

The Whole Counsel of God
Study 17

WHAT IS SIN?

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

Romans 3.23

We will begin our study of the doctrine of sin by asking the question, what is sin? This word is built into the core of the Christian faith as is witnessed by such central statements on Christ’s mission as, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1Tim 1.15), and, “Christ died for our sins” (1Cor 15.3).

The word sin is one of those household terms of the church. But, as is commonly the case with such words, there is trouble under the surface. Christians just know how to use the word sin, but with this familiarity comes a hidden danger. The meaning of the word is assumed and often left unspecified, and this can have frustrating results. People join in putting the label sin on certain behaviours but they may not be working with a common understanding. In fact, they may be working with very different and conflicting ideas. This is not simply a problem in the common conversation among Christians but can also obscure the discussion of biblical doctrine. From time to time, we have to go beneath the surface of rhetoric and examine and clarify our ideas.

The word sin has come into a deeper crisis. Our culture has largely dropped the term. The idea of sin no longer has a place in the way people commonly think. When we say that a person has sinned, we are evaluating his action with reference to a divine law or moral order that is above human beings. In our postmodern world, such a judgmental concept is perceived as evil and unacceptable. Human behaviour is rather evaluated in psychological, sociological and medical terms. The word sin is perceived as a religious term that must be left behind with bad religion.

Whatever shifts take place in the minds of people and whatever changes occur in the world, the word of our God stands forever (Isa 40.8), and this is true of the word of his salvation as well as of his judgment. The biblical terms for sin, enshrined in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the scriptures, remain. We must also keep in mind that languages are not just boxes of labels for things, events and experiences. Language is a way of looking at things, events and experiences. It is a way of thinking. This is true of the scriptural use of language. Through its use of words, the scriptures present a way of seeing things, and among other things it makes us look at the dark and evil side of human behaviour in a certain way.

In the study of the doctrine of sin, we have to enter the biblical way of thinking and conform our minds to the revealed mind of God. As we engage in this, the concept of sin will be clarified for us, a concept that Christians use so freely when sharing the gospel, when worshipping God for his redeeming love, when learning the way of sanctification and when judging the evil in the world around them. The word sin will no longer simply be a term that has its place in the gospel. It will be a term that speaks and says something about the gospel.

A. NAMING THE SUBJECT

We might ask, “If the word sin poses a communication problem, why not choose another term that will ease things up?” I am not raising this question to suggest hunting around for another word but to raise the question of terminology for our study. In the discussion of doctrinal topics, our subject is commonly called the doctrine of sin. Should we stick with this name?

When Christians read Genesis 3, they just understand that this is the account of the first sin. In fact, we almost assume that the word sin is used in this narrative. Actually it is not. The only term used for this act

in Genesis 3 is the descriptive one of eating. The first sin was at one level a simple act of eating. The woman ate and gave to her husband and he ate (Gen 3.6). God asked Adam the searching question, “Did you eat...? (v 11)” He prefaced the sentence over Adam by pointing out the charge: you ate (v 17). Things cannot be left at this. We need a name that identifies the act by what was wrong with it.

Romans 5.12-21 gives us a very different vantage point from which to see the first sin and all other sins that came out of it. The apostle Paul has guided his readers out from the universal condition under sin (3.9) to the position in which they boast in God (5.11). Sin has been removed before God by the death of Christ and the believer has the assurance of the glory of God. He is confident of being reconciled to God. From this spiritual height, the apostle makes us look back at sin to see it not as what we have done or what we are under but as that which entered the world through Adam in contrast to that which has come through Jesus Christ. Now we get an objective view of sin. We stand in Christ—no longer under sin—and now we can look at sin as a whole and point to it. This gives us a doctrinal perspective on sin.

As we go into Rom 5.12-21, we soon realize that sin is not referred to by a single term. The apostle uses four words for the act of Adam, only one of which is the word sin. This raises some interesting questions for our study. Is sin simply one thing? Why have Christian theologians latched onto that one word to deal with this subject? The fact that several words are used for the same act presses the question as to the difference between the terms, and this raises the question about what the word sin means.

To begin with we have to contend with Bible translators. Often they do not stick with the same English word to represent one word in the original language. This interferes with word studies. So, we have to work through the terms Paul uses and be consistent in assigning English words to represent them.

The first term Paul uses is *hamartia* which is translated as *sin*. He begins, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (5.12). In vv 13-14 Paul proceeds to introduce a distinction in types of sins. For sin that is imputed under a law, he uses *parabasis*, and we will represent this word with *transgression*. In vv 15 -18 Paul works out the contrast between what came through Adam’s one act and what came through Christ. Here he uses another word, *paraptōma*, for which we will use the term *trespass*. The last term he uses is found in v 19. Here Adam’s sin is presented as an act of disobedience (*parakoē*).

Sin

Bible translators are quite consistent in representing the Greek word *hamartia* with our word sin. The basic idea in this Greek word is to miss the mark or miss something (such as a road). This word was used for failure to do something or for doing something wrong.

The Greek word we are considering is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *hāṭā’* which means to miss something. This Hebrew word is used with its literal sense in Judges 20.16 that tells of the 700 left-handed Benjamites who could sling a stone at a hair and not *miss*. The word is used in Prov 19.2: he who hurries his footsteps *errs* (i.e., misses the way).

The Hebrew word for sin that we are looking at is the predominant word for sin in the OT. In the Greek LXX, it was translated principally with the Greek word *hamartia* for good reason. The words are a good match. This Greek word is the word used most often for wrong doing in the NT.

The English language does not have a word that matches *hamartia*. The word sin comes from an old Germanic word that at its root means darkness. Early on it was established in the languages of Northern Europe as the Christian term for human wrongdoing. The word has retained its predominantly spiritual sense and refers to wrong behaviour as being against the divine and sacred order. This English word at least has the spiritual weightiness about it that we find in the NT teaching on sin.

Transgression

The second word Paul uses is *parabasis* which has the basic meaning of going or stepping over. Paul's specific use of this term is stated in Rom 4.15: "Where there is no law, there is not transgression (*parabasis*)." All transgression is sin, but all sin is not transgression. Transgression only happens when a sin is committed under a law that specifically forbids the action. It is the act of overstepping a limit set by an explicit law. The word *transgression* comes from a Latin word that means to step or cross over, and this is very close to root meaning of the Greek word *parabasis*.

In Rom 5.14, the apostle speaks of Adam's sin as a transgression. God gave him a clear command, a prohibition, and he stepped over it. Between Adam and Moses, people sinned but did not transgress the way Adam did because God did not give a law in this period. After the giving of the law at Mt Sinai, the Israelites' sins were transgressions like Adam's.

We have stressed the distinction between sin and transgression. We must also see the connection between the two. Romans 3.20 says that "through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." Law makes sin transgression, and in transgression sin is made known for what it is. In Rom 7.7-13 Paul works this out in terms of the human experience of becoming aware of sin. He points out that sin was in him as desire, but he did not know this desire as sin. When the Law entered his conscious experience, it defined and showed up this desire as covetousness. Sin was aroused to break the commandment in every way, and by this sin became utterly sinful (v 13). In the transgression, sin's full character is shown. Transgression is sin brought to the surface.

Trespass

We have chosen this word to represent the Greek word, *paraptōma*. The verb form is *parapiptō* and has the basic meaning to fall beside or to fall away. It is used once in the NT in Heb 6.6 with the sense of falling away. The noun, *paraptōma* is used quite often in the NT for sinful deeds. In Rom 5.16 it is used for the many trespasses of the human race, and in v 20 it is used in parallel with the word *sin*. Sin as an action is a trespass. There is, however, an important distinction to be observed. The word *trespass* is only used of a step of sin. It is not used in the big way that the word *sin* is used. Sin entered the world (5.20) and reigned (5.21). This is not said of the trespass.

The word *trespass* comes from an Old French word that has the basic meaning to pass over. In their root meanings, transgression and trespass are close, but the two words are used differently. Transgression has a clear reference to law. It is the violation of law, and this makes it the appropriate term for *parabasis*. Trespass is a broader term for any unwarranted intrusion or step beyond one's rightful sphere. The Greek word *paraptōma* could also be represented by the word *misstep* which refers to a wrong step or action. However, the sense of offence felt in the word *trespass* is lacking in this word.

The careful and subtle distinctions made between terms are important for understanding sin. Sin is larger than the mere act, but it does not float in the air. It always walks in boots. It is action. Sin in its full character is transgression, but sin also walks where there is no law, and both come under God's impartial judgment. Sins committed under the Law will be explicitly judged since each deed is a transgression that receives its own condemnation. But, sins committed outside of the law are still sins for which people will perish under God's judgment on all sin (Rom 2.12). These sins also have the character of serious violation, and the word *trespass* brings that out.

Disobedience

The last term Paul uses for Adam's sin is *parakoē*. The basic sense of this word is to refuse to listen, i.e., to disobey God's word. God pointed to this in Gen 3.11 when he asked Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? (see also Gen 3.17)."

Of the four words Paul uses for Adam's act, sin is the key term which appears in the opening and closing statements of v 12 and v 21. This term is used in the earlier discussion when Paul summarizes the human position before God (Rom 2.12; 3.9,23), and it is the only one of the four terms carried over to the discussion on sanctification in chapters 6 to 8.

The three other terms Paul uses for Adam's sinful act (transgression, trespass and disobedience) focus on sin as action. Two of the terms focus on the feet. Sin is ever a stepping aside from the right path but under the law it is a stepping over the prescribed boundary. Sin is also a matter of the ear and the will. It is disobeying God. While these three terms fill in our understanding of sin, they also help us to distinguish the specific concept of sin or *hamartia*. This concept is abstract and refers to something large. It does not focus the mind on the feet or the ear but on the way our acts align us with the true aim of human action. It is the largest term.

So far we have only fixed the term for our subject. In the process of doing this, we have gained a feel for the word sin. Now we have to enter into the thought world of scripture to fill in our understanding of the subject. Here we have to immerse ourselves in the biblical text.

B. THE HUMAN SIDE OF SIN

Right from the beginning, the Bible makes us aware that there are two sides to sin. We first of all see the human side. Genesis 3 is the account of Eve and Adam sinning. But, there is also a nonhuman side. Sin did not arise out of the human nature God created. It entered through Satan. This side is pointed to right from the beginning in the role of the serpent, but it is only laid bare through the revelation of God in Christ. We will begin by looking at the human side.

If sin is missing the mark, what is the mark?" To answer this question, we will look at the way Paul develops the theme of sin in Romans. The theme of sin is developed in two directions. First, Paul deals with sin as human behaviour that makes us accountable to God as judge (Rom 1.18-5.11). Sin in this sense needs to be forgiven and the sinner needs to be justified by God. Second, the apostle looks at sin as a reigning agent or force. This perspective on sin is introduced in Rom 5.12-21 and developed in Rom 6.1-8.13 where Paul shows how the believer is engaged by God to wage a war with sin as the great rival to God.

1. Sin as an act (Romans 1.18-5.11)

This part of Romans begins with the affirmation of God's wrath (1.18) and ends on the triumphant note of reconciliation (5.11). The two themes that embrace the discussion on sin and justification point to our relationship with God as the overriding concern. This points to the issue in missing the mark.

a. The reference points for understanding sin

People do not sin in a vacuum. All people exist in relation to God, and the reference point for evaluating their behaviour is the knowledge of God given to them by God. Paul establishes the set of reference points very clearly in Rom 1.18-3.20.

The knowledge of the creator: the Gentiles were given the knowledge of the invisible attributes of the creator, which left them without excuse (Rom 1.20). This knowledge is not mere information to be passively received. It is relational and imposes the duty to glorify God as God and give him thanks (Rom 1.21). Through such worship, people confirm their relationship with the creator and relate to him through all things.

The knowledge of God's judgment: in addition to the knowledge of the creator, the Gentiles had the knowledge of God's righteous decree that the person who practices sins is worthy of death (Rom 1.32).

This knowledge of righteous judgment is the work (function) of the law written in the heart, and the conscience bears witness to it (Rom 1.15).

The Law: The Jews had the advantage over the Gentiles in that they were given the written Law of God, which gave them an explicit knowledge of sin (Rom 2.17-20 and 3.19-20).

God has given all people a measure of knowledge about him so that all must respond to him.

b. Analysis of sin in Romans 1.18-3.20

Romans 1.18 is the thesis statement for the discussion on sin. The whole sweep of human sin is expressed in two terms: all *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness* of men. To this is added that people suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Ungodliness: the Greek word translated ungodliness is *asebeia*, and means to be without reverence. The apostle closes his charges against the human race with the quotation, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (3.18). The opening charge of irreverence and the closing charge of having no fear of God tie the whole discussion on sin together.

The sin of irreverence to God is taken up in the indictment of the Gentiles Rom 1.19-27. The root sin of the Gentiles was not glorifying God as God and not giving thanks. The Gentiles did not relate to God in a way that is true to God. From this sin of neglect, they fell into idolatry by which they went completely out of line with the truth of God. This sin had its due effect was in their self-degradation.

Unrighteousness: in Rom 1.28-32 Paul traces the result of the ungodliness in the general outbreak of vices that ruin all relationships. At the head of the list of vices, he says that they were filled with all unrighteousness (v 29a). Here he draws on the second term for human sin in v 18. Paul ends this list of vices with a statement that clarifies what he means by unrighteousness. They knew the righteous decree of God against those who commit such sins but defied the judgment.

Ungodliness is being out of alignment with the glory and truth of God in the neglect of true worship and in worship of the creature rather than the creator. Unrighteousness is being out of alignment with the truth of God’s judgment against sin.

Suppressing the truth in unrighteousness: Paul takes this charge up in Rom 2.1-16. In v 2 he affirms: “We know that the judgment of God is according to the truth upon all who practice such things” (lit. transl.). In v 8 he points out that wrath and indignation will be on all who do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness. Here he has in mind those who defy God’s judgment in 1.32-2.5.

Romans 2.6-11 reviews the way God will judge and shows that people will be evaluated by God according to the way they have aligned their life. Those who actively seek glory, honour and incorruption will receive eternal life (2.7). These qualities are presented to the human mind in the knowledge of the eternal creator (Rom 1.20), and human beings are to seek them from God. This search sets the whole direction of life. A life that is truly aligned to the glory of God is one that seeks glory from God. Not to glorify God plunges one into corruption.

In Rom 2.17-29 Paul turns his attention to the Jew who stands apart from the Gentiles by having the Law that put him into a covenant relationship with God. His confidence in the Law involved a boast in God (v 17). The Law also gave the knowledge as to which behaviours God forbids. The covenantal status given by the Law and the Law’s instructions on behaviour are united. The Jew’s practice did not line up with the Law and through this he dishonoured God (vv 23-24). As a result, the Jew lost his position in relation to God (vv 25-29). The true covenant relationship with God is to honour him and receive one’s praise from him alone (v 29).

Behind the profiles of the Gentiles and the Jews, we can see the reality of mankind being made in God's image. Paul's indictment of mankind works out how this image functions under sin. The Gentiles exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God and for the corruptible creature and ended up imaging the corruption in themselves. The Jews retained the knowledge of the incorruptible nature of God but dishonoured him in their covenant relationship with him, and as a result they lost the covenantal honour of being Jews.

Paul encapsulates his view of sin in 3.23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin is not simply an act. It involves the entire alignment of one's life and being. Through sin, God is dishonoured and the sinner misses the only true aim of human life, i.e., of man as the created image of God.

c. The right relationship with God (Romans 3.21-5.11)

Paul's discussion on sin is aimed toward his exposition of justification by faith. He makes this link explicit in Rom 3.23. The statement, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," underpins God's free justification by faith, and the concern with the alignment of human life with the truth of God is carried through to the teaching on justification.

The gospel deals with both sides of the divine-human relationship. The concern on God's side is stated in 3.4: "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar." God must be true to what he is in relation to us. How God is true is shown in the righteousness of God (3.21-26). God demonstrates his righteousness in that he is just and the one who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3.26). God's first concern must be that he be just in his act of justifying us.

Paul turns to our side in 3.27ff. Here is the shortlist of the ways faith is true to God:

- ✓ Faith excludes all boasting (3.27), which must be the case before God (4.3)
- ✓ Justification by faith is true to monotheism, that there is one God of all (3.29-30)
- ✓ By faith we establish God's law (v 31)
- ✓ The believer stands in the presence of God who makes the dead alive and calls the things that do not exist as existing (4.17) and gives glory to God (4.20-22)
- ✓ Our faith brings us all the way to boasting in hope of the glory of God (5.2)
- ✓ It all ends with believers boasting in God (5.11)

Sin is being out of alignment with God. Justification by faith removes the misalignment and aligns the believer with God as just (i.e., true to his judgment) and as the God of glory.

2. Sin behind the action (Romans 5.12-8.13)

Now we turn to the other side of sin. Here we see sin not as what we do but as what makes us do what we do. We can only arrive at the full doctrine of sin if we grasp this other side of sin.

a. Seeing sin reigning (Rom 5.12-21)

Romans 5.12-21 draws us into the doctrine of original sin. Later we will take up this doctrine. For now our interest is in how Paul opens up the view of sin as reigning in the world.

Paul begins in v 12 by pointing out that sin entered into the world and that death came through sin. The connection between death and sin is the important link that the apostle sets up.

In Rom 5.13-14 Paul points out that in the period between Adam and Moses sin continued to be in the world and death reigned. What it means for death to reign is quite easy to grasp. Death is universal and all people come under its claim and power. But, more is involved. Sin is only imputed where there is a law, and that means that the divine sentence of death is only passed over people for their own sin if that sin was

a transgression of a law. Where there is no law, the sentence of death is not passed over the people for any particular sin they committed. They must die by the fact that death reigns. This is true to our experience. The fact that people die is not due to their personal wrongdoing. People die because death is like a universal law of human existence on earth. As stated in Rom 5.17, death reigns as a result of Adam's sin.

Now notice the shift in Paul's closing statement in Rom 5.21. Here the apostle does not say that death reigned but that *sin reigned* in death. This shift from death to sin is understandable. The reign of death is only the result of sin so that it is sin that reigns. In making this shift, Paul is introducing the view of sin he will develop in his teaching on sanctification in chapters 6 to 8.

The concept of the universal reign of sin must be grasped from the final evidence of it in the reign of death. Just as the reign of death means that all come under the power of death, so the reign of sin in death means that all come under the power of sin. Adam's descendants do not bring the fact of death on themselves by their own choice. Death is like a king over them. The same holds true of sin's reign. Human beings are not born innocent and set up sin's reign over themselves. Through Adam's sin, sin reigns over his descendants. The Christian comes to learn this terrible reality through his painful experience in his mortal body.

b. Sin as a ruling force (Romans 6.1-8.13)

Romans 6 opens up to us the view of sin as a slave owner that rivals God. Outside of Christ, people are slaves of sin (6.20). When they believe the gospel from the heart (vv 16-17) they become enslaved to God (v 22). The believer who has joyfully become a slave of God soon finds himself in a struggle with sin. Though he has died to sin and is alive to God, he still has a mortal body (6.12). Here we have to keep in mind the inseparable link between sin and death. The fact that the body is mortal points to the presence of sin (the cause of death) in it, and this indwelling sin is active in the body in pressing the believer to obey its lusts (6.12). Notice the word *obey*. The lusts are seen as the commands of the slave master.

The believer is caught between God and sin and must make his decision. This decision is pressed in Rom 6.13. The *NASB* speaks of the members of the body being presented either as *instruments* of unrighteousness to sin or as *instruments* of righteousness to God. The Greek word translated with *instruments* is the word *hopla*, which literally means weaponry. That Paul has a war in mind is confirmed by Rom 7.23 where he sees sin waging a war in his members.

To grasp what Paul is saying we have to see the distinction he makes between the body and its members. The body is the organ through which we exist in this world. Sin exists in this organ. The members are our hands, feet, eyes, ears, tongue, etc., by which we carry out our actions. Sin that dwells in the body through the lusts of the body wants the believer to present his members to carry those lusts out in his actions. It wants to use those members as weapons to fight its battle against God by defeating God's will in the life of the believer. God wants the believer to present his members to him to fight in his war against sin.

The believer who joyfully gave himself over to God finds that God enlisted him as a slave-soldier. His service is first of all military service. He must begin doing the will of God by giving the members of his body to God to defeat sin that is in his body and seeks to defeat the will of God. In Romans 7.14-25 Paul lets us know how fierce this battle gets.

The idea of sin as being actively out of line with God comes through in Romans 6 and 7. As a master, sin is God's rival and aligns its subjects against God. Though sin is not the master of the believer, it still wants the believer to give his members to act out opposition to God's will, to wage sin's war against God.

c. The concept of sin as a power

When the Bible speaks of sin as a power that seeks to master people, a demonic kind of being is not in mind. Sin may be personified at times but sin is never seen as a being that God has created (as is the case

with demons). Sin only works through created agents, whether human or angelic. So, how are we to understand sin as a reigning agency?

People exist within a relationship with God that was set up by God and remains under his power. When they do not align themselves to God, they become trapped under the wrong alignment. The sinner decides to sin, but he cannot control the conditions of his own heart and mind. As he turns from God, darkness and corruption overtake him. In fact, his created nature turns against him. He changes under his own sin. God, who is over all, will bring down upon the sinner's own being the consequences of his own misalignment. Romans 1.18-32 shows us how this worked out in the case of the Gentiles.

The first punishment for sin is that the sinner is locked up in his sin and doomed to progress in sin and be progressively corrupted by it. All of this moves toward sin's final outcome—death. Sin will bring about its full consequences on those who sin. In this way sin reigns over the sinful. The misalignment in relation to God takes over and governs the lives of the misaligned.

In Romans 6 and 7 Paul shows how this rule of sin becomes a reality in our own experience. Sin seeks to reign in the body through the lusts of the body (Rom 6.12). God created the body with the capacity for appetite and enjoyment of things. But, through sin, human nature is not aligned to God. Rather than human nature only desiring what can be received in obedience to God, our nature has become self-directing and desires things without any reference to the will of God. This makes the desires of our bodies sinful; they are not aligned with God.

The word Paul uses for self-directing human nature is *flesh*. In Rom 7.5 Paul points out that while we were in the flesh the passions of sin were at work in the members of our body. Sin has its power through our flesh. Apart from life in Christ by the Spirit, the flesh arrests the mind so that the mind is set on the things of the flesh. This mindset is hostile to God, cannot submit itself to the laws of God and cannot please God (Rom 8.6-8).

Sin involves both our doing and our being and works in two directions. The one who sins becomes a sinner. His actions are not aligned to God and he is put out of alignment with God. But, sin also works the other way. The person is a sinner out of alignment with God. His nature, cut off from God's controlling influences, is oriented against God and he is driven to sin. Sin takes over the whole person.

C. THE OTHER SIDE OF SIN

Sin in its human dimensions is huge, but there is more to it. There is the other side—the rule of Satan and the whole kingdom of darkness over the world in sin.

When we studied the doctrine of angels, we saw that sin had its origin in heaven among the ranks of angels. This is not our concern at present. Rather, our interest is in Satan's involvement in people's slavery to sin. Through the sin of Adam, Satan and his demons gained the position of spiritual control over the fallen race. The theme of God's redemption from this spiritual evil is not taken up in Romans but in Ephesians.

1. Satan's role outlined in Ephesians 2.1-3

Paul outlines Satan's role in the world in Eph 2.1-3. He begins by pointing out that the Christians were once dead in trespasses and sins. Notice that Paul uses two terms for their conduct. By this he signals that he will look at their former way of life from two points of view. In v 2 he looks at the way they walked. The focus is on their feet. Here he looks at the trespasses. In v 3 he focuses on the drive to sin within their bodies, and this is comes under the concept of sin.

The role of Satan is opened up in v 2. Paul begins in v 2 by setting up to statements in parallel: "according to the course (lit. age) of this world," and "according to the prince of the power of the air." The course of the world and the ruler of the power of the air are coordinated. As ruler, Satan presides over the course of the world.

Satan's role as ruler gets a double explanation. He is the ruler "of the power of the air," and to this is added, "of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." The air represents the immediate sphere of invisible, spiritual influence over the world in contrast to the higher heavens in which God is enthroned. Satan is ruler of the world's spiritual atmosphere, and he carries this role out by ruling the spirit that is working in the sons of disobedience, i.e., those marked by disobedience to God.

Ephesians 2.2 looks at what is over people in the world. In v 3 the perspective shifts to what drives the people to sin from within their own being. This establishes the important distinction between Satan's role and the power of sin within people.

Satan interferes in the relationship between God and people. He takes over the place of God in the world and so is called the god of this world (2Cor 4.4). He works on the minds of people by blocking the light of the glory of God and rules the spirit that works in those who do not obey God (2Cor 4.4; Eph 2.3). His role is distinct but coordinated with the flesh and the power of sin within human beings. As long as the mind is cut off from the truth of God, the human being is left to be governed by his flesh. Satan keeps people in a spiritual state and environment in which they are left to carry out the desires of the flesh and they sin from within themselves, which brings them under God's judgment for their deeds.

Satan is not alone in this rule. Ephesians 6.12 gives a fuller description of this spiritual kingdom of darkness: rulers, powers, world forces of this darkness and spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.

2. The believer and Satan's dominion

Through Christ, God "rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col 1.13). This is graphically portrayed in Eph 2.1-6. We who were dead under Satan's dominion were made alive together with Christ, raised and seated with him in heavenly places. By the word seated, Paul is referring to Christ's enthronement in heaven (1.20-21). The rulers of wickedness in heavenly places work against the believer to move him off from his stand in Christ and bring him under the authority of the ruler of the age in the course of this world, and in this battle the believer must take on the whole armour of God.

3. Understanding Satan's role

The key to understanding Satan's role is in the theme of kingdom. He stands in direct contrast to Christ in his position as God's appointed king who realizes God's purpose that mankind reign.

Kingdom is a social concept. People are held together under a reign. This is seen in the universal need for political rule, and it is true in the spiritual realm as well. This is dimension of experience acknowledged in the expression, "the spirit of the age." This spirit unifies the minds of people under the controlling influence of certain ruling attitudes, ideas and values. Left here, the idea of the spirit of the age is abstract. Biblical revelation shows us the concrete reality behind this. There is a spiritual kingdom that rules the spirit that works in those who do not obey God. This spiritual rule gets its visible expression in what Paul calls "the age of the world." An age is the temporal form that the world takes.

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We began our study by fixing the term by which our subject is named. But, what the scriptures disclose about sin can't possibly be encapsulated in a single word. The word at best is only a pointer indicating that we look at the alignment to the required goal of human action. The revelation of God in Christ has laid bare for us what all is involved in the misalignment of sin, and it is huge. The nature and enormity of sin point out something about our salvation. Our salvation delivers us from the misalignment and aligns us to God in

a way that is true to him, and this salvation deals with the full scope of sin and exceeds it. The revelation of this salvation gives us the doctrine of sin.