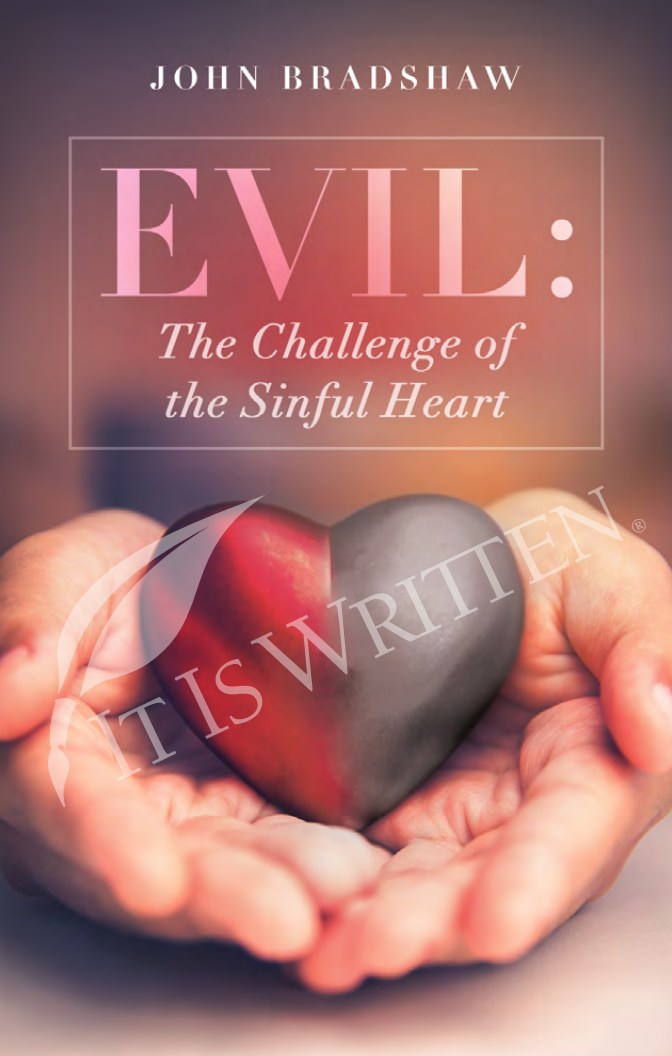
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EVIL:

The Challenge of the Sinful Heart



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EVIL:

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BY JOHN BRADSHAW

In many ways, it is like it never even happened. Ask around. It is almost certain that the person you ask has never heard of it.

In 1921, people who in most cases would have been considered decent, law-abiding, upstanding citizens took part in a massacre. More than likely, you have never heard of it either.

As many as three hundred people were murdered. Maybe more. Many, many others were injured. Property destruction of a massive scale. Houses, businesses, hotels, theaters, personal possessions and more were completely destroyed. And to rub salt into the wounds of

those who had been so spectacularly mistreated, insurance companies refused to pay the victims of this unfathomable horror.

The proper authorities weren't alerted until well after they could have made a difference. In fact, it seems there was a concerted effort to prevent help from arriving to assist the victims. Ten thousand people were left homeless. Forty or so city blocks were burned to the ground.

So where did this happen? In the killing fields of Cambodia? War-torn Yugoslavia? The Soviet Union? No. It happened in the United States of America. It was the largest civil disturbance in American history. The fact that so little is known about it is part of the tragedy of it all. It remains one of the worst incidents of racial violence in this country's history. And given American history, that is really saying something.

In 1921, Greenwood, Oklahoma, a suburb of Tulsa, was a prosperous community. It was the wealthiest black community in America and was known as the Black Wall Street. But on Memorial Day weekend of that year, Greenwood's prosperity came to an awful, abrupt, and very final end.

Although slavery had ended in the United States more than half a century before in 1865, there was still enormous economic disparity between white and black Americans. Blacks were subjected to Jim Crow laws, and Tulsa—at the time, the oil capital of the world—was, like many parts of the United States, a hotbed of biting, bitter racism.

The town of Greenwood was populated exclusively by African Americans, many of whom were prosperous and ran successful businesses. Greenwood had its own hospital, many doctors including a nationally renowned surgeon, a library, a school, two theaters, two hotels, and a wide range of other businesses and services. There was real prosperity in Greenwood.

At that same time, lynchings were a common occurrence in the United States. Between 1882 and 1968, there were almost 5,000 known lynchings spread across more than 40 states, an average of more than one lynching per week for 86 years. Experts agree there were undoubtedly more, maybe thousands more. Almost three-quarters of the people lynched were black.