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The Emergence of Sin with Dr. Matt Croasmun

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Jon: This is Jon and Tim at The Bible Project. This podcast is generally just a long discussion between you and I, about biblical theology preparing for videos that we're making.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: And so it's just you and I bantering, and discussing theology. I'm your student. One day you came to me and said, "You know what'd be really cool, as I'm reading all these books preparing for these talks, it'd be so rad to be able to interview some of these scholars and just pick their brain some more. So we're starting to line those up.

Tim: Every Bible Project video begins with huge stack of books for me. And some of them are just like, "Whoa."

Jon: Every time we think of a new video we want to make, Tim is like, "Sweet, I got like four books I want to read."

Tim: Totally. So as we were prepping for quite a while for the Spiritual Being series, one of the books I came across, was by scholar at Yale, named Matthew Croasmun. He is a research scholar at Yale Divinity School. And then also found out he's planted a church and is pastor at a local church there. He is a really sharp guy. And he wrote this fascinating book called "The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans." And it was stimulating in a million ways. One is half of it is about science and this thing called emergence theory.

Jon: And if you know us, we kind of every once a while, geek out about physics and cosmology as much as we can.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: We just jump right in. It's an idea that's fascinated me for a long time, and it's just been basically what you described, Tim was what does it mean for something to exist, to be real, and to have its own volition, and power? And us as a human, we exist, but we're just a bunch of cells, which are a bunch of atoms. And so at what point does something become something? And philosophers and physicists, are all thinking about this and realizing there's something real that happens when a collection of parts becomes a whole. And that thing becomes greater than the collection of parts.

Tim: That is in some of his parts. So he was already interested in that. But then he also noticed that in Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul will use the word "sin" to refer to stupid things people do. But then he also uses the word "sin" to describe what sounds like a person. That it enslaves people, it rules them, it captures and deceives

them. Sin has a body in Paul's thoughts. There's this phrase "the body of sin" - what sounds like a person.

So these two ideas combined in his mind, and he wrote this fascinating book that just opened my imagination to some new ways of thinking about the powers of evil and sin in Paul's thought and in a worldview shaped by the Bible. So Matthew Croasmun said yes to talking to us, and so we got to have a long conversation with him.

Jon: Thanks for joining us. Let's talk with Matt.

Tim: Matt, thank you for talking with us today and taking the time.

Matt: So glad to be here.

Tim: We are talking with you, one, because I was doing a series of projects for The Bible Project in Paul's letters. And your book, I think I read a review of it on Scot McKnight's blog, Jesus Creed, and it was glowing, and so positive, and it addressed issues that I have been interested in for a long time. So I picked it up and mind blown in the helpful way, and my imagination was expanded. So first of all, thank you. Thank you for the time you invested in that book. I'm sure it required many lonely nights.

Matt: Yeah, I know. This is the work of the Bible scholar, right? You do all this work and you thought is like, someday, as many as like half a dozen people might read what you write.

Tim: Before we dive into talking about the ideas in the book, tell us a little bit about how you ended up in Yale, where you came from, and how you got interested in biblical studies.

Matt: Oh, yeah. So I was a music major in college. I was at Yale in undergrad. I've been out here for a good long time now. But we had a language requirement as I'm sure many colleges do, and I didn't want to take a living language because that intimidated me. So I thought, "I'll take a dead language. That'll be fun." Just because, I don't know, I didn't have to go listen to tapes or record my voice or whatever. It was tapes back then. This is before digital. All to say, I thought like, "Oh, yeah, I'll do a dead language."

And somewhere back in my mind, I remember that some part of the Bible was written in Greek. I probably couldn't even have told you which parts but I thought, "Okay, well, between Latin and Greek, I'll do Greek." Honestly, that was sort of how it all started. And then I was terrible at Greek, actually. But by a time I chug through what I needed to, I felt like, "Well, I might as well read the Bible, if that was somewhere in the back of my mind, part of my goal." And took a couple of classes in undergrad. My first which was with Harry Attridge on "The Epistle to the Hebrews."

Tim: Holy cow.

Matt: Which I didn't know that he literally wrote the book, the commentary on Hebrews. It was just like this spiritually, nourishing, intellectually challenging. It was an incredibly rich experience. Basically, that was it. I was hooked. So this is all Harry's fault. And I remind him of that from time to time. But yeah, it's been a lot of fun.

Tim: Wow. Was your family environment growing up a religious environment that kind of fostered positive connections to the Bible at all?

Matt: Yeah, sure. So I grew up in an evangelical covenant church on the North Shore of Chicago. It was a good church that instilled a sort of love of Scripture, if also, you know, some sort of biblical leaning... some ideas about what the Bible was. I mean, I remember sort of getting to college with this belief that the Bible was this magic book, where if anyone read it with an open mind, they would come to the rational conclusion that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to save them from their sins. And I would invite my secular friends to read the Bible, and they seemed pretty fair-minded, and they didn't come to that conclusion. I remember feeling a bit betrayed. I don't know if anyone ever told me that...you know, no one I don't think ever probably said it exactly that way, but somewhere I had this belief about the Bible.

So definitely getting into Biblical Studies, and I think just growing up required sort of reconfiguring a good deal of those sort of...It's not really the Bible. It's like beliefs about the Bible that were hanging on to it, and figuring out how to set some of those aside that needed to be set aside, while still finding scripture to be a place that God inhabited and a place where I still might be able to meet with God, and bring my questions and try to puzzle out the deeper questions of life in that space.

Tim: Thank you for sharing. Talk to us about you're hooked on biblical studies. Your book "The Emergence of Sin", this was a book version of your dissertation. That's right?

Matt: Yeah. Yeah.

Tim: So were the questions that you were pursuing in the book, were those kind of forming early maybe before you really knew it, culmination, or did it come kind of later to you?

Matt: I think that this project really may owe its origins as much to a set of TED Talks as to anything that was at first in the Bible. I remember seeing a TED talk on sort of synchronicity and how complex systems just tend to sync up. There was this image that actually did make it into the book of the London Millennium Bridge. The day that was open and the way that sort of the crowd just walking across the bridge and the bridge's physical structure, and the movement of these people sort of became this sort of feedback loop where, I don't know, just sort of randomly the bridge started the, you know, more people were walking to the left, then to the right, and the bridge starts to sway just a little bit. And the more that the bridge starts to sway, the more people have to walk in step with the movement of the bridge. And then the thing just keeps feeding back on itself. And eventually you see this bridge swinging violently back and forth and people having a hard time standing up.

Anyway, it was that idea. I forget. There were several others or TED Talks. This idea, I didn't know what emergence was, but I sort of had a list of like Ted Talks, so I

thought, "The same idea just keeps coming up over and over and over again." And then what happened was, I was reading Jerome Murphy-O'Connor in his theological anthropology, his Paul and theological anthropology called "Becoming Human Together" I think. And he described sin this way.

And I think I described this in the book is sort of, like, he was like, maddeningly tantalizingly close, I thought, to the case. He describes this, there is no dictator who can be blamed for this. He says, it's a little bit like when these racist, these patriarchal, these...we can get into some of what these concrete systems might look like, but are all these sort of unjust systems that sort of catch us up, make us start to walk in step as it were. He used language that sounds exactly like the Millennium Bridge. He said, "It's like a crowd getting swept up in a panic." And I thought, "This is it."

Then he goes on, and says, "It is easy to see how this sense of being swayed by a force beyond human control could be transmuted in the mind of simple people into a belief in a supernatural evil power." And I just thought, "Wait. Wait. Wait. All of a sudden, we have to call people simple minded for...Where is that coming from?" The moment I saw that, I thought, "You mean simple minded people like Paul?"

Then the final piece was "I think Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's argument here is that we shouldn't confuse a complex system with a human person." But then the more I started to look into biological anthropology, the more I started to think, "Well, what else is a human person on the modern scientific account other than a complex system?" Anyway, that's, I think, sort of where all this started coming together for me.

Tim: So would you say that's kind of the core set of questions and interests that really drove you? Because it really drove you into two multidisciplinary project of both philosophy of science emergence and then Pauline theology.

Matt: I think that's right. I mean, my father is a Caltech trained chemist. One of my uncles was, until he retired, a NASA scientist. So scientific worldview was, as fundamental for me in certain ways, as anything I learned in church.

Tim: You're saying it felt natural to you to explore?

Matt: Absolutely. To really see things together. Like the world that Paul's describing has to be my world, so these sorts of different modes of explanation need to somehow be able to line up. And I think also the other thing that drove me in this direction was just thinking experientially. I feel like in my own life I know what it is to be caught up in patterns of thought, in modes of relating to people, in ways of exploiting and using power that seem bigger than me. Certainly, it's not that it's not my fault because I participate in those very systems. But any explanation of our moral lives that doesn't take into account those sorts of systems just seems incomplete to me.

Tim: Good. Let's tack it on to something real specific in Paul's letters as we go broader. In one of the opening chapters, you address what has been presented as a puzzle to modern interpreters of Paul. That he'll use the verb "to sin" or the noun "sin" describing stupid things that people do, terrible things people do. We've all sinned

and fallen short of the glory of God. But then Paul will also use the noun "sin," especially in Romans, he'll use the noun as an active agent of verbs. Sin enslaves, it rules, it deceives, it takes captive. And this has been a puzzle in modern interpretation of Paul. Some people explain in different ways, and it ties into what you're talking about is this mythological entity, is this invisible spiritual being with wings flapping around somewhere...

Matt: Oh, with a pitchfork.

Tim: With a pitchfork. Yeah. Talk to us about how people in the modern era have understood that and how that fits into your project.

Matt: So basically three different approaches, I think, that we can see. The first would be sort of Bultmann's approach, great modernist biblical critic, and the great demythologizer. And his basic take was, Paul may describe as a cosmic tyrant, as some sort of supernatural agent, but any of us, he thinks, who live in a world with modern technology can no longer entertain these sorts of fantasies. We need to find some other way of reading Paul's text to make it meaningful for us. Namely, we need to make it about our existential struggles to be moral, to be authentic, to be true to ourselves and sort of noble and just.

The second approach to that actually comes from one of his doctoral students, Ernst Käsemann, who very much in reaction to this insists, no, one of the first to give us a sort of thoroughly apocalyptic Paul, where the sort of this vibrant spiritual world isn't an incidental feature of Paul's thoughts that we can just scrape away to make it more amenable to our purposes. Käsemann says, "No, no, that's actually the fundamental issue for Paul. What it is to be human is to be someone set under lordship either of sin and evil or of grace and of God and of love."

I mean, this is the sort of Bob Dylan, you know, it may be the devil, it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody. Käsemann to this day has followers, Beverly Gaventa, J. Lewis Martin, folks like this, whose work I find really compelling in many ways.

The third approach, it comes from the sort of the liberationist camp, largely in Latin America. And these folks suggest that whatever you might say about sin as sort of individual existential failures, or as sort of a matter of cosmic tyranny, maybe the most salient way that we see sin in the modern world is actually as embedded in social institutions. And so here, there are some Marxist intuitions working. So you know, that's going to be the capitalist system, it's going to be unjust governments, it's going to be corporations that operate certain ways, racist structures, sexist structures.

And their thought is that these sorts of structures aren't just full of sinful people. The sin that we see operating there isn't just an aggregate, just an adding up of the sins of the individuals that are involved. There's actually a remainder left over that you can't really assign other than to the structure and the institutions themselves. And so Oscar Romero and others really lean into that interpretation.

It struck me I guess at first glance this sort of, why do we have to choose? Each of those seems to capture something really important, actually, about what Paul is trying to say - is there's some way of holding them all together. And really, for me, emergence theory then becomes a way of potentially validating each of these insights and giving a framework for interrelating them.

Tim: And for you, it all came together in the Millennium Bridge?

Matt: It did. Seriously.

Jon: And maybe this would be good moment to then try to really explain what emergence theory is. I mean, you gave the example of the bridge. But even there, maybe really be explicit. What is the emergent phenomena happening in the Millennium Bridge? And is there any other examples you like to go to?

Matt: Yeah. With emergence, we want to talk about two dynamics. One would be sort of supereminence relationship where...

Basically, when you think about emergence, first of all, you're thinking about the world as being stratified into various sorts of layers of complexity. And so in the physical sciences, we can think about that as a sort of the smallest, the micro, the most basic fundamental levels the sort of what particle physics and various sorts of physics describe. Then we would move up into the chemical. And the thought being, you know, a bunch of atoms doing their things or a bunch of subatomic particles doing their things becomes at some point chemistry. A bunch of chemicals, doing their thing eventually becomes biology. A certain sort of set of biological things doing their things become psychology. A bunch of individual psychology doing their things become sociology or become social entities. And you can keep on going.

Actually, there are multiple different philosophies of science all agree on this basic feature of the world. And basically, the big question in philosophy of science or one of the big questions is, how do you relate these layers? And this classic reductionist view would say, "Well, all that's real is what's really happening at the smallest, most fundamental level." So we can start all the way up in the social. What's happening in a social system? Oh, there's nothing real in a social system. That's just a convenient metaphor to use for talking about a bunch of individual psychologies. But when we think about individual psychologies, there's nothing real going on there either. What's really happening is a bunch of neurons firing inside a bunch of people's brains.

Jon: What would be a good example of a social emergent phenomenal? Like racism?

Matt: Yeah, like racism. A sort of reductionist view would say, "There's no real thing called race," or "maybe there's not even a real thing called racism. That's just a convenient way for talking about...For example, in some studies, we have sort of a Migdala excitation, you know. That sort of the fight or flight response - part of the brain sort of lighting up in certain social situations when you see an unfamiliar face to trigger this response. They say, "You can just see it. This is actually just brain function. And the brain function is just chemistry. And the chemistry is just physics, and the only thing that's real are these very, very lowest levels.

Emergence suggests instead, that these higher levels actually are irreducible to explaining the world as it actually is. That these aren't just convenient ways of talking about large sets of smaller entities, but that chemicals are real and biological animals are real and appropriate to talk about as units, and not just shorthand for talking about piles of particles. But it is true still to say an emergence just won't make sure it is... they would say it's important to still say that a chemical is composed of atoms and subatomic particles that do obey the laws of physics, and it is appropriate to say that, for example, racism is going to have sort of neurobiological substructure. It shouldn't be surprising that you can see in an fMRI machine, you can almost see racism happen as it were. That's the simplification, right? But that the world is sort of stitched together this way.

So those relationships, the sort of dependency of higher level, higher order social entities, say, on psychology, or psychologies dependent on biologies, those relationships are called relationships of supervenience. But then what's interesting is then you have this other half, which is this downward causation piece, where it's not just that my psychology emerges from my biology. But then on the emergence account, my psychology actually sort of constrains my biology in ways that change sort of how my biology works, which I take it is exactly what you can see in that fMRI machine where the social institution of American racism is actually changing the brain chemistry of American patients.

Tim: I mean you tap into the mind, body relation and debate. Even though it's actually kind of difficult to describe it, somehow it because we all know, basically what conscious mind is.

Jon: I was going to say this is getting really dense, and I can hear people through their headphones starting to kind of check out. But the mind thing, it's really practical.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That as an organism, we are complex...I don't know how you've described it, but we're a bunch of—

Tim: Complex biological systems?

Jon: Yeah. But we think of ourselves as kind of one thing. But in reality, we're like a super organism. And we wouldn't reduce ourselves to just, "Well, I'm just bacteria and cells and different things." I think of myself as a whole.

Tim: Although some people do. Like you said, Matt, a reductionist approach. And you come across this in the modern West is people who disbelieve in even the reality of their own consciousness in theory. They wouldn't in their real life experience. But in theory, they would say, "Well, my consciousness is just a happy byproduct of my biology."

Matt: There was This American Life episode not too long ago that ran exactly down this road, and basically suggested, I think, perhaps a little bit...I mean, I love This American Life, but I think it was a little bit intellectually irresponsible, actually, the extent to which they just said, "Well, this is just basic scientific fact that you are sort

of an illusion, and all that's real is your brain is producing this illusion of you, which you're pretty attached to, but otherwise, like really isn't a thing." That is out there. That's a problematic sort of way of thinking about it, I think.

The other problematic view, which is maybe more prevalent in religious circles is the dualistic approach. Which is to say, "Sure, my brain exists. And if I thought I was, in some sense, just a bunch of complex biological systems, oh, shoot, maybe I'd fall into the reductionist world and start to think I'm just a fiction of my own fictional imagination." But the dualist will then say, "No, no. I know what I am. I am a soul." And as I heard one dualist suggest as a slogan, "The brain," he suggested, "is just an electrified piece of meat your soul uses to think with." Like a strong sort of dualistic view would say, "You know, there's this whole other thing called soul that is sort of incomprehensible or indescribable unscientific terms that sort of can save you from reductionism, but I think leaves you in a place where..." I just thought that there would be this really huge part of our world that totally defies any sort of scientific explanation or even description.

Tim: That's helpful. I would like to hear back from you, if I understand what you were getting at. But one thing that came to me as I was reading your book is, a lot of this is debating about at what level does something become what we would call "real." So if I have my electrified piece of meat in my brain...

Jon: I love that.

Tim: ...but it is generating this thing that I experience as my mind and consciousness and emotions, it's fully dependent, in this moment, on that electrified piece of meat. The piece of meat constitutes and makes up what I experience as mind and consciousness. But at the same time, it's not reducible to any one little cells of the piece of electrified meat in my brand. And so, it's a different category of real. That's the phrase I kept coming back to me in my mind as I was reading through the book is, the emergence theory is a way of saying higher level entities are real, but they're real in a way that's emergent. Or they are in a different category of real than the level that they emerge from. That was the way that my electrified piece of meat was making sense of what you're saying.

Matt: I think that's quite right. And I suppose then the only thing I would want to add to that is to say that everything you care about is only real in that sense.

Tim: Yes, yes.

Matt: I forget who made this list, but somebody has some list of haircuts and dollars and humans and nations, and whatever. All of these things I guess are only real in the sense that they emerge from complex social structures that give them meaning and then from the physical things below that. So it strikes me as a bizarre move to try to say that anything less than...I don't know what's more real than that. You start to realize everything you care about is only that real.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: It's also striking me that as you try to be reductionistic and you get smaller and smaller and smaller, it becomes less understandable and almost less real to me. Like, once you get into the quantum realm, all of a sudden, we're like, "I don't know. What is that?"

Matt: What actually would count as most real then, it starts to like just sort of slip through your fingers. And some of the philosophers of chemistry that actually read on this said, strict reductionism depends on a sort of fantasy version of physics in which may be at the base level, we've got tiny little balls of stuff. But quantum mechanics severely complicates that view.

Tim: That supervenience that real entities exist that aren't reducible to the parts that they're made up of in a lower level.

Jon: For example, you. And, for example, the economy.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Or for example, sin. But then the other part of that you said is downward causation. My mind, which is constituted by my electrified piece of meat but not reducible to it, my mind can actually influence the shape of the piece of meat, and of my whole body by what I eat, and what I think about, and my mental habits that actually shape the physical structure of my brain. So these higher level entities exercise deep influence on every level that's below them too. That's a key part of what you're saying.

Matt: Right. And that's I think, part of the defense of even wanting to call them real. If they didn't have any sort of causal powers, it would be sort of like, "Well, okay, I guess if you want to call that real, that's fine. But it must be able to do something."

And certainly, that's the big question when it comes to persons is we think that people, persons are things that are able to do something in the world. And if I'm able to do something, then my mind that emerges from that electrified piece of meat can then electrify that piece of meat in various sorts of ways. It does get complicated trying to figure out exactly how that works. But in broad strokes, that's right. It's this feedback loop where this thing that emerges from this complex system can then constrain and act back on those basic complex structures from which it emerged.

Tim: So all the way back when Rudolf Bultmann says, when he reads Paul talking about sin as a tyrant that enslaves and rules and does things to you, he thinks simple-minded people might think of sin that way. But we know it's about my own personal crisis of moral decision making.

Jon: We could reduce it down to just the individual moral level.

Matt: Correct. Correct.

Tim: What you would want to respond is to say, "Well, what if what it requires for something to be a real person is..." We're talking about a different level. Paul has a different level of person or entity in mind when he imagines sin enslaving or deceiving a person or a whole group of people. So it's about what level of something

being a person, a will and volition, what level are we going to attach sin to? So many great chapters in this book.

But you focus on the concept of a superorganism. Something that's real. That you could call it a single organism or person, but that is made up of...I loved the beehive example, but you can use whatever example you want. But a superorganism, talk to me about that.

Matt: I think you're right. I think thinking about social insects is exactly the right way to think about this. When it comes to a beehive, it's not an easy question to answer. Which is the organism? The hive, or the individual bee? A bee can't reproduce. Most individual bees can't reproduce. Only the hive really can reproduce.

The individual bees aren't genetically distinct. They're all genetic copies of the queen. Entomologist E.O. Wilson suggests that it's better to think about individual bees the way you'd think about individual cells in your body. You have a bunch of different cells, but they all contain the same DNA, and they all sort of help you be you and do what you do. Which really starts to sound like, man, maybe the hive is the organism, and each bee is sort of like a cell. And the ways that they differentiate from one another or the ways that, like, a skin cell is different from a blood cell, not the way that like one human being is different from another.

But the whole point here is that, well, it's sort of an open question, and neither answer seems obviously wrong. But certainly, the larger option seems totally plausible. Maybe the super organism is the right level to be like the individual. That's the real thing. Which I think opens us up for thinking about larger social bodies that we might be a part of, which ends up getting us I think, actually, pretty close to some of the language that Paul uses.

Tim: Our concept of what is a person or an organism really depends on your vantage point within the hierarchy of complexities.

Jon: If you were a cell living in a human body and had your own consciousness, you wouldn't really be thinking about the collection of cells having consciousness. You'll just be doing your thing. If you're just a bee going from flower to flower, you imagine to be having its own consciousness, whatever that is, but yeah.

Tim: That's helpful. It's helpful as an analogy. Actually, I found myself after reading the book, going throughout my days, I would have this meta-reflection. I would be like, "I want a cup of coffee right now." I'd be walking by a coffee shop, and then I just began to think about coffee is a big deal in Portland, huge part of the food economy. And then I started thinking about why do I desire certain kinds of coffee. Like, that's not innate to me, I hated my first cup of coffee when I was like, whatever, 12 or 13. So actually, this desire for certain kinds of coffee is a fabricated one from my environment and my lived experience.

And then there are certain kinds of advertising and certain kinds of aesthetic of certain shops that's designed by an aesthetic approach. These are systems. Then I would just like be having a cup of coffee and be like, "I'm just to be right now doing what I'm programmed to do." But yeah, I am a responsible moral agent. And those

aren't opposites to each other. It's just a wider framework. Just very helpful. Very helpful for me.

Jon: So I think the crux of this then is, how does this relate to Paul and how he talks about sin and its influence on us? Maybe speak to that a little bit, Matt

Matt: I think one of the sort of pivotal texts for me is Romans 6:6, which talks about the body of sin, which I had never reflected on too much until I had sort of done some of this thinking about the science, and I started to think, "Well, what on earth is body of sin?" And thought, "Well, I mean, one obvious answer would be its analogous to the body of Christ. Why does anybody read it like that?" It turns out Anders Nygren did back in the day, but very few people have read it that way.

But I started to think, "Well, if sin is a person, then might sin not have a body? And if sin had a body, what sort of body would it be? Well, it might really be something analogous in certain ways to the body of Christ. That is that we might sort of makeup collectively the body of sin. And as our desires are being fundamentally shaped, or we might say, from a moral point of view, misshapen, by certain sorts of social perversions..." I mean, Augustine thinks that what you desire, this is actually central to your moral formation.

So once we see a sort of market economy, you know, the onslaught of advertising starting to fundamentally shape the way what it is that we desire, we can start to see, "Oh, here it is, I'm starting to become a sort of part of some larger entity." Which I take it Paul is describing as the body of sin.

Tim: And so Paul has some...his mind has been shaped in such a way that he can envision as a personal entity, a corporate human superorganism, and call it sin, and talk about it as the agent. You were the first person who drew my attention to Nygren's work about the body of sin as like this antibody of Christ.

Maybe it means grappling a new with the imagery of body of Christ, which is on the surface more familiar to many readers of Paul's letters because he uses it all over the place. But we wouldn't say, well, therefore, Christ, the new human isn't real because he is constituted by his body. No one takes that away from Paul's phrase "the body of Christ." Maybe some people do. Maybe some people do, I don't know. But I'm just trying to play out the analogy the body of sin, the body of Christ.

It begs the question, of course, then, who or what is that "person"? Who's the head of the body of sin that's the equivalent to the head of the body of Christ in Paul's thought? What should that be in our thought too? Do you have any thoughts about that?

Matt: I think it's important that we say that there are analogies straw, but there are also important disanalogies. There are ways that these two bodies are very different from one another. For example, I don't think that strictly within Christian theology we would think of Christ as constituted by his body. By the body of Christ, that is. It's not like, no church, and then there's no Christ anymore. But we might think about the body of sin that way. And so trying to keep this not from straying too far into the theological nerd route, but there are...Well, I'll try this out.

So there aren't certain ways of thinking about the doctrine of God. You can talk about God having two different natures: consequent, and antecedent. What those mean are, the antecedent nature of God is God's sort of prior existence as sort of the ground of all being. But then God also has this consequent sort of existence along these lines of theological reflection, which is, God in relation to God's creation as it unfolds. And I think we would say, if that's true about God, and therefore true about Christ, we would then say that sin would be like Christ, and that it has this consequent nature, it's part of the unfolding of creation, but it would not share in God's antecedent nature, this sort of prior existence. That is, sin's just a creature like us. And I take it no sinners, then there is no sin, at least on this on this reading. But no church, there still is Christ.

Tim: How is that related to C.S. Lewis? He had this metaphor that appeared in a couple of his writings about evil as a parasite on the good, namely, that it doesn't actually have its own existence. Its existence depends on something prior to it, namely, the Gods good world. And so in that sense, it actually isn't really a thing. It's a thing that exists only as a distortion of the ultimately real thing. Is that related to what you're talking about?

Matt: I think it is. And here I'll admit that there's a bit of attention in my own thought on this matter. I think sometimes I'm inclined to think, "Nah, sin's just as real as any other creature." What Lewis is pointing at, and what Carl Bart also would be sort of in line with this thinking, is that sin may be less real even than a creature. I'll leave that as an open question. But at any rate, what it isn't, is it's not as real as God. What certainly isn't is we don't have a dualistic world here where there's the angel on one shoulder, and there's the devil on the other, or there's, you know, God the power of good and sin or the devil as the power of evil and they're equal into opposite forces. There is a priority to the good. I think that's a helpful corrective for us.

It depends on what sorts of lines we're trying to draw. If we're drawing a line between natural on the one hand and supernatural on the other, then we'd be inclined to put ourselves on the natural side, and maybe sin, any sort of cosmic power, demons, etc., and God and angels on the supernatural side. Paul didn't know anything about natural or supernatural division. That was invented during the enlightenment.

If instead, we're drawing a Pauline distinction between creative things, on the one hand, and the creator on the other, then I think we're working with categories that are more familiar to Paul. And in that case, sin definitely goes on our side of the line, maybe even a little further away from the real maybe then we are if Bart or Lewis is right. But I think that really helps keep our minds straight about what sort of thing we're talking about, even when we try to take Paul's mythological language seriously.

Tim: And that's the body of Christ metaphor is Christ is on the God creator side of that equation in Paul's thought. And therefore prior to any body through which he manifests himself in the world, that's the mismatched part of the analogy, where the body of sin is a distortion of what ought to be the body of the Creator, namely, his people.

Matt: What seems really important to me about suggesting that we're already a part of a body of sin is that I think otherwise, when we think about the body of Christ, our modern individualism makes us imagine that, "Well, before we joined the body of Christ, we're sort of free agents." And a weird thing that the body of Christ is, is that now we start to participate in this weird sort of communal life that's sort of foreign to who we naturally are as free agents. This is where Käsemann is right. Paul's imagination is, "Now you're always already part of a social existence. You're always being constrained by some sort of moral community, some sort of social community. What changes when you join the body of Christ is you're transferred from one social body to another rather than going from being a free agent into this new social arrangement."

Tim: Let's go back to my coffee analogy. Then I am enslaved to the body of coffee in that way. I am.

Jon: Help me understand that one.

Tim: Well, it's just that I was enculturated and socialized into my need for—

Jon: But there's no superorganism, what we would call, like—

Tim: No.

Jon: Well, I guess there's—

Tim: I'm picking a maybe morally neutral one.

Matt: It may be, you know, the coffee-industrial complex may not be quite complex enough to qualify as an integrated super organism. But it may be, you know, on its way there.

Jon: Yeah, it's on its way. So when did sin emerge to become its own thing? When we get to Genesis 3, we encounter a creature that seems to have existed, which already is part of this whole body of sin and death.

Matt: Oh, that's a terrible question. By which I mean that's a great question. That's the sort of question you hope no one asks. Paul deals with this in Romans 5. Paul's thought is that when sin comes, sin enters in, and then exercises dominion. I'm inclined to think of that as sin entering in through Adam and Eve's transgressions, and then exercising dominion thereafter. I recognize that that changes the logic of the narrative of which sort of comes first.

But for my money at least, I'm already thinking about this sort of Garden of Eden narrative in more poetic sort of terms. So I'm willing to make my peace with that. But I certainly recognize that I think Genesis 3 has a different sort of angelology or demonology, sort of different understanding of the origin of evil. But man, that's serpent is hard to pin down. That serpent is not named as Satan. It's not named as sin. So it is a slippery thing, regardless. But your point is well taken. I think it does require some sort of rejiggering of how this works.

Jon: Well, and you probably appreciate that coming from an evangelical background that the paradigm is we were created into this system that already was in place with good and evil. And then we got to choose between the two. And it sounds like you're wrestling through maybe a more different nuance of it, which is that us wrestling through it, and making these poor decisions and creating that culture, then sin emerges out of—

Matt: That's helpful. Let's think about it this way. Adam's decision is different than mine. Adam chooses disobedience. But Adam doesn't choose disobedience within a social structure that sort of helps him do so

Jon: Oh, sure. There was no culture yet.

Matt: And so I guess that would be the sort of distinction I'm trying to make is that the sin in Paul's sort of vivid sense of this sort of tyrant, Adams not under sins dominion as he chooses to sin. You and I and every other human we've ever interacted with has been under the dominion of sin as we choose sin.

Jon: But is there a place for you then for some other type of as Paul would call the powers and authorities?

Tim: That's right. I did want to ask you if you would say there's an analogy between Paul's concept of the superorganism sin, and his language about the principalities, powers, and authorities. Because there's actually a related puzzle there. Paul's language about the powers, he can use the same vocabulary to talk about the Roman governor, to talk about the high priestly system that killed Jesus, and to talk about what we would call spiritual powers. But it's the same vocabulary, which seems just like the sin vocabulary can refer to something we will call human, to something we will call cosmic. I'm curious if you've given thought to that, or how you would talk about it.

Matt: Well, I suggest in the book that we can understand the ancient goddess Roma as one of these sort of emergent entities who I would take to be...I mean, this is the goddess who herself sort of embodies the Roman Empire in some ways that Paul may have in mind as he's thinking about Rome as a sort of single entity. I was trying to be circumspect in the book, as a scholar is supposed to be and be careful about, you know, not getting too wide-ranging. But here among friends, I will happily say, I'm quite inclined to try to think about, certainly some amount of what Paul's doing there with this language along exactly these lines. And I think my exploration of this sort of cult of the goddess Roma, and even some of the ways that ancient Roman philosophers are talking about the Roman Empire, or certainly the Roman army as an extension of the body of the Emperor. And the emperor is the sort of animating spirit of the body, which is the empire.

In that sense, I think I suggest at one point, that Nero, that some of these more sort of egomaniacal emperors may in a certain sense, be a sort of incarnation, as it were, of this goddess Roma. I think it makes a lot of sense. As you said before, Paul has ancient reasons and ancient resources for thinking about social bodies this way. These stoic philosophers who are thinking about the Roman Empire in exactly these terms are chief among them. And so, yeah, in as much as it's the same intellectual

resources for Paul, the same basic ideas in his context that help him think about sin and think about powers and authorities this way, why not exploit the same opportunity for us in thinking on emergent terms in both contexts as well?

Tim: It's really helped me actually feel like Paul is actually a little more sane as he looks out at the world than perhaps Rudolf Bultmann was in the sense of being able to actually account for the whole of my human experience, which is a social collective experience, as much as it is my own individual experience of life and my moral decisions. I mean, who doesn't have moral conflict over what their governing structures are doing in the world? It's hard to pin them to one person. It's a whole system. And I don't know, maybe a reductionist or somebody like Rudolf Bultmann could talk about those structures. But they didn't read Paul in those terms. It's really helpful.

Thank you so much. It's been very fun to talk with you. If you're in a local church, or you're invited to a Christian campus group, and you're trying to share what you think matters about these ideas in the evening talk to some college students or to local church, what are some ways that you would encourage just a local community of Jesus' followers to take these ideas seriously?

Matt: I think for me, what's most important is to help people see themselves as fundamentally, socially constrained. So I think the mythology that we're bought into is a myth of individuality, a myth of individualism. And those are the things I think that need to be demythologized. And so I want to help people see rightly the ways that we are not our own masters. We are constrained by our social institutions, by the communities we choose to invest in, by the patterns of thought we choose to fall into or rather don't intentionally choose. And so, therefore, think really seriously about our participation in certain sorts of systems. And to take seriously our culpability, when we participate in racist, sexist, classist systems of various sorts. And of course, you pose this as a hypothetical, I'm a Vineyard pastor. This is my world.

The other thing that's really important to me is to say to people, "Look, all three of these ways of thinking about sin are important and valuable. Because they point to different parts of the Christian life. It's important to think about sin at the individual level, my own sort of my individual misdeeds, the ways that I harm other people in the world. And to think about sort of personal discipleship, and sometimes therapy is a really important part of that. Like working on my psychology that's actually really important and part of my discipleship. But it's also important to recognize the sort of large social structures and to strive for justice, you know, in response to the malformations of social structures. That's also an important part of discipleship. It's an important part of participating in the coming of God's kingdom. But it's also important at the same time, I think, and appropriate to...I'm in a Vineyard Church for good charismatics.

I mean, you got to like, recognize some spirits and pray for deliverance and cast out demons and take seriously this sort of the spiritual dimension of what's going on. But I would just hope to be inviting people, whether it's through whatever sort of reflection they're engaged in, to be looking for ways to hold their whole world together so that they can live forward in all three of those sorts of modes.

Tim: Thank you. Thanks. That's a really helpful response. Matt, this has been a great privilege. It's really fun to talk with you. And thank you again, for the many years and sleepless nights of writing that book. It wasn't just stimulating for me. It was immensely helpful.

Jon: Oh, man, Tim was talking about it constantly while he was reading it. It was blowing his mind one hour after the next.

Tim: So thank you for the effort you put into that. I trust that it will do what God was calling it to do through you as you wrote that.

Matt: Well, thank you for the time and attention you gave to it. Honestly, it's always a serious honor when someone takes the time to really invest themselves in a set of ideas. And this has been a really fun conversation. Thanks.

Tim: Likewise, Matt. Thanks again, for taking the time.

Matt: Be well.

[00:53:42]

Jon: That was really great. I'm slightly concerned that it was too intellectual.

Tim: Oh, interesting.

Jon: I mean, it took every amount of focus with my electrified meat.

Tim: Well, especially the conversation about emergence theory is theoretical.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But I think the brain analogy is helpful. We use the word brain to talk about a physical thing in my skull, but we use the word "mind" to talk about the thing that emerges from it. I wouldn't experience my mind without my brain. But my mind also can form thoughts and ideas that exert influence on my brain and body

Jon: So there's the philosophical part of that.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Then there's another part of it, which is I guess maybe the fear of, are we dismissing some sort of real other types of power by just calling it emergence. I think what I'm reflecting on is, you know, by using this language and talking this way, it feels at first like maybe we're taking the devil or Satan less seriously. But in a way, this actually starts to make powers of evil and sin way more serious.

Tim: And more real.

Jon: And more real.

Tim: I think so. I think that's why I found it helpful was first it puts back on the table what is the definition of a real person. And maybe I'm just taking an assumed definition of a personal being, and saying, therefore, a spiritual being must, like sin, or the principalities and powers in Paul's thought. Why am I taking it for granted that I know what kind of being that that is? Maybe it's a being kind of exists in a way that's a very different kind of personal being than I am.

Matt's work shows that there are actually lots of different ways to talk about a personal being being real, but that isn't a person like I am. That's helpful to me and to your point. I think it actually makes these personal realities more of a present and visible force in my day to day life than whatever. I just think of silly medieval concepts of like reptilian creatures flapping about that are invisible.

Jon: But the comfort in that is there's this meta-story that helped me understand, and I feel like you guys are kind of trying to take that away from me a little bit. I lumped you into his thesis project.

Tim: And even notice when we asked him about that

Jon: Does the devil exist...

Tim: And I think he's working out his own way of talking about that, I think I still am, too, but for me, what's helpful is that he's forcing me to think about it in ways that I haven't before. And then I go back to texts in Paul or Genesis, then I realized, like, "Oh, yeah, that's quite doesn't say what I assumed that it said."

Jon: And whatever way the Satan, the devil exists, what we're not saying is that he doesn't exist. What we're saying is that there is a power, there is a creature, there is an entity, there's something. But what it is, how it came to be, these are all things that are way beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Tim: Or that I shouldn't think that the simplest explanation to me is, therefore, the right one. Reality is extremely complex. And the biblical literature that talks about these things is actually fairly nuanced and complex. We've talked about this. The spiritual powers of evil, like the snake, for example, in Genesis 3, the power and agency of that being becomes real in and through a human decision. The power of that being is fully connected to humans who are under its influence and acting upon it. And then right after page three, it's the human actions that become the foreground of the story. I think that's saying something.

Jon: Well, could you say that in the same way, if humans on a collective level, who are making poor decisions are like, you know, swaying the Millennium Bridge in a way that it becomes its own power, that then becomes its own superorganism? In that same way, couldn't the Divine Council rebelling create the same sort of phenomena which then does preexist humanity in some way?

Tim: Oh, I understand. Because the Divine Council is tied very much up with this vision, and it's right there in Genesis 1 right on through the end that...

Jon: It's a parallel story.

Tim: ...the heavenly realm is a mirror of the earthly realm.

Jon: I know. I want to create this kind of he's used the word ontology, just of that it was first...it existed and then we come on to the scene later.

Tim: Well, in Genesis 1, the heavenly realm and the earthly realm are both created. Neither one of them is prior. They're brought into existence in the same narrative, and they're mirrors of each other.

Jon: Yeah, sure.

Tim: And so, therefore, a human rebellion is corresponding to a heavenly rebellion. The Heavenly realities are usually in the background, but then occasionally, they peek out. The book of Daniel that we've been exploring is a great example, where he sees empires warring, and then he has a vision, and he sees Gabriel of the heavenly host saying, "Yeah, man, three weeks I was fighting with the Prince of Persia up here." So the biblical authors assume a heavenly, earthly mirrored reality when it comes to evil. There you go.

Matt's work has given me some very helpful categories to critique my previously held assumptions about how I read and even think about any of this in the Bible. So I don't think he thinks he's offering his last word, but he definitely is pushing us to think and imagine wider, which is very helpful for me.

Jon: Very, very cool. What a cool guy.

Tim: That was a great conversation. I enjoyed doing that.

Jon: If you're following along with this podcast maybe for the first time, this is The Bible Project. We're a nonprofit, primarily an animation studio, I suppose. But we exist to show the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. We have animations, explainer videos, we've got this podcast, study notes. It's all free, and you can find it on our websites, thebibleproject.com. And it's made possible because of thousands of generous supporters.

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