

SESSION 3

The Nature of Sin



QUESTION 1:

What's an early memory of being punished for doing something wrong?

THE POINT

We are sinners, and on our own, we can do nothing about it.

THE PASSAGE

Isaiah 59:1-13

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Kids are experts at “no.”

“Kids, get in the car.”

“No!”

“Hurry! We’re going to be late.”

“No!”

Nobody has to teach kids to do this. I certainly didn’t teach my children to do this! Admittedly, I frequently said no to my parents, and they didn’t teach me to do that. It is something we are born with.

By saying “no,” we are in essence rejecting the authority of whomever we are responding to. Kids can love their parents deeply, but in that moment, they are rejecting the authority of their parents. From birth, we all are good at rejecting authority—and not just the authority of our parents. We are also adept at rejecting God’s authority, saying no to what He wants, and doing what we want instead. It’s called sin, and we are born with a nature that leads us to sin.

Saying no to our parents’ commands often led to punishment, and the same is true when we say no to God’s commands. No amount of good on our part will cancel out that punishment.

Thankfully, God did not leave us in this state.

Isaiah 59:1-5

1 Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:

2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness.

4 None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity.

5 They hatch cockatrice' eggs, and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush made a funny statement: "I do not like broccoli. And I haven't liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I'm President of the United States and I'm not going to eat any more broccoli!"¹ Of course, President Bush was perfectly capable of eating broccoli. But as president, he now chose to have nothing to do with it.

God has a far-greater reaction to sin. He absolutely detests it. He hates it so much that it repulses Him. Because a holy God will have nothing to do with sin, Isaiah wrote, "your iniquities have separated between you and your God." Because of our sin, He hides His face from us.

What exactly is sin? Consider the first sin ever committed. Adam and Eve deliberately disobeyed God's order not to eat from a certain tree (Gen. 3:2-7). As a result, God sent them out of the garden of Eden and they were separated from God's presence (v. 24). Previously, they had been able to walk and talk with God (v. 8), like a family together in one house, but now they never would be allowed back in. Humanity's relationship with God was damaged from that point on.

That seems a little extreme, doesn't it? After all, it was just a piece of fruit—but the issue was far greater than it might appear on the surface. The issue was their disobedience. Greg Gilbert puts it this way:

“When Adam and Eve bit into the fruit, therefore, they weren't just violating some arbitrary command, ‘Don't eat the fruit.’ They were doing something much sadder and much more serious. They were rejecting God's authority over them and declaring their independence from him.”²

Let's not confuse sin simply with “bad things we do.” Sin is so much deeper than that. Sin is what we do when we place our desires, our agendas, *ourselves* above God. It's not “just a piece of fruit.” By eating what God said not to eat, we are placing our small choice ahead of God, and to place anything ahead of God—no matter how “small” it seems—is rebellion and mutiny.

Sin puts everyone on a level playing field. Since all rebellion is rebellion—no matter how “small”—we are all seen as sinful people. No one can justify his or her sin by saying, “At least I'm not as bad as *that* person.” Each of us has a sick heart set on treasonous rebellion against a holy and perfect God.

As we shall see in the next session, it's not that God doesn't care or is incapable of helping us. As Isaiah said, “Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear,” but our sin is the barrier. God desires to save us, “but your iniquities are separating you from your God.”

QUESTION 2:

What evidence do you see in this world that everyone has sinned?

Isaiah 59:6-8

6 Their webs shall not become garments, neither shall they cover themselves with their works: their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their hands.

7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.

8 The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace.

My house is slowly turning into a zoo. We have a few farm animals that live outside, but two animals have a special place in our house: our dogs Annie and Nola.

The thing is, dogs can be messy, especially our Goldendoodles. They have a limitless supply of energy and, like most dogs, they are not bothered in the least by mud. When it rains and the dogs have been outside, they bring mud with them the second they come inside. If we don't clean them up first, everything they touch in the house will need to be cleaned. It doesn't matter what they do to try to clean themselves, they only end up making everything they touch a muddy mess.

That is the idea that Isaiah was pointing to in this passage. We can't cover up our sinful works, because on our own we're completely unable to repair the damage our sin does. Our "works are works of iniquity" and our "thoughts are thoughts of iniquity." Even the "good" we attempt to do to cover our sin is marred with sin! We simply cannot "make up" for our sin. We can't just do more good things to outweigh the bad things and call the relationship good. As the prophet Isaiah said later, "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6).

The picture Isaiah painted goes against how most people view themselves. Most people won't deny they've made mistakes and done things they shouldn't have, but they see themselves as basically good people. In a study of how Americans viewed sin, LifeWay Research found:

- ▶ 10 percent don't believe sin exists.
- ▶ 8 percent believe they are not sinners.
- ▶ 5 percent acknowledge they are sinners, but they are OK with being sinners.
- ▶ 34 percent know they are sinners, but they are working to be less of a sinner.
- ▶ 28 percent look to Jesus Christ to help them with their sin problem.³

It's sad enough that 23 percent won't even acknowledge that sin is a problem, but it's equally tragic that 34 percent think they can fix it on their own. Isaiah 59:8 is clear: as the prophet wrote, we have made our own roads crooked. We've laid the road we walk on—and we can't straighten it!

QUESTION 3:

What are some common ways people try to cover over their sinfulness?

Isaiah 59:9-13

9 Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness.

10 We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon day as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men.

11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

12 For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them;

13 In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.

For a period of my life, I had a \$180-a-day addiction to heroin and cocaine. I spent my days on the streets of New Orleans figuring out how I was going to come up with enough money to fuel my addiction. I resorted to selling drugs and stealing from my loved ones. For someone on the outside looking in, the solution was obvious: “You are destroying yourself and the people around you. You need to stop.”

For people in the throes of an addiction, though, nothing is quite so straightforward. You see everything through a fog. In that state, your options are limited to only those things that will carry you to your next fix.

Isaiah was writing to people with a similar condition: they were spiritually dead, given over completely to their addiction to sin. He described them as people who “grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noon day as in the night”; and “roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves.”

QUESTION 4:

What makes these images an effective way to describe our lives in sin?

Isaiah also told us why they were like this: “our transgressions are multiplied before thee.” Instead of improving themselves (as many people think they can do), the people’s sins were only growing and multiplying. They couldn’t hide who they were. They were sinners and their sins testified against them.

It’s the same for us. The apostle Paul said it in a similar way. “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world” (Eph. 2:1-2). We weren’t incapacitated or knocked down; we were *dead*. What hope do dead people have?

Neither Isaiah nor Paul paints a pretty picture of humanity and the world—and neither did Jeremiah: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). We are terminally ill with sin, sick without any hope of getting better on our own. We can’t do a thing in the world to revive our dead, stony hearts.

In the midst of the darkest period of my life, when drugs ruled my life, I knew only destruction. Everything I touched eventually crumbled—not because I was cursed or having a string of bad luck. I was on a destructive path because of my sin.

No one has a story exactly like mine, but yours is similar. Before coming to faith in Christ, we are all in the same boat: spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, and in possession of a debt far greater than we could pay on our own. We stand no chance of paying it back or of working our way back to life.

But that is not the end of the story! A few verses later, Isaiah said that God saw the people’s plight and “his arm brought salvation.” (Isa. 59:16). Paul pointed to the same truth: “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)” (Eph. 2:4-5).

Feel the magnitude of what these passages tell us about God. On our own, we were less than powerless—we were blind people stumbling down the street, dead people with no hope for revival. Just as my dogs cannot clean the mud off themselves, we cannot clean ourselves from sin. But God decided that something had to change, and since none of us could do it ourselves, He would—and did. It was God who took the first step toward us. It was God who delivered a way for us to be free of the debt of our sin. It was God who made it so that our relationship with Him could be repaired.

Without salvation from the sin that infests our hearts, we are completely without hope. But as we will see in the next session, His intervention breathed hope and life into our dismal condition.

QUESTION 5:

Where do you see hope or good news in Isaiah 59:1-13?

ENGAGE

Isaiah 59 is packed with vibrant imagery. Use the space below to draw some of the images that catch your attention and explain the significance of the images in the context of Isaiah's teaching.

LIVE IT OUT

We are all sinners. In the next session, we will focus on the solution and salvation offered through Jesus Christ. For now, consider what you will do with the truth that you have a sin nature and are prone to sin.

- ▶ **Confession.** Admit you are a sinner who has fallen short of God's standard. Confess your sin to Him and ask for forgiveness. He is faithful and just to forgive you.
- ▶ **Prevention.** Evaluate where you are most prone to give into temptation. Being tempted is not sin, but it can easily lead to sin. Draft some safeguards to help you avoid temptation in the first place.
- ▶ **Accountability.** Reach out to one or two believers (of the same gender) in whom you can confide. Talk through areas in which you are weak and ask them to hold you accountable and walk with you so that you will not fall into sin.

Though we will never attain a sinless life, with the help of the Holy Spirit and those around us, we can identify the spots where we need help and take bigger steps toward living in a way that honors God.

END NOTES

1. Caroline Tanner, "George H.W. Bush: His most presidential and relatable quotes, including the broccoli ban," *USA Today ONPOLITICS Newsletter*, December 1, 2018, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/12/01/george-h-w-bush-his-most-presidential-and-relatable-quotes/547365002/.
2. Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Crossway Books, 2010), 49.
3. "Most Americans Admit They're Sinners," *LifeWay Research*, August 15, 2017, lifewayresearch.com/2017/08/15/most-americans-admit-theyre-sinners/.

