

The Big Topics - Part One: Sin

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[0 : 00] If you were here last week, you'll have remembered hopefully that this week is going to be the first of five weeks of talks where we're going to be tackling some of the big, indeed perhaps the biggest of topics which lie at the heart of what the Christian faith and Christian life is all about.

So you'll have heard me mention maybe last week or if you've caught up online, if you weren't here, we'll refresh you. There's five areas in particular that we're going to be looking at over these five weeks. So we're looking at sin, the cross, hell, heaven and mission.

Five big topics and we're going to do those in that order. So this week, we're going to start with sin. Okay, yes. Come on.

So before we begin though with this cheeriest of topics, it's worth saying I think at the beginning of what we're doing over the next month or so, don't be surprised if these next five weeks raise some significant questions for us.

Or indeed offer us new ways of looking at things. I mean, I more or less know what's coming. I'm going to be doing them week by week. So I'm aware that some of the views that we're going to be considering may challenge us to reconsider perhaps beliefs which we may have held for maybe quite some time now.

[1 : 33] But I'm also aware that if this whole faith and church and God stuff is new or relatively new to us, it's a good opportunity over these next five weeks to really consider what it's all about in the big picture.

And see if that might be something that we want to take on board for ourselves. So whether that prospect of either renewing things that we've perhaps, views we've held for quite some time or discovering things for the first time.

Whether that prospect causes us to feel inspired and invigorated or whether it makes us feel nervous and restless. I guess my hope and my prayer as we begin is that God by his spirit and through his word that he may open our hearts and minds to understand more fully the good news of his love in Jesus.

And so let's pray in fact. Let's commit this morning and this course of talks firmly into God's hands. So dear God, as you know, just been hearing, we're going to be exploring these big topics of sin, the cross, hell, heaven and mission over these five weeks.

All hugely important but also sometimes complicated, sometimes controversial areas which lie at the heart of our understanding of you and who you are.

[2 : 53] So we need your help, please, to do this exploration. Please give us open minds to what it is that you'll be saying to us.

Give us open hearts to receive what you want to give us. And Lord, I guess most of all, give us open spirits so that we are increasingly in line with your truth and your love in our lives.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Okay. Now, part of the prompting really to get this stuff underway and tackle these big subjects is because I'm increasingly aware how hard it is for many of us, myself included, to explain or put into words what we believe and why.

I mean, I know in my gut. I know I believe in God. I know I believe he's good. I know that he loves me. I know I believe that Jesus died and rose again.

And I know I believe that we've got his spirit here with us and in our lives. But if you were to start digging beneath those beliefs about how it all works and why, then my clarity and maybe yours will begin to get a little bit more hazy on that.

[4 : 20] And I guess part of my sort of thinking of how hard it is sometimes to put into words what we do actually believe and why is partly a result of being a dad and having two children. So, if you don't know, we've got Heidi and Bobby.

Bobby on the left, obviously, Heidi on the right. But they're five and seven years old now. And they're at an age where they are full of questions.

Every day it's question after question after question, which is great. It's the way we learn by asking questions. But their questions range from everything. Well, from why do men have nipples?

Bobby's obsessed with this for some reason at the moment. No idea why. So, that's one extreme. Why do men have nipples? Well, we'll come to that. To the other extreme, I was talking with Heidi the other day and she was asking me, how can I be sure that fairies don't exist?

It's a good question. Good question. I mean, the nipples one is complicated enough, all right, to answer. But talking to your seven-year-old, trying to disprove the existence of fairies is harder than you might imagine.

[5 : 33] And you might be thinking, she's seven, you know, she can believe what she wants about fairies. You know, let her believe that they exist. And we can debate the parental parameters on that if you want. But it gets even more complicated, nipples and fairies aside.

When certain Bible stories get discussed in our house. So, Noah's Ark, for example, in which the Bible seems to be saying that God loved the world so much that he caused a mass flood to wipe everyone from it.

I mean, if that's true, it's a pretty horrific story, if you think about it. It's a story of mass genocide. And not really suitable bedtime material for children to be read before they go to sleep.

Let alone, as we did in our house, play with little playmobile sets of Noah's Ark as you act out the story. How does the flood and Noah's Ark demonstrate God's unfailing love, as we've just been singing about?

That is not an easy question to answer. Well, then, let's fast forward from Noah and his Ark. What about Jesus? Well, we've just had Christmas.

[6 : 53] And in many ways, I guess, aside from the awkwardness of trying to explain what the virgin birth is all about to a five-year-old. Christmas, as we've just been celebrating over the last month.

Christmas, I think, is comparatively straightforward to get our heads around. God with us as one of us. I mean, that's a truth, that's a story, which all ages can get something of the wonder of.

Christmas, I think, is relatively straightforward to get something from. Easter, on the other hand, which is two, three months away, that's altogether trickier, I would say, to get our heads around.

And so, I mean, a common way in which the story of Jesus' death and resurrection is explained and has really always been explained to me in this way.

It might go something like this. And this way of explaining it may well be familiar to you. So, the story goes, basically, that God made human beings and loved them so much that he wanted them to know him and to follow him.

[8 : 02] But humans decided to go their own way, which made God very angry. And he knew he had to punish them for their sins. However, God sent Jesus to live a perfect life and then die so that he could take God's anger and punishment for those sins onto himself.

Jesus' death means that humans can be forgiven. And that means that instead of being condemned to hell forever, we can go to heaven when we die.

Now, that might have been, the words may differ slightly, but that, I suspect, is a pretty common way of understanding and being explained the story of Jesus.

We might call it the gospel. That's how it tends to be summarized. Our sin deserves to be punished, but an angry, holy God is pacified by a perfect human sacrifice so that we get to go to heaven.

And yet, and yet, I would suggest there are numerous, serious problems with this way of understanding what the good news of Jesus is all about.

[9 : 26] But don't just take my word for it, though. Here's what Tom Wright, who is probably the leading and most respected biblical scholar alive today.

It's what he has to say about that way of understanding the gospel. He says this. He says, such a view of the relationship between God and humans is a travesty.

It is indeed unbiblical. Hmm. Now, if that's causing you to scratch your head a little bit, don't worry, because we're going to try and unpack over this in the coming weeks why such an understanding might indeed be a travesty and be unbiblical.

But in order to do this, I think we need to start with the initial problem, which is that of sin. And we need to start with sin, I think, because our understanding of it in relation to God sets the tone for much of what is to come in the story and much of what will come over these coming weeks.

Now, this word. There's a general tendency, I'm aware, to balk at using this word, sin. Often we kind of substitute it for wrongdoing or the ways we've let God down and so on.

[10 : 44] It feels quite a sort of old-fashioned word. One which, rightly or wrongly, is reckoned to be used by people in a way which makes you feel rotten and then feel superior.

We don't always like using the word sin. And yet, the normal Greek word, which we translate in the Bible as sin, is actually this word, hamartia.

Hamartia. Let me hear you say, hamartia. Come on. Now, we do these Greek words occasionally. If you come long enough, you will be fluent in Greek within two or three years, I promise you.

Man, it'll help you order a beer next time you go to Coz or whatever, but you'll be fluent in Biblical Greek anyway. Now, hamartia means missing the mark.

Aiming for a target, but failing to hit it. That's what sin means. That's what sin is translated from.

Now, I think this definition is interesting.

[11 : 46] Because far from being a word which describes arbitrary lists of things we should or shouldn't do, the idea of missing the mark, that implies that there was at least an intention to do right, to aim for the right thing.

But that for one reason or another, that target was missed. Sin could be understood, therefore, as misguided or misdirected intention.

In that the person who sins, whether they believe in God or not, their aim in life will be to find meaning and fulfilment in whatever way they feel it is right to do.

The trouble is, sin means we end up going off course, either by a small or a big margin. So, if sin is indeed missing the mark, missing the target of what life should be about, I guess we need to ask, what might the mark be that we're meant to be trying to hit?

Well, if we go back to the very first thing that we learn about what it means to be human, way back in Genesis chapter 1, the first thing we learn is that we as humans are made in God's image.

[13 : 08] We're made to be divine image bearers, reflectors, if you like, mirrors of the nature, the character, the purposes, the glory of God.

And so putting this together, the made in God's image and the sin, missing the mark stuff, when we sin, it would seem fundamentally we are missing the mark of God's image.

We're missing the target of who we're designed and made to be. People made in the image of God. Sin, therefore, means that instead of reflecting God, we mirror and reflect something else.

Something, by definition, something that is not God. Sin means that our thoughts, our words, our deeds become influenced and shaped, not by God, but by other forces, other desires, other priorities.

Sin means that we make something else more important in our lives than God and his ways. And the word which the Bible uses for that skewed, kind of out of order, topsy-turvy approach to life is this word.

[14 : 24] They call it idolatry. And again, to quote Tom Wright, who knows what he's talking about, he says this. He says, Now what does he mean that idolatry underlies it, underlies sin?

Well, we can define an idol, which is all what idolatry is about. An idol can be defined as anything more important to us than God.

An idol is anything which is more important to us than God. So idolatry happens when we say to ourselves, If I have that thing in life, if I can just get that and have that and keep that, then my life will have meaning.

I know I'll have value. I know I'll feel significant and secure. Now that meaning, that value, that security, it can come from all manner of things.

It can come from the importance that we place, say, on family or on being a parent. It can come from money or talent or popularity. It can come from the work we do, our career.

[15 : 42] None of those things in and of themselves are wrong. Indeed, they can all be incredibly good. Rather, it's how important they become in relation to the importance and priority of God in our lives.

So, for example, we know, I would say, we know we don't reflect God's image, his character in our lives when we lie.

When we tell lies. We know that doesn't reflect who God is. God doesn't lie. And as people made to bear his image, he commands us not to lie.

Pretty clearly, one of the Ten Commandments in Leviticus, 1911. Do not lie, says God. Pretty clear cut on that one. And yet when we do lie, as we all do from time to time, including me, it's because even though we might know it's wrong, we think it's more important to, say, protect our reputation than we think it is to do what God says we should do.

And so focusing on what other people think of us as opposed to what God thinks of us, that becomes, for that moment and maybe longer, our number one priority in life.

[17:02] Our reputation becomes our idol. Now you tell me. Perhaps that's something you can identify with. I don't know how often you lie. I can tell you how often I lie.

It comes more often than I realise when I think about it. Little things that just think, why did I say that? That's not true. Why did I say that? And I know the root of it is to protect people thinking worse of you.

Now I don't know how you do that. Maybe it's not a weakness for you. Maybe you are the true teller extraordinaire. Good for you if that's the case. But if this is something you can identify with as a weakness perhaps, perhaps what other people think of you and your reputation, perhaps that, in some way or other, perhaps that dominates much of your thinking.

And if so, we may have made our reputation and protecting it the most important thing. And therefore it becomes an idol. Well, how about money?

Always a nice topic to talk about. We know God calls us to be generous. Umpteen verses in the Bible, but this one from 1 Timothy 6.18. Do good. Be rich in good deeds and be generous and willing to share.

[18:14] Be generous. Don't be stingy. Don't be tight. And yet when we are greedy or stingy, it means we're trusting in money and looking to keep hold of that rather than trusting in God to meet our needs.

And so money, security, comfort, whatever comes with it, becomes an idol which pushes God into second or worse place. Again, I don't know how you, what your relationship is with money, how much it dominates your thought, how much it keeps you awake at night, how much you worry about it, how much you want to keep it.

You know, what are your concerns with your long-term security? Does that stop you being generous? Does your sense of entitlement, this is mine, I've earned it, it's mine to do as I choose, does that stop you from being generous?

If so, greed or hoarding might be an idol that we struggle to keep in check. Another one perhaps. What about gossip? Gossip. We know gossip is destructive. All sorts of verses in the Bible tell us Proverbs is big on gossip. One here from Proverbs 11, 13.

[19:25] A gossip, it says, betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret. And yet when we ignore this kind of advice and instead choose to gossip, I think it means deep down that we're prioritising our own popularity in having something juicy to share over God's call on us to treat other people as we would like to be treated.

None of us want to be gossiped about. And yet when we do gossip about others, we're not treating other people as we would want to be treated. And that therefore is a sin. Gossip means, I think, that we're prioritising our own popularity over doing right.

And again, I don't know. Gossip's not a huge problem in this church, which I'm very grateful for because gossip is so destructive. But maybe you know, actually, there's a tendency to enjoy it and to find that you succumb to it more often than perhaps you'd like to.

Do you use information that you've got about other people to boost your own sense of worth because you know people are going to be excited to hear what you've got to say in order to be liked?

If so, gossip may easily become an idol in our lives. You see, whether it's lies or greed or gossip or any other of other things, these sins, though, these actions, these behaviours, I would say that they're actually merely symptoms of a deeper problem, a deeper idol.

[21:00] So as we've been saying, with lies, it's not just the lie we're telling, it's our reputation that matters to us most. With greed, it's not just the money, it's the security that we're prioritising.

With gossip, it's not just sharing tidbits of information, it's our popularity that is key. Different things which we can find it easy to make, even for a moment, more important than God and his ways in our lives.

And the trouble is, when something other than God creeps in and becomes all important for us, either temporarily or longer term, soon begins to shape us as people.

We may not intend or even realise it's happening, but it's amazing how quickly these things can begin to have what we might call influence or power over our lives and how we live.

The United say, that's the problem or one of the main problems with sin and with the idols that lie behind them. They can begin to distort and blur our ability to do what we're meant to do, to be these divine image bearers which God created us to be.

[22 : 13] And instead, we begin to embody other, ungodly priorities. Now, I said there, we can talk about the things we idolise having a shaping kind of influence or power over us.

And I'm aware that might sound a bit weird. You know, these things there having an impact on who we are as people. But it seems to me anyone who has struggled with addiction or knows someone who has, you'll be aware that the language that addiction and addicts will speak of is that the thing they're addicted to can often have a hold or a power over them.

Whether it's drink or drugs or sex or food, whatever it is. It's as if these idols, these most important things in life, and that's what they are for addicts. They can take on a life of their own if and as and when they become all important to us.

There's almost a sense in which we sort of hand over control to these idols, retreating from the image-bearing role God has given us to instead be shaped by the greed or the lust or the fear which dominates our thinking and dominates our lives.

And in this idea, I think it perhaps leads us to consider if there's something even deeper going on than simply seeing our sin as bad behaviour which is fed by the idols which lie behind that behaviour.

[23 : 57] Indeed, the Bible often describes or names this deeper, destructive, ungodly power and influence. We talk about our sins, but the Bible talks about sin as a thing.

That's what it names this power as, almost personifying it, giving it an identity which exists separately, independently perhaps, from what we ourselves do or say or think.

So for example, in the book of Romans, we're told that we can be slaves to sin. It's quite a weird concept really, but it implies that sin can be our master.

Or again, in Romans, Paul says this about himself. He says, sin produced in me every kind of covetous desire. It's not that he's shirking responsibility and blaming sin for his own weakness, but it does imply that sin takes on a life and has a presence of its own.

Now again, if that all sounds a bit strange and a bit detached, I think I'd ask us to recall perhaps a time when we've walked into a building or been in a place which for whatever reason when we walk in, if you can remember this, when it doesn't quite feel right.

[25 : 21] You know when you walk in somewhere and something just gives you a bit of a chill, a sense of uneasiness. It doesn't feel right. I think we're all aware perhaps of different rooms, different places, locations, that can feel different.

Each house, each building will have a different feel it seems to each other. Some are peaceful and positive places that we enjoy spending time in. Other places can make us feel pretty uneasy and anxious.

People often comment about this church building here and its atmosphere. First time people walk through they often say to me, there's a good feel to this place. Marie has it in the office during the week.

This is a nice environment to work in. Something hits people as they walk in. You may have felt that yourself perhaps first time or each time you come in hopefully. What I'd suggest is that that feel of this place and other churches is not just exclusive to this.

That feel though is a result of decades and decades of prayer and worship taking place here. It's almost as if that goodness, that life has seeped into the very bricks of the place.

[26 : 34] Something about that becomes part of the character, if you like, of the building. Equally though, in buildings where ongoing sins and idolatry have been committed, where perhaps abuse has taken place, where betrayal has happened or whatever, again, it's not surprising if something of that negative behaviour or motivations affects the very fabric of the place.

We get a chill or an uneasy feeling when we walk into somewhere like that. I've had this numerous times in my life. There are certain places where you just think, this is not right in here.

I had it in prison when I was helping with a chaplaincy team in Bristol. We talked about prisons a few months ago now, and Carolyn and Sue and so on. Not that the whole prison felt ungodly, not at all, but there were certain cells you walked into and it felt physically different.

I don't know if Jack would have certain houses that you'd visit with the police. There's an atmosphere. How do we explain that? How do we explain that, both in a good way, here, hopefully, but in a bad way, in other places?

I think the Bible helps us to explain that. Because the Bible labels that bad atmosphere, that destructive power, that dis-ease, calls it sin itself.

[27 : 53] evil. But we could also go a bit further and call it out for what it is, which I think we could call evil. We could call it evil. And once we begin to see that evil can have its own presence, its own power, if you like, within a place, all of a sudden, the idea of someone personifying this evil, we might call it the devil or Satan, well that becomes a very real possibility.

Now, I don't tend to talk about the devil or Satan much, you might have noticed I've been here some time, and I don't talk about the devil much because, for one main reason, I don't see the Bible talking about the devil much.

It doesn't get much of a look in the devil in a good way in the Bible. Indeed, I think there's a danger sometimes that we can grossly overplay his influence as if he's in this sort of equal tug of war with God, as if he's everything God is but just the opposite, the yin to the yang or whatever.

But no, that is anything but the case. Because the understanding the Bible gives us of the devil, of Satan, is that he's a fallen angel, powerful, spiritual presence, yeah, but someone who's only able to be in one place at one time, and who certainly doesn't share God's all-knowing ability or power. And the trouble is, this devil, this fallen angel, is first and foremost called the accuser, he's a troublemaker, he's a stirrer.

[29 : 31] And that means where there is sin, where there is idolatry, he will do all he can to feed that evil so that it takes hold in buildings, in organisations, and sadly in people's lives.

Now I'm not saying this to make us afraid, far from it. Indeed, James in his letter, he says, resist the devil and he will flee from you. And in my experience, that is exactly what happens.

If we don't sin, if we don't make idols of things, then the devil and whatever spiritual accomplices he's got, they've got nothing to work with, they've got nothing to work with, and he can't get a foothold in our lives.

But none of that is to deny what I think is the reality of his existence, and of the existence of a system or a power, a spiritual influence, if you like, of evil, of sin, which sadly is present in our world. And yet once we accept that sin and evil exists in and of itself, I think it helps to explain what's going on in that creation story which we looked at briefly earlier.

[30 : 43] in particular, the bit in the story where sin first appears in the world. If you recall the story of Adam and Eve, before they choose to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit, they are first tempted by what's described as the serpent, a snake, a talking snake, look at that.

Now, nowhere in the creation story is this serpent described or named as the devil. That association only becomes clear much later in the Bible.

But here's the interesting thing with that story. If sin is said to have entered the world through Adam and Eve's rebellion, how do we account for the existence of the serpent before what's known as the fall?

If sin is said to have entered the world because of Adam and Eve's rebellion, how do we account for the existence of the serpent before that rebellion, before the fall?

And even before the serpent appears, the tree in the garden of Eden, which God describes as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that tree already exists, which means that evil as a named concept sin is present before the fall and before humans sin.

[32 : 17] Now that might raise all sorts of other questions for us. How can there be evil as part of God's good creation and all that? We haven't got time for that one today. But all of this seems pretty important to me.

Really as an explanation for what we mean when we talk about this three-letter word sin. See, on one level, as I think we've been exploring, it is about immoral behaviour, you know, the thoughts, the words, the actions, the lies, the gossip and so on, which miss the mark in terms of God's ideals for our life.

On another, deeper level, behind that behaviour, it's rooted in idolatry, the way in which we choose to give priority and ultimate importance to created things rather than the creator.

but even deeper than idolatry. Indeed, the source of those temptations, I would say, is evil itself.

The spiritual power and influence which exists at a cosmic level. Now, why does all this matter?

Why have I banged on for so long to get here?

[33 : 24] I think it matters because when we talk next week about Jesus dying on the cross, I'd say we need to see his death as not only for the forgiveness of our sins and not only as the way in which the power of idols is broken.

Even more profoundly than that, Jesus' death and resurrection involves the breaking of the power and the defeat of evil and of death itself in a massive, cosmic, eternal, spiritual sense.

That's why Jesus' death and resurrection is so important. And that's why I think it marks the beginning of new life, of a spiritual revolution, because the power of sin, of idolatry, and of evil itself has been broken.

And the hold that death and decay and disease has over on us has been defeated once and for all. Indeed, what I'd like us to finish on, and this is part one of five, so in some ways we've got to press pause now and we'll carry on next week.

But what I'd like us to leave us with, and this is the heart, I think, of what I'd like us to go away remembering, is the importance of us knowing and grasping just how significant it is for us and our world that Jesus died and rose again.

[34 : 56] Yes, Jesus takes our sins onto himself and frees us from the grip of idols, and yes, Jesus displays on the cross what it means to be the ultimate, perfect, divine image bearer, you know, giving up his life because of his love for us.

And again, we'll unpack that in the weeks to come. Above all, above all, I would say, Jesus' death and resurrection broke the power of sin, of evil, and of death in a cosmic sense, once and for all.

And when we begin to let the magnitude of all that Jesus has won for us on the cross, when we begin to appreciate the magnitude of that, then I'd suggest that changes everything because it turns us into people who can only look at God with wonder and gratitude and worship.

And we'll press pause there, and we'll come back next week. All right.