

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

THORN

A Lutheran Word for the Christian Who Struggles

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CHAPTER SIX

The Saint Who Sins

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” — Romans 7:24–25

We have been going down for three chapters now. Down past the sin you could see to the corruption you could not. Down past the corruption to the will that turned out to be in chains. I told you at the start that I would make the news worse before I made it better, and I have kept that grim half of the promise without flinching. This is the chapter where I keep the other half.

So feel the floor change under your feet, because from here the book climbs.

You came into this chapter holding two things that seem to cancel each other out. You are, by everything we have seen, a sinner all the way to the bottom — corrupt in nature, bound in will, unable to fix yourself. And yet I have kept speaking to you, this whole time, as though you securely belong to God. You have been bracing, I think, for me to finally resolve the tension the way everyone else did — by making one of the two go away. By telling you that if you are really God’s, the sinner must shrink and eventually vanish; or, if the sinner will not vanish, that you must not really be God’s after all.

I am going to do the opposite. I am going to tell you that both are true, fully, at the same time, in the same person — and that this is not a contradiction to be solved but the very secret that sets you free. There is a phrase for it, the oldest and most freeing phrase the Reformation ever coined: *simul iustus et peccator*. At the same time righteous and sinner. Not formerly a sinner, now righteous. Not partly righteous, working on the sinner. At the same time, right now, today, wholly both. You are a saint who sins. Scripture says you will be one until you die, and — this is the part you were never told — that is not the disproof of your faith. It is the description of it.

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Everything turns on a distinction so small it would be easy to miss, so let me slow all the way down and set it in front of you, because almost everyone gets it wrong, and getting it wrong is what kept you on the treadmill.

When people hear “saint and sinner,” they almost always picture a mixture. A pie chart. You start out, say, eighty percent sinner and twenty percent saint, and the Christi-

an life is the slow work of growing the saint slice and shrinking the sinner slice, year by year, until — ideally, eventually — the chart is nearly all saint. On this picture, your besetting sin is simply the stubborn part of the sinner slice that has not been whittled down yet, and your standing with God is something like a reading off the chart: the more saint, the more secure; the more sinner, the more doubtful. That is the picture nearly every Christian carries without examining it.

And it is exactly the picture the Reformation rejected. Do you see why it had to? That pie chart is the victorious-life gospel in a quieter coat. It still hangs your assurance on a percentage — on how the slices are doing this week — which means it still hangs your assurance on you, on your progress, on the very scoreboard this book has been prying out of your hands since chapter one. A partly-and-partly Christian is just a Christian still being measured by his sin, only now with a more flattering chart.

The Reformation's *simul* is not partly and partly. It is wholly and wholly. You are, at one and the same moment, completely righteous and completely a sinner — not fifty-fifty, but one hundred percent each — and the reason this is not nonsense is that the two are measured in two entirely different places, by two entirely different standards. In one relation you are wholly righteous. In another relation you are wholly a sinner. Both totals are true at once because they are answers to two different questions. We will give those two relations their proper names and their full treatment in the next chapter; for now I only need you to hold the shape of it. One ledger reads, in your hand, *one hundred percent righteous*. The other ledger reads, in your hand, *one hundred percent sinner*. And both ledgers are correct.

How can that be? Because of where the righteousness comes from.

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Here is the Gospel breaking in, the thing the whole descent was clearing the ground for. Lean in.

The righteousness that makes you a saint before God is not yours. It never was, and it never will be, and that is the best news you have ever heard, though it will take a moment to feel like good news. It is Christ's righteousness — his own, the real, finished, perfect article — and it has been credited to you, reckoned to your account, laid over you like a robe that is not your size and not your color and not your weave, a righteousness from entirely outside yourself. The old word for it is *alien* righteousness, not because it is strange but because it is *another's* — it belongs to Someone else and has been made yours by gift.

Luther — and now I am quoting Luther the man, not the Confessions, so hold it at the right weight — loved to describe what happens here as a joyful exchange. Faith, he said, joins you to Christ the way a bride is joined to a bridegroom, so that everything that is yours becomes his and everything that is his becomes yours. And what is yours? Your sin, your bound will, your corrupt nature, your besetting failure — all of it. He takes it, all of it, as his own, and carries it to a cross. And what is his? A spotless righteousness, a perfect record, the full approval of the Father. He hands it to you, all of it, as your own. Your bankruptcy becomes his; his fortune becomes yours; and the exchange is total. This is why your righteousness before God does not grow. It was never a thing that grows. It was complete the moment faith laid hold of Christ, because it is *his* completeness, and his completeness was never partial. You are not eighty percent righteous and climbing. You are, before God, as righteous as Christ is — because the righteousness you are wearing is the righteousness of Christ.

Now hear what that does to your besetting sin. It cannot lower the number. It was never the source of the number. Picture it this way: a man is gravely sick, and a physician of perfect skill takes his case and gives his unbreakable word that he will heal him completely. Is the man well or sick? He is both, at once. In his body, at this moment, he is genuinely sick — running the fever, feeling every symptom. But by the sure promise of the One who has taken charge of him, he is already, reliably, a well man, a healing man, a man whose recovery is not in doubt because it does not depend on him. Ask him on his worst night, drenched in fever, and the answer is the same as on his best: sick in himself, well by the promise. That is you. Your sin is the fever, real and felt and not to be pretended away. Christ's righteousness is the physician's word, and it has already decided how the story ends.

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But I have to turn now to the other ledger and read it just as honestly, because a comfort that works by quietly shrinking your sin is no comfort at all — it is just the perfectionist lie running the other direction, and I will not hand it to you.

In yourself, the sinner is still total. The corruption we mapped in chapter four did not get smaller at your conversion. It was not eradicated, and it will not be eradicated in this life — not by the crisis experience, not by the second blessing, not by the accumulated years, whatever the holiness preachers promised. The Lutheran confessors were unsparing about this: the disordered desire, the *concupiscence*, that bent and curving appetite — it genuinely remains in the believer, in you, today, and they refused, against enormous pressure, to call it anything softer than what it is. Rome wanted to say that

whatever remains in the baptized is not really sin anymore, just a harmless tinder, an inclination with the guilt burned off. The reformers said no. What remains is truly sin — real sin, God-offending sin, the kind that would condemn you if it stood alone. They would not let you off the hook by redefining the hook.

And then, having refused to minimize it, they said the thing that holds the whole simul together: it is not imputed. The remaining sin is real, and it is not counted against you. For Christ's sake, God does not charge it to your account.

Both halves are essential, and most teaching drops one. The teaching that drops the first half — that says your remaining sin is not really sin — leaves you brittle, because the day you finally cannot deny that it is sin, your peace shatters. The teaching that drops the second half — that says your remaining sin is counted against you — is the treadmill you came in on. The Gospel keeps both: it is truly sin, and it is truly not held against you.

You are allowed, at last, to stop pretending. You do not have to launder your besetting sin into a “struggle” or a “weakness” or a “season.” You can call it exactly what it is — sin, real and grievous — look it dead in the eye, and in the very same breath know it is not on your ledger before God. That is a freedom the perfectionist never tastes, because he has staked everything on the lie that it went away. John says it without mercy and without exception: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). And then, in the same passage, the door: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us” (1 John 1:9). Not deny. Not defeat. Confess — and be forgiven, again, today, as a way of life.

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Which brings us to the most fought-over chapter in the New Testament, and to the moment you finally get to read it as your own.

You know the passage even if you do not know the reference. A man cries out: I do not understand my own actions. I do not do the good I want; the very thing I hate is what I do. There is a war inside me. “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). That is Paul, in the seventh chapter of Romans, and the question of who he is talking about has divided readers for as long as there have been readers.

Here is the reading you were probably handed. That divided, defeated man is Paul *before* he was converted — or worse, Paul as a “carnal Christian,” a believer stuck in a

lower, beaten-down stage he was supposed to escape by getting to chapter eight, where the victory lives. On this reading, Romans 7 is a phase. It is the before-picture. If you are still living there, still crying *who will deliver me*, you simply have not yet laid hold of the deliverance, have not yet crossed over into the triumphant life of Romans 8. Romans 7 is the dungeon you are meant to climb out of.

The Reformation read it the other way, and so did the deepest readers of the church for centuries, and once you see why, you will not be able to unsee it. That divided man is not Paul before grace. He is Paul under grace — the regenerate apostle, writing in the present tense about his ongoing, normal, Christian life. And the evidence is sitting right there in the passage, because look at what this man says about himself: “I delight in the law of God, in my inner being” (Romans 7:22). An unconverted man does not delight in the law of God in his inner being. We established that two chapters ago — the natural mind is hostile to God, at peace with its sin, undivided in its turning-away. Only a person in whom the Spirit has done something new could hate his own sin like this, could want the good he keeps failing to do, could cry out in genuine anguish to be delivered from a self he can no longer make peace with.

The war is not the evidence that grace has not arrived. The war is the evidence that it has. The unbeliever is not torn in two; he is whole, in the wrong direction. It takes a new birth to start the war. Corpses, as I said at the very beginning, do not fight. I will not pretend this reading has never been disputed — careful Christians have read the chapter the other way and still do — but the confessors found that sentence about delight impossible to get around, and so, I think, will you.

And then watch what Paul does in the final verse, because he holds the entire *simul* in a single breath. The cry — *who will deliver me?* — is answered instantly and triumphantly: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25). The deliverance is real and it is already given. And then, in the very next clause, after the thanksgiving, with the rescue announced — he describes himself as still divided: “So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (Romans 7:25). Rescued and still divided. Delivered and still at war. Saint and sinner, in one sentence, after the *thanks be to God*. He does not resolve the tension by graduating out of it. He plants the flag of the Gospel right in the middle of it and keeps living there. Paul wrote your life. He just wrote it without your shame.

This is simply what the Christian terrain looks like, and Paul puts it plainly to the Galatians: the flesh and the Spirit are at war in you, “to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:17). That sentence describes the believer — only a believer

has a Spirit in him for the flesh to war against. The frustration you have read as failure is the friction of two natures in one person. It is the sound of being a saint who still sins.

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So now go back and pick up the verdict you walked in with, the one from the first pages of this book, and look at it in this new light.

You concluded, somewhere in the dark, that the sin you could not shake was proof your faith was counterfeit. You did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic said: *real Christians don't keep losing like this; therefore I am not one*. And we can now name, with precision, everything that was wrong with that arithmetic. It measured your standing on the wrong ledger — the sinner ledger, the one that reads one hundred percent and always will — when your standing was never recorded there at all. It read your assurance off the scoreboard of your progress, when your assurance was hanging the whole time on a finished righteousness that is not yours and cannot be lost because it was never yours to lose. And it took the very thing that marks you as alive — the war, the hatred of your sin, the cry to be delivered — and read it as the mark of death.

The saint who sins is not a failed Christian. The saint who sins is what a Christian is, on this side of the grave. Your besetting sin did not put you outside the category. It located you squarely inside it, in the company of Paul, who served the law of God with his mind and the law of sin with his flesh and called himself, in the same breath, a man with reason to thank God through Jesus Christ his Lord. On your worst night, drenched in the fever, you are wholly righteous before God in Christ. On your best morning, you are still wholly a sinner in yourself. And neither the worst night nor the best morning moves your standing by a hair, because your standing was never yours to move. The scoreboard you have watched your whole life — turn it off. It was never wired to the thing you thought it was measuring.

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Now I have to stop and post a guard, because this is the exact doctrine that gets stolen and put to terrible use, and I would rather hand you the guardrail myself than let you wander into the ditch on either side.

The first ditch is the one everyone warns about. *If I'm wholly righteous no matter what, and my sin isn't counted against me, then who cares — I'll sin all I want*. Hear me: the moment that thought feels like the logical conclusion, you have stopped talking about the simul and started talking about something else. The remaining sin is *truly sin* — we just

spent a whole section refusing to soften it — and a saint does not make peace with the enemy still firing inside his own walls. John’s word was *confess*, not *shrug*. The simul is not a permission slip; it is a battlefield report. It tells you that the war will go on your whole life and that you will not lose your standing over it — which is the only thing that makes it possible to keep fighting honestly, without lying about your wounds and without despairing of the outcome. A soldier who knows the war is already won fights differently than one who thinks each skirmish decides everything. He fights more freely. He does not fight less.

There is a famous and famously abused line of Luther’s that lives right here, and I am going to give it to you whole, because given in pieces it becomes poison. Writing to a friend who was paralyzed by the fear of sinning, Luther said, in effect: be a sinner and sin boldly — *but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly*. People love to quote the first half and bury the second, as though Luther were granting a license. He was doing the reverse. He was prying a terrified man’s white-knuckled grip off of his own performance. He was saying: you live in the real world, where you are going to sin; stop pretending you can tiptoe through life sinless; and precisely because you cannot, let your confidence in Christ run harder and louder and bolder than your sin ever could. The whole weight of the sentence is on the second clause. It is not “sin freely.” It is “trust more freely than you sin.”

And there is a second ditch, on the opposite side, and I want to name it too because it is the one a book like this can slide into if it is not careful. It is the ditch that hears “wholly sinner” and concludes that nothing ever really changes — that sanctification is a fiction, that the Spirit does no actual work, that you will be exactly as enslaved on your last day as your first and might as well stop expecting otherwise. That is not the simul either. The same confessions that say your standing rests entirely on Christ’s reckoned righteousness also insist, without embarrassment, that the Spirit genuinely changes the people he indwells — that there is real new obedience, real fruit, a real reshaping of desire over time, and that the Law keeps speaking to the Christian as a guide to what that renewed life looks like. The change is real. It is simply not the foundation. It is the fruit growing on a tree whose roots are planted in someone else’s righteousness, not the thing holding the tree up. You will, by the Spirit’s work, very likely find some sins loosening their grip across the years. You will also, until you die, be a sinner in yourself who needs the whole Gospel every single morning. Both. Always both. That is the whole point.

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So the comfort has broken open, and it will not close again. You are a saint who sins, and you may stop being scandalized by your own existence.

But you may have noticed that this entire chapter has been leaning on something it never fully explained — those two ledgers, those two relations, those two different places where you are measured and come up, on the one hand, perfectly righteous, and on the other, wholly a sinner. I kept promising to give them their proper names. It is time to. Because once you can see clearly that there are two completely different kinds of righteousness — one you have before God and one you have before the world, one received and one performed, and that the entire catastrophe of your Christian life has been the confusion of the two — you will hold in your hand the single tool that keeps the comfort of this chapter from ever slipping away again.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of THORN is the invitation it opens onto.

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