

“The Ultimate ET”

Hebrews 9:24-28 ¹

The Second Sunday of Advent: Penitence

In the fall of 1982, Nathan was seven years old and Anna was three. The movie “ET” was still a new release, and the four of us went to see it. As you may remember, ET, the star of the movie, is an extraterrestrial creature who has missed the departure of his spaceship from Earth. ET finds a home with two Earth children, and the movie is filled with both humor and pathos as the children try to help ET get back home.

The movie has some moderately religious overtones, but is mostly a whimsical treatment of the idea of extraterrestrial life. The movie ends with ET’s mother ship returning for him and whisking him off into the night . . . at which point Anna began to shriek uncontrollably. We hurriedly took her outside the theater, and when she finally stopped hyperventilating, we asked her what in the world the matter was. She tearfully replied, “ET . . . went . . . home.”

The theme of the Second Sunday of Advent is Penitence. Today our focus is on our Sin that made both the Incarnation and the Crucifixion necessary. As we think about this, I submit to you that Jesus of Nazareth is the “Ultimate Extra-Terrestrial,” the “Ultimate ET,” because “*God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our Sins*” (1 John 4:9-10).

The Bible doesn’t tell us nearly as much as we’d like to know about the greater Reality that exists beyond space and time, but the Bible clearly affirms that such a Reality exists, and that it was from that Reality that Jesus entered our world. The Bible is also very clear that Jesus came into our world to give His own life to release us from the deadly power of Sin.

Now the truth is that we don’t like to talk about Sin, especially at CHRISTmas. The whole idea makes us uncomfortable, and it seems to me that there are two reasons for this discomfort. In the first place, I think you and I resist the idea of Sin for the same reason Adam and Eve did: we want to “call our own shots,” living our lives without accountability to any power beyond ourselves.

A standard part of nearly every news report of scandal or crime is the suspect’s statement that “I did nothing wrong. I did nothing illegal.” One songwriter captured the idea this way: “Everything I do that’s wrong is someone else’s fault.”² This attitude is so dominant in our culture that world-renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book some years ago with the title, *Whatever Became of Sin*; and we need look no further than the very latest news feed to see current and flagrant examples of this approach to responsibility.

Now if there really is such a thing as Sin, then that which is or is not Sinful is so with reference to some moral standard. And if such a standard, such a law, really exists, then at some point we’re going to be held accountable to it, and we just don’t like that idea—not one bit. Our problem is that the Bible mentions Sin from start to finish, more than 800 times.

The Bible talks about Sin from Genesis to Revelation, and the Bible is very clear that God became human in Bethlehem’s manger for only one reason: to rescue us from Sin. If you and I

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 6, 2020. The Second Sunday of Advent.

² Anna Russell, *Psychiatric Folksong*, frontispiece of Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Press, 1973; Bantam Books, 1978).

intend for our lives to be governed by the Bible, then we're going to have to come to grips with what the Bible calls "Sin."

The other reason I think the idea of Sin makes us uncomfortable is that if there really is such a thing as Sin, if there really is a moral standard to which we're accountable, we don't know how to measure up to it. On our own, we have absolutely no idea how to pass this test, although we certainly try.

Some years ago, ABC's David Hartman interviewed a man named Albert Speer on *Good Morning America*.³ The occasion for the interview was a new book Speer had written. Albert Speer was a Hitler confidante whose technological genius was credited with keeping the Nazi war machine operating throughout World War II, and he was the only one of twenty-four Nazi war criminals tried in Nuremberg who admitted his guilt. As a result of that admission, Albert Speer spent twenty years in Spandau prison.

Referring to one of Speer's earlier writings, David Hartman asked him, "You have said the guilt can never be forgiven, or shouldn't be. Do you still feel that way?"

Speer's face was anguished as he answered, "I served a sentence of twenty years, and I wish I could say, 'I'm a free man. My conscience has been cleared by serving the whole time as punishment.' But I can't do that. I still carry the burden of what happened to millions of people in the war, and I can't get rid of it. This new book is part of my atoning, of clearing my conscience."

Hartman pressed the point: "You really don't think you'll be able to clear it totally?" And Speer shook his head. "I don't think it will be possible."

For thirty-five years, Albert Speer had accepted complete responsibility for his crime. His writings were filled with sorrow and warnings to others to avoid his Sin. But he still carried the same guilt. It hadn't helped. And shortly after this interview, he died.

A psychiatrist once told a *Prison Fellowship* volunteer that "Psychiatry, properly administered, can turn a schizophrenic bank robber into a mentally healthy bank robber, just as a good teacher can turn an illiterate criminal into an educated criminal. I can cure somebody's *madness*, but I can't cure his *badness*."

After a conversation with a psychiatrist who made a similar point, Randy Nabors reflected that "I saw how much difference the cross of Jesus Christ makes in how people deal with the trail of broken and destroyed lives we leave behind; and how terribly real Sin is, not only to the victim, but also to the perpetrator. There is no way we can live with ourselves, or with others as bad as ourselves, unless the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from our guilt and shame. **The stink of Sin would be unbearable but for the reality of the cross. For in the cross is redemption.**"

I don't think I'll ever forget the words of yet another psychiatrist at Baylor University Medical Center when she told a group of chaplain interns, of which I was one, "We psychiatrists are instrument tuners. We can do a lot to get the human instrument ready to play, but we have no tunes to offer. You chaplains are the music teachers. Teach it well."

My friends, apart from Jesus, you and I basically have two choices in life: we can become overwhelmed by our Sin, as Albert Speer did, and live lives that are driven by the attempt to work

³ Retold by Charles Colson in the *Prison Fellowship Newsletter*, December, 1981.

out our own forgiveness—without success; or, as many others do, we can deny our Sin and our guilt, lying to ourselves about our goodness in order to maintain some measure of self-esteem.

One of the most common responses I hear when conversations turn toward spiritual things is “I’m a good person,” or “She’s a good person.” The unspoken implication of this statement is usually something like “I’m already a good person, and I don’t need your religious stuff.”

I would certainly agree that it’s important to be “a good person.” I find it interesting, though, that such a claim has meaning only with reference to some moral standard about what it means to be “good.” To what or to whom shall we compare ourselves? Sadly, from the Garden of Eden to this very day, the human story is that we’d much prefer to compare ourselves to our own standards rather than to the standards God has set for us.

In the awesome freedom God grants us as persons created in God’s own image, God does allow us to choose the moral standard to which we compare ourselves . . . that is, until we die or until Jesus returns, whichever comes first. After that, there is only one Standard, and our opinions about it won’t matter one bit. When that time comes, we will discover that *“We are all infected and impure with Sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our Sins, like the wind, sweep us away”* (Isaiah 64:6).

My friends, the Bible is very clear that every human being is guilty of Sin, and that our Sin separates us from God. If we look at all the Bible says about it, I think it would be fair to say that Sin is anything we do or think that causes us to miss or to reject God’s purposes in our lives.

Why does God hate Sin so much? God hates Sin because Sin destroys all that is good. Sin destroys God’s creation. Sin destroys God’s children. **Sin destroys us.** The Bible says that *“the wages of Sin is death”* (Romans 6:23), and tells us that God sent Jesus, the Ultimate ET, to Bethlehem not to take pleasure out of our lives, but to take death out. Here’s an illustration of our problem

Jill and I celebrated our first Christmas, forty-seven years ago, in the Navy Lodge in Charleston, South Carolina while we were waiting for our apartment to become available. Our room was essentially a very ordinary motel room, home to a vigorous colony of roaches. Our first Christmas tree was a little one about two feet tall that sat on a coffee table.

Paul and Lisa Richardson had a similar first Christmas. Here’s Paul’s story about what happened the next year: “There it stood—the best tree in the lot. It was the second Christmas of our married life, and with newlywed-like impulse, we decided to forego the two-foot high plastic tree that graced our coffee table the year before. We had found the perfect tree instead. It was wide at the base and came to a perfect point on top. With blissful Christmas cheer we paid the \$25, maneuvered it into our ‘77 Chevy Citation, and drove to our apartment.

“I cleared a spot next to the couch and set it up in the corner . . . at least I tried to set it up in the corner. Our perfect tree immediately fell, turning our tree stand into green and red scrap metal. Another tree stand and multiple attempts only brought about the same problem: the tree wouldn’t stand up.

“When I probed into the forest of green needles, I discovered that our perfect tree had a huge flaw. The base of the tree began straight and centered, but the middle of the trunk contorted in pretzel-like twists, bending this way and that, but coming out straight at the top. **It was perfect on the outside but hopelessly flawed within. It could never stand on its own.**

“In our not-so-perfect Christmas tree I saw the story of Christmas. On the outside we like to pretend that we have it all together: ‘Tis the season to be jolly!’ But inside we know differently. There we find hurts, pains, disappointments, anger, and bitterness. Worse yet, there is that contortion of our souls the Bible calls Sin.

“No matter how many ornaments Lisa and I hung on our tree, we knew it could never stand on its own. And no matter how many ornaments we attach to our lives, we can never be right with God on our own.

“The Christmas story is not about God seeing how nice we were and coming down to spend some time with sweet people. It is the story of God seeing twisted, hurting, Sinful people, and coming down to die for us. **The Christmas story is a story about Love. God came to save us from Sin.**”⁴

And so it is, my friends, that **Jesus came to take the Death out of life.** The Bible makes a powerful statement about taking Death out of Life when it tells us that “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*” (Hebrews 9:22). We recoil from such a statement. It seems barbaric and crude. We don’t understand it. It offends us.

But it has always been so. When we look at the biblical record, we see that God has always required blood sacrifices for Sin; and the radical nature of the remedy reveals the gravity of the disease. The problem with that remedy, though, was that the blood of animals could not and cannot remove our Sin. The sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the Temple were symbolic, provisional and temporary until the true Sin Bearer would come, in the fullness of time, to Bethlehem’s manger.

Yet with respect to this Sin Bearer, it has always been true that *when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God* (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

*For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands. **For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.*** [That was Albert Speer’s problem.]

*But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight—not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. **We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our Sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.***

For all have Sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our Sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our Sins and to satisfy God's anger against [Sin]. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us. . . .

*Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on our good deeds. It is based on our faith. **So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law***” (Romans 3:20-28).

⁴ Paul Richardson, Half Moon Bay, California.

Lee Strobel, a former atheist who wrote the best-selling book, *The Case for Christ*, told a powerful story about what God has done for us. Here's how he told it:

"An acquaintance called with what he said was an embarrassing request: His little girl had been caught shoplifting from our church bookstore, and he wanted to know if I would represent the church so she could come and apologize. He said he wanted to use this incident as a teaching moment. I agreed—but I had a much bigger lesson in mind.

"The next day, the parents and their eight-year-old daughter trooped into my office and sat down. 'Tell me what happened,' I said to the little girl as gently as I could.

"Well,' she said as she started to sniffle, 'I saw a book that I really wanted, but I didn't have any money . . ." Now tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. I handed her a tissue. 'So I put the book under my coat and took it. I knew it was wrong. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I did. And I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. Honest!'

"I'm so glad you're willing to admit what you did and say you're sorry," I told her. "That's very brave, and it's the right thing to do. But what do you think an appropriate punishment would be?"

"She shrugged. I thought for a moment before saying, 'I understand the book cost five dollars. I think it would be fair if you paid the bookstore five dollars, plus three times that amount, which would make the total twenty dollars. Do you think that would be fair?'"

"She nodded sadly. 'Yes,' she murmured. She could see the fairness in that. But now there was fear in her eyes. Twenty dollars is a mountain of money for a little kid. Where would she ever come up with that amount of cash?"

"I wanted to use this moment to teach her something about Jesus. So I opened my desk drawer, removed my checkbook, and wrote out a check on my personal account for the full amount. I tore off the check and held it out to her. Her mouth dropped open. 'I'm going to pay your penalty so you don't have to. Do you know why I'd do that?' Bewildered, she shook her head.

"Because I love you. Because I care about you. Because you are valuable to me. And please remember this: That's how Jesus feels about you too. Except even more.'

"At that moment, she reached out and accepted my gift. I wish I could find the words to describe the look of absolute relief and joy and wonder that blossomed on her face. She was almost giddy with gratitude."⁵

Yes, my friends, God has acted in a profoundly new way in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Ultimate ET, who came to this planet to set us free. And whether we like it or not, whether we understand it or not, it was Jesus' death on a Roman cross and His resurrection from Death on the third day that paid our debt and set us free from Sin.

So it is that the Second Candle of Advent represents Penitence—sorrow for our Sin—while the Third Candle represents the Love that redeems us from our Sin. When we have begun to understand our Sin, and when we understand that Jesus came to save us from it, we are not surprised when we see the shadow of a cross falling upon the manger in Bethlehem . . . and our hearts grieve because that shadow falls for us.

⁵ Lee Strobel and Gary Poole, *Experiencing the Passion of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2004).

I don't expect to ever fully understand all Jesus taught us, but I understand this much:
“There is forgiveness of Sins for all who turn to me” (Luke 24:47).

Have **you** turned to Him?