

Lesson II: Questions 16, 17, and 18

In our last lesson we considered two truths that must be held together.

Q14: God governs all His creatures and all their actions in His most holy, wise, and powerful providence.

Q15: In the estate wherein man was created, God entered into a covenant of life with Adam, upon condition of perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil upon pain of death.

This lesson brings us to the next questions: the Fall, sin itself, and the sin of the Fall.

16-18

Question 16: Were our first parents faithful?

Q. Did our first parents continue in the estate wherein they were created?

A. Our first parents being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the estate wherein they were created, by sinning against God.

The answer is brief, but it is one of the great turning points in all Christian doctrine: no, they did not continue. They fell. Up to this point the catechism has taught us about God's goodness in creation, man's original uprightness, and the covenant arrangement in Eden. Now we are told that our first parents did not remain in that blessed state. They fell from it.

The catechism says they were "left to the freedom of their own will". That phrase must be handled carefully. It does not mean Adam and Eve were outside God's providence, nor does it mean they were independent of Him. It means their sin was voluntary. They were not forced into rebellion. God did not make them sin. He did not compel them against their will. They sinned *willingly*, and therefore they sinned *truly*.

That is exactly the point of **Ecclesiastes 7:29**: "*See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*" The verse assigns the blame with clarity. God made man upright. What went wrong did not come from the Creator's hand as evil. It came from the creature's turning. Man was made straight, but man sought out crooked paths.

That matters because sinners are always looking for excuses. Ever since Eden, man has tried to move blame away from himself. We are happy to blame circumstances, pressure, weakness, upbringing, or other people. There can be partial truths in some of those explanations, but none of them removes guilt. The catechism will not allow us to blame God, and it will not allow us to hide behind circumstances. God made man upright. Man fell by sinning against God.

[6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. [8] And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:6-8, ESV)

Genesis 3:6-8 shows the shape of that fall. Eve saw, desired, took, and ate. Adam, who was with her, also ate. Then came the immediate consequences: shame, exposure, covering, and hiding. Sin did not raise them upward. It did not make them godlike. It stripped them. The first response of fallen man was not joy but shame, and not confession but concealment. As soon as sin entered, fellowship was broken and fear took its place.

Genesis 3:13 sharpens the point. When God asks the woman what she has done, she says, "*The serpent deceived me, and I ate.*" That statement includes a real element of truth, but it is still evasive. She was deceived, yes, but she also ate. The deception was the *occasion*; the eating was the *act*. She does not simply say, "I sinned." Already the instinct to shift blame is at work.

This is part of what the Fall means. It means more than the first sin itself. It means the loss of original righteousness, the entrance of guilt and corruption, and the rupture of communion with God. It means that the world we know is not the world as God first made it. Shame, fear, alienation, and death are intruders. They belong to a fallen order, not to the goodness of creation as it came from God's hand.

But before you judge Adam too harshly, remember that he was our perfect representative, both upright and pure. We often imagine that if we had been in Adam's place, we would have done better. But the history of our own lives says otherwise. As Voddie Baucham put it, "*if God had substituted you or anyone else for Adam, the fall would have still happened. It would have just happened faster. Maybe with more flair.*"¹ The pattern of Eden repeats itself in us constantly. We question God's goodness, we treat His command as negotiable, we reach for what He has forbidden, and then we hide. The Fall is not only something that happened back then. It explains what we are by nature now.

At the same time, this question prepares the way for hope. If man truly fell, then man cannot restore himself. If the problem is not superficial but moral and spiritual, then the remedy must come from outside us. The catechism is not leading us into despair. It is laying the groundwork for the necessity of a Redeemer. But first, we must receive the bad news.

Question 17: What is sin?

Q. What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Having told us *that* our first parents fell by *sinning* against God, the catechism now asks the obvious next question: what *is* sin? The answer it gives is short, but remarkably full. It tells us that sin includes both what we fail to be and what we actively do. It includes *falling short* and *crossing the line*. It includes *omission* and *commission*.

First, sin is any *want of conformity (omission)* unto the law of God. The older word "want" here means lack. Sin is not only *doing what God forbids*. It is also *failing to be what God requires*. That matters because many people think of sin only in outward terms. They think mainly of obvious acts: lies, theft, adultery, drunkenness, blasphemy. Those are certainly sins. But the catechism, reflecting the Scriptures, is wiser and deeper than that. It reminds us that sin also includes *deficiency, inward crookedness, and falling short* of the full obedience God deserves.

Where God's law requires love, lack of love is sin.

Where God's law requires truth in the inward parts, inward falseness is sin.

Where God's law requires holiness, pride, envy, and unbelief are sin, even when "internal".

We do not have to commit scandalous public evil to be sinners. To fail to conform to the law of God entirely is itself sin. We often think of God's Law as a list of "thou shalt not" commands, but:

[4] "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [5] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, ESV)

Second, sin is any *transgression (commission)* of the law of God. This is sin in the more obvious sense: stepping over the boundary God has set. It is disobedience to a known command. This is the sense emphasized in **1 John 3:4**: "*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.*" That is plain and direct. Sin is not merely *unfortunate* or *unwise*; it is *lawlessness*.

That word matters. It tells us that sin is not defined by personal preference, social trends, or cultural consensus. Sin is measured by the law of God. Yes, even under the New Covenant. What makes sin sinful is that it stands against His rule. The issue is not simply that a person has made a mess of his life, though sin certainly does that. The issue is that he has violated the authority of God.

¹ Voddie Baucham, 'Creation and the Fall (Session 1, Semper Reformanda 2022)', October 21, 2022.
<https://web.sermonaudio.com/sermons/10222261125264>

Put those two halves together and you begin to see how searching this definition is. Sin covers *what we should not do, but do*. But it also covers *what we should do, but do not*. It covers wrong acts, but it also covers defective hearts. It covers open rebellion, but it also covers inward lack of conformity. The definition leaves us nowhere to hide.

That is one reason why modern man prefers softer vocabulary. We often hear people speak of mistakes, wounds, trauma, struggles, unhealthy patterns, or bad choices. Some of those words can describe aspects of real experience. But none of them is large enough to carry the full moral weight of sin. The Bible does not flatten sin into mere pain, nor does it reduce it to poor judgment. Sin is not merely “missing the mark”. Sin is *lawlessness*. It is want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

This is also why sin is ultimately Godward. The law at stake is *His* law. To sin is not merely to *malfunction*. It is to *offend* the holy God. That is what makes forgiveness necessary, atonement necessary, and reconciliation necessary.

If sin were merely *ignorance*, we would need *instruction*.

If sin were merely *weakness*, we would need *strengthening*.

But since sin is *lawlessness* before God, then we need *pardon, cleansing, and righteousness*.

And that is exactly what the catechism is doing here. It is not trying to crush us for the sake of crushing us. It is trying to teach us to speak truthfully about our condition. Until we understand what sin is, we will not understand why Christ had to come. A small view of sin will always produce a small view of grace. But when we see that sin is broad, deep, and Godward, then the gospel begins to appear as the glorious thing it truly is.

So this question should do two things in us.

1. It should *humble us*, because God’s Law reaches further than our outward behavior.

2. It should *make us honest*, because our problem is deeper than we often admit.

It is not enough to ask whether we avoided certain outward sins today. We must also ask whether we conformed entirely to what God requires. By that standard, every mouth is stopped.

Question 18: What was the sin of the Fall?

Q. What was the sin whereby our first parents fell from the estate wherein they were created?

A. The sin whereby our first parents fell from the estate wherein they were created, was their eating the forbidden fruit.

Now the catechism returns from the *general definition* of sin to the *particular act* by which the Fall entered history. The answer is striking in its simplicity: they ate the forbidden fruit. That may sound almost too simple. But the simplicity is part of the point. The Fall was not an *abstraction*. It was not a *myth* about human limitation. It was a *real act of disobedience in space and time* (~6,000 years ago).

Genesis 3:6 identifies that act. Eve took of the fruit and ate, and gave some to Adam, and he ate. The outward act was not *complicated*. But it was *full of meaning*. God had spoken clearly. He had set *one* boundary in the midst of abundance. Every other tree was freely given. This *one* tree was forbidden. The issue, then, was not the fruit as such. The issue was obedience to God’s Word.

That is important. The seriousness of the first sin is not measured by the apparent smallness of the act. Proud human reason looks at the eating of fruit and thinks, “surely the matter cannot be that serious.” But Scripture teaches us otherwise. The heinousness of a sin is measured not merely by the outward act, but by the God against Whom it is committed. Adam and Eve were not merely taking food. *They were rejecting the authority of their Creator*.

Genesis 3:12 shows how quickly this disobedience bore bitter fruit. Adam says, “*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.*” He admits the act, but he does not own the guilt plainly. He shifts blame toward the woman and, indirectly, even toward God. Sin had hardly entered the world before it began to distort human relationships and corrupt honest confession.

Genesis 3:16-17 shows the judicial consequences that followed. To the woman God speaks of multiplied pain in childbearing and sorrow in the marriage relation. To Adam He says, “*Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it’, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.*” The result of that one act is not minor inconvenience. It is curse, sorrow, toil, disorder, and death.

That teaches us something we must never forget: ***sin is never small***. We are tempted to think lightly of “little” acts of disobedience. But Eden teaches us that ***there is no little sin against a holy God***. The first transgression was one act of eating, yet from it came misery for the whole race. That does not make God severe in the wrong sense. It reveals how glorious and holy He is, and how serious rebellion against Him really is.

This question also keeps before us the covenantal character of Adam’s sin. Adam did not stand merely as a ***private person***. He stood as ***the federal, covenantal head*** of the human race. His obedience would have had public consequences, and so did his disobedience. That is why the catechism gives an entire question to this apparently simple act. The eating of the forbidden fruit is not an embarrassing detail to be hurried past. It is the hinge on which the history of man turns.

And here again, the catechism is preparing us for Christ.

Since one man’s ***disobedience*** brought ruin, we need One Man’s ***obedience*** to bring life.

Since Adam ***fell*** in paradise by ***disobedience***, we need Christ to ***stand*** under trial by ***obedience***.

The doctrine of Adam’s first sin is not a distraction from the gospel. It is one of the things that makes the gospel intelligible. If we do not have a real, historical Adam who stood in our place, then we do not have a real Savior who can save us. Our understanding of salvation hinges on our understanding of Adam and the Fall.

We should also let this question search us personally. We are not standing before the same tree, but the root issue remains the same. Will we live by God’s Word, or will we decide that our judgment is better? Will we submit as creatures, or will we grasp at autonomy? Every temptation carries some echo of Eden. Sin still says that God’s boundary is too narrow, His warning too strict, and His gifts not enough.

Conclusion

These questions belong together.

- **Question 16:** our first parents fell from perfection in Eden by sinning.
- **Question 17:** sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.
- **Question 18:** they fell by eating the forbidden fruit.

These are hard truths, but they are necessary ones. They explain why the world is as it is, why we are as we are, and why salvation cannot come from man himself. The catechism is teaching us to tell the truth about ***sin*** so that we will be ready to hear the truth about ***grace***.

Since man fell, man needs rescue.

Since sin is lawlessness, we need more than advice.

Since Adam’s disobedience brought curse, only Christ’s obedience can bring blessing.

So as you go into this week, let these questions do their work.

- **First**, let them make you ***honest***. Stop speaking lightly about sin in yourself. Call it what Scripture calls it. Be quicker to ***confess*** than to ***excuse***.
- **Second**, let them make you ***grateful***. The darker the truth about Adam’s fall, the brighter the glory of Christ’s obedience appears.

The first Adam brought ruin.

The last Adam brings life.