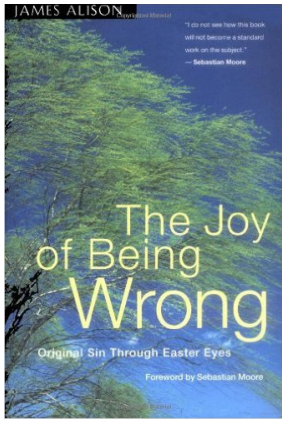
Excerpt Page for Lent 4 (from James Alison) — March 15, 2026

Excerpt from James Alison's *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* [Crossroad, 1998], pages 119-25.

The section titled "The Johannine Witness" in Chapter 4, "The Resurrection and Original Sin"



In John Chapter 9 we have, according to Raymond Brown, "Johannine dramatic skill at its best." We also have an extraordinary meditation on the redefinition of sin as worked by Jesus. At the beginning of the tale, we find the disciples questioning Jesus as to the cause of the blindness of a man blind from birth in terms of sin. Is he blind because of his sin, or that of his parents? At the end of the chapter, Jesus indicates the change in the understanding of blindness that has come about thanks to his presence: "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" (John 9:39). What has happened in between?

The structure of what has happened is twofold: it is simultaneously that of an inclusion and an exclusion. In the first place, the story is of an inclusion. The man was blind from birth, and thus cut off not only from a certain participation in a human good, but also from full integration into the community of Israel. His blindness was considered part of a moral defect that meant he was ipso facto impure and unable to participate fully in the cultic life of Israel.[1] His sight is easily given him on a Sabbath (which element, so important in other accounts of Jesus' healings, is scarcely given a place at all in this account), and integrated into the life of the people by the process of his healing. The healing has various elements: clay[2] is used, mixed with Jesus' spittle thus showing Jesus as fulfilling the original creation, and bringing it to perfection.[3] The man is sent to a pool outside the city, and comes back seeing. Most commentators see in this detail, as in the whole story, reference to the baptismal process of illumination, thus indicating that an historical incident is being re-told in the light of the resurrection which had made of Baptism the way in to the Church. It is by this washing in a pool, considered by Rabbinic sources a place of purification, that sight was given. The man was now able, at least in theory, to be integrated fully into the life of Israel.

Then there is the story of the exclusion: the former blind man is taken to the Pharisees, and, as they investigate the nature of his cure, it becomes more and more apparent that Jesus was involved in the cure. Since such a cure would suggest the messianic nature of Jesus, the pharisees at first doubt the cure, and then become increasingly abusive in their questioning. Finally they throw the former blind man out. During this process of increasing violence, there is simultaneously a process by which the blind man (who had never seen Jesus, because he actually received his sight at the pool of Siloam), becomes increasingly aware of who Jesus is: first he is just a man, then a prophet, finally he is a man from God who is superior to Moses (having done a work after all, that has never been known since the world began). At this point he is cast out. Jesus then comes to him, and he is able to recognize his benefactor as Lord and worship him. It is interesting that it is during the process of

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[1]Leviticus 21:18 prohibits blind descendants of Aaron from exercising the priesthood, but the disciples' question about sin indicates a popular appreciation of blindness as going further than mere cultic disqualification.

[2]Heb.: *adamah/adam* — the obvious pun.

[3]This is also the sense of Jesus' Sabbath miracles: showing God not as resting but as continuing and fulfilling creation.

his exclusion that he comes to perceive with increasing clarity the nature of his benefactor, at the same time as the pharisees become increasingly hardened in their attitude towards Jesus.

Jesus' final comment, "For judgement I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind," is his assessment of the whole story. In the first place Jesus has carried out no active judgement at all. The only judgement related in the story has been that of the pharisees, casting the man out. This is part of the ironic Johannine re-casting of judgement by which it is by being crucified that Jesus is the real judge of his judges. So because Jesus is the cause of the former blind man's expulsion, the former blind man shares Jesus' rôle as judge of those who have expelled him. It is not that Jesus simply abolishes the notion of judgement or is merely much more of a judge than the other judges: the sense in which Jesus is a judge is a subversion from within of the notion of judgement. The judgement that excluded the former blind man is revealed as the judgement (also discernment) that the expellers are really blind.

In this story then we watch a revolution in the understanding of sin, and a revolution that takes place around the person of Jesus but is actually worked out in the life of someone else. The structure of the story is the same as is to be found time and time again in John: that of an expulsion, or proto-lynching, one of the many that lead up to the definitive expulsion of the crucifixion, which is also the definitive remedy for all human order based on expulsion. The revolution in the concept of sin consists in the following: at the beginning of the tale, sin was considered in terms of some sort of defect that excludes the one bearing the defect. At the end of the tale sin is considered as the act of exclusion: the real blindness is the blindness which is not only present in those who exclude, but actually grows and intensifies during the act of exclusion.

This change of perception is exactly the change that was wrought by the resurrection of the crucified Christ. That is to say that what John has done is apply to one of Jesus' no-doubt historical healings of a blind man on the Sabbath the revolution in the understanding of sin that came about as a result of the resurrection. The sin of the world is understood quite specifically as being involved in the work of "your father the devil," who "was a murderer from the beginning."[4] Sin is recast entirely in the light of the casting out of Jesus. Jesus is quite specifically shown as having no problem with the sort of "sin" that is taken to exclude the "sinner" from the community: he cures the blind man with no problem at all (just as, in the previous chapter, he held nothing against the woman caught in adultery, but everything against those who would stone her). Sin is revealed as the mechanism of expulsion which is murderous, and those are blind sinners who are involved in that mechanism without being aware of what they are doing. The problem is not with those who are only blindly part of the mechanism of exclusion: they at least do not know what they are doing, and thus have no guilt. The problem is with those (like the pharisees who question Jesus in John 9:40) who form part of such mechanisms of exclusion, but think that "they see" — that is, think that they have moral insight, know good from evil, are capable of discernment and judgement. Such people not only take part in mechanisms of exclusion, but justify them as good and from God. Their guilt remains.

We have here, then, a further subversion from within. Just as Jesus subverts the notion of judgement from within, so also the notion of sin is subverted from within. Jesus doesn't abolish the concept of sin, or simply define it much more strongly than before.[5] The notion of sin is subverted

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[4]John 8:44. This is part of the proto-lynch that immediately precedes the story of the man blind from birth.

[5]Exactly the same notion of subversion from within can be applied to the Matthean handling of the relationship between Jesus and the Law: he came not to abolish but to fulfil the law. However, this fulfilment is not a mere tightening up of the law, but a re-casting of the law around the persons of victims, who therefore become the criteria by which the law is to be understood. Thus the fulfilment of the law is a subversion from within of the current understanding of the

from within, in the light of the resurrection of the crucified one, in such a way that what sin is is shown to be much more drastic than previous interpretations, but from quite a different direction. Sin is not what excludes in the person of the excluded one, but the dynamic act of excluding in the persons of the excluders.

We can go further with this Johannine approach to sin. There are indications present in chapter 9 that more is intended in this story than a merely casual description of a particular incident regarding sin. The question of the sin as being related to the origins of humankind is hinted at in Jesus' use of clay in his restoration, or fulfilment, of creation, as well as in the insistence that the man was blind from birth. The relation of this story to something original is understood by the former blind man himself, who reckons that never (Greek: *ek tou aiônos*) has such a healing taken place. In the light of John's irony this means much more than that a particularly spectacular miracle has taken place, such as has never taken place before. It also suggests that there has been present a blindness from the beginning of the world that only now is being cured for the first time. Furthermore, when Jesus speaks, at the end, about judgement it is clear that he is not concerned with a particular local incident, but about a discernment relating to the whole world (*kosmos*). Here we have a highly subtle teaching about the whole world being blind from birth, from the beginning, and Jesus, the light of the world coming to bring sight to the world and being rejected precisely by those who, though blind, claimed to be able to see. All humans are blind, but where this blindness is compounded by active participation in the mechanisms of exclusion pretending to sight, this blindness is culpable.

What we have then in chapter 9 alone is a cosmovision of the sin of the world and the way Jesus comes to remove that sin, on his way subverting the understanding of sin completely. When this cosmovision is linked to other Johannine passages we begin to get something close to what one might call a theology of original sin. In the first place consider the passage already alluded to in chapter 8, where Jesus discusses with the Jews who had believed in him their and his paternity. It is now commonplace that this passage is the Johannine equivalent of the woes to the scribes and pharisees which appear in Matthew and Luke, where the ultimate criterion is the same: participation or not in a religion based on murder. Matthew and Luke specifically indicate that the history of murder of which this generation is accomplice goes back to Cain. When John refers to "your father the devil (who) was a murderer from the beginning" this is also a reference back to the primordial murder which Genesis places at the beginning of human culture. Related to this primordial murder is a culture of lies, lies related to murder, as well as a blindness that cannot see the truth. Abraham was part of the way out of this culture based on the murderous lie, and if Jesus' interlocutors had been sons of Abraham as they claimed, they would not be trying to kill him, but they are trying to kill him, and therefore are sons of Cain, whose desires were produced by the devil. Where Paul talks of sons of wrath, John talks of sons of the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning. The idea is the same: from the beginning human culture is radically mendacious and murderous. This can be understood only in the light of the Son who reveals the true Father, and thus true sonship.

This subversion of the original order of the world is brought out again in John 16, where Jesus tells the disciples, in the context of warning them about persecution and being killed, that he will send them the Defense Counselor.

> And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because

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law: and was rightly seen as subversive by those who regarded themselves as the guardians of the law.

> I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgement because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:8-11)

It is exactly this of which we have been talking. The understanding made available after the resurrection of Jesus enables sin, righteousness, and judgement to be seen in an entirely different light. Sin is now recast in terms of Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to believe in the forgiveness of sins made available by the victim risen as forgiveness. Those who do not believe in Jesus remain in sin, because they remain in the mode of casters-out. It is those who receive the cast-out one who are enabled to live without sin. Righteousness is defined in terms of Jesus, because he goes to the Father, therefore goodness is seen in terms of the loving obedience by which Jesus gave witness to his Father even to death: righteousness is the mutual self-giving of the Father and the Son which we call love, love lived out under the circumstances of victimage. Judgment is redefined in terms of Jesus because in what appeared to be the judgement and expulsion of Jesus, it was really the ruler, or *Archôn*, which can equally well be Satan or the governing principle of the world, who was revealed for what he is, and thus judged.

Thus, when John shows the subversion from within of the understanding of sin that is operated by Jesus' death and resurrection, he is quite specifically doing two things. The first is to depict sin as, in fact, the condition of blindness within which all humans live, unless enlightened by the Light of the World. This blindness is related to a governing principle that has been present from the beginning of the world, and this governing principle is directly linked to an initial murder which has determined the content of the sort of blindness that is being described. This murder-related blindness is able to be perceived for the first time thanks to a different murder (that of Jesus), and the resurrection that enabled the victim to be received as forgiveness. The first beginnings of "sight" about sin consist in the recognition of one's complicity in the murderous order of the world, and therefore of the degree of one's blindness. All other understandings of sin are understandings that are blind to the real order of the world, and are thus all the more blind when they claim to have some insight into what is good or bad without being aware of the dynamism of expulsion that in fact structures their "vision."

The second thing John is doing in his subversion of sin is linking directly the subversion of the understanding of sin with the subversion of the understanding of the Father. This is what is meant by the Holy Spirit convicting the world with regards to the understanding of righteousness (16:8-11, quoted above). The new understanding of righteousness was made available by the resurrection opening up the free flow of love between Father and Son. For John, as can be seen from these passages, the change in the perception of God that is brought about by the resurrection is also, simultaneously, a change in the perception of sin. I will return to this crucial point later, since, as I hope will become apparent, the doctrine of original sin is the anthropology that is uncovered by the resurrection as the necessary counterpart to the discovery that God is Trinity.

It is quite wrong to say that John knows only of the "sin of the world" or structures of sin, but not of original sin. It is clear from his texts that there is a distinct understanding that the sin of the world has origins, and origins of a quite specific sort. The passages I have indicated bear clear witness to John having understood as one of the first fruits of the resurrection the making available of the understanding that we are all wrong (blind), and that this does not matter. Being wrong can be forgiven: it is insisting on being right that confirms our being bound in original murderous sin.