

Jericho: The Lesson of Not Coming Into Sin

Ancient Israel had to learn a painful, tragic lesson at Jericho. What should Christians today learn from their experience?

by Mario Seiglie

The Bible is replete with instructions and exhortations about coming out of sin. Equally important, however, is the concept of avoiding sin in the first place.

Jericho is a vivid case in point. The story of the fall of that ancient city took place during the season of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread that marked the beginning of the Israelites' inheritance of the Promised Land.

After wandering 40 years in the wilderness, the unfaithful and rebellious first generation of Israelites had died off. Moses also died, and God had named Joshua as his successor. God then allowed the second generation to enter Canaan and form the beginnings of the kingdom of Israel.

In the spring the Israelites came upon the plain of Moab with the Jordan River in front of them. As He had previously parted the Red Sea, God now miraculously opened the Jordan, and they entered the Promised Land. "The LORD your God dried up the waters of Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God *did to the Red Sea*, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over, that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever" (Joshua 4:23-24, emphasis added throughout).

A fresh start

Once Israel passed into Canaan, God instructed that the male Israelites should be circumcised, since the previous generation had not obeyed even the simple command involving circumcision. God was forging a holy nation, and its male residents were to bear this sign that they were God's special treasure and an obedient people (Genesis 17:11; Exodus 19:5).

Next, with the powerful fortress city of Jericho nearby, the Israelites celebrated the Passover and began keeping the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Joshua 5:10-12). Once they entered the Promised Land, they no longer needed the miracle of the manna, and it ceased to appear on this first day of Unleavened Bread.

God showed them that their 40-year journey had come to an end and they no longer needed the supernatural food. As God had told them through Moses, "you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2). The Israelites were finally inheriting the Promised Land, which God had promised to their forefather Abraham more than 400 years earlier.

As they began to eat unleavened bread made from the grain of the land, God instructed them in how they were to capture Jericho, a major obstacle to them in their conquest of the land. Seven momentous days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to follow, along with a spiritual lesson for the ancient Israelites and for us.

Facing the fortress of Jericho

God ordered the priests of Israel to march around the city on each of the seven days of the feast. The Jewish historian Josephus marks the time: "So on the first day of the feast the priests carried the ark round about, with some part of the armed men to be a guard to it . . . and when they had done this for six days, on the seventh Joshua gathered the armed men . . . and told them these good tidings, that the city should now be taken"

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(*Antiquities of the Jews*, book 5, chapter 1, paragraph 5).

The biblical account begins: “Now Jericho was securely shut up because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none came in” (Joshua 6:1-5). The huge city doors had been sealed shut, and no one could enter or leave the heavily fortified settlement. No one could go in or out other than through the gates in the sturdy walls.

Archaeologists have described Jericho as one of the oldest cities in the world. By Joshua’s time it had already seen civilizations come and go. For the last several centuries it had successfully resisted all attempts to conquer it. Its massive fortifications had discouraged any invader.

Hundreds of years earlier Abraham and Lot had journeyed to the Jordan Valley and the area around Jericho. To the south were the “cities of the plain,” which included Sodom and Gomorrah. These had been destroyed because of their wickedness, but Jericho continued as the chief city to their north and one of the gateways to the land of Canaan. Since it occupied such a vital strategic and commercial location, the Canaanites had heavily fortified it.

Doubly fortified

In this century, archaeological evidence of the excavated Jericho shows that the level of the site that corresponds to that era had a double wall. The first part of the wall was a towering structure of huge stones 15 feet high topped by a brick wall eight feet high.

When the Israelites entered the city, God solemnly warned them not to take any of the spoils for themselves. God considered the place impure and unholy from centuries of atrocious sins.

Excavators found that, even if this first wall were breached, the attackers would find themselves trapped inside a pit and looking up at a higher second wall from which defenders could hurl deadly spears, rocks and arrows.

As the Israelites camped near Jericho, the residents of the city remained mostly confident that they could withstand any siege. The Israelites looked puny to them; they had few weapons and no siege towers or battering rams. Bizarrely, a group of priests walked around the city every day blowing horns. What did that have to do with capturing a fortified city?

Yet the inhabitants were concerned, not because of the Israelites, but because of the reputation of Israel’s God, who had

separated the waters of the nearby Jordan. “So it was, when all the kings of the Amorites who were on the west side of the Jordan, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan from before the children of Israel until we had crossed over, that their heart melted; and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the children of Israel” (Joshua 5:1).

A fortress finally falls

On the final day of Unleavened Bread, in what must have become a joke to the populace of Jericho, the Israelite priests marched seven times around the city. The Israelite soldiers were poised nearby, but they must have appeared powerless. The city dwellers must have thought this the most ridiculous and ill-equipped army they had ever seen.

Yet, when the priests completed their seventh encirclement, they sounded their trumpets, and instantly a mighty earthquake shook the town. The walls noisily heaved, cracked and crumbled.

Normally, since the walls were reinforced from the outside, they would have collapsed in a rubble, which still could have provided protection from the invaders. But in this case the walls appeared to defy gravity and fell out and flat, allowing the Israelite soldiers to quickly move over and through the rubble. The Bible account says that “the wall fell down flat. Then the

people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city” (Joshua 6:20).

In 1990 archaeologist Bryant Wood wrote in *Biblical Archaeology Review* about his findings in Jericho. He mentioned that parts of the outer and inner wall had collapsed outwardly, which allowed the Israelites to enter the city. His conclusions based on studies of the devastation of the city are fascinating. “Was this destruction at the hands of the Israelites?” he wrote. “The correlation between the archaeological evidence and the Biblical narrative is substantial.” He lists several points in favor of the biblical account (March-April 1990, p. 57):

- The city was well fortified (Joshua 2:5, 7, 15; 6:5, 20).

- The attack occurred just after the spring harvest (Joshua 2:6; 3:15; 5:10).

- The inhabitants had no time or opportunity to flee with their foodstuffs (Joshua 6:1).

- The siege was short (Joshua 6:15).

- The walls were leveled, possibly by an earthquake (Joshua 6:20).

- The city was not plundered (Joshua 6:17-18).

- The city burned (Joshua 6:24).

Warning to the Israelites

When the Israelites entered the city, God solemnly warned them not to take any of the spoils for themselves. God considered the place impure and unholy from centuries of atrocious sins. “Now the city shall be doomed by the LORD to destruction, it and all who are in it . . . And you, by all means abstain from the accursed things, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it” (Joshua 6:17-18).

Why did God tell the Israelites not to take spoils? After all, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the Israelites needed new clothing, food and other goods.

Several hundred years before, God told Abraham that in the fourth generation His people would inherit the Promised Land: “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Genesis 15:16).

God allotted the Canaanites 400 years to live their wicked existence. But, after this period, their sins had greatly multiplied. This was a hopelessly corrupt society, and God did not want the Israelites to participate in any of the Canaanites’ sinful ways. The Israelites had recently been consecrated. They were circumcised, took the Passover and had just finished removing leaven from their midst. They were not to soil themselves with anything of that condemned society.

True to human nature, someone defied God’s instructions. “But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan . . . took of the accursed things; so the anger of the LORD burned against the children of Israel” (Joshua 7:1).

The results were immediate and tragic. Because of Achan’s sin, the Israelites were defeated by the inhabitants of the next city, Ai.

Joshua grew depressed and fearful, but God told him to remove the sinner and Israel would again be triumphant: “Get up!

Why do you lie thus on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among

to the south, Sodom and Gomorrah. They persisted in their moral and spiritual decline for centuries until it was too late.

As the spiritual descendants of the ancient Israelites (Galatians 6:15-16), we must not allow the allure of worldly soci-

ety to draw us into it. This is one of the lessons of the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. The apostle John warns: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:28-30).
When we take the Passover and keep the seven days of Unleavened Bread each year, we remember that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us spiritually, delivering us from enslavement to the sins of the world. God wants us *outside* of those walls and doing His work: trumpeting God's truths to a world whose society might appear well fortified but one that in the time of God's judgment will collapse.

A time of destruction

As mentioned above, God had told the patriarch Abraham that his descendants would take the land of Canaan "in the fourth generation," but not before, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Genesis 15:16).

Just as God waited until the time was right before allowing the Israelites to come into the land of Canaan, He allots us a certain time. We do not know when God will consider the world's sins to have "reached to heaven," but we know He is watching. John in vision "heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her *sins have reached to heaven*, and God has remembered her iniquities'" (Revelation 18:4-5).

One day God will consider that the world's evil deeds have gone far enough. This, too, is described in Revelation: "So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God" (Revelation 14:19). Someday this will happen. On which side of the wall of Jericho will God find us?

The lesson for us is to remember not only how to come out of the world, but how not to be lured back into it. We picture this, during the spring feast days, not just by *eating unleavened bread* but by *avoiding leavened bread*. Just as God inaugurated the Passover and Unleavened Bread season by removing Israel from the corrupt society of Egypt, He wanted the Israelites to remember when they entered the Promised Land that they were not to take part in the corrupt practices of the Canaanites.

We must learn this important lesson: We are to *come out* of sin (symbolized by Egypt) and *avoid going back* into sin (represented by Jericho). If we succeed, we can inherit our Promised Land, the coming Kingdom of God. **GN**



The remains of the ancient city of Jericho can still be seen at Tell es-Sultan, about six miles north of the Dead Sea. The effects of archaeological excavations that began at the site in 1907 and continued in later years are clearly visible.

their own stuff" (Joshua 7:10-11).

Joshua quickly determined who was the guilty man. After Achan confessed his sin, he and his family were stoned to death. God's favor was restored, and the Israelites continued their conquest of the Promised Land.

Lasting lessons

What can we learn from this? Jericho represents the allure of a wicked society. Sometimes one is tempted to climb up the walls of the world, so to speak, and peer inside. In Jericho the inhabitants enjoyed comfort, wealth and a certain sophistication—all new and tempting to a generation of Israelites who had known only the hardships of a life in the wilderness.

Jericho, well guarded, appeared safe inside. Little did the citizens of Jericho know they were living on borrowed time. They paid no lasting heed after they witnessed the destruction of their counterparts

to the south, Sodom and Gomorrah. They persisted in their moral and spiritual decline for centuries until it was too late.

As the spiritual descendants of the ancient Israelites (Galatians 6:15-16), we must not allow the allure of worldly soci-

The Lesson of Foot-Washing

On the evening before His death, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, then instructed that His followers would continue this practice to help us remember. What are we to learn from this simple but profound observance?

by Jerold Aust

Peter was puzzled as Jesus of Nazareth knelt down to wash His disciples' feet. Jesus and the 12 apostles had gathered in a private room. He had earlier directed Peter and John to prepare their last meal together. It was during this time that Jesus instituted the symbols of the New Testament Passover: the unleavened bread that would represent His broken body and the wine that would signify His blood that he would lose less than a day later.

Peter was watching, fascinated, as Jesus bent down to wash His disciples' feet. This was unusual, even strange, to see a teacher washing His followers' feet.

Peter had observed Jesus rising during supper to remove His outer garment and wrap a towel around His waist. Peter well knew this was an act customarily performed by slaves or servants. In that day, whenever guests were invited to a home, the lowliest household slave or servant washed the guests' feet. (John 1:27 and Luke 7:44 refer to this custom.) In this case, since this was a private gathering, no servants were present to carry out the menial job of removing sandals and washing the feet of guests.

Wasn't Jesus too good for this?

What was Jesus doing? Surely it was beneath Him to abase Himself in this way. As Jesus moved from one disciple to another, the room probably quieted. All eyes followed Jesus' every move. The disciples shifted their positions to watch Him lift the pitcher of water and pour it into a basin.

Carefully, systematically, Jesus moved from disciple to disciple, washing each man's feet. Peter looked on transfixed, scrutinizing Jesus' every move. Peter suddenly realized it was his turn.

As Jesus bent down to wash his feet, Peter blurted out, "Lord, are *You* washing *my* feet?" (John 13:6, emphasis added throughout). Apparently Peter was the only one who openly questioned—and protested—his Master's actions. His understanding of Jesus' behavior wouldn't come until God sent the disciples the Holy Spirit. Only later would they comprehend the spiritual significance of this act of humility and the symbols Jesus instituted during that evening's Passover service.

Jesus responded simply, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (verse 7). Of course, Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit's revelatory power, which would eventually guide the disciples' understanding (John 16:13), enabling them to grasp the spiritual meaning of this physical act. Later they would understand that this ceremony signifies the Christian's humble service to God, His Church and mankind.

Again, Peter's impetuosity surfaced. He protested that Jesus should never lower Himself to the undignified demeanor of a servant: "*You* shall never wash *my* feet!"

Jesus Christ calmly responded, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8).

Peter's next saying mirrors our human tendency to overreact: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" (verse 9).

Our Savior then informed Peter: "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you" (verse 10).

He made clear that the act of washing each other's feet is not really an exercise in personal hygiene. Although His disciples wouldn't understand until later, Jesus spoke of becoming spiritually pure, which would happen through His shed blood and death for the sins of humanity.

One man among the disciples was not clean in spirit: Judas Iscariot, who would betray the Savior. Jesus knew who would betray Him, "therefore He said, 'You are not all clean'" (verse 11).

Lessons for Christ's followers

What are we to learn from Jesus Christ's act of humility? Jesus Himself clearly explained the primary lesson of foot-washing: "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (verses 13-14).

In other words, if Jesus Christ is willing to humbly and unconditionally serve His followers in a lowly human task, those disciples should follow His example and be willing to perform even the most unpleasant tasks for their brethren and mankind.

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The apostle John, who recorded these events, later explained this attitude with a simple question: “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17). No follower of Christ is to set himself above serving any other human being. God observes His people and blesses those who honor Him by serving as conduits of His truth and examples of true spirituality.

Jesus instituted the foot-washing ceremony to illustrate that He had come to *serve* mankind. He had earlier made this

was his willingness to die and His death, which was to befall him the next afternoon. His example of humility, service and generosity is all the more poignant because of its contrast with the attitude of the rest of humanity. Our natural tendency is to look for ways to make others serve us. God’s way, on the other hand, is unpretentious, willing service to others.

Serving others God’s way imposes no

Peter well knew that Christ’s actions were customarily performed by slaves or servants. In that day, whenever guests were invited to a home, the lowliest household slave or servant washed the guests’ feet.

lets everyone come out ahead. It is not the way we normally, naturally think. That is why we must change to God’s way, which works forever.

Our way does not work for long. Although we may temporarily benefit, in the long run our human way of doing things traps us. Service to others lives on, but taking or serving only the self dies with those who seek to serve themselves.



Those who would follow Jesus Christ must ask a tough question: Will we dedicate ourselves to Jesus’ way of outgoing, humble service toward others, or will we go the way of the world, demanding and taking and serving ourselves? Christ’s example of washing His friends’ feet is a reminder of that fundamental choice.

You can do three things that will help you understand and capture Jesus’ attitude as He washed His disciples’ feet:

- Ask God to help you better understand and practice the spirit of foot-washing.
- Seek God’s attitude of humility and service by researching and studying the many examples of it in your Bible, including Abraham, Ruth and Daniel.
- Look for ways to serve others.

Every year as we approach the Passover season, let’s keep in mind the wonderful lesson of washing others’

clear to those who would follow Him: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it *shall not be so* among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, *let him be your slave*—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

Christ’s ultimate service for mankind

conditions and expects no reward: “But love [even] your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil” (Luke 6:35). This powerful scripture tells us much about God’s character—that His approach is one of unbiased service to mankind.

Spiritual system at work

Jesus reveals to us a spiritual system that

feet, which symbolizes our serving others with humility and without imposing our own conditions. Jesus tells us to emulate His actions in this simple ceremony: “For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15).

Then He shows us the results of a selfless, serving attitude: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (verse 17). *GN*

How Does the Bible Define Sin?

In our struggle to avoid and overcome sin, it is vital that we understand exactly what it is. Let's see how the Bible defines sin.

by Scott Ashley

What exactly is sin? Do you understand how the Bible defines it? As Christians, we are to avoid sin—but how can we avoid sin if we don't fully comprehend what it is?

The Bible defines sin in several scriptures, each of which gives us a better understanding of what it is. But, before we look at these scriptures that define sin, we should first understand what the word *sin* means.

Two broad concepts

The Hebrew and Greek words translated “sin” throughout the Bible revolve largely around two major concepts. The first is that of transgression. *To transgress* means “to step across” or “to go beyond a set boundary or limit.” This concept can be compared to an athletic playing field with lines delineating the boundaries within which the game is played. When a player crosses over those boundary lines, he has committed a “transgression” and gone out of bounds. Limits are set that define the playing area, and the players are to stay within the limits of that area.

Most of the other words translated “sin” in the Bible involve a second concept, “to miss the mark.” Again, to use a sports analogy, if a player aims for the goal and misses, how many points does he get? None. He missed the goal, missed the mark at which he was aiming.

This view of sin includes the concept of our going in one direction but straying off course to the side and not continuing in the direction we intended to go, with the result that we don't make it to the goal we intended. We miss.

This concept also encompasses the idea of failing to measure up to a standard. For example, most academic courses and tests are graded or judged according to a minimum standard. If we don't meet that standard, we fail that test or course. A minimum level of performance is expected, and anything less than that standard is failure. By not meeting that standard, we “miss the mark” and don't pass. We can miss the mark by either *missing* the goal at which we were aiming or by *falling short* of that goal. In either situation we fail to reach the mark set for us.

Both of these concepts, transgressing and missing the mark, involve a basic requirement. If we *transgress*, which means to cross over a set boundary or limit, then we must have a boundary or limit

to cross over. If we *miss the mark*, we must have a mark, target or standard to miss. Sin, then, is to transgress those boundaries God has set for us or to miss the target He set for us.

This is where the biblical definitions of sin become important, because these scriptures define the boundaries and standards God set for us. They define the playing field on which we are to live our lives. They also define the goal we are to aim for, the minimum standard we are expected to meet. In other words, the biblical definitions of sin show us the *standards* God has given us that define *what is acceptable* to Him and *what isn't acceptable*. They show us what *measures up* and what *falls short* of those standards, the fundamental principles God has given us to live by.

The definitions of sin in the Bible are not simply arbitrary dos and don'ts. Instead, they show us *the way God lives*. They show the spiritual principles by which He lives, the same standard of conduct He expects His human creations to live by.

Transgressing the law of God

What, then, are the boundaries and standards God has set for us that define sin? The most basic definition of sin is in 1 John 3:4: “Whoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for *sin is the transgression of the law*” (King James Version, emphasis added throughout). Here God defines a boundary for mankind. He says that sin is transgressing His holy, spiritual law (Romans 7:12-14). Breaking that law—crossing that divine boundary, that limit God set for us—is sin.

When we look at 1 John 3:4 in other translations, we see another important perspective. Here's how the New King James Version translates this verse: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and *sin is lawlessness*.” The word translated “lawlessness” is the Greek word *anomia*, meaning *without law* or *against law*. The concept conveyed here is that sin is *active violation* of God's laws and basic moral principles. This refers to actions that are not just *outside* the bounds of God's law, but actions that are in *deliberate rebellion* against those laws—deliberately trampling on and rejecting that boundary.

God gave humanity His laws to show us His way of love. Those laws define how we demonstrate love to God and our fellowman (Deuteronomy 30:15-16; Matthew 22:35-40; 1 John 5:3). Sin is violation of that law of love. God showed us

The scriptures that define sin define the boundaries and standards God set for us. They define the playing field on which we are to live our lives. They also define the goal we are to aim for, the minimum standard we are expected to meet.

a way to live in peace and harmony with Him and with mankind and defined this way of life by His law. When we sin, we violate or transgress that boundary and break God's law.

Broader definition of sin

We have seen one standard God has set for mankind: He expects obedience to His laws. God's law defines acceptable behavior and actions, and, when we break the standard of God's law, we step across the bounds He has set. But has God set other boundaries for us, other ways in which He defines sin? What about actions and behavior that aren't covered by specific laws?

In 1 John 5:17 we find a much broader definition of sin: "All unrighteousness is sin . . ."

Other Bible versions help us more fully understand the meaning: "Every *wrong action* is sin" (Twentieth Century New Testament). "Every act of *wrong-doing* is sin" (Phillips Modern English). "Any kind of *wrongdoing* is sin" (Weymouth New Testament in Modern Speech). "All *iniquity* is sin" (Moffatt Translation).

The basic thrust of this scripture is that, if any action or behavior is *wrong*, it is *sin*. The word translated "unrighteousness," "wrong action," "wrongdoing" and "iniquity" in these versions is the Greek *adikia*. The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* defines this word as "action that causes visible harm to other persons in violation of the divine standard" (Lawrence O. Richards, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1985, "Sin").

Other meanings of this word and its verb form are "evildoers," "dishonest," "unjust," "wickedness," "to be unfair," "to harm," "to mistreat," "to hurt" and "to wrong [another person]" (*ibid.*).

These meanings go beyond just physical deeds and actions and cross over into attitudes and motives for our actions and what goes on in our minds. They involve what we think. We see the beginnings of a different standard, one that involves not just what we do but what we are.

Christ reveals an underlying principle

Jesus Christ clarified this divine standard in Matthew 5:21-22: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that *whoever is angry with his brother without a cause* shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother,

'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire."

One commonly understood standard of behavior was to refrain from murdering another human. If someone committed murder, he would himself be put to death. Here Jesus drew attention to the law's underlying principle: If you *think* of other people as worthless, viewing them as undeserving of life or existence, then you are in danger of *eternal death*, not just physical stoning. Jesus Christ showed that sin includes not only our physical actions, but also our thoughts and attitudes.

He explained this further in verses 27-

We should realize that sin starts in the mind. When we allow evil thoughts to enter our mind and stay there, eventually these evil thoughts can spring into action, leading us to sin.

28: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has *already committed adultery* with her in his heart." Christ said that this sin is not defined by just a physical act; if we even allow such a thought in our mind we have sinned. We have mentally crossed that boundary, trampling that limit God gave us.

We should realize that sin starts in the mind. When we allow evil thoughts to enter our mind and stay there, eventually these evil thoughts can spring into action, leading us to sin. We are what we think (Proverbs 23:7). Jesus told those of His day who were obsessed with physical cleanliness and ritual washings that it isn't what goes into our bodies that defile us, but the evil that is *already there* in our minds that debases us (Matthew 15:17-20).

Humanly speaking, we don't see anything wrong with allowing wrong thoughts into our minds. Often they are quite pleasurable and entertaining. But eventually those sinful thoughts lead us into sin. The result is the trampling of God's law. Jesus Christ instructs us to disrupt that process before it gets started, by not even allowing wrong thoughts into our minds.

Do not violate your conscience

In Romans 14 God reveals yet other ways in which we can fail to measure up to His standards. In this chapter the apostle Paul wrote to a congregation composed of Jews and gentiles, discussing how their differing backgrounds had affected them. In

the Roman Empire of the time literally dozens of holidays were observed, including feast days and fast days during which certain foods would be eaten or avoided.

Those who had been members of the Church for some time knew that such practices had no meaning for Christians, so they ate what they wanted when they wanted. But others were being called into the Church out of that Roman background and were offended at the eating of such foods. This created conflicts among the congregation because the new members had spent their whole lives thinking that eating particular foods was wrong on particular days of the calendar.

Paul addressed this problem in verses 19-22, telling Christians to be careful that they don't offend those newer and weaker in the faith. Then notice what Paul said in verse 23: "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is *not from faith* is *sin*."

Here we see a third standard that defines sin for us: "Whatever is not from faith is sin." Just what is God telling us in this passage? From the context we are told that if we violate our conscience we are sinning. If you do something that you feel you shouldn't be doing, you are sinning.

Why is this sin? Because mentally and spiritually we are compromising when we do something that we don't think is right. When we compromise, we are destroying *character*.

Character is crucial

God expects us to build spiritually mature, godly character in this life, becoming ever more like Him (Matthew 5:48). We build eternal, godly character by remaining faithful to what is right in spite of pulls to the contrary. We resist the temptation to do things we know we shouldn't. We live by faith that God will give us the strength to endure whatever trials we face in this life. But when we compromise we tear down that character. We give in. Every time we give in, we find it that much harder to resist giving in the next time we face temptation.

One of the insidious things about compromise is that it spreads. If we get away

with something once, we find it much easier to try it again next time. Compromise grows like a cancer. It comes on slowly, then spreads. Before you know it you can be in a fight for your spiritual life. That is why God says that, if our actions aren't done in faith or according to faith, if they violate our conscience, *we are sinning*.

God wants us to live within the boundaries and standards He has set for us, to change our values, attitudes, thoughts and lives so they are in line with His standards, not our own.

We need to be sure that what we do is out of faith and confidence that it is right and acceptable to God—or *not do it*. We need to be sure our motives are right and our conscience remains clear in everything we do. For this reason it is vital that we properly *educate our conscience* so that it is in accordance with God's Word, the Bible. It is not within our natural ability to discern right and wrong (Jeremiah 10:23). We are to learn God's ways that define right and wrong for us (Hebrews 5:14).

God wants us to live within the boundaries and standards He has set for us, to change our values, attitudes, thoughts and lives so they are in line with *His standards*, not our own. The process of conversion can be simply defined as replacing *our standards*, values and thoughts with *God's standards*, values and thoughts.

Sin can be what we *don't* do

We have seen the ways that we can sin by *what we do* as well as *what we think*. In case you haven't noticed, the standard God expects of us keeps getting *higher* and *harder* for us to meet. This last definition of sin may be the most difficult for us.

Did you realize that we could go through life without *ever* stealing, lying, hating or breaking a single command from God, all the while perfectly controlling our thoughts, and yet still sin every day of our lives? We could avoid all those things, but we could still be sinning according to this last definition of sin. Most of us probably don't realize we are involved in this last kind of sin and probably don't even realize that it *is* a sin.

We have seen that we can sin by the things we do. But we can also sin by the things that we don't do.

James 4:17 tells us, "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it,

to him it is sin." Perhaps you have heard of *sins of commission*, sinning by the actions we take: stealing, lying, committing adultery and so on. But this verse tells us that some transgressions involve *sins of omission*, sinning by things we *omit* doing.

James tells us that if we *know* to do

good, and we recognize that we *ought to be doing* certain things, the *failure* to do them is a sin. We are not meeting the standard God has set for us. We are missing the mark.

The four Gospels are filled with examples of this sin. Jesus often clashed with those who were diligent about strict literal obedience to God's laws but never realized God expects more of us. In Christ's day the Pharisees referred to detailed lists of what could and couldn't be done lawfully on the Sabbath; they were diligent about tithing down to the last seed or grain of spice; they spent hours studying the law, fasting and praying. Yet Christ called them "blind guides," "hypocrites" and a "brood of vipers."

These people simply didn't comprehend the *intent* of God's law. They put great effort into *not committing* sins, but concentrated so much on this struggle that they failed miserably at doing what they *should* have been doing.

Consider the conflicts they had with Jesus Christ. Their biggest disagreements were over the Sabbath. They were infuriated that Christ *healed* on the Sabbath. According to their teaching, one could provide only medical help or treatment on the Sabbath if the situation were life-threatening. Thus when Jesus performed great miracles on the Sabbath—healing those who had been crippled or sick for years—the Pharisees were furious. Instead of rejoicing for those who were healed, they were enraged.

They wanted to kill Christ because in their distorted view He was breaking the Sabbath. They were blind to the fact that Jesus was *doing good*, that He was easing the misery and pain of people who had suffered for years. It was because of their willful spiritual blindness and hostility that Christ called them hypocrites and snakes.

Changing what we are

We should learn an important lesson from this: Strict obedience to God's law alone doesn't change what we are. It's a start, certainly. As we have seen, obedience to His laws is a standard God expects us to meet. But there's more to it than that.

Sometimes we make the same mistake the Pharisees made. We can concentrate so much on avoiding breaking God's law that we lose sight of the purpose of that law: to change our *focus* from thinking about ourselves to being concerned for and showing love for others.

We may think that never breaking God's law is good enough. But what did Jesus Christ say? Only a few days before His execution, Jesus made clear an obligation for those who would follow Him:

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory . . . all the nations will be gathered before Him . . . Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' . . . And these [those who *did none* of these things] will go away to everlasting punishment, but the righteous [those who *did* these things] into eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-43, 46).

Jesus illustrated this point through other examples. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) provides a prime example of a sin of omission. The rich man took *no* notice of a

poor beggar, a man who had absolutely no significance in the wealthy man's busy life but who was *greatly valued* by God.

Another wealthy man filled his barns with impressive provisions while neglecting to extend a helping hand to those in need (Luke 12:16-21). This man stored up treasures for himself, filling his storehouses to overflowing with far more than he could possibly use while at the same time showing no regard for others—another sin of omission.

Whose will is most important?

Christ's teaching helps us understand why it is sin *not* to do what we know we should do. It boils down to whose will is most important in our lives: Is it *our will*, doing what *we* want to do? Or is it *God's will*, doing what *He* thinks is most important?

Not doing what we know is right is putting *our* will ahead of God's. It demonstrates to God that we don't have the desire or character to put *His* will ahead of our own. It shows we are unwilling to completely surrender ourselves to Him. This is why it is sin: We put ourselves before God, our will before His will.

James elaborated on the requirement that we do good deeds. He asked several basic questions about our faith: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? What good is it? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

James says such faith—faith without godly works—is useless, worthless. Such faith is of no lasting value because *it doesn't change the person*, nor does it help others just to hear the words "Be warm and filled" when they're cold and hungry.

It is through *action*—through *works*, through doing the good that we know we ought to be doing—that God builds His nature and character within us. If we want to get rid of our selfish, sinful nature, we have to replace it with something else. We don't just magically, instantly get rid of it; we have to *replace it* with God's nature, with His thoughts and ways.

Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." God's Spirit working within us will help us recognize sin and avoid it so

we no longer will "fulfill the lust of the flesh." His Spirit will likewise help us recognize, understand and grow in His ways, enabling us to strengthen and demonstrate our faith through the works that James pointed out are necessary.

Opportunities abound for us to do the good that we know we ought to be doing. We can start right in our own families by working to make them strong, by making our families a warm, affectionate, supporting, encouraging place for all family members. We have plenty of opportunities in our spiritual family as well. God's Word tells us in James 1:27 that pure religion is to "look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (New International Version).

God wants us to become a more compassionate, more caring and more truly loving people, reflecting His way of life. He wants us to become more like Jesus Christ, who gave His life as a living sacrifice for all humankind. Many opportunities exist for us to do good: to encourage, strengthen, help, give, show love for those in need. When we do those things, we are doing *good works*—sacrificing our time and energy for

the well-being and benefit of others.

The ultimate definition of sin

God sets high standards for us in finding and overcoming the sins that affect us. Ultimately, these definitions tell us that sin is *anything* that is contrary to the will of God or doesn't express the holy character of God. That is the standard He has set for us, as seen by these definitions.

Our efforts to identify and remove sin can be compared to the story of a sculptor chipping away at an enormous block of stone. Another man asks him what he's sculpting, and the sculptor replies, "An elephant." The other man then asks, "How do you sculpt an elephant?" The sculptor considers the question, then says: "It's really very simple. You just chip away anything that doesn't look like an elephant."

We are doing the same thing when we start chipping away sins from our lives. Our goal is, with God's help, to chip away *everything that isn't like God*. We are removing sin—everything that is *contrary to or doesn't express the holy character of God*—with the purpose of more fully and maturely reflecting God's very mind and way of life. **GN**

FINDING YOUR WAY BACK TO GOD

Realistically, many of our readers have been afflicted by the ravages and suffering brought on by sin. Sins of commission, sins of omission, missing the mark perhaps countless times, violating our consciences—the sheer weight of these multifaceted transgressions is just too great to bear!

The only answer to the problem of sin is, of course, Jesus Christ. He came to earth not only to make possible complete forgiveness of the past, but to help us conquer the strongholds of sin that have become deeply entrenched habits that are enormously difficult to dislodge from our lives. He is our merciful High Priest in heaven, always interceding with God the Father on our behalf, ever ready to help us gain the victory over sin.

"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, New Revised Standard Version). The apostle John, while acknowledging our human weaknesses, encourages us not to give in to sin. "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2, NRSV).

This gives us every reason to be greatly encouraged in our daily struggle against sin. After all, Jesus Christ has been there and fully understands our plight. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16, NRSV). **GN**

—John Ross Schroeder

The Concepts of Sin in the New Testament

Examining the many Greek words defining the concepts of sin expands our understanding of sin and how it affects us.

by John Meakin

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, one of God's annual festivals, depicts the Christian's need to eliminate sin from his life. But to live a sin-free life we must first understand *what sin is*. God gives us this understanding through many scriptures.

The New Testament, which was written in Greek, contains many words that add to our understanding of the concept of sin. These are translated into various English words in addition to "sin." A close study of the use of these terms can prove rewarding in expanding our understanding of sin and its effects in our life. Following is a summary of the Greek words defining the concepts of sin.

• **Falling short: *hamartia, hamartema, hamartano*.** This word in various forms occurs around 250 times and is the most common way in the New Testament to express the concept of sin. The central idea is to "miss the mark." This word is used several ways. It can refer to general sin or wrongdoing (John 8:21) or specific acts of sin (Matthew 12:31; 1 John 5:16). The apostle Paul also used it to personify an ungodly power that can control people (Romans 6:6). It also refers to the inward element that produces wrongdoing (Romans 3:9; 7:13).

Hamartia entered the world by Adam (Romans 5:12). He disobeyed God and disregarded His instruction. Adam missed the mark and fell short. Ultimately, this mark (of perfection) is nothing short of the perfection of God's character—the ultimate aim of God's spiritual children (Matthew 5:48). As sinners we "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

God's laws give us a knowledge of *hamartia*, or sin (Romans 3:20). We must not continue in such sin (Romans 6:1-2), but repent, be forgiven and have our sins blotted out (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

• **Unrighteousness, iniquity: *adikia, adikos* (and other forms of the same word).** *Adikia* literally means "not right" and denotes injustice (Luke 18:6) or dishonesty. It is the comprehensive term for a wrong situation or wrongdoing between individuals. The human tongue is a "world of iniquity" (James 3:6). God rejects workers of iniquity (Luke 13:27) and commands us to depart from iniquity (2 Timothy 2:19).

God is righteous (Romans 9:14) and expects us to be like Him. God will forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness if we are willing to confess our sins and ask Him for forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

• **Trespass: *paraptoma*.** This word occurs 23 times, coming from *para*, meaning "aside," and *pipto*, meaning "to fall." It refers to a false step, blunder, sideslip, lapse or deviation—the failure to maintain godly conduct by the resistance to temptation.

Perhaps the most familiar use of the term is in Jesus' example prayer to His disciples, where we are encouraged to "forgive men their trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Jesus was delivered to death for our trespasses (Romans 4:25). Through our acceptance of His sacrifice in our place, our trespasses, our offenses, are not imputed to us (2 Corinthians 5:19).

When we were dead in our sins, we were brought back to life through God's grace and forgiven by Christ's sacrifice (Ephesians 1:7; 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Our Christian task is to help those overtaken in any trespass (Galatians 6:1). Through the fall (trespass) of Israel, God has brought salvation to the gentiles (Romans 11:11).

• **Iniquity, lawlessness: *anomia*.** This word occurs 15 times and literally means "no law." It is usually translated "iniquity" in the King James Version and "lawlessness" in the New King James, though in 1 John 3:4, which contains perhaps the best-known definition of sin, it is translated "transgression" in the King James Version.

Even outwardly religious professing Christians who may do many wonderful things fall under God's stern judgment if they continue to practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:23) or fail to uphold His laws. God will remove all such people from His coming world-ruling Kingdom (Matthew 13:41).

The Pharisees were prime examples of those who seemed to be righteous but in reality were full of *anomia* (Matthew 23:28). Such lawlessness is prophesied to be the dominant spirit of the time immediately before Jesus Christ's return (Matthew 24:12). God hates lawlessness (Hebrews 1:9) and commands us to repent of it. We are blessed when

The New Testament, which was written in Greek, contains many words that add to our understanding of the concept of sin. A close study of the use of these terms can prove rewarding in expanding our understanding of sin and its effects in our life.

God forgives our lawless deeds (Romans 4:7) and He remembers our lawless deeds no more (Hebrews 10:17).

• **Transgression: *parabasis*.** This word comes from *para*, meaning “across,” and *basis*, meaning “foot.” It holds the meaning of violating a specific law, crossing a specific line God has drawn. Unless a line exists to cross over, no transgression can be committed (Romans 4:15). The effect of the law is to render people “transgressors” when they violate, or cross over, the boundary God has set.

Both Adam (Romans 5:14) and Eve (1 Timothy 2:14) transgressed God’s instruction, though of the two only Eve was deceived. In Galatians 3:19 we read that God added a law alongside another law “because of transgressions”—disobedience to *existing* law or instruction.

Because of human nature’s hostility toward God (Romans 8:7), we naturally tend to cross the boundary lines set by God (Romans 7:18). That is why Christ, who “by means of death” is mediator of the New Covenant, is so important (Hebrews 9:15). His death redeems (purchases) us from transgressions of God’s laws under the covenant to Israel. The promise of the New Covenant through Christ brings forgiveness of our transgressions and allows the same laws to be written in our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

“For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator” (Hebrews 9:13-16, NKJV).

• **Ungodliness: *asebeia*.** This word literally means “no worship.” It appears in the Bible in various forms 17 times. *Asebeia* is the opposite of *eusebeia*, which literally means “good worship” or godliness. *Asebeia* means living in rebellion against God and His standards. If *anomia* is defiance of *God’s laws*, then *asebeia* is defiance of *God Himself*. It can also mean irreligion in general.

God made His law for the lawless and ungodly (1 Timothy 1:9) that He may bring

them to repentance. Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). The world in Noah’s time was destroyed by a flood because of the ungodliness of the earth’s inhabitants (2 Peter 2:5-6). God is angry with the ungodliness of men (Romans 1:18) and warns us against any corrupting activities that will produce even more ungodliness (2 Timothy 2:16-17; Titus 2:12).

Ultimately, God will intervene to “turn away ungodliness” from Israel, His chosen people (Romans 11:26). If God allows persecutions against His chosen people to judge and purify them, how much more serious will be the judgment He will bring on the ungodly (1 Peter 4:16-18; Jude 15).

Even outwardly religious professing Christians who may do many wonderful things fall under God’s stern judgment if they continue to practice lawlessness or fail to uphold His laws.

• **Debt: *opheilema*.** This word occurs only twice and is used as a metaphor for offense or sin in Jesus’ example prayer known as the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12). Our sins are debts we owe to God.

• **Disobedience: *parakoe, apeitheia*.** This word comes from *para*, meaning “aside,” and *akouo*, meaning “to hear,” and has the meaning of “hearing amiss.” It means a refusal to hear, or heed, God’s commands and is used three times. It was through Adam’s disobedience that all humanity was made sinners (Romans 5:19). By bringing every thought into captivity, we can be “ready to punish all disobedience” (2 Corinthians 10:5-6). Our disobedience merits a “just reward” (Hebrews 2:2).

Apeitheia is used seven times and literally means “not persuaded.” It refers to obstinate rejection of the will of God. It describes the nation of Israel’s unbelief (Romans 11:30-32), which prevented Israel’s first generation from entering the promised land (Hebrews 4:6). We are warned not to go the same way (verse 11).

Satan’s spirit dominates the “sons of disobedience” of this world (Ephesians 2:2). We are warned against being deceived by such obstinate people, who attract God’s fierce anger (Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6).

• **Ignorance, error: *agnoema*.** This word occurs only once, in Hebrews 9:7, where it is translated “errors” in the KJV. The NKJV translates this as “sins committed in ignorance.” It refers to sins committed inadvertently through ignorance or unwitting error.

Lack of knowledge, however, does not

mitigate the sin, which still needs to be atoned for. Ignorance is no excuse. In ancient Israel the high priest entered the tabernacle each year on the Day of Atonement to make an offering for these sins. As we become aware of our ignorance, we need to repent. Even sins of ignorance must be covered by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

• **Fault: *amomos, hettema, memphomai, aition, elencho*.** Several Greek words are translated “fault” in English. Pontius Pilate found Christ “without fault” (Greek *aition*, Luke 23:4, 14), meaning without cause, crime or legal ground for punishment.

Paul found fault (Greek *hettema*, mean-

ing “decrease,” “diminishing” or “loss”) with the Corinthian brethren who were taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 6:7). The NKJV translates this as “utter failure.”

Paul wrote that the problem with the Old Covenant was “finding fault with them [Israel and Judah]” (Hebrews 8:8). Here “fault” is *memphomai*, meaning “blame.” The Israelites’ heart was to blame rather than any of God’s laws.

Ephesians 1:4 tells us that those chosen by God are to be “without blame” (*amomos*, meaning “rebuke,” “blemish,” “blot” or “censure”).

Matthew 18:15 instructs us that, if a brother trespasses (Greek *hamartano*, meaning to sin or fall short), we are to “tell him his fault alone” (*elencho*, meaning “to tell a fault,” “convict,” “reprove” or “rebuke”).

Understanding what sin is and recognizing its ruinous, destructive effect on human life is the first step to overcoming sin. The Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures our freedom from enslavement to sin. God has released us from sin through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, and we are to remain free from sin.

Rather than being enslaved to sin, Paul exhorts us to serve a different master: “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:16-18, NKJV). *GN*

How to Overcome Sin

You need to understand this vital biblical formula for overcoming sin.

by John Meakin

Avital aspect of God's purpose for us involves our coming to repentance, recognizing our sinful state and how far short we fall of God's standards, and determining to begin living God's way of life. We strive to identify and overcome our sins and live a sin-free life.

However, when God helps us recognize the enormity of our sins, a natural human response is dejection and discouragement. Even the apostle Paul struggled with his weaknesses, lamenting that "in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find . . . The evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Romans 7:18-19).

How can we possibly overcome our deficiencies of character and attain to the eternal life that God offers us? How can we change and overcome sin?

During Jesus' ministry a rich young man came to Him and asked what he should do to achieve eternal life. Christ told him, ". . . If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). When the man asked which commandments Jesus was talking about, Christ referred to five of the Ten Commandments, along with the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." But He omitted mention of the Tenth Commandment, which forbids coveting. Covetousness was the man's problem and one of the reasons this account is in the Bible. The young man was just too attached to his riches to give them up, so he "went away sorrowful" (verse 21-22).

Christ noted how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God because of the human tendency to covet and rely on physical possessions rather than God. The disciples, amazed, asked, "Who then can be saved?" Christ's answer provides the key to overcoming sin: "With men this is impossible, but with God *all things are possible*" (verse 26, added emphasis throughout).

None of us can overcome our deficiencies, our sins, our shortcomings, without God's help. Even if we could by our own will alter our actions, only God can change our hearts. This is why Paul appealed to members of the church in Rome not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by God's Spirit and "by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:1-2).

To come to grips with our sins, each of us must surrender to God. When God is calling a person to fundamental change, He leads the person to this point of surrender. Repentance comes through

God's goodness, not our own (Romans 2:4). God grants repentance so we may know the truth (2 Timothy 2:25) and live (Acts 11:18). We are free, however, to decide whether to repent. Peter exhorted his countrymen to "*repent* therefore and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

After repentance, and after baptism as an outward sign of our repentance, God promises to give us His Spirit. That Spirit empowers us to recognize and overcome sin. Through conversion we become a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) as far as God is concerned. He enables us to live as a different person, leaving behind our sins.

We can overcome sin

In 1 John 3:9 the apostle John tells us, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God." We should understand several points from this verse. First, the converted Christian does not habitually sin. He has, after all, turned away from sin. The sense here is not that a Christian will *never* sin, because we remain human, imperfect and subject to the pulls of our nature and a degenerate world around us. Instead, the sense is that a Christian will not remain in the *practice* of sin.

A second point of this scripture is that God's Spirit is like sperm. It impregnates Christians and *enables* us not to sin. We are empowered not to sin by God's "seed" (Greek *sperma*), which lives in us. *Cannot* in the Greek does not mean *can never*, as it is often used in English. Rather, it means *enabled* or *empowered not to sin*. This is encouraging news—that we can, with God's help, overcome sin!

Nevertheless, in practice how do we go about rooting out sin? It is not as simple as asking for more of God's Spirit and sitting back to relax as God somehow miraculously and instantaneously nullifies our trespasses. We have work to do and must make a conscientious effort while God's Spirit continues to empower and reinforce our efforts.

In Ephesians 4 Paul presents an easy-to-understand formula for change. He illustrates the method with several examples so we may clearly understand what is involved in overcoming sin. When we examine these verses, we notice three steps we must take to shift from a sinful life to one that properly repre-

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sents God's working with and within us. If we miss any one of these steps, change either cannot take place or will remain incomplete.

Paul's instruction regarding overcoming sin is to "put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Out with the old

The first step, says Paul, is to "put off . . . the old man." To do this we must realize that our nature, the old man, is our carnal, selfish nature, which lives hostile to God (Romans 8:7). Our unconverted human heart will not obey God (Deuteronomy 5:29) and is in God's eyes "deceitful" and "desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). Our self-centered way of sin inexorably earns us death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; Romans 6:23).

The "old man" to whom Paul referred is both our unconverted mind and the individual acts of sin that spring from it. He, the old man, must be put to a symbolic death through the waters of baptism (Romans 6:1-4). Spiritually, we must lay the ax to the root so that the evil tree with its corrupt fruit will cease producing sin.

Over time God can work with the worst of us; He can free us from the many sins that imprison us—sins that we may feel we can never overcome. We can be released from the myriad bonds that ensnare us and hold us captive, even as Gulliver was held captive by Lilliputians with hundreds of tiny ropes as described in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. We can be free, even though now we lie helplessly caught in the cords of sin (Proverbs 5:22).

God, in granting us repentance and reconciling us to Himself by the death of His Son, wipes out our past sins and gives us the help we need to overcome.

With God's help we are progressively liberated from a wrong way of life that Paul described as slavery (Romans 6:16). To break free of enslavement we must "put to death" our "members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

As we study God's Word, we see our sins revealed to us. The Scriptures help us identify changes we must make. The Word of God, if we let it, powerfully cuts and penetrates to the core of our being "and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the

heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

As we give ourselves to the penetrating light of God's Word, God helps us identify our wrong practices and thoughts. We must turn away from them and adopt godly thoughts and perform godly works. But we cannot do it alone.

Having begun to identify what we need to change, with God's Word and His Spirit we can ask God for the help to overcome. We need to stir up God's gift of His Spirit within us (2 Timothy 1:6). That Spirit can renew us every day and will empower our new nature for the successful fight against sin (2 Corinthians 4:16). By this Spirit we can "put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13).

Many fail in their fight against sin by attempting to overcome it by their own strength rather than relying on God's Spirit.

God can work with the worst of us; He can free us from the many sins that imprison us—sins that we may feel we can never overcome.

Paul acknowledges this human deficiency. He knew full well the impact of the law of human nature and conduct. ". . . Evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good," he wrote (Romans 7:21). This scripture describes the struggle of Paul's—and every Christian's—corrupt nature with his new godly nature.

It is through Jesus Christ, through His sacrifice for sin and by His nature dwelling in us (Galatians 2:20), that we can live a new, godly life. We can be redeemed "from every lawless deed" and purified as "His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). With God's help we can overcome.

In with the new

If we only put off the old man, the process of overcoming is incomplete. A Christian life is a life of changes. We may have identified what is wrong: the ungodly characteristics of the old man. We may have gone to God to ask for more of His help to change. Yet now comes the hard part: We must, with God's help, incorporate the positive traits that are the opposite of the flaws we have identified. Paul described this as "put[ting] on the new man" (Ephesians 4:24) with all its godly attributes. We must focus our attention and effort on the godly behavior we desire to practice.

We must concentrate on the positive to eliminate the negative. This is where the examples Paul uses are so instructive and clear, as in his first example of lying

(verse 25). Someone came to me once and admitted he had a problem with lying. I quipped that I wasn't sure I could believe him. After all, when is a liar not a liar? He doesn't stop being a liar just because he keeps his mouth shut. He may be a liar between lies, so to speak. The only way a liar can demonstrate proof of a change in character is to "speak truth with his neighbor" (same verse). He must put off the old by putting on the new.

When a former liar begins consistently to tell the truth, his old ways of prevarication begin to shrivel up and die. This is how God's Spirit helps us overcome.

Paul lists another example, that of stealing. When is a thief not a thief? Someone who is not stealing something may be only a thief between jobs. The only demonstrable proof that a thief has changed his ways is his

starting to do the opposite. Stealing is simply the act of unlawfully getting and taking. The opposite trait is giving. God can help a thief to learn to work "that he may have something to give him who has need" (verse 28).

Destructive or constructive words?

Paul cites yet another example of the way we communicate. Our tongue is often an accurate indicator of our dominant nature, whether good or bad. Jesus Christ noted that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). James tells us that the unbridled tongue is "a world of iniquity" (James 3:6).

Keeping silent so that no corrupt communication slips out may be a step in the right direction. But keeping your mouth shut is not at all proof that your nature has changed. After all, "even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace" (Proverbs 17:28). Your nature has fundamentally changed when you begin using your tongue in a positive way. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearer" (Ephesians 4:29).

To overcome the wrong use of speech, we need to ask God to help us concentrate on *encouraging and building up* someone instead of tearing him down. Let your words spring from "a well of life" (Proverbs 10:11). Make your talk as "choice silver" (Proverbs 10:20). We should pray for God to let our speech be "always with grace,

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What Is True Sincerity?

What is true sincerity? Do you have it? Do you need it?

by Bill Butler

One day Alexis, a young man of the ancient city of Corinth, was pouring hot water into a colorful clay vessel. It began to leak and then suddenly broke apart in his hands, spilling its contents on his feet. Looking closely at the broken pottery, he discovered that the clay was mixed with wax.

When the hot water melted the wax, it revealed the inferior quality of the vessel. Alexis had bought a piece of junk.

Corinth was famous in its day for its fine pottery. However, many dishonest merchants plied that trade. If a vessel were cracked, some deceitful potters would melt wax and carefully wedge it between the cracks. They would then skillfully paint over the flaw so it couldn't be noticed by an unsuspecting customer.

Careful shoppers found they could expose the cracks by holding the pottery up to bright sunlight. They could see the flaws under the paint in much the same way an X-ray device might work.

What does wax in a piece of pottery have to do with our lives as Christians?

We can draw an analogy from this simple account that applies to every Christian's life. A man or woman of God is sometimes referred to in the Scriptures as a vessel, as in one of the apostle Paul's letters to Timothy. We are to be "a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21). God says He is the potter and we are the clay He is forming into His vessels (Romans 9:21-23; Isaiah 29:16).

Covering faults

The practice of covering up poor workmanship with wax was common in Corinth in New Testament times. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he wrote to the Corinthian church concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread: "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of *sincerity* and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8, emphasis added throughout).

The meaning of the Greek word *eilikrinia* translated "sincerity" is "purity." In the Bible it is used in referring to *purity of motive*. *Sincere* appears two times in the King James Version. *Sincerely* appears three times and *sincerity* 10 times. They are translated from Greek words meaning "genuine," "without deceit," "unmixed" and "unadulterated."

The English word *sincere* is a good translation of the original Greek. This word in English comes from two Latin words, *sin-e* and *cere*. *Sin-e* simply means without, and *cere* means wax. So *sincere* can mean literally "without wax" (John Ciardi, *Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language*, Harper & Row, New York, 1980, p. 360). An honest merchant in the ancient city of Corinth when presenting his product to a buyer might say that it was a sincere piece of pottery.

When you buy a jar of honey, it may say PURE HONEY on the label. Honey is considered pure if the beeswax has been removed. The little pieces of wax from the beehive have been strained out. Pure honey is honey without wax. It would be technically correct to call it *sincere* honey. Pure honey is not mixed with wax.

In the case of honey, the wax wasn't deliberately placed there; it was already there because of the way the bees made it. But its presence lessens the purity of the honey.

Wax in building materials

In ancient times unscrupulous workmen sometimes used wax in construction of buildings. This lowered the quality of the product and deceived the buyer.

Many impressive buildings stood in the city of Corinth. It was a great commercial center, a hub of trade and industry, a prosperous city. Much construction took place during the time the apostle Paul visited there.

Huge marble pillars were commonly seen as both support and adornment in public buildings. Some stoneworkers of the day lapsed into the habit of producing inferior marble to increase their profits. They would use wax to get around the time-consuming process of polishing the marble surfaces. They would give a pillar a rough polish and then rub wax into the cracks, the areas of imperfection, making it look smooth and shiny. It looked like expensive work—until the first unusually hot summer day.

As with the potters of the day, an honest stonemason would refer to his work as a sincere column; that is, one without wax.

Christians are compared to a building. We read in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that "your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit." We as Christians are to come to Christ "as to a living stone, rejected

In ancient Corinth dishonest merchants used wax and paint to deceitfully conceal cracks and flaws in their pottery. What does wax in a piece of pottery have to do with our lives as Christians?

indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house . . ." (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Notice how God wants us to build this spiritual house: ". . . Laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (verses 1-2, King James Version). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* lists one of the definitions of sincerity as "freedom from hypocrisy."

The Christian is expected to live a life of sincerity. Paul prayed "that your love may abound" and "that you may be *sincere* and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness . . ." (Philippians 1:9-11).

What can we learn from these analogies that will help us "abound" by growing in sincerity?

Two ways to reveal wax

Let's consider the pottery analogy. Did you notice the two ways of discovering poor workmanship by the deceptive use of wax? One way is to expose the vessel to sunlight. A second method is to expose it to heat. You can then reveal the crack by melting the wax in it.

A wise shopper in Corinth would buy a

piece of pottery only after holding it up to the sunlight so he could see through the layer of paint on the surface.

The vessel (the Christian) must look for the wax (the insincerity) by holding his life up to the light shed by the Word of God. God Himself is compared to the sun. In Psalm 84:11 we see that "the LORD God is a sun and shield" (see also Isaiah 60:19-20). God is light (1 John 1:5) and the source of light. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights . . ." (James 1:17).

Revealed by sunlight

Notice what Paul says to the saints at Philippi. He prayed "that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve [test] the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ . . ." (Philippians 1:9-10).

The English word *approve* here comes from a Greek word that means to judge or test for genuineness by sunlight or to examine by the rays of the sun. "Genuineness" is one of the many definitions of the word *sincerity*.

You've no doubt heard phrases such as "I can see through that person's motives," or "I can see right through what he is trying to do." Maybe these sayings had their ori-

gin in the testing of pottery for its sincerity by sunlight.

Do we look for the flaws in our character by holding ourselves up to the light of the Word of God? Do we really desire to know the truth about our character? God's Word will reveal it to us.

Our weaknesses can be exposed by the true light. Paul, in another epistle, tells us that "all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light . . ." (Ephesians 5:13).

A Christian must judge his conduct every day by the light of God's Word. We read that God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105), and God's commands are "a lamp, and the law is light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6:23). We are "all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5).

Sincerity and truth

The scripture we read earlier from 1 Corinthians 5 told us we are not to be leavened with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but to strive for the unleavened bread of sincerity *and truth* (verse 8).

As important as sincerity is, we must also live according to the truth. That truth comes from the Holy Scriptures. Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).



Photo courtesy Richard Cleave

Is the pottery flawless or did an unscrupulous workman fill flaws and cracks with wax, then paint over the defects? In ancient Cor-

inth, buyers were careful to look for "sincere" pottery—vessels that were pure and well made and could stand the test of use.

Millions of people have many of the traits of sincerity we have discussed here, but they do not know the truth about themselves because they have rejected the source of all truth. They cannot understand true sincerity. This applies even to many outwardly religious people.

Blindness to insincerity will afflict any of us if we don't allow God's Word to lead us. A Gospel writer shows us that the sincere worship of many is in vain because they are "laying aside the commandment of God" and "hold the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8). God tells us that those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Revealed by heat

Wax can be revealed a second way: exposure to heat. This is not always the most pleasant way. Remember what happened to Alexis.

God is described metaphorically as fire (Deuteronomy 4:24; Revelation 1:14). He often helps us come to see our character flaws by exposing them to heat. He allows the trials in our lives to act as this fire. He allows trials so that you, through "the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory . . ." (1 Peter 1:7).

Our true character is often revealed in our handling of the trials we face. We see a person's mettle when the heat's on. This should not frighten us. God often uses our trials to reveal our weaknesses and show us what we need to overcome. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you," wrote the apostle Peter, "as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

But Paul warns us that "each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

God will deal with the sins of whole nations by heat and fire. "For behold," wrote the prophet Micah, "the LORD is coming out of His place; He will come down and tread on the high places of the

earth. The mountains will melt under Him, and the valleys will split like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel" (Micah 1:3-5).

This retribution will be the result of mankind's attempts to cover up its sins with the wax of hypocrisy, deceit and guile. "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20). "He who covers his sins will not prosper . . ." (Proverbs 28:13).

If we don't try to wax over our sins, and if we do our part with God's help to remove the wax, we will have nothing to fear from the test of heat and fire when it comes.

Get rid of wax

Remember the analogy of the honey. We saw that the wax was not put there deliberately. It was already present because that's the way the bees make it.

The same is true of human nature. Much wax needs to be put out of our lives simply because we are human. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Paul knew about the natural mind of man: ". . . The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

The scripture we began with in 1 Corinthians 5 tells us that we are to "keep the feast" with "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (verse 8). The festival referred to here is the Feast of Unleavened Bread. God appointed this feast to be kept forever by His people (see Leviticus 23:6-8; 2 Timothy 3:16). It pictures the need for Christians to put out leaven by turning away from sin.

Ultimately all our deeds must stand up under the clear light of day and the scrutiny of the Sun spoken of in Psalm 84:11. Every work will be judged for authenticity by that ultimate source of light, Jesus Christ.

Then we will be ready when "the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Let's do our part to remove the wax of insincerity from our character and life, and our praise will come from God. *GN*

Overcome

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seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6).

Likewise, consider the contrast in behavior mentioned in Ephesians 4:31-32. We can rid ourselves of our base traits *by concentrating on upright characteristics*. We can apply the principle of these simple points to every aspect of our behavior. Apply this formula and, with God's help, change becomes at long last realistically possible.

Which force will be with you?

Two somewhat obscure verses appear in this section of Scripture that should now make sense. When we indulge the nature of the old man with all its corrupt practices, we "*grieve the Holy Spirit*" (verse 30) and "*give place to the devil*" (verse 27). Perhaps now we can understand that God's Spirit cannot dwell or work in an alien environment of lying, stealing and corrupt communication and attitudes, whereas Satan thrives in such surroundings and indeed encourages them.

On the other hand, when we put on the behavior of the new man, the opposite attitude prevails. Satan hates godly behavior and cannot remain long in such a setting. God's Spirit, however, flourishes in a person who lives a godly life.

All this beautifully illustrates some simple yet profound truths: If you "submit to God" and "resist the devil," he will flee from you (James 4:7). "Walk in the spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). We can remove the air from a glass by filling it with water. Likewise we can rid ourselves of corrupt human nature by filling our life with the nature of God and its many wonderful attributes.

The good news is that by the grace of God we can overcome sin. That does not mean we will never sin again, because as long as we are physical we are subject to human weakness. However, we need not become discouraged in the face of our sins. Indeed, we should rejoice that we are mindful of them, because this awareness provides the first step toward their eradication.

God helps us recognize our misdeeds. Through the power of His Spirit working in us we are strengthened, encouraged and filled with hope in our battle against sin, knowing that our victory is assured. When we put off the old man, are renewed in the spirit of our mind and put on the new man, we will ultimately overcome sin. It is inevitable! *GN*