

## THE EFFECTS OF SIN

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There is little talk today about sin—even in some Catholic circles. Not only is there a loss of the sense of sin, but many are also totally oblivious to the fact that sin has real consequences. This is what our two readings are about today: the effects of sin.

In his Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul warns the people not to fix their desires on evil as their fathers did, not to commit fornication as some of them did and died!<sup>1</sup> He was referring to an incident from the Old Testament that took place some time in the second half of the thirteenth century before Christ. Waiting to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites were encamped in the northeast corner of the plains of Moab to the east of the Jordan River. The place was called Peor where, as part of the worship rites of their pagan god Baal, Moabite men engaged in sexual relations with temple prostitutes. God had warned the Israelites to refrain from mixing with the local peoples of these lands because of such things but their men couldn't resist the temptation and engaged in these illicit relations themselves. As a result, Moabite women enticed them into taking part in their ritual meals and sacrifices to Baal. When God's anger flared up because of this, He told Moses to instruct the Israelite judges to publicly execute all of the men, who had submitted to the rites of Baal. The Book of Numbers tell us that on that day, 24,000 Israelites were put to death for their sin of worshiping a false god.<sup>2</sup> The one true God wanted them to learn that sin has consequences.

In this same letter to the Corinthians St. Paul recalled two other punishments suffered by the Israelites for their sins. One took place after they had crossed the Red Sea. God had fed them with manna but they complained, saying, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!" So, "In punishment the Lord sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died."<sup>3</sup> The other punishment mentioned by Paul referred to "the men whom Moses had sent to reconnoiter the land [of Canaan] and who on returning had set the whole community grumbling against him by spreading discouraging reports about the land."<sup>4</sup> For their lies they were struck down by the Lord and died.

Fallen human nature can be so obstinate that even the Israelites, who saw the awesome glory of God on Mount Sinai, who saw the pillar of fire and the column of smoke, who saw all the wonders God had worked in the desert, still rebelled against Him time and time again. God had been so good to them in so many ways that finally He declared: all those, who "have failed to heed my voice, not one shall see the land which I promised on oath to their fathers."<sup>5</sup> That's why they had to wander in the desert for forty years before entering into the Promised Land; so that all those, who had seen the wonders God had worked but yet rebelled, would be dead. Sin has consequences.

In his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul recounted the results of sin from the past. In today's gospel Jesus, who knew the future, predicted what would happen to the Holy City because of what it would eventually do to Him. He wept over the city and said: "If you only knew today ... The days will come when your enemies will erect a rampart

against you, and encircle you and hem you in on every side ... and not leave one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the day when the Lord visited you.”<sup>6</sup> He was predicting the devastation that would fall upon Jerusalem because it had turned away from God.

Centuries before the coming of Christ, Moses had written of this. “The Lord will raise up against you a nation from afar, from the end of the earth, that swoops down like an eagle, a nation whose tongue you do not understand.”<sup>7</sup> Isaiah too, had written about it. “I will bring distress upon Ariel, with mourning and grief. You shall be to me like Ariel, I will encamp like David against you; I will encircle you with outposts and set up siege works against you.”<sup>8</sup> The learned men of Israel should have known that this was about them.

But even though the scribes, the Pharisees and many others would call for Jesus’ death out of their own pride and lust for power, God would still give them almost forty more years to repent and avert His divine wrath from the Holy City, which should have welcomed the Son of God with open arms. Instead, their hearts became even more hardened in their rejection of the Messiah. And the consequences of this free choice of their wills? The total and brutal devastation of a once proud and magnificent city.

The Jews had been a constant source of trouble for the Romans. And so, in the year 66 they sent the Syrian army to Jerusalem under the command of Cestius Gallus. Encamped under the walls of the city, it looked as if he was going to swoop down upon it at any time. Instead, he later gave the strange order to retreat. But this too, was to be part of God’s plan in order to give Christians in the city a chance to leave before the ensuing siege. St. Luke records Jesus’ words of warning about this: ‘When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is at hand. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Let those within the city escape from it, and let those in the countryside not enter the city, for these days are the time of punishment when all the scriptures are fulfilled.’<sup>9</sup> The Christians recognized God’s warning and left. The Jews did not.

A year later, angered by the unceasingly relentless provocations of the Jews, Rome then sent Flavius Vespasian to finally put matters in order and by the year 70, the full force of Roman vengeance fell upon the city leaving it a heap of smoldering ruins filled with corpses—as reported by the Jewish historian Josephus, over a million. In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses had predicted the fate of this unfaithful city in horrifying detail many centuries earlier.

Sin has consequences. It’s just that we don’t usually think of them because sin feels too good and it darkens our minds. “Sin creates a proclivity to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts. This results in perverse inclinations, which cloud conscience and corrupt the concrete judgment of good and evil. Thus sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself.”<sup>10</sup> God doesn’t punish us “a tit for a tat” when we sin, but all sin is a rejection of God and when we reject God we reject His life and grace. And when we reject His life and grace, all that is left for us are the forces of darkness, which are then given reign to spread further throughout the world. We think that sins are personal but we only have to look back at the first sin of Adam to see how even one seemingly small sin has affected not only all mankind, but also, all of creation.

“Death entered the world on account of man's sin. Even though man's nature is mortal God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin.”<sup>11</sup> We live in the Communion

of Saints and so, “if one member suffers, all suffer together ... every sin harms this communion.”<sup>12</sup> That’s why because of Adam’s sin all must die.

“Sin makes men accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence, and injustice to reign among them. Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. ‘Structures of sin’” are the expression and effect of personal sins.”<sup>13</sup>

Each one of our sins affects all mankind in some manner, but it also affects all of creation itself. If God created man not to suffer and die, He surely didn’t create a world in which hurricanes would wreak terrible destruction and in which earthquakes would kill thousands of people in an instant. Just as He created man to live a life free of pain and death, He created the world to be filled only with harmony and goodness. Because Adam sinned, all of creation became disordered. And then, each one of our sins leading from that first sin brings into the world greater and greater disorder. Because of Adam’s sin and rejection of God’s way, God told him: “Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field.”<sup>14</sup> And St. Paul writes, that because of this, “creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now.”<sup>15</sup>

We never think of the consequences of our sins, but at the end of time, when we will all stand at the Final Judgment, God will spread out all of history before us and probably, one of the most horrifying experiences of that judgment will be when He shows us again not only what our sins were, but also how they affected the course of history after us. We will shudder to realize what this or that rejection of God’s law meant for the world and how it could have been better if we had but followed His way and not our own.

Sin has consequences. Just as good spawns more good, sin breeds more sin, dragging us further away from the goodness and perfection in which God originally created the world. It would be a much better world if more people would think more about what effect their sins will have on us all.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 25:1-9.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 21:5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 14:36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 14:22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 19:42, 43, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 28:49.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 29:2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 21:20-22.

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1865.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1008.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 953.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 1869.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 3:17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:19-22.