

Sin, Violence, and Sexual Assault

In this chapter, we will explore what God says in Scripture about sexual assault and its effects. But before doing that, we must investigate what the Bible says about sin, evil, and violence. This is important because sexual assault is a result of sin, evil, and violence. Evil and sin work to infuse disgrace and violate peace. Sexual assault is a powerful means of achieving such destructive effects.

In the Beginning

The Bible begins with God, the sovereign, good creator of all things: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”^a God’s creative handiwork, everything from light to land to living creatures, is called “good.”^b But humanity, being the very image of God, is the crown of God’s good creation (“behold, it was very good”^c). As the pinnacle of God’s creation, human beings reveal God more wonderfully than any other creature—as they were created to be like God,^d by God,^e for God,^f and to be with God.^g

In Genesis 1:26, God says “Let us make man in our image.”¹ In the very beginning, our Creator gave us a remarkable title: he called us the image of God. This reveals the inherent dignity of all human beings.

To fully understand what “image of God” means, we need to look at the context of Old Testament history. Moses, the author of Genesis, and his Israelite readers understood these words because they lived in a world full of images. The most dominant images in the cultures of the

^aGen. 1:1.

^bSee the sevenfold use of “good”: Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

^cGen. 1:31.

^dGen. 1:26.

^eGen. 1:27.

^fGen. 2:15.

^gGen. 2:15.

ancient Near East were those of kings. Kings throughout the ancient world made images of themselves and placed them in various locations in their kingdoms. The pharaohs of Egypt, the emperors of Babylon, and the rulers of other empires used images of themselves as a way to display their authority and power. This custom of Moses' day helped him understand what was happening when God called Adam and Eve his image. Just as human kings had their images, the divine King ordained that the human race would be his royal image. Put simply, the expression "image of God" designated human beings as representatives of the supreme King of the universe.²

Immediately after making the man and woman, God granted them a special commission: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"^h This verse contains five commands: "be fruitful," "multiply," "fill," "subdue," and "have dominion." These decrees reveal our most basic human responsibilities.

It was God's design that humanity should extend the reign of God throughout the world. This involves two basic responsibilities: multiplication and dominion. First, God gave Adam and Eve a commission to multiply: "Be fruitful . . . multiply . . . fill." Their job was to produce so many images of God that they would cover the earth. Second, God ordered them to have dominion over the earth: "fill . . . subdue . . . have dominion." Adam and Eve were to exercise authority over creation, managing its vast resources on God's behalf. Having dominion means being good stewards of creation and creators of culture—not dominating.³

Richard Pratt argues that multiplication and dominion are deeply connected to our being the image of God. To explain this, he describes the ancient Near Eastern context:

Many kingdoms in the ancient Near East stretched for hundreds of square miles. The kings of these empires were powerful leaders, but the sizes of their domains presented serious political problems. . . . Ancient kings simply could not have personal contact with all regions of their nations. They needed other ways to establish their authority. Many rulers solved this problem by erecting images of themselves at key sites throughout their kingdoms. They produced numerous

^hGen. 1:28.

statues of themselves and endowed their images with representative authority. . . . When citizens saw the images of their emperor, they understood to whom they owed their allegiance. They knew for certain who ruled the land.⁴

Moses described the twofold job of humanity against this historical background. To be sure, God had no problem filling the earth with his presence, but he chose to establish his authority on earth in ways that humans could understand. Similar to how ancient emperors filled their empires with images of themselves, God commanded his images to populate the landscape of his creation. In the command to “multiply,” God wanted his images to spread to the ends of the earth. Just as an emperor conferred authority on his images, God commanded his likeness to reign over the world. His command to “have dominion” is God giving humans authority to represent him in his world.⁵

***Shalom* and Violence**

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see that God’s plan for humanity was for the earth to be filled with his image bearers, who were to glorify him through worship and obedience. This beautiful state of being, enjoying the cosmic bliss of God’s intended blessing and his wise rule, is called *shalom*. One scholar writes, “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.”⁶

Shalom means fullness of peace. It is the vision of a society without violence or fear: “I will give peace (*shalom*) in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid.”¹ *Shalom* is a profound and comprehensive sort of well-being—abundant welfare—with its connotations of peace, justice, and the common good. While it is “intertwined with justice,” says Nicholas Wolterstorff, it is more than justice. In *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Wolterstorff argues that *shalom* means harmonious and responsible relationships with God, other human beings, and nature. In short, biblical writers use the word *shalom* to describe

¹Lev. 26:6.

the world of universal peace, safety, justice, order, and wholeness God intended.^{j7}

Genesis 3 records the terrible day when humanity fell into sin and *shalom* was violated. Adam and Eve violated their relationship with God by rebelling against his command. This was a moment of cosmic treason. Instead of trusting in God's wise and good word,^k they trusted in the crafty and deceitful words of the Serpent.^l In response, the Creator placed a curse on our parents that cast the whole human race into futility and death. The royal image of God fell into the severe ignobility we all experience.⁸

This tragic fall from grace into disgrace plunged humankind into a relational abyss. Paul Tripp writes:

What seemed once unthinkable wrong and out of character for the world that God had made now became a daily experience. Words like falsehood, enemy, danger, sin, destruction, war, murder, sickness, fear, and hatred became regular parts of the fallen-world vocabulary. For the first time, the harmony between people was broken. Shame, fear, guilt, blame, greed, envy, conflict, and hurt made relationships a minefield they were never intended to be. People looked at other people as obstacles to getting what they wanted or as dangers to be avoided. Even families were unable to coexist in any kind of lasting and peaceful union. Violence became a common response to problems that had never before existed. Conflict existed in the human community as an experience more regular than peace. Marriage became a battle for control, and children's rebellion became a more natural response than willing submission. Things became more valuable than people, and they willingly competed with others in order to acquire more. The human community was more divided by love for self than united by love of neighbor. The words of people, meant to express truth and love, became weapons of anger and instruments of deceit. In an instant, the sweet music of human harmony had become the mournful dirge of human war.⁹

God's good creation is now cursed because of the entrance of sin.^{m10} The world is simply not the way it's supposed to be. The entrance of sin

^jIsa. 32:14–20.

^kGen. 2:16–17.

^lGen. 3:1–5.

^mGen. 3:14–24.

into God's good world leads to the shattering of *shalom*. Sin, in other words, is "culpable shalom-breaking."¹¹

Evil is an intrusion upon *shalom*. The first intrusion was Satan's intrusion into God's garden, which led to Adam and Eve's tragic disobedience—the second intrusion. When sin is understood as an intrusion upon God's original plan for peace, it helps us see the biblical description of redemption as an intrusion of grace into disgrace or light into the darkness of sin or peace into disorder and violence. Just as sin and evil are an intrusion on original peace, so redemption is an intrusion of reclaiming what was originally intended for humans: peace.

Sin wrecks the order and goodness of God's world. Sin is the "vandalism of shalom."¹² Plantinga writes: "God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin. In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, spiritually, or otherwise."¹³

Regarding this dimension of sin, Plantinga writes: "All sin has first and finally a Godward force. Let us say that *a* sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame. Let us add that the disposition to commit sins also displeases God and deserves blame, and let us therefore use the word *sin* to refer to such instances of both act and disposition. Sin is a culpable and personal affront to a personal God."¹⁴

God's image-bearers were created to worship and obey him and to reflect his glory to his good creation. According to G. K. Beale, "God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation."¹⁵ After the fall, humankind was enslaved to idolatry (hatred for God) and violence (hatred for each other). Sin inverts love for God, which in turn becomes idolatry, and inverts love for neighbor, which becomes exploitation of others. Instead of worshiping God, our inclination is to worship anything else but God. Idolatry is not the ceasing of worship. Rather, it is misdirected worship, and at the core of idolatry is self-worship.

Instead of loving one another as God originally intended, fallen

humanity expresses hatred toward their neighbors. Sin perverts mutual love and harmony, resulting in domination and violence against others.¹⁶ Both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with God's image-bearers are fractured by the fall. Evil is anti-creation, anti-life, and the force that seeks to oppose, deface, and destroy God, his good world, and his image-bearers. Simply put, when someone defaces a human being—God's image-bearer—ultimately an attack is being waged against God himself.

The foundational premise of the Bible after Genesis 3, therefore, is that this fallen world, particularly fallen humanity, is violent.¹⁷ The cosmic war begun by the Serpent in Eden, described in Genesis 3, produces collateral damage in the very next chapter. Immediately after the fall, there is a radical shift from *shalom* to violence, as the first murder takes place in Genesis 4. After God shows regard to Abel's worshipful offering, Cain responds by raging against God and murdering his brother.¹⁸ The downward spiral of humankind and the constant spread of sin continued as God's blessing is replaced by God's curse.⁹

Violence is sin against both God and his image-bearers. In our hatred for God, we hoard worship for self and strike against those who reflect God's glory. Cornelius Plantinga explains: "Godlessness is anti-*shalom*. Godlessness spoils the proper relation between human beings and their Maker and Savior. Sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it bereaves and assaults what God has made."¹⁸

A portion of the Old Testament is a catalog of cruelty. Widespread violence and the appalling evil of fallen humanity are recorded in detail on nearly every page of the Hebrew Bible:

Acts of reprobate violence explode from the pages of the Old Testament as evil people perform unspeakable acts: Children are cannibalized (2 Kings 6:28–29; Ezek. 5:10; Lam. 2:20), boiled (Lam. 4:10), and dashed against a rock (Ps. 137:9). During the Babylonian invasion, Zedekiah is forced to watch his sons slaughtered, after which his own eyes are gouged out (Jer. 52:10–11). Pregnant women are ripped open (2 Kings 15:16; Amos 1:13). Other women are raped (Gen. 34:1–5; 1 Sam. 13:1–15; Ezek. 22:11); one of them is gang raped to the point of death

⁹Gen. 4:4–5, 8.

⁹The word "curse" occurs five times in Genesis 3–11: 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25.

(Judg. 19:22–30). Military atrocities are equally shocking. We read about stabbings (Judg. 3:12–20; 2 Sam. 2:23; 20:10) and beheadings (1 Sam. 17:54; 2 Sam. 4:7–9). These are normal military atrocities. More extraordinary cases involve torture and mutilation: limbs are cut off (Judg. 1:6–7), bodies hewed in pieces (1 Sam. 15:33), eyes gouged out (Judg. 16:21; 2 Kings 25:7), skulls punctured (Judg. 4:12–23; 5:26–27) or crushed by a millstone pushed from a city wall (Judg. 9:53). Two hundred foreskins are collected (1 Sam. 18:27), seventy heads gathered (2 Kings 10:7–8), thirty men killed for their clothing (Judg. 14:19). Bodies are hanged (Josh. 8:29), mutilated and displayed as trophies (1 Sam. 31:9–10), trampled beyond recognition (2 Kings 9:30–37), destroyed by wild beasts (Josh. 13:8; 2 Kings 2:23–24) or flailed with briers (Judg. 8:16). Entire groups are massacred (1 Sam. 22:18–19; 1 Kings 16:8–14) or led into captivity strung together with hooks through their lips (Amos 4:2).¹⁹

Sin and Sexual Assault

We have seen how violence is a bitter fruit of the fall and is, without question, a “vandalism of *shalom*.” In biblical thinking, we can understand neither *shalom* nor sin apart from reference to God. David confesses to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”^p Despite committing adultery with Bathsheba and orchestrating the murder of her husband, Uriah, David can write that he has sinned against God “only.”^q David’s sins against other human beings were also, in the ultimate sense, transgressions committed against God himself. According to Plantinga, “*Shalom* is God’s design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.”²⁰

Sexual assault is a vandalization of *shalom*. It can influence how victims feel about themselves, how they understand connections and boundaries with others, and ultimately, how they relate to God. Throughout the Bible, the conception of sexual assault is that it has devastating emotional and psychological consequences for the victim.^r

Sexual violence uses sex as a weapon of power and control against

^pPss. 51:4.

^qSee 2 Samuel 11.

^rDeut. 22:25–29; Judg. 19:22–25; 20:5; and 2 Sam. 13:12, 22, and 32 are a few places where sexual coercion is depicted in the Bible.

others. Sex is the means by which we fulfill our calling of multiplying and taking dominion. It is noteworthy that the very means of fulfilling God's plan for humanity is now a tool for violence toward other images of God. In *shalom*, sex was also a reflection of unity and peace between man and woman. It is a picture of two becoming one.

God meant for sexual feelings, thoughts, and activity to give pleasure and build intimacy in marriage. Satan understands the importance of what God has designed, and sexual assault is one of his chief means of destroying it. Sexual abuse creates in the victim's mind a tragic and perverse linkage between sex, intimacy, and shame. When someone is sexually violated, one of the most creative and intimate of human experiences—sexuality—is transgressed by violence and subjugation.

Sex, the very expression of human union, intimacy, and peace, becomes a tool for violence after the fall. Plantinga writes: "The story of the fall tells us that sin corrupts: it puts asunder what God had joined together and joins together what God had put asunder. Like some devastating twister, corruption both explodes and implodes creation, pushing it back toward the 'formless void' from which it came."²¹ Violence is also the outworking and fruit of idolatry as humans have inherent dignity as the image of God. One scholar notes:

The Old Testament records some horrific incidents of sexual violence: when people are alienated from God, depravity and violence are inevitable. Biblical stories of rape are infrequent but vivid, including the story of Dinah's rape and the resulting sexual retaliation by her brothers (Genesis 34), the abuse to death of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) and Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1–21). In a similar vein are pictures in the prophetic books of the ravishing of wives and virgins as the aftermath of a nation's being conquered (Isaiah 13:16; Lamentations 5:11; Zechariah 14:2).²²

Sexual violence distorts this beautiful act of union, pleasure, calling, and worship. God intended humankind to "be fruitful and multiply,"^s spreading divine image-bearers throughout his good world. This multiplying of offspring and exercising of dominion was to happen through the God-ordained sexual union between man and woman, husband and wife, in the context of marriage: "Therefore a man shall

^sGen. 1:28.

leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”^t

This peaceful, loving relationship was shattered by the entrance of sin into the world. Instead of unashamed intimacy and trust, there is shame and mistrust. Instead of grace, there is disgrace. Hatred toward other divine image-bearers, not love, characterizes human life after the fall:

As soon as human rebellion and self-assertiveness reared their ugly heads, shame, guilt and self-consciousness took over. Pathetic attempts at self-concealment (Gen 3:7) are replaced by God’s own provision of covering (Gen 3:21). Henceforth nakedness was unnatural. Clothing is God’s covering, his divine gracious response to human rebellion. Being unclothed thus becomes a metaphor for being exposed to the judgment of God.²³

A foundational element of paradise—sexual innocence in community—has been spoiled by the treachery of sexual assault. Sexual assault is uniquely devastating precisely because it distorts the foundational realities of what it means to be human: embodied personhood is plundered, sexual expression is perverted and used for violence, intrapersonal trust is shattered, and disgrace and shame are heaped on the victim.

Sexual assault is one of the most frequent and disturbing symbols of sin in the Bible. It is a complete distortion of relationship, a mockery and devastation of the original intent of being made for relationships with God and others. References to sexual violence is a way that God, through the biblical authors, communicates that sin has progressed so far that sex, an expression of union, peace, and love, is now used as a tool for violence.

The betrayal of creation and the refusal of any sense of covenantal relationship, sexual assault physically, emotionally, culturally, and structurally wounds the victim. Sexual assault is not just a criminal, physical, and psychological act; it is also a spiritual act in which the connectedness of humans with one another and with God is violated and broken, and the reality of defilement, guilt, terror, shame, alienation, and separation can take years to be made whole again.

^tGen. 2:24–25.

Sin names the reality of sexual assault, and assault in turn symbolizes sin and its destructive effects. The Bible speaks about the reality and effects of sin in various ways: disease, burden, debt, and defilement. Sexual assault is another way to speak of sin, in both its reality and effects. Sexual assault both names and symbolizes that sin is not only something that is done to us but also carries the effects of defilement, woundedness, and terror.

Sin is broken relationships with God, self, and others, and sexual assault signifies, even as it causes, brokenness and disruption. Sexual assault reminds us of the double-sidedness of so much sin: it is both personal and cultural. Sexual assault is an individual act of violence, one person against another. But it's also cultural: it is used as a weapon in warfare,²⁴ and it's an epidemic in nearly all cultures.²⁵

There appears to be a societal impulse to blame traumatized individuals for their suffering. Alexander McFarlane and Bessel van der Kolk suggest that doing otherwise would threaten our cherished conceptions that the world is essentially just and that persons are free, self-determining, and basically good individuals responsible for their destinies:

Society becomes resentful about having its illusions of safety and predictability ruffled by people who remind them of how fragile security can be. Society's reactions [to traumatized people] seems to be . . . in the service of maintaining the beliefs that the world is fundamentally just, that people can be in charge of their lives, and that bad things only happen to people who deserve them.²⁶

In short, we sacrifice those who suffer so we can maintain our illusions of autonomy and safety.

The distress caused by sexual assault can be described well by Simone Weil's term "affliction." An event constitutes "affliction" if it has uprooted and attacked someone in all dimensions: physically, psychologically, and socially. Since affliction involves "social degradation or the fear of it in some form," it can be argued that one of the factors involved in affliction includes some form of interpersonal neglect or harm.²⁷ If victims were offered sufficient social support, they could be spared from the kind of suffering that constitutes affliction.

Marie Fortune describes sexual assault four different ways. First,

it is a bodily sin. Sexual assault is a violation of bodily boundaries of personal space and distorts one's sense of body image. Second, sexual assault is a sin against relationship, violating the command to love one's neighbors as oneself. Third, it is a sin betraying trust and destroying relationships between victims and those who should have cared for them but instead caused them harm. The consequence of this sin is that it creates barriers of trust for victims in their future relationships. Fourth, it is a sin against not only the victims but also the community surrounding those victims.²⁸

It is obvious that sexual assault is a sin against another human involving physical, psychological, and emotional violation through the commission of a nonconsensual sexual act imposed through coercion, intimidation, force, domination, and violence. Such an act entails not only a violation of the physical boundaries of the body, but also a denial of the victim's will or agency—one dimension of being the image of God.

Through sexual assault, the assailant aims to reduce the victim to a nonperson. Because the assault is bodily, it is sexed, and the scope of its harm includes the very personhood of the victim. The dominance inherent in an act of sexual assault, by which the assailant forces his/her incarnate will on the victim, is a hierarchical structure in which the victim's difference from the assailant is stamped out, erased, and annihilated.²⁹

This aspect of sexual assault involves the violation of the victim both bodily and mentally. By constraining the victim and disregarding, disbelieving, or deliberately acting contrary to her or his desires, the transgressor undermines the victim's sense of personhood.³⁰ Such acts of violence often result in emotional trauma for the victim, which is manifest in a sense of helplessness, loss, vulnerability, shame, humiliation, and degradation.³¹ A particularly evil effect of sexual assault is that some victims not only feel a sense of radical disgrace, but also participate in their own self-destruction.³² The self-hatred, defilement, and guilt they experience cause them to act out self-destructively.

Violence ensnares the psyche of the victim and propels its action in the form of defensive reaction. This is one of the most insidious aspects of violence. In addition to inflicting harm, the practice of evil keeps re-creating a world of violence, either against others or oneself.

Evil generates new evil as evildoers fashion victims in their own ugly image.

In addition to being a sin against others, sexual assault is also a sin against God because the blessing of sexuality is used to destroy instead of build intimacy. It is an attack against his image in his imager-bearers. The ability of sexual assault to obscure internal and external relationships makes it a cosmic affront to the Creator and the order of his creation.³³ Sexual assault is a sin against God because it violates his most sacred creation, human beings made in his image.

There are explicit passages calling sexual assault sin—a violation of God’s law. Deuteronomy 22:25–29 addresses nonconsensual sexual acts and shows concern for the welfare of the violated woman. In Deuteronomy 22:25–27, the perpetrator is put to death by stoning, and it is stressed in the text that the woman is innocent of any wrongdoing and that no harm should come to her.³⁴

In addition to these and other biblical texts calling sexual assault sin, there are also depictions of sexual acts that the Bible characterizes as sexual assault resulting in emotional trauma. These passages are 2 Samuel 13, Hosea 2:1–13, Jeremiah 13:20–27, and Ezekiel 16 and 23. They demonstrate an understanding that such acts of sexual assault result not only in emotional trauma for the victim, but also in humiliation and a debilitating loss of sense of self. These passages depict sexual assault as deeply traumatizing and resulting in devastating emotional and psychological consequences for the victim.

The Bible says that sexual assault is wrong, should not be done, and is not something the victims should experience. It also claims that God sees, knows, and cares about this sin and its effects, and has acted to redeem people from its effects.

Transgression against God and Victim

Far from being a peripheral issue in the Bible, sexual assault is clearly depicted as sin against God and neighbor, mentioned frequently throughout the Bible, and referred to as a symbol of how badly sin has corrupted God’s good creation.

The Bible confirms the effects of sexual assault we described in chapter 3. On what the Bible says about sexual assault, Hilary Lipka

³⁴Gen. 6:1–3.

writes: “A comprehensive study that includes all biblical texts reveals that there is evidence not only of a core conception of rape, but also an understanding that sexual violence is devastating for the victim, resulting in emotional trauma and a debilitating loss of sense of self.”³⁵

We have seen in this chapter that sexual assault is a sin against the victim and a sin against God. However, it is very difficult in the Bible to distinguish the difference between the transgression against the victim and the transgression against God. It is so difficult that some scholars assert that there is no distinction between these two aspects of transgression. Sexual assault is always a sin against the victim and God because all crimes are depicted as sins, that is, violations of God’s will and the reflection of his glory in others.³⁶

The victim’s experience of assault is not ignored by God, minimized by the Bible, or outside of the scope of healing and hope found in redemption. God’s response to evil and violence is redemption, renewal, and re-creation. Evil and violence are not the final word. They are not capable of creating or defining reality. That is God’s prerogative alone. However, evil and violence can pervert, distort, and destroy. They are parasitic on the original good of God’s creation. In this way evil serves as the backdrop on the stage where God’s redemption shines with even greater brilliance and pronounced drama. What evil uses to destroy, God uses to expose, excise, and then heal.³⁷

God’s redemption imparts grace and brings peace. We turn to God’s redemption in the next two chapters.

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