

completely. So, he asked his natural son to tell them his feelings and ask them to come to him personally and make their own peace with him, if they still *really* wanted to. And so the natural son did as his father wished and went to tell them the good news."

## Reflection

Does this story of family fall-out ring true for you or anyone you know in your own life? Although simplistically put, essentially it is also the traditional history of salvation (see also, later views on Jesus' death on the cross).

Of course the one big question is, "*Why* did God re-act in that way?" However, as was raised before, we can not help but think in that way because it is our human way of thinking. But, by doing so, we must realise at the same time that we are creating our own problems in trying to get into the mind of God. Having said that, there is one thought to ponder over, though. If God really is full of love because He *is* Love, then because that itself is an emotion maybe we can *in some way* attribute emotions to God, and an anthropological way of trying to relate to Him is not necessarily always inappropriate.

Hopefully, though, the story above will help to make the concept of Original Sin and its affects on all humankind a little easier to grasp.

## What Happens to Those Dying in Original Sin?

The Church used to think that those who died before Jesus' redemption, and those (including babies) who died before Baptism, could not enter Heaven but went to a place or state called Limbo. But this was never a dogma of Faith. Common sense tells us that if it was so then great people like Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Jesus' own step-father, and John the Baptist (praised by Jesus in the words 'no greater man has been born of woman'), to name but four, would be deprived of the glory of God. Instead, a more reflective insight into God's love tells us that God would ensure such injustice did not occur. It is surely more appropriate, then, to see that God would allow Jesus' redemption to be applied retrospectively (and in this context Jesus descent into 'Hell' after his death may be a way of expressing this solution) or, in the case of those dying after the redemption but before baptism, in an implied way. As such, a place or state like Limbo no longer makes sense, as the Church has recently stated.



# Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

## 5. Original Sin – Really a Sin?

*Was there really an Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?*



### Questions for

### Reflection

1. If Genesis is not a true story, where did Original Sin originate?
2. Why is Original Sin passed to all people (not Mary)?
3. How can Abraham be recognised as virtuous because of his faith, Moses be seen by the Jews as the greatest prophet, and Jesus call John the Baptist 'the greatest born of woman', when all three were supposed to be subject to Original Sin?
4. Does Baptism or Jesus' death remove Original Sin?

## The Garden of Eden

We all know the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. From what we already understand about how the Bible should be interpreted, you may now realise that this story should not be read in a literal sense, for reasons that will be outlined below. It is instead the mode chosen to reveal these key truths:

- Humans have a single ancestor
- That ancestor sinned and lost the opportunity of full permanent union with God
- That offence had repercussions for all Humans thereafter

We have, to some extent, already considered the first truth when we discussed evolution. Some evolutionists will argue that the jump to a new species would have been a multiple one, that is, with several new members appearing at the same time. However, the jump could equally have been via one individual, whom biblical writers called Adam, who went on to interbreed and, in turn, his progeny grow and breed over generations, all tracing their genetic composition from that single individual.

The second truth is far more difficult to define precisely and we must exercise some humility here, and say we do not know exactly what happened. Those who prefer to read the Bible in a literal sense will say why not accept the story as it is told in Genesis 3? The answer why we should not is in the following questions:

- How is the tempting serpent able to enter a garden of 'perfection'?
- How can Adam and Eve be presented in a completely 'ideal' state yet they managed to succumb to temptation?
- Is not the way God is anthropologically shown, for example, as walking in the garden, a definite clue that this story is a myth in the proper sense of that word?
- What happened to the garden itself and the Tree of Life, do they still exist?
- What happened to the winged creature and fiery sword that are supposed to guard the Tree of Life to prevent anyone re-entering the garden?

All we can accept, in Faith, is that at some point in the distant past God made a decision for humankind to emerge, with the intention of granting us a gift of divine union and eternal life. God made the new species in his image and likeness in that the new creature that emerged was sinless, had self-consciousness, a knowledge of good and evil, free-will, and an innate knowledge and awe of the divine. However, this creature used its free-will in a negative way, committing the first sin, shown in Genesis 3 as pride leading to disobedience. The effect of this was to negate God's intended plan for that creature and its offspring to be automatically united with him on their deaths.

Although Genesis 3, with its anthropological view of God, is thought to be a 'primitive' genre of writing, this is not at all in accord with its extremely well developed analysis of sin. What we actually mean by sin will be considered below, but here it is valuable to recognise the deep insights this chapter provides on sin:



- sin occurs because of our pride
- others often influence us to wrong-doing
- we tend to pass the blame for our actions onto others
- we try to justify our actions to ourselves as not sinful

If we are honest, don't we recognise all this in ourselves?

## Is Original Sin Really Sin?

Sin is the theological term used to describe any action that offends God's goodness, love or justice. Note the emphasis on *any* action. We are so used to thinking of sin as *personal sin*, that we forget its wider meaning. Personal or actual sins are offences we commit although we know they offend God, offences for which we are rightly held to be blameworthy. But sometimes people may do evil things in ignorance or without full consent. In such circumstances they are not blameworthy, although the nature of the action itself remains evil and is, therefore, technically sinful.

Original Sin, for all humans except Adam and Eve, is sin without consent. It is similar to sin committed in ignorance except that its inherited implications were a deprivation of eternal life with God. Really, Original Sin would be better understood if it was not called sin, because of the psychological connection we make to personal sin. Perhaps it should be termed 'Inherited Loss'.

## Why Should We Be Punished for Our Ancestor's Sin?

Consider the following simple story.

"A millionaire had a natural son whom he loved very much. However, he decided to share his love and wealth with another child as well, and he adopted another son. His adopted son was loved and was very happy. When he married, his wife was welcomed into the family. However, his wife was intrigued to know the source of the family fortune as she wanted more for themselves. So, she asked her husband to find out by looking in his father's safe although they both knew this was the only thing his father told them never to do. They opened the safe, found millions of money bonds and stole some of them. When the father found out he felt so let down that he told them both to leave his house and make their own way in the world, although he knew they would find it very hard. In his deep sorrow he told them never to visit him, even if they had a family.

The father's natural son knew his father still loved them both dearly and so he regularly visited his step-brother and sister-in-law, reassuring them how much they were still loved and telling them that if they persevered and maintained their goodness their father would eventually allow them back. The natural son also kept trying to persuade his father to change his mind. He felt so sorry for his step-brother and his family that eventually he went on his hands and knees to his father and begged him to allow them to return. The father was so taken aback by this show of love and humility, and he loved his natural son so much, that he wept bitterly and agreed to change his mind. However, he had been so badly hurt by their betrayal that he was still not sure if he could trust them

