

SESSION 8: Paradise Lost

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 27-29, 45-46:

WCF	WLC	WSC
6, 9	21-29, 149	13-19, 82

Introduction

Rebecca West once summarized the human condition as follows: “If the whole human race lay in one grave, the epitaph on its headstone might well be: ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’”⁸¹ You may also have heard it sardonically said, “I’d be a humanitarian, if it weren’t for people.”

There is a deep-seated problem with humanity. These sections of our standards discuss this problem from both an *anthropological* and a *theological* perspective. As we enter into this discussion, it is worth remembering that sin and ruin are not just a problem with others. To the contrary, “this story is our story. It is *our* first parents that were seduced by the depths of Satan’s subtlety...”⁸²

The Devil’s Oldest Trick

WCF 6.1 summarizes the account of humanity’s ruin recorded in Genesis 3. It is worth pausing to consider this passage. In so doing, we might first notice how Adam and Eve missed an important warning sign. “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” asked the serpent (Genesis 3.1). “But how, the narrator expects us to ask, did the snake know anything about God’s command? If he heard that command, why has he so grossly distorted it?”⁸³

This passage demonstrates to us the pattern of temptation. First, the command of God is *distorted* – “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2.17) becomes “You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden.” Second, the distorted form of the command is *questioned* – “Did God actually say...?” Third, the Word of God is *denied* – “You will not surely die,” (3.4). And finally, *suspicion* is thrown on God himself – “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,” (3.5).

How did Adam and Eve ever fall for such a trap? Satan beat us in Eden because he succeeded in getting us to enter into debate on his terms. “The tempter begins with suggestion rather than argument. The incredulous tone... is both disturbing and flattering: it smuggles in the assumption that God’s word is subject to our judgment. The exaggeration... is a further and favourite device: dangled before Eve it will draw her into debate on her opponent’s terms.”⁸⁴

Through this, the devil achieved his greatest victory. Sinclair Ferguson explains:

⁸¹ Cited by Alan Jacobs in *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 44.

⁸² Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 83.

⁸³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 73.

⁸⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*, 67.

In Eden the Serpent persuaded Eve and Adam that God was possessed of a narrow and restrictive spirit bordering on the malign.... What was injected into Eve's mind and affections during the conversation with the Serpent was a deep-seated suspicion of God that was soon further twisted into rebellion against him.... what the Serpent accomplished in Eve's mind, affections, and will was a divorce between God's revealed will and his gracious, generous character. Trust in him was transformed into suspicion of him by looking at "naked law" rather than hearing "law from the gracious lips of the heavenly Father." When this distortion of God's character is complete, we inevitably mistrust him; we lose sight of his love and grace; we see him essentially as a forbidding God.⁸⁵

In aligning with Satan, humanity swallowed "a lie big enough to reinterpret life... a false system... dynamic enough to redirect the flow of affection and ambition... God will henceforth be regarded, consciously or not, as a rival and enemy... presenting divine love as envy, service as servility, and a suicidal plunge as a leap into life."⁸⁶

What lies at the root of our all of humanity's problems? What was – and what remains – the darkest lie in the universe, coursing deep within the spiritual bloodstream of our race? The devil's oldest trick consists in sowing into our hearts *suspicion of God* – the belief that God cannot be trusted.

The Reign of Terror

In embracing the serpent, Adam and Eve plunged our raced into the threefold ruin explained in WCF 6.2. First, "they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God." The Creator now became a terror: "They now fled from God when he came near them. They hid from the one who came to seek them out... Having given their ears to Satan, they could no longer hear their God without fear."⁸⁷

Next, they "became dead in sin." Satan had said we wouldn't die, and on the surface it seemed he was right – for neither Adam nor Eve dropped dead in the instant. However, "death and decay now entered their bodies and minds, and it was inevitable from that moment they would one day become dust again."⁸⁸

Finally, they became "wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body." Like a maniac set loose in our souls with a hot branding iron, self-deception is now seared on our hearts. "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes," (Ecclesiastes 7.29). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17.9)

In short, our Edenic rebellion ushered humanity into a reign of terror in which we flee from Author of life, return to dust at death, and in the meantime find ourselves unable to trust anybody – including ourselves.

⁸⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 80-83

⁸⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 68.

⁸⁷ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 84.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

Autonomy and Total Depravity

The test of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not about starvation. Every other tree in the garden was available. There was plenty of food to eat. The test was about *trust*. Would Adam and Eve obey God simply because he said so – simply because he is God? The answer was no. Although they knew God was good, they rebelled against him. Have decided that God could not be trusted, they decided to try to play god for themselves. This is the basic sin, the sin beneath all other sins – *an attempt to be your own god*. The theological term for this is *autonomy* – trying to be a law unto yourself, rather than submit to God's. The biblical name for autonomy is 'sin.'

One of the best definitions of sin is found in WSC 14: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." Notice how this definition incorporates the two different ways in which we might sin: by *failing to be or do what God requires*, or *actually doing what God forbids*.⁸⁹

Having become "wholly defiled" (WCF 6.2) by our rebellion, the human race is now "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil," (WCF 6.4). These expressions refer to what theologians in the Reformation tradition term "total depravity." J.I. Packer explains what it means – and what it does *not* mean:

The phrase *total depravity* is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God's eyes. We cannot earn God's favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.⁹⁰

But how are Adam's sin and corruption communicated to us? The language in WCF 6.3 is very careful. Adam's *guilt* is said to be "imputed," whereas his *corrupted nature* is said to be "conveyed" to "all their posterity" descended by *ordinary generation*. This paragraph brings out three very important truths.

The first truth is that of *federal headship in God's covenants with man*. Packer again offers a good explanation:

God made the first man the representative for all his posterity, just as he was to make Jesus Christ the representative for all God's elect (Rom 5.15-19 with 8.29-30; 9.22-26). In each case the representative was to involve those whom he represented in the fruits of his personal actions, whether for good or ill, just as a national leader involves his people in the consequences of his action when, for instance, he declares war.⁹¹

People raised in Western cultures frequently find this doctrine repellant.⁹² To many of us, it seems unfair that Adam's sin should make us guilty. Two replies may be made.

To begin, we should understand that the difficulty arises from our assumptions. *Behind every hard question is a hidden assumption!* In this case, it is because we assume that humanity is essentially individualistic that we see Adam's federal headship as unfair. But is this a fair assumption?

⁸⁹ These expansions from the *First Catechism* (Philadelphia: GCP, 2003-2004), #30-31.

⁹⁰ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 83-84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁹² Interestingly enough, Middle Eastern people, with their higher view of family shame and solidarity, have little difficulty grasping the concept of federal headship.

Even Westerners recognize that in some arrangements – such as team sports – the penalties incurred by one player affect the whole team. Those are the rules of the game. But if we understand this principle in matters of sport, why do we object to it in spiritual matters? Is not God, our Creator and ruler, permitted to write the rules of sin so that it, too, is a team sport?

Further, we should note that it is precisely this principle of federal headship that makes our salvation possible. Sin is a team sport – but so is salvation! Just as God ordained a representative for us at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so he sent a substitute for us to be nailed to the tree at Calvary. “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous,” (Rom 5.19; cf. 1Cor 15.22).

The second truth brought out by WCF 6.3 (and WLC 26) is that of *genealogical corruption*. Although the guilt of Adam’s first sin is imputed, the resulting depravity of nature is passed on to us by biological descent. It is from this “original corruption” that “all actual transgressions” proceed (WCF 6.4, WLC 25-26, WSC 18). “From this *state* of sin erupts a *life* of sin.”⁹³

Third, note the crucial caveat about “ordinary generation” found in WCF 6.3, WLC 22, and WSC 16. It is precisely because Jesus was *not* born by ordinary generation – but rather by the extraordinary generation of the incarnation and virgin birth – that he became the Second Adam, the only human begin since Adam who does not start life with Adam’s guilt or his hard-wired sin nature. It is only as the Second Adam that Jesus is able to answer our sinfulness, both by paying for the “guilt of Adam’s first sin... together with all actual transgressions” at his cross and by supplying in his perfect obedience that obedience which Adam forfeited – the “want of original righteousness.”

As we conclude this section, we should note what the standards say about both the *reality* and *wages* of sin. Though believers have their corrupt nature “through Christ, pardoned and mortified,” its death will not be complete until theirs – or until Jesus returns (WCF 6.5). Likewise, every sin deserves every possible misery (WCF 6.6, WLC 27-29, WSC 19).

Human Freedom and Man’s Fourfold State

What does the fall into sin mean for human freedom? WCF 9.1 describes human freedom as follows: “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.” Commenting on this paragraph, Morton Smith writes, “Man’s liberty, therefore, consists in: negatively, the absence of compulsion, and positively... the idea that what we are and do is our own character and our own action.”⁹⁴

What exactly does this mean? A.A. Hodge makes an important distinction:

Liberty consists in the power of the agent to will as he pleases, from the fact that the volition is determined only by the character of the agent willing. Ability consists in the power of the agent to change his own subjective state, to make himself prefer what he does not prefer, and to act in a given case in opposition to the coexistent desires and preferences of the agent’s own heart.

Thus man is as truly free since the fall as before it, because he wills as his evil heart pleases. But he has lost all ability to obey the law of God, because his evil heart is not subject to that law, neither can he change it.⁹⁵

⁹³ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 90.

⁹⁴ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1994), 288-289.

⁹⁵ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 289.

Hodge’s distinction between ‘liberty’ and ‘ability’ is implied by the language of WCF 9.2, which states, “Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.”

We might summarize all this as follows:

1. Human freedom is *not* the power to change our heart’s desires.
2. Human freedom is *not* the power to will contrary to our heart’s desires.
3. Human freedom *is* the power to will according to our heart’s desires.

Why then does God hold man accountable for his thoughts, words, and deeds? *Because these things express who we are.* As Jesus says, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks,” (Lk 6.45). It is not our inability to change that makes us guilty. *It is our free exercise of our corrupt hearts.*

Just as WCF 9.2 describes the state of man’s will “in his state of innocency,” so the rest of WCF 9 describes how the human will changes through regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification. WCF 9.2-5 thus describes “human nature in its fourfold state.”⁹⁶ We can visualize this information as follows:

WCF	Summary	When	Ability	Liberty	Heart Condition	Proof
9.2	Able to sin (<i>posse peccare</i>)	Before the Fall	Yes	Yes	Changeably Righteous	Eccl 7.29
9.3	Not able not to sin (<i>non posse non peccare</i>)	After the Fall, Before Regeneration	No	Yes	Life in the Flesh, Cannot Please God	Rom 3.10-12, Rom 8.7-8
9.4	Able not to sin (<i>posse non peccare</i>)	After Regeneration, During Sanctification, Before Glorification	No	Yes	Lfe in the Spirit, Able to Please God	Rom 7.15-25, Gal 5.17
9.5	Not able to sin (<i>non posse peccare</i>)	After Glorification, For Eternity	No	Yes	Unchangeably Righteous	Heb 12.23, Jude 24-25

Before moving on to a further discussion of the fall, it is worth pausing to meditate upon two points.

First, we should embrace a *cautious optimism belonging to the regenerate state*. Although sin is still a struggle in the life of believers, WCF 9.4 reminds us that believers are truly free from our “natural bondage under sin.” Our Lord affirmed this when he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” (Jn 8.34-36). Paul echoes the same sentiment when he writes, “But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom 8.10-11).

This is a point worth remembering in counseling: just as a child has an innate desire to please his parents, so a *regenerate heart has an innate desire to please God*. This desire is one of the chief marks of a converted person (Mt 5.6), and it is to this desire that shepherds should appeal. To get to the will, we must go through the affections. To get to the affections, we must go through reason. Notice how often the Bible speaks of Paul using reason to get to affections to get to hearts.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ The Scottish minister Thomas Boston published a very famous book under this exact title in 1720.

⁹⁷ See Acts 17.2,17, 18.4,19, 19.8-9, 24.25

Second, we should consider the *superiority of the state of glory to the state of innocence*:

Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life.

Adam, however, did not yet have this high state of blessedness; he did not yet have eternal life... He had the possibility of not erring, sinning, and dying, but not yet the impossibility of erring, sinning, and dying. He still lived in the state of one who could sin and die, and was therefore still in some fear and dread. His was not yet the invariable perfect love that casts out all fear... The image of God therefore had to be fully developed – thereby overcoming and nullifying this possibility of sin and death – and glitter in imperishable glory... Adam was not Christ. The natural was not the spiritual. Paradise was not heaven.⁹⁸

In this same vein, Cornelis Venema describes the life of believers in the world to come:

Believers will stand in the glory of resurrection bodies in the presence of God and all his people, unbowed by the burden of sin’s devastation. The God who forgives all the sins of his people, who heals all their diseases (Psa. 103:3) will renew the youth and strength of his people. Believers will know what it is ‘to take up wings like eagles’ and experience the exhilaration of never growing weary in well doing.⁹⁹

Important Questions

1. How does Adam’s starting point (*posse non peccare*) magnify the enormity of the fall?
2. How should the reality of sin and its consequences reshape our expectations and perspective on life in this world?
3. How should the reality of human depravity adjust our attitude toward human reason in all areas of human endeavor? How does it make clearer our need for divine revelation?
4. Why is the biological unity of the human race a theological necessity?
5. Consider the following questions regarding a person caught in sin:
 - a. Is it ever valid for any person caught in sin to say, “I had no *choice*...”?
 - b. Is it ever valid for a non-Christian caught in sin to say, “I cannot *help* it...”?
 - c. Is it ever valid for a Christian caught in sin to say, “I cannot *help* it...”?
6. Is any person *able* to change their own heart (Jn 6.44, Eph 2.1-3)? Does any person *desire* it? May any person *excuse* the condition of their heart (Lk 6.45)?

Additional Resources

Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*

J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 30-33, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
7	20, 30-35	12, 20

⁹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 573.

⁹⁹ Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 471.