

The Reign of Evil

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Paul was not only the greatest but the first of all Christian theologians. We know fairly exactly what he had to start with; he tells us in 1 Cor 15:3-5 what he had received--the tradition that was current when he became a Christian. It is quite short enough to quote:

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
was buried
rose on the third day according to the Scriptures
appeared--to a number of people (Paul was himself able to expand the primitive list, adding his own name at the end).

That is, it was known and accepted that certain events had taken place; these had received incipient theological interpretation in terms of the Old Testament.

With 1 Corinthians 15 we may put a second passage, 1 Cor 11:23, where Paul, calling the Corinthian Church to order, recalled in similar language ("I received...I handed on") what he had learnt about the church supper:

The Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took a loaf, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in memory of me." Similarly he took the cup after they had had supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink, in memory of me."

Here is an historical event, and a continuing event (a weekly supper), the former controlling the latter. Here, also, is more interpretation: a sacrificial giving of body and blood, establishing a covenant--a new covenant, though Paul does not use, his predecessors had not used, the adjective that would have given a clear reference to the new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31. Paul adds a verse, which points to what he took the tradition to mean: "As often as you eat the loaf and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he come." It was

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a proclamation of the Lord's death, establishing a relation between God and man, and continuing until the Lord (evidently therefore no longer dead--an implicit reference to the Resurrection) should come again.

Paul thus entered into a tradition of events provided with an incipient interpretation. Historically and conceptually, this brings us to the point at which Paul started. From the simple historical point of view we have a sequence of events:

Supper, in the night in which Jesus was betrayed, or handed over.

Death and burial.

Resurrection on the third day.

Appearances--last of all, Paul says, to me.

We should add a further expected event:

Until He come.

Before Paul's conversion, Christian thought focused on these events, adding two propositions that gave them meaning:

For our sins; and,

according to the Scriptures.

In all these propositions, Jesus of Nazareth is the subject of the verb (except where, in other passages which I have not quoted, we read that God raised Him from the dead). It is not hard to state these facts; if you had actually encountered Jesus following His death it was impossible not to accept, state and ponder them. But they were not easy. They called accepted conceptual frameworks into question. It was especially difficult to relate the recorded events to their experienced consequences. How did the death of Jesus of Nazareth deal with our sins and inaugurate a new covenant?

It was left to Christians after the Resurrection to answer such questions to the best of their ability and to explain their position to their contemporaries. Of course, they had the assistance of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not work without reference to the human material available; and though there were, no doubt, many good Christians who were open to the Spirit's operation, there was only one who had the necessary gifts to evolve out of these traditional--and indispensable--propositions a powerful and coherent theology. His name was Paul.

Nothing more self-evident, and nothing more profound, can be said about Paul's theology than that it was a theology of salvation. Those who are Christians may be defined as the saved (1 Cor 1:18), or perhaps as those who are in process of being saved (the participle is in the present tense), for salvation in its fullness and finality still lies in the future. "Now is salvation nearer to us, as we march through time, nearer than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11). The verb *to save* regularly appears in the future tense or the subjective mood, with an element of contingency, or at least futurity. Finality is sure, yet it is uncertain; for Paul himself, having preached to others, may in the end turn out to be rejected (1 Cor 9:27). But salvation is what theology is about.

A theology of salvation presupposes a world that is somehow wrong, a situation from which men need to be delivered. This is an impression of the world

that is familiar enough in our time, and it was by no means unfamiliar in Paul's, though then the wrongness of the world was expressed in somewhat different terms. In what sense is the world wrong? From what do we need to be delivered? Some of Paul's contemporaries thought of a world that had been wrong from the start, that was wrong in itself and could only cease to be wrong by ceasing to be itself. Creation was an unfortunate error that had to be undone; salvation was de-creation. The empirical universe was an unhappy mixture of spirit (which was good and immortal) with matter (which was bad and subject to death). Salvation consisted in the resolution of this radical dualism. The mixture had to be sorted out and spirit freed from matter. This was the basic proposition which the various gnostic myths expressed in an endless series of mythological fantasies--fantasies indeed, but not fantasies that we may regard as objects of scorn, for they were the products of sensitive minds burdened by the evil of the world, which they took as seriously as it deserved to be taken. But this was a view that no orthodox Jew, adhering to the Old Testament, could hold; Paul did not hold it. Yet his view of the world was, in some respects, akin to this astrological, gnostic view that he was bound to reject. The fundamental difference, indeed, was absolute. The world was not made wrong, it had gone wrong. It had gone wrong because, though made good by the good God, it had escaped from His dominion and come under that of evil powers; at this point the resemblance between Paul and his gnostic contemporaries is absolute. This was the world's misfortune; it was also, as we shall see, its fault. (One might say with a little exaggeration, a collective misfortune and an individual fault.)

Gilbert Murray wrote that "astrology fell upon the Hellenistic mind as a new disease falls upon some remote island people....In all the religious systems of antiquity, if I mistake not, the Seven Planets play some lordly or terrifying part."¹ These seven heavenly bodies, whose regular and predictable movements created a strong impression of destiny and determinism, had each of them its own sphere (or hemisphere) in which it moved. These seven spheres formed an impenetrable barrier between this material world of bondage to destiny and to the heavenly powers and the upper world of spirit, freedom, life and God. These astrologers might, for a suitable fee, inform you about your destiny. For escape from it, you needed the mysteries for sacramental agencies, or gnosis, which was in essence (though capable of great refinement) the secret of how to get out.

At present we are not concerned with getting out; we are dealing with the reign of evil, and we are to note that Paul has reached a position strikingly similar to that of contemporaries, though he began in a different place and must think of salvation not as de-creation, an unmixing of creation, but as a restoration of creation to what it originally was and was always intended to be in that mind of God. There are other differences too, which we shall encounter shortly; at the present, we may explore the similarity further.

We may look with confidence for the similarity in the time "before faith came" (Gal 3:23), a situation in which there was no gospel to set men free. Man is in prison, kept under lock and key. In the immediate context, Paul is

thinking of bondage under the law of Moses, a bondage which is ended when men become sons of God in Christ. All this is expressed in language which is suitable for Jews who have become Christians; moreover, in classic form, it contains truths which, *mutatis mutandis*, are applicable to all Christians. But Paul knows that his readers are not converted Jews; they are Gentiles (though their faith is being threatened by Judaizers), and accordingly he begins (in chapter 4) to express himself in a new way. Even an heir, while an infant and underage by law, is kept under the rule of stewards and governors--and is anything but free. Similarly, until the appointed moment when God sent forth His Son (4:4), we were enslaved under the elemental spirits (*stoicheia*) of the universe.

What are these *stoicheia*? We must pick up what hints we can (for Paul naturally assumes that his readers know all about them and need no definitions or explanations). The hints are to be found chiefly in vv 8-12. The Galatians are in danger of falling back into bondage from which they have been liberated by Christ. They are going back to the *stoicheia*; Paul (who does not think much of them) calls them the feeble and poverty-stricken *stoicheia*. What then was the previous state to which the Galatians were threatening to return? They had been enslaved to beings which in the nature of things are not gods. These are the *stoicheia*, beings regarded by some as divine though in the proper sense they are not god. Paul does not say that they do not exist; only that they are "no-gods"; not exactly "anti-gods," but not to be described by the word god as a Jew understood it. They are the heavenly powers; planets, perhaps, or powers represented by the planets, or inhabiting the planets.

There are two things to note here. One is that Paul is talking like a gnostic, or at least a modified gnostic. The change that had happened to the Galatians (which they seemed about to reverse) is described in terms of knowledge. In the old days they had not known God; their release is described as "now that you have come to know God"--exactly what a gnostic would have said. But as soon as Paul has said it, he corrects it: "or rather have come to be known by God." The important thing is not that you know God but that God knows you. So the language of gnosis can (with proper caution and correction) be applied. The second thing to note is that Paul has not forgotten about the Law, but incorporates it with what he is saying about the *stoicheia*. For the Galatians are not turning back to their old heathenism; they are turning to the Law, which (as Paul said in 3:19) was given by angels.

Law we shall come back to, briefly, at a later point. For the present, note that the *stoicheia* reappear in Colossians; and whatever we make of the authorship of Colossians, the point is the same. In 2:8 the *stoicheia* are connected with *philosophia*, which is much nearer to gnosis than to what we mean by philosophy. Verse 2:20 indicates we have been removed from the reach of the elements by dying with Christ. The whole context is important, but I can only name the relevant themes:

1. Again the heavenly powers are associated with the Law (2:14, 16).
2. Other words are used, too: principalities, powers, angels (2:10, 15, 18).
3. In this context, Christology develops (2:9, 10, 17).

The reference to other words will remind us of other passages in other epistles where *stoicheia* are not mentioned but a variety of other terminology appears. In addition to those I have already listed, there are powers and rulers, and Paul knows the astrological terms height and depth (Rom 8:38f.). He evidently distrusts all these powers, even angels.

The powers are in conflict with Christ; it is a conflict that takes place in three acts.

Act 1--The powers have been defeated by Christ: Col 2:15, 1:13; cf. Eph 1:21; see also 1 Cor 2:8 (which indicates something less than defeat); cf. Eph 2:2. It is worth noting that these references (apart from that in 1 Corinthians) come from epistles which, if not deuteropauline, are certainly late).

Act 2--The demons continue the fight; so very clearly in Eph 6:12, cf. 3:10; also Rom 8:38f. and the references to *stoicheia* that we have already considered; but especially the references to Satan, who is very active: 1 Cor 5:5, 7:4; 2 Cor 2:11, 11:14, 12:7; 1 Thess 2:28 (cf. Eph 4:27, 6:11).

Act 3--This continued conflict will be brought to an end by Christ's final victory: 2 Thess 2:8-12; 1 Cor 15:24-28. This restores the order willed by God in creation: Col 1:16, 18; 2:10. Note again what is said of Satan: 2 Thess 2:8; Rom 16:20.

The position is thus neither static nor simple. Paul and his readers live between crucifixion and resurrection on the one hand, and the parousia on the other, each a decisive divine victory. It corresponds to this that Christians have been rescued from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's Son (Col 1:13), yet remain and groan within the world of sin and death (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 5:4). They are saved in hope (Rom 8:24). It is worth noting that in this scheme Paul reproduces the pattern, though not the terminology, of the eschatology of the Gospels, in which the kingdom is mysteriously present but is still to come in power, and the Son of Man is exposed to suffering and death and will come in glory at some point in the future.

It would be possible to stop here and present a neat and comforting, if not in all respects comfortable, picture. Evil powers have usurped authority over God's universe and are, of course, running it wrongly. God, however, has no intention of allowing them to get away with their wickedness, and in due course will drive them out. For the present, things are bound to be unpleasant for those caught in the crossfire, but before long the powers of evil will be put to flight. It is unfortunate that we should have to suffer because things have gone wrong, but it was not our fault and we shall be compensated. It would be possible to stop here; and wrong.

The tyranny under which the human race suffers is not only external; it is also internal. Man is not simply an unfortunate sufferer under the malign influence of the planets. We cannot adequately deal with the reign of evil without introducing a new word: sin.

This is not an easy term to define. One might do much worse than to use our starting point and say that sin is the inward correlative of the external tyranny, the subjection to astrological and demonic forces, under which man lives.

He is not simply, as some Jews tended to think of him, the unfortunate victim of oppression, the deprived heir of an Adam who had lost his wisdom, beauty, strength and freedom; nor is he the unlucky product of a gnostic mythical "accident" (as in *Poimandres*, where heavenly man, leaning out of heaven to enjoy his own reflection in the watery deep, leaned too far, fell out of heaven and found himself in the embrace of [female] nature, a union out of which a mixture of spirit and matter, good and evil, was produced). He is himself a guilty rebel against his Creator, condemned to perish by his fault, his own fault, his own most grievous fault. How far the individual member of the race generated this fault himself, how far he inherited it, how far he acquired it from his environment, are questions we must for the present, and perhaps altogether, defer.

I shall, however, take this opportunity to point out that we see here for the first time one of the most important hermeneutical and theological problems, a problem that will go with us in one form or another throughout our work. How far is this inward bondage of man to sin simply a demythologized way of expressing the outward bondage of man to the elements? It might be better to put the question the other way round. How far is the outward bondage of man to the elements simply a mythologized, pictorial way of expressing the inward bondage of man to sin? Are the two capable of being equated without remainder? That they are related is, or will become, clear; are they, though cast in different terms, identical? If they are, then we may, if we wish, dismiss the *stoiceia* at once; and most of us, I suspect, would be glad to see them go. They are an embarrassment, for we do not, today, speak naturally in these terms. The consequence of this would be that Pauline theology could virtually be rewritten in terms of existentialism; theology would become anthropology. There is truth in this view; some measure of equivalence as well as parallelism exists between the two kinds of bondage. Man's rebellion is man's way to his own loss of privilege and of life itself: by man came death. There will be (if we may anticipate work we have not yet done) a corresponding parallelism and equivalence in the sphere of redemption, for salvation will consist in existential renewal or reorientation of man's life as he discovers authentic existence: by man came also the resurrection of the dead. There is truth in all this, some truth; but is this the whole truth? Or does there remain an objective, external element in man's bondage, and hence in his liberation also? *Christus pro nobis*, *Christus extra nos*, as well as *Christus in nobis*?²

These are not questions that I may even attempt to answer in this article. If we stick to our present theme the answers may emerge in due course. I have allowed myself to digress for a moment in order to make clear how fundamental are the issues with which we are concerned. It is easy to get lost, or at least to feel lost, in a maze of detail, and a good thing from time to time to look at a large map. But that does not mean that we can afford to scamp the detail. We had better get back to it.

We are speaking of sin; what has Paul to say about it? We will jump in at the deep end with a sentence that has caused much difficulty, and indeed offense. In Rom 14:23, Paul declares that everything that is not of faith is sin. So,

if you are not actively engaged in being religious, and feeling religious, are you a sinner? Is every activity you engage in outside an ecclesiastical framework wicked? To believe so mistakes Paul's antithesis. If faith is (and for the moment at least we may allow ourselves to assume it) the true relation of man to God, anything that is outside this true relation, anything, that is, that is wrongly related to God, is, by definition, sin. That is, sin is primarily a relational rather than an ethical word, and is nothing if not (in the strictest sense) theological. Of course, to be wrongly related to God will have ethical consequences; this follows from the nature of God. But these are consequences, and in the first instance sin is defined in relation not to an ethical system but to God.

Let us track down this relational, pre-ethical, understanding of sin in more detail. There is plenty of material in the opening chapters of Romans. The essence of the matter is set out at once in 1:18-32, where the sin of the Gentile world is traced back to its idolatry, so that sin immediately appears as a false, negative relation with God. The very existence of creation exterior to himself, the existence of objects for which he was in no sense responsible--sun, moon, earth and so on--should have convinced man of an eternal power and divinity (1:20), a power, not his own, not human, conceivably demonic but, in fact (as a reader of the Old Testament did not need to be told), divine. This is what can be known about God (1:19)--not the whole truth about God, but the basic fact that there is a "not-I," something other than self, with which I am confronted. What does man do in the presence of this divinity? What he ought to do may be inferred from 1:21: he ought to glorify God and give thanks to Him. But verse 21 has a negative in it; this is precisely what man will not do. Instead of believing gratitude, he gives God a rebuff. Why? Because to recognize an eternal power and divinity--such a "not-I"--would mean recognizing a master; and this is what man is unwilling to do.

It is worthwhile here to pause in order to note the allusions that show that Paul has in the back of his mind the story of creation and the Fall in Genesis 1-3. What has happened is the perversion of an element in God's good creation. The human creatures were intended to have dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28; cf. Ps 8:6); but their lust for dominion was unbridled. Having tasted the sweets of authority, man sought more and more to make himself free even of God by depressing God to his own level. He changed the truth of God into a lie, and rejected all the intimations of God that came to him from a world still unfallen. He preferred to worship human and animal images which could never be his lord (1:22f.). So far, all is a matter of relation; ethics is not yet involved, but it follows as an immediate consequence. Man's rejection of a right relation with God is the origin of man's disorder. His wisdom becomes folly (1:21f.). He plunges into moral wickedness, and that by God's own decree (1:24, 26, 28). Immediately we meet the words desire and uncleanness; for Paul, sexual, and especially homosexual, sin is the most blatant of all sins because it is the clearest example of man's self-assertion, the ultimate case of arrogating to oneself a right one does not possess. It is bad enough when I make an illicit claim on another person's property; worse when I make such a claim on another person's person.

So much for idolatrous Gentiles; no Jew was in doubt that they were sinners (sinners of the Gentiles [Gal 2:15]). All that we have time and need to pick out of chapter 2 is the devastating counterblast, "You who judge practice the same things" (2:1)--a theme that runs, positively and negatively, through the whole chapter. It cannot mean that all are equally guilty of the vices listed at the end of chapter 1, any more than "observing the righteous ordinance of the law" (2:26) can mean that Gentiles observe the Sabbath and abstain from pork. In simple terms, it means that the self-appointed judge, whether Jew or Gentile, dispossesses God, putting himself in God's place; instead of giving glory to God, he takes it for himself. The pre-ethical origins of sin are very clear.

Chapter 3 contains the joint indictment of Jew and Greek (3:9), with a detailed demonstration of the point out of the Old Testament (3:10-18). This is important because it shows that, for Paul, the charge of universal sinfulness is not a matter of observation but of the Word of God. The assertion of the Psalm, "There is none righteous, not even one," matches the quasi-philosophical (but really exegetical) argument of chapter 1.

That exegetical argument was based on Genesis 1-3 and made use of the figure of Adam, though without naming him. The reference becomes explicit in chapter 5, and before laying down Romans we must look briefly at what Paul has to say there. The relational, non-ethical, meaning of sin becomes unmistakable as Paul, introducing new words, speaks of trespass and transgression (5:15, 16, 17, 18, 20). *Sin* cannot be measured, can hardly be properly observed, unless a further factor, *law*, is introduced into the situation (5:13). It is law that turns sin into concrete acts of transgression. So it was with Adam; so it is with the rest of mankind; for all sinned (5:12). Only *law* was needed to turn universal *sin* into universal *transgression* (and so far as law was not universal, or might have seemed not to be universal, some might seem to have escaped, so that Paul has to make a special point in 5:14).

What Adam's sin was is given fundamental definition by its contrast with the *act of grace* (5:16) and the *obedience* (5:19) of Christ, who humbled himself in obedient faith before God. *Grace* is condescending, outgoing, non-acquisitive love. This is contrasted with the acquisitiveness of Genesis 1-3, and of all human life since, and helps to clarify what sin is. It is not simply greed, but man's desire to secure himself--even vis-à-vis God. The contrast is expressed in the title of Nygren's classic book, *Agape and Eros* (giving love and acquisitive love). Paul does not use the word *eros*; his word (both noun and verb) is *desire*, which he draws from the last of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21; quoted in Rom 7:7).

At this point we may pause for a moment to survey the ground that we have covered regarding sin;

1. Sin is connected with Adam; the word *adam* is Hebrew for man, humanity. That is, sin is coextensive with the human race and proper to the being of man as such, not an accident, which any given man may or may not incur, but a definition of human nature--at least a partial and provisional definition. The ultimate definition of human nature, for Paul, is Christ, *der rechte Mann*; but this is man as intended by God, not man as he is.

2. Sin is connected with idolatry, the most primitive of all sins. It is thus essentially a theological rather than a moral concept, a relation (or lack of relation) with God. It exists wherever God is dispossessed of His place and His right. In this sense, Jews as well as Gentiles may be idolaters. The root of idolatry (to press further back still) is pride, for the only way in which man can put himself on a level with God, the being whom he worships, is to deny the true God and put a no-god in his place. The connection between the external tyranny of the *stoicheia* and the internal disorder of human nature is already apparent.

3. The consequence of sin is death. The more man seeks life in and for himself the more he turns his back on God, who is life. Again the story of Adam (Man) is in mind. By rebelling, seeking life by illicit means, Adam condemned himself to death: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen 2:17). This, collectively, man continues to do, and death reigned from Adam to Moses even over those who, having no law, did not trespass as Adam did (Rom 5:14); much more from Moses onward.

4. It follows that sin, like death, is something that concerns the whole man, not part of him. It is a definition of the totality of human existence in this age.

These summary observations are worth making, but they leave open a number of questions of various kinds. If the human race is now to be thought of as universally sinful, at least in the sense of being imperfectly related to its Creator, and if this was not the original intention of the Creator (if, that is, something originally good has been corrupted into evil), what was the source of the corruption? It is easy to paint a picture, as I have done, of the usurpation of God's cosmos by unruly and ill-intentioned cosmic elements; but where did these elements come from? Did God make them, and, through inadvertence or negligence or weakness, make them evil? Is there a corresponding corrupting force within the microcosm, the life of man? Alongside this question, almost paraphrasing it, is the strictly exegetical question: What does Paul mean by the word *flesh*? Does this point to an initial dualism in human nature in such a way as to contradict the conclusion that sin is a phenomenon of the whole man and the belief that God's original creation was wholly good?

This will prompt the next stage in our inquiry into the reign of evil; it can be brief, for not long ago I wrote³ about the great passage in Galatians 5 in which Paul gives the basic principles of his understanding of *flesh*. The key to this is the observation that flesh has two counterparts, two opposites. One is love; if flesh is what love is not (or is love with a minus sign outside the bracket) then it denotes self-centered existence, life directed to my own ends. This, of course, need have nothing to do with gross, vulgar, carnal sins but may be exercised within a religious framework (and has indeed all too often been exercised within an ecclesiastical framework in which men have pushed for the best jobs and used their positions to manipulate others). The constituents of the human person are what they should be, but they are set in a false configuration; there is still no better phrase than Luther's *cor incurvatum in se*, the heart turned in

upon itself. The other counterpart of flesh is Spirit, for the only way not to be self-centered is to be God-centered, and that, for Paul, is what the Spirit means: God in his readiness to fill and control a human life.

Another passage of primary importance if we are to understand what Paul means by *flesh* is Rom 7:17-8:13, of which we can glance at only a verse or two. The argument begins back in 7:7, not as an account of human nature, or of conversion, but as an answer to the question, "Is the Law sin?" If it is not to be identified with sin (and how could it be, since it is the word of God?), how is it related to sin? In fact, Paul says (7:17) it is sin itself as a living force that is responsible for sinful actions. He goes on to say (7:18), "There is no good thing in me, that is in my flesh." The parallelism shows that here flesh means "me-devoted-to-sin," which is not very different from the "me-devoted-to-myself" of Galatians. This is evidently not the whole truth about "me," because I want to do what is good, but that it is true is proved by my practical inability to achieve the good I want to do.

Paul turns the corner into chapter 8, but he has not forgotten that he is writing about law, or that he has defended law as good. He cannot, however, deny (8:3) that it is ineffective, and it is ineffective on account of the flesh (cf. 7:12, 14). Flesh is thus a force that operates in a direction contrary to the true intention of the law, which is to secure *man's* obedience to God. Clearly this does not mean flesh as material, or even flesh as *man's* "unspiritual nature." This is further emphasized by the expression "sin's flesh" and especially by the statement that the Son of God came in the likeness of sin's flesh. If we may paraphrase Paul's straightforward language in our polysyllables, the incarnation meant that Christ shared fully in existence that was normally anthropocentric. That He (or God) condemned sin in the flesh (the only place where there was any point in condemning it) means that He lived a theocentric existence in anthropocentric circumstances.

The result of Christ's living a God-centered life while in the likeness of sin's flesh (real material flesh which, however, He did not permit to be under the dominion of sin) is that the requirement that the law rightly makes, namely God-centered existence, may be fulfilled in us--in that we live not "according to flesh" but "according to Spirit" (verse 4). The righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled only where this new existence is lived.

Verse 5 is a fundamental definition of what is meant by this. The alternative to "minding the things of the flesh" is not "minding the things of the higher, or spiritual, life" but "minding the things of the Spirit (of God)." Once more, flesh is anthropocentric life, Spirit is God-centered life.

It is important once more to recall that Paul's view of the perversion of the world in its alienation from God is twofold. Independently of man, and objectively, the universe is perverted because it has come to be under the wrong direction, under the wrong rulers. The *stoicheia* and other powers (or possibly the same powers under other names) have seized control. The result is that the universe itself is in bondage to corruption (Rom 8:21). Unless something is done about this, it will inevitably be destroyed. Man will share in this destruction; he

is already on the way to death, and he lives under the authority of darkness. Christians, though they have the assurance of the divine love, continue under the threat of the demonic forces (Rom 8:38f.). One of these forces bears the title "sin," often described by Paul in almost personal terms. This means that we are already moving over to the second aspect of alienation.

Inwardly, and subjectively, the individual man is perverted. The disorder is anthropological as well as cosmological, and the essence of it is that man lives within the closed circle of his own existence, seeking to control his own affairs in his own interest. Turning away from God and manufacturing deities to suit his own desire, he falls into foolishness and moral corruption, abusing even such good gifts of God as the law. He is under the primeval sentence of death.

Where did all this evil come from? How did the snake get into the garden? Paul does not tell us; and anyone who has pursued Calvin's tormented thought as he tried to deal with the problem will have little stomach for investigation. "The first man fell because the Lord deemed it meet that he should: why he deemed it meet, we know not...Man therefore falls, divine providence so ordaining, but he falls by his own fault (*suo vitio*)."⁴ Certainly we may say that God gave His creature freedom, which must from the beginning have left the door open--for temptation, for the snake to come in, for man to go out. This, however, is not an explanation. There is perhaps an inevitability given in the gift of creativity. Precisely because man is the center of new, creative, independent existence, he will wish to push his creativity and independence as far as they will go. If he pushes them too far, encounters God, and in the end discovers the truth of the God who loved enough to give him birth, shall we not say with Augustine, *Felix culpa*?⁵ Here we may rejoin Paul, who knows that only through their disobedience do men apprehend the mercy of God (Rom 11:32).

We are still using mythological language if we say that evil must reign in order that God may be seen to get the better of it; and, so far as the myth speaks (as we have seen) of an objective perversion and points to an objective restoration of God's universe, we must not attempt to get rid of it. But Paul himself has a demythologized version of the truth in question, and this also we must not miss. Our greatest danger lies not in our obviously wicked actions, which no one would ever think of defending, but in the perversion of our religious aspiration and discipline. Paul did not write letters complaining of the treatment he received at the hands of the heathen, though (if we may trust Acts) they sometimes treated him pretty roughly. He filled page after page with complaints against the religious. *Corruptio optimi pessima*⁶ is as true in the realm of theology as elsewhere; it is what the reign of evil means. In other words, as Paul says (Rom 7:13), "Did that good thing come to mean death for me? No; on the contrary it was sin, that sin might appear in its true colors, producing death for me through that good thing, that sin might through the commandment become overwhelmingly sinful."

NOTES

1. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (London: Watts, 1935), pp. 144-146.
2. Christ for us, Christ apart from (outside of, beyond) us as well as Christ in us.
3. C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).
4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:23:8.
5. O blessed guilt.
6. The (absolute) worst corruption of the good (person).