

Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, A Breviary of Sin by Cornelius Plantinga

A Book Review by Matt Mezak

Christian or not, every person in the world has an understanding that there are some things wrong in our world. That something is not quite right, there is rampant injustice, cruelty, disaster, and greed everywhere in the world. Then, we look inward and we experience miseries like loneliness, alienation, fear, depression, anxiety.

Whether inward miseries or outward disasters, we all have this sense that things are not the way they are supposed to be.

We can each have our diagnosis on this problem, but the Christian answer to that problem is that sin is the reason why.

Counter to typical definitions of sin, Plantinga shows how sin and its effects go way beyond what we typically think of as sin. Sin is not just a moral offense against God, although it surely does include moral offense.

Plantinga is primarily concerned with the breaking of shalom, whereas typically Christians - myself included - have been concerned with the breaking of the law.

Shalom

When we hear this word, we may think first of a traditional Jewish greeting. We think shalom means peace, and it does, “but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight - a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. **Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be... it is God's design for creation and redemption.**”

In Plantinga's describing of what our world might look like in shalom, he describes plenty of wonderful realities that we would all laugh at for how unrealistic they are. Strong marriages, secure children, government officials who tell the truth and praise the virtues of other public officials, business associates who celebrate one another's promotions, nations and races who value their respective differences, ballistic silos and warehouses converted into scuba diving training tanks. Where humans reflect and point to God within their own character and personality.

“The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom... God would preside in the unspeakable beauty for which human beings long.”

Sounds pretty great? Well there's just one problem.

You and I.

Sin

Plantinga argues that sin is primarily an offense to God, not because it is offensive to God (as if God could even be offended), but because it is offensive to what God has made, and the shalom with which God made. God is concerned about the breaking of the law, but he is concerned with the breaking of the law **specifically because it breaks shalom.**

When we begin to see that sin is devastating because it breaks shalom, not just because it breaks law, we'll begin to see that our sin is not just a 1-1 transaction between me and God, but rather it is a devastating blow to the whole web of relationship that's present in our world. My sin does not just impact God and me, rather it disrupts an entire ecosystem known as shalom. This is the picture we see in Genesis 6:11-12 when God laments the broken ecosystem that has impacted every human relationship: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways."

In the most sobering section of the entire book, Plantinga goes on to describe how sin is both "fatal and fertile... it both kills and reproduces." He describes how sin is like a cancer that kills **because** it reproduces. That sin is like this "polluted river that keeps branching and rebranching" and as the water spreads it actually is the water that kills. Families transmit sin and like the alcoholic who comes from alcoholic parents, or the racist who comes from racist parents, the sin of the parents is reproduced in their children and ends up being fatal to oneself and their life to be. Families pass down these distorted relational patterns to those who will then take and give those patterns to their own children, and so on. It is a vicious cycle.

You see, sin is far more than telling a lie, or taking something that doesn't belong to you. For those are too small ways of looking at sin, too narrow in their effect. "Sin attaches to intention, memory, thought, speech, intelligent action ... and transforms them into weapons." Sin impacts us to the very core, and it's this exact reality that I think Paul was getting at in Romans 7:15-20: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."

If you've ever felt like Paul, where you fall continuously into this cycle of knowing what disrupts shalom, yet doing it anyway, knowing what edifies shalom, yet failing to do so, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* by Cornelius Plantinga is for you.

We must first understand our sin accurately before we can fight against it. If we have this perception and distorted view of sin that sin is just merely the actions we do, we'll never be able to fight against our sin, for we'll view our enemy as a little thumbtack of an annoyance rather than an enemy crouching at your door, whose desire is to consume you.