



Bavinck on the Nature and Punishment of Sin

Sin and Its Consequences

After offering a broad overview of the necessary connection between God's justice and the punishment of sin in history through the instrument of judicial authority, Bavinck identifies more specifically the particular punishments of sin that God administers in human life and history: guilt and pollution, the two consequences of Adam's original sin, as well as death and the dominion of Satan. While sin produces its own effects in separation from God and all that accompanies it—"darkness, ignorance, error, deception, fear, disquietude, a sense of guilt, regret, misery and enslavement" (RD 3:169)—the most important dimensions of the punishments of sin stem from God's active imposition of them upon the sinner.

In the history of Christian theology, the original sin of Adam is the basis for two fundamental features of the fallen condition of his posterity. In the first place, all human beings are accounted *guilty* by God and are liable to the punishment due them for their transgression of his holy law. The guilt of sin presupposes the obligation of human beings, who were created in God's image in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, to obey the holy law of God and to refrain from transgressing any of its requirements. By virtue of the original sin of Adam, as the covenant representative of the human race, and the actual sins of all his posterity, all human beings stand under indictment by God, and their acts of disobedience are imputed or reckoned to them. "Guilt is an obligation incurred through a violation of the law to satisfy the law by suffering a proportionate penalty. It binds the sinner, immediately after the violation of the law, to its demand for satisfaction and punishment" (RD 3:170-71).

For this reason, some of the most important biblical terms for sin emphasize the guilt of the sinner (cf. Gen. 4:13; Ex. 34:7; Matt. 6:12). Because all human beings transgress the law of God, they are liable to the curse that falls upon those who do not continue in all things written in the book of the law (Gal. 3:10). God, who will in no wise clear the guilty, holds the whole world accountable and subjects all to his divine, inescapable judgment (Rom. 3:19). This divine witness to God's punishment of the guilt of sin is also subjectively confirmed by human conscience. Even though human conscience does not always produce an adequate awareness or consciousness of sin, it nonetheless testifies to the guilt and shame that belong to all human beings in the presence of God. "The human conscience is the subjective proof of humanity's fall, a witness of human guilt before the face of God. God is not the only accuser of humankind; in their conscience humans condemn themselves and take God's side against themselves" (RD 3:173).

The second feature of the fallen condition of the human race is the *pollution*, or uncleanness, of fallen human nature. Whereas the guilt of sin testifies to the legal state of sinners who have transgressed God's law and are liable to punishment on that account, the pollution of sin refers to the pervasive corruption of human nature that results from Adam's original sin and the hereditary depravity that belongs to all his posterity in union with him. Sin consists not only in the act of transgression, but it includes also the thoughts, desires, and inclinations of the heart. The fullness of sin always involves guilt and pollution, the state of liability to punishment, and the condition of being unclean in all the features of our human nature. Sin is not only the violation of the law of God but also the corruption and vitiation of the image of God in which all human beings were first created.

Contrary to the Roman Catholic teaching that the fall into sin deprived human beings of their "supernatural gifts" but not "natural gifts," Bavinck affirms the traditional Reformed doctrine of the

pervasive corruption through sin of the entirety of our human nature. Utilizing the distinction between the "image of God" in the "broader" and in the "narrower" sense, however, Bavinck insists that fallen human beings do not cease to be human. Even though pervasively corrupted, sinners "retain their body, soul, faculties, powers, intellect, will, and so on" (RD 3:174). These characteristic features of our humanity are retained after the fall, even though they now serve and function in the wrong direction. God's good gifts are now employed not to glorify and enjoy him but to disobey and dishonor him. From the sinful corruption of human nature spring all the actual sins of all human beings. This does not mean that all human beings sin in the same way or to the same degree. Nor does it rule out the organic development of sin throughout human history, which takes various forms in different times, places, societies, and cultures. In this respect, it is possible to speak of the "corporate guilt and the corporate action of sin" in the course of the history of the human race (RD 3:175).

Suffering

In addition to guilt and pollution, the two most obvious punishments of original and actual sin in the human race, is also the universal reality of suffering in human history and even within the created order itself. The original dominion and glory that belonged to the human race and the created order in the state of integrity have now been replaced by the distress, turmoil, and disease of the creation under the curse of God due to human sin and disobedience. Through the sin and disobedience of Adam, God's good creation has become disordered and subject to the curse. As a result of Adam's sin, God's curse expresses itself in the pain of childbirth, the enmity between the man and the woman in marriage, the arduous labor to subdue the earth and enjoy its bounty, sickness and death, famine, plagues, wars, defeats, childlessness, deprivation of goods, and the like (RD 3:176). The original harmony and order of the creation has been replaced with disharmony and disorder that mar the splendid tapestry of God's good creation.

Bavinck observes that throughout the history of the human race, the inescapable presence of suffering in all aspects of human life and the creation itself has elicited an incessant lament among teachers of religion, philosophers, and poets. Only the most superficial analysis of the world could fail to lament the myriad forms of suffering that area pervasive feature of human life and history. However, even though a general apprehension of the universality of suffering exists, in the history of philosophy the tendency is to explain this suffering as a natural and inevitable feature of the world. Indeed, within the context of non-Christian worldviews, the presence of suffering is often regarded as a necessary dimension of the finite world, and the biblical connection between sin and suffering in the created order is denied or diminished. Even God himself is viewed as part of world order, and the reality of suffering expresses the dark side of God's nature and inscrutable purposes.

Philosophy is almost always intent on casting the blame for [suffering], as well as for that of sin, either directly or indirectly on God. Suffering in that scenario is derived from an independent evil principle (Parsiism, Manichaeism), from an original evil being (Daub), from a dark strain in God (Bohme, Schelling), from the blind, irrational will to be (Buddhism, Schopenhauer, Hartmann), from the self-objectivization and self-realization of God (Hegel), from matter (Plato, Aristotle, Philo), from the necessities of nature (Weisse, Rothe), from the finiteness of creatures (Leibnitz), from the developmental state of the world (Ulrici), from the sinful human consciousness that construes the inherently necessary imperfections of the world as being evil (Schleiermacher, Lipsius, Ritschl), and so on. (RD 3:178-79)

In all of these diverse systems of thought, suffering is viewed not as a consequence of God's judgment upon the human race and the created order but as an inherent feature of the natural order. Because God is not viewed as the independent and sovereign Lord of all creation, he is not seen as the one who superintends and punishes sin in a way that serves his good purposes, yet without being the author of sin and evil.

In his evaluation of non-Christian attempts to deny the reality of suffering as a punishment for sin and to make suffering a natural part of the world order, Bavinck offers several observations.

First, if we were to eliminate all forms of suffering that are connected, directly or indirectly, with the sin of the human race, many common forms of suffering would be eliminated (e.g., shame, disgrace, illness, sensual indulgence, deception, hatred, greed), and many others would be significantly diminished.

Second, many forms of suffering in the world, though not directly connected with personal sins committed by human beings who bear God's image, are nonetheless the consequence of God's curse upon the created order, which was pronounced after Adam sinned and the human race sinned in him. "The disharmony and enmity of nature is rooted, not in personal sins, but in the sin of the human race. On account of this sin, God struck the earth with a curse and subjected the creation as a whole to futility and decay [cf. Rom. 8:18-25]. Fallen people no longer belong in paradise" (RD 3:180).

Third, the Scriptures and evidence of modern science confirm that the entire natural order witnesses to a disruption in the relation between human beings and the world. Just as the created nature of human beings has assumed the "accidental" feature of sinful rebellion against God, so the created order and its capacities are redirected and corrupted through the curse of God pronounced upon it.

And fourth, the creation itself was "infralapsarian"; that is, it was created by God in the beginning with a "provisional" state of goodness that could be altered through the introduction of sin and the pronouncement of God's curse. "For God the fall was neither a surprise nor a disappointment. He anticipated it, incorporated it into his counsel, and already took account of it in creating the world. . . . Prior to the fall, the state of humanity and of the earth as a whole was a provisional one that could not remain as it was" (RD 3:182).

Death

The suffering that results from sin and God's curse culminates in the ultimate penalty of death. Although there are some theologians in the history of the church (Pelagius, Socinius, Rationalists, and many modern theologians) who have denied the link between sin and death, the scriptural representation of death emphasizes that it is an inescapable consequence of God's judgment upon all human beings who have transgressed God's law. The punishment of death is uniformly represented in Scripture as the "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23), the "unnatural" dissolution of human life in fellowship with God and in the enjoyment of his gifts. Death is "the last and greatest enemy," since it robs human beings of the fullness of life in service to God and to others and of the exercise of stewardly dominion over the creation itself.

While Bavinck acknowledges that modern science has sought to deny the necessary link between human sin and death—treating death as though it were simply a natural and benign feature of the life of finite creatures—he insists that there is no reason to deny "the bond between sin and death" (RD 3:184). While it is true that human beings were created from the dust of the earth and thereby *capable* of suffering the penalty of death, Adam (and the human race in him) was not originally created as a creature who was *subject* to death. Only on account of human sin and disobedience do God's image-bearers become liable to condemnation and death. When modern science insists that death is a necessary and inevitable feature of human life, it offers an explanation for human mortality that exceeds its competence. The universal phenomenon of death is evident and undeniable. But the explanation for the universal reign of death is not self-evident or easily resolved within the boundaries of the natural sciences. There are many features of human mortality that remain mysterious and inexplicable from the standpoint of modern science. Christian theology, therefore, should not refrain from insisting upon the indissoluble connection between human sin and its punishment in death.

Dominion of Satan

The final punishment for sin that Bavinck identifies is the manner in which Satan and his angels rebelliously and tyrannically seduce humanity into sin and disobedience against God. When Adam

plunged the human race into sin, he did so at the instigation of the serpent, who was an instrument of God's archenemy, the devil. As a result of Adam's fall, sinful humanity has fallen under the tyranny of the evil one. The world, insofar as it is captivated by a spirit of rebellion and opposition to the kingdom of God, has been taken captive to the wiles of the evil one and his minions. Accordingly, the history of redemption is one of restoring a new humanity in service to God, freed from the tyranny of the devil and for renewed life in fellowship with God.

In his treatment of the scriptural teaching regarding the dominion of Satan, Bavinck notes that there is a universal recognition of the existence and influence of evil spirits "among all peoples and in all religions" (RD 3:186). Oftentimes this recognition has taken the form of an exaggerated and superstitious view of the influence and role of evil spirits in human life and history. Even the Christian church at times in its history has assigned an inappropriate place to evil spirits and their activities, neglecting to recognize that the working of such spirits is always governed by God's providence and made subservient to his comprehensive purposes. In the early church, some of the church fathers taught that every person not only has a specific guardian angel but also a personal demon. Even though the Christian church and the civil magistrate sought to curtail such practices as magic, fortune-telling, and other forms of pagan superstition, many of these kinds of practices flourished from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century in Europe. The influences of evil spirits were linked to all forms of "physical evil in the world," such as sickness, plague, famine, death, and crop failure. The principal goal of redemption through Christ was liberation from the devil's power and influence rather than from the guilt and corruption of sin. Elaborate ceremonies were devised to resist the power of demons and to expose witches and witchcraft as the expression of demonic activity. Even within Protestantism at the time of the Reformation, there were many who retained superstitious convictions regarding the work of evil spirits and forms of witchcraft.

Although Bavinck is critical of an exaggerated and superstitious view of the dominion of Satan in human life and the world, he repudiates the "rationalistic" denial of his existence and work in modern thought. The Reformed tradition soberly recognizes the power and influence of Satan and his angels, which always remains subject to God's all-embracing counsel and providence. Furthermore, the power and influence of Satan and his angels is not primarily coercive in a physical and material sense but in an "ethical" sense. The principal work of Satan is to deceive sinful human beings by undermining the veracity of the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of Satan's strategies aim to draw humanity away from fellowship with God and to encourage sinful rebellion and opposition to his goodness and truth. For this reason, Satan "mimics everything: God reveals himself in theophany (incarnation), prophecy, and miracle; the demonic caricature of these three, accordingly, is obsession, mantic, and magic" (RD 3:190). Rather than succumb to the illusion of rationalism that Satan and his angels have no existence or evil influence, the church needs to be on its guard and properly armed to resist their conspiracies against the Word of God. "One must realize in this connection that this sinful power forms a kingdom that, in its opposition to God and his kingdom, operates systematically. If one were able to survey the whole of it, one would undoubtedly discover a plan of attack and defense in the history of its struggle. In the sinful life of the individual but much more in that of families, generations, peoples, and humanity as a whole throughout the ages, there is a deliberate methodical opposition to God and all that is his" (RD 3:189).

Conclusion

While a treatment of the punishment of sin in all its forms may appear rather sobering and discouraging, Bavinck's treatment, as we noted at the outset, aims to provide a background for the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. The light of the gospel shines most brilliantly against the backdrop of the darkness of sin. For in Christ and his saving works, we see a wonderful and intimate marriage of God's justice and mercy. The God of our salvation does not save his people in sovereign grace and mercy at the expense of his justice. Not at all. Rather, in the wisdom of the cross of Christ, we see simultaneously the grandeur of God's unfathomable love and the full satisfaction of his justice. Through union with Christ by faith, believers are delivered from the curse of sin and death, liberated from bondage to sin and the evil one, and made to be heirs with Christ

of the blessings of everlasting life in communion with God. No feature of sin or its punishments is left unaddressed or unconquered in the rich and full redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Cornelis P. Venema

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