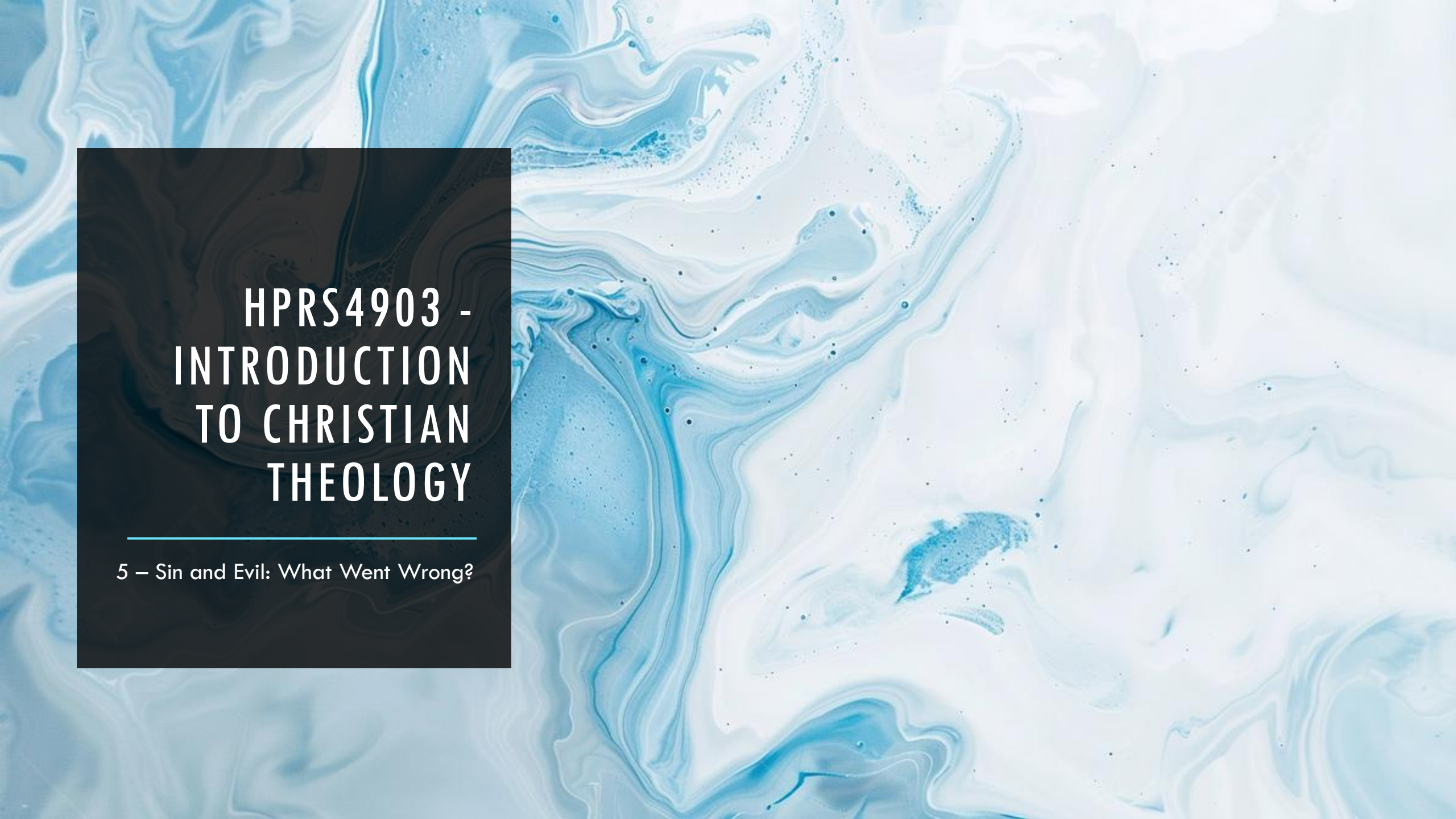


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HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

5 – Sin and Evil: What Went Wrong?

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SIN AND EVIL: WHAT WENT WRONG

SIN AND EVIL: WHAT WENT WRONG?

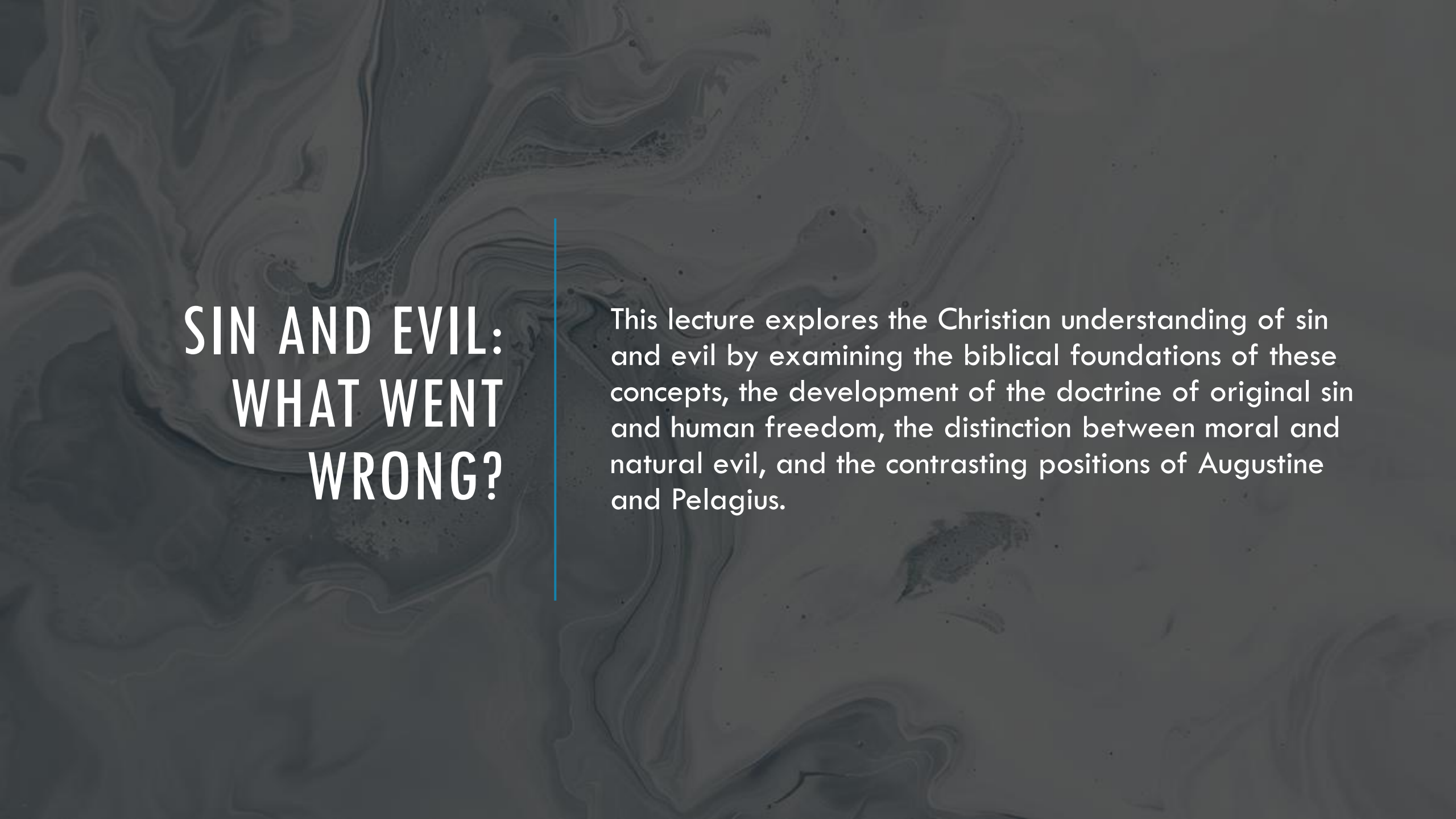
Christian theology begins from a paradox.

On the one hand, as we saw in the previous class, the biblical tradition affirms that creation is good, willed by a loving God.

On the other hand, human experience is marked by suffering, injustice, violence, and moral failure.

The question that naturally arises is not simply *what is good?* but *what went wrong?*

The doctrines of sin and evil represent Christianity's attempt to name and interpret this tension.



SIN AND EVIL: WHAT WENT WRONG?

This lecture explores the Christian understanding of sin and evil by examining the biblical foundations of these concepts, the development of the doctrine of original sin and human freedom, the distinction between moral and natural evil, and the contrasting positions of Augustine and Pelagius.

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SIN AND EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

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The Bible does not offer a single systematic doctrine of sin or evil. Instead, it presents a range of narratives, laws, prayers, and reflections that together portray the reality of human wrongdoing and suffering.

In the Old Testament, sin is often understood as a consequence of our relation with other things, rather than abstractly or as having its own existence.

For example, the Hebrew word *ḥaṭṭā'ah* refers to “missing the mark”, suggesting a failure to live in right relationship with God, others, and creation as at the core of “sin”.



SIN AND EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

The opening chapters of Genesis set the stage for understanding the way that the Christian tradition understands this.

Genesis 1 affirms the goodness of creation, while Genesis 3 narrates the human rupture of trust in God.

The serpent's temptation—"you will be like God"—captures a recurring biblical theme: sin as the desire to determine good and evil on one's own terms.



SIN AND EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴ “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

SIN AND EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

Following this, sin spreads outward in the Biblical narrative.

Cain murders Abel; violence fills the earth before the flood; human pride culminates in the Tower of Babel.

Crucially, sin is not merely presented as individual wrongdoing, but as a force that distorts social and cosmic relationships.

The Old Testament prophets frequently diagnose injustice, idolatry, and exploitation as expressions of sin embedded in structures and institutions, not just personal failures.



SIN AND EVIL IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

In the New Testament, sin is interpreted in the light of the example and actions of Jesus.

He proclaims forgiveness for people, heals the sick and lame, and confronts both personal and systemic evil throughout his travels.

Particularly in the latter half of the NT, sin is portrayed as a form of bondage or as something that enslaves us rather than merely misleads us.

Paul writes that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).



ORIGINAL SIN AND THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

One of the most interesting wrinkles of this development is the idea of ‘original sin’ – something you have probably come across before.

This doctrine emerges as Christian theologians reflect on the universality of sin and suffering. Original sin does not mean that humans inherit personal guilt for Adam’s act. Rather, it names the condition into which all humans are born: a world already marked by broken relationships, disordered desires, and alienation from God.

Reflecting on Paul in Romans, Augustine argued that humanity shares in Adam’s fall because Adam represents humanity as a whole. Humans are born into a state of disordered love where we love lesser goods more than the highest good, God.



ORIGINAL SIN AND THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

This raises quite pressing questions about human freedom though.

If humans are born into sin, are they truly free?

Christian theology responds by distinguishing freedom from the idea of choice.

True freedom is the capacity to love and choose the good. Sin does not eliminate freedom, but it damages it. Humans still choose, but our choices are shaped by our distorted desires and limited vision.



ORIGINAL SIN AND THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

What this means is that humans are not puppets controlled by sin, but neither are we morally neutral agents starting from scratch.

Our freedom is real but wounded, and this wounded freedom explains why our good intentions so often fail and why bad intentions often win(!).

At the same time, Christian theology insists that sin does not define humanity's ultimate identity, because the grace and forgiveness of God precedes and exceeds sin.





MORAL EVIL AND NATURAL EVIL

Christian reflection on evil often distinguishes between *moral evil* and *natural evil*.

Moral evil refers to suffering caused by human action: things like violence, injustice, cruelty, or exploitation.

Natural evil refers to suffering arising from natural processes: earthquakes, disease, or famine.

In some ways, moral evil fits more easily into traditional accounts of sin as it can be traced to human freedom and action.

Christian theology insists that such evils are not caused by God. God creates humans capable of love, and that capacity includes the possibility of misuse or non-use.



MORAL EVIL AND NATURAL EVIL

Natural evil is more difficult to make sense of, generally.

Earthquakes and diseases do not appear to result from a moral choice or be the responsibility of someone (usually!).

The Bible does not really offer a single answer to this difficulty, instead some texts portray natural suffering as part of a fallen creation, “groaning” as it awaits redemption (Rom. 8:22).

Others emphasize the limits of human understanding – for example, in the Book of Job, God does not explain suffering but challenges the assumption that suffering must be morally deserved.



MORAL EVIL AND NATURAL EVIL

However, Christian theology generally resists viewing natural evil as always a divine punishment.

Instead, it understands the world as dynamic and unfinished, in that the same processes that make life possible also generate suffering. Creation is good, but not complete.

The distinction between moral and natural evil is therefore really important ethically:

Moral evil demands repentance, justice, and transformation.

Natural evil calls for compassion, solidarity, and healing.

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AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

The tension between sin and freedom that we have talked about really came to a head in the early fifth century in the debate between Augustine and Pelagius. Their disagreement shaped Western Christian theology profoundly and still has an impact on the way we think about responsibility and evil.

Pelagius, a Welsh monk (possibly), was concerned that Christians were using sin as an excuse for moral laziness, saying that they couldn't help doing bad things because of sin. Instead, Pelagius argued that God would not command what humans could not do and so, in order to avoid doing bad things, we just had to try harder.

AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

Sin, for Pelagius, consisted of individual acts of disobedience, not an inherited condition that we are stuck with.

For him, humans are born morally neutral, with the full capacity to choose good or evil, and the entire moral responsibility to act in a good manner. This means that we have the free will to achieve human perfection through our actions – although, of course, few (if any) do.

Augustine strongly disagreed. He believed that Pelagius underestimated the depth of sin and overestimated human ability to avoid sin without the intervention of God.

AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

For Augustine, sin is not merely imitation of bad things but an inescapable condition that all humans share. Humans inherit a disordered will that inclines them toward selfishness and away from moral perfection.

Grace, or God's action, is therefore not merely external instruction but internal transformation. Without grace, humans cannot fully will the good and cannot achieve moral perfection alone.

AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS

The Church eventually sided with Augustine, rejecting Pelagianism as inadequate.

Yet Pelagius's concerns did not disappear and the argument over the nature of sin and its impact on our behaviour continues to rear up in the history of the Christian tradition.

The lasting significance of this debate lies in the balance that the Christian tradition affirms, the balance between both human responsibility and human dependence on grace.

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THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

These doctrines of sin and evil shape Christian theology in several quite important ways.

First, they provide a realistic account of the human condition.

Christian theology does not assume that education, progress, or good intentions alone can resolve moral problems. It recognises deep patterns of self-deception and domination that persist in our actions even in well-meaning societies and even despite our best intentions.



THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

Second, these doctrines safeguard the goodness of God in the face of questions about the experience of evil or suffering in our lives.

Evil is not attributed to God's will or to God's nature. God creates good, but allows us / it to have freedom.

Evil arises from the misuse of that freedom and from the vulnerability of a dynamic creation to change.



THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

Third, sin explains the necessity of redemption in our lives.

If humanity's problem were merely ignorance of the moral good, better information would suffice. Christianity claims instead that humanity needs transformation and that salvation is not just moral improvement, but the restoration of relationship with God.

At the same time, theology must handle sin-language carefully to avoid over emphasis or a washing over.



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ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

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All this talk of sin and evil has deeply shaped thinking in the field of Christian ethics – what should we do?.

The recognition of sin discourages in the practice of Christian ethics the development of moral superiority and self-righteousness. No one stands outside sin and therefore ethical reflection therefore must begin with self-examination, rather than the condemnation of others.

It also sharpens our sense of moral responsibility, because sin is not fate. Humans are called to resist evil, even knowing that their efforts will be incomplete, and to strive to realise and action the moral good in their lives.



ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SIN AND EVIL

Sin-language also enables Christians to name structures that deflect us from our relationship with God as evil.

Racism, economic exploitation, and environmental destruction are not merely the result of individual choices, but are patterns embedded in systems that we have created. The doctrine of sin provides a way to critique these structures without reducing them to isolated bad actors and without throwing our hands up in powerlessness.

Christian ethics also insists on hope – that despite our fallen nature, and despite our failing actions, and despite the systems we have created that distance us from each other, good can happen.



RESPONSIBILITY, JUSTICE, AND HOPE

The Christian doctrines of sin and evil therefore emerge in answering a difficult and unavoidable question: what went wrong in a world created good by God?

The biblical tradition answers not with a single explanation but with a layered diagnosis; that sin names humanity's fractured relationship with God, others, and with Creation.

Evil describes both human wrongdoing and the suffering embedded in a vulnerable world.

RESPONSIBILITY, JUSTICE, AND HOPE

The doctrine of original sin highlights the depth and universality of this condition, while affirming that human freedom to choose the good, though wounded, remains real.

For Christian theology, sin and evil are not the final word. Instead, they frame the need for redemption and shape ethical seriousness in promoting our ability to meaningfully choose.

To acknowledge sin is not to despair of humanity, but to tell the truth about the world in order to participate honestly in its healing.



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