in this life for our own good are based upon His assessment of the entire situation, a set of factors which constitute our “accountability”, and this assessment, it is important to note, is our Lord’s, not ours (i.e., how *we* may “feel” about the gravity of our sin is not the issue at all, whether we are hardly concerned or greatly concerned).

All sin is sin, flows from the free will of the sinner, and carries with it a sentence of death which is only removed in Jesus Christ. However, in what we may call “practical” or “temporal” terms, God nevertheless recognizes that some sins are worse than other sins (e.g., Judas’ “greater sin” of betraying Christ: Jn.19:11; cf. Jer.16:18; Hos.10:10; 1Cor.6:18; 1Jn.3:15), and that the degree to which we are to be chastised needs to vary with the circumstances (cf. our Lord’s forgiveness of Peter’s denials: cf. Lk.22:31-32; 22:60-62; 24:34; Jn.21:15-19; 1Cor.15:5). While many sins may be relatively minor and some may even be committed in complete ignorance, there are occasional acts of sin that are in fact so detestable in the eyes of the Lord that they are visited with termination of physical life (as in the case of Judah’s son Onan: Gen.38:10). But if God put every sinner to death immediately, the world would be instantly depopulated, for sin is universal, and few individuals, if they be honest, can go very long without conceiving, for example, a sinful thought. In spite of the fact that sin should decrease even as sanctification increases through the normal and mandated process of spiritual growth, even as believers we are all sinners and shall remain so as long as we dwell in these sinful bodies. Unlike protagonists in a Greek tragedy, therefore, God allows us to remain here on earth in spite of our commission of personal sins, so that, ideally, we may learn from (and about) our mistakes, with smaller mistakes generally incurring less overt divine discipline than larger, more flagrant ones.

Just as wise parents may wish to spell out for their children the particulars of the probable discipline for certain behaviors which will in no sense ever be tolerated, and yet at the same time not wish in any way to leave the impression that therefore nothing else will be punished, so we are given in scripture some very specific prohibitions whose violations clearly carry severe consequences (e.g., the Ten Commandments), but find much of the rest of the ground of sin less clearly demarcated in terms of the punishment we may receive. There are no doubt good reasons for this. One probable reason that comes readily to mind is that uncertainty of the type and severity of consequent discipline contributes greatly to the holy and pure fear of God which in turn helps us to stay clear of sin (Ps.19:9; Is.11:2-3; 2Cor.7:1; cf. Ps.130:4). The last thing we need as believers who are fighting the battle for sanctification is a sense that “we know for sure” that a particular sin or type of sinning will not be punished “too severely”. The point is, we don’t know how God is going to react and discipline particular failures on our part, and that very uncertainty helps us (or should help us) to build up hesitancy and resistance to sin.

The second obvious reason for the absence in scripture of a strict table of legal liability and consequent punishment for sins is that God knows everything. He deals with us as individuals and does so in a perfect way. He and He alone knows and understands the degree of consciousness or arrogance with which we have done what we have done, and He and He alone

knows best how to motivate us to turn away from such sins in the future. Scripture does, however, outline in broad terms the relative factors which govern the degree of earthly accountability for our sins as we are held accountable for them by God in time (but let us ever be mindful of the fact that all of our sins have been ultimately and eternally atoned for by the blood of Christ):

1. Sinning Ignorantly versus Sinning Consciously: It stands to reason and scripture certainly supports the idea that with greater cognizance comes greater responsibility and, in the case of sin, greater accountability (Gen.3:9-19; Lev.4:1-6:7; Is.7:15-16; Ezek.3:4-7; Jn.9:39-41; 15:22-24; Rom.1:20; 2:1; 2:17-24; 1Tim.1:13; 2:14; Jas.3:1). As was suggested above in our discussion of the conscience, “nature itself” is most instructive in regard to many basic principles of what is right and what is wrong (1Cor.11:14; cf. Rom.2:14-16), so that in most cases “ignorance” will be a relative thing. That this is true of consciousness of sin as well is aptly demonstrated by the case of Adam and Eve where both of our original parents could recite the prohibition against the forbidden fruit. But while both were fully aware that they were violating the divine command (and so were completely guilty), nevertheless both had some claim to mitigation: “the serpent deceived me”, pleaded Eve, while Adam had responded in defense “the woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave to me from the tree and I ate” (Gen.3:12-13). Eve had been led to doubt (and misunderstand) the divine command, while Adam had been pressured by the impending loss of his beloved. It seems fair to say that neither sin is an example of high-handed selfish arrogance without complication or mitigation – and the Lord did, of course, let both of our first parents live despite the grave significance and repercussions of what they had done.

The general principle here seems to be that the greater the ignorance and the greater the compulsion of the will, the more the mitigation and the less the accountability. Keeping in mind the further principle that God knows us far better than we know ourselves (so that it is infinitely better to avoid sin in the first place than to seek mitigating factors afterwards – as if we could ever hope to argue our case before the Master Potter!), there are any number of factors which *may* lessen accountability. Clearly, the mentally incompetent are held to a lesser standard, and very young children are not expected to be able to consistently choose the “right over the wrong” until a certain age (which may well vary with the culture and the individual: Is.7:15-16). Just as the law in general recognizes a variety of mitigating circumstances in criminal statutes, so we may expect that in times of great stress, or grief, or when otherwise under great emotional or physical duress, we might be much more apt to sin, and we may have some hope that a merciful God will take such factors into consideration. Of course, if we are trying to recover from an addiction to gambling, for example, then making a free will decision to go to the racetrack is certainly not going to help our chances. To the extent that the mitigating circumstances which lead to sin are themselves a result of sinful folly, we may be assured that they will weigh more heavily in the balance of God’s justice than those which are truly out of our control.

Relative experience in the Christian life and relative knowledge about scriptural teachings on sin can also contribute to ignorance in the short term. But just as children grow up and move on to ever greater standards of responsibility, so should it be with us (Heb.5:11-14). A comparable,

reverse analogy can thus be drawn in terms of true ignorance about what conduct the Bible proscribes and prescribes. While it is true that “to whom much is given, much is expected” (Lk.12:48), it can hardly be much to our credit (or figure greatly in the mitigation of our punishment for sin) if we have deliberately or at least practically cultivated ignorance about scriptural prohibitions and canons of behavior, and have continued to sin as a result.

Deception, while it is a special category of ignorance-mitigation, is one which we should all seek to avoid as far as possible. It is precisely in this connection that Jesus told us to be “innocent as doves, but wise as serpents” (Matt.10:16; cf. Rom.16:19; 1Cor.14:20), and every step forward in Bible knowledge, learned, believed, and applied to life, should make it harder for the deceiver to deceive us. In this regard it is also important to note that one of the worst and potentially most dangerous forms of deception is self-deception (1Jn.1:8; cf. Job 15:31; 1Cor.15:33). For while we are naturally on our guard against external threats, when we stop being honest with ourselves we let down our defenses to the greatest possible dangers.

2. Sinning Arrogantly:

Woe to you who drag along your guilt with strands of worthlessness, and your sin with cart ropes. Isaiah 5:18

Scripture makes a clear distinction between the fully conscious, deliberate, fully pre-meditated and arrogant sort of sinful behavior described above and sin which is committed “in error”. In the Mosaic Law, there was an entire category of sacrifice devoted to such “sins of ignorance”, namely, the so-called “sin” and “guilt” offerings (Lev.4:1 - 6:7). The key words usually rendered in these verses as “ignorantly” or “unintentionally” constitute the Hebrew prepositional phrase *beshegagah* (hggwb). Rather than knowledge or intentionality, the verbal noun which forms the core of this phrase is much closer to the idea of sin which one finds in the Greek noun-verb pair, *hamartia-hamartano* (ἁμαρτία / ἁμαρτανω), the root from which the word Hamartiology, the subject of this study, is derived. For the corresponding Hebrew verb, *shagah* (hgw), as with *hamartia-hamartano*, means something more like “missing the way”, “taking a wrong turn”, “making an error or mistake”. Thus this category of sinning clearly suggests, from the parallel etymologies, behavior in which, “if one had thought better about it”, one would never have engaged in it the first place. In other words, whatever the element of mental, moral, informational, or situational “mistake” involved in such sins, it is just this element which distinguishes them from “arrogant sins”.

Now if anyone sins out of error (i.e., *beshegagah*), he shall bring a she-goat one year old as a sin offering. And the priest will make atonement on behalf of the person who went astray in his sin of error against the Lord so as to atone on his behalf, and it will be forgiven him. For both the native born of the sons of Israel and the resident aliens among you there shall be one law for whoever acts out of error. ***But whoever acts with a high***

hand (i.e., “sins arrogantly”), whether native born or a resident alien, *is offending the Lord*. That person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His command, that person shall surely be cut off. His guilt [stays] in him. Numbers 15:27-31

The demarcation point between forgivable “error” and unforgivable “high-handedness” is not clearly drawn here, and, as suggested above, that is no doubt deliberate and in any case salutary. For while clear examples of sins that are genuinely mistakes and sins which are clearly “in God’s face” readily present themselves, there are innumerable examples that also come to mind of behavior which might possibly fit either classification, and this element of doubt tends to restrain us from sinning rather than weakening our resolve to resist it. Clearly, sin is serious business in God’s eyes, and we would do well to avoid it at all times since the only absolutely sure way to steer clear of truly arrogant, high-handed sin is to abstain from sin altogether.

While the recognition of the danger all sin presents for the reasons discussed above is good armor with which to fortify ourselves against the world, the flesh, and the evil one, scripture does also give us reassuring information about where this line between error and temerity, between ignorance and arrogance, is to be drawn, namely, respect, reverence and fear of God on the one hand, and contempt, despite, and fearless defiance on the other. Let us consider the analogy of earthly fathers and their children (an analogy which we are biblically called upon to consider in many places since family relationships are designed by God to be illustrative of divine truth: Eph.3:14-15; cf. Prov.3:11-12; Heb.12:7-11). While there are many occasions when fathers and their children are at odds, and children often commit acts of rebellion, in the majority of cases children do not “cross the ultimate line” of complete rejection of parental authority – a certain amount of residual respect and godly “fear” generally remains even after the most extreme adolescent rebellions. Thus in most instances where children violate parental precepts they do not do so to a degree that makes the process of discipline, repentance, reconciliation and restoration completely impossible. They may become insolent and rebellious, but they do not break completely free of the family and parental authority. Occasionally, however, some children do rebel to such an arrogant and audacious degree that their actions do constitute the sort of “high-handedness” described in Numbers 15:30, behavior which so completely, thoroughly, and irremediably rejects the authority of the parents that no future reconciliation is possible (the most extreme of which, unfortunately not unprecedented in our society, would be murdering one’s parents; cf. Deut.21:18-21).

In the same way, there comes a point in a person’s rebellion against God where the ultimate line is eventually crossed. This is a point of no return which represents a breach so severe that further mercy cannot be forthcoming – not only because of the acuteness of the offense towards God, but also because the person concerned has progressed so far into apostasy that he or she would not in true free will seek restoration if forgiveness were offered (and of this extreme the devil is the premier example). As is also the case in our family analogy, such extreme spiritual degeneration does not spring out of nowhere, but is rather the result of what may often be a lengthy process of rebellion and hardening of the heart (see section IV.6 below). And as in our family analogy, the

extreme contempt and despite of continued, thoughtless sinning “with a high hand” is an impossibility until respect, reverence, and “the fear of God” have been completely worn away by this process of heart-hardening (Rom.3:18; cf. Rev.19:5).

Indisputable, unmitigated, reckless and continual “arrogant sin” is essentially impossible for a believer without laying a prior foundation of apostasy. Ultimately, the only sin for which Jesus could not die and for which there is therefore no forgiveness, is the willful rejection of Himself, namely, “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” who testifies to the truth of Him, His Person and His saving work on our behalf (Matt.12:31). Sinning arrogantly to the ultimate degree is thus a symptom of prior apostasy, for on the one hand a person cannot so disrespect God if there is any fear of Him left in the heart, and on the other hand if a person does still maintain residual faith and even a modicum of godly fear, this will be sufficient to dissuade them from giving themselves over to a life of completely unmitigated arrogant sin.

This helps to account for the description one finds throughout scripture of the believer as a holy, sanctified person, in spite of the fact that we are simultaneously all sinners (to one degree or another). For example, the distinction in the Mosaic Law treated above between inadvertent and arrogant sin which seemingly leaves absolutely no middle ground between the two categories should be seen from this perspective: those who are true followers of God may err, but they do not defy God with total fearlessness (and those who do defy God with total fearlessness are by definition not true followers of Him). We believers have been washed, and our sins are not on the order of ever requiring another bath to cleanse them away. Instead, our post-salvation sins are of the nature of “getting our feet dirty” – our essential “cleanness” remains as long as we retain our faith in and faithfulness to our Lord (Jn.13:1-10). We find this same distinction throughout the book of 1st John as well, where there are a number of passages which demonstrate this essential “cleanness” from what at first may seem an absolute perspective, but what is in fact a recognition of the persistent presence of faith and faithfulness, of respect and reverence and the fear of God, persistently resident in all who truly believe (also in Romans; compare Rom.2:12 with 8:1-2):

No one abiding in Him continues in [a life of] sin. No one who continues in [a life of] sin has seen Him or known Him. Children, let no one deceive you. The one who performs righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. The one who continues in [a life of] sin is of the devil, since the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God appeared, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who has been born of God continues in [a life of] sin, since His seed (i.e., the Word of truth in which we believe) remains in him, and [so] he is not able to continue in [a life of] sin since he has been born of God. 1st John 3:6-9

Everyone who hates his brother is [the same as] a murderer, and you know no [one who truly is a] murderer (i.e., confirmed in this evil; cf. 1Cor.6:9-11) has eternal life abiding in him. 1st John 3:15

We know that everyone who is born [again] from God is not [continually] sinning, but the one who is born [again] from God guards himself [against apostasy], and [so] the evil one is not [able to] lay hold of him. 1st John 5:18

And yet John is equally adamant about the truth of our universal sinfulness, our subsequent need to actively repent, confess and resist sin, and of the reality for believers of restoration after sins they have committed *as* believers – all points of doctrine obviously and completely incompatible with any misplaced notion of the possibility – let alone the reality – of sinless perfection:

If we say that we do not possess sin (i.e., a sin nature which is producing personal sins), we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say, that we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word is not in us.

1st John 1:8-10

My children, I am writing these things to you so that you won't sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate to [approach] the Father [on our behalf], Jesus Christ the righteous. 1st John 2:1

If anyone sees his brother engaged in a pattern of sinfulness which does not lead to death (i.e., is a deviation rather than a complete turning away), let him ask [forgiveness on his brother's behalf], and life will be given to him (i.e., forgiveness and deliverance will result), that is, in those cases where those sinning are not [sinning] unto death. There is sin which leads to death – I am not telling you to pray in that case. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin which does not lead to death (i.e., temporary deviation, confessed and repented does not result in death). 1st John 5:16-17

The common theme which unites all of the passages quoted above is the truth that sin is incompatible with the Christian walk. As Christians, we do not sin. When we do sin, it is not true Christianity we are practicing, but a throw-back to our previous way of life. Sin brings discipline, and requires repentance and confession, but is thereby cleansed away in reconciliation and restoration to full fellowship with the One who died for our sins. Persistent sinful conduct can and does weaken faith, sometimes even to the point of the death of faith (as in 1Jn.5:16-17 quoted immediately above). But those who are and would remain truly Christ's eventually and inevitably respond to our loving Father's discipline and avoid the ultimate hardening of heart that opens up the way to arrogant sin practiced in complete fearlessness of God (cf. Ps.36:1; Rom.3:18).

9. The Ten Commandments (Ex.20:1-17; Deut.5:6-21)

Separation from sin and evil, from all that is profane and ungodly in the world, has always been a hallmark as well as a requirement of God's people. In large part, the Mosaic Law served as a means of providing a very graphic, tangible, visible standard of separation between the holy and

the profane. Much of it (the dietary regulations, for example) was primarily symbolic, designed by God to represent the deeper truth of the absolute division between those who were truly His people and those who were not. In Christ, we are no longer under this Law, but under grace (Rom.6:14), not relieved of the responsibility to avoid sin (Rom.6:15), but given the opportunity through the power of the Spirit to live new lives of service to our Savior which reflect the power, glory, and goodness of Him (Rom.6:16-18; cf. Rom.6:4; 7:6; 2Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15; Eph.4:24; Col.3:10). The opposite side of this “perfect offense” remains a perfect defense of complete sinlessness, and while none of us is or will ever be perfect in either, this is the standard to which we are called and the goal to which we should aspire. For in turning to Christ, we believers have turned our backs on the world and all of its false promises and false allures. We understand that nothing the world offers can satisfy us, even if we were to gain it all (Matt.16:26). We understand the dangers of the world and its lusts (1Jn.2:15-17), that friendship with it is perilous in the extreme (Jas.4:4), and that to serve our Master as He would have us do requires us to despise the present sinful world and our lives in it even as we esteem the One who came to save us from it (Matt.10:39; 16:25; and Col.1:13-20). We can see this same essential orientation towards God and away from the world, towards holiness and away from sinfulness, in the Mosaic Law generally, but most perspicuously in the Ten Commandments, the quintessential expression of the separation from sin and worldliness which the Law calls for (cf. Matt.15:4-6; 19:16-26; Rom.7:7-25).

The calling out by God of a specific family and its development into a unique, witnessing nation necessitated its separation, its sanctification from all that was profane in the pagan world in which it existed. While the mark of God’s promise to Abraham of a holy progeny, namely circumcision, served to distinguish Israel as unique in God’s eyes, and was also, importantly, a symbolic testimony of belief in God and His promises (Rom.2:29), the Mosaic Law provided a behavioral code of separation, sanctification and demarcation. For the Law called upon Israel to “be holy as I am holy” (Lev.11:44-45; 1Pet.1:16), so that the essential underlying principle in all of its precepts was to separate the holy from the profane (Lev.10:10; 20:25-26). The Ten Commandments, since they comprise the essence of the Law (cf. Deut.4:13), still provide the fundamental and irreplaceable standard for separating the people of God from all that is evil, showing us how we are to sanctify our conduct in life’s most important and crucial areas:

Area #1: **Holiness towards God** (sanctifying and separating Him in what we think, do and say):

1. No other gods: guarding the sanctity of how we *think* about Him.
2. No idols: guarding the sanctity of how we *act* toward Him.
3. No misuse of His Name: guarding the sanctity of how we *represent* Him in our *speech*.

Area #2: **Holiness towards Life** (sanctifying and separating ourselves from reliance on the world):

4. Keep the Sabbath: guarding the sanctity of the day of rest; trusting God, not ourselves, for provision in this life (cf. Ezek.20:12; 20:20). *n.b.*: this is the only commandment not repeated in the New Testament. As the book of Hebrews emphatically assures us, specific day observance has been replaced with the reality of *continual* rest in and reliance on God (in the same way that animal sacrifice has been replaced by the reality of Christ's sacrifice: Heb.4:1-11; cf. Rom.14:5-8; Col.2:16-17). Since the cross, we are to rest in God at all times, not just on one particular day, seeking Him always.

Area #3: **Holiness towards Authority** (sanctifying and separating ourselves from rebellion against divinely constituted authority):

5. Honoring Father and Mother: guarding the sanctity of our behavior toward legitimate authority, all those who under the charge of God function as stewards in His place towards us, and who preserve our freedom to seek God (parents being the first and prime example).

Area #4: **Holiness towards Others** (sanctifying and separating ourselves from infringement upon the right of others to use this life to seek God):

6. No Murder: guarding the sanctity of life, the *sine qua non* for every human being to seek after God in the time God has given.

7. No Adultery: guarding the sanctity of the family, the basic support network required by the vast majority of people for normal function in life as a base for seeking God.

8. No Theft: guarding the sanctity of property, a necessary element for survival in the world to the end that one may seek after God.

9. No False Witness: guarding the sanctity of freedom of the innocent before the law, an important requirement for being able to remain free so as to freely seek God.

10. No Covetousness: guarding the sanctity of freedom of action in general from threats of evil action and intent which impede, hinder and prevent the search for God.

As even a peripheral reading and consideration of the above should show, these commandments reveal much about what is sinful beyond the specifics they relate. For example, the need for proper respect and sanctified behavior towards *all* authority is clearly implied in the fifth commandment (so that it should come as no surprise that this is explicitly taught elsewhere in scripture: Rom.13:1-7; Tit.3:1; 1Pet.2:13-25). Whether in the case of behavior directed towards God, towards our own attitude to life, towards authority, or towards others in general, the perfect standard of sanctification and sinlessness in all things is the rule by which our Lord measures us. For as Christians, this constitutes our "normal" behavior. Finally, we also see a crucial, basic rationale at the heart of this overarching command to avoid sin: inevitably, sin hampers the search for God and His truth, both in the case of the sinner and all those who are affected by his or her sin. Nothing should give us stronger motivation than this knowledge, for it is, after all, to this purpose that we have been called, and it is this purpose that fills our hearts: learning, believing, and serving the truth of Jesus Christ, and helping others to do the same.

III. God's Dealing with the Collective Sin of Mankind

1. The Holy Character of God

God's character is impeccably holy (Hebrew *qadhosh*: wvdq). It is and must remain completely *separated* from sin and evil. Consequently, the original sin of Satan and his followers is the reason behind God's present change in His manifest location to the third heaven as opposed to the earth as was originally the case (Ezek.28:13-16), His departure thus making clear the distinction between the light wherein He dwells and the darkness of what is now the devil's world (1Tim.6:16). Holiness cannot mix with evil. Where God's holiness does come into contact with evil, His holiness does not change (for God cannot change and is unaffected by creature misconduct: Eccl.5:1-2; cf. Job 35:6-8). Instead, His righteousness must demand immediate judgment upon evil as a result of any contact between the two. This explains why we mortal human beings even as believers cannot see God's glory and live as long as we still remain here on earth in these present sinful bodies (Ex.33:19-23), but we will indeed dwell with Him forever in resurrection once we have been made perfect (Jn.14:1-3). And the Father *will* return to dwell on earth with redeemed mankind forevermore (Rev.21:1-4; 21:22-23; 22:3-5), but only after the present heavens and earth have been cleansed by fire from every vestige of evil so that new heavens and a new earth result (2Pet.3:7-13). The ordinances of the Mosaic Law which draw such a sharp distinction between the holy and the profane (particularly in respect to the tabernacle whose proscribed holy of holies represents the third heaven: Heb.8:5) are illustrative of this principle.

Such knowledge does and should inspire fear and the desire to pursue sanctification and personal holiness. Nothing could be more foolish for a believer than to persist in sinfulness out of a misplaced feeling of permanent and unconditional safety (cf. Deut.29:19). However, considering that any and every sin is incompatible with God's holiness, and is therefore punishable by death in its threefold entirety, spiritual, physical, and eternal, it is well to consider that the distinctions between sins treated above, whether ignorant or arrogant, great or small, specifically prohibited in scripture or not, would be entirely moot had not holy God in His great mercy provided a way to treat with sinful mankind, satisfying His righteousness without compromising His holiness through the sacrifice of His own dear Son our Lord Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. Issues such as relative mitigation and forgiveness of sin in time would not matter at all unless God had first provided a way to satisfy the absolute punishment for sin which His righteous character demanded. For, otherwise, leniency toward sinners would involve Him in the compromise of His holiness. That, of course, is only a hypothetical, because God is eternal, perfect, and immutable. His character cannot be changed, and His nature cannot be altered. He *is* holy, and could never be anything less. For sinful creatures in rebellion against Him, this is not good news. How in the world then, given the immutable and impeccable holiness of God, can we who are steeped in sin ever have the slightest prospect of avoiding eternal condemnation away from the presence of God, let alone any hope of living with Him forever? The good news in Jesus Christ is that God has indeed provided a way for us to be reconciled to Him. In spite of His pure, fiery, unyielding holiness, we will live with Him forever, for we believers have been made holy too, positionally

in Christ at the present time, and in full experiential reality in resurrection at that glorious future time, all on account of the precious sacrifice of our Lord on our behalf, dying for our sins in our place.

All of God's actions toward the world in general and mankind in particular flow from His infinite nature and perfect character (see the first installment of this series, "Theology"). His character is perfectly holy (1Pet.1:15-16); therefore He must act towards us in perfect justice. His character is good in the perfect sense of the word (Ex.33:19; Ps.145:9); therefore He desires to act towards us in perfect love (1Jn.4:8-10; cf. Ps.145:18-20). While it may seem inscrutable to human logic, there is never a conflict between God's justice and His love; He is perfectly just and perfectly loving at the same time, with His holiness and His goodness un-compromised in all that He does. For God has found a way to make this peace, and to reconcile us to Himself, and that way is *the* only way to salvation, the One true Way, our Lord Jesus Christ.

For it was [God's] good pleasure for the fulfillment [of His plan] to reside entirely in [Christ], and so through Him to reconcile everything to Himself, having made peace through Him, through the blood of His cross, whether things on earth, or things in heaven. Colossians 1:19-20

Our Lord met the demands of God's holiness in dying for our sins on the cross, so that God is just to pronounce us justified, to pronounce us righteous not on the basis of what we are or have done, but on the basis of our faith in the One who died in our place. In Jesus Christ, "mercy and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed" (Ps.85:10). In the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ the apparent conflict between what holiness demands and goodness desires has been resolved forevermore in our favor, for those who believe the truth of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn.14:6).

2. The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

Of necessity, any systematic study of sin must focus upon the sinner and his or her acts of sin (as is the case here). But the *solution* to sin, once and for all, is Jesus Christ, His Person and work on the cross on behalf of all mankind. This is true whether one speaks of sin in the aggregate (i.e., the collective sins of all mankind), sin as an obstacle to personal salvation (i.e., the sum total of the charges against any particular person), or sin as an impediment to a believer's walk (i.e., the need for confession after salvation of a believer's particular sins). The decree of judgment against us, individually and collectively, initially and experientially, has been removed forever through the cross of Jesus Christ (Col.2:13-14; cf. Eph.2:14-18). The Person and the work of Christ are properly the subjects of part 4A and 4B of this series respectively (forming the centerpiece of this seven part series). But it is important at this point to give a brief overview of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf as it relates the removal of the sin problem.

1. Definition of Atonement: In some respects, the English word "atonement" is an unfortunate choice for translating the Hebrew and Greek roots *kaphar* (כַּפַּר) and *hilas*- (ἵλασ-) respectively.

Etymologically, atonement is an English coinage wherein the prepositional phrase “at one” has been made into a noun by appending the suffix “-ment”: “at-one-ment”. Thus the basic idea given by the word itself is directed more towards the reconciliation of God and Man than the solving of the sin problem (i.e., although estranged, we are made “one” with God in Jesus Christ). The essential idea behind the Hebrew root *kaphar* is rather one of wiping out, cleansing, and purifying what is sinful (and so making forgiveness possible: cf. Ex.29:36; Lev.23:27; Dan.9:24). This is most evident in the central ritual of *Yom Kippur*, “The Day of Atonement” (as we translate it), the pouring out of blood on the “mercy seat”, the golden cover on top of the ark of the covenant. Since the holy of holies represents the third heaven, and the mercy seat is a type of the throne of God, it is virtually impossible to overlook the symbolism of the blood, representing the work of Christ on the cross, placed before the throne of God by the high priest who represents Him who is our true High Priest. As it says in the book of Hebrews where all these matters are discussed in great detail (cf. especially chapters 5-10), “we cannot talk about all these things in detail now” (Heb.9:5), but it is important to point out that the symbolism of the blood poured out upon the cover of the ark, which in turn contained the tablets of the Law (and other representations of human sinfulness: Heb.9:4), is clearly meant to portray God the Father’s satisfaction with the work of His Son in dying for the sin of the world (Heb.9:23-28). The blood “wipes out” or “cleanses” or “purifies” the sin upon which it is poured out (Heb.9:22). The fact that atonement in the biblical sense refers to the covering, cleansing, or purifying of sin is also clear from the New Testament where the Greek root *hilas-*, while, in typical Greek fashion, more conceptual, is focused upon the same essential idea of expiation, cleansing, or purification (Rom.3:25; cf. Heb.2:17; 9:5; 1Jn.2:2; 4:10), along with the forgiveness that flows therefrom (compare Jer.31:34 with Heb.8:12). Biblically speaking, therefore, atonement is best understood as first and foremost God’s work in Christ on our behalf directed towards sin making reconciliation possible (rather than as primarily emphasizing reconciliation as the English word most often chosen to translate the Greek and Hebrew referents implies).

2. The Need for and Requirements of Atonement: All of us owe a debt to God we cannot pay ourselves. In biblical terms, atonement means the effective paying to God of the price for sins (cf. Matt.18:27-32), but since we have already established that all mankind is sinful, all mankind thus stands in need of atonement from another source. For the human race’s very great problem is that God in His perfect holiness can only accept a perfect payment: no one who is sinful could ever do anything to atone for any sin, since the sinfulness of the person concerned would compromise and taint the sacrifice right from the start. Only a perfect person, a sinless person, could ever atone for sin, but of course there would never be a need for such a person to do so on his own behalf. In order for the sins of the human race to be atoned for, someone would have to willingly pay the price in our place, someone perfect and without sin. This explains the need 1) for the incarnation, “God with us” in the Person of Immanuel, our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil.2:7-8); 2) for the virgin birth, to avoid the taint of sin coming down from Adam through the male line (Is.7:14); 3) for our Lord’s sinless life, to be the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb without spot or blemish (Heb.4:15); and 4) for His death on the cross: He had to go to His death of His own free will and pay the price for our sins in order to accomplish atonement on our behalf (Heb.2:17).

3. The Means of Atonement: In order for us ever to be able to live with a holy and perfect God, the price for our sins had to be paid (Matt.6:12; 18:27-32; 20:28; Lk.1:68; 24:21; Rom.3:24; 1Cor.1:30; 6:20; 7:23; Gal.3:13; 4:4-5; Eph.1:7; Col.1:14; 2:14; 1Tim.2:6; Tit.2:14; Heb.9:12-15; 1Pet.1:18; 2Pet.2:1; Rev.5:9; 14:3-4). Since God is just, and He could not in His perfect justice just “let us off”. Someone had to pay that price – without a sacrifice, without “the shedding of blood”, there is no remission of sins (Heb.9:22). Jesus is the only One who could die in our place, for He is the only One who ever lived a perfect life without sin. For this purpose He came into the world, as even His Name Jesus proclaims:

“You will call His name ‘Jesus’ (i.e., “The Lord saves”). For He Himself will save His people from their sins”. Matthew 1:21b

Understanding our sin and our sinfulness is important on many levels, but one of the most critical of these is that without this understanding and appreciation we do not really have a clue about the awful fate our Lord saved us from, and how dearly He paid to accomplish that salvation. He had to bear our sins in order for us not to be held eternally accountable for them. Death is the inevitable result of sin, the “sting” that results from it empowered by our inability to measure up to God’s perfect standard (1Cor.15:56). For us to live, Christ had to die. For our sins to be forgiven, Christ had to be judged for them in our place. This principle is taught clearly in all of the rituals of the Mosaic Law. Jesus is the Lamb without spot or blemish, the perfect sacrifice who is slaughtered on our behalf, whose blood is poured out to pay the price for the sins that we have committed (Jn.1:29; 1Cor.5:7; 1Pet.1:18-19; Rev.5:6-13). This is of course a metaphor. Jesus’ literal blood did not save us anymore than He is a literal lamb – He did not bleed to death (compare Matt.27:50; Mk.15:37; Lk.23:46; Jn.19:30 with Jn.19:33-35). The point of this analogy to the sacrificial slaughter of a lamb is to emphasize the awful and awesome judgment on the cross He underwent on our behalf, dying for our sins (Is.52:13 - 53:12). He was “baptized” into our sins (Lk.12:50; cf. Mk.10:38-39), identified with them in judgment, so that God in His perfect justice could forgive us, because Jesus paid the price for us. The water baptism of John makes just this point by means of another powerful metaphor. Our sins wash away into the water, then Jesus goes down into the water, and is thus associated with or “baptized into” our sins so as to take them away by this sacrifice of Himself (compare Mk.1:4-5 with 1:9-11). His resurfacing is a picture of the resurrection, and the Father’s pronouncement shows that Jesus’ work would and did indeed effectively solve the sin problem on our behalf (cf. Rom.4:25).

Along with the “blood of the Lamb” metaphor, the baptism metaphor only teaches us the principle that Jesus died for our sins. As to the precise manner in which our Lord died for our sins on the cross, it is best to stay close to what scripture actually records. We can say of a certainty that after being betrayed, forsaken, denied, abandoned, arrested, falsely accused and condemned, maligned, ridiculed, spit upon, tortured, and beaten to the last reserves of His strength (Ps.22; Is.52:13 - 53:12), our Lord was nailed to a cross for us, saw with His own eyes the loss of everything He had in His humanity as they gambled away His clothes and earthly possessions, and then, after ministering truth and grace in His words on the cross, went into the

darkness for us (Lk.23:44), was “made sin for us” (2Cor.5:21), “bore our sins in His body on the tree” (1Pet.2:24), and was “forsaken” for us (Matt.27:46), that we might be forgiven and might move from death to life because He gave up His life unto death for us. We cannot know the depths of the suffering that He endured in the darkness as He bore the sins of the world, your sins and mine, but we know that when it was over He proclaimed *tetelestai* (τετελεσται), “it is completed” (Jn.19:30), for with those words the entire plan of God was indeed complete: Man who had been created to answer creature rebellion had been saved and made one with God forever (for all who choose Him), and the entire universal rift that had been started eons ago by the evil one had been made whole and right in principle. Now we only wait for God’s good timing when all things will be put under Christ’s feet, and the final end when He hands over the kingdom to the Father so that God will finally be “all in all” (1Cor.15:28).

(4) For He bore our sicknesses and He carried our weaknesses. And yet we considered Him as [the One who had been] punished, smitten and afflicted by God. (5) But [in fact] He was made subject to torment on account of our transgressions, and He was crushed because of our collective guilt (lit., “guilts”). The punishment [required] for making peace [with God] on our behalf [fell] upon Him. Because of His wounding, we have been healed. (6) We have all gone astray like sheep. Each of us has turned to his own way. And the Lord caused the guilt of us all to strike Him. (7) Though He was oppressed and afflicted, like a lamb led to slaughter He did not open His mouth, and like a ewe before her shearers He did not open His mouth. (8) By repressive judgment He was taken away, and who gave any thought to His posterity? For He was cut off from the land of the living. He was punished for the transgression of my people. (9) And they assigned Him a grave with the wicked (pl.) and with a rich [man] in His deaths (*sic*). Not for any violence that He had done. Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. (10) For it was the Lord’s good pleasure (i.e., “will”) to crush Him, to subject Him to torment. But though you make His life a guilt offering, He will see His seed, He will lengthen His days, and the good pleasure (i.e., “will”) of the Lord will prosper in His hand. (11) [Released] from the trouble [inflicted] upon His life, He will [again] see [the light of life] and be satisfied (i.e., in resurrection). My righteous Servant will provide righteousness for the great [of heart] (i.e., believers) through the[ir] acknowledgment of Him, and He Himself will carry their guilt (lit., “guilts”). (12) Therefore I will allot to Him [the plunder] among [His] many [brothers], and He will apportion plunder to the mighty [among them]. Because He lay bare His life unto death, and was dealt with as transgressors [are], so that He bore the sin of the many, and substituted [Himself] for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53:4-12

This is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins concerning many people. Matthew 26:28

For what He died, He died to sin, once and for all, and what He lives, He lives to God.
Romans 6:10

For what the Law could not accomplish (i.e., solving the sin problem) because it was weak on account of [its dependence on sinful human] flesh, God [did accomplish]: having sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the purpose of [expiating] sin, [God] rendered summary judgment on [all] sin in [Christ's] flesh.
Romans 8:3

For I entrusted to you as of primary importance what I had also received, [namely] that Christ died on behalf of our sins according to (i.e., in fulfillment of) the scriptures.
1st Corinthians 15:3

He made Him who had no [personal] experience of sinning [to be] sin (i.e., a sin offering) for us, so that we might have (lit., “become”) God’s righteousness in Him.
2nd Corinthians 5:21

[Jesus Christ], who gave Himself on behalf of our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father. Galatians 1:4

Christ bought us free (i.e., “redeemed” us) from the Law’s curse, having become a curse on our behalf. For it is written: “Cursed is everyone [who is] hanged upon a tree” (Deut.21:23; cf. 1Pet.2:24). Galatians 3:13

For He Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity between us, by discharging the Law of the commandments and its requirements in His [own] flesh, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind]. Ephesians 2:14-16

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, in order that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wound you are healed.
1st Peter 2:24

4. The Universality of the Atonement: Christ’s sacrifice is *the* cornerstone of the plan of God (Ps.118:22; Is.8:13-15; 28:16; Dan.2:34-45; Matt.16:18; 1Cor.10:4; 1Pet.2:4-8). All of history as it actually unfolds according to the eternal decrees of God is predicated upon the cross (Eph.1:9-11; Col.1:17-20; 2Tim.1:9-10; cf. Matt.21:42; Rom.5:6; 8:29-30; 1Cor.8:6; Eph.2:20-22; 1Pet.2:6-8; Heb.9:26), and every scripture in the written word is ultimately focused upon the work of Him who is the Living Word of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Jn.5:39; cf. Jn.1:1-14; Heb.1:1-4; 1Jn.1:1-4; Rev.1:2; 19:13). In His eternal plan, therefore, decreed before the foundation of the universe before the creation of angels or men, God foreknew creature free will and the corresponding rejection of Him that this would entail on the part of many. In His incalculable mercy and wisdom, our God provided a solution for the death and loss that such rebellion would entail, the redemption of fallen mankind through the blood of His very own Son, for all who would accept His Person and His work. The resolution to the problem of our death

on account of sin is His death for our sin (Rom.6:10), resulting in the defeat of that last and most terrifying enemy which will be swallowed up in life for all who believe (Is.25:7-8; 1Cor.15:26; 15:54-57; Heb.2:14). The cross of Jesus Christ has eliminated for all mankind the impossible problem of sin, even in the case of all sins committed before our Lord's death which he died on behalf of the world:

For all sin and fall short of God's glory, [but we are all] justified without cost by His grace through the redemption (lit., "ransoming" from sin) which is in Christ Jesus. God made Him a means of atonement [achieved] by His blood [and claimed] through faith, to give proof of His justice in leaving unpunished in divine forbearance [all] previously committed sins, so as to prove His justice in the present, namely, so that He would be [shown to be] just [in this] and [justified] in justifying the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:23-26

The passage above very plainly refers to **all** sins committed before the historical crucifixion of our Lord (v.25), and corresponds directly to the critical fact with which the passage begins: all sin, therefore all stand in need of atonement. This universality of Christ's sacrifice, His death for **all** the sins committed in world history, past, present and future, is taught in a number of scriptures:

On the next day, [John] saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, the One who takes away the sin **of the world**". John 1:29

But if anyone hears My words and does not hold on to them, I do not condemn him. For I did not come to condemn the world but to save **the world**. John 12:47

For it is the love of Christ that constrains us, having brought us to this conclusion: One died **for** [us] **all**; so then we all have died [in Him]. And He died **on behalf of all** so that those who are [now] alive might no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised [from the dead]. 2nd Corinthians 5:14-15

For that God was [and is] in Christ making overtures of reconciliation between **the world** and Himself – **not** taking their transgressions into account – and has entrusted us with this message (lit., "word") of reconciliation. 2nd Corinthians 5:19

[God] who wants all men to be saved and come to accept the truth. For as God is One, so there is [only] One Mediator between God and Man, Christ Jesus in His humanity, who gave Himself as a ransom **for all [mankind]** . . . 1st Timothy 2:4-6a

But now we do see Jesus crowned with glory and honor on account of the death He suffered, even He who became "a little lower than the angels" [for a brief span] so that by the grace of God He might taste death **on behalf of us all**. Hebrews 2:9

Unlike the [human] high priests, [Jesus] has no need of making sacrifice day by day, first on behalf of His own sins, and then **for the sins of the people**. For this [latter] He did once and for all when He offered Himself [as a sacrifice]. Hebrews 7:27

And He Himself is the atonement for our sins, and not just for ours, but also for **the entire world**. 1st John 2:2

And you know that that One appeared to take away **our sins**, and sin is not in Him. 1st John 3:5

It is because Jesus died for **all** sins that no further sacrifice for sins is necessary (Heb.10:15-18). Universal atonement, however, does not mean universal acceptance of the atonement on the part of the human race. The fact that Christ died for all, does not mean that all accept His sacrifice, putting their faith in Him and His work for eternal life. Universal atonement **does** mean that Jesus has taken away sin as a barrier to salvation. Universal atonement **does not** mean that mankind universally accepts the offer of forgiveness of sin, deliverance from sin, and reconciliation with God that is universally available through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the same way the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom **for many**. Matthew 20:28 (Mk.10:45; cf. Heb.9:28)

For this is the blood of my covenant which is poured out **concerning many** for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:28 (Mk.14:24; cf. Lk.22:20)

The ransom from sin and death is available to all, but not all embrace it. The failure of some to accept who Jesus is and what He did in dying for our sins does not invalidate the atonement of the cross either generally or individually, but it does render that atonement of no practical benefit for those who reject it. For by refusing to accept what God has done in taking away our sins through the sacrifice of His one and only Son, a person must necessarily stand before God on his own merits instead. Jesus is the Savior of all mankind, but only those who accept, believe, and follow Him gain the benefits of the salvation God offers to all in Him.

For this reason we toil and strive, for we have put our hope in the Living God who is the Savior of all men, **especially believers**. 1st Timothy 4:10

For God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. The one who believes in Him is not being judged, but **the one who does not believe has already been judged** on the grounds that he has not put his faith in the Name (i.e., the Person) of God's only Son. John 3:17-18

When He [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will call the world to account regarding sin, and righteousness, and judgment:

- regarding sin, because they do not believe in Me.

- regarding righteousness, because I am going to my Father and you are not going to be seeing Me any longer.
- regarding judgment, because the ruler of this world has now been judged.

John 16:8-11

The last two passages above make it abundantly clear that failure to receive the benefits of the atonement of the cross are a result of personal choice, the choice *not* to believe in Jesus. This is the one sin for which our Lord could not die, the sin of refusing to accept His sacrifice for our sins. God stands ready to forgive every other sin as impediments to salvation, except the sin of denying the truth of Jesus Christ. Calling God “a liar” when He sacrificed His one and only Son to die on our behalf is the “unforgivable sin”, the “eternal sin” of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”, namely, the rejection of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt.12:31-32; Mk.3:28-30; Lk.12:10). But for all who do accept the truth, who do trust in Jesus, and who do follow Him faithfully maintaining their faith to the end, His atoning sacrifice has already removed sin as an issue in entering into a relationship with God, and by grace through faith though sinners in practice we are made righteous in principle, justified by the blood of the One who shed His blood in our behalf (Rom.3:24; 4:25).

[God] has *erased* the charge against us along with its bill of particulars (i.e., the record of our personal sins). This stood against us, but He *removed* it [as an obstacle] between us by nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:14

[Jesus Christ] who gave Himself on our behalf *to redeem* us from all lawlessness (i.e., sin; cf. 1Jn.3:4) and *to cleanse* for Himself a people [to be His] own unique possession, zealous for good works. Titus 2:14

IV. God’s Dealing with the Sins of Individual Human Beings

1. God’s Justice and Mercy

We are all God’s creation. He knows us all from eternity past, and has always had in mind what is best for us in every way. God does not desire the loss or condemnation of a single human being – He wants all to be saved (Ezek.18:23; Matt.18:14; Jn.12:47; 1Tim.2:4; 2Tim.2:24-26; 2Pet.3:9). Nowhere is this truth more clearly demonstrated than in the sacrifice of His only Son on behalf of the entire world:

For God loved *the world* so much that He gave [up] His only Son, [with the purpose] that everyone who believes in Him should not be lost [forever], but have eternal life [instead].
John 3:16

While God could have created us (and the angels too, for that matter) as loyal servants who would never even consider rejecting Him, He graciously made us what we are in our essence, beings of true and intrinsic value who possess the spiritual means to decide in favor of Him (or

not). How wonderfully we are wrought in *this* respect is virtually impossible to fathom, since no one who possesses free will can really imagine what it would be like to be without it. Suffice it to say that with no real internal ability to make important choices, we would not be “us” in any meaningful sense of the word. But it was so important to God that we be what we are that He was willing to pay the price above all prices for our future blessed eternity with Him. For to provide His creatures with a genuine choice meant of necessity that some (many, in fact) would choose against Him, and that our restoration would require the sacrifice His own dear Son (see the Satanic Rebellion series).

He was handed over on account of our transgressions (i.e., to redeem us from sin), and was raised up on account of our justification (i.e., so that we too could be raised, having been justified by His death). Romans 4:25

The result of Jesus’ sacrifice on behalf of all mankind is to make that redemption and justification possible for all who are willing to take it. Thus the condemnation of sins God’s justice demanded as the outworking of His holiness was fulfilled once and for all by our dear Lord at Calvary. Consequently, God is free to act towards us in mercy rather than in the severity of just judgment (Ps.86:15; 103:2-14; 145:8; Lam.3:22-23; Is.57:16; cf. Ps.30:5; Rom.11:22-23), and that mercy, whose counterpart in the goodness and love of God is grace (Eph.2:1-9; Col.2:13-14; cf. Rom.5:8), is available free of charge to all who are willing to accept it.

For God’s grace, overflowing with salvation, has [now in Jesus Christ] gloriously appeared to all men. Titus 2:11

Since, as we have seen above, all sin before the cross was “overlooked” until the cross (Rom.3:25-26; cf. Matt.9:2-7; 2Pet.1:9), this atonement has ever been the case in principle (although we have the reality of it now, in addition to understanding it in a way impossible before our Lord’s atoning sacrifice).

The prophets diligently investigated and inquired about this salvation, when they prophesied about this grace [that was to come] to you. For they were eager to discover the precise time the Spirit of Christ within them was signifying as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. For it was revealed to them that in prophesying these things, they were not so much serving themselves as they were you – and these same things have now been proclaimed to you through those who gave you the gospel through the Holy Spirit, sent from heaven – even angels want to look into these things. 1st Peter 1:10-12

Thus the awesome, perfect, holy character of God which demands irrevocable justice upon all that is sinful has been satisfied by the work of Jesus Christ once and for all (Rom.3:24-25). The issue for mankind in salvation is, as a result, no longer one of personal sin, for these have been forgiven in Jesus Christ, but of willingness to accept the perfect sacrifice that God has made on our behalf. The justice of God, terrifying beyond measure to all that is in any respect not

perfectly just, has been propitiated in mercy by the cross. All that He requires now is that we respond to His mercy (cf. Mic.6:8), receiving the truth of the death and resurrection of His only Son rather than trampling His gracious offer under foot (Heb.10:29).

For believers, the issue of the justice of God expressed in judgment versus mercy is not one of *salvation*, for we have now passed from death to life and have been delivered from the prospect of condemnation (Jn.3:17-18; Rom.8:1). We have received the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ through faith, and know that we shall never enter into judgment as long as we hold fast to our confession.

For you have been saved by [God's] grace through faith [in Christ]; and this did not come from you - it is God's gift. Nor did it come from what you have done, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [the purpose of accomplishing] good works, which [very works] God has prepared ahead of time for us, that we might walk in them (i.e., live our Christian lives in the accomplishment of them).
Ephesians 2:8-10

It is through this gospel that you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you - otherwise you have believed in vain. 1st Corinthians 15:2

2. God's Forgiveness of Sins

At the cross, Jesus Christ paid the price for all the sins of all mankind, past, present, and future. This ineffably gracious sacrifice by the Father of His Son and by the Son of Himself made possible the forgiveness of all sin. By atoning for the sins of the world, Jesus made it possible for all the world to receive forgiveness for those sins. To put the matter in theological terms, from the standpoint of satisfying God's character (propitiation), atonement empowered grace and unleashed mercy, so that we see in this blessed new reality what our God of love is really like: He longs to be gracious to us (Is.30:18; cf. 1Jn.4:7-19)! He deeply desires all to be saved, to take advantage of the price above prices paid by His Son (Ezek.18:23; Matt.18:14; Jn.12:47; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9). But the cross did not change the responsibility shared by all mankind *to accept* the sacrifice of Christ through faith. While unconditionally available through the blood of Christ, forgiveness must be embraced in free will in order to be received. God stands ready to forgive the sins of anyone and everyone based upon the work of His own dear Son on the cross, but that gift of gifts has to be accepted (cf. Acts 2:38; 10:43).

Then I said, "Who are you, Lord?", and the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But stand up on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this [very] reason, [namely] to appoint you a minister and a witness, both of what you have [now] seen, and of [other things] in regard to which I shall appear to you [later]. [For] I am going to rescue you from this people (i.e., Jewish opponents) and from the gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so as to turn from darkness to [the] light, even from the power of Satan unto God, *that they may receive the forgiveness of [their] sins* and a share among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me. Acts 26:15-18

Without faith, there is no forgiveness. But for all who accept Jesus through faith, our sins are forgiven at the point of faith (Col.2:13). In Christ, as we are now and ever shall be, we are in possession of this forgiveness of sin and its corresponding redemption as part of our birthright as born again children of God (Jn.1:12-13; Rom.3:24; 8:14-23; Gal.3:26; 4:5-6).

In whom (i.e., Christ) we possess our ransoming [from sin] (i.e., redemption) through His blood, the *forgiveness* of our transgressions according to the riches of His grace.
Ephesians 1:7

In whom (i.e., Christ) we possess our ransoming [from sin] (i.e., redemption), the *forgiveness* of our sins. Colossians 1:14

The passages above present forgiveness not only as something accomplished in the past, but as something we believers continue to hold within our grasp. Thus forgiveness of sin by virtue of our faith in Christ and our new position in Christ is not only a historic fact already realized at the point of faith (Acts 13:38-39; Eph.4:32; Col.2:13), but it is also a continuing feature of the Christian life. Thus, we receive an initial, blanket forgiveness of all our sins when we believe, and this forgiveness extends forward in time as well as backward. Through this forgiveness, God considers us “righteous”, and this “righteousness through faith” is unaffected by the sins we commit after salvation (Rom.3:21-22; 3:28; 4:5; 4:13; 5:1; 6:7; 8:1; 9:30-31; 10:6; Gal.2:16; Phil.3:9; Heb.11:7).

Blessed are they whose lawless deeds have been forgiven and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin (i.e., “consider sinful”). Romans 4:7-8 (Psalm32:1-2)

As long as we remain in Jesus by faith, we maintain the righteousness and the forgiveness we have in Him through faith. But God has not only forgiven our sins in toto for salvation, a blessed reality we experience and possess when we put our trust in Jesus Christ (“positional” forgiveness). He has also made provision for us to be forgiven whatever sins we may commit subsequent to believing in Christ (“experiential” forgiveness). It is very important not to confuse these two discrete aspects of forgiveness, namely, blanket forgiveness of all of the unbeliever’s sins at salvation, past, present, and future, versus specific forgiveness of the believer’s post-salvation sins upon repentance and confession. For, on the one hand, falling into sin after salvation does *not* mean that we now require a new dose of salvation-forgiveness, that we have somehow fallen entirely from grace if once we sin – that would be giving confession-forgiveness entirely the wrong emphasis and meaning for we remain “in Christ” and continue to “possess” (positional) forgiveness in spite of personal sins (Eph.1:7; Col.1:14). To recall our Lord’s words to Peter which effectively distinguish between positional and experiential forgiveness, “he who has had a bath only has need to wash his feet, but otherwise he is completely clean” (Jn.13:10; cf. Ex.30:19-21; 1Jn.1:9).

Don’t you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes

nor practitioners of homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is [exactly] what some of you were – but ***you were washed [clean]***, but you were made holy, but you were made righteous by [faith in] the Person (lit., Name) of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God. 1st Corinthians 6:9-11

So then as believers in Jesus Christ we are no longer evil-doers, but that does ***not*** mean that we shall never again do evil (although we most definitely ***should*** not: Rom.6:15; 1Jn.2:1). We still dwell in these bodies of sin, are still tempted to sin, and so still continue to commit sin (although the progression ***should*** be away from sin and toward holiness: 2Cor.7:1; Heb.12:14; cf. Rom.6:22; 1Thes.4:3). Being forgiven all of our sins at salvation therefore does ***not*** mean that we will never sin again and have no need to repent and confess our sins – that would be over-focusing on the initial, “positional” forgiveness that is ours by virtue of our union with Christ, falsely assuming that once forgiven no other forgiveness will ever be necessary (or available), and that is not the case. As Jesus has told us, although we have bathed from sin, we still need to keep washing our feet (Jn.13:1-10; cf. Heb.10:22-23). Thus God’s continuing “experiential” forgiveness which is forgiveness received by confession is an important and necessary counterpart of His once and for all “positional” forgiveness which is received at salvation, both of which have been paid for in the same “coin”, the blood of His own dear Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ:

We are forgiven when we believe in Christ, demonstrating our initial faith in Him:

For you know that it was not with perishable things [like] silver or gold that you were ransomed from the futile manner of life passed down to you by your ancestors, but [you were redeemed] with precious blood, like that of a lamb without spot or blemish, [that is, by the blood] of Christ. 1st Peter 1:18-19

We are forgiven when we confess our sins, demonstrating our continuing faithfulness to Him:

But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we do have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son is cleansing us from all sin. 1st John 1:7

The world at large may be largely unconcerned about sin. But we know that sin is death. Praise be to our gracious Father and His loving Son who through the cross have removed the shroud of sin and death forevermore for us who believe and gratefully embrace the forgiveness they offer! For we who have been made righteous through our faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross on our behalf have received on the basis of that sacrifice the “once and for all” forgiveness that has covered all our sins for all eternity. And not only that: now that we have entered into the family of God, just as a loving human father forgives his children when they respond to his remonstrances (cf. Lk.15:11-32), so our heavenly Father continues to forgive the sins we commit in this life, for we are now His own dear children, and beloved in Jesus Christ.

But as many as accepted Him (i.e., Jesus, the Word), to them He gave the power to become *children of God*, [that is,] to those who put their faith in His Person (lit., “Name”), [even those] who were not [born] of blood, or fleshly desire, or human will, but [who] were *born of God* (i.e., “born again”). John 1:12-13

3. The Natural Consequences of Sin

Just as the original sin of Satan and his angels resulted in their ejection from the first Eden, so the sin of Adam and Eve resulted in their ejection from the garden of Eden on the perfectly re-created earth. We have treated above the consequences of our first parents’ sin for us their progeny, and shall discuss below the consequences in terms of God’s direct response to our personal sins. But there is another category of consequence that is sometimes overlooked in studies of this sort, namely, the repercussions that sin may have which come about in the natural course of things. The original heavens and earth as made by our Lord were perfect and without sin, and the same was true of the re-created earth of the garden of Eden. Yet the result of creating angels and human beings with genuine free will meant that some (in the event, a third of angelic kind and the large majority of human kind) would choose to turn away from God. Far from being some sort of “mistake”, the process of winnowing out the wheat from the chaff has been at the heart of the plan of God all along. It is, in fact, so deeply important to our God that His Kingdom on the new earth and in the new heavens be entirely composed of those who willingly chose for Him during this winnowing process that we call history that He ordained angelic and human history to proceed in this very way, even though it would necessarily entail the sacrifice of His own dear Son our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in order to finally reconcile all things to Himself, both in heaven and on earth (Col.1:19-20). The putting off of the judgment of sin until the cross and the resolution of the sin problem at that time, coupled with the putting off of the judgment of unbelievers and of the execution of judgment upon Satan and his angels until the end of time has meant that the world as we know it has been allowed to continue in spite of the presence of sin and evil and of sinners and evil-doers (both human and angelic). As He made clear for angelic kind in His judgment of the original heavens and earth, and for human kind in His judgment through the great flood, God has imposed limits upon the extent to which He will allow evil to progress. As is obvious in the case of the two examples cited, creature behavior past a certain point of evil will not be tolerated and will bring a swift and certain divine response (and that is true down even to the individual level as we shall see below). In addition, the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit in this regard should not be forgotten or underestimated (e.g., the horrific nature of the Tribulation will come in no small part as a result of the holding in abeyance of His ministry in this regard: cf. 2Thes.2:6-7). But in perfect foreknowledge of all that would happen in history (for nothing can happen apart from His divine decrees), God has also constructed the world in such a way so as to provide a system of “natural” consequences for sin, all of which may be easily anticipated in advance by even the most casual observer of the human condition, and all of which therefore provide at least some level of restraint for those who do in prudence see the connection and wisely turn away.

1. Psychological consequences: Sin and evil cannot help but affect us internally in a most negative way. From philosophers of antiquity to present day psychologists and psychiatrists to the “man in the street”, both ancient and modern, there is and has always been an appreciation in the human heart that doing wrong to others harms the doer of the wrong as well. For example, harming someone else and realizing the harm one has done creates dis-ease in the conscience, a feeling of guilt and regret that rob us of our internal peace (at least initially, until the heart becomes completely hardened). So that quite apart from the damage done to our relationship with the Lord as believers, failing to do what is right or actively giving in to what is wrong does have predictable and significant internal psychological consequences such as every human being has experienced.

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Proverbs 14:30 NIV

There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked. Isaiah 48:22 (cf. Isaiah 57:21)

2. Physical consequences: In addition to its internal, psychological negative effects, sin has tangible external consequences as well. Indeed, the concrete damage that sin may cause is so wide-ranging in type and degree that it would require its own volume to detail exhaustively. For whether sin be of the heart or of the tongue or of the hand, it is capable of doing immense physical damage, and that is plain for all the world to see.

I passed by the field of a lazy man, even by the orchard of a man with little sense. And behold, it was all overgrown with weeds, thistles covered it over, and its wall of stones had been trampled under foot. And as I was looking [at this], I took it to heart, [and] I took a lesson from what I saw. A little slumber, a little rest, a little folding of the hands to sleep, and your poverty will come marching in, and your scarcity like a man armed for war. Proverbs 24:30-34

Who says “woe!” and who says “oh!”? Who has complaints and who has quarrels? Who suffers wounds in vain and sees all through a haze? Those who linger over wine and those who come to test the mix. Don’t gaze at wine til it blushes, til it winks at you in the glass. Though it goes down oh so smoothly, in the end it will bite like a snake, and strike at you like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights, and your heart will speak distorted things. And you will be like a man asleep on the high seas, like a man asleep at the mast top. “They struck me”, you will say, “but I feel no pain. They beat me, but I hardly noticed. When will I come to so I can look for another drink?” Proverbs 23:29-35

Flee from fornication (i.e., sexual sin)! Every [other] sin a person may commit is separated from the body. But the one who fornicates is sinning against (lit., “into”) his own body. 1st Corinthians 6:18

3. Social consequences: Closely related to the above but significant enough to be deserving of its own category is the harm that sin does to personal relationships at every level. When we lie or

cheat or betray a confidence or gossip or act with insensitivity or lack of love, we do obvious damage to our relationships with other people, often to the very people we are closest to and purport to love. This is also a category of predictable, natural consequences resulting from sin, one very well known to anyone with the slightest experience of interpersonal relationships.

A man given to distortions generates quarrels, and a slanderer alienates a close friend.
Proverbs 16:28

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
Proverbs 17:14 NIV

4. Legal consequences: Finally, though not unrelated to the above three categories, there are sins which cross the line into crime. As with the other sub-categories above, consequences for criminal behavior are also obvious to us all.

Submit to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as the one in authority, or to rulers as sent through Him to wreak vengeance on those who do evil, but to bestow praise on those who do good. 1st Peter 2:13-14

Let every person be subject to [all] superior authorities. For no authority exists which has not [been established] by God. And those that exist are [in turn] subject to God. Therefore whoever opposes [established] authority has taken a stand against God's [ordered] arrangement, and those who have done so will receive judgment upon themselves. For rulers do not exist to discourage good deeds through the fear they inspire, but rather evil ones. So do you wish to have no fear of the authorities? Then do what is good, and you will have praise from them. For they are ministering to God on your behalf for your [own] good. But if you do evil, beware, for they have not been invested with the power of punishment (lit., "the sword") for nothing. For they are ministering to God in the severe vengeance [they bring down] upon those who do evil.
Romans 13:1-4

4. The Fact and Purpose of Divine Discipline

As sobering as the natural after-effects of sinful behavior discussed above can be, they do not exhaust the potential consequences that may befall believers when we sin. God does respond to our actions. He does discipline us when necessary, and that is a fact which every believer needs to keep firmly in mind (Prov.1:7).

Because of your anger, there is no wholeness in my body. Because of my sin, there is no peace in my bones. Psalm 38:3

You discipline a man by laying rebukes upon his guiltiness. Psalm 39:11

Evil will pursue sinners, but He will repay the righteous with good. Proverbs 13:21

For all Israel has transgressed your Law and turned away from hearkening to your voice, so that you have poured out upon us the curse and oath written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, because it is against Him that we have sinned (i.e., “you, the God of Moses”; cf. Deut.28:15-68). Daniel 9:11

For the one who does wrong will receive [punishment] for the wrong he has done, and there is not favoritism [with God]. Colossians 3:25

Knowledge of a level of consequence beyond the natural repercussions which we may be able to anticipate with human eyes and which may seem tolerable (although even here such hopeful calculations are often a matter of wishful thinking) is an important hedge against sin. God takes careful note of all we think and say and do, and that should give us pause. For while our fellow human beings may be fooled or kept in the dark about our sinful thoughts, words, and even deeds, God knew about these transgressions before we committed them, and He is certainly capable of responding to them in ways that will accomplish the essential divine purpose of discipline, namely, of helping us stay clear of similar sinful behavior in the future. God disciplines us to teach us to stay away from sin for our own good. In this regard, then, the fear, awe, and respect of God is not only salutary but beautiful (cf. 1Sam.12:24; Ps.33:8; 2Cor.5:11; Eph.6:5; Phil.2:12; Heb.12:21).

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
Psalm 19:9a

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.
Proverbs 14:27 NIV

And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him (i.e., the Messiah), the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and the fear of the Lord will be to Him a sweet fragrance. Isaiah 11:2-3a

For God not only knows what will hurt us – He also knows what will heal and help us. And He punishes us not to destroy us or exact vengeance, but as a loving Father, to discipline us for our own good in every way. Therefore the good news here is that God’s discipline is often more palatable and always more beneficial than the consequences of sin that come naturally.

Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. Deuteronomy 8:5 NIV

Then David said to Gad, “I am in terrible anguish. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His compassion is great. But let me not fall into the hand of man.” 2nd Samuel 24:14

You have not yet resisted to the point of [having to shed your] blood in your struggle against sin. And you have forgotten the encouragement scripture gives us as to the sons we are: “My son, do not treat the Lord’s punishment lightly, and do not lose heart when

you are rebuked by Him. For the Lord punishes those He loves, and flays everyone He receives to Himself as a son.” So take your punishment in this spirit - God is behaving towards you as to sons. For what son has never been punished by his father? And if it should be that you are not receiving punishment (in which all [true sons] share), then you are illegitimate and not sons at all. Now we all had human fathers who punished us and we respected them for it. How much the more then shall we not submit ourselves to the Father of our spirits and live? For while our human fathers meted out our punishment for a relatively short time according as they saw best, when He punishes us it is definitely for our own good - that we might partake of His holiness. Now no punishment is a cause of rejoicing as it is being experienced, but rather of regret - only later does it bear fruit for those who have been trained through it - the fruit of [personal] righteousness that makes one whole and complete. Therefore (going back to the race analogy of v.1), pick up those hands hanging slack at your side, put some strength back into your weak knees, and make straight tracks for your feet, so that, [even though you fell down,] what you sprained might not be twisted completely out of joint, but might instead work its way back to health. Hebrews 12:4-13

We are in God’s own family, we are God’s own children. He loved us so much that He sacrificed His own dear Son on our behalf (Jn.3:16), and He died for us while we were yet sinners by occupation (Rom.5:8-11). Now, as believers in His Son, we are sons of the living God (Jn.1:12-13), and the discipline we receive for sin is tailored to us as God’s children by a loving Father who wants only what is best for us. Therefore punishment for sin is a reality of the Christian life, but so is the purpose for which it is given, our training and proper upbringing as children of God dedicated to the challenge of spiritual growth.

5. Principles of Divine Discipline

Divine judgment upon evil is frequent in the Bible (cf. Rom.1:18-32). God’s fearsome treatment of apostasy is also well-documented in scripture (e.g., the destruction of the Exodus generation, the apostate northern kingdom, and His disciplining of the Church eras of Sardis and Laodicea). In short, the Bible is replete with negative examples sufficient to demonstrate for us God’s holiness and our need to fear and respect Him, being as careful as we can be to stay away from even a hint of disobedience. Short of outright rejection of the Lord and His authority, however, the logic behind the principle of universal sinfulness unfortunately guarantees that all believers, even the most dedicated and admirable ones, will stumble from time to time. When we think of the great believers of the Bible (not to mention the early congregations such as the Corinthians and Galatians), there are very, very few among those who have received even a passing biographical treatment where we are not given to see, along with their strengths, the occasional slips which the sin nature makes unavoidable. Whether it be David’s adultery and murder, Elijah’s flight to the desert, Peter’s denials of Christ, or Paul’s reckless journey to Jerusalem despite divine warning (Acts 21:4; cf. Acts 21:10-14), almost all even of the greatest believers of all time are documented as having sinned (and all, of course, did sin from time to time).

Your first forefather (i.e., Abraham) sinned, and your spokesmen (i.e., Moses and Aaron) transgressed against Me. Isaiah 43:27

God knows that we are but flesh (Ps.78:39; cf. Is.57:16). And God knows who are truly His (2Tim.2:19; cf. Num.16:5). While it may not be clear to us, even in the case of our own lives on occasion, God is well able to distinguish between a true son who is straying in a not irremediable way and an apostate (or unbeliever) guilty of sin who has no intention of ever again accepting divine authority. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are not held to the standard of perfect righteousness contained in the Law, for we are already perfectly righteous in our Lord Jesus Christ – through faith (Rom.9:30; 2Cor.5:21; Phil.3:9; Eph.2:8-9). So while we may (and sometimes will) err accidentally and even willfully, God deals with us as His sons, and disciplines us in love rather than in wrath (Heb.12:5; cf. Rom.1:18).

Though a righteous man may fall seven times, he will rise up [again]. But the wicked will be thrown to the ground in [his] evil [state]. Proverbs 24:16

When God does discipline us, He does so as a father disciplines his children (Deut.8:5). But God knows us even better than our earthly fathers did. He is perfectly aware of how we will react to one type of punishment versus another. God is Master of all means, natural and supernatural, and knows precisely what the effect of His disciplinary actions will be. In short, God knows what will cause us pain and how we will react to that pain much better than even we ourselves do. He may use mental anguish or conscience (Job 33:16-18; 1Sam.16:14; 24:5), disease (Lev.26:16; Job.33:19-22; 1Cor.5:4-5; Jas.5:13-18), or any manner of setbacks or disasters to make His point (2Sam.7:14; Ps.39:11; Amos 3:6). There is nothing that is impossible for Him, and that is true when He punishes us as well as when He blesses us (Matt.19:26; Lk.1:37; 18:27). This realization alone should be sufficient to create within us a sense of awe and respect for Him with whom we have to do. But, as our quotation from Hebrews chapter 12 above makes very clear, along with that awe and respect we need to keep firmly in mind that God is treating us as a father treats his beloved children. Since the family and all of its relationships are inventions of God, and since God describes Himself as the Father in His holy scriptures, it is certain that we are meant to learn these twin axioms of divine discipline from our experience and observation of human families, and that this is no small part of God's purpose behind His creation of the family. Whether what we have experienced and observed is wildly positive or depressingly negative (or a combination of the two), we are to draw out from these observations and experiences the idea of what a perfect father would be like, and how his approach to discipline would likewise be perfect, based upon perfect knowledge not only of our misdeeds, but also of what it will take to turn us away from them without at the same time utterly destroying our morale. While many of the tenets of divine discipline are obvious from this analogy, particularly as they are explained in Hebrews 12:4-13, it will be helpful to provide here a list of some of the more salient principles:

1. Not all suffering is for punishment: Although his comforters wrongly assumed that the calamities which befell him were the result of personal sins, Job was being paid the highest of honors by the Lord when He allowed the devil to test him with suffering far beyond what most of

us could ever endure (Job 1-2). Paul likewise endured much in the service of Jesus Christ quite apart from failure and transgression on his part (Acts 9:16; 1Cor.4:9-13; 2Cor.1:8-10; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:23-29; cf. Gal.4:13-14; 2Tim.1:8; 2:9), including a special “thorn in the flesh” (2Cor.12:7-10). Indeed, the greatest honor that a believer in Jesus Christ can have, and one which is indicative of a significant measure of spiritual growth, is to “share the sufferings of Christ” (Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29; 3:10; Col.1:24; 1Pet.4:13; cf. 2Cor.13:4; 13:9; Gal.6:17). In God’s plan for each of us, there must be testing for growth, for only in times of trial, pain, and deprivation can our faith be properly tested and tempered (1Pet.1:6-7; cf. Job 23:10; Ps.66:10; Prov.17:3; Is.48:10; Jer.17:10; Rom.5:3-5; Jas.1:2-4). Therefore suffering is an important and in fact essential element in our spiritual advance (Rom.5:3-5; 1Pet.1:5-8), being “good” for us in ways that may be impossible for us to understand at the time, analogous to the requirements laid upon us by our human parents designed to train us up aright apart from any sort of discipline. And not only this, but in all our righteous suffering we can confidently expect for it to go hand in hand with the blessing of God (1Pet.3:14; cf. 1Pet.2:19-21) and with the comfort and peace of God (Jn.14:27; 16:33; 2Cor.1:3-7; Phil.4:7).

2. Since all believers sin, all believers are disciplined: We have shown above that the Bible teaches the universality of the sin nature and of personal sin (cf. Rom.3:23). In verses six through eight of our main passage on divine discipline, Hebrews 12:4-13, we find also that all of God’s legitimate children receive discipline from His hand, and that without such discipline we would not be His children indeed (which indeed we most certainly are). This is important to remember when we are feeling the sting of punishment so that we do not lose heart (cf. Prov.3:11-12; Heb.12:5-6). Just as all of our fellow believers undergo suffering for personal growth (1Pet.5:9; cf. 1Pet.4:12-19), so we all from time to time must undergo corrective discipline, and we should take comfort in the fact that this is a common and commonly shared experience.

3. Though not enjoyable, all divine discipline is for our own good: As Hebrews 12:11 assures us, no divine discipline is “a cause for rejoicing”, but all divine discipline can in fact lead to a harvest of “righteousness” which is characterized by “peace”, that is, wholeness and completeness in our relationship with God. For when we are truly “right with God”, we possess experientially that peace which “passes all understanding” (Phil.4:7). The broader principle here, therefore, is that God means all the punishment He graciously and judiciously metes out to us to be for our true good in every way. Without close divine attention, achieving the sanctification to which we have been called would be impossible for us, sinful human beings that we are. He punishes us when appropriate “that we might partake of His holiness” (Heb.12:10). Just as even the most responsive child needs to be “trained up” (Prov.22:6; cf. Prov.13:24), so we too as children of God really do require our Lord’s loving hand of discipline as a powerful incentive to “hate what is evil” and “cling to what is good” (Rom.12:9; cf. Is.7:15-16). We ought therefore to embrace this principle and take comfort from it, even when we are hurting, for in responding to divine discipline there is great blessing, and deliverance from worse punishment down the road (Job 5:17-18; Ps.37:23-24; Prov.24:16; 1Cor.11:32; cf. Lam.3:27-40; Ezek.18:1-32).

Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, [even] the one whom you teach from your Law, to keep him secure from days of evil [disaster], until a pit is dug out for the wicked man. Psalm 94:12-13

Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now your Word protects me. Psalm 119:67

It is good for me that I was afflicted, so that I might learn what you have prescribed. Psalm 119:71

I know, O Lord, that your judgments are righteous, and that in your faithfulness you afflicted me. Now please grant your mercy [upon me] to comfort me just as you promised your servant. Psalm 119:75-76

For the Lord reproveth those He loves, just like a father who delights in his son. Proverbs 3:12

As many as I love, I reprove and discipline. So become zealous and repent. Revelation 3:19

4. The purpose of divine discipline is correction, not destruction: When he is disciplining his children, no normal human father would set out to destroy or permanently handicap his own flesh and blood in the process. How much more will our God not seek our good in such correction, seeing as how He gave up His one and only Son to death in order to deliver us from eternal destruction?

Because God has not appointed us for wrath, but for [taking] possession of [our] salvation (i.e., for resurrection) through our Lord Jesus Christ, the One who died on our behalf, that, whether we stay awake or sleep (i.e., pass on to heaven), we shall live together with Him. 1st Thessalonians 5:9-10

Taking the human family analogy as our guide, we may expect our heavenly Father to follow the same principle of proper parental conduct that is evident in the paradigm of the human family, a divine invention as we have said. Our Father has as His goal the training up of sons and daughters obedient to His will, not the visitation of punishment for its own sake and to our ultimate harm.

And you fathers, do not enrage your children, but train them in the discipline and admonition of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4

And you fathers, do not exasperate your children, lest they lose heart. Colossians 3:21

These passages give the fatherly side of precisely the same situation given from the children's side in Hebrews 12:5 where we are told not to "treat the Lord's punishment lightly" and also not to "lose heart" when rebuked. These two commands in Hebrews 12 are exact counterparts of the

two imperatives given to human fathers in the verses quoted above, “don’t enrage” and “don’t exasperate”, actions which bring about despise and despair respectively (or “rejection” and “loathing”, if we consider the two Hebrew verbs of Proverbs 3:11, the original passage from which this New Testament quotation is taken). As children of God, we know that our heavenly Father’s behavior towards us is perfect and for our good in every way, so that nothing He does in terms of discipline *need* ever cause us to become enraged so as to reject His authority or to become exasperated so as to loath it. Such reactions, though occasionally they may have some basis in the case of human fathers whose conduct cannot be perfectly wise (hence the admonitions above) are improper in the extreme in the case of our heavenly Father, who by definition is incapable of treating us either unfairly or in a manner that is not entirely in our best interest. We must take care not to become enraged, or exasperated, or spiteful of His discipline, or lose heart (when we feel His punishment), or reject His authority, or loath the process. Rather we must remember that our heavenly Father is working with us, behaving towards us like a father to his sons (Heb.12:7), even as He is laying upon us the sometimes heavy hand of divine discipline. For He seeks our good in every way, but that all-embracing good can only come when we respond to Him obediently in every way (Ps.118:18; Is.42:3; Jer.30:11). Therefore we need to remember this principle and “take our punishment in this spirit” (Heb.12:7), remembering that the Lord’s mercies are incalculably great, even though we may have been brought to tears on account of the discipline we receive for our sins.

5. We are punished for our sins, but we could never “pay” for our sins: It is critically important for us to distinguish between punishment for sins and payment for sins. Being imperfect and sinful from birth, it is impossible for anything we could ever do, however great, to be acceptable to the Father as a payment for any sin, however small. It is also entirely unnecessary for us to even think in these terms, since He has already paid the price above prices through His sacrifice on our behalf of His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. So while it may be possible to make amends for wrongs we have done to other human beings (and a good policy as well: Prov.14:9), we need to avoid thinking about the punishment we receive in divine discipline as any sort of “pay-back”. God does not need “pay-back”, we are incapable of providing it, and Jesus has already died to satisfy divine righteousness in respect to all human sin. The punishment we receive for the sins we commit is always just, always fair (Neh.9:33), always designed for our ultimate good, but our suffering does not constitute or effect restitution, atonement, penance or make amends in any way, shape or form. We suffer for our sins to learn obedience (Heb.12:4-13). We do not pay for them. Christ did pay for them (1Cor.6:20; 7:23; 2Pet.2:1; cf. Jn.1:29; Rom.6:10; Heb.1:3), and suffered and died for them that we might have eternal life (1Pet.2:24; cf. Jn.3:16).

6. Whatever punishment we receive for sins is always less than we deserve: If our punishment were truly to be on the order of a full pay-back for what we had done, nothing less than instant condemnation would suffice, but we have been delivered from the wrath of God through the blood of Jesus Christ (Ps.130:3; Rom.8:1; 8:31-34; cf. Jn.3:36; Eph.2:3-5; 1Thes.1:10; 5:9). As it is, therefore, not only is our punishment designed for our good rather than our destruction, but

it is in every case lovingly administered and far less than our sins would otherwise merit (Job 11:6; 33:27; cf. Neh.9:31):

Even after all that has come upon us on account of our evil deeds and our great guilt, even so you have held back [our punishment] below [its full measure] from [what] our iniquities [deserved], and have given us an escaped remnant like this. Ezra 9:13

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in mercy. He will not accuse without end, nor will He harbor [His anger] forever. He does not deal with us in proportion to our sins, nor does He recompense us in proportion to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy on behalf of those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, [so far] has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his sons, [so] the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him. Psalm 103:8-13

As we give our own children considerations that we would never give others, so the Lord is extremely patient in His dealings with us His children (Deut.8:5; cf. Ex.34:6; Ps.78:38-39; Jer.15:15). Yet we must not expect Him to put up with outrageous conduct from us forever, for it is also true that there is no favoritism with God (Rom.2:11; Eph.6:9; Col.3:25; cf. Jas.1:17). We would therefore do well to keep the fear of God before us at all times, keeping in mind that He will not with limitless patience allow His holy Name to be defiled by our reprobate conduct ad infinitum (Ex.20:7; Is.48:11; Is.52:5; Rom.2:24; cf. Deut.32:26-27; Ezek.22:9-31).

The Lord is slow to anger, great in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression. Yet He will not leave [the guilty] unpunished. He visits the iniquity of fathers upon their sons to the third and fourth [generation]. Numbers 14:18

7. The degree of punishment is proportional to the sin: Just as a wise father would be sure to visit particularly dangerous, outrageous, or self-destructive behavior with more immediate and more intense punishment (when very small indiscretions might occasionally be overlooked entirely), we should expect our heavenly Father to behave towards us in like fashion. For while even the smallest sins required the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cleanse, in God's opinion some sins are most assuredly "worse than others" (as we have already established above). The Corinthian believers were guilty of much sinful behavior (cf. 1Cor.3:1; 2Cor.13:1-10; etc.), but irreverent conduct during communion (1Cor.11:30) and sexual immorality (1Cor.6:18; cf. 1Cor.5:4-5) clearly had more dramatic and dire repercussions than some of their other sinful activities. We may safely assume that David made a habit of confessing his sins to the Lord, but clearly the discipline he received because of his double sin involving Uriah and Bathsheba was proportionally more severe than what he experienced for much lesser offenses (as reflected in his Psalms of confession: Ps.32:3-5; 38:1-22; 51:1-12).

8. The particular punishment we receive is individually tailored to us: Our Lord knows what will best keep us individually from certain behavior, and, in the event that nothing will keep us from

it (short of effectively removing our free will as is sadly all too often the case), He also knows what will best lead to our repentance after the fact. Just as we are not all the same, with our circumstances, level of spiritual growth, and corresponding responsibility differing widely, so we may expect that precisely the same sin may produce quite different punishment regimes for two different believers. Just as parents learn early on that not all of their children respond to discipline in exactly the same way, so our omniscient Lord who knew us before time began is well aware of what punishment will best serve His purpose of training us up in the way we should go. This should not be taken to mean that God is any way unfair because of different punishments for the same or similar sins. It is certain that whatever standard of minimum suffering is required by God's justice and strict sense of impartiality will be met in each and every case. But it is a well known judicial principle that judgments do not have to be identical to be fair, and we can be sure that our Lord, the perfect Judge, is well able to craft punishments which meet all His purposes and requirements. After all, we are not the same, so that a higher standard of behavior is to be expected from the spiritually mature, for example, than from those who are new to Christ (Ps.25:7; cf. Job 13:26).

The servant who knew his master's wishes and yet did not prepare or act according to those wishes will be beaten with many blows. But the one who did not know, although his conduct was worthy of a [severe] beating, will be beaten with few blows. And to everyone who is given much, much is expected. And to whomever people entrust much, they will ask of him even more. Luke 12:47-48

Don't many of you be teachers, my brothers, for you know that we will receive a stricter judgment. James 3:1

Although we all have different personalities, different stages of spiritual growth, and different levels of responsibility, we may be sure that all of these factors play into the crafting of our punishment in each case from the hand of the ultimate and perfect Judge, our Savior Jesus Christ (Jn.5:22-23).

9. The issue of circumstances: Some actions which are normally sinful may under certain circumstances be justified, and some actions which are normally subject to measured punishment may under certain circumstance be visited with the most severe of penalties. In the former case, we may note that while the taking of human life is sternly prohibited under normal circumstances, it is often justified in time of war (compare Ex.21:12-14 with 1Sam.15:1-4; cf. Ps.18:34). Another common example of this principle is the acceptability of prevarication in a just cause (Judg.4:9-22; 1Sam.20:28-34; cf. 1Kng.18:1-14). On the other hand, we may also cite instances of the imposition by the Lord of the harshest possible penalty upon technical violations in order to set the principle at the beginning of new divine eras of the need to adhere strictly to divine commands (Acts 5:1-11; cf. Lev.24:10-23; Num.15:32-36; Josh.7:1-26). Another common example of this principle is the harsher judgment upon prevarication under circumstances that cause injury to others (Ex.20:16).

10. The effectiveness of divine discipline depends upon our responsiveness: Just as a child who refuses to learn (or change his ways) from the punishment meted out for his misdeeds is little helped by the discipline he receives, so it is with us. If we refuse to recognize and acknowledge that the personal disasters coming our way pursuant to sin are in fact coming from the hand of God, refuse to take the lessons God is giving us, refuse to change our minds about our behavior (and so refuse to change our behavior as well), then we are in effect “despising” God’s gracious disciplining of us (Heb.12:5), and failing to respect Him and His authority (Heb.12:9). Failing to submit to God in this process deprives us of all the benefits which divine discipline is meant to convey, and ensures that things will go from bad to worse until we have a change of heart. When we find ourselves under divine discipline, we need to keep a very close watch on our attitudes, taking care not to become sullen or angry, reacting more in the manner of stubborn mules than children of God (cf. Is.1:2-3).

Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding, but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Psalm 32:9 NIV

11. Extreme stubbornness in the face of divine correction brings more intensive discipline: Divine discipline is designed to bring about our repentance and confession in the first instance (2Cor.7:9-10; 12:21; Jas.5:13-16; 1Jn.1:9; Rev.2:5; 2:16; 3:3; 3:19), and our responsiveness and acceptance in the second (Heb.12:12-13; Jas.4:8-10). But if we insist on being resistant to God’s training, and if we persist in the behavior for which we are being punished, we can expect ever increasing pressure and severity of discipline unless and until we respond in the appropriate way (Deut.28:15-68; Ps.107:10-22; Heb.10:26-31; cf. Hos.10:10; 1Cor.5:4-5).

But if men are bound in chains, held fast by cords of affliction, he tells them what they have done – that they have sinned arrogantly. He makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil. If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. But if they do not listen, they will perish by the sword and die without knowledge. Job 36:8-12 NIV

12. Divine discipline is unbearable prior to but bearable following repentance and confession: Just as we may mitigate some of the punishment imposed on our children once their attitude and behavior truly changes, so our heavenly Father deals with us in grace and for blessing after repentance and confession (as opposed to wrath and cursing prior to our change of attitude and behavior; cf. Ps.38):

When I was silent [about my sin], my bones grew old with groaning all day long, because day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vigor was drained away as by the heat of summer. [Until] I said, “I will make my sin known to You, and I will not cover [over] my guilt. I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”, and You forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah.* Psalm 32:3-5

“Come now, and let us consider your case” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like [white] wool. If you are willing and will listen, you will eat the good [things] the land produces. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 1:18-20

In contrast to divine discipline, otherwise undeserved suffering, that is, testing for the building up of our faith, is bearable through the comfort, grace, and sustaining power of the Lord and His Spirit (1Cor.10:13; 2Cor.1:3-7; 12:9-10; Phil.4:13). Likewise in the case of divine discipline there is every indication from scripture that, after we return to the Lord, He deals with us in His incomparable mercy, drying our tears, healing our wounds, and welcoming us back into His loving embrace (Job 33:23-30; Ps.37:23-24; Prov.24:16; Is.54:6-8; 55:7; Jer.31:18-20; Mic.7:18-19).

And [so the prodigal son] got up and returned to his father. But while he was still some distance away, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. And he ran toward him and fell upon his neck and kissed him. And his son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.” But his father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring a fine suit of clothes and put it on him, and put a signet ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fatted calf. Butcher it so that we may eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and has [now] come back to life. He was lost, but he has been found.” And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:20-24

13. But repentance and confession do not necessarily mean the immediate end of punishment: As we all know well from our understanding of the character of God from scripture, (well-butressed by our experience of His merciful conduct towards us in spite of our sins), and as the examples above show, there are occasions upon which our Lord’s complete and immediate forgiveness is accompanied by an equally immediate and complete remission of punishment. We would be wise to consider, however, that this is not always the case (Hos.6:1-5). Repetition of sinful behavior, persistence in sinful behavior (especially of the same type), obdurate refusal to repent and confess immediately, are all examples of behavior that can make the process and the discipline both more severe and more long-lasting. Just as wise parents continue punishment as long as necessary for the good of the child, that is, as long as the child *needs* it, so our heavenly Father who knows us better than we could ever hope to know ourselves is well capable of knowing when it is best to continue our punishment in love and forgiveness past the point of our repentance and confession. Depending upon the severity of our behavior and the rapidity and sincerity of our change of heart, we may have to wait for the removal of our punishment until we have truly “learned our lesson” (Ps.99:8-9; Mic.7:8-9).

In the Law, the required restitution for crime is often greater than the damage originally done (Ex.22:1; 22:4; 22:7; cf. Num.14:34; 2Sam.12:6; Is.40:2; 51:19; Jer.16:18; 17:18; Lk.19:8). Seven being the number of fullness and completeness in scripture, we sometimes see this “full

measure” of divine discipline being expressed in the “seven-fold” principle (cf. Deut.28:7; Prov.6:31; Matt.12:43-45).

And if after all this you will not listen to me, I will add to your discipline seven times [over] because of your sins. Leviticus 26:18 (cf. vv. 21, 24, 28)

The Law also contains a “seven-fold” principle in regard to the time period necessary for purification (Lev.12:2; 13:4-5; 14:8; 15:13; Num.12:14-15; 19:11-16; 31:19). Not surprisingly, therefore, we sometimes see these twin principles at work in cases of divine discipline as well, especially in the case of exceptionally arrogant and high-handed sinning, where the punishment may be severe, and the wait for complete relief quite long (Dan.4:32-34; cf. Gen.41:28-32; 2Kng.8:1-2). David, for example, was severely chastened for his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba, the discipline apparently lasting nigh on *twice* seven years until the punishment proclaimed to him by Nathan was completed (2Sam.13:23, 13:38; 14:28; 15:7; 19:9 - 20:22; and compare Gen.16:16 with 17:1; cf. Num.14:34). This principle is a helpful one for us to keep in mind as we advance spiritually in the Christian life, for the closer we get to God, the less tolerant we may expect Him to become of willful rebellion, and the more long-lasting we may expect our discipline to be (cf. Jer.16:18).

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “Please heal [Miriam!]”. But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father had deliberately spit in her face, would she not continue in her shame for seven days?” Numbers 12:13-14 (cf. Num.14:34)

Should it come about that we do fall into such serious sin that we bring down upon ourselves just such an extended period of intensive discipline, even so we can be confident of God’s mercy upon our repentance and confession. The Lord will deliver us at the appointed time, even though we may have totally sold ourselves into sin (Jn.8:34; Rom.6:16).

If you buy a [fellow] Hebrew as a slave, he shall be in servitude to you six years, but on the seventh year he shall go free without having to buy his freedom. Exodus 21:2

6. Apostasy and the Sin unto Death

Along with Hebrews 12:4-13, chapter three of the book of Lamentations also provides a broad overview of the principles we have set out above, showing first and foremost the merciful purpose behind God’s discipline and the proper response that all believers should adopt toward the Lord’s loving reproof.

For the Lord will not forsake [a person] forever. Though He cause him to suffer, yet He will have compassion on him according to the greatness of His mercy. For He does not afflict [a person] from His heart (i.e., “willingly”), nor [willingly] make the sons of men suffer. Lamentations 3:31-33

Do not both good and bad things come forth from the mouth of the Most High (i.e., at His decree)? Why should any mortal man alive be complaining about [punishment received on account of] his sins? Let us carefully examine our paths, investigate [our behavior], and return to the Lord. Lamentations 3:38-40

This world is a battlefield, and this life a fight to the finish in the service of Jesus Christ. It is not a place where comfort and ease are the norm, not, at any rate, for those who are genuinely and diligently striving to grow closer to the Lord and to serve Him as He would have them do. Our faithfulness, our commitment, our faith in Jesus will be tested in this life, and maintaining this our most precious commodity requires constant effort. Make no mistake, the combat in which we are involved concerns the maintenance of our faith and concomitant eternal life.

Fight the good fight of faith. 1st Timothy 6:12a

I give you this command, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies that were made long ago about you, that you conduct a good [spiritual] campaign, one that is in keeping with them. 1st Timothy 1:18

I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith. 2nd Timothy 4:7

Clearly, we need to be on the offensive in the Christian life, walking with the Lord, growing in the Lord, and producing for Him day by day. But we also need to conduct a good defense in respect to the forces arrayed against us, resisting the world's tempting influences, the flesh's proclivity to sin, and the tricks and traps of the evil one. In spiritual terms, good offense and good defense are counterparts of each other and go closely hand in glove. Therefore we can never afford to become fixated upon one to the exclusion of the other. Just as a preoccupation with holiness and sanctification is admirable, but problematic if it should lead, out of a misplaced sense of self-satisfaction with one's Christian approach, to being unproductive for the Lord, so a good relationship with the Lord, consistent growth, and effective production are wonderful, but do not excuse any return to sin and sinfulness. In fact, of course, lack of what we are here calling offense will always compromise defense, and vice versa. For example, believers who are over-focused upon avoiding certain types of sin to the exclusion of growth and production often become self-righteous, judgmental, and legalistic. On the other hand, those who are dedicated to learning the truth and to ministering on behalf of the Lord inevitably have their relationship with Him and their ministries compromised if they fall back into a pattern of sinful behavior. It is the latter problem which most concerns us here at this point in our present study. Moreover, scripture leaves no real room for doubt about the fact that for a believer to begin to embrace sin in the manner of an unbeliever compromises faith and leads if unchecked to the death of faith and corresponding loss of salvation (e.g., Matt.7:24-27; 10:33; Lk.6:46-49; 14:34-35; Jn.15:5-6; Rom.11:17-23; 1Cor.10:6-12; 15:2; 2Cor.13:5; 1Tim.6:20-21; 2Tim.2:12-13; Heb.2:1-3; 3:6-19; 10:35-39; 2Jn.1:8-9).

Don't you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practitioners of homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 1st Corinthians 6:9-10

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies – ***and whatever is similar to all these things***. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Galatians 5:19-21

But among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse jesting – things that have no place [among you]. Thanksgiving [is what ought to be heard coming from you] instead. For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure, or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Don't let anyone deceive you about this with empty words, for it is because of just such things that God's wrath comes upon those who refuse to obey and believe. So don't enter into partnership with them. Ephesians 5:3-7

Those who want to get rich fall into temptations, traps, and many senseless and harmful lusts – the kind which swamp men[’s hearts] to their destruction and damnation. 1st Timothy 6:9

Living faith or faithfulness requires us to adopt the correct, biblical approach to sin and sinfulness, namely to repent and confess if and when we do fall into sin, then resume our course of “normal” Christian behavior ***instead*** of allowing individual sins to develop into a pattern that begins to degrade and destroy our faith (cf. Ex.30:18-21; 1Cor.11:27-32).

No one abiding in Him continues in [a life of] sin. No one who continues in [a life of] sin has seen Him or known Him. Children, let no one deceive you. The one who performs righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. The one who continues in [a life of] sin is of the devil, since the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God appeared, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who has been born of God continues in [a life of] sin, since His seed (i.e., the Word of truth in which we believe) remains in him, and [so] he is not able to continue in [a life of] sin since he has been born of God. 1st John 3:6-9

We can see from the passage above what “normal” Christian behavior should be as far as “defense” is concerned. As Christians we have died to sin in principle (i.e., “positionally”), and should therefore be making every effort to line up our experience with this important spiritual reality. Furthermore, it should be noted that we are described in this passage as “unable” to continue in sin because of the truth in our hearts which we believe. There is thus a bitter internal

conflict within every believer who lapses into sin, and inevitably either faith will triumph or faith will die, for we are “unable” to live on indefinitely with both faith and sin, with both faithfulness and sinfulness. We must either return to the light or give in to the darkness, and we are constitutionally unable to linger long in the shadows that separate the two.

What shall we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace [which abounded in Christ’s sacrifice for our sin] may abound [all the more]? May it never be! We [are they] who have [in Christ] died to sin. How then shall we yet live [our lives] in it?

Romans 6:1-2

Clearly, we all fall short of the perfect standard of complete sinlessness, but the chasm between those who loath sin and are fighting against it and those who are largely unconcerned with it (or worse yet are essentially embracing sin) is deep and wide. The former believer is on the high road to Zion, while the latter is in the process of slipping away. We may take comfort in the fact that just as a loving parent will not let his child continue too deeply into rebellion without intervening, so our heavenly Father ever makes judicious use of divine discipline in order to wean us away from self-destructive behavior of this sort. And we have other allies in this fight: the Word of God remaining in us, pointing out to our consciences the right path (1Jn.3:9), the Holy Spirit who opposes the sin nature and all its rebellious deeds (Gal.5:16-25), and our fellow believers who through encouragement (Heb.3:13), prayer (Eph.6:18), and prudent correction (Gal.6:1-2; Jas.5:19-20; Jude 1:22-23; cf. Col.3:16) also do battle in this arena on our behalf. When we lapse into sin, these forces are all “pulling us back”, even as God’s discipline is making the way forward into deeper sin ever more painful.

There are thus powerful forces guiding us to what is right, and strong incentives to return to the narrow path to which our Lord has called us. But what if a person refuses to respond, even in the face of accelerating and intensified punishment? In such cases, a person will eventually be forced to choose for or against God, and, in the absence of a clear choice, they risk being removed from this world in an exceedingly painful fashion. For in the absence of repentance and return to God, a believer who has lapsed into extreme sinfulness of this sort will eventually either fall into apostasy or face the sin unto death.

At this point, therefore, we need to differentiate between two closely related yet distinct phenomena, namely, between the falling away into unbelief known as “apostasy” and God’s removal from this world of flagrantly sinful believers by means of “the sin unto death”. These two negative developments are the most extreme that may occur in the life of a believer. The primary distinction between the two is that while the former involves a total loss of faith (and therefore of salvation), the latter does not (i.e., the person is removed from this life before the seed of faith expires completely). Inasmuch as everyone dies eventually and we can hardly expect the death of those involved in the process of apostasy to be a pleasant affair (whether or not that process has run to completion), it may be impossible for us to tell with our limited powers of observation whether the person in question was still a believer, albeit a reprobate one, or had completely fallen away from the faith (just as it is sometimes difficult to tell whether or not a person is a genuine believer in Jesus Christ in the first place). One thing is certain,

however: we would not and should not wish to fall into *either* category under any circumstances. For even should we escape this life by the skin of our teeth with the last remnant of our faith barely intact (and so maintain our claim on eternal life), the “sin unto death” by which we would then make the transition is bound to be most unpleasant.

1. Apostasy: The English word “apostasy” is a transliteration of the Greek word *apostasia* (αποστασια; cf. 2Thes.2:3), and entails the act of willfully turning away, forsaking, or “rebellious” from someone or something (cf. Acts 21:21). Since apostasy is, in precise terms, spiritual rebellion against God, only a believer can become an apostate. Although unbelievers can, it is true, turn away from the divine truth that governs mundane human affairs (rejecting law and order, for example, or abandoning their healthy fear of the occult), and so fall deeper and deeper into adherence to the devil’s lies, apostasy is, technically speaking, spiritual unfaithfulness to God which presupposes a prior measure of fidelity. There are many stops along the road that leads downward to complete rebellion from God and a total loss of faith in Jesus Christ so that we need to be careful to distinguish apostasy, which is an absolute state of unbelief on the part of a former believer, from, for example, a lack of productivity for the Lord on the part of one who is “lukewarm” (but nonetheless still maintains a degree of faith in Christ; cf. Matt.13:22; Mk.4:18-19; Lk.8:14), or a worldly and largely unsanctified approach to life on the part of a believer whose fear of God has diminished to a dangerously low level (cf. Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15-17). Both of these two latter statuses are indications of serious trouble in the spiritual life of any Christian, but do not indicate that the extreme condition of apostasy has yet been reached (although there is certainly that danger, especially if the believer persists in these behaviors: cf. Jn.15:2; 1Cor.6:9-10; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.5:3-7; Jas.2:14-26).

The process of apostasy, the road traveled by the believer which leads to loss of faith, is characterized in virtually every respect by being the exact opposite of the road he or she should be traveling. Instead of orienting towards God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and our upward calling, the person involved in the process of apostasy has turned his or her back on God, and taken the wide road which leads to destruction instead of the narrow path that leads to eternal life (Matt.7:14). Instead of pursuing sanctification, such persons indulge their sinful natures. Instead of seeking God, they engage in worldly solutions. Instead of looking to their eternal rewards, they are concerned with the pleasures and worries of this life. Instead of esteeming the truth of scripture, they allow it to fall in their esteem while the wisdom of this world grows in their estimation proportionally. Instead of striving to make their hearts ever more tender towards God, they harden their hearts against His warnings. Instead of responding to the voice of the Spirit, they quench His power. Instead of their lives being Christ, they love themselves progressively more even as they love Him less.

It is easy enough to find “reasons” to explain why believers go down this road, sometimes “persevering” all the way to the end of it resulting in the complete evaporation of their faith (which is the definition of the state of apostasy). Life is difficult, and more so for believers than for unbelievers because the devil has a special interest in detaching the faithful from the Lord (cf. Lk.22:31 [“you” is plural in the Greek]; Rev.12:10). Furthermore, faith is tested, and as

believers we may be assured that part of the life of faith we are called to lead will include trials and tribulations which serve to prove the quality of that faith (or lack thereof: Gen.22:1; Ex.15:25b; Num.14:20-23; Judg.2:22; Ps.66:10-12; 1Pet.1:6-7; 4:12).

We all stumble, we all fail, we all are less responsive to the Lord than we should be. But truly serious problems arise when instead of getting back up off the ground after failure, repenting, confessing, re-engaging, and returning to the proper walk whereby we were advancing spiritually, we wallow in depression, sullenly refuse to admit our mistakes and failings, lose interest in the truth of scripture, lose our fear of God, begin to put ourselves in control instead of the Spirit, begin to live for ourselves instead of Jesus, and begin to reverse the very process that led to our previous spiritual growth and production in the first place. The experience of the Exodus generation who started well and ended poorly serves as a fitting example of this reversed spiritual process:

(1) For I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, about the fact that our [spiritual] forefathers (i.e., the Exodus generation) were all under the cloud (i.e., protected by the Glory). (2) And all of them were baptized into Moses (i.e., closely identified with him) in both the case of the cloud and of the sea (i.e., received the same protection and deliverance as he did). (3) And all of them ate spiritual food (i.e., divinely provided manna). (4) And all of them drank the same spiritual drink (i.e., divinely provided water). For all of them drank from the spiritual[ly significant] Rock which followed them – for that Rock was Christ. (5) But God was not pleased with most of them and their bones were strewn about in the desert as a result. (6) And in this they have come to serve as examples for us, so that we might not lust for wicked things as they lusted for them. (7) So do not become idolaters as some of them did, as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to play (i.e., feasting followed by indulgence in idolatrous rites)”. (8) And let us not commit fornication, as some of them committed fornication, and there fell in a single day 120,000 of them. (9) And let us not put Christ to the test, as some of them tested the Lord and [as a result] were killed by serpents. (10) And let us not complain, as some of them complained, and were killed by the Destroyer. (11) All these things happened to them as an example to us, and were written to warn us – we who live at the culmination of the ages. (12) So let him who thinks he stands firm beware lest he fall. (13) You have not suffered any testing beyond normal human [experience]. And God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity, but, along with the test, He will grant you the way out, so that you can bear up under it.

1st Corinthians 10:1-13

Faced with the testing God brought them through, the Exodus generation failed “10 times” to respond to the Lord in a proper way, reacting instead in a variety of faithless ways (Num.14:20-23). In order to be faithful, one must “have faith”, one must believe in the goodness and the faithfulness of God, and trust Him in spite of the terrors, disasters, and disappointments we may be called upon to behold (Heb.11:6). Failing to do so is essentially doubting Him, His motives, His power, His grace and mercy. When we refuse to accept the truth about our Lord under the pressure of testing, we inevitably come to believe lies that are extremely detrimental to our faith.

“God doesn’t care. God doesn’t see. God is unfair. God has cast me aside.” This is the sort of “grumbling and complaining” that Paul warns about in the verses above. What we think comes out in what we say and is followed up by what we do. It is bad enough if we allow ourselves to think, talk, and act this way even for a moment. But when we fall into a chronic pattern of blaming God instead of trusting Him, we not only damage our faith – we put it in serious jeopardy. If to this process is added a lackadaisical attitude towards spiritual growth (i.e., hearing, believing, and applying the truth of scripture) and towards production, it will be all the easier to fall into the pattern of “apostatizing”. This will be true to an even greater degree whether our disaffection be the result of reaction to divine discipline for sinfulness, or whether we should become involved in a pattern of *additional* sinfulness in reaction to the pressures of testing from which we refuse to relent and repent (for blaming God is itself, of course, sinful). In either case, left unchecked, sin accelerates this process, taking ever greater control over our lives (cf. Ps.19:13; 119:133; Heb.12:1), and the end result can be a re-entrance into the same state of spiritual death occupied before salvation:

Everyone is tempted by his own lust, being dragged away [by it] and enticed [by it]. Then, should lust conceive (i.e., should the person give in to it), it gives birth to sin. And sin, should it be fully carried out to the end (i.e., should the person give in to a life of sin), produces death (i.e., spiritual death, the death of faith). James 1:14-15

Spiritual death, our original state at birth, is the eventual outcome of the backsliding process (cf. in Jude 1:12 those who are “twice dead” and now without the Spirit: Jude 1:19). For to continue following the path of sin, without repentance, without restoration, requires that we constantly and deliberately choose against our Master, Jesus Christ, until He gradually becomes less and less in our thinking, and gradually disappears from our hearts altogether (Matt.7:21-23). That is why sin’s reward is always death (Rom.6:23). At the point where faith dies, separation from God is complete. The former believer in Christ has become an enemy of His cross (Phil.3:18), and has been enslaved again in sin’s captivity (Jn.8:34-35). And the ending is worse than the beginning (2Pet.2:20-22), for, in the end, the path of abandoning faith is identical to rejecting Christ (1Jn.5:16-17; cf. Matt.12:31; Heb.6:4-6).

Make sure, brothers, that none of you develop an *evil heart of unbelief* (i.e., lack of faith) by *turning away* (lit. “apostatizing”) from the living God. Rather keep encouraging each other every day as long as we still call it “today” (i.e. still remain in this world), lest any of you *be hardened [in heart] by the deception of sin*. For we all have a share in Christ, *as long as we hang on* to that original confidence [of our faith] firmly to the end, as it says:

Today if you hear His voice,

Don’t harden your hearts as they did at the provocation [at Meribah].

For who provoked Him, though they had heard? Did not all of them who came out of Egypt under Moses’ leadership do so? And with whom was He enraged for forty years? Wasn’t it the very people who had sinned, then dropped dead in the desert? And to whom did He swear that they would never enter into the [place of] rest [He had

promised], but to those who had been disobedient to Him? Now we see that they were unable to enter into this [place of rest] **because of their unbelief** (i.e., their loss of faith). Hebrews 3:12-19

Being stubborn about turning back to God (Ps.32:9; cf. Is.1:3ff), and deliberately hardening our hearts against His loving and merciful reproofs (Prov.28:14) is a surefire way to feed the process of apostatizing. Once we develop a proclivity for a particular type of sin, it is all too easy for us to let this “cardio-porosus” of hardening the heart spread until our heart stops beating for the Lord altogether (cf. Ps.7:14; Jas.1:15). The seed which is sown on the rocky ground provides us with a clear picture of just such apostasy:

And he who was sown on the rocky places, this is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy. He has no roots [to his faith], however, but lasts only a short time. So when tribulation or persecution occurs on account of the Word, he is immediately tripped up (*skandalizetai*; i.e., he apostatizes). Matthew 13:20-21

And these [second types] who are sown on the rocky places are similar. Whenever they hear the Word they immediately receive it with joy, although they have no root [of faith] in themselves, but are only temporary [believers]. When tribulation or persecution because of the Word comes [their way], they are immediately tripped up (*skandalizontai*; i.e., they apostatize). Mark 4:16-17

And those [whose seed of faith fell] on the rock do receive the Word with joy when they hear it. However these [types] have no root [to their faith]. They believe for a while, but in time of testing **they apostatize** (*aphistantai*). Luke 8:13

Tribulation, persecution, testing, in short, the pressures that befall every believer in Jesus Christ are at the root of apostasy whenever we react to them improperly. As, for example, when a person blames God for the death of a loved one or for some other tragedy that may befall them (cf. Prov.19:3). Sin will surely be present in the life of an apostatizing believer (for anyone who becomes disinterested in living a sanctified life for Jesus Christ will have little reason to walk carefully in this respect). Generally speaking, we may expect those who apostatize to return to the same manner of life they had before salvation.

For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ they should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than - once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ] committed to them - to now **turn their backs on it**. And so in their case this proverb is true: “The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow, though washed, to her muddy sty”. 2nd Peter 2:20-22

2. The Sin unto Death: First of all, it is important for us to distinguish the sin unto death from “the unpardonable sin” of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (Matt.12:31-32; Mk.3:28-30; Lk.12:10). As Mark 3:30 demonstrates, such blasphemy is described as being “against the Spirit” because those guilty of the sin were attributing Christ’s miracles to the devil instead of to the Spirit. Therefore the “unpardonable sin” is not the “sin unto death” but is instead the sin of rejecting Jesus Christ (to whom the Spirit testifies in all truth). This is the only “eternal sin”. Secondly, it is of course possible for believers to be less than totally enthusiastic about the spiritual riches they have in Jesus Christ without coming either to the point of apostasy or under the judgment of the “sin unto death” (although if we are not moving aggressively forward in the Christian life we necessarily run a correspondingly greater risk of falling backward into just such extremes). We think, for example, of the Laodiceans who are only “lukewarm” (Rev.3:14-22), and that category of believers treated in the parable of the sower who live “among the weeds” and become unproductive as far as service to the Lord is concerned because they are weighed down by the worries of this world (Matt.13:22; Mk.4:18-19; Lk.8:14). While both of these examples are certainly to be avoided and constitute extreme disinterest in following and serving our Lord Jesus Christ, they do serve to show that there are gradations of unacceptable conduct in the process of apostatizing which may fall short of threatening eternal life in an absolute way through full-blown apostasy (even if they are spiritually dangerous and do compromise eternal rewards: 1Cor.3:10-15; 9:27; Gal.6:9; Heb.10:35-36; 2Jn.1:8).

The sin unto death, on the other hand, does fall into a separate category, even more serious than the two examples cited immediately above. The process of apostasy is always terribly negative, even when, as in the examples above, it does not proceed as far as it might. When carried to extremes, it has two potential outcomes, both horrendous to contemplate. In addition to the danger of reentering permanent spiritual death through this process of spiritual degeneration (the total loss of faith and faithfulness), apostatizing also poses the danger that this same process may result in a most unpleasant physical death otherwise known as the “sin unto death”, that is, the physical removal of a believer from this life through God’s judgment upon egregious and unrepentant sinfulness:

If anyone sees his brother engaged in a pattern of sinfulness which does not lead to death (i.e., is a deviation rather than a complete turning away), let him ask [forgiveness on his brother’s behalf], and life will be given to him (i.e., forgiveness and deliverance will result), that is, in those cases where those sinning are not [sinning] unto death. There is sin which leads to death – I am not telling you to pray in that case. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin which does not lead to death (i.e., temporary deviation, confessed and repented does not result in death). 1st John 5:16-17

One reason that John discourages us here from praying for individuals subject to the sin unto death is that the sin unto death, despite its horrific nature, constitutes a merciful deliverance on God’s part of wayward believers perilously close to apostasy because of gross sinfulness. While most patterns of sinful regression are correctable, and in such cases we should pray for our fellow believers who are stumbling and reaping the resultant divine discipline so that “life will be

given” to them, there are some cases where the sinful behavior is so flagrant (whether in terms of its type, chronic nature, or brazenness) that the believer leaves the Lord little choice but to remove him or her from this life:

[For I have already decided], in the name of our Lord Jesus, when all of you are gathered together with my spirit by the power of our Lord Jesus, to hand such a one over to Satan for the destruction of his body so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.
1st Corinthians 5:4-5 (cf. 1Cor.11:32)

The sin unto death is therefore a means of *saving* a person’s eternal life by ending their physical life (and in this respect it is the antithesis of God’s merciful deliverance by death of the godly believer: Is.57:1). There is thus a critical distinction to be made between the believer who ends in apostasy on the one hand and the one who is removed via the sin unto death on the other. For while the former person consciously, deliberately, and decisively chooses to abandon God, the latter person wants to have it both ways, being unwilling to relinquish his or her relationship with the Lord but also unwilling to give up the outrageously sinful behavior for which God is calling him or her to account. On the other hand, apostasy may or may not involve what we would call gross sin or a pattern of chronic, brazen, and flagrant sinfulness, but the sin unto death always does. The apostate turns away from the Lord out of reaction or distraction, and their will is set and solid in doing so. The believer terminated by the sin unto death is a different case. This person, by giving in to sin to such a great degree, has been deceived by sin and come to be held fast in its grasp. Rather than plunging headlong into apostasy through deliberate choice, such individuals have “backed” into it, being not so much willing to abandon the Lord as *unwilling* to turn away from sin. The candidate for the sin unto death is thus holding onto the Lord with one hand while with the other refusing to let go of his or her blatant and outrageous sinful behavior. This is a situation which is impossible to maintain indefinitely, and one which inevitably must end in either repentance or the sin unto death.

Even believers who do turn away from God to the point of losing their faith in Jesus Christ may not necessarily be guilty of the same sort of intense and intensifying pattern of shameless sinfulness that characterizes those who come in for the sin unto death. In each case we see that God is making a different point. By allowing apostates to show by their return to and persistence in unbelief that they were not really willing to choose for Jesus Christ above all else, He demonstrates the validity and the value of the perseverance of those of us who do. And by refusing to allow glaring and extreme excess of sin beyond a certain point among those who are called by His Name, He demonstrates the importance and necessity of pursuing sanctification.

For there most definitely is a point beyond which we as His children will not be allowed to go (cf. Ps.19:13; Prov.15:10). King Saul offers us a useful profile of the believer whose regression does not end in total apostasy where faith has completely died, but does involve rejection of divine authority to such an extreme degree that the sin unto death is the ultimate result (cf. Ex.23:21). Samuel’s words to him on the eve of his death, “tomorrow you and your sons will be with me” (1Sam.28:19), show conclusively that, in spite of the ignominious sin unto death Saul was about to suffer on Mt. Gilboa at the hands of the despicable Philistines, he was still a

believer. But his disregard for the authority of the Lord had caused the Lord to “turn away from him and become his enemy” (1Sam.28:16-18), and despite a wonderful start, Saul’s pattern of spiritual degeneration is clear to see throughout the book of 1st Samuel (beginning in chapter thirteen).

Given our limited powers of perception, we should be careful about speculating whether one of our fellow believers has turned to apostasy or begun to fall under the extreme judgment of the sin unto death – or neither of the two. We should remember the example of Job whose experiences did indeed seem to his fair-weather friends to be necessarily the result of just this sort of behavior and resultant punishment from God (cf. Matt.7:1-2).

For many are walking (about whom I have been telling you and now tell you with tears) as enemies of the cross of Christ. The end [of this course of theirs] is destruction, their god is their appetite, and they glory in things of which they should be ashamed. They have their minds set on earthly things. Philippians 3:18-19

In the passage above, Paul lumps the two categories together, and that is perhaps the safest course when evaluating persons who are demonstrating their lack of faith and faithfulness in one way or another. For while we may be able to distinguish between these two related degenerate states in theological terms, in practical terms only God knows who has definitively rejected His Son and who has not.

But while we should tread lightly in regard to evaluating others, the principle is certainly important to keep in mind in regard to our *own* behavior: not only is there divine discipline for sin – this discipline may turn terminal if we pursue our lusts to extreme ends. Moreover, scripture provides sufficient precedents for us of just such wasted lives, the most common example of which is the Exodus generation, who witnessed some of the most amazing miracles in all of the Bible, yet came to a horrible end, “dying on account of their sins” (cf. Num.27:3; Ps.78), with their bones to be bleached by the desert sun (1Cor.10:5). We need to remember, therefore, that it is always possible that the Lord will remove us from this life if we are impudent enough to “put Him to the test” by carrying our waywardness beyond the point of His tolerance, and it would be prudent of us not to investigate where that line may lie. Some actions are so unacceptable that they invite instant termination (as in the arrogance and complete lack of holy fear underlying some specific acts, such as in the case of touching or looking into the ark of God: 1Sam.6:19; 2Sam.6:6-7; cf. Ex.28:43; 30:20-21; Lev.16:13; 22:9; Num.4:15; 4:20; 18:22). In other cases, only rapid repentance of certain outrages avoids an instant administering of the sin unto death (as when David confesses his sin when confronted by Nathan and Nathan responds, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die”: 2Sam.12:13-14). But failure to respond results in the sin unto death being carried out (cf. Ex.30:18-21; Jn.13:1-10).

(27) Therefore whoever eats the [communion] bread or drinks the [communion] cup of the Lord in an unworthy way is guilty [of offense against] the body and the blood of the Lord. (28) So let [each] person evaluate himself and in this manner (i.e., following

confession of all sins remembered in such reflection) let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (29) For the person who eats and drinks judgment for himself if he does not evaluate his body [aright] (i.e., refusing first to repent and confess). (30) It is for this [very] reason that many among you are sick and infirm – and not a few have passed away (i.e., have suffered the sin unto death). (31) But if we were evaluating ourselves [so as to repent and confess], we would not be falling under judgment. (32) And when we are being judged [for this offense], it is by the Lord that we are being disciplined, to the end that we might not be condemned (lit., “terminally judged”) along with the world. 1st Corinthians 11:27-32 (cf. 2Chron.30:18-20)

Just as in the case of apostasy, so in respect to sinful conduct so egregious that it flirts with the sin unto death we find that the best policy is to turn away from sin entirely, rapidly confessing our sins and changing our ways when we do stumble. And the best way to carry out this policy is, as it always is, to follow the Spirit in the transformation of our thinking and behavior so essential to serving our Lord in true sanctification.

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking (e.g., unbelief). (18) They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (19) And having once lost all sensitivity [for what is right], they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more (e.g., accepting a substitute for God). (20) This is not how you learned to follow Christ. (21) [For you have learned the truth] – if, at any rate, you have truly heard Him (i.e., Jesus) and have been instructed in Him according to what is [definitely] true in Jesus – (22) that in respect to your previous behavior you have put off the old Man, the one that is being destroyed by deceptive lusts, (23) and that instead you are being re-made in the spirit of your mind, (24) and that you have put on the new Man, the one created in righteousness and sanctity of the truth according to God's standards.

Ephesians 4:17-24

(19) My brothers, if someone of you wanders from the truth, and someone [else] turns him back [to the faith], (20) he should know that the one who turns [the] sinner back from the error of his way will save his life from [the sin unto] death, and will [thus] cover a multitude of sins (i.e., the result will be forgiveness instead of the sin unto death).

James 5:19-20

7. God's Dealing with the Sins of the Unbeliever

We are all sinners. This is true of both believers and unbelievers. And while many unbelievers may indulge in gross sinfulness, outrageous behavior, and even criminality of every sort, the same is true of believers who have proceeded far enough down the road to apostasy. On the other hand, there are in any given society at any given time generally a majority of unbelievers

whose lives are not characterized by such things, but instead live lives largely oriented to God's natural truth, restrained from evil by the system of restraint God has imposed for the protection and preservation of our opportunity to choose our eternal path. Without this normal human response to conscience, to God's natural law, and to the authority structures He has put in place (Rom.13:1-7), life on this earth would be nigh on impossible, inhabited as it is in its entirety by human beings with corrupt natures.

For whenever the gentiles who do not have the Law do by nature the things [written in] the Law, these who have no Law are a Law for themselves. For they demonstrate that the essence of the Law has been written in their hearts when their conscience testifies against them, and their [mental] deliberations [based on conscience] alternatively either condemn them or acquit them. Romans 2:14-15

In general terms, both believers and unbelievers are left on this earth for something approaching what we may call the normal human life-span (cf. Ps.90:10). Some live a bit longer. Some die earlier. In the case of the righteous, such early departures to heaven often constitutes a merciful deliverance from the physical troubles and spiritual dangers of this life, present or impending (Is.57:1-2). In the case of children who die before reaching an age when they will be accountable to God for their decisions, this too is a deliverance (for their eternal life is thus assured, since in such cases they have died without rejecting Christ; cf. 2Sam.12:22-23). In the case of believers whose conduct passes beyond the pale of what God will tolerate, the sin unto death, as we have just seen, is a very real possibility.

I give you this command, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies that were made long ago about you, that you conduct a good campaign, one that is in keeping with [those predictions], holding onto your faith and to a clean conscience (cf. 1Tim.1:5-6) – which [clean conscience] some have rejected (lit., “pushed away”) and [have thus] suffered the shipwreck of their faith. Among these [apostates] are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they might be taught not to speak blasphemously. 1st Timothy 1:18-20

Unbelievers likewise are not allowed to do with impunity all that their lusts and arrogance would lead them to do. Scripture is so replete with examples of God's often terminal judgment upon the unrighteous (and especially upon those who persecute the righteous) that the point hardly needs emphasizing to anyone with even the passing familiarity with the Bible (e.g., Ex.1-15; Deut.9:1-6; Judg.4-8; Ps.37; 73; Is.14-24; Jer.25; Ezek.18; 2Thes.1; 2Pet.3; Rev.19).

And there arose among the people false prophets, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who shall introduce destructive false doctrines – even denying the Master who bought them – and bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their lascivious ways so that the way of truth will be subject to blasphemy on their account. And in their greed they will exploit you for profit by means of their fraudulent

teachings. [God's] condemnation upon them long since has not been lying dormant, and [His impending] destruction of them has not been slumbering. 2nd Peter 2:1-3

The main difference between God's behavior towards believers and unbelievers on this score is that while we are His children, unbelievers are not. At first glance, that might seem to indicate that we therefore have more latitude than those who are not of God's family, but in fact exactly the opposite is true (cf. Amos 3:2). If I see my own child misbehaving in the park, I immediately correct his or her behavior, ideally in a way that will help him or her learn to change that behavior for the better. If, however, I see a child whom I do not know doing the same things, I am unlikely to take any action whatsoever unless the conduct is seriously endangering the child himself or others. In a similar way, God is working with us to purify us, but that would be, in many respects, a pointless exercise in the case of all those who do not know Him.

Additionally, while God's wrath is ever directed towards all sin (Rom.1:18; Eph.5:5; Col.3:6), because of our Lord Jesus Christ's work in atoning for all sin on the cross, no one receives the full penalty for personal sin here on earth, whether believer or unbeliever (for that would mean immediate consignment to the lake of fire). We also clearly see the Lord's gracious and loving character at work in His tolerance and long-suffering directed towards the unbeliever, specifically in His merciful desire that all should accept the good news of salvation in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Ezek.18:23; Matt.18:14; Jn.12:47; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9). God's policy is mercy towards us all in Jesus Christ, with His ultimate kindness or sternness based on our faith response to His gracious Gift (Jn.3:16-18; Rom.11:22-23; 11:31; cf. Matt.23:23). This is true not only in anticipation of all those who eventually will (Rom.8:28-30; Eph.1:4-5; 1:11; 1Pet.1:2), but even in the case of those who will not come to Christ (Matt.5:45; Acts 14:16-17; 17:24-28). The premier example of God's tolerance of vile unbeliever activity is none other than the apostle Paul, the "worst of sinners" (1Tim.1:15), who persecuted the Church of Christ to an inordinate degree (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-6; 9:13-14; 26:9-11; Gal.1:23), and so by all human calculation should have been removed from this life by the unbeliever's equivalent of the sin unto death – except that God in His mercy overlooked his horrendous sins of ignorance in full anticipation of his coming unequalled service to the Body of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 9:15; 1Cor.15:9-11).

(12) I am [so] thankful to the One who empowers [us], Christ Jesus our Lord, for considering me faithful and putting me into ministry, (13) although I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a man of outrageous insolence. But I was shown mercy for the things I did in ignorance and unbelief. (14) For the grace of our Lord has been poured out super-abundantly [associated] with faith and with the love which is in Christ Jesus. (15) The saying is true and worth careful consideration: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I am among the foremost of them". (16) But it is for this very reason that I was shown mercy, that is, so that in me first and foremost Christ Jesus might demonstrate the full measure of His patience [toward unbelievers] as a pattern for those who are [likewise] going to believe in Him for eternal life. 1st Timothy 1:12-16

In any case, unbelievers are not eternally condemned for any of their personal sins (all of which were born by our Lord on the cross), but for the eternal sin of rejecting Jesus Christ as Savior (whether they do so in direct exposure to the gospel or by default: Ex.32:33; Jn.3:18; 5:24; 6:53; 8:24; 9:41). So whatever the degree of mercy or judgment God may exercise regarding the sins of unbelievers (Rom.3:25-26), and whatever His timing may be in dealing with their behavior (Prov.16:4), as our Creator and the One who opened the way for us to have eternal life, God is entirely justified in all of His actions and completely just in all that He has ever done in respect to every human being who has ever lived (cf. Ps.73; 2Cor.11:15; 2Tim.4:14):

For the one who does wrong will receive [punishment] for the wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism [with God].

Colossians 3:25 (cf. Acts 10:34; Rom.2:11; Eph.6:9; Jas.2:1; 2:9; 1Pet.1:17)

Get out, My people. Go into your rooms and close your doors behind you. Hide yourselves for a little while until My indignation has run its course (i.e., until the Tribulation is over). For behold, the Lord is about to come forth from His place in order to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. And the earth will reveal the blood shed upon it, and conceal its slain no longer (i.e., the persecution of believers will be punished).
Isaiah 26:20-21 (cf. 2Pet.3:10b)

V. The Believer's Dealing with Sin

As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are forever “in Him”, and, since we are in this union with or “position” in Him, we are free from condemnation, having been forgiven all of our sins as far as our eternal status is concerned (Rom.8:1; Eph.1:7; Col.1:14; cf. Rom.6:1-10).

Therefore, in regards to our status as those who have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ, sin is no longer an issue, and our main responsibility is to appreciate and take courage in that blessed fact. For, after we have received Jesus through faith and so having been forgiven all of our sins, our true, new relationship toward sin is one of having died to it as those now alive forever “in Christ”.

(1) And you [too] were [once spiritually] dead in the transgressions and sins (2) in which you then lived your life, after the fashion of this temporal world, after the pattern of the ruler who holds sway in the air [around us (i.e., the devil)], that spirit who is now at work in those who have chosen disobedience. (3) In company with these [disobedient unbelievers] we all once lived our lives in the lusts of our flesh (i.e., sin nature), carrying out the will of the flesh and its desires. And [so] we were [all] children of wrath by nature (i.e., by physical birth) just like the rest [of mankind]. (4) But God, being rich in mercy on account of the great love with which He loved us, (5) even as we were dead in our sins, made us alive *with Christ* – you are saved by grace! – (6) and raised and seated us together *with Christ* in the heavenly places (i.e., positionally). (7) [He has done this] in order to demonstrate in the ages to come the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us *in Christ Jesus*. (8) For you have been saved by [God's] grace

through faith [in Christ]; and this did not come from you - it is God's gift. (9) Nor did it come from what you have done, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created *in Christ Jesus* for [the purpose of accomplishing] good works, which [very works] God has prepared ahead of time for us, that we might walk in them (i.e., live our Christian lives in the accomplishment of them). Ephesians 2:8-10

Thus our positional relationship towards sin is one of complete deliverance from it, and that deliverance and redemption is based entirely upon our new relationship with Jesus Christ by grace through faith. This positional release from sin and its power is clear to see in all of the various ways in which scripture describes our new relationship with our Lord (as is the fact that all of these descriptions are based upon our non-meritorious faith in the work of Jesus on the cross as opposed to any effort on our behalf). Both positionally now and ultimately forever, in Jesus Christ we who believe are all . . .

- Born again: Instead of being spiritually dead on account of sin, we have now been rendered spiritually alive by the Spirit through faith in Christ (Matt.19:28; Jn.1:13; 3:3-8; 1Cor.4:15; Gal.4:29; Tit.3:5; Heb.12:9; Jas.1:18; 1Pet.1:3; 1:23; 1Jn.2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4; 5:18).
- Created anew: Our new life has given us a new standing with God. We are no longer sinful in His eyes. For believers, life has begun again anew, and is now to be lived for Jesus Christ apart from sin (2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:10; 4:22-24; Col.3:9-10; cf. Rom.12:2; Eph.2:15).
- No longer spiritually dead but alive: We are no longer separated from the life of God. Rather, instead of being dead to Him, we have passed from death to life (Jn.5:24; 1Jn.3:14), so that now we are positionally dead to sin but alive in Him and to Him and for Him (Rom.6:1-23; 8:10; 1Cor.15:22; Eph.2:5; Col.2:13; 2Tim.2:11; 1Pet.4:1; 1Jn.3:6).
- No longer darkness but light: Light in scripture is a metaphor for truth, and Jesus is both the Truth and the Light of the world (Jn.1:4; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). As believers we are no longer part of the lies of this world but have responded to the truth and are to reflect the truth (Matt.5:16; 2Cor.3:18). In Jesus, we are no longer in the darkness of sin, but are ourselves "light", witnesses to the sinless one true Light, our Lord (Jn.12:36; Eph.5:8; Phil.2:14-16; Col.1:12-13; 1Thes.5:5; cf. 2Cor.6:14).
- Part of Christ's Bride: As the eternal complement of our Lord, we believers, the Church of Jesus Christ, are destined and designed to be with Him forever (Matt.9:15; Matt.25:1-13; Mk.2:19; Lk.5:34; Jn.3:29; 2Cor.11:2-3; Eph.1:22-23; 5:22-33; Rev.19:7-14; 21:2-4; 21:9ff.; 22:17). We are eternally part of Him as His Bride, washed of our sin by His blood, loved, cherished and possessed by Him in a way that even a perfect human marriage could only approximate (Eph.5:25-32; Rev.19:7).
- Adopted into the family of God: We are no longer outsiders subject to God's wrath because of sin, but have become His children through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ (Jn.1:12-13; Rom.8:16-17; Gal.3:21-4:7; Eph.3:15; Heb.12:4-11; 1Jn.3:1-2).
- No longer of this world but citizens of heaven: Although we remain in it, we are no longer of this world (Jn.17:16; 1Pet.2:9 & 11). We have set our sights not on the things

which are seen, but the unseen hope of glory to come (2Cor.4:17-18; 5:7; Col.1:27; 3:1-4; 1Tim.1:1). Through faith in Jesus Christ we are no longer bound by sin to this visible world of dust, but are citizens of heaven, awaiting the return of our King (Phil.3:20; Heb.12:22-24; cf. Eph.2:19).

- Heirs of God: Through faith in our Savior we have been liberated from the fear of death and understand that our physical death only means entrance into eternal life wherein we have an inheritance that will never fade away as heirs of God forevermore in Jesus Christ our Lord (1Pet.1:4; cf. Matt.6:19-21; Rom.8:16-17; Eph.1:14; 1:18; Col.1:12; 2:3; Heb.9:15; 10:35; 2Jn.1:8; Rev.11:18; 22:12).
- No longer under the Law but under grace: In Christ we have been redeemed from our sins and from the concomitant curse of the Law so that we now find ourselves instead under the grace of God through faith in our Savior (Rom.6:14-15; Gal.3:10-13; 3:23-25; 4:1-7; 5:18; Eph.2:1-10; cf. 1Cor.9:20-21).
- No longer sinners but positionally sinless: Our current standing is that of “sanctified”, that is, we are positionally holy and without sin as a consequence of our faith through being baptized by the Holy Spirit into our sinless Lord Jesus Christ (1Jn.3:6-9; cf. Rom.6:1-2).
- Washed clean from sin: Through faith in Jesus Christ, the filth and the stain of sin has been positionally washed away forever (Jn.13; 1Cor.6:11; Eph.5:26; Tit.3:5; Heb.10:22; Rev.7:14; 22:14; cf. Ex.19:14).
- Redeemed from sin: Through faith in our Savior Jesus we have been ransomed from sin and bought free of slavery to it by the blood, that is, our Lord Christ’s saving work on the cross (Matt.20:28; Lk.1:68; Jn.8:31-36; Rom.3:24; 1Cor.1:30; 6:20; 7:23; Gal.3:13; 4:4-5; Eph.1:7; 1:14; Col.1:14; 1Tim.2:6; Tit.2:14; Heb.9:12-15; 1Pet.1:18-19; Rev.5:9).
- Forgiven our sin: We are not under condemnation but have had all of our sins blotted out through faith in Jesus Christ (Jn.3:18; 5:24; Rom.8:1-4; Eph.4:32; Col.2:13; 1Jn.1:7-9).
- Made near to God: Though we were alienated from Him in the past, we now stand positionally “near” in the presence of holy God through the blood of Jesus Christ (Eph.2:13; cf. Heb.4:16; 7:19; 10:22; Jas.4:8).
- Made righteous in Christ: By virtue of being in Jesus Christ through faith, God now considers us righteous and no longer sinful, possessing as we do not our own self-righteousness, but the genuine righteousness of our very own Lord and Savior through our position in Him (Rom.3:21-24; 3:28; 4:4-5; 4:13; 5:1; 5:8-9; 8:1; 9:30-31; 10:6; 2Cor.5:21; Gal.2:16; Eph.2:8-9 Phil.3:9; Heb.11:7; cf. Jer.33:16).
- Reconciled to God: As sinners, we were once God’s enemies, but we have now been reconciled to Him by the blood of Jesus Christ through our faith in Him and His sacrifice for us on the cross (2Cor.5:18; Eph.2:16; Col.1:20-22).
- Turned back to God (and away from sin): In faith we have changed our basic orientation from being directed towards sin and evil to being directed instead towards God and His truth through faith in Him who is the Truth, our Savior Jesus Christ (Lk.1:16-17; Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 15:3; 15:19; 26:18-20; 2Cor.3:16; 1Thes.1:9; 1Pet.2:25; cf. Matt.13:15; Lk.22:32; Acts 14:15; Jas.5:20).

- Sanctified: Perhaps the most common scriptural description of all used to express our new position as believers in Jesus Christ is that of our status as “saints” or “holy ones”, having been “sanctified” or made “holy” in Him. For we were formerly profane, separated from holy God by our sins (Ps.143:2; Rom.5:8; Eph.2:1-3; 2:12; Col.2:13; cf. Eph.4:22), but now we have been made holy in Jesus Christ, sanctified by our faith in Him and His work for us on the cross (Rom.1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 1Cor.1:2; 6:11; 2Cor.1:1; Eph.1:1; Phil.1:1; Col.1:2; 1Thes.3:13; 2Thes.1:10; 1Tim.5:10; Philemon 1:5; Heb.3:1; 1Pet.1:15; Jude 1:3; Rev.8:3 et passim in the New Testament).

All of these descriptions express our new status of “positional” perfection in Jesus Christ, but also anticipate the full experiential reality our eternal status in Him (when there will be no possibility of sin forevermore), even as they indicate, encourage, and command our conformance to these new heavenly realities here in time. We are new creatures in Jesus Christ, and we are expected to act like it both in embracing a positive Christian walk (spiritual growth and production) and eschewing a negative one (perfecting our sanctification in the fear of the Lord: 2Cor.7:1; Phil.2:12; Heb.12:14).

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.
Ephesians 5:8

For while we can appreciate these positional blessings and anticipate the enjoyment of them as eternal ones, in this sinful world, in these sinful bodies, our conformity with the high standards of behavior they entail and our appreciation of them as seen through the veil of this present reality are bound to be imperfect. Not that it should not be a top priority of every Christian to strive to make that conformity as complete as possible (i.e., to “pursue sanctification”; see section V.2 below). But this is a goal towards which we should ever be marching, rather than a place to which we expect to arrive perfectly short of the perfection of the resurrection.

1. Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness

This section addresses the mechanics contained in scripture by which we reorient to the truth and are restored to our fellowship and walk with the Lord. Although repentance, confession, and forgiveness are all intimately related, it will be helpful for our understanding of these issues to consider them separately. Repentance, confession, and forgiveness constitute the essential mechanics of recovery for believers who have made what are, God willing, temporary slips (as opposed to taking faith shattering falls). Small or large, these deviations stand in stark contrast to the “job description” of holiness evident in the long list of positional attributes of believers catalogued above. Just as the process of sanctification (treated in section V.2 below) develops our ability to reflect these positional characteristics and encourages us to strive to make them as complete a reality in our experience as possible, so these characteristics of our position in Christ both serve to encourage us to repent, confess, and claim forgiveness when we sin (e.g., grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption are ours in Christ, so why would we not want to

return to the Lord after sinning?), at the same time as they hold up for us a perfect standard which convicts us of our failures (e.g., we are born again, made new, heirs and children of God, light in the Lord – so how can we continue in sin?). Having established that all of us sin and need restoration, that divine discipline is likewise universal for the children of God, and that resistance and failing to return to Him inevitably makes things worse, it is time we examined the means provided by God for believers to recover from sin and return to Him. God knew before time began that we His children would continue to require mercy and forgiveness even after salvation as long as we remain in the world, and so He has provided the method and the manner for our recovery from sin.

Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated this principle on the night before He died for all of our sins on the cross when He personally washed the feet of His disciples (Jn.13:1-17). This was a symbolic demonstration of the need for all of us to help our fellow believers recover from sin and pursue sanctification (Jas.5:19-20; Jude 1:22-23; cf. Col.3:16). But it also clearly demonstrated the principle that while we are all positionally sinless through our new status of being “in Christ” (i.e., we have all “had a bath” and so are “clean” as far as positional forgiveness of sin for salvation is concerned: Jn.13:10), we still have need of continual cleansing from the sins we commit in this life as believers. We will always have need of “washing our feet”. For by virtue of living in these bodies of sin in the midst of this evil world we will continue to require restoration to fellowship whenever we lapse into sin. Without such continuing cleansing we can have “no share” in our Lord (Jn.13:8). Indeed, our continuing fellowship with the Lord we love requires that we likewise continue to recover from sin whenever necessary (1Jn.1:6; cf. 1Jn.1:3). With the analogy of foot-washing our Lord was showing us that we are in need of only one release from the bondage of sin, a “redemption” provided for us once and for all by His death in our place on the cross and appropriated by us immediately when we put our faith in Him (Col.2:13-14). This is the “bath” or cleansing from sin which has already been accomplished and need never be repeated. This once and for all bath is represented by John’s baptism, and is not to be confused with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (see below). We do, however, continue to commit acts of personal sin as believers, and when we do, we are in need of “foot-washing”, that is, of the forgiveness and restoration which comes to us when we confess our sins to God. We need to be washed *from our sin* only once. We need to be cleansed *of our sins* as often as we commit them.

1. Repentance: Although the baptism of John was concerned with the repentance of unbelievers leading to salvation rather than to our topic here (i.e., the repentance of believers leading to forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with God), it does serve to illustrate the essence of the mechanics in both processes. First, the person heeds to the call to repent (Matt.3:2; 3:5; Mk.3:5). Second, the person is cleansed as he or she owns up to the sins committed (Matt.3:6; Mk.1:5). Third, the person is now forgiven all his or her sins (Mk.1:4; Lk.3:3) and enjoys fellowship with the Lord (cf. Jn.1:35-51). As with John’s baptism (the only true New Testament water baptism and subsequently rendered obsolete by the baptism of the Spirit whose symbolism and effects are entirely different: Matt.3:11), repentance is the essential attitude required by God before confession. Confession is the expression to God of that changed attitude, and forgiveness and

fellowship are the results. Indeed, true repentance never lacks confession and true confession is impossible without repentance. While it is helpful to consider the two separately as we are doing here, in practice they are inseparable (Rom.10:9-10; cf. Acts 5:31) and are always followed by God's forgiveness and the believer's restoration into the full and complete good favor or "grace" of God.

1) The need for repentance: Sin separates us from God (Is.59:1-2). He is perfect in His holiness and so can have no contact with sin whatsoever (as evidenced by the fact that the Father's throne now resides in the third heaven, separated from the sinful world by an insurmountable gulf). In our relationship with Him, therefore, sinful behavior on our part alienates us from Him by definition. It is true that as believers, children of God through faith in Christ, we are ever after *positionally* under His good favor or "grace". Even when we sin, He continues to love us for the sake of His Son in whom we now stand secure through faith (Eph.2:8-9). But just as foul behavior on our part temporarily estranges us from those who love us even in the cases of our closest human relationships (or at least causes temporary upheaval in those relationships), so we cannot expect to live in sin without provoking a reaction from our Lord and God. Repairing human relationships generally requires an apology (loosely analogous to confession), and a change of behavior which, if it is to be genuine and lasting, necessitates a prior change of attitude (cf. Hos.5:4). In this analogy, that change of attitude in regard to our relationship to God is known in biblical terms as "repentance". All sin is offensive to God, for God is holy and intrinsically pure, incapable of condoning or having any direct contact with sin. Thus all sin interrupts our fellowship with our Lord (and has the potential to damage it seriously if we fail to "turn around" in a timely fashion). When we become aware that we have sinned, therefore, the very first step in the process of restoration is to admit it to ourselves, to own up to our failure, and to turn away from any shred of attitude that suggests that what we have done is in any way justified, not so terribly wrong, or not very important (or, in severe cases of spiritual retrogression, from denying to ourselves that we have even done anything sinful at all). In other words, repentance requires that we stop thinking about our behavior in human terms and begin again to see our sins as God sees them.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we are lying and are not acting truthfully. 1st John 1:6

We cannot walk in the darkness of sin and continue to have fellowship with our Holy Lord. We are wrong to think this way, and, if we are wise, will be quick to repent and confess our sin on each and every occasion when we do sin. As His sons and daughters, we continue to enjoy the blessings and benefits of God's grace as long we persevere in faith in Jesus Christ. However, should we adopt and embrace the folly of assuming that we remain fully and experientially in all of God's good graces even as we follow our lusts instead of His truth, He will be quick to command our attention through divine discipline, and we may fully expect that discipline to intensify with every step we take away from Him for the express purpose of turning us back to Him in repentance. If we consider that, as with all retrogression in life, the farther one falls the

harder it is to get up and return to where one was before, the truth of the proposition that it is much better to recognize the need for repentance immediately will be obvious.

Whether our recognition of the need to repent and confess is self-motivated and immediate or comes as the result of intensifying divine discipline, our situation before turning around is the same, namely, we are experientially carnal, asleep, dead – even if as members of the Body of Christ our status in Him is exactly the opposite.

But, brothers [and sisters], I could not speak to you as spiritual [people] but as carnal [ones], as if you were [still but] infants in Christ. 1st Corinthians 3:1

Arise, sleeper! Awake from the dead, and Christ will shine on you! Ephesians 5:14

For this [prodigal] son of mine was dead, but he has come back to life. He was lost, but he has [now] been found. Luke 15:24 (cf. Lk.15:32)

When we are in the wrong, having sinned against God (for He is always the offended party when we sin: Ps.51:4; cf. Ps.41:4; Is.42:24), the dangers and disadvantages of refusing to recognize the need to repent are many and serious. Not only is our harmony, peace, and joy in Him negatively affected as well as our spiritual growth and production, but we also run the risk of bringing upon ourselves intensifying divine discipline and an accelerating cycle of sin and spiritual retrogression, the end of which in the most extreme cases may involve the sin unto death or apostasy.

So then, brothers, we are under obligation – but not to the flesh to live by its rules. For if you are living by the rules of the flesh, you are destined to die. But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. Romans 8:12-13

We are indeed spiritually alive in Jesus Christ, but living as if we are dead, acting as if we are asleep, walking in the darkness instead of in the light, cannot help but be extremely detrimental to our spiritual health in every way. We need to come back to life, to wake up, to come back into the light, in short, we need to repent whenever we fall into sin. This may seem obvious in the abstract, but becoming sullen, resistant, blasé, or otherwise oblivious to our need for repentance is a sort of sloppiness in the practice of spirituality which, sad to say, all of us as believers seem to fall into from time to time (cf. 2Cor.12:21). And this attitude inevitably grows like gangrene the longer we resist the need to repent, for the more flagrantly and the longer we continue sinning “right in God’s face”, the more increasingly difficult it becomes to own up to our mistakes and “look Him in the face” (making the occurrence of some drastic intervention of extreme divine discipline all the more likely). With experience (especially of divine discipline), we will soon learn that it is always better to turn around quickly, recognizing our need for repentance as soon as possible.

And whatever the reason may be for any initial resistance to this need, for the sake of our spiritual health we cannot afford to allow any attitude or emotion to blunt the truth of our need to repent of the sins we commit. In this we must avoid all extremes that may keep us from our recognition of that need. We cannot be so shocked by what we have done that we become paralyzed by fear and forget about the mercy of God, for He waits as a loving Father to be merciful to us (Is.30:18). Nor can we become so complacent in the knowledge of His mercy that we fail to give Him the proper respect, for He is well able to make us rue that complacency (Heb.12:6). Humble self-examination is what is called for in every case, and the sooner the better.

(18) See to it that there not be among you any man or woman or family or tribe whose heart is turning away this day from the Lord your God so as to go and serve the gods of these nations. See to it that there does not [spring up] among you [any such] root producing poison and wormwood (i.e., the bitterness caused by idolatry: cf. Heb.12:15). (19) If [such a person] hears the words of this curse, but reassures himself in his heart, saying, "I will have peace [and prosperity], even though I am walking in the stubbornness of my heart", so as to sweep away the well-watered with the dry (i.e., the rest of you will be cursed by your association with him unless the Lord acts). (20) The Lord will not be willing to forgive him [if he persists], but instead the Lord's wrath and zeal will burn against that man, and the whole curse written in this book will lie in wait for him until the Lord wipes out his name from under the heavens. (21) For the Lord will set him apart for evil out of all the tribes of Israel according to all the curses of the covenant written in the book of this Law. Deuteronomy 29:18-21

When men are bound in fetters and held fast by the cords of affliction, then [God] tells them of their offense and of their transgressions, that they have acted insolently. He opens their ear to correction, and commands them to return (i.e., repent) from iniquity. If they listen and obey, they will finish their days in prosperity and their years in pleasantness. But if they refuse to listen, they will perish in a moment (lit., by a missile), and will expire as those without knowledge. Job 36:8-12

An oracle concerning the transgression of the wicked. In his heart there is no fear of God, [and no fear of Him] before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes too much to discover his iniquity (i.e., sin) so as to hate it. Psalm 36:1-2

"Come now, and let us consider your case" says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like [white] wool. If you are willing and will listen, you will eat the good [things] the land produces. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah 1:18-20

But rebels and sinners will be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish. Isaiah 1:28 NIV

Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is [yet] near. Let the wicked person forsake his way and the man of iniquity his [evil] thoughts. And let him return to the Lord, so that He may have mercy upon him, even to our God, for He will abundantly forgive. Isaiah 55:6-7

For you say, “I am innocent. Look, His anger has turned away from me.” Behold, I am about to enter into judgment with you *because* you say “I have not sinned”. Jeremiah 2:35

Do not both good and bad things come forth from the mouth of the Most High (i.e., at His decree)? Why should any mortal man alive be complaining about [punishment received on account of] his sins? Let us carefully examine our paths, investigate [our behavior], and return to the Lord. Lamentations 3:38-40

(31) But if we were evaluating ourselves [so as to repent and confess], we would not be falling under judgment. (32) And when we are being judged [for this offense], it is by the Lord that we are being disciplined, to the end that we might not be condemned (lit., “terminally judged”) along with the world. 1st Corinthians 11:31-32

God opposes the arrogant, but gives grace to the humble. James 4:6

2) What is repentance?: Our determination to turn away from the wrong path of sin and back to the right path of following God is intimately bound up with the issue of confessing our sins to God because without a genuine attitude of repentance, rote prayers of confession risk becoming little more than ritualistic superstition. It should go without saying that when we are suffering under the heavy hand of divine discipline, we are unquestionably sorry about the consequences of our sin (1Kng.8:38-40). But this is true even in the case of unbelievers (Heb.12:16-17; cf. Matt.27:3-4). The first thing we can say about genuine and effective repentance, then, is that it must move beyond the obvious, subjective regret for the suffering we have brought upon ourselves to an objective appreciation of the fact that our sinning was 1) offensive to God, and 2) completely deleterious to our relationship with Him, our spiritual growth, our ministries, and our eventual eternal rewards. Otherwise, we risk a continual bouncing in and out of the same sorts of sinful behavior, reverting to our previous mistakes just as soon as the pressure of discipline lifts. Such a pattern is fraught with obvious spiritual dangers. Instead, when repenting of our sinful actions we ought to take care to return to God “heart and soul” (i.e., “wholeheartedly”: 1Kng.8:46-50), that is, in complete determination not to repeat past mistakes along with the concomitant damage and pain we have brought upon ourselves (Neh.1:8-9; Ps.51).

If I had been aware of iniquity [still] in my heart, the Lord would not have listened [to my prayer of confession]. Psalm 66:18

You meet with him who rejoices in doing righteousness, those who remember you in [all] your ways. Behold, you were angry [with us] because we kept on sinning. We [kept doing so] for a long time. Shall we then be delivered? Isaiah 64:5

(4) For, in the case of those who have been enlightened (i.e., have become believers, “light in the Lord”: Eph.5:8), and who have experienced the heavenly gift and become partakers of the Holy Spirit (i.e., have been baptized *with* the Spirit so that He indwells them, and *by* the Spirit into union with Christ), (5) and who have experienced that the Word of God is good, and [who have experienced] miracles [foreshadowing] the age to come, (6) it is impossible to restore them to [true] repentance after having fallen [into sin] *as long as* they keep crucifying the Son of God afresh and exposing Him to open shame (i.e., while they continue in their sin, the particular sin in question here being continued participation in the sacrificial rites of Law which foreshadowed Christ’s work on the cross and suggesting by that participation that His work was ineffective). Hebrews 6:4-6

For if we willfully continue in the life of sin after accepting and recognizing the truth [of the gospel], there remains no further sacrifice we can make for our sins, but only a terrible expectation of judgment, and a burning fire, ready to devour those who oppose [His will]. Hebrews 10:26-27

Secondly, while it is true that the degree of determination necessary to effect true repentance corresponds to some degree to the flagrancy, repetitiveness, and chronic nature of our wayward behavior, true repentance is *not* measured by intensity of emotion. True repentance is measured by our change of attitude *going forward*, rather than the intensity of our regret *looking backward*. This is clear from the primary verbs for this concept in both Greek and Hebrew. In Greek, *metanoeo* (μετανοεω) means, etymologically, to change one’s mind or attitude, while Hebrew *shubh* (שׁוּב) means to turn around and come back. Thus each verb indicates a clear and genuine change on the repentant believer’s part (of attitude and spiritual direction respectively), but neither word in any way connotes that an excessive display of emotion is somehow necessary for effecting that change. We change our minds so as to do better in the future. We return from our wrong way so as to take the right way in the future.

This is a very important point, because our God is a merciful and forgiving God who loves us so much that He gave His only Son to die in our stead. Having loved us so *before* we were His children, how will He not want only our best, now that He is our Father (Rom.5:9-11)? God wants us to change our attitude towards our sinfulness and *move forward* in our spiritual lives, not to continue to engage in self-flagellation forever over mistakes we have made in the past. True repentance does indeed reject the wrong path and the wrong thinking of the past, and does so decisively. But its purpose is to set us moving forward again on the right path with the correct thinking, rather than to plunge us into paroxysms of guilt about what lies behind us, for that can only prove self-destructive in the long run. God can definitely make us “feel bad” for what we have done. Indeed, divine discipline is an important part of getting our attention and causing us to understand the gravity of our mistakes through appreciation of their spiritual consequences. But this is to get our attention and bring us to the point of repentance, not to have us lock our gaze upon our past mistakes forever, and, after repenting, we are wrong to do so. God does not need us to burden ourselves with excessive guilt in the bargain. He forgives us when we repent and confess our sins (see sections V.1.2 and V.1.3 below). It is crucial for believers to avoid the

trap of self-flagellation over sins, especially over sins which have been repented of, confessed, and forgiven long ago. Not only is excessive and morbid preoccupation with the guilt of long past errors spiritually counterproductive and potentially very damaging in that regard, but continuation in such a pattern over a long period of time can also come perilously close to or even cross over into “salvation by works” in trying to “make up” for past mistakes, should we come to the pass of assuming that what we are doing in torturing ourselves in this way is somehow godly and good and pleasing to the Lord. There is a great difference between having a contrite attitude in the aftermath of sin and being unable ever to move on because of inordinate guilt.

So we need to learn to avoid both extremes, namely, of falsely assuming that sinfulness is of no real account because of our secure position in Christ, or of failing to appreciate the grace and mercy we possess as members of the Body of Jesus Christ, children of the Living God, redeemed and forgiven forever in our beloved Lord. In short, genuine repentance is a turning away from allegiance to sins past along with a commitment to turning away from future behavior of this sort as well, so that we may move forward with our Christian lives. That is not to say that we must be perfect for the repentance to be real. It may take struggle to win victory in areas which as individuals we may find challenging for any number of personal reasons. But it does mean that our attitude has to be one of honest determination to turn away from sin and back to God and His truth (without at the same time becoming overly fixated upon our past mistakes).

2. Confession: As long as we sojourn on this earth we shall always be vulnerable to personal sin, and we must therefore always be ready to confess whenever we become entangled in the “sin which so easily besets us” (Heb.12:1). Condemned by our hearts in regard to any particular sin, and convinced of the need to repent by the Spirit testifying to our conscience, confession to God of that sin should follow immediately. All personal sin needs to be confessed for the sake of our relationship with our Lord and our continued spiritual growth.

He who conceals his sin does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13 NIV

As is clear from the verse above, confession and concealment are mutually exclusive. If we are seeking to hide what we have done from God we will certainly not be willing to come to Him and admit our error. And how ridiculous! We may chuckle when we read about Adam in the garden attempting to hide himself from the Lord and trying to cover up his nakedness with a fig leaf. God Almighty knew before the universe was made all about Adam’s fall and Adam’s attempt to make things right apart from God. But are we any different? Any time we try to hide our guilt and sin from the Lord out of shame or any other motivation, and any time we try to make up for our sins through our own works instead of coming clean and admitting them to God, we are being as utterly foolish as Adam (Job 31:33). And the longer we persevere in such folly, the more spiritual damage we stand to do to ourselves to our own grievous harm. Even so, it is a very common thing for us, emotional creatures that we are, to be so out of sorts with ourselves or with others (or even with God!) because of some failure we find particularly disturbing, that we

are unwilling to do the spiritually prudent thing and *immediately* return to God in our hearts (cf. Is.64:5b), expressing our repentance through a prayer of confession for the sins we have committed. Often, the worse we fail, the more pronounced this reluctance may be, even though such times are the very *worst* times to delay the process of admitting our errors to ourselves and then confessing them to God in a truly contrite way (cf. Elijah in 1Kng.19:1-18). Beyond all argument, personal sin on the believer's part requires us to acknowledge that sin in prayer, otherwise known as confessing our sins to our God who is the proper object of that confession (Lev.5:5; Ps.32; 38; 51; 130:3; 143:1-2; Prov.28:13; Is.1:16-20 Neh.9:2-3; Matt.3:6; Acts 8:22; 1Jn.1:9).

Against You and You alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your eyes.
Psalm 51:4a

If we confess our sins [i.e., *to the Lord*], He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1st John 1:9

(1) To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul (18) See my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins! Psalm 25:1 & 18

“Return, O wayward Israel”, says the Lord. “I will not make My face to fall upon you [in an angry stare]. For I am merciful”, says the Lord. “I will not prolong [My anger against you] forever. Only recognize your guilt, that you have sinned against the Lord your God”. Jeremiah 3:12b-13a

We must resist the temptation of trying to hide our sins, or of trying to downplay our sins, or of being so embarrassed about our sins that we fail to return to the Lord in our hearts and seek His forgiveness through the confession of those sins. And we must never assume that we can somehow make up for the sins we commit. Only God can forgive sin on the basis of Christ's sacrifice. And God is merciful and willing to forgive those who return to Him and own up to their sins.

Part of this contrite attitude we are required to demonstrate is an appreciation and reciprocation of God's mercy and forgiveness in the way in which we deal with others, especially our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ:

And forgive us what we owe you just as we also forgive those who owe us.
Matthew 6:12

And forgive us our sins just as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
Luke 11:4

This is not a quid pro quo. It is not as if we are being rewarded for forgiving others. Rather, failure to forgive others is itself sinful, while our willingness to forgive others is a measure, an indication of the genuine nature of our contrition. Since repentance is in large measure adopting

God's attitude towards our sins, if we want His forgiveness of those sins, we need to adopt His forgiving attitude to others, and if we want His mercy, we need to demonstrate His merciful attitude towards others (cf. Matt.5:7; 6:14-15; 18:23-34; Mk.11:25; Lk.6:37-38; Col.3:13). If we are truly repentant, then surely we will also be willing to respond to our Lord's command to extend the same loving forgiveness to others that we are now asking of Him. Just as we need to adopt His attitude toward sin for genuine repentance, so we need to adopt His attitude of mercy when we seek that mercy. Such love covers a multitude of sins (1Pet.4:8; Jas.2:13; cf. Prov.16:6). Once we have adopted an attitude of genuine repentance and of seeking mercy without the sinful hypocrisy of denying mercy to others, then we can (and indeed must) be fully convinced of the truth that God is ready and willing to accept our confession and grant us forgiveness for all our sinful deeds.

1) The Mechanics of Confession:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1st John 1:9

This verse states the mechanics of confession at their most succinct. Simply returning to God in our hearts and then admitting our sins to Him in a prayer of confession brings forgiveness and cleansing based upon the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ who bore all of our sins on the cross. Because of God's perfect faithfulness (He stands by His promise to forgive) and because of His perfect justice (He has already judged all our sins in His Son our Lord Jesus Christ), our forgiveness and cleansing are assured, even for sins we may have overlooked (cf. 1Jn.1:7).

However, few things would be worse than to assume that a genuine and sufficient confession involves merely stating the fact of our sins to God *without* a concomitant attitude of repentance or *with* a hypocritical lack of mercy towards those indebted to us. If we truly have no intention of forgiving others and/or no intention whatsoever of changing our ways, it would be better to skip the entire exercise. For this approach reeks of hypocrisy and duplicity, and betrays a fundamental flaw in such a person's whole relationship with God, namely, a complete lack of fear and respect for the One who made us, who saved us, and who knows us better than we know ourselves.

I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah ***had no fear*** In spite of [seeing] all this [which I did to Israel], her sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, ***but only in pretense***, declares the Lord. Jeremiah 3:8b, 3:10 NIV

On the other hand, while the importance of a reverent fear of God to our spiritual health and safety cannot be underestimated, an equally disastrous misapplication of scripture is the substituting of irrational terror for legitimate awe, of obsessive panic for holy fear, and of pathological dread for true reverence. It is inappropriate and spiritually dangerous to conceive a disproportionate and morbid fixation upon God's judgment for sin to the exclusion of His mercy

and goodness. For just as it is highly dysfunctional for a child to over-focus upon his or her father's goodness to the point of complete disrespect for his authority, and so by analogy equally foolish for us to deceive ourselves into thinking that God is deceived by what amounts to false confessions and rote naming of sins where we truly have no regrets and no intentions of changing our ways, by the same token, we too should avoid being so paralyzed by our awe of God that we fail to come to Him and seek His mercy, confessing our sins and claiming the forgiveness that is ours as children of the One who paid the price of prices for all of our sins in the sacrifice of His one and only Son on our behalf. After all, we are not and never will be perfect, and that includes perfection in repentance and in the improvement of our behavior, even when we have the best of intentions. In all of this we must put ourselves in God's hands, remembering that He knows everything, and that, even if our hearts accuse of imperfection, He is greater than our hearts (1Jn.3:20).

Simply put, therefore, the mechanics of confession are threefold. We must . . .

1) Recognize our error and admit it to ourselves (i.e., **repent**). When we sin we need to change our mind in a meaningful way about our erroneous course of action, being determined to change our ways in keeping with our change of heart.

(8) Get closer to God, and He will get closer to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and sanctify your hearts, you double-minded. (9) Lament and grieve and mourn. Let your laughter turn to grief, and your joy to humiliation. (10) Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you. James 4:8-10

2) Come back to God in our relationship with Him (i.e., **confess**). Just as we have determined in our hearts to be reconciled to Him, we need to admit to Him in private prayer that we recognize that we have sinned, not apologizing for our sins, as if that could make any difference to God (for only the blood of Christ can cover them, and the blood of Christ has covered them), but owning up to them and accepting responsibility for them.

(31) But if we were evaluating ourselves [so as to repent and confess], we would not be falling under judgment. (32) And when we are being judged, it is by the Lord that we are being disciplined, to the end that we might not be condemned along with the world. 1st Corinthians 11:31-32

3) Rest in the peace and comfort of His divine mercy (i.e., **be confident of His forgiveness**). God's cleansing and forgiveness come to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, not through any works of contrition on our part. Secure in the knowledge that God Himself has paid for our sins, that He accepts our confession, and that He has cleansed us from our sins, we need to have confidence that, regardless of whatever discipline may come our way to teach us as sons and daughters to stay away from all that is spiritually harmful, we have nonetheless been truly restored to full fellowship with Him and our Lord Jesus Christ.

(6) Don't worry about anything, but in everything let your requests be made known to God in prayer and in petition with thanksgiving. (7) And the peace of God which surpasses every thought will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

But in this process we must avoid . . .

1) Assuming that God is impressed by our emotional reaction. True repentance is a genuine change of heart *on our part*. It is *not* the expression *to God* of our emotion and regret.

2) Thinking that our prayer of confession is a sacrifice. True confession is admitting our sins to God in private prayer. It is *not* a sacrificial rite or sacrament that carries any weight with God, since only Christ's sacrifice is of any effect in the forgiveness of sins (cf. Heb.10:17-18).

3) Failing to appreciate that we have indeed been forgiven. True forgiveness is ours upon genuine repentance and appropriate confession of our sins. It is a fact *regardless* of how we may feel. God is faithful and just to forgive us when we properly confess our sins (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5; 51; Prov.28:13). Giving in to excessive feelings of guilt after the fact is to fail to appreciate the integrity of God and to doubt His promise of forgiveness.

- **Repentance:** Self-directed acknowledgment of sin.
- **Confession:** God-directed acknowledgment of sin.
- **Forgiveness:** Provided by God; received, believed and appreciated by us.

2) Public Confession of Sin: Just as repentance is a personal and private matter directed towards oneself (i.e., a contrite owning up to personal failure with a concomitant commitment to turning away from sinning in the same manner habitually), so confession too is primarily to be a personal and private acknowledgment to God of the sins one has committed (cf. Ps.25:7; 25:18; 51:9; 79:9; 1Jn.1:9). Indeed, the instances in which sin should be admitted and confessed to other Christians are very few and far between. Not only does scripture not command the public confession of sin except in a very few, distinct circumstances, but there are good, biblical reasons for avoiding such behavior. For, on the one hand, Christ is our High Priest (Heb.7-10; esp. Heb.10:21), and we share in His unique priesthood (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6). All believers therefore have a special access to God that was never true of the Levitical priesthood (Rom.5:2; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.13:10; cf. Heb.6:19-20). Appointing certain members of the Church as special "confessors" is therefore not only unbiblical but an insult to the grace of God and the wonderful position we now possess in Jesus Christ our Lord who, as our High Priest at the right hand of the Father, makes continual intercession on our behalf (Rom.8:34; Heb.7:25; 9:24; 1Jn.2:1; cf. Rom.8:26-27). On the other hand, the dangers and damages of making it a

habit of telling each other about all of our sins, mental, verbal, and overt, are obvious. We all understand that we are all sinners and that we continue to inhabit bodies of sin throughout our earthly lives, that the struggle against sin is long and hard, and that it will never be entirely won until we have exchanged these bodies of “sin and death” for the new bodies that will be ours at resurrection. But do we really need to hear about every fault, foible, failing, and transgression of every fellow believer in the Church? The logistics of this process alone make it clear that if such were the intent of scripture, we would have little time for any other pursuit or ministry (even the Levitical sacrifices are largely concerned only with sins of ignorance as we have seen). Worse to tell, sinful creatures that we are, it is inevitable that hearing about the sins of other believers, some of whom will of necessity be more spiritually advanced than ourselves (or so we may assume), cannot help but embolden us to sin at the same time that it destroys our opinion of them. Beyond all question, it is a blessing that for the most part we are to confess our sins only to God without the necessity of informing our brothers and sisters in Christ of every mental, verbal, and overt instance of misconduct – or having to hear all of their confessions as well.

There is a (rare) time and place for public confession, but the Bible is very specific about when and where that is appropriate. As far as normal, daily confession is concerned, the “Lord’s prayer” in both Matthew and Luke makes it clear that prayers of confession are to be addressed to “our Father who is in heaven”, not to our fellow believers. It is against Him that we sin (Ps.51:4), and it is from Him that we must ask “forgive us our debts” (Matt.6:12; Lk.11:4). That said, examples (or assumed examples) of biblically endorsed public confession include the following:

- The Mosaic Law: Many scholars see the Law as requiring public confession for some types of sins (Lev.5:5; Num.5:7). However, the two aforementioned verses are the only indications that such might have been the case, and both verses describe the penitent person as confessing *first*, and then bringing his or her offering. Thus what little the Law does say about individual confession is completely consistent with the prayer given us by our Lord, namely, that private, individual confession to God was required rather than a public naming of sins. Moreover, as we have seen above, it is sins of ignorance which are emphasized by the Law (as a deliberate indication of the impossibility of keeping the Law for salvation). In any case, it should be noted well that there is at present no longer any specialized priesthood inasmuch as all believers, having Jesus as our High Priest (Heb.10:21), are now priests in our own right with direct prayer access to the Father (Rom.5:2; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.13:10; 1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6).
- Corporate or congregational confession: On a number of occasions in the Old Testament, Israel makes (or is instructed to make) group or corporate confession of their collective sins (e.g., Lev.26:40; Num.29:7-11; Josh.8:30-35; 1Kng.8:33-35; Ezra 10:10-12; Neh.9:1-2; cf. Neh.1:6; Daniel 9:4-6). The Day of Atonement constitutes a special case wherein the high priest confessed the sins of the entire people (Lev.16:21). This was a ritual foreshadowing our Lord’s actual satisfaction of the penalty for the sins of all mankind (cf. Heb.1:3; 7:27; 9:12). Congregational confession is not expressly prohibited in the New Testament economy, but is nowhere mandated, and should not be seen as in

any way a substitute for the critically important regular practice of our individual confession of our sins to the Lord. Confession of sins before partaking of the Lord's supper is crucial on account of the dire penalties incurred for partaking "unworthily" (1Cor.11:27-32), but this too is an individual matter, even if the silent prayer by which our sins are confessed takes place in a congregational setting.

- John's baptism: Those who came to be baptized by John offered public confession of their sins (Matt.3:6; Mk.1:5), and we do find one somewhat similar occurrence during the apostolic revival in Ephesus (Acts 19:18). Both John's baptism and the apostolic direction of the Church have been discontinued, yielding, in the case of the former, to the baptism of the Spirit (Matt.3:11), and, in the case of the latter, to the sovereignty of the local church after the passing of the twelve apostles (cf. Tit.1:5). Moreover, in each of these two cases the confessions are "once and for all" events taking place in close conjunction with salvation (and taking place in a unique, corporate setting at that), rather than what the Bible now requires of us, namely the individual prayer of confession for cleansing and forgiveness of sin *after* salvation on each occasion of personal sin.
- Public rebuke in the local church: 1st Timothy 5:20, while sometimes taken as equivalent to confession and occasionally applied to the entire membership of the local church, truly applies only to men in leadership positions caught in overt and particularly gross sinfulness (as the prior context of 1Tim.5:17-19 clearly shows). Furthermore, rather than a self-generated confession to God, what is being described in that verse is a process of corrective censure coming from apostolic oversight (and now, in the absence of the office of apostleship, from the congregation or other members of the leadership). The rationale for such public rebuke of leaders is clear. Those entrusted with the welfare of the church must be above reproach (1Tim.3:2; Tit.2:7-8), not sinlessly perfect (1Kng.8:46), but free of sin so gross and overt that it compromises their duties (1Tim.3:1-13; Tit.1:5-16; 1Pet.5:1-4; cf. Jn.21:15-18). Similar to the above is the principle of disciplining outrageous sinfulness among the membership of the local church (1Cor.5; cf. 2Tim.4:2; Tit.1:13; 2:15), but here too what we have is formal rebuke rather than confession. David's confession to Nathan the prophet when confronted with his sin in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba constitutes an Old Testament equivalent (2Sam.12:13).
- Reconciliation: Jesus tells us that before coming to God to ask forgiveness, we need first to make sure that our brothers and sisters have nothing against us (Matt.5:23-24), and that, if we are on the receiving end of this request for forgiveness and reconciliation, we should be willing to grant it even if happens "seventy times seven times" (Matt.18:21-22). Here too what we have is not really so much a confession or admission of sins – those whom we have wronged are well aware of what we have done – but rather a request to be reconciled and to receive forgiveness in human terms.
- Confession in solicitation of prayer: James 5:16 is frequently misunderstood because it is generally read and applied out of context. In the context (i.e., verses 13-18), we see that confessing our sins to others is being recommended (rather than required) in cases where we are approaching the sin unto death on account of excessive sin and therefore desperately in need of the prayer support of others. We should note well that only church leadership is being recommended as the audience for such an admission of sins, and only

in the circumstance of terminal or at least very serious illness where the prayers of the church leadership are being solicited. The reason for this is that we as believers do have the right to petition the Lord on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Christ to ask for their forgiveness (cf. Jn.20:23; 1Jn.15:16; cf. Jas.5:15), and since “the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas.5:16b, KJV), the prayers of the church elders will ideally be particularly helpful in such circumstances (it is, after all, for this very reason that they have been called to the sickbed).

- Public Testimony: There are many occasions when it is right and proper for any of us who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb to admit that we are sinners, have sinned, do sin, and are only able to make progress against sin by grace and the power of the Spirit. This may take place in both formal and informal settings, but in either case does not need to involve a specific cataloging of our personal sins (cf. Job 33:27-28). Indeed, it is the case that, beyond some very general indications of our areas of sin (and one should use extreme caution here as well), we should avoid giving the specifics of our sins in such testimonies (because of the serious potential pitfalls, cf. Jude 1:23). Paul’s repeated admission that he was “the worst of sinners” (1Cor.15:9; 1Tim.1:13-16) may serve as a model of what is and what is not appropriate in this regard. In any case, it should be noted that the purpose of such exercises is not personal forgiveness but the edification of others, so that this is also, technically speaking, not a case of confession to God.

3. Forgiveness: As James tells us, it is “the [confessional] prayer offered in *faith*” that brings forgiveness (Jas.5:15). Once we have turned away from our sin and confessed it to God and trusted in Him for our forgiveness, it is absolutely essential that we accept without doubt or reservation the blessed truth that we are in fact forgiven all the sins we thus confess. Nothing could be worse for our spiritual condition than to allow inordinate guilt and nagging doubt to plague our relationship with the Lord after we have done what we have been called upon to do by the Lord through His Word. For He is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.51:7ff.), and if ever we forget this truth or fail to put it fully into practice we are, in effect, denying or at least doubting the efficacy of His marvelous grace, purchased at the highest possible price, the blood of Jesus Christ. Once we have repented of our sins and admitted them to our God, we must be absolutely convinced of our immediate restoration into the full good favor of God. Confession does not necessarily mean that we will not experience any consequences stemming from our sins, for they may result in both natural repercussions and a course of divine discipline. But it does mean that we have been forgiven them immediately upon confessing them, and that our fellowship with our Lord has been restored.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we are lying and are not acting truthfully. But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we do have fellowship with one another (i.e., with the Father and the Son; cf. v.3), and the blood of Jesus His Son is cleansing us from all sin. 1st John 1:6-7

And [so the prodigal son] got up and returned to his father. But while he was still some distance away, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. And he ran toward him and fell upon his neck and kissed him. And his son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.” But his father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring a fine suit of clothes and put it on him, and put a signet ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fatted calf. Butcher it so that we may eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and has [now] come back to life. He was lost, but he has been found.” And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:20-24

Our heavenly Father loves us, loves us so much that He gave His one and only Son over to death for us. And Jesus loves us so much that He went to the cross for us, to die in our place, to redeem us with His life’s blood. God wants us to turn from sin and to turn back to Him. He is eager to “forgive us and to cleanse us from all our unrighteousness” (1Jn.1:9), and, like the father of the prodigal son (Lk.15:17-24), delighted to welcome us back into His embrace (cf. Is.12:1-6). It is not only permissible for us to put aside our feelings of guilt and remorse after we have been cleansed in this way and welcomed back into our Father’s good graces and our Lord’s warm fellowship, but it is imperative that we do so (cf. 2Cor.5:17-21). Failing to accept the truth that we have been forgiven, cleansed, and restored following our return to God is to doubt the promises, the character, the integrity, the goodness, and the love of God. It is also to subtly diminish the saving work of Christ on the cross. For beyond all argument Jesus has already paid for all of our sins with His own blood. Being unwilling to accept the truth of our forgiveness in Him when we have come back to Him in our hearts is, at the very least, a failure to appreciate the reality, the moment, and the magnitude of His blessed sacrifice on our behalf.

God’s forgiveness of us is based upon who He is and what Jesus has already done. Therefore we must be careful to avoid the blasphemous notion that our repentance and confession are anything more than obedience to His commands. We have all like sheep gone astray (Is.53:6; cf. Ps.119:176), but God in His great mercy and love is ever filled with compassion for those who are truly His, the sheep of His hand for whom the Great Shepherd of the sheep gave up His life (1Pet.5:4; cf. Jn.10:1-18). The truth of the compassion, love, mercy, and forgiveness of our God runs deep and wide throughout the scriptures, and we cannot help but open our eyes and our hearts wide to it with shouts of thanksgiving and tears of joy (cf. Ps.130:3-4; Is.57:15-19; Dan.9:9).

“The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit – a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God. “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I held my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord your Redeemer. “To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my

covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah
54:6-10 NIV

So what shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for our sake, how will He not also graciously give us everything [we need] along with [that gift of] Him? Who will [dare to] bring charges against God’s elect? God is the One who is pronouncing [us] justified. Who is he that condemns [us]? Christ Jesus is the One who died [condemned in our place], and the One, moreover, who was raised from the dead [for us], who is [seated] at the right hand of God, who is also making petitions on our behalf. What will separate us from Christ’s love? Tribulation? Or privation? Or persecution? Or hunger? Or destitution? Or danger? Or violence? As it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long. We were accounted as sheep for slaughter”. But in all such things we are decisively victorious through Him who loved us [enough to do what He did for us]. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angelic nor human authorities, neither things present nor things to come, neither heavenly powers, be they the highest [of the elect] or the lowest [of the fallen], nor any other created thing [on this earth] will be able to separate us from *the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Romans 8:31-39

For if God is good and gracious and compassionate by nature, if He has already sacrificed His one and only Son on our behalf, and if Jesus has already paid the penalty for all of our sins through His death for us on the cross, how could it possibly be that we who have been accounted righteous in our Lord Jesus Christ would not be immediately and completely forgiven all of our sins just as soon as we are willing to admit them to ourselves and acknowledge them to our God? Indeed, to have any other opinion, even if it be a mere emotional impression, is to completely misread and misunderstand the essence of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Our Father understands the difficulties of this life and the problems we face in this world. Our Savior understands them from personal experience (Heb.4:15; cf. Heb.2:14-18). God knows the struggles we have with sin, the sinful nature within us, and the temptations of the world without, energized and directed in large part by the evil one. In our struggles against sin, we must learn to resist effectively and not minimize the effects of any of our actions which are not consistent with walking the way Jesus walked (1Jn.2:6). But we must also understand that we will make mistakes (1Jn.1:10), and must be quick to return to our Lord when we stumble and be fully convinced in our hearts of His complete forgiveness of us when we do come back to Him. If we would be successful in our Christian walk and in carrying out the mandates and mission that our Lord has for each and every one of us, we must hold on tight to both truths, refusing to give up the fight against sin, even as we glory and rejoice with complete assurance in the forgiveness we have in Jesus on every occasion when we do turn from our sin (cf. Deut.30).

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. Micah 7:18-19 NIV

And you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Return to Me’, says the Lord of hosts, ‘and I will return to you’, says the Lord of hosts”. Zechariah 1:3

2. The Principle and Process of Sanctification

1. The Principle of Experiential Sanctification: God is our Father. Even when we sin, He loves us as His own dear children – and such we are (1Jn.3:1-3). He deeply desires us to return to Him when we sin (Is.1:18), and, when we do sin, both the Son and the Spirit intercede on our behalf (Rom.8:27; 8:34; 1Jn.2:1; cf. Mic.7:8-9; Zech.3; Jn.1:4-17).

Confession is in truth not something God needs from us but something we need to do in order to understand and navigate our relationship with Him. If we are going to walk as Jesus walked, we need this mechanism as a test and a check of our spiritual status and as a measure of our progress (or lack thereof) in the spiritual life we have been called to lead. Our forgiveness is already waiting for us, stored up in the treasury of God’s riches and provided by that most valuable of all treasures, the Father’s gift of Jesus Christ and His gift of Himself on the cross. In Him we have been forgiven once and for all at salvation with a forgiveness that is immutable as long as we believe. But while the “positional” forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ is secure, we nevertheless do require the continuing “experiential” forgiveness of the sins we commit as we walk through this world.

Repentance and confession are the means God has provided for us to regain the experience and reality of forgiveness in time. Like children whose status in the family is immutable, yet who are required to respond in a positive and repentant way when disciplined for their rebellious actions, so we too must be ever mindful of the need to turn back to our heavenly Father whenever we find ourselves caught up in sin. For we have already been “bathed” from sin (1Cor.6:11), and so, as we walk through this world, only need to have the dirt picked up by our feet washed off (Jn.13:10). Therefore if we make swift repentance and regular confession our practice, then we are truly “walking in the light”, with the result that “the blood of His Son continues to cleanse us from all sin” (1Jn.1:7). This includes sins whose deleterious nature we may not fully appreciate at the time, as well as transgressions that may escape our notice altogether. As long as we stay on the correct course, the “walk in the light” following after our Savior Jesus Christ, we need not have any fear (temporally or eternally) of unnoticed and unconfessed sins of ignorance. As long as we are purposefully headed in the right direction, repenting and confessing our sins on a regular basis, the gap between the perfect ideal to which we have been called and the reality of our necessarily imperfect application will not be so large as to fatally hinder our spiritual growth. Ideally, this gap should narrow over time as we advance in the Christian life. The process of narrowing the gap is called in scripture “sanctification”.

2. The Process of Experiential Sanctification: We are “holy” in Jesus (1Cor.6:11), and in resurrection in the New Jerusalem we will be “holy” in the presence of our God forevermore (cf.

1Jn.3:2; Rev.21:27; 22:3; 22:14-15). However, in these bodies of sin, in this world of lust and decay, under the pressures proceeding from the evil one, our holiness is maculate, even under the best of circumstances and with the best of intentions. As we proceed in the Christian life, our knowledge should increase as should our motivation and our discipline. But pressures have a tendency to increase as well as we advance on the road to spiritual growth, and we will never be completely free of sin this side of eternity. Therefore the process of becoming holy, of living in a more and more sanctified way, is one of utmost concern for the dedicated believer in Jesus Christ – or should be. The process of becoming more holy or sanctified in time, “experiential sanctification”, is the *defensive* counterpart to production and active ministering according to our various spiritual gifts, that is, our taking up the *offensive* in the Christian life. Both elements are dependent upon and essentially inextricable from the process of spiritual growth. The Christian walk generally and spiritual growth in particular are subjects that properly belong to part 6A of this series, “Peripateology: the Biblical Study of the Christian Walk”. However, since sanctification or holiness is essentially defined in terms of our separation from sin, it is appropriate for us to consider this aspect of the Christian walk in our present study.

1) Definition: Experiential sanctification is the process of becoming sanctified or holy, of gaining, laying hold of, exhibiting, and acting according to the biblical principles of true holiness. Neither of the two etymological roots seen in the two key words “sanctified” and “holy” are themselves biblical, and both have connotations in contemporary English which are somewhat misleading in terms of what the Bible actually means by the process of sanctification and the pursuit of holiness. The Greek root *hag-* (‘αγ) stands behind all of the words in the New Testament which convey the notion of holiness (rendered in the versions by variants of “holy” and “sanctified”; cf. the corresponding Hebrew *qadash*, wdq). This root possesses as its basic idea the separation of the realm of the divine from the realm of the profane. Put in its most basic, biblical terms, holiness is separation from sin, and sanctification is the process by which such separation from sin is achieved.

It is essential to appreciate from the beginning of this discussion that 1) except for our perfect Lord, no human being has ever achieved a state of complete, experiential sanctification (cf. the biblical commentary on the records of Abraham and Moses, two of the greatest believers who ever lived: Is.43:27); and that 2) sanctification is *true* separation from sin rather than either the mere appearance of living a holy life on the one hand, or the separation of oneself only from such sins as one or one’s peers may find particularly disturbing or offensive on the other. In respect to the first caveat above, the essential and enduring sinfulness of everyone born with a sin nature has been sufficiently set forth in the previous sections of this study (see especially section II.2). Reining in the sin nature with its multifarious lusts and desires is neither an easy nor a short-term task, but is an essential and continuing necessity for all who choose to walk as Jesus walked (which is, of course, the only sure way to salvation, spiritual growth, and eternal reward). In respect to the second caveat, the reader is referred to those sections above which document the wide swath sin cuts through all areas of human behavior, potentially affecting everything we think, say, and do (see section II.7). To limit one’s personal definition of sin to a few obvious and personally detested types of behavior, then claim “holiness” on the basis of refraining from a

small set of prohibitions, constitutes hypocrisy to a pharisaical degree (Matt.23:1-32; cf. 2Tim.3:5). If we would be truly holy, we must turn away from **all** sin, and must learn to limit, control, and, eventually, eliminate sin to an ever greater degree in every aspect of our lives. For there can be no doubt that God has most definitely called us to this task.

(19) I [am going to] put this in human terms because your flesh is [still] weak: just as you [once] presented your [bodily] members as servants to impurity and to lawlessness in the service of lawlessness, so now present your [bodily members] as servants to righteousness **in the service of sanctification!** (20) For when you were servants of sin, you were free from righteousness. (21) So what fruit were you bearing then? [Only] things of which you are now ashamed! And the end result of all those things is [spiritual] death. (22) But as it is now, having been liberated from sin and made subservient to God, the fruit [you bear] is **in the service of sanctification**, and the end result of this is eternal life. Romans 6:19-22

Therefore, my beloved, possessing such promises as these, let us cleanse ourselves from every pollution of body and spirit, **perfecting our sanctification in the fear of God.**
2nd Corinthians 7:1

(25) Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved His Church and gave Himself over [to death] on her behalf, (26) **so that He might sanctify her**, having purified her by the washing of the water [of truth] in [His] Word. (27), so that He might Himself [and] for Himself present His Church in glory, without spot or blemish, but **so that she might [instead] be holy** and without blame. Ephesians 5:25-27

And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all men, just as also we have toward you, that you may stabilize your hearts **blameless in sanctification** before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His holy ones. 1Thessalonians 3:12-13

This is the will of God: **your sanctification**, to keep away from sexual immorality, for each of you to know how to control his own body **in sanctification** and honor (not in lustful desire like the gentiles who do not know God), not to overstep and take advantage of your brother in any matter, for the Lord avenges all such actions, just as I told you before and solemnly testified to you. For God did not call us to impurity but **in sanctification.** 1st Thessalonians 4:3-7

[God] who saved us and called us **to a holy calling**, not through our works, but through His own [sovereign] choice [of us] and [His] grace [towards us], [that grace] which was given to us in Christ Jesus in eternity past. 2nd Timothy 1:9

For while our human fathers meted out our punishment for a relatively short time according as they saw best, when [God] punishes us it is definitely for our own good - **that we might partake of His holiness.** Hebrews 12:10

Pursue peace with everyone and *sanctification*, without which no one will see the Lord.
Hebrews 12:14

But just as He who has called you is holy, *you too should be entirely holy in your behavior*. For the scripture says: *Be holy*, because I am holy.
1st Peter 1:16 (see also Lev.11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7)

And everyone who has this hope in Him (i.e., of resurrection and eternal life) *is sanctifying himself* just as that One (i.e., Jesus Christ) is holy. 1st John 3:3

Let the unrighteous continue to act unrighteously, and let him who is filthy continue in his filthiness, and let the righteous continue to produce righteousness, and *let him who is sanctified continue in his sanctification*". Revelation 22:11

2) The call to turn away from sin: The Bible is filled both with prohibitions against specific transgressions as well as many general exhortations to turn away from sin and evil in general and to live holy lives instead. Scripture makes it quite clear that the walk necessary to please God, avoid trouble, and live productive lives for the Lord must include learning how to give sin a wide berth in all of its manifestations, whether it proceeds from the heart, the tongue, or the hand.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil. Proverbs 4:23-27 NIV

Indeed, since we have been forgiven our sins, since we are sanctified in Christ, and since we have been made righteous in Him, it is not just the case that we ought to walk as those who have been forgiven, sanctified, and justified, but it is also the fact that our Lord expects us to do so and that scripture often describes believers as people who *do* walk in a cleansed, holy, and righteous way. Sinlessness, holiness, and righteousness are, for those of us who have committed ourselves to following in the footsteps of our Savior, more than mere words. They are what amounts to a "job description" which, ideally, should indeed describe how we actually *do* walk.

(4) Everyone who does sin also does lawlessness. Indeed, sin is lawlessness. (5) And you know that that One appeared to take away our sins, and sin is not in Him. (6) No one abiding in Him continues in [a life of] sin. No one who continues in [a life of] sin has seen Him or known Him. (7) Children, let no one deceive you. The one who performs righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. (8) The one who continues in [a life of] sin is of the devil, since the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God appeared, to destroy the works of the devil. (9) No one who has been born of God continues in [a life of] sin, since His seed (i.e., the Word of truth in which we believe) remains in him, and [so] he is not able to continue in [a life of] sin since he has been born of God. (10) By this [principle] the children of God and the

children of the devil are [made] manifest. No one who is not performing righteousness is of God, even the one who is not loving his brother. 1st John 3:4-10

3) The will to turn away from sin: Rather than expecting us to see the standard above as impossible, God has filled His Bible to overflowing with encouragement for us, exhorting us to take up the challenge of living the life we have been called to lead. The forgiveness, righteousness, and sanctification we have by virtue of being one with our Lord Jesus Christ should motivate us to strive to make our behavior on earth conform to our status in heaven. The first step in the admittedly difficult and lifelong process of refining our behavior day by day to bring it more and more in line with that of our Lord's is the development of an attitude dedicated to doing what is right while allowing sin and sinfulness no quarter.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen [into an angry stare]? Will you not be forgiven if you do what is right? But, if you do not do what is right, [know] that sin is crouching at the door, and that it desires to have you – but you must gain the mastery over it". Genesis 4:6-7

You have not yet resisted to the point of [having shed your] blood in your struggle against sin. Hebrews 12:4

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not [even] make any plans for carrying out the lusts of the flesh. Romans 13:14

In the same way [that Christ did], consider yourselves as well to be [positionally] dead to sin, but [spiritually] alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord! So do not let sin reign in your mortal body so as to obey its lusts, and do not offer up your [bodily] members to sin as weapons of unrighteousness. But rather offer yourselves up to God as those now alive from the dead, and [offer up] your [bodily] members to God as weapons of righteousness. Because sin will not (i.e., **must not**) rule over you, for you are not under [the] Law but under grace. Romans 6:11-14

For God's grace, overflowing with salvation, has [now in Jesus Christ] gloriously appeared to all men. [This grace] instructs us to reject ungodliness and worldly lusts, and [instead] to live our lives in this world in a prudent, and righteous, and godly way. Titus 2:11

"Don't keep sinning any longer, lest something worse befall you." (Jesus to the lame man He had healed at the pool of Bethesda) John 5:14

Wake up (i.e., from your "sleepy" indulgence in sin) [and start living] righteously. And don't keep sinning. For some of you have an ignorance of God (i.e., do not fear Him as you should). I say this to your shame. 1st Corinthians 15:34

But the solid foundation of God (i.e., that each of us lays down in the heart; cf. 1Cor.3:10-11) stands firm with this seal [of approval]: “The Lord knows those who [truly] belong to Him”, and “Let everyone who calls upon the Name of the Lord stand clear of unrighteousness”. Now in a large household there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and clay, the former [meant] for noble purposes, the latter for ignoble ones. Therefore if anyone purifies himself from these [sinful activities], he will be a vessel [used] for noble purposes, *sanctified*, most useful to his Lord, and ready for every honorable job. So flee youthful lusts, and pursue [instead] righteousness, faith, love, [and] peace with all who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. 2nd Timothy 2:19-22

A key element in the development of an attitude resistant to sin is resiliency in self-discipline or biblical “self-control”, the ability to follow up the course of action upon which we have determined with staying power even when temptation rises and threatens to swamp our resolve (Acts 24:25; 1Cor.7:9; Gal.5:23; Tit.1:8; 2Pet.1:6). We must in such times remember that God will always provide an exit from such testing and temptation, whether He chooses to deliver us from it or through it (1Cor.10:13).

Don’t you know that all the runners in the stadium run the race, but that only one receives the prize? Run in such a way so as to achieve what you are after. And again, everyone involved in competition *exercises self-control in all respects*. Those athletes go through such things so that they may receive a perishable crown of victory, but we do it to receive an imperishable one. So as I run this race of ours, I’m heading straight for the finish line; and as I box this bout of ours, I’m making every punch count. I’m “pummeling my body”, one might say, bringing myself under strict control so that, after having preached [the gospel] to others, I might not myself be disqualified [from receiving the prize we all seek]. 1st Corinthians 9:24-27

4) The ministry of the Holy Spirit: We are not alone in our struggle against sin and for sanctification (1Thes.5:24; cf. Phil.2:13). As believers in Jesus Christ we have an ally of limitless power, we have the very Spirit of God indwelling us, filling us, empowering us. The only limits on His power and influence are those we ourselves impose by failing and refusing to respond to His guidance (Eph.4:30; 5:18; 1Thes.5:19; cf. Is.63:10). To the extent that we yield up our will to Him and respond positively to the discipline we receive, we will find that the grace God gives us in this battle against sin and for sanctification will be greater than any trouble or temptation we will ever face (Jas.4:5-6; cf. Rom.8:1-17; Eph.6:18). For the One who indwells us is, after all, the very “Spirit of holiness” (Rom.1:4; cf. Rom.15:16; 1Pet.1:2).

For greater is He who is in you (i.e., the Spirit) than he who is in the world (i.e., Satan). 1st John 4:4b

(15) But if you bite and devour each other, take care that you are not consumed by each other. (16) But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for. (17) For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit’s will, and the Spirit is

opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (20) idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; (21) drunkenness, orgies – and whatever is similar to all these things. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, uprightness, faith, (23) humility, self-control. Against such things, there is no Law. (24) Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its weaknesses and its lusts. (25) If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by means of the Spirit. Galatians 5:15-25

So then, brothers, we are under obligation – but not to the flesh to live by its rules. For if you are living by the rules of the flesh, you are destined to die. But if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. Romans 8:12-13

5) Prayer: As children of God, we have access to the Father through prayer on account of Jesus' sacrifice for us (Rom.5:2; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.13:10; cf. Heb.6:19-20). When we do sin, we have our Savior Jesus Christ as our advocate before the Father (Rom.8:34; Heb.7:25; 9:24; 1Jn.2:1), and we have the Holy Spirit interceding on our behalf as well (Rom.8:26-27; cf. Jn.14:16-17; Eph.6:18). If we ask help from God, He stands ready to give it to us (Lk.11:9-12; Jas.1:5), and Jesus has promised us to answer prayers offered in His Name (Jn.14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-27). Let us therefore be quick to turn to the Lord in prayer for help in our battle against sin, for He will help us in our time of need, both to resist the temptation to sin and to recover from sin when we fail (Ps.119:133).

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Romans 8:26-27 NIV

So let us approach the throne of grace with boldness of speech that we may receive mercy and find favor for help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16

Who can know [all] his sins of ignorance? Cleanse me from [my errors that are] hidden [from me]. And also hold your servant back from arrogant sins. Let them not have mastery over me! Then I will be [a man] of integrity, and will be innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer! Psalm 19:12-14

6) Knowledge: As we are told many times in scripture, to fear God is the foundation of all true knowledge and wisdom (Job 28:28; Ps.111:10; Prov.1:7; 9:10; 31:30; Eccl.12:13; cf. Is.11:1-3; 33:6; Ps.130:4). The better we know God and His truth, the more willing and able we will be to

fight the fight against sin, and to pursue the goal of sanctification and holiness to which we have been called. Sanctification is not something that can be “worked up” overnight, no matter how great our dedication or intense our motivation. Spiritual growth through receiving and understanding the truth of the Word of God is an essential part of the process of sanctification. The more we know, not just intellectually but experientially, that is, not just as *gnosis* or academic knowledge, but as *epignosis* or internalized, accepted, and believed truth to which we are committed, the better able we are not only to discern sin, but also to avoid temptation and to bear up under it when we must. If we truly wish to walk in a holy way as our Lord would have us to do, there can be no substitute for continuing, purposeful spiritual growth, without which meaningful sanctification is impossible (Tit.1:1; and see the Peter series). Only by turning our earthly thinking into divine thinking can we hope to effectively turn away from sin and evil on a consistent basis, and the only way to so “reprogram” our fleshly minds is through the pure water of the Word of the God, the very thinking of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (1Cor.2:6-16).

I have given them Your word, and the world hated them, because they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. For they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. ***So make them holy by means of Your truth*** – Your word is truth. And just as you sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. I am consecrating Myself for their sake, so that they too ***may be made holy*** (i.e., “be sanctified”) ***through truth***.
John 17:14-19

We have much to say about this [subject of Christ’s priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God’s truth are again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food! For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant. Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.
Hebrews 5:11-14

7) Good Habits: The world is a dangerous place, spiritually speaking. It is filled with evil people, evil practices, and ruled over by the evil one. As long as we are in it, we must cope with the limitations of our sinful flesh, and cope too with the pressures that the world brings to bear against us. Indeed, we are not called upon to leave this world, for the Lord has instead left us in this world as a witness to it and against it. The importance of a good walk in order to preserve a good witness for Jesus Christ should thus be obvious to all. Therefore as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ we all need to remember where we are and what we have been called to do. We need to be as innocent as doves in the way we walk but at the same time as wise about the world as serpents (Matt.10:16; cf. 1Cor.14:20). We need to remember that certain behaviors which are no problem for us personally may be dangerous for our fellow believers, and we must therefore be careful not to put a stumbling block in the way of those for whom Christ died (cf. Rom.14:1 -

15:4). At the same time we need to remember that we are all different and are all tempted in different ways – what may be no problem for someone else may be a great temptation for us. Even the greatest believers of the Bible, David, Moses, and Elijah, for example, were not immune to being thrown off of the straight path when they let their guard down. We need to learn what circumstances, places, behaviors, and individuals to avoid. For it is true of us all that “bad companions corrupt good morals” (1Cor.15:33; cf. Prov.13:20). Therefore in everything we do we need to cultivate habits of thinking, of speech, and of overt behavior which avoid sin, questionable accommodation with the world, and, ideally, even the appearance of the same. In so doing we will be true children of the Father who loves us, and good servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If anyone assumes that he is “religious”, but is not keeping his tongue in check and only deceiving his [own] heart [instead], his “religion” is pointless. “Religion” which is pure and uncontaminated before our God and Father is [of] this [sort]: to help orphans and widows in their distress (i.e., an example of “good offense”), to keep oneself undefiled from [the contamination of] the world (i.e., the principle of “good defense”).

James 1:26-27

8) Newness of life: Although the ultimate victory over sin will not be won until the final trumpet sounds and we rise incorruptible to be with our Lord forever (1Cor.15:52-57), we have been born again to the living hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ (Jn.3:3-8; Jn.5:24, Rom.5:17; 8:10; Eph.2:1-10; Col.2:13; Jas.1:18; 1Jn.3:14; cf. Jn.1:13; Acts 5:20). For believers in Jesus, everything is new (Rev.21:5). The old things have passed away in principle (cf. Rev.21:4), and we have died to this present world along with all of its sin, evil, and decay (Rom.6:1-14; 7:1-6; 8:13; Gal.2:19; 5:24; 6:14; Eph.4:22-24; Col.2:20; 1Pet.2:24; cf. Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15). Instead, we have been called to life in the newness of life that we now possess in union with our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore we have been buried with Him (i.e., Jesus) through this baptism [of the Spirit] into His death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the Glory of the Father, so also *we might walk in newness of life*. Romans 6:4

Therefore I entreat you by God’s mercy, brothers, to dedicate your bodies as a living sacrifice, well-pleasing to God – [this is] your “priestly-service” spiritually performed. Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by this renewal of your thinking*, so that you may discern what God’s will for you is, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do]. Romans 12:1-2

(16) For this reason we do not lose heart, but even if our outer person is deteriorating, nevertheless *our inner person is being renewed day by day*. (17) For this present light affliction of ours is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond any possible estimation. (18) [Let us] not [then be] having [any] regard for what can be seen, but [instead] for what cannot be seen. For the things which can be seen are ephemeral. But the things which cannot be seen are eternal. 2nd Corinthians 4:16-18

(14) For it is the love of Christ that constrains us, having brought us to this conclusion: One died for [us] all; so then we all have died [in Him]. (15) And He died on behalf of all so that those who are [now] alive might no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised [from the dead]. (16) So from now on we see no one in fleshly terms (i.e., but rather from this spiritual perspective). And even though we saw Christ in the flesh, we no longer rely on that fleshly perspective. (17) For if anyone is in Christ, that person is a **new creation**. Prior things have passed away. Look! **New things** have come.

2nd Corinthians 5:14-17

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is significant, but what is significant is a **new creation** (i.e., Jewish and gentile believers united in Christ). Galatians 6:15

(21) [For you have learned the truth] – if, at any rate, you have truly heard Him (i.e., Jesus) and have been instructed in Him according to what is [definitely] true in Jesus – (22) that in respect to your previous behavior you have put off the old Man, the one that is being destroyed by deceptive lusts, (23) and that instead you are being **re-made** in the spirit of your mind, (24) and that you have **put on the new Man**, the one **created** in righteousness and sanctity of the truth according to God's standards.

Ephesians 4:21-24

Stop lying to each other, having put aside your “former person” (i.e., don’t obey your “old” person/man, that is, your sin nature; cf. verses 1-8), and having **put on the “new” one which is being renewed** to obedient knowledge according to the pattern of the One who created it. Colossians 3:9-10

Conclusion: As long as we live in this world, we shall struggle against sin. But we can and we must take comfort in the fact that Jesus died for every one of our sins, and that God’s mercy through His blood is ever available for the cleansing of His children who are walking in the light. Let us therefore embrace these truths, not disregarding the call to be holy, forgetful of the holy fear of God, nor fearing His wrath so much that we stumble in our faith, for He is merciful. May we ever be slow to turn to sin, and quick to turn back to our Lord when we do, recognizing our imperfection, but seeking to perfectly follow in the footsteps of the One who died that we might have eternal life. Let us stand secure on the work of Christ, and diligently strive to produce fruit for the One who bought us and called to a holy life of service for Him and for His Church. And let us be ever willing to confess our sins, admitting all of our shortcomings to our God and Father on each and every occasion when we come before His throne of grace in prayer.

When I was silent [about my sin], my bones grew old with groaning all day long, because day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vigor was drained away as by the heat of summer. [Until] I said, “I will make my sin known to You, and I will not cover [over] my guilt. I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”, and You forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*. Therefore let every Psalm 32:3-5 (cf. Ps.51)

“Come now, and let us consider your case” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like [white] wool. If you are willing and will listen, you will eat the good [things] the land produces. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 1:18-20

I have wiped away your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like vapor. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you! Isaiah 44:22

Have mercy on me, O God, sinner that I am! Luke 18:13b

Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil by means of the good. Romans 12:21

Blessed is the man who stands firm in temptation, because when he has been [tested and] approved he will receive the crown of life which [God] has promised to all who love Him. James 1:12

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and was and is coming (i.e., the Father), and from the seven spirits (i.e., the Holy Spirit) which are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth. To the One who loves us ***and has released us from our sins by His blood*** – and He has made us a kingdom, priests of His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. Revelation 1:4b-6