

Sin – A Closer Look

Where Are You? Sin as Absence and Separation

How to Read This

Most of us were taught to think of sin as a list of wrong things people do. This piece argues that Scripture goes deeper: at its root, sin is a condition we are born into. Something vital is *missing* in us, and a relationship that should exist is *broken*. We will call these **absence** and **separation**.

The main text is written for anyone in the pew. You can read it straight through and come away with the whole picture. Readers who want the Greek and Hebrew behind the argument will find notes, chapter by chapter, in a closing section titled **For deeper study**. Skip it freely; the main text never depends on it.

This is a distilled edition of a much longer study. Scripture quotations are from the NASB (1995) unless noted. REV refers to the Revised English Version. Words in square brackets inside quotations are clarifications or the underlying Greek or Hebrew word.

1. “Where Are You?”

The first question God asked after the first disobedience was not “What have you done?” It was “Where are you?”

Genesis 3:8–10 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.”

God knew where Adam was. The question was a summons, and it exposed what had changed. The man who had walked with God was now hiding from Him. Only afterward does God ask about the act itself: “Have you eaten from the tree?” (3:11).

The order matters. First, *where are you*: a question about presence and relationship. Then, *what have you done*: a question about behavior. Both are real, but the first goes deeper.

Adam’s answer holds the two ideas that run through this whole piece. “I was naked”: something was **missing**. “I hid myself”: something was **broken between** him and God.

Absence and separation

Paul captures both in a single verse.

Ephesians 2:12 Remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

“Without God” is absence. “Separate,” “excluded,” and “strangers” are separation. Isaiah says it even more plainly:

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

Think of darkness. Darkness is real; people stumble and get hurt in it. But darkness is not a “thing” the way a lamp is a thing. It is the *absence of light*. You do not get rid of darkness by fighting it. You turn on a light. “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

Scripture describes people apart from God with words of absence: lacking, weak, blind, dead, lost. It describes them with words of separation too: alienated, enemies, strangers, far off. And it describes the remedy in the same terms: reconciled, brought near, given access, made sons. If sin were only a list of misdeeds, forgiveness alone would be enough. But God does more than clear the record. He brings people *home*.

Where behavior fits

None of this makes sinful behavior less serious. Sins in intent, word, and deed are real, they hurt real people, and they will be judged. But here they are treated as the *fruit* of a deeper condition, not its definition. A fever is real and must be treated, but the physician is ultimately after the infection that causes it.

The story of a face

The Bible can be read as the story of a face. Adam hid from the presence (literally, the “face”) of God. Cain “went out from the presence of the LORD” (Genesis 4:16). The prophets warned that sin would make God “hide His face.” And at the very end of the story comes this promise:

Revelation 22:4 They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.

From “Where are you?” to “they will see His face”: that is the path this piece follows.

2. What the Word “Sin” Really Means

No writer of Scripture ever used the English word “sin.” They wrote in Hebrew and Greek, using words with histories and ranges of meaning. English translations use the one word “sin” for nearly all of them, so it is easy to assume it always means the same thing. It does not.

A flexible word

The Greek word usually translated “sin” is *hamartia* (verb: *hamartanō*). Long before Paul, Greeks used it for missing a target, making a mistake, wronging someone through poor judgment, falling short of a standard, or offending the gods. Paul, raised in the Greek city of Tarsus, knew this word well, and God chose it to describe both humanity’s general plight and its many failures.

Here is how flexible it is in the New Testament:

- In **1 Peter 2:20**, a slave “sins” against his master. This could be something as small as serving the wrong drink. It is an offense against an authority, not necessarily against God.

- In **Matthew 1:21**, Jesus will “save His people from their sins.” Here “sins” stands for the *consequences* of sins, ultimately final judgment.
- In **Romans 6:12**, “do not let sin reign” speaks of Sin as if it were a king.

The question to ask with each verse is simple: *what sense is in view here?*

Falling short, or lacking?

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The word for “fall short” (*hustereō*) is elsewhere translated “lack,” “be in need,” “destitute,” or “impoverished.” So the verse can be read: all have sinned and *are lacking* the glory of God.

Two figures of speech

Sin is an abstract idea, like righteousness, grace, or death. We can point at a tree; we cannot point at sin. We can only point at something done and call it sin. So Scripture uses figures of speech to make sin vivid. Two matter most.

Personification gives human qualities to something that is not a person. “Sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7). In Romans 6, Sin “reigns,” is “master,” owns “slaves,” and pays “wages.” Roman readers knew emperors, slave masters, and army paymasters firsthand. The picture told them they were serving the *wrong master*, and therefore not in relationship with the right one. Personification is one of Scripture’s most vivid pictures of separation.

Metonymy puts one word in place of something closely associated with it, as when we say “the White House announced” and mean the administration. Scripture often puts “sin” for its *consequences* or *legal status*. When Christ “bore our sins” (1 Peter 2:24), he could not literally carry an idea. He bore the consequences: humiliation, punishment, and death. When Jews and Greeks are declared “under sin” (Romans 3:9), it is courtroom language: charged, found guilty, and subject to the penalty.

Four ways Scripture speaks of sin

Sense	What “sin” refers to	Typical signals	Examples
Act	An intent, word, or deed contrary to God or to love of neighbor	The verb; the plural “sins”; “commit,” “confess”	Luke 17:3–4; Matthew 3:6
Absence	A condition of lack: lacking life, spirit, the glory of God, the ability to do good	Singular “sin” in Romans 5–8; “dwells in me”; “without”	Romans 3:23; 7:17–20; Ephesians 2:12
Separation	A condition of estrangement from God	“Alienated,” “enemies,” “far off,” “reconciled,” “brought near”	Isaiah 59:2; Colossians 1:21; Romans 5:10
Status or consequence	The guilt, legal standing, or outcome that follows sin	“Charged,” “under,” “bear,” “take away”	Romans 3:9; Matthew 1:21; 1 Peter 2:24

These four are one reality seen from different angles. Absence and separation are the *condition* every person is born into. Acts of sin are the *fruit* of that condition. Status and consequence are the *verdict and outcome*. Personification is the *dramatization*.

Even sin as act points to absence. “To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17): a good left undone. “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23): an act missing trust. Every sinful act is, in some way, an act from which God is absent.

Jesus pictured how absence and separation feed each other:

John 15:5–6 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up.

A branch cut off from the vine (separation) dries up (absence) and bears no fruit. Cut off from God, the source of life and light, people lack life and light, and that lack shows up as self-centered living.

3. What Was Lost in the Garden

To understand what is missing in us, we need to ask what humanity once had. Scripture names three actors in the story of sin: the devil, who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8); Adam, “the one who sinned” (Romans 5:16); and everyone else, for “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23).

The devil’s story is the first story of separation. A beautiful, powerful spirit being, created blameless, grew proud and tried to make himself “like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). He was cast “as profane from the mountain of God” (Ezekiel 28:16). Strictly speaking, if any sin deserves the name “original,” it is his.

What Adam had

God placed the man and woman in a garden, blessed them, and told them to “subdue” the earth and “rule” over it (Genesis 1:28). They had God’s presence, life, blessing, and authority. They also had, it can be reasoned, *spirit*.

Genesis says God “created” man in His image (1:27). That word appears only at the very beginning (1:1) and again here; the rest of creation was spoken into being. Since “God is spirit” (John 4:24), being made in His image implies God gave man spirit. That spirit gave Adam and Eve direct connection with God and the power to carry out their charge to rule.

That spirit was given conditionally:

Genesis 2:17 From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.

Adam lived about 900 more years. So in what sense did he die “that day”? Throughout the Old Testament, spirit from God rested on certain people conditionally, and could be lost. Saul lost it through disobedience (1 Samuel 16:14). Samson lost it and his strength with it (Judges 16:20). After his sin with Bathsheba, David pleaded, “Do not take Your holy spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11). Adam, likewise, lost the spirit God had given him. He was alive in body and breath, but cut off from God, who is spirit.

What was lost

The consequences of Adam’s disobedience are best described not as things *added* to him but as things *taken away*.

- **Presence.** Adam and Eve hid from God's presence, then were "sent out" and "driven out" of the garden where God had walked with them (Genesis 3:8, 23–24). This is separation.
- **Life.** God barred the way to the tree of life, lest man "take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (3:22). Whatever the tree was, its fruit evidently had power to sustain life. Without it, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (3:19). Mortality is the absence of enduring life.
- **Spirit.** The direct connection with God was forfeited. This is both absence (something missing within) and separation (a relationship broken).
- **Glory and dominion.** The authority to rule was forfeited. The devil could later say of the world's kingdoms, "To you [Jesus] I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me" (Luke 4:6). He is now "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4).
- **Blessing.** Life outside the garden meant toil, pain, and anxiety, life outside God's original blessing.

Think of leaving your house unlocked in a rough neighborhood. You did not hand your furniture to the thieves, but you "opened the door"/gave up control, and they walked in. Adam did not literally hand anything to the devil. He forfeited the power that would have enabled him to keep the devil out (Genesis 2:15, "keep" = to guard, protect).

What this means for the rest of us

Scripture never says something "entered" Adam when he sinned. It says "through one man sin entered into *the world*" (Romans 5:12). Adam's children are not guilty of his act; God does not punish children for a father's sin (Ezekiel 18:20). But they are born without what he lost and outside the place he once lived. Like Israel suffering defeat because of Achan's sin (Joshua 7), the whole human family lives with the consequences of one man's choice.

That loss is felt. Without spirit, people are limited to the senses and their own reasoning and emotions. Many carry a sense of inner void, a feeling of not knowing who they really are. They try to fill it, and try to make their own light. Ecclesiastes names the despair underneath: if it all ends in death, it is all vanity (3:19–20). Nothing a person does on their own can make up the shortfall.

4. Two Deaths

Death is the clearest picture of absence there is. A body that has just died still has every organ. It lacks only one thing, the one that matters: life. In Scripture, life comes from God; when God breathed into Adam, he became a living being (Genesis 2:7), and the tree of life stood in His garden. Death is being cut off from the source of life. It is both absence and separation.

Scripture speaks of two literal deaths, and they come from two different sins.

	The common death	The second death
Cause	Adam's disobedience: barred from the tree of life	Each person's own sins, unrepented and unforgiven
Who experiences it	Everyone, however they live	Those who reject God and His Son
Duration	Temporary: all will be raised	Permanent

	The common death	The second death
Key verses	Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12–14; Hebrews 9:27	Revelation 20:11–15; 21:8; John 5:28–29
Escape	Only for believers alive when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17)	Through faith in Christ (John 3:16)

The common death

“It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). People do not die this death because of their own sins. Death reigned “from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam” (Romans 5:14). It came because Adam was barred from the tree of life. Sinful living may hasten it and wise living may delay it, but no one escapes it.

The second death

The second death is the consequence of each person’s *own* sins.

Revelation 20:12, 14–15 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened ... and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ... This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Jesus spoke of the same day: “All who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29). In John 3:16, “eternal life” is set against “perish,” to be utterly destroyed.

The second death is the final form of both absence and separation. It is the permanent absence of life, and it is described as exclusion: “away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:9); “depart from Me” (Matthew 7:23). Notice the echo of the garden. Adam was sent out and barred from the tree of life. In the new city, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life ... Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers” (Revelation 22:14–15). The second death is the garden’s exclusion made permanent. That is why the good news is so very good.

God takes no pleasure in it. “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11).

5. The Weakness We All Share

The New Testament sometimes uses “sin” not for an act but for a *condition*, a state a person is in. Two passages show this clearly, and they show the two sides of the condition.

“You will die in your sin”

John 8:21 I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come.

Here “sin” is singular and emphatic. Commentators note it means a *state* of sin, not a particular act. A doctor might say to a patient in intensive care, “In your current condition, if nothing changes, you will

die.” The religious leaders were in a life-threatening condition of unbelief and spiritual blindness (Matthew 23:16–19). Out of that condition came the desire to kill Jesus. And Jesus described the outcome as separation: “where I am going, you cannot come.”

“The good that I want, I do not do”

Romans 7:18–19 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

This is a different person. He *wants* to do right but cannot carry it out. Here the condition is described as absence: the ability is missing.

Jesus said the same thing to Peter on the night of His arrest: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). Peter truly wanted to stay awake and pray. He could not. “Weak” (*asthenēs*) means without strength. Paul uses the same word for every person before Christ: “while we were still helpless [weak], Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). Weakness is itself a word of absence: the lack of strength.

The flesh is not evil

Scripture does not say the body is evil. The risen Christ had “flesh and bones” and ate fish (Luke 24:39–43). The “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19–21) are behaviors; the behavior is sinful, not the flesh. “Flesh” in this sense means a person living from body and soul alone, without spirit: limited to the senses, mortal, vulnerable to sickness and to the influence of “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God ... he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Above all, the person without spirit is weak in this: they cannot save themselves. Everyone needs a savior.

What “sin which dwells in me” means

Romans 7 says, “no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me” (7:17). Does this mean some *thing* lives inside us, like a virus or a second self?

Sin is not a spirit, a person, or a substance. It cannot literally live anywhere. The word “dwell” (*oikeō*) means to reside, and in Scripture it stresses *permanence*. The point is that a lasting condition goes with us everywhere and keeps getting in the way. Think of a person who is blind or deaf. Their condition is a lack: of sight, of hearing. It affects every decision they make. In Romans 7, “sin” names a permanent condition of lack that results in unwanted behavior.

The remedy for absence is a gift

Romans 7:24–25 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Notice what kind of answer Romans 8 gives. If the problem were something that had entered us, we would expect the answer to be its removal. Instead the answer is something *given*: “the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:9). The same word, *dwell*, is used. Where “sin” dwelt as a permanent condition of lack, the spirit from God now dwells as a permanent gift.

The remedy for absence is not subtraction but addition: God supplying what was missing. The flesh is still weak, and believers will still sometimes fail. But they are no longer only flesh.

6. Far From Home

Absence describes what is missing *in* a person. Separation describes what is missing *between* a person and God. The Old Testament states it outright: “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God” (Isaiah 59:2). The Hebrew word, *badal*, is a strong one. It is the word used when God “separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4) and when the veil “served as a partition” before the holy of holies (Exodus 26:33). It describes a dividing line.

Notice what Isaiah says the problem is *not*: “the LORD’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear” (59:1). The separation is not on God’s side.

The language of the New Testament

The New Testament never says “sin separates you from God” in so many words. Instead it uses a whole vocabulary of broken relationship:

- **Alienated:** “you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind” (Colossians 1:21)
- **Enemies:** “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God” (Romans 5:10)
- **Strangers:** “you are no longer strangers and aliens” (Ephesians 2:19)
- **Far off:** “you who formerly were far off have been brought near” (Ephesians 2:13)
- **Lost and dead:** “he was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:24)

Ephesians 2:12–19 gathers nearly all of these into one passage: separate, excluded, strangers, far off, brought near, dividing wall, reconcile, access, household. It is perhaps the clearest statement in Scripture that the human problem is separation and the work of Christ is bringing near.

So “separation” must be understood in its full depth. It is not mere distance, like two friends who live in different cities. It is *estrangement*: distance with hostility of mind, darkened understanding, and in the end, death.

The far country

The parable of the prodigal son is a story of separation from start to finish. The younger son “went on a journey into a distant country.” When a famine came, “he began to be impoverished” (Luke 15:13–14).

Who moved?

There is an old saying: “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” Scripture consistently places the separation on the human side. Adam hid; God came looking. Paul told the Athenians that God “is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). The father in the parable never left home; the son did. And when the son came back, “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran” (Luke 15:20).

This matters for understanding the remedy. If the separation were God’s doing, the problem would be persuading God to come near. Instead, God takes the initiative: “God demonstrates His own love toward

us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God takes sin seriously; the hiding of His face is a real response to real sin. But His response to the separation is not to keep it. It is to end it, at great cost.

Reconciliation, not just pardon

The New Testament word for ending the separation is *reconcile*.

2 Corinthians 5:18–20 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them ... we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

God did the reconciling; no one met Him halfway. Each person still needs to receive what God has done.

It is worth noticing that “forgiveness” is never used together with “reconcile.” They are related but not the same. Forgiveness deals with sins as acts: the record of debt. Reconciliation deals with sin as separation: the broken relationship. A judge may pardon a criminal and never want to see him again. God does more. He clears the record *and* brings the person home.

Separation between people

Sin separates people from one another too. Adam’s first words after the fall blamed his wife (Genesis 3:12). Within a generation, a brother killed his brother. The same cross that reconciles us to God also “broke down the barrier of the dividing wall” between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14). The opposite of separation is fellowship: “our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ,” and “with one another” (1 John 1:3, 7).

7. Living Under the Wrong Ruler

In Romans especially, Paul speaks of Sin as if it were a person. Sin enters the world, reigns like a king, owns slaves, and pays wages. This is personification; Sin is not literally a king. But every one of these pictures describes a relationship, and in each case it is the *wrong* one. To be a subject of Sin is to be estranged from your rightful King.

Sin enters

Romans 5:12 Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

The verse does not say sin entered *Adam*. It says sin entered *the world*. The word “entered” is used almost always of people or spirits entering a place. Paul may be picturing Sin as an actor stepping onto the world’s stage, with Death right behind. Or “sin” may stand for the *condition* that came into the world through Adam. Either way, nothing here says a substance entered human nature. The contrast is deliberate: Sin entered the world and brought death; Christ “comes into the world” (Hebrews 10:5) and brings life.

Sin enslaves and pays wages

Romans 6:16 Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word for “wages” (*opsōnion*) meant a soldier’s pay. The Weymouth translation catches the picture: “The wages paid by Sin are death.” The point is about *service*: serve Sin, and the payout is death. God’s gift, by contrast, is not earned at all.

Four small words that tell the whole story

Four phrases in Romans trace the move from separation to reconciliation. Each turns on a small relationship word.

Phrase	What it describes	Key verse
Under sin	A legal status: charged, found guilty, and subject to the penalty (ultimately the second death)	Romans 3:9
In sin	A relationship with the condition inherited from Adam: helpless, ungodly, sinners, enemies	Romans 6:1
Dead to sin	That relationship ended, as Christ “died to sin once for all”	Romans 6:2, 10–11
Freed from sin	The new status of the believer: no longer Sin’s slave, now a slave of righteousness and of God	Romans 6:7, 18, 22

In sin. “Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?” (Romans 6:1). Paul could have written “continue sinning”; he uses the verb just fourteen verses later. Instead he uses the noun with the article: “continue in *the* sin.” The question is really: should we keep living in our old relationship with the condition we inherited, as if we were still helpless, ungodly, and enemies of God?

Dead to sin. We say of an estranged person, “He’s dead to me.” The prodigal’s father said his son “was dead.” The meaning is: no more relationship. “The death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God” (Romans 6:10). Death has no claim on the risen Christ. Believers died with Him, so: “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). “Consider” means *reason it out and adjust your thinking*. It does not mean believers no longer sin. Neither Sin nor Death is dead yet, and sins still carry real consequences here and now.

Freed from sin. “Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (6:18). In Paul’s world a slave who died was free from his master. Christ died in our place, paying the “ransom” (1 Timothy 2:6), and believers are released. This is first a change of status: from a death sentence to a “life sentence,” by grace. It is not “freedom from sinning” yet. But it changes what a person can become. Paul’s question to the believer is, in effect: since Sin no longer has any legal claim on you, why live as if it does?

Whose are you?

Taken together, these pictures move the question from “What have you done?” to “Whose are you?” The person apart from Christ lives in the empire of Sin and Death, in its service, in line for its wages. The

good news is a change of ownership and a change of address: “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

8. What Grows from the Condition

So far we have looked at sin as a condition. Now we turn to sins as behavior: what we do in intent, word, and deed. These are real and serious. They harm the people who commit them and the people around them, and they will be judged. But they are the fruit, not the root.

Law: it names sin but cannot cure it

Most people’s thinking about sin starts with law: a rule is given, a rule is broken, a penalty follows. Scripture speaks this way too. “Where there is no law, there also is no violation” (Romans 4:15).

God’s moral law, “love God, love your neighbor,” is written on the conscience (Romans 2:14–15). The Law of Moses spelled it out. It kept a society civil enough for the Messiah to come. It showed honest people how far they fell short. It was a “tutor to lead us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24). But here is what no law can do:

Galatians 3:21 If a law had been given that was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.

Law addresses sin as act. It cannot supply what is missing or end a separation. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). That is why the answer to sin is not more law but a gift. Righteousness before God has always rested on trust, as with Abraham, who “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3).

Desire: the God-given capacity misdirected

Desire is not sin. God built the capacity to desire into Adam and Eve, intending it to be directed toward Him. But a person who lacks something will want to fill the lack. Jeremiah described it exactly:

Jeremiah 2:13 My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Two evils: turning away from God (separation), and trying to supply for oneself what only God can give (an absence filled with something that cannot hold water).

In the garden, the trees were “pleasing to the sight” (Genesis 2:9). Enjoying beauty was good. Then the serpent persuaded Eve she was missing out, and the tree became “desirable to make one wise” (3:6). Enjoying became wanting what God had forbidden. The serpent offered her what had tempted him: to be like God.

James traces how desire becomes sin:

James 1:14–15 Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

It is the language of a birth: desire conceives and bears Sin; Sin grows up and bears Death. “Lust” is not a different capacity. It is ordinary desire gone out of bounds. Nothing in Scripture says the capacity itself was corrupted at the fall. What changed was the setting: no spirit within, and a world outside the garden, under the devil’s influence.

The heart: shaped by what we turn toward

In Scripture, “heart” never means the physical organ. It means a person’s inner disposition: intentions, desires, purposes. Jesus said evil things come “out of the heart” (Matthew 15:19). He did not say the heart *is* evil. The heart is malleable. Like a physical heart, it can be strengthened by good food and exercise. “Your words were found and I ate them,” said Jeremiah (15:16). “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Psalm 119:11).

Works of the flesh

Paul lists what life lived from the flesh alone produces:

Galatians 5:19–21 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

- **Attempts to fill the void:** sensuality, drunkenness, carousing, greed, idolatry. Reaching for something to satisfy a lack only God can satisfy.
- **Expressions of separation:** enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, disputes, factions, envy. The breakdown between people that mirrors the breakdown with God.

The “fruit of the spirit” stands in stark contrast: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). It is the fruit of a relationship restored and an absence filled. Willpower might stop some behaviors. But sin begins with desire (Matthew 5:28), and only the gospel and the gift of holy spirit produce a new person with new desires.

The Ten Commandments

The most familiar list of sins begins not with a rule but with a relationship: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). The first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” uses the Hebrew *al panay*, literally “before My face”: the same face Adam hid from.

The “unforgivable” sin

Mark 3:28–29 All sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

If sin is at root separation, and God has provided reconciliation at great cost, then the gravest sin is the one that refuses reconciliation for good. Scripture’s concern in these passages is less a single act than a settled condition: someone who, facing God’s clear working, persists in rejecting it. Jesus said the religious leaders would “die in your sins” unless they believed (John 8:24). Everyone has some unbelief. Jesus seems to point to an unbelief that has become irreversible. When the devil offered Jesus the world’s kingdoms in exchange for worship (Matthew 4:8–10), Jesus refused. Others through history may have accepted such an offer and, in doing so, deliberately rejected the one true God.

9. Presence Restored Through Christ

Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Everything so far has described the problem. Now we turn to what God has done about it. Through Jesus Christ, sins are forgiven, the separation is ended, and the absence is filled. Many verses about Christ speak of sins and their consequences: He “died for our sins” and “bore our sins.” But the purpose they state again and again is relational: “so that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

What Christ did

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

The name Jesus means “Yahweh saves.” “He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21) means He, God through Christ, saves them from the *consequences* of their sins: the wrath of God, final judgment, and permanent death. Like a death sentence commuted, the convict is “saved from” the consequence of the crime.

Jesus Christ did this by living without sin and then accepting the penalty due for sin. “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). He was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Because He was righteous, God raised Him from the dead, never to die again (demonstrating that the righteous will live *forever*).

“Christ died for the ungodly ... for us ... for all” (Romans 5:6, 8; 2 Corinthians 5:14). The Greek word for “for,” *hyper*, can mean “in place of” and “on behalf of.” Christ took the consequence in our place. He “gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6), the price paid to free a slave. He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), recalling the Passover lamb whose blood made death pass over a house.

Christ entered the separation

If sin is at root separation from God, it is significant that on the cross Jesus cried out in words of abandonment:

Mark 15:34 “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

These words quote Psalm 22. Whatever else they mean, they show Christ entering the experience sin produces, the experience of being forsaken, though He had committed no sin. He bore not only the physical consequences but the relational one. Yet Psalm 22 does not end in abandonment: “Nor has He hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him for help, He heard” (22:24). The one who entered the separation was heard, and God raised Him.

At the moment of His death, “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51). The veil that for centuries had marked restricted access was torn, and torn from the top, from God’s side.

Hebrews 10:19–22 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh ... let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.

“Draw near” is the opposite of “far off.” What Adam lost when he hid among the trees and was sent out of the garden, Christ has opened again: access to the presence of God.

Blood

“The life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). In Scripture, blood stands for a life given up in death. So the blood of Christ answers both sides of the condition: a life given to address the absence of life, and a death that opens the way back into God’s presence.

Atonement: “at-one-ment”

The English word “atonement” was formed from “at one”: making two estranged parties one again. The Hebrew *kaphar* means “to cover.” Under the Law, a priest’s sin offering “covered” sin, and it was forgiven (Leviticus 5:10). But those sacrifices were a shadow of what was coming (Hebrews 10:1). In Christ, sins are not merely covered; they are “wiped away” (Hebrews 2:17, REV). He “wiped clean the record of debt that was against us ... having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14, REV). One teacher compared it to a credit card: the sin went on the card, and Christ paid the balance.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness addresses sin as act: a debt cancelled on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice. In Acts, the apostles preached the same message five times: God raised Jesus, and everyone who changes their mind (*repent* means “change of thought”) and believes in him receives “forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). None of these sermons tells people to list their sins. Forgiveness came with accepting Jesus as Lord and Christ, and it was confirmed by the gift of holy spirit.

In the letters to churches, forgiveness is something believers already *have*: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). The phrase “forgiveness of sins” never appears in Romans at all. Romans focuses instead on being made righteous before God, and on believers considering themselves “dead to sin” (6:11). Forgiveness is a settled standing, not something to earn again each day. So Paul’s focus is upward and forward: “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13).

What believers are told to do is forgive *each other*: “forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). Forgiveness between people is itself a way of ending separation.

10. The Gift That Fills the Void

If the human condition is absence, lacking life and lacking spirit, then the remedy must be the supply of life and spirit. That is exactly what God gives.

Ephesians 1:13–14 (REV) In whom you also, when you heard the message of truth—the good news of your salvation—and when you believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance.

What Adam lost, given back permanently

In the Old Testament, spirit from God came on certain people, conditionally. Moses longed for more: “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” (Numbers 11:29). Joel foresaw the day God would “pour out My Spirit on all mankind” (Joel 2:28). Jesus promised it before His ascension: “you will receive power when the holy spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). On the day of Pentecost, the risen Christ “poured out” that promised gift (Acts 2:33).

Now every person who believes receives it, at the moment of believing. And because it is given on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, not ours, it is permanent. Saul and Samson lost their spirit; believers cannot lose theirs. It is a “pledge,” a down payment on full life with God to come. It is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). It answers the inner void and the lost identity described earlier. The identity God wants for every person is found in Christ.

The law of the spirit of life

Romans 8:1–2 Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Romans 7 ended with “the law of sin”: the person who wants to do good but cannot. Romans 8 does not answer with a better rulebook. It answers with life.

“The first man, Adam, became a living soul. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45). God breathed breath-life into Adam, and every person since has been animated by that same breath-life. When God raised Jesus, He was given a new kind of life: still “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39), but animated by spirit-life. Christ was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (or “made alive by spirit”) (1 Peter 3:18). It is this risen Christ who now gives of that spirit to those who believe.

Why call it a “law”? Because the spirit of life is never at odds with God. It can only empower what is righteous. It fulfills God’s promise to write His law “on their heart” rather than on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 10:16). No written code can cover what love requires in every situation. Walking by the spirit can.

Living it out

The gift does not make anyone automatically righteous in this life. Believers still live in “breath-life” bodies that are weak. The gift helps the person who *wants* to live righteously. So Scripture calls for a renewed mind:

Romans 8:5–6 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.

“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:14). Scripture calls this putting off the “old man” and putting on the “new man” (Ephesians 4:22–24). These are not two literal people inside us. They are two ways of life, and we choose which one to live out. Through a renewed mind and reliance on the gift, a person can be strong where they were once weak.

11. “They Will See His Face”

The last two chapters of the Bible deliberately echo the first three. Almost everything lost in the garden reappears, restored.

Lost in Genesis 2–3	Restored in Revelation 21–22
Man hid from the presence (face) of God (3:8)	“They will see His face” (22:4)
Sent out of the garden where God walked with man (3:23–24)	“The tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them” (21:3)
The way to the tree of life guarded (3:24)	“On either side of the river was the tree of life” (22:2)
“Cursed is the ground because of you” (3:17)	“There will no longer be any curse” (22:3)
“To dust you shall return” (3:19)	“There will no longer be any death” (21:4)
Toil, pain, and anxiety (3:16–19)	“No longer any mourning, or crying, or pain” (21:4)
Dominion forfeited to “the god of this age”	“They will reign forever and ever” (22:5)
Darkness and spiritual blindness	“There will no longer be any night ... the Lord God will illumine them” (22:5)
All are lacking the glory of God (Romans 3:23)	“The glory of God has illumined it” (21:23)

Both sides of the condition are answered. The separation is ended: God dwells among His people, and they see His face. The absence is filled: life, light, glory, and dominion are restored. Jeremiah’s “broken cisterns that can hold no water” give way to “a river of the water of life ... coming from the throne of God” (Revelation 22:1).

Now and not yet

Believers do not yet see God face to face. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yet much has already changed. The believer has been reconciled, brought near, given “access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18), and given the very thing Adam lost. The glory we all lack is already, in part, being restored: “we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

A different answer to the first question

When God asked, “Where are you?” Adam answered, “I hid myself.” For the believer, Scripture gives a different answer:

Colossians 3:3–4 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Adam hid *from* God. The believer’s life is hidden *with Christ in* God. This is figurative language. Having died with Christ (the “dead to sin” of Chapter 7), the believer’s true, everlasting life is not yet on display. It is kept safe with the risen Christ, and it will be “revealed with Him in glory” when He appears. The word that once described someone hiding from God’s presence now describes a life kept secure within His presence.

Living in the light of this

If sin is, at root, absence and separation, then the Christian life is, at root, presence and relationship. Sins still matter, and they still have consequences. But the believer does not deal with them chiefly by trying harder to keep rules. The believer deals with them by living out of the relationship that has been restored and the gift that has been given.

James 4:8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

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

Walk in the light, and the darkness has nowhere to stand. Draw near, and the distance closes. Abide in the vine, and the branch bears fruit. The God who asked, “Where are you?” has gone to great lengths, through His Son, so that one day every one of His children can answer, “Here I am, before Your face.”

12. Three Familiar Terms, and Good Company

This chapter looks at a few terms often heard in theology and church history. It adds background but is not needed to follow the main message.

“Free will,” “original sin,” and “sin nature” are common in sermons and theology books. None of them appears in Scripture. It is fair to ask how well each one communicates what Scripture actually says.

Free will

God commanded Adam not to eat from one tree, which implies Adam could choose. Moses set before Israel “life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Believers today are told to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). People are free to choose. But there are only two meaningful choices, to obey God or not, and they lead to different ends. Freedom does not mean we can choose anything and expect life to go well.

Original sin

The doctrine of original sin took shape over several centuries and was fully formed by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), the first writer to use the phrase. Adam and Eve were not created inherently righteous in the way God is; if they had been, they could not have been tempted (James 1:13). Nor were they created unrighteous; God called His creation “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Their choice turned a possibility into reality. As noted earlier, if any sin deserves to be called “original,” it is the devil’s, who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8).

Sin nature

“Sin nature” is commonly described as a corrupt nature inherited from Adam, something in us that rebels against God. This study finds the term more clouding than clarifying. What Scripture describes is not something added to human beings, but something taken away. Adam’s children are born:

- without spirit, with an inner void, dependent on the senses;
- without access to the tree of life, and therefore mortal;
- into a world ruled by a wicked spirit;

- and possibly with some physical weakening over time.

Put together, that is all that is needed to explain how widespread sin is. Yet people remain responsible for their choices; Romans 1:20 calls them “without excuse.” Nothing entered Adam when he disobeyed; something was removed. As darkness covered the damaged creation before God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:2–3), so darkness filled Adam within once the light of spirit was gone.

We inherit not Adam’s guilt but the *consequences* of his disobedience. And through Christ, we can inherit the blessings of his obedience. Romans 5:19 puts them side by side: through one man’s disobedience many were “made sinners”; through one man’s obedience many will be “made righteous.” Both describe a standing given to us, not a change in what we are made of.

In good company

Seeing sin as absence and separation is not a new idea. Writers across many centuries have described it in similar terms, though they differ from this study, and from each other, on many points.

- **Augustine** wrote that evil is “the absence of good,” as disease is the absence of health. He also prayed, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”
- **The Eastern Orthodox tradition** speaks of “ancestral sin.” What we inherit from Adam is not his guilt but mortality and separation from the life of God, and personal sins arise from this condition, often driven by fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).
- **Blaise Pascal** described an emptiness in every person that “can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God himself.” The popular phrase “a God-shaped hole” paraphrases him.
- **C. S. Lewis** wrote that “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there.”
- **Paul Tillich** described sin as a threefold estrangement: from God, from oneself, and from others.
- **Jewish thought** has long reflected on *hester panim*, the “hiding of the face” of God (Deuteronomy 31:17–18).

None of these writers is the authority for this study; Scripture is. But it is good to know that this way of reading Scripture has deep roots, and that it has often been held alongside the more familiar picture of sin as breaking God’s law.

For Deeper Study

These notes are for readers who want the Greek and Hebrew behind the argument. They follow the order of the chapters they support.

Ch. 2 — The tenses in Romans 3:23. “Have sinned” is in the aorist tense, viewing the action as a whole. “Fall short” is present tense: all *are lacking*. In one sentence Paul joins sin as an *act* (something done) with sin as a *condition* (something presently missing). The acts are the evidence; the lack is the ongoing state. This verse is, in miniature, the subject of this whole piece.

Ch. 3 — “Dying you shall die.” The Hebrew of Genesis 2:17 reads literally “dying you shall die,” an emphatic certainty. On this reading, Adam was a three-part being (body formed from dust, breath-life breathed in, and spirit from God) and lost the third that very day. The phrase “spiritual death” never

appears in Scripture, but it describes what happened. Jesus pictured the same thing when the father called his returned son one who “was dead and has come to life again” (Luke 15:24): dead, meaning no living relationship.

Ch. 4 — The nature of the second death. This study understands the second death as a final end rather than unending conscious torment, since fire consumes rather than preserves. Sincere students of Scripture hold a range of views on this, and it does not change the main argument here.

Ch. 5 — “The sin” in Romans 5–8. In Romans 5–8 Paul often writes “*the sin*” with the definite article, which most translations leave out. Many commentators note that he uses it not for the specific sins we commit but for the underlying root. This study differs from those who see that root as a corrupting force living in a person. It identifies the root as the condition inherited from Adam: being without spirit, mortal, and living in a world dominated by the devil. In literary circles *hamartia* still means a “fatal flaw.” Spiritually, every person is born with one: the absence of spirit.

Ch. 10 — Holy spirit as a gift. The Greek of Romans 5:5 has no article: “through holy spirit having been given to us.” Most translations capitalize “Holy Spirit” and add “the” because their translators understand it as a person. This study understands holy spirit, in these contexts, as a *gift*: an enablement that gives its recipient a direct relationship with God, who is spirit, and the ability to act with His power, as Christ did. When Jesus calls it “the Helper” who will “teach you” (John 14:26), the study reads this as personification, emphasizing that having the gift is like having Christ Himself present. Readers from other traditions will hold different views here.

“Made alive in the spirit” (1 Peter 3:18). The Greek has no preposition here: *thanatōtheis men sarki, zōopoiētheis de pneumati*. “Spirit” is a bare dative, and translators supply “in.” It can just as legitimately be read as instrumental: “made alive *by* spirit,” as the KJV and NKJV have it (“quickened by the Spirit”). That reading fits Romans 8:11 and Christ as the “life-giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45). It also fits verse 19, “in which” or “by which” (*en hō*) he went and made proclamation. The main objection is the parallel with “put to death in the flesh,” which suggests both datives work the same way. But parallel form does not require the two datives to serve the same function.

As mentioned in the opening, this is a distilled edition of a much longer study. The longer study is entitled “Sin: A Closer Look” and is available on Amazon.