One does not necessarily have to live very long to discover that there is something wrong with people. Some unfortunate children discover it all too soon, when parents, whom they had a right to expect to be always kind and loving, act unreasonably, lose their tempers and mistreat them. They will later discover that this ‘something wrong’ is not confined to their parents and family: in differing forms, and in greater or lesser degree, there is something wrong with everybody.

History shows that this ‘something wrong’ has been endemic in international relationships in all ages without exception; and still today, in spite of huge, beneficial advancements in every kind of science and technology, it reveals itself in monstrously irrational behavior. If only the nations could trust each other and co-operate instead of competing in the development of earth’s resources, they could turn the world into a paradise. Deserts could be made fruitful; poverty, famine, and epidemics eliminated: and everybody’s welfare and lifespan increased. But no, nations do not, and cannot, trust each other; and in consequence oceans of money, time, and energy are spent on ever more sophisticated weapons of destruction.

But it is not only nations that behave irrationally. We all do. You do, I do. Sooner or later, in spite of all our resolutions and good intentions we have to admit, as Paul put it centuries ago, “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19).

What then is wrong with us? What is this universal disease from which we all suffer? The ancient Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, studied its symptoms and tried to probe its causes. So did the ancient philosophers, and so do modern ones. And so have literary giants like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitzin. It is certain that we shall never truly understand ourselves or the world we live in, unless we face this disease realistically. The Bible confidently and joyously insists that we can find continuing and increasing deliverance from it; and it calls this deliverance salvation. But we shall not grasp what salvation means, or how it works, unless we first understand the biblical term for the disease.

That term is ‘sin.’ To help us understand it, let us use the analogy of physical disease. Medical personnel must distinguish between the symptoms from the disease itself and the root cause of the disease. For if one is going to achieve a cure, it is no good just suppressing the symptoms without getting rid of the disease. And there is no hope of that unless one can attack the root-cause and eliminate it.
SIN: A Disease. Its Symptoms and Its Cure

Take jaundice, for example, which, strictly speaking, is not a disease but an outward symptom of some internal disorder, or a cancer of the liver, etc. Clearly, it would be no use trying to get rid of the jaundice, if one did not get at the underlying cause.

THE SYMPTOMS OF SIN

The New Testament gives us various lists of the symptoms of sin, and normally adds a warning about the gravity of these symptoms. Here is one list:

*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God* (Galatians 5:19-21).

Here is another, which gives a gruesome description of the symptoms that can occur when the disease of sin is in an advanced stage:

*As it is written: "There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* (Romans 3:10-18).

None of these lists implies, of course, that all the symptoms are to be found in equal proportions in everybody. On the other hand, the New Testament insists that everybody shows some symptoms, for the disease is universal.

Then there are what may be called more general symptoms. One of these is Moral Weakness. *“For when we were still weak...”* (Romans 5:6).

As an example we may take Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:11-26; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:16). He was the last man you would have suspected of being weak. He was a high-ranking soldier, the officer in command of the Roman army in Judea; and he was also responsible for law and order in the country.

Outwardly, Pilate was like a great beam of wood that on the surface looks solid and strong, but inside it has been eaten away by wood-worm; and when you put pressure on it, it collapses.

When he talked with Jesus in private, and became aware of the reality of God and of the enormous sin it would be if he crucified the innocent Son of God, he decided he must do what he knew to be right and release Jesus (John 19:8-12). But when he went outside, the crowd shouted menacingly and their leaders blackmailed him, threatening to slander him to the Roman emperor. And Pilate caved in. Though he knew that what he was about to do was a criminal betrayal of justice, fear destroyed his resistance and out of fear he sentenced Jesus to be crucified.
This leads us to ask: have we never told a lie out of fear of what the consequences would be if we told the truth? Have we never done something that we knew to be wrong, because the group to which we belonged insisted on doing it, and we were afraid to stand against the group?

Another general symptom of sin is **Ungodliness**:

> We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:9-11)

The original Greek word here translated ‘ungodly’ means ‘people who have no respect or reverence.’ The One for whom they have no respect or reverence is, in the first place, God. But it does not stop there. Man is made in the image of God; and when people lose respect and reverence for the Creator, they begin to devalue his creature, man. They lose respect for the sanctity of the human body - their own and other people’s. This spawns the large and ugly brood of sexual sins, abuse of alcohol and drugs which injure physical health and enfeeble the mind. They lose respect for the sanctity of truth. Hence all kinds of lies, deceptions, and broken promises. In the end, they lose respect for the sanctity of life. Hence the endless crimes of violence.

**Alienation and Enmity Against God** is another symptom:

> The sinful mind is hostile to God (Romans 8:7).

> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior (Colossians 1:21).

Large-scale examples of this particular symptom have been all too evident during this present century. The governments in many countries have used all their power in an attempt to systematically blot out all belief in God and Christ. But enmity against God is not confined to outright atheists. Sometimes, even outwardly religious people can at heart be enemies of God. The Christian apostle, Paul, was always very religious; but he was a bitter enemy of Jesus Christ before he was converted (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

The fact is that there is a rebel against God in the heart of everyone of us. When God commands us in the Bible to do something or not to do something, his very command often stirs up resentment inside us and makes us want to do the very opposite. The Apostle Paul cites an example from his own experience (Romans 7:5, 7-9). For some years he lived unaware of God’s commandment “You shall not covet.” But then God brought this command home to his heart; and Paul found that this very commandment stirred up all kinds of coveting in his heart, that, struggle as he might, he could not control – and what is more, deep down within him, did not altogether want to control.

Of course, this basic enmity against God does not necessarily, or often, express itself as open hostility to God. More often it takes the form of indifference.

Now if someone says, “I’m just not interested in music or art,” we may think it is a pity; but we do not get upset about it, for it is only a matter of taste. But if a woman says “I’m just
not interested in my husband,” it is tragic; for it is clear evidence that she is alienated from her husband. Love has been destroyed. And if someone says, “I’m just not interested in God,” this is supremely tragic. We owe our very existence to God. Not to be interested in him is an unmistakable symptom that, somewhere along the line, serious alienation from God has taken place.

These, then, are some of the symptoms. But the underlying disease involves *a desire to be independent of God.*

**A desire to be independent of God, our Creator:** According to the Bible (Genesis 3), the very first sin which mankind committed was not something crude and lurid like murder or immorality. It occurred when Adam and Eve were tempted by the devil to grasp at independence of God so as to decide by themselves what was good and what was evil. They imagined that they could safely be their own god. So they took the forbidden fruit. It led at once to alienation from God and a sense of guilt and shame which made them want to run away and hide from God, whom they now felt to be against them. We have all followed them down that path of disobedience and independence. But to live like that is to live an untruth, an unreality. We did not create ourselves. We are creatures of God. To live alienated and independent of him is contrary to the fundamental law of our existence.

And so the New Testament says that **sin is lawlessness:**

*Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness* (1 John 3:4).

Now we know what dangers we would run if we disregarded the Creator’s physical laws, like, for example, the laws of electricity. Suppose a man buys an electric kettle but makes no attempt to read or follow the manufacturer’s instructions. He wires it up as he himself thinks best. As a result he electrocutes himself. We should scarcely pity him: we should call him a fool for neglecting the maker’s instructions and taking no notice of the laws of electricity. Similarly, fundamental neglect of, and disobedience to, the Creator’s moral and spiritual laws must lead to moral and spiritual disaster. It is the root cause of all sin’s many symptoms.

The remarkable thing is that, according to the Bible, there is a cure.

“*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*” “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*” (1 Timothy 1:15; John 3:17).

The following chapters, therefore, will study the terms which the New Testament uses to describe this salvation and how it works.

But there are two things we should notice at once. Many people think that the way to be saved is to do our best to cut out the symptoms of sin from our lives. That is a good enough thing in itself to do; but it cannot save us. You may cut every apple off an apple tree; but the tree is still an apple tree. That is its inward nature. So even if we could suppress every symptom of sin, we should still have a sinful nature within us. And that, says the New Testament, is not our fault. We were born that way. We inherited a fallen sinful nature from our first parent, Adam. But in a similar way we can, if we will, receive from Christ his unfallen, holy life, the nature of which is to live a life pleasing to God. “*For through one man’s (Adam’s) disobedience the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of the One (Christ) shall the many be made righteous*” (Romans 5:19).
And the second thing to notice is this: God loves us while we are still sinners. This is the secret why God’s salvation is so practical and actually works. We do not have to improve ourselves before God is prepared to accept us and begin his great work of salvation within us. He loves us and is prepared to accept us as we are. This is the burden of the argument in Romans 5:6-11, a passage any person who is serious about the problem of sin should think through rigorously.