

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SIN

By Robert W. Smith

Understanding the concept of sin is basic to our understanding of ourselves, our understanding of the problems that surround us in the world today, and most important of all, our understanding of God. This study is designed to give us new perspective about sin through an examination of the meaning of the words for “sin” in biblical Greek and Hebrew. By this means we seek to regain some of the original sense God intends for us to understand in his Word about sin, the problems it creates, and God’s remedy.

## *Sin in the Old Testament*

First, let’s consider the Old Testament concept of sin. Its predominant import is to miss the right point, describing those who have lost their way; even those who with the best of intentions are still off the track (Hebrew, *chata*). It also has the sense to err—that is, doing that which is not done—that which is unacceptable conduct (Hebrew, *shalah*). Also, it often has the sense to rebel (from the Hebrew *pasha* or *marad*).

So we see at once that the Old Testament idea of sin recognizes a standard of acceptable behavior (specified by God) from which men depart. It’s an easy step from there to an attitude of rebellion which brings with it a sense of guilt. Feelings of guilt are caused by departure from God’s norm, attended by a sense of opposition to God (who has authority to call us to account).

In addition to this, there is also the idea of acting in some degree of ignorance, implying a clouded mind incapable of assessing the consequences of unacceptable actions. Beyond this the Hebrew concept of sin also includes the idea of uncleanness: that sin makes us polluted and unfit for fellowship with God who is spotlessly holy.

So in the Old Testament concept of sin we have these ideas:

1. Sin is missing the right point.
2. Sin is unacceptable conduct.
3. Sin is rebellion against authority.
4. Sin contains an element of ignorance.
5. Sin makes unclean.

The net result for man is an uneasy sense of guilt and frustration—a sense of alienation from God and fear of facing him, in life or in death.

## **A Problem We All Share**

It’s easy to see that these factors describe the common state of mankind, reflected by the unrest of his heart in the presence of God and the sense of frustration and futility which is our common lot. It is not far from this sense of futility to the current phenomena of flagrant deviation from required norms and ultimate repudiation of every norm—the swamp of moral relativism in which much of the world lives today.

Our understanding of sin should therefore give insight into current trends of thought and life with a view, we trust, to supplying the remedy.

## **The Value of Revealed Truth**

Our understanding of the problem of sin also highlights the value of the revealed truth of the Bible, which tells of a God who sovereignly reigns and against whose authority man only breaks himself. It is no wonder, then, that the Bible makes valiant effort to show man the folly of missing the right point, whether in rebellion or in ignorance. No wonder it reveals the antidote to sin and guilt with pleading power and shows us how to be free from that feeling of dread which makes us want to flee from the greatness of God and our ultimate accountability to him.

But the sense of sin and guilt also has its useful side. Guilt is to the soul of man much like pain is to the body. It can be used by God to show us that we have violated not just human standards of conduct—the mores of man's making—but rather we have violated God's norms. The relative weight of sin in man's view is not the question. Instead, our "missing out" through life's frustrations is because we have missed the point of God's plan.

The true sense of sin and real guilt are God-given, to lead us back to a right relationship with him. Thus the question is not how we missed the point, or whether guilt is incurred through a mistake or in conscious rebellion. The result is still the same guilty feelings and sense of uncleanness, which must be removed somehow. In sinning, there is always an element either of bad judgment or of outright rebellion which must be dealt with by God.

For example, at the beginning of the race, Eve was deceived and sinned, while Adam sinned willfully: "For...Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:14). Note that Eve is called a transgressor even though she was deceived. To set aside guilt, from whatever cause, requires the same atoning sacrifice, even though outright rebellion may make us more culpable, for guilt is the sum of debt incurred by acts of sin and somehow the debt must be paid off.

## **Gaining Perspective**

An understanding of the concept of sin helps us gain perspective on the totality of human existence. Through such understanding we are able to grasp the reason behind man's basic insecurity, with its accompaniment of overwhelming inferiority feelings—or on the other tack, the bluff and bluster of man's colossal conceit, the cover-up for insecurity.

Here also we begin to understand man's insatiable quest for knowledge, which was originally God-given, but now is a misguided attempt on man's part to prove his own fancied self-sufficiency. "You will be as God" (Gen. 3:5) was the promise, the lying insinuation of Satan. Yet, we are not independently self-sufficient as God is. We see God still hanging around in the wings, still sovereign, still the author of life, still the great supplier of all our needs, still waiting for us to come to our senses and acknowledge our utter dependence on him. We seem inherently to know that we have made a moral overdraft on our account, with insufficient funds to cover the debt and that no amount of mere knowledge or intellect will supply the deficit. Man is ever learning and yet never coming to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. We know so much but understand so little. Yet we find it so hard to admit it.

## Sin's Consequences

We see in Scripture the original pair as a picture preview of all of us. We can all be trusted to act and react the same way they did. Thus, we see the consequences of sin being lived out as the *status quo* of our human experience as well as in the experience of the original pair.

What are these consequences? As we observe the original model and extend our thinking to the present, we discover these truths:

1. An attempt to “cover up.”
2. A tendency to shift any blame off ourselves.
3. A sense of guilt and unacceptability.
4. A desire to escape the consequences of our wrong acts.
5. A drive for knowledge to bolster our ego.
6. Attempts to pit our vaunted intellect against the knowledge of God.
7. Operating from our own mind set and/or sensual drives.
8. Minds beset with the cold power of doubt, with its attendant insecurity.
9. Rejecting of any idea of uncritical obedience to revealed truth about God.
10. Flouting of God's sovereign authority.
11. Being stuck with our own stupidity.
12. Falling heir to all the frustration and futility of life without God, which is in reality the “walking death” inherited from Adam.
13. Living in a world of illusion. Finding all the wrong answers to the right questions because we fail to see that “...the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6), and “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Proverbs 9:10).
14. By believing the lie, we become slaves of the one we obey—dupes subject to Satanic power and influence.
15. Ultimately, we become God's critics.

Referring to the Genesis account of the entrance of sin into the race, Gottfried Tuell writes:

*“...The narrator (of Genesis) consciously emphasizes the demonic nature of the thought which derives from doubt, which strives fanatically for knowledge and which for the sake of it tears down everything that would hamper it. He gives us to understand that a kind of alien power comes over*

*the man who sins, which he must obey against his better judgment because it convinces him by its assured manner and its correspondence with his own feeling.*

*Because man seeks to be wise irrespective of God's authority, because he seeks to penetrate behind the thoughts of God and to anticipate them, because he not only wills to do this but is able to do so within certain limits, a sphere of mistrust is opened up in which it is possible and tempting for man to renounce the attitude appropriate to him as a creature, to regard the creator with criticism and to think and act as himself God, unhampered, and responsible only to himself."*

So we see that sin brings in devastating problems—putting man at odds with the God who made him.

## **Man's Unfolding Understanding**

Our understanding of the psychology of sin can be further enhanced by examining the unfolding pattern in the history of Greek thought, leading up to the ultimate usage of the Greek words for sin in the New Testament.

The most commonly used word for sin in the Greek New Testament is *hamartia* and its related forms, used some 217 times. Tracing the use of this word through the golden age of the Grecian philosophers throws a flood of light on the current state of things, particularly worldly thought patterns. This information from the Greek philosophers themselves should be enlightening.

## **The Greek Philosopher's View of Sin**

Aristotle defines *hamartia* as, "a missing of virtue, the desired goal, whether out of weakness, accident or defective knowledge." However, there was no thought of guilt involved. It took the usage of this word in the Septuagint (Greek version of the Jewish scriptures) to invest it with the idea of being an offense against God. In the Septuagint, revelation of God through the Word was added to the futile gropings of man as expressed through the Greek philosophers. And without the information that God alone can give, even the best of man's thought only leads into a dead-end Street.

The biblical view of sin is not found in classical Greek, for in Greek thought there was no sense of man's enmity against God consisting in man's refusal to yield to God's authority and do his will. *Hamartia* covers everything from crime to harmless faults in its classical Greek usage. It includes:

1. Artistic and intellectual defects;
2. Technical and hygienic failures;
3. Errors of judgment on the part of legislators;
4. Political blunders; and finally,
5. Ethical failures mistakenly performed in good faith, but done through non-culpable ignorance.

“Virtue” for Aristotle (in the definition cited above) was not an absolute, but the means between two extremes. *Hamartia* was to him a deviation from that means, to either extreme. *Hamartia*, then, was doing that which is not intellectually or technically correct in accordance with the Greek mores. It had no moral force, as it always retreated into the inescapable ignorance to which man was bound through no fault of his own. So no sense of guilt was implied. In this view all guilt derives from ignorance, but this ignorance is a limitation of human existence imposed by fate and deserves no blame.

The deep meaning of the Greek tragedy is anchored in this concept: human guilt follows from the limitation of human knowledge, not as personal, moral guilt, but as guilt given with existence itself. Man acts in ignorance, with unforeseeable consequences for which he is not responsible. All he can do is accept and confess the fact and the consequences of his ignorant error. The result: tragedy, with no remedy.

Socrates based his work of instruction on the principle that ignorance is the root of all evil. It follows that, for the Greek philosopher, right understanding will lead to right action. The man who really understands and knows acts rightly. And, of course, behind this assumption stands the belief that man is basically good.

We see in this the foundation of modern thought patterns: the idea that education will produce right behavior and that man, being basically good, only needs to learn and he will behave. So we read such statements as that formulated by Solon: “According to the immanent laws of developing reality, according to the law of time, the bad withers and the good flourishes and establishes itself.”

In all this we see the background of more modern thought, the view that all wrong action of men stems from ignorance, which can be removed by education, and thus avoiding any thought of personal responsibility.

The factor obviously lacking in this philosophy, from the Christian view, is the will, by which man expresses his defiance of God and his Word.

## *Sin in the New Testament*

*Hamartia* achieves a moral and spiritual meaning in the New Testament by a dual process. First, words first employed about the natural and physical realm of life are eventually transferred into usage encompassing the moral and spiritual realm. Secondly, God takes these words and invests them with still deeper meaning as they are employed by him in the biblical revelation of truth. We can discover some of this added meaning by examining both the derivation and development of the words themselves and then by viewing their usage in the context of the New Testament.

### **Source Information**

As we do this, we first want to look at the etymology of *hamartia*. We discover from Trench’s *Synonyms of the New Testament* that the derivation of this word is a bit obscure and uncertain, yet with certain possibilities that intrigue our interest. The first of these is the conjecture that *hamartia* may derive from *marpto*, which coupled with the letter *alpha* negates the sense, forming *hamarptia*, “a failing to grasp.”

Another possibility is that it may stem from *meros*, meaning “part” or “share,” from which a negative verb was formed meaning “to be without one’s share, to miss out.” While these possible derivations are interesting, the more certain meaning is derived from an observation of the use and scope of the word in Greek writings, and especially in the New Testament.

Trench summarizes his own understanding of *hamartia* by the statement: “Only this much is plain, that when sin is contemplated as *hamartia* it is regarded as a failing and missing the true end and scope of our lives, which is God.” Thus *hamartia* signifies missing the mark, being the exact opposite of the Greek word for hitting the mark, to attain, to achieve.

In secular Greek, Trench adds, it is used of “a poet who selects a subject which is impossible to treat poetically, or who seeks to attain results which lie beyond the limits of his art. (Aristotle, Poët, 8 and 25)

If we were to incorporate these various ideas altogether we could describe *hamartia* as “missing out because we have missed the point of our life and existence.” It appears obvious that if this truly represents what God wants us to understand about the nature of sin, it should drastically alter our whole approach to life and our attitude toward God for no one really wants to “miss out” on anything good, especially when it involves missing the whole point of one’s life and reason for being.

### New Testament Examples

As we look at New Testament usage now, with this definitive research data in our minds, the light of fuller understanding should break through as to the deep significance of sin as revealed in God’s Word. This is our aim.

The starting point in this part of our investigation is Romans 3:23 “...since all have sinned (*hamartanein*) and fall short of the glory of God.” The addition of “fall short of God’s glory” is helpful confirmation of the sense of “missing the mark” implicit in *hamartia*. Add to this our Lord’s words in John 8:24 “...for you will die in your sins (*hamartia*) unless you believe that I am he.” Here we have the fatal consequences of sin declared and the remedy offered—in the Son sent from the Father to redeem man.

To summarize the far-reaching effects of sin in the more than 200 uses of *hamartia* in the New Testament the following charts may be helpful.

CHART I	THE EFFECTS OF SIN
(1) WHAT IS SIN?	Not acting in faith (Rom. 14:23) The product of desire (Jas. 1:15) Not doing what we know we should (Jas. 4:17) Transgression; lawlessness (1 Jn. 3:4) All unrighteousness is sin (1 Jn. 5:17)
(2) WHAT SIN DOES	Brings death (Rom. 6:16, 23; 7:5, 11) Enslaves us (Rom. 6:17, 20; Jn. 8:34) Deceives us (Rom. 7:11; Heb. 3:13) Gives certain pleasures (Heb. 11:25) Surrounds us (Heb. 12:1) Can be against our own body (1 Cor. 6:18) Can be against our own brothers (1 Cor. 8:12) Can be fatal (1 Jn. 5:16; Heb. 10:26)
(3) WHO SIN TOUCHES	All under sin (Rom. 3:9; Gal. 3:22) Both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 2:12) All have sinned (Rom. 3:23)

<b>CHART II</b>	<b>GOD’S REMEDY FOR SIN—CHRIST IN THE LIFE</b>	
(1) HOW CHRIST DEALT WITH SIN	Where sin abounded, grace all the more (Rom. 5:20) Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3) God made (Christ) to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21) In Christ we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14) He, by himself, purged our sins (Heb. 1:3) He put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:26) He bore our sins in his own body (1 Pet. 2:24) His blood keeps on cleaning us from sin (1 Jn. 1:7) If we confess our sins, he forgives (1 Jn. 1:9) He is the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn. 2:2) He was manifested to take away our sins (1 Jn. 3:5) He loosed us from our sins (Rev. 1:5) BUT ALSO— Christ’s coming exposed sin (Jn. 15:22, 24)	
(2) THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST MAKES	<b>THE CHRISTIAN &amp; SIN</b> Sin not charged (Rom. 4:8) Dead to sin (Rom. 6:2, 7, 11; 1 Pet. 2:24) Not sin’s slave (Rom. 6:6, 12, 14, 17) Free from sin (Rom. 6:22; 8:2) Yet sin is still a problem (Rom. 7:14, 17, 20) We still sin (1 Jn. 1:8-10) But we don’t <i>practice</i> sin (1 Jn. 3:9) It’s not for us (1 Jn. 2:1) Abiding in Christ keeps us from sinning (1 Jn. 3:6)	<b>THE NON-CHRISTIAN &amp; SIN</b> Sin reigns (Rom. 5:21) Dead in sins (Eph. 2:1)  Are of the devil (1 Jn. 3:8)  Are dying in sins (Jn. 8:24)

In this charted form, we have summarized over 60 of the more than 200 occurrences of *hamartia* in the New Testament. It’s remarkable to see what a clear overview it gives us to list the occurrences of this word under these headings in the order in which they occur in the New Testament. Perhaps we could learn even more if we reviewed the remaining references to *hamartia* from a volume such as *Englishman’s Greek Concordance*. We suggest this for your further study.

## Other Greek Words for “Sin”

To complete the picture we must take a quick look at the other words in the New Testament which relate to the concept of sin.

- Asebeia*      Godlessness - living and acting as though God didn't exist; or, if he does we owe him nothing. Ruling God out, refusing to give to God the thanks and worship due him. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness (*asebeia*) and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18).
- Parakoe*      Disobedience resulting from a refusal to listen—being inattentive to what God has to say. “For as by one man's disobedience (*parakoe*) many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). Also compare Heb. 2:1-3.
- Paraptoma*      A blunder or deviation from right; failure to act in accord with the standard. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass (*paraptoma*), you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1).
- Parabasis*      Transgression - conscious crossing of a divinely appointed boundary; trespassing into areas clearly proscribed. “You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking (*parabasis*) the law?” (Rom. 2:23).
- Anomia*      Lawlessness - deliberate disregard of God's laws by acting contrary to them in a spirit of rebellion. “Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness (*anomia*); sin is lawlessness” (1 Jn. 3:4). Note that *hamartia* is *anomia*.
- Hettema*      Defeat - failure to appropriate available resources, thereby accepting failure as inevitable. “To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat (*hettema*) for you” (1 Cor. 6:7).
- Agnoema*      To err through ignorance not necessarily willfully but through thoughtless heedlessness. “...Taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors (*agnoema*) of the people” (Heb. 9:7).
- Apistia*      Unbelief - challenging the veracity of God and failing to act on his trust-worthiness. “...I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief (*apistia*)” (1 Tim. 1:13).

Though this is by no means an exhaustive list of the terms in the New Testament which describe and define sin, we can begin to see not only what sin is and does, but how it relates to God. Thus we can begin to form in our minds a theology of sin.



## A Theology of Sin

<b>SIN</b>	<b>AS IT RELATES TO GOD</b>
<i>HAMARTIA</i> (Sin)	<u>Missing the very point of life</u> , which is to know God and the beauty of his plan.
<i>ASEBEIA</i> (Ungodliness)	<u>Ruling God out of our lives and plans</u> , and living as if we owed him nothing.
<i>PARAKOE</i> (Disobedience)	<u>Refusing to listen to God</u> , as if you knew better than he how life should go.
<i>PARAPTOMA</i> (Offense)	<u>Being consecrated blunderers</u> , not necessarily with evil intent but still out of line.
<i>PARABASIS</i> (Transgression)	<u>Flouting God's laws of life</u> in conscious, rebellious contempt of his commands.
<i>ANOMIA</i> (Lawlessness)	<u>Defiance of God's laws</u> as if he had not spoken, and living in anarchy against God.
<i>HETTEMA</i> (Defeat)	<u>Accepting defeat</u> as if there were no available resources in Christ.
<i>AGNOEMA</i> (Ignorant error)	<u>An ignorant mistake</u> , not so much willful as stupid, but still an error.
<i>APISTIA</i> (Unbelief)	<u>Calling God a liar</u> and acting as if he were an enemy trying to deceive us, or somehow selfishly desiring to make us miserable by getting us to do something we won't like.

## Our Lord's Personal Word about Sin

To conclude this study it may be refreshing to hear directly from the Lord Jesus himself. His should be the final word on the subject, as the Savior from sin.

In his earthly life and ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, we see that the Lord Jesus, while not directly unfolding a doctrinal treatment of sin, nevertheless revealed: (1) its nature and reality and, (2) his consciousness of being victor over it.

To illustrate, in Luke 15, verses 18 and 21, the prodigal son confesses, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." By this Jesus shows us what sin is: going out from the Father's house and living a life remote from God, with all that means in terms of loss and poverty and uncleanness.

He declares his victory over sin in these words spoken to a paralyzed man, "Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you" (Mt. 9:2 - NKJV); also, "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you' or 'Rise and walk'?" (Mt. 9:5 - NKJV). Jesus is fully aware of the alienating power of sin and the overcoming grace and

forgiveness of a loving heavenly Father whom he represents in his earthly mission of redemption. This mission and capacity is clearly reflected in the announcement of the angel to Joseph about the Coming One, "...and you will call his name Jesus (Lord God Savior), for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21 - NKJV).

A simple and beautiful example of the Lord's ability to handle the sin problem is the following story.

### ***Who Else Can "Fix Sin"***

A basic test of the worth of a religion is what it teaches about what God has done to "fix sin," according to Jim Mexican, a 20-year-old Navajo Indian. Jim used the question about "fixing sin" to defeat representatives of a false religion. The story is told by Gordon Fraser, director of Southwestern School of Missions at Flagstaff, Arizona:

*Jim Mexican came to us a year ago as a new believer. He is a Navajo, 6'1" tall, 20 years old. He attended a government school for five years but admits: "I fool around all time—not learn enough English." He started studying his Bible avidly, and we could hear him downstairs at 5 a.m. sounding out his words.*

*A few months after he came to us, he came into the office and said: "Want to go to reservation—see my auntie. These fellows go two-by-two, always bodder her—want to chase them off."*

*We felt that Jim would be no match for these carefully trained young cultists, but we finally yielded to his insistence and let him go for the weekend. We prayed and worried some, but Jim was back on Monday wearing a wide grin. Our conversation went something like this:*

*"How did you make out, Jim?"*

*"OK, I guess—they went away and left my auntie alone. I don't think they come back."*

*"But what did you tell them?"*

*"I ask them one question."*

*"What was that? Usually you have to argue a long time before they leave."*

*"I ask them, 'How you fellows fix sin?'"*

*"That would be a rather difficult question for them to answer—what did they say?"*

*"They say, 'Start out right—live clean life—obey the law of the gospel—just stop sinning and you be alright.' I tell them, 'Too late—I already a bad sinner—get in jail five times in six months—how you fellows fix sin like that?'"*

*"What did they say to that?"*

*"They jump in pick-up truck and slam door. They say 'Crazy Indian' don't know nothing—they go away mad—I just laugh at them."*

With renewed perspective on sin and its devastation, our only response should be, “Hallelujah, WHAT A SAVIOR!” and a life of grateful cooperation with the saving work of Jesus Christ in us and through us.

“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, *much more*, now that we are reconciled, *shall we be saved by his life*” (Rom. 5:10, emphasis mine).

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### **Source Materials**

Kittel - *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, pgs. 267—316.

Trench - *Synonyms of the New Testament*, pgs. 239-249.

*Englishman’s Greek Concordance*.

Thayer’s - *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

The Indian story is from *The Doorstep Evangel* published by Dr. Willard Aldrich, President of Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland, Oregon.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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