

The Depravity of Man

by Stephen Cavness

“Saved from what?” That was the answer one theologian gave when a student caught him off guard by walking up to him and asking abruptly, “Professor, have you been saved???”¹

The well-intentioned student obviously intended to be asking “Are you a Christian?” but the vagueness of his question reveals our need for clarity when we use certain words or phrases. This need is especially apparent when we interact with a lost world that does not use those words or phrases at all or, if they do, they do not use them the same way that we do.



Stephen is the pastor of Cave City Baptist Church in Cave City, KY. He also teaches Systematic Theology at Glasgow Christian Academy, and is a co-host of the radio program “Biblical Thinking”

I. THE MEANING OF SIN

In our culture, “sin” can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. To some it is simply a mistake, a flaw, or an indiscretion. Some consider it to be a lack of judgment that is relatively minor. To others, something is a sin only if it is seen as a grave injustice. Of course, there are views that fall between these two views. So the question we have before is this: Is sin open to interpretation or is there a standard definition that we are to use?

As Christians who hold to Sola Scriptura, we go to the Bible to find God’s view and definition of sin – and it has a lot to say about sin! Romans 3:23 has perhaps the most succinct definition of what sin is. This passage defines sin as a falling short or missing the mark of God’s glory and holiness. Romans 14:23 tells us that anything we do that is not a result of our faith in God is sin. God’s standard is complete holiness and anything we say or do that falls short

of perfect obedience intended for His glory is sin.

We must be careful, though, not to insinuate that to “sin” is only to do something that we should not do, which are acts of “commission.” Sin can also be acts of “omission” or not doing what we should do. In both types of sin, it is not just doing things on the bad list or not doing things on the good list that is the problem. Those are expressions of a deeper rooted sin, which is our failure to glorify God in everything that we do. In other words, we are not sinners because we commit individual acts of sin. The biblical truth is that those individual acts of sin come as a

result of our being sinners by our very nature. We sin because we are sinners. It is who we are and what we do.

If we do not grasp this truth, then we will at best underestimate and undervalue the grace of God and at worst we will misunderstand the Gospel!

We do not need to be “saved” from our missteps or mistakes. We do not need to be saved from bad decisions. We need to be saved from the wrath of God Himself because He is not only gracious and loving but also holy and just. And His holiness and justice demands that He pour out His wrath against all sin and sinners!

II. THE SCRIPTURE AND SIN

We know this to be the case because Scripture tells us that Christ “came as a propitiation.”² The word “propitiation” means “an appeasement of wrath.” All men are “by nature objects of wrath” and to deny that God punishes men for sins and pours out his wrath on sinners is to either deny or ignore a large part of Scripture. Consider the following passages:

Psalm 5:5,

The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;

You hate all who do iniquity.

Psalm 11:5-7,

The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked,

And the one who loves violence His soul hates.

Upon the wicked He will rain snares;

Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.

For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness;

The upright will behold His face.

Romans 1:18,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Romans 2:5,

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

Romans 2:8-9,

But to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.

Romans 3:5,

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He?

Romans 5:9,

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

Ephesians 2:3,

Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Colossians 3:5-6,

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.

First Thessalonians 1:10,

... and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

These few verses, not to mention many others, speak to the wrath of God against “sinners,” not simply “sins.” “Sins” do not go to hell; people do. The Bible is clear. The wrath of God is poured out on those who have not had that wrath satisfied by the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

III. THE JUSTICE OF GOD AND SIN

I do not disagree that God loves His children. Why would I? The Scriptures are clear on the fact that God

is love! But they are also clear that He is just and gracious and merciful. How can He be merciful and gracious

if there is no pending punishment? We cannot be saved from something that we were never in danger of! He cannot be just if He allows evil men to go unpunished.

The Bible is very clear. Jesus Himself is very clear. There are those people who will not come to Christ and they will go to hell. Why do they go to Hell? They go to Hell because of their rebellion against God (sin). They go to Hell because they deserve the wrath of God poured out on them. To be clear, this is something that all of mankind deserves, including you and including me. The difference for Christians is that by grace and through faith in the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Christ, their sin has been atoned for. The non-Christian who dies in his or her sin does not have a substitute and must pay their own penalty.

“The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). What is a wage? A wage is something that is earned. What all people earn by sinning is death. All have sinned³ and so all have earned death. The only hope of escaping this death is faith in Christ. If there is no faith in Christ then sinners get what they have earned and what they deserve. This is not intended to be mean or cruel or unloving. It is intended to be just.

Imagine if a judge in your city had a known child molester on trial who had

been caught in the act and was known to be guilty. Now imagine that the judge not only did not send him to jail but set him free. “You are free to go because I want you to know that I am loving!”

That judge would be off the bench as fast as possible and people would be rightfully outraged! So it is with the justice of God. He *is* loving. He *is* gracious. He *is* merciful.

And He *is* just.

This is why missions and evangelism are so important! In His love, God has commanded all believers to spread the Good News to all so that they might be saved! He desires that we proclaim to everyone everywhere that He sent his Son so that whoever believes will be saved! And all need saving because we are all sinners! That is good news indeed, that Christ has come to save sinners!⁴

So if you are a Christian, you have an answer the next time you hear the question, “Are you saved?” You can answer with great joy, humility, and gratitude: “Yes I am saved. I have been saved from the wrath of God that I deserved and have been given by God what I didn’t deserve and could never earn. I have been given His infinite love and mercy by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ! Glory to God!”

If you are not a Christian, then I implore you to repent. Repent of your sin that makes you an enemy of God and cast yourself on His Son Jesus Christ. Ask for forgiveness for your sin and ask to be made righteous before

God through His sacrifice so that you might His friend. So that you might become an adopted son or daughter who has been saved indeed!

End Notes

- 1 R. C. Sproul, *Saved From What?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002) 13-14.
- 2 See Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10.
- 3 Rom 3:23.
- 4 1 Tim 1:15.