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The Enemy Within: Defoe's *Crusoe*, A Portrait of Human Sinfulness

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Robinson Crusoe, the reflective and long-winded but adventurous castaway of Daniel Defoe’s classic story—and arguably the first English novel—has often been seen as a literary forerunner of the modern value of self-reliance. Yet despite the many and often outlandish descriptions of what Crusoe managed to extract from and build on his deserted island, his frequent acknowledgment of dependence on God’s providential supply for his many needs suggests that the author thought far more of divine grace than he did of human resourcefulness. And Crusoe’s persistent anxiety about his current circumstances or future prospects can hardly be said to promote individual pride or self-confidence based on his accomplishments. On the contrary, Defoe’s Crusoe offers a study in human nature that agrees with the Bible regarding the source and extent of human sinfulness.

Bad Beginnings

Though composed in 1719, Defoe set his tale of shipwreck and survival in the previous century, when both religious devotion and economic opportunity consumed the aspirations of many Europeans. It is no accident that Christian principles and a desire for wealth create conflict in the heart of the main character, for the author pits these two timely concerns against one another. Robinson Crusoe, a German immigrant to England, narrates the account of his own adventures and misfortunes and interprets them
from a thoroughly Christian perspective even though he lives—by his own confession—contrary to the Bible’s teaching for the first third of the story. Indeed, the development of Crusoe as a character revolves around the struggle to understand his own internal impulse to make ungodly choices which lead to increasingly serious consequences.

His stubborn selfishness leads the young Crusoe to abandon his parents, “without asking God’s blessing, or my father’s, without any consideration of circumstances or consequences, and in an ill hour, God knows,” and to risk physical and spiritual danger in pursuit of wealth. He even calls his abandonment of his parents’ counsel, “my original sin.” He admits that he was by no means poor or unprepared for success at home, because his father had done everything he could to prepare him for a “competent” living. Yet this would not satisfy the young man who—almost too late—realizes that his problem is within him: “that there seemed to be something fatal in that propension of nature, tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me.” Of course, what Crusoe observes is the universal sinfulness of humanity, for “None is righteous, no, not one …. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12).

Reflecting on his inability to control sinful tendencies despite the painful consequences of his own greed, Crusoe acknowledges that this universal corruption on human nature is ultimately irresistible for those who do not know Christ. One’s tendency toward sin actually grows more powerful each time one indulges the flesh.

Eventually, Crusoe is presented with an offer to make a huge amount of money quickly by stooping to grasp a share of the wicked profits of the slave trade. He laments “that I was born to be my own destroyer, could no more resist the offer than I could restrain my first rambling designs, when my father’s good counsel was lost upon me.” For it was on this fateful voyage bound for the Slave Coast of Guinea that Crusoe suffered shipwreck and washed up alone on the shore of an exotic island, far from normal trade routes and with no hope of rescue. By his own account, the castaway’s “state of life” prior to this crisis had been persistently contrary
to God’s righteousness and biblical wisdom. He had forsaken godly values and corrupted his ways seeking material over spiritual gain. Moreover, he repeatedly refused to forsake his ways and turn to God when he met the natural consequences of sinful choices.

Yet Crusoe also recognizes that such foolishness is hardly unique to himself. “How incongruous and irrational the common temper of mankind is,” he declares, “to that reason which ought to guide them . . . that they are not ashamed to sin, and yet are ashamed to repent; nor ashamed of the action for which they ought justly to be esteemed fools, but are ashamed of the returning, which only can make them be esteemed wise men.”

Lost– then Found

Thus, through a long series of misfortunes—resulting from his own rebellion against God’s law—Crusoe finds himself stranded on an uninhabited but remarkably abundant island somewhere in the Atlantic. Alone, Crusoe is forced to reevaluate his life’s ambitions and see the folly of his sinfulness, which has not only left him separated from all human society but from God as well. Though understandably despairing at first, he begins to see his circumstances, and even the misfortunes that produced them, as evidence of divine providence in his life. The grace of God in spite of Crusoe’s vulnerability on the island causes him to view his condition as blessed rather than cursed. Repeatedly, the survivor’s improbable resourcefulness is outdone by remarkably good fortune. The ship on which he ran aground in the storm remains intact long enough to allow him to recover essential tools and provisions to make his survival possible. Later, another ship is stranded on his coast with no survivors but containing weapons and supplies that prove critical to his success. Salvaged grain turns out to produce reliable annual harvests once Crusoe realizes, quite by accident, that the soil and climate are suitable. He even discovers native goats on the island, which he domesticates to further improve the quality of his diet. And he is preserved through events that could have been life-threatening, such as a serious bout with tropical disease and a terrifying earthquake.
Nevertheless, Crusoe admits that his initial willingness to give God credit for these blessings quickly fades in each instance. He is forced to concede that his “religious thankfulness to God’s providence began to abate” after each provision or protection. His self-centeredness haunts him, even in isolation.

After two years lost on that uninhabited island, Crusoe discovers the characteristic of human sinfulness that leads him to be “rescued” from the spiritual separation which had made him a castaway from God. Searching in one of the chests he’d recovered from the shipwreck for something with medicinal qualities, he instead finds “a cure both for soul and body.” Among the few books that had been protected from the surf, he took a Bible, “which, to this time, I had not found leisure, or so much as inclination, to look into.” As he read the New Testament morning and night, he experienced the ability of the Word of God to bring about conviction of sin. “It was not long after I set seriously to this work,” he explains, “but I found my heart more deeply and sincerely affected with the wickedness of my past life.” His chief enemy and the cause of his ruin had been his own sin, not the fault of others or circumstances. The guilt was his own. It is human nature that produces sin, not one’s environment. He realizes that the island prison in which he is confined—pristine, abundant, a perfect environment in many ways—leaves him no excuses behind which to hide. The enemy was within! “I was earnestly begging of God to give me repentance, when it happened providentially, the very day, that, reading the Scripture I came to these words, He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour; to give repentance, and to give remission.” (Acts 5:31, KJV) Claiming the hope of salvation through Christ, Crusoe cries out in repentance and faith to God and experiences deliverance from the spiritual prison of sin!

From that point on, he views his confinement in different terms. “As for my solitary life,” he asserts, “it was nothing; I did not so much as pray to be delivered from it, or think of it: it was all of no consideration, in comparison to this [salvation from sin].” And he appeals to readers of his account, “that whenever they come to a true sense of things, they will find deliverance from sin a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction.” There is a more profound and universal isolation in the human
experience than any uninhabited island can create, “for all have sinned andall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through
the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propi-
tiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:23-25a) The true
enemy of humanity is within, and our reconciliation to God requires an
internal transformation, made possible only through the gospel of Christ.