

Sin as Conqueror, Captor & Enemy

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Introduction

What is sin and to what degree does it affect (or possibly *infect*) the believer in Christ? Thousands of pages have been written attempting to answer these questions—and the basic summary that has emerged is that sin, according to Scripture, is a lack of conformity to the law of God.¹ Though sin is designated by a number of terms, the Hebrew **חַטָּאת** (sin), **רָעָה** (iniquity), and **פְּשָׁע** (transgression) as well as the Greek *ἁμαρτία* (sin), *ἀνομία* (lawlessness), and *ἀδικία* (unrighteousness) all portray this basic meaning of sin as primarily wrongdoing or rebellion against God.

While the above definition is basically accurate, it does not reflect the vivid portrayals of sin found in the pages of both Testaments very well—particularly the depiction of sin as a conquering enemy. The Exodus slavery motif is drawn on heavily by the Biblical authors, especially in the New Testament, where sin plays the part of Pharaoh and the pursuing Egyptian army and believers are following their new deliverer, Jesus, into the Promised Land. It is this idea of sin that we are seeking to trace throughout redemptive history as presented in the pages of Scripture. The purpose in presenting this is to help point the Church back to one of the primary images employed by the Holy Spirit through the authors of Scripture so as to provide a Biblical-metaphorical lens through which we might view our present struggle with this ancient enemy. And while the personification of sin in Paul's writings, especially Romans 6 and 7, is the clearest example of the captor/enemy metaphor, this is not an image originating with Paul. Sin portrayed as an enemy captor can be traced from Genesis through Revelation—and so our exploration of this metaphor for sin must rightly begin “in the beginning.”

¹Alexander and Rosner. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. electronic ed.

Part 1 – Sin’s victory and capture of humanity

The first mention of sin in the Bible is found in Gen. 4:7. God has just rejected Cain’s offering after accepting Abel’s. God asks a dejected Cain, “*If you do right, will you not be accepted²? But if you do not do right, sin (חַטָּאת) is crouching (רָבַץ) at your door. Its desire (תְּשׁוּקָה) is towards you, but you will master (תִּמְשָׁל) it*” [author’s translation]. While this is one of the most difficult passages in the Hebrew Bible from a grammatical standpoint³, the second sentence is quite clear in its portrayal of sin as an active, hostile agent. The verb רָבַץ means “to lie down, crouch” (i.e. of animals with chest to the ground).⁴ However, רָבַץ is usually used to describe animals in a state of rest or repose. Only in Gen. 49:9 does this verb clearly describe a ferocious posture: “*Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched (רָבַץ) as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?*” [ESV] Context makes this the most likely concept being presented in Gen. 4:7, as later references will demonstrate.⁵

Not only is sin portrayed as a predatory beast, but it is a hungry one at that! It possesses a desire, or craving (תְּשׁוּקָה) for Cain, as a predator craves its prey. It is worth noting that (תְּשׁוּקָה) is also used to designate the desire the woman will have toward her husband in 3:16. And just as God tells the woman that her husband will rule over her, God tells Cain that he will rule over, or master, (תִּמְשָׁל) this enemy. The imperfect tense could be construed as a promise (“you will surely master it.”) or an imperative (“you must master it!”). Either way, Cain is presented with an option—either he will rule over sin, or it will rule over him!⁶ Thus, our first encounter with sin in Scripture reveals it to be “the stalker behind the door who casts a long, dark shadow over the rest of human history.”⁷ And “the subsequent history of Genesis is replete with evidence that the stalker has no shortage of victims.”⁸ We know that Cain did not, in fact,

² Literally, הֲלוֹא אִם-תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת “if not you do well, to lift?” The verb נָשָׂא is most likely referring to the lifting of Cain’s face, which was described as “fallen” (נָפְלוּ פָנָיָהּ) in the previous verse. Thus the lifting would serve as a way of showing that Cain was in a right standing with God and accepted by Him. For further discussion cf. Hamilton, 225-228

³ For a discussion of the grammar of this passage cf. Hamilton, 225-228.

⁴ Holladay, 331. However, Holladay notes that in this particular passage, the meaning is unclear and should be interpreted by context.

⁵ See below. One interesting interpretation brought out in the REB’s translation of this passage, links רָבַץ with the name for a demon in Akkadian mythology that inhabits doorways ready to spring on those who enter or leave. (cf. Archer, et.al. 830) Noting this theory, Matthews rightly points out: “If there is an allusion to the door demon, then the narrative is personifying sin as a demonic spirit ready to pounce on Cain once he opens the ‘door’ of opportunity. This may well correspond with the ‘seed’ of the serpent in 3:15, which will do battle with the ‘seed’ of the woman Eve. The imagery is effectively the same and the message clear: sin can be stirred up by wrong choices.” (Matthews, 270-271)

⁶ The Independent Personal Pronoun אַתָּה provides emphasis “You, you will master it!” cf. Williams, 22

⁷ Ryken, et al., 792

⁸ Ibid.

master sin, nor did the rest of humanity, as the Flood in chapters 6-9 would demonstrate. However, it would not be until Israel's formation as a nation with centralized worship that sin would be personified once again as a powerful enemy.

The Psalmists acknowledged the reality of sin (עוֹן) and Israel's worship thus laments sin's victory over fallen humanity:

For innumerable evils have encompassed me; my iniquities (עוֹן) have overtaken (נִשְׁגָּ) me, and I cannot see; they have become more numerable than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me. Psalm 40:12(13 Heb.)

Sinful deeds (עוֹן) prevailed (גָּבַר) against me, you covered our transgressions. Psalm 65:3(4 Heb.) [author's translations]

The verb (נִשְׁגָּ) is used to describe the pursuit of Israel's Egyptian captors in Exodus 14:9 and 15:9 and has the basic meaning of "overtake, reach, take hold upon."⁹ (The LXX's καταλαμβάνω, likewise means "to gain control of someone through pursuit, catch up with, overtake by authority figures, seize with hostile intent."¹⁰) The term גָּבַר means "to prevail, be mighty, have strength, be great" and is commonly associated with warfare and has to do with the strength and vitality of the successful warrior.¹¹ In Ex. 17:11 גָּבַר was used to describe the back-and-forth battle with Amalek at Rephidim. The fact that the Psalmists use language reminiscent of Israel's Exodus struggles shows that during the period of David's and Solomon's rule, when Israel was enjoying political freedom unparalleled in her history, she still saw her sin as a hostile spiritual captor who was overpowering and deadly.

The book of Proverbs likewise recognized the hostile, captive nature of sin and its power to overthrow and conquer humanity. Proverbs paints a vivid picture of sin's power to capture its prey:

The iniquities (עוֹן) of the wicked ensnare (לָכַד) him, and he is held firmly (תָּמַךְ) in the ropes (חֲבָלֵי) of his sin(חַטָּאת). Proverbs 5:22

An evil man is ensnared (מוֹקֵשׁ) by the transgression (פִּשְׁעוֹ) of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble. Proverbs 12:13

Righteousness will guard the ones of integrity, but sin (חַטָּאת) will overthrow (סָלַף) the wicked. Proverbs 13:6

⁹ Cf. Harris, et. al., TWOT, 602-603. Other instances of נִשְׁגָּ used in a similar manner are found in Gen. 31:25; 44:4, 6; 47:9; Num. 6:21; Deut. 19:6; 28:2, 15, 45; Jos. 2:5; 1 Sam. 14:26; 30:8; 2 Ki. 25:5; 1 Chr. 21:12; Job 24:2; 27:20; 41:18; Ps. 7:6; 18:38; 40:13; 69:25; Prov. 2:19; Isa. 35:10; 51:11; 59:9; Jer. 39:5; 42:16; 52:8; Lam. 1:3; Ezek. 46:7; Hos. 2:9; 10:9; Zech. 1:6

¹⁰ Cf. BDAG

¹¹ Cf. TWOT p.148

An evil man is snared (מוֹקֵשׁ) by his own sin (פְּשָׁע), but a righteous one can sing and be glad. Proverbs 29:6 [author's translations]

The verb לָכַד is almost always used to describe the capture of enemy territory, usually a city, by an army or conqueror.¹² (The LXX's ἀγρεύω gives the sense of being captured unaware by a hostile force.)¹³ In 5:22, the conqueror is sin (עוֹן) and the second line of the couplet describes the sinner being bound (תַּמְךָ)¹⁴ not by literal ropes¹⁵ (a normal means of securing those captured in battle), but rather by the ropes of sin (חַטָּאת).

The metaphor of a snare or trap (מוֹקֵשׁ) [παγίς LXX] is also used to describe sin's effect on a person. Here we find the third Hebrew term for sin (פְּשָׁע)¹⁶ being described as something that captures or traps the sinner.¹⁷ Paul will later draw on this image of sin as a snare (παγίς) of the Devil in his pastoral advice to Timothy.¹⁸

In addition to conquering, capturing, binding, and trapping, sin is also described as overthrowing (סָלַף) those who are involved with it. סָלַף is only used nine times in the OT and has the basic meaning of “to twist, distort, ruin.” Sin “so twists the sinful and foolish man that his way becomes perverted and he rages against God.”¹⁹ Thus we find in Hebrew proverbial thought that sin has the power to overthrow, capture, and bind Israel in a way that is tantamount to the spiritual equivalent of their captivity under the Egyptians.

¹² Cf. Num. 21:32; 32:39, 41f; Deut. 2:34f; 3:4; Jos. 6:20; 7:14ff; 8:19, 21; 15:16f; 19:47; Jdg. 1:8, 12f, 18; 3:28; 7:24f; 8:12, 14; 9:45, 50; 12:5; 15:4; 2 Sam. 5:7; 8:4; 12:26ff; 1 Ki. 9:16; 16:18; 1 Chr. 11:5; 18:4; Neh. 9:25; Job 5:13; 36:8; Ps. 9:16; 35:8; 59:13; Eccl. 7:26; Isa. 8:15; 20:1; 24:18; 28:13; Jer. 5:26; 18:22; 34:22; 37:8; 38:3, 28; 51:31; Lam. 4:20; Dan. 11:15, 18; Amos 3:4f; Hab. 1:10; Zech. 14:2

¹³ Cf. BDAG, 15, where the example of this meaning is noted in the 4th century B.C. by Aeneas Tacticus: “...so they would least of all be caught off guard by any hostile forces approaching them in stealth.”

¹⁴ The verb תַּמְךָ literally means “to hold fast, grasp firmly in hand” but is often used metaphorically in Scripture to describe someone devoting themselves to someone or something. Cf. TWOT, 973 For literal usage see Gen. 48:17; Exod. 17:12; Ps. 16:5; 63:9; Prov. 3:19; Isa. 41:10; Amos 1:5,8.

¹⁵ חֶבֶל most often means “rope, cord, or line.” It is also sometimes symbolic of “captivity or subjection.” Cf. TWOT, 258 The LXX's σείρα has the same literal meaning and was later used in the NT to refer to chains as well. (2 Peter 2:4)

¹⁶ פְּשָׁע is usually translated as “transgression” and has the basic meaning of overstepping a boundary. In the eyes of the LXX translators פְּשָׁע is virtually synonymous with חַטָּאת and often translated as ἀμαρτία.

¹⁷ מוֹקֵשׁ is almost always used metaphorically to describe something evil such as idolatry (Exod. 23:33; Deut. 7:16;) or Israel's surrounding enemies (23:13). Only once is it used in its literal sense (Job 40:24); but even here it's being used in a poetical description of the Behemoth's might.

¹⁸ 1Tim. 3:7; 2Tim. 2:26. See below.

¹⁹ TWOT, 627

During the intertestamental period, Jewish writers continued to regard sin as a dangerous foe. The Jewish teacher, Ben Sira, steeped in the Torah²⁰ and drawing from the imagery in Genesis 4, pictured sin in its ferocious, predatory nature:

Flee from sin (ἁμαρτία) as from a snake; for if you approach sin, it will bite (δάκνω) you. Its teeth are lion's teeth, and destroy (ἀναίρῶ) the souls of men. Sirach 21:2

A lion lies in wait (ἐνεδρεύω) for prey; so does sin (ἁμαρτία) for the workers of iniquity. Sirach 27:10 [RSV]

In the eyes of Ben Sira, sin is a deadly predator that is likened to both a serpent and a lion; two images used to describe the Devil—the ultimate power behind sin—elsewhere in Scripture.²¹

Other Jewish Wisdom literature also presented a personified (or more likely *deified*) Wisdom whose interaction with sin is described in a manner that strikingly foreshadows what would occur in the New Testament:

For perverse thoughts separate men from God, and when his power is tested, it convicts the foolish; because wisdom will not indwell (κατοικέω) a deceitful soul, nor dwell in a body enslaved (κατάχρεος) to sin (ἁμαρτία). Wisdom 1:3-4

When a righteous man was sold, wisdom did not desert him, but delivered (ῥύομαι) him from sin (ἁμαρτία). She descended with him into the dungeon, and when he was in prison she did not leave him, until she brought him the scepter of a kingdom and authority over his masters. Those who accused him she showed to be false, and she gave him everlasting honor. Wisdom 10:13-14 [RSV]

In these passages we see that sin is able to enslave a person—and more interesting for the Christian is the thought that in such a person Wisdom will not dwell (κατοικέω).²² Wisdom is also pictured as delivering the righteous from sin²³ by employing the same verb (ῥύομαι) used to describe God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt.²⁴ The idea that sin was an enemy captor who enslaved God's people was indeed at home in the religious imagery of 2nd Temple Judaism.

By the time we arrive at the New Testament, sin is described as having thoroughly enslaved mankind. Jesus declared this during his encounter with the Jewish leaders who were opposed to him in John 8:34 with a statement that is strikingly reminiscent of the Proverbs: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave (δοῦλός) to sin (ἁμαρτία)*” [ESV]. These Jewish leaders were

²⁰ deSilva, 161-162

²¹ Cf. Gen. 3; 1Pet. 5:8; Rev. 12:9, 20:10. See below.

²² Cf. Matt 23:21; 12:45; Luke 11:26; and most importantly Eph 3:17 which uses κατοικέω to describe the indwelling of Christ in the hearts of believers. These NT passages no doubt resonate with the image of Wisdom prevalent in 1st and 2nd century BC Judaism.

²³ In this passage, Joseph is the righteous man and his slavery and imprisonment in Egypt is being described. Wisdom is put in the place of God as being his deliverer. The Christological applications of this description are striking.

²⁴ Exod. 14:30

claiming that they were not enslaved to anyone, (a near comical notion, given the ongoing Roman occupation!) and thus had no need to be set free by the truth (v.32). However, Jesus' words reflect the Hebrew notion that even people who are physically free are still sin's slaves—no matter who their ancestors may be.

However, the most detailed presentations of sin as a captor having enslaved humanity are found in the writings of Paul, particularly in his letter to the Romans. In 3:9 Paul declares that it is not just Israel, but everyone—Jews and Greeks, who are enslaved under sin (πάντας ὑφ' ἁμαρτίαν εἶναι).²⁵ We learn in 5:12 that this ancient enemy entered the world through one man (δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν) and brought with it an ally, death (θάνατος), which spread to everyone—evidence of humanity's captivity. In the next chapter, Paul will proclaim the victory that the second Adam won over the captor and enemy of the first Adam.²⁶ Then in chapter 7, Paul will retell the tale of humanity's capture by sin from the perspective of the first Adam.²⁷ “The speaker in 7:7-25 speaks with great personal pathos of coming under the Law at some point, learning about desire and sin, and being unable to do what he wants to do because of enslavement to sin or flesh.”²⁸ Sin's victory over and enslavement of Adam, and all humanity since, is vividly portrayed:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin (ἁμαρτία) came alive (ἀναζάω) and I died...For sin, seizing (λαμβάνω) an opportunity through the commandment, deceived (ἐξαπατάω) me and through it, killed (ἀποκτείνω) me...For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under (πιπράσκω) sin...So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells (οἰκέω) within me...Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells (οἰκέω) within me...For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war (ἀντιστρατεύομαι) against the law of my mind and making me captive (αἰχμαλωτίζω) to the law of sin that is living in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver (ῥύομαι) me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I

²⁵ ὑπό, literally “under,” functions as a marker of that which is in a controlling position, ‘under,’ ‘under the command of,’ ‘under obligation.’ Cf. BDAG p.1036

²⁶ Cf. Rom. 6. See below.

²⁷ For a survey of the various interpretations of the identity of the speaker in Romans 7, as well as a thorough argument for Paul using the rhetorical device of impersonation to speak as Adam, see Witherington, p.179-185. (also cf. Stuhlmacher, p.106) It must be noted that Romans 7 is probably the most commented upon passage in all of Paul's writings—possibly in all of the NT. Many interpreters, following Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, argue that Paul is speaking autobiographically in this section either of his life as a Pharisee before conversion, or of his current walk with Christ. However, many early Church Fathers such as Origen, Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster, as well as many English Revivalists such as Wesley, Coke, Fletcher and Clarke realized the insurmountable difficulties in regarding Romans 7 as autobiographical—particularly with regard to its description of someone totally enslaved to sin and unable to resist it. However, since these interpreters did not produce the amount of commentaries or systematic theological works as their Reformed brothers, the Lutheran/Augustinian interpretation became the dominant one, at least on a popular level. This is reflected in the works on the subject by minds as varied as Bultmann, Barth, Kasemann, Cranfield, and even the Methodist scholar, C.K. Barrett. For a rejection of the Lutheran/Augustinian position by a Calvinist scholar, cf. Hoekema's critique in Deiter, et.al., p.232. For a grammatical argument in favor of Romans 7 verbs being gnomic, rather than historical present tenses see Wallace, 392, 532.

²⁸ Stowers cited in Witherington, p.186

myself serve (δουλεύω) the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh, the law of sin.

Rom. 7:9, 11, 14, 17, 20, 22-25

The sin that had been crouching at Cain's door had been given life (ἀναζάω) by Adam's desire and subsequent disobedience. It deceived (ἐξαπατάω), killed (ἀποκτείνω), enslaved (πιπράσκω), indwelt (οἰκέω), and continued to wage war (ἀντιστρατεύομαι) against those it captured (αἰχμαλωτίζω). Who will deliver (ρύομαι) the captive from the grip of the captor? It is the answer to this question to which we now turn.

Part 2 – The promise of freedom from the captor

Though the situation appears bleak throughout most of the Bible with regard to sin's dominance, God's original promise-command to Cain would not be abandoned. Humanity would one day rule over sin—and it would be God Himself who would enable this rule. This is taught unambiguously in the NT, but there are promises of such deliverance from sin's slavery in the Hebrew Scriptures as well.

The Psalmists realized that God would not leave Israel in its state of bondage to sin: “*Wait for YHWH, Israel. For with YHWH there is grace, and with Him there is abundant redemption (פְּרוּתָהּ). He Himself will redeem (פָּדָה)*²⁹ *Israel from all his sins (עוֹנֵי).*” **Psalm 130:7-8** [author's translation]. The Psalmist declares Israel to be in a state of slavery to sin, as the language of “redemption” makes clear. Originally, פָּדָה had to do with the payment of a required sum for the transfer of ownership, and was a commercial term. The word was given special religious significance by the Exodus: “*You shall remember that the LORD your God redeemed you...*” (Deut. 15:15, 24:18). Israel had been delivered, ransomed from servitude in Egypt by the hand of God. The Exodus deliverance colored Hebrew thought through the centuries and though Psalm 130 is the only instance in the OT of redemption being used to describe God's deliverance of His people from sin, it would become a dominant metaphor in the NT.³⁰

The other promise of God's victory over sin found in the Hebrew Scriptures comes from the Prophet Micah: “*He will turn and have compassion on us. He will tread down (כַּבַּשׁ) our iniquities (עֲוֹנוֹ) and He will hurl (שִׁלֵּךְ) all our sins (חַטָּאתָה) into the depths of the sea.*” **Micah 7:19** [author's

²⁹ λυτρόομαι (LXX): “redeem, set free, liberate”

³⁰ Alexander and Rosner, *NDBT*: “Theologically, Psalm 130:7–8 contains the most far-reaching insight. Only Yahweh's power, not powerless Israel itself, offers hope for redemption (*i.e.* forgiveness of sin). This insight into sin as an overpowering force anticipates the NT teaching on redemption as release from slavery to sin.” Also cf. *TWOT*, 716

translation]. The parallel phrases reveal that not only will God conquer and subdue³¹ sin, He will get rid of it! The imagery of crushing under foot (כַּבַּשׁ) brings to mind the promise given by God in Genesis 3:15 regarding the serpent and the “seed” of the woman. Just as the woman’s “seed” would crush the serpent in victory, so too will God crush sin. But not only is there a possible allusion to Genesis in this passage, but the imagery of God’s “hurling” sin into the depths of the sea foreshadows evil’s ultimate destination in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10, 14-15). Though not a prominent theme, images of God’s deliverance of Israel from sin by redemption, as well as His conquering and defeating sin by force, are found in the pages of the OT—and in the NT these images are greatly clarified.

Paul plainly declared humanity’s bondage to sin, yet he did so knowing that God had already determined that a reversal would take place “*so that, just as sin reigned (ἐβασίλευσεν ἡ ἁμαρτία) in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*” **Romans 5:21**³² [ESV] This reigning of grace would be the result of one man’s actions, as Paul makes clear; it would also be done by God Himself, as the Psalmist and Micah foretold—all in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Part 3 – The captives freed by Jesus

This breaking of sin’s captive grip on humanity would be accomplished by a human—one who would do what Cain, and the rest of humanity, could not do. But this human would also be the God who promised that He would personally redeem Israel from sin’s bondage. This is one of, if not THE, core messages of the New Testament and we can see it near the beginning of Jesus public ministry when He declares His purpose:

*The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom (ἄφεσις) for the prisoners (αἰχμάλωτος) and recovery of sight for the blind, to release in freedom (ἄφεσις) the ones who are oppressed (θραύω),..." **Luke 4:17-18** [author’s translation]*

It is interesting to note that αἰχμάλωτος literally means “spear-captured,” and translates the Hebrew term for those captured in battle and led away in captivity (שָׁבוּיִם). The term θραύω translates Isaiah’s word

³¹ For the significance of כַּבַּשׁ see TWOT, 430: “subdue, bring into bondage, keep under, force. In the OT it means ‘to make to serve, by force if necessary.’ *Kabash* assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place...[it is used to describe the] conquest of the Canaanites in Num. 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; in Jer 34:11, 16 it refers to forced servitude.”

³² See also Gal. 3:22 where Paul depicts humanity as a having been imprisoned under sin according to scripture (συνέκλεισεν ἡ γραφή τὰ πάντα ὑπὸ ἁμαρτίαν).

רְצוּצִים which means “the ones being crushed” (i.e. by oppressive conditions). Here Jesus announces that He has been sent to finally bring true freedom (ἄφεσις); and since He didn’t actually start a liberation movement to free slaves, nor did He attempt to physically overthrow the occupying Roman forces, His words must be taken metaphorically to describe deliverance from Israel’s spiritual captor, sin.³³

Likewise, the author of Hebrews as well as the Apostle John³⁴ believed this to have been Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth:

“...But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages for the removal (ἀθέτησις) of sin (ἁμαρτία) by the sacrifice of himself.” Hebrews 9:26b

“The one doing sin (ἁμαρτία) is from the devil, since from the beginning the devil is sinning. It was for this reason the Son of God appeared: to destroy (λύω) the works of the devil.” 1 John 3:8

“To him who loves us and has freed (λύω) us from our sins (ἁμαρτία) by his blood...” Rev. 1:5 [author’s translations]

Jesus’ primary mission was to remove (ἀθέτησις)³⁵ sin, first from the believer’s life and, as we will soon see, ultimately from creation itself. John lets us know that sin is the devil’s primary work, but Jesus came to destroy (λύω)³⁶ that work through the shedding of His blood (the redemption promised in Psalm 130), thus providing true freedom from sin’s grip.

The most detailed account of humanity’s freedom from its captor by the redeeming work of the blood of Jesus comes from the mouth of Paul. Before His retelling of Adam’s defeat and enslavement to sin, Paul shares with the Roman believers the freedom from captivity Jesus purchased on their behalf.³⁷ “Paul says in v.2 that continuing to sin is not an option for Christians, because they have died to sin and must not attempt to continue living in it.”³⁸ This freedom from the captor is the very thing Jesus gave His life for:

For he died— he died to sin once for all, but he lives— he lives to God! Likewise, you— even you— must count yourselves on the one hand to be dead to sin, and on the other hand alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign (βασιλεύω) in your mortal

³³ Ryken, et.al. *DBI*, 113

³⁴ Though John is not accepted by all scholars as the author of 1John and Revelation, there is no conclusive evidence which would deny authorship of either of these works to the Apostle John. For the purpose of our present topic, Apostolic authorship is assumed for both.

³⁵ The only other use of ἀθέτησις is found in Heb. 7:18 and describes the setting aside of the Levitical priesthood with the appearance of Jesus, who is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. In the same way, Jesus literally nullifies sin’s power over the believer.

³⁶ As John’s use of the term in Rev. 1:5 shows, λύω often means simply “to release, unbind” (cf. Matt 21:12, Mark 7:35, John 11:34). Given the nature of sin as capturing and entangling the sinner, this is a fitting term to describe Jesus’ action.

³⁷ As a skilled rhetorician, Paul chose to “forestall some possible false conclusions that one might draw from the argument in 5:12-21” before continuing on to describe the plight of those who are still in Adam, rather than in Christ, in 7:14-25.

Witherington, 154-155.

³⁸ Witherington, 156

bodies, to make you obey (ὑπακούω) its desires. Do not present (παρίστημι) your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as those having been brought from death to life, and your members as instruments for righteousness to God. For sin will not have dominion (κυριεύω) over you, since you are not under law but under grace...Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves (δούλους εἰς ὑπακοήν), you are slaves (δοῦλοι) to whom you obey—either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin (δοῦλοι τῆς ἁμαρτίας) have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free (ἐλευθερώω) from sin, you became slaves of righteousness...But now having been set free (ἐλευθερώω) from sin and having become slaves of God, you have the fruit of sanctification and the result—eternal life! For the wages (ὀψώνια) of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord...

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive (κατέχω), in order for us to serve in the newness of Spirit and not the old way of what is written.

Rom. 6:10-14, 16-18, 22-23; 7:6 [author's translation]

Because Jesus succeeded where Adam fell, and also paid the wages (ὀψώνια) owed to sin by dying once and for all, those who unite with Him are as free from sin's captivity as He is. Paul's use of slavery terminology would have resonated in the ears of his audience in Rome—where eighty-five to ninety percent of the population were slaves or of slave origin.³⁹ Paul states that for the believer, sin no longer reigns (βασιλεύω) or has dominion (κυριεύω) for those who have been freed (ἐλευθερώω) from the captive (κατέχω) slavery to sin (δοῦλοι τῆς ἁμαρτίας). D.G. Reid summarizes Paul's view of the believer's freedom from the ancient captor and enemy:

The paradox of Israel's existence is this: though Israel was to be the agent of salvation for the world, it too became trammled in sin and death by the very gift of divine Law. This story lies behind Paul's narrative of sin, flesh, death and Law in Romans 5–7, in which they seem to function as personified forces opposed to divine redemption. The reign of sin and of death are intertwined, with sin reigning in death (Rom 5:21) and sin the "master" over humankind, the "slave" (Rom 5:6, 14). Moreover, sin finds its foothold in the flesh (Rom 6:12 ; cf. 8:7), and its soldiers wield "weapons" (*hopla*) of wickedness rather than weapons of righteousness (Rom 6:13 ; 2 Cor 6:7). Sin preys on people, awaiting the opportunity to make the Law a "bridgehead" (*aphormē* in Rom 7:8 can carry this military sense) into humans and so "wages war" (*antistrateuomai* , Rom 7:23) and "takes prisoners" (*aichmalōtizō* , Rom 7:23). Those caught in the bondage of these powers cry out, like Israel in lament, for a deliverer; thankfully, deliverance comes through "Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 7:24–25 ; cf. 1 Cor 15:57). In Christ believers "are more than conquerors through him [Christ] who loved us," a love that no earthly or cosmic power can sever (Rom 8:37–38).⁴⁰

³⁹ Hawthorne and Martin, 881

⁴⁰ Hawthorne, 950

However, the fact that Paul has to exhort the Roman believers not to present (παρίστημι) themselves to their old master shows that though Jesus brought freedom from sin's grip, it is a freedom that can be forfeited by choosing to return to sin's captivity—to go back into Egypt instead of onward to the Promised Land.

Part 4 – The captor's desire to retrieve its former captives

Though freedom has been provided by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the message of Scripture is clear that the believers' battle with the enemy will continue until the final judgment. However, the roles have changed quite a bit for those having been set free. Believers are no longer fighting to gain their freedom—they are fighting to keep it! And the weapons they use are not physical arms, but the power of the Holy Spirit and Prayer (2 Cor. 10:3-5). And much like Pharaoh and the pursuing Egyptian army, sin—the work of the devil—is not willing to give up its former slaves without a pursuit, and has set traps in order to once again bind and capture its prey. The former captor is now a deadly enemy who will stop at nothing to prevent a final, spiritual Exodus of God's people. Using language reminiscent of Proverbs, Paul warns Timothy in each of his letters to the young pastor about the “snare” the enemy uses to “capture”⁴¹ believers and how he and his congregations can avoid it:

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare (παγίς) of the devil. 1 Timothy 3:7

and they may escape from the snare (παγίς) of the devil, after being captured (ζωγρέω) by him to do his will. 2 Timothy 2:26

Paul continued throughout his ministry to regard sin as a deadly foe. The tension between his declaration of true freedom in Rom. 6 and his warnings elsewhere about becoming ensnared or recaptured by sin are seen by some as contradictory. However, they are simply an acknowledgment that the final victory over sin, when it will be “hurled into the sea” (Mic. 7:19, cf. Rev. 20:10), has not occurred yet:

For Paul freedom in Christ is a present reality, but it is not automatically manifested in the lives of believers. They are still capable of yielding themselves to sin and of letting it reign over them (Rom. 6:12–13, 16; 8:12–13; Gal. 5:13). Freedom may also be lost or surrendered by those who are not vigilant or willing to defend their freedom from those who would have them become enslaved again (Gal. 2:4; 5:1–2).⁴²

⁴¹ The verb ζωγρέω can have either a positive connotation (“spare, keep alive”) as in Josh 2:13, 6:25, 9:20; Luke 5:10 or it can have a negative connotation (“capture as prisoner”) as in Deut. 20:16; 2Sam 8:2, 2Chr. 25:12. Since Paul is referring to the devil in this passage, ζωγρέω is certainly negative in this instance.

⁴²Alexander and Rosner. *NDBT*

The author of Hebrews also views sin as a continuing threat and repeatedly warns believers about their dangerous enemy and the methods it uses:

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened (σκληρύνω) by sin's deceitfulness (ἀπάτη τῆς ἁμαρτίας). Hebrews 3:13 [NIV]

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off (ἀποτίθημι) everything that hinders and the sin that so easily ensnares (εὐπερίστατος)⁴³, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Hebrews 12:1 [author's translation]

In your struggle (ἀνταγωνίζομαι) against sin, you have not yet resisted (ἀντικαθίστημι) to the point of shedding your blood. Hebrews 12:4

In the mind of the Hebrews author, sin can still deceive, make stubborn, and tangle up and ensnare the believer. But since the believer is no longer sin's slave, but rather is surrounded by encouragers and witnesses—the faithful, both on earth and in Heaven, he or she can successfully throw off, resist, and struggle against the former master—even if it means shedding his or her blood.

James, using a human reproductive metaphor, gives his readers further insight into how sin reasserts itself in their lives along with the end result of its development if left unopposed:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away (ἐξέλκω) and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived (συλλαμβάνω), it gives birth to (τίκτω) sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth (ἀποκυέω) to death. James 1:13-15

James describes an evil desire as the means by which sin reestablishes its control over the believer—enticing, seizing⁴⁴, and dragging⁴⁵ them away—with the ultimate goal of bringing forth its offspring, death (cf. Rom. 7:14-25).

Finally, Peter alludes to the original nature of sin, having the devil play the predatory role of Cain's old enemy.

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around (περιπατέω)⁴⁶ like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (καταπίνω). 1 Peter 5:8

⁴³ "The reading εὐπερίσπαστον ("easily distracting"), found in P⁴⁶ and 1739, most likely a palaeographical error or a deliberate modification of εὐπερίστατον, which is supported by all other known witnesses." Metzger, 604.

⁴⁴ James' use of συλλαμβάνω is possibly an intentional use of homonym. The term means both "conceive" and "seize/capture" (For examples of συλλαμβάνω being used to describe capture, seizing, or arrest see Gen 30:8, Josh 8:23, Jdg 7:25, Matt 26:55, Mark 14:8, Luke 22:54, John 18:12, Act 1:16, 26:21)

⁴⁵ For ἐξέλκω used to describe forceful capture rather than "luring" or "drawing away" see Gen. 37:28.

Peter’s description of the devil is strikingly similar to Ben Sira’s description of sin (Sir. 27:10). As we see in Paul’s writings, sin and the devil are closely linked in both action and purpose—they are both seen as ruling captors who have been stripped of their slaves and stop at nothing to get them back. The goal of the enemy is clear: to devour the believer, just as a lion devours its prey.⁴⁷

Part 5 – The captor’s final defeat and the liberation of all creation

When we first encounter sin, it is a crouching predator intent on capturing its prey. Sin succeeds in this for a time. But then Jesus goes into sin’s very domain and redeems those held in sin’s grasp, leading them out as a free people. Yet, the enemy (who is intimately linked with the devil and is often spoken of as having the same purpose and doing the same actions) gives chase and seeks to recapture. Ultimately, Scripture is clear on the destiny of the enemies of God and His people. It will not be God’s people who are devoured; the enemy will be the one “swallowed up in victory.” (1 Cor. 15:54). And just as during the Exodus, when the “horse and rider were cast into the sea” (Ex. 15:21), there remains another sea into which the pursuing enemies of God’s People will be cast!

*...the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet also were, and they will be tormented day and night into eternity. **Revelation 20:10** [author’s translation]*

Not only will humanity in Christ be completely free from the enemy’s attack, but “*even the creation itself will be liberated from the bondage of ruin by the freedom of the glorious children of God.*” (Rom. 8:21, author’s translation). Thus, God’s original charge to Cain will be realized through humanity united with Jesus and following Him victoriously into the eschatological Promised Land.

Conclusion

We began this study by asking the question, “What is sin and to what degree does it affect the believer in Christ?” This is an important question and in answering it, one must take into account the

⁴⁶ A similar use of περιπατέω is found in Psa. 12:8 [11:9 LXX] “On every side the wicked prowl (περιπατέω), as vileness is exalted among the children of man.” [ESV]

⁴⁷ καταπίνω is used in the LXX metaphorically on a number of occasions to describe the defeat or destruction of the righteous by the wicked (cf. Hab. 1:13 as well as the Psalms of Solomon 8:30). The most interesting of these occurrences, given the frequent link between serpent/beast imagery and sin/devil, is found in Jeremiah 51:34 [28:34 LXX], “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured (καταπίνω) us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar. Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then has spewed us out.”[NIV]

personification of sin as both captor and enemy of God's people. The imagery used to personify sin is varied, as we have seen. The authors of Scripture often described sin as:

a form of tyranny or bondage. Sin wraps the sinner up with strong cords (Prov 5:22), and it easily entangles its victim (Heb 12:1). The reason Cain is warned not to let sin have mastery (Gen 4:7) is that sin is a slave driver. The psalmist took the hint and prayed that sin would not rule over him (Ps 119:133). Jesus warned that "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (Jn 8:34 NIV). Paul could vouch for the bondage of sin from his own experience as a man "sold as a slave to sin ... a prisoner of the law of sin" (Rom 7:14, 23 NIV; cf. Rom 6). Indeed, "the whole world is a prisoner of sin" (Gal 3:22 NIV)...Paul goes so far as to personify sin as a killer or an executioner: "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (Rom 7:11 NIV). Alternatively, it is the mother of all death, for "when it is full-grown, [it] gives birth to death" (Jas 1:15 NIV).⁴⁸

But what difference does this make for those in the body of Christ? How does recapturing this image of sin as enemy captor help the Church fulfill its purpose? Personally, I believe seeing sin as a foreign enemy can have a tremendous effect on how the Christian views his or her walk with God. Seeing sin for what it is—a foreign oppressor waging war against God's people—rather than as a human infirmity or spiritual stain with which we simply have to live until death—allows believers to see themselves for what they are: Free (Rom. 8:2;)! As God's elect, believers can embrace their calling as saints (Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:18) and avoid false guilt or condemnation (Rom. 8:1) because instead of viewing themselves as wretched and sinful, in bondage to their passions, they can see themselves as members of God's army waging spiritual warfare against their oldest enemy. And what will be the final outcome? "The book of Revelation develops this idea in the most thoroughgoing way, making clear that whilst evil will have some temporary victories, the final victory has already been won by the Lamb and will be finally realized in the new heaven and earth. In the meantime those who are in Christ can participate in the victory that has already been won."⁴⁹ Therefore the believer can "*hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*" (Heb. 10:23)

⁴⁸Ryken, et. al., 793.

⁴⁹Alexander and Rosner. *NDBT*

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