THE BIBLE TEACHING

When did you first rebel and demand your own way? You can't remember? It must have been early in your life. So it was with the human race. When ancient Hebrews asked, How did sin come into the world? an elder would begin to tell the story of the first man and the first woman and the serpent. When the story was over, the people would nod their heads knowingly; for they then understood something about themselves and about the human race. Or someone would ask, Why can't people get along with one another? And the elder would tell the story about the building of the great tower and how everybody wanted to make a name for themselves. Again the people would nod with understanding.

Sin with its many manifestations runs through the Bible from beginning to end. We will study this theme in relation to freedom, relationship, temptation, rebellion, alienation, wickedness, and grace. Sin is not merely a topic. Sin is the human condition.

Freedom

God breathed into men and women the power to think, to decide. This will, this divinely granted freedom, makes us different from rocks, plants, and animals. We have a will so that we can make choices. We are not totally determined by forces inside us or outside us. God wants children, not puppets.

When God said, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Genesis 2:17), God appealed to man and woman's freedom of choice. They would be held accountable.

Like Adam and Eve, we have choices to make and are held accountable by God. In what ways and for what are you being held accountable to God?

Relationship

Sin makes no sense apart from relationship. If there is no God, there is no sin. We might violate social customs or stumble over the natural order, but sin is an affront to Someone. We get out of step with our Creator. Sin changes our relationships with other people. Sin scrambles our inner person so that we experience feelings such as shame and guilt. The man and the woman disobeyed God, so they hid. They broke the innocent relationship of love and trust.

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Temptation

Some people say, "The devil made me do it." That attitude sidesteps responsibility. Yet we are pushed and pulled by sinister forces. Human experience testifies to a "whisper in the ear." The subtle serpent symbolizes an evil power that tempts us. Jesus was tempted (Matthew 4:1-11). Which one of us does not know the tug and nudge of temptation?

When you are tempted, what are the words the serpent speaks to you?

Rebellion

Deeper than any individual act of wrongdoing is the human tendency to rebel. From the beginning, people have tried to break out of divine boundaries, grab control of their own lives, and ignore what they knew to be right. Human beings, in selfish striving, seek to be independent of God. We dislike being limited. Pride sweeps over us. The ancient Greeks called it *hubris,* pride that offends the gods and leads to destruction. The story of the tower of Babel shows our desire to be self-sufficient. Paul said, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature [that is, themselves] rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

Rebellion includes disobedience (or transgression) and self-centeredness. We turn from God when we want to do things our way. The seven deadly sins listed in the Middle Ages—pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth—are called source sins because they are the fountainhead of sinning. But behind *them* is a willful, disobedient, self-centered rebellion. This rebellion is complete and universal:

> "There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
> there is no one who has understanding,
> there is no one who seeks God"
> (Romans 3:10-11; see Psalms 14:3; 53:3).

Alienation

The woman and the man lived in blissful innocence, naturally trusting and loving God. The earth was their paradise. In childlike wonder, they did not know there was such a thing as evil. But with their disobedience came knowledge of wrongdoing, shame, guilt, alienation. They immediately covered themselves and went into hiding.

David tried to hide his adulterous and murderous actions from the nation, and even from his own conscience, until the prophet Nathan beamed the spotlight of truth on his soul.

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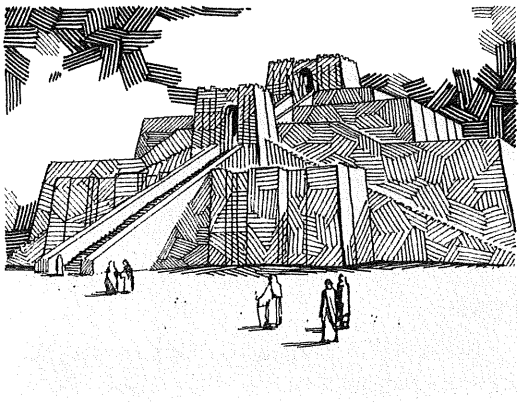

The tower of Babel is usually pictured as a *ziggurat,* a kind of temple tower in the form of a terraced pyramid. Such *ziggurats* were built by the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians.

What are some signs of your anger, guilt, alienation? What do you do to hide your sins?

One way to hide is by rationalizing. The man in the garden said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). And the woman countered, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate" (3:13).

When have you found yourself rationalizing and blaming others?

Wickedness

From the rebellious heart, all sorts of wickedness spring. We can talk about the Ten Commandments, about racism or cheating on income tax, about the drug traffic or child abuse or pornography or backbiting and gossip. From the brackish well of self-centeredness comes the foul water of our personal and collective sins. Cain's murder of Abel followed the parents' disobedience. Things went from bad to worse as Lamech cried out proudly,

> "I have killed a man for wounding me,
> a young man for striking me" (Genesis 4:23).

The disease is widespread. The whole human race is infected.

Grace

With evil so pervasive, sin so vile, we wonder why God does not destroy us all. The Bible speaks of God's temptation to do so (Genesis 6:5-7). But there is always a restraining side to the action: Through Noah and his family, God gave humankind a chance to start again.

Notice, particularly in Genesis 3 and 4, the touch of God's grace even amid human rebellion. God did not abandon the woman and the man. God came to them, questioned them, but did not destroy them. Their punishment was a form of grace: The man would earn bread by sweat; yet work is one of life's great blessings. The woman would bear children with pain; yet children are usually so welcome that the pangs of childbirth are soon forgotten.

Did God lie when he said they would die? Did the serpent tell the truth when he said they would not? Both God and the serpent told their own truth. Life to God meant fulfillment, joy, a relationship of unblemished love. Life to the serpent meant eating and sleeping and going through the motions of living. When the woman and the man rebelled, something

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beautiful died. Innocence was destroyed. A relationship was broken. Pure love of God and one another was violated, mixed forever with guilt and spiritual separation. Cherubim and a flaming sword guard the garden of innocence. We can never go home again.

Yet God did not abandon the people. Even as God drove woman and man out of the land of innocence, God took the time and tenderness to make clothes for them and help them dress themselves (3:21). Notice also that the "mark on Cain" (4:15) was to protect him, not to persecute him as is commonly thought. The grace of God permeates the Bible. God's mercy accompanies people even in their wickedness. That grace culminates in the cross of Jesus Christ.

MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Disciples acknowledge their rebellion, accept responsibility for their sin, and repent.

As disciples, we acknowledge our human rebellion, accept our personal responsibility for sin, and repent, placing ourselves back under the authority of God.

We all try to hide our sinfulness, even from ourselves. Recall a time when some person or some event caused you to see your sinful nature.

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Because we tend to defy God and take life into our own hands, how do we go about putting ourselves back under God's authority? Read again Psalm 51.

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The hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" includes this line: "Take away our bent to sinning." What do you think that means?

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We are part of the collective wickedness of the world. We have the capability of destroying ourselves. What, in your view, are the means and our chances of our survival?

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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

Write a brief autobiography with your own "Adam and Eve" or "tower of Babel" story.

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