

Does the Bible Teach the Doctrine of Original Sin?

by
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Ugh! Original sin? It sounds so archaic, so pessimistic, so grimly medieval. For heaven's sake, this is the era of the Mars rover and the Human Genome Project. And haven't the most learned psychologists and sociologists assured us that people are by nature good, having been turned to their evil ways not by some inner instinct but through the influence of a deviant culture and substandard education?

Clearly, there are obstacles to our understanding and acceptance of this notion of original sin. Perhaps the first thing we should do, therefore, is to define our terms. The terminology of *original sin* has been used in any one of three ways. Often people think immediately of the *original* original sin — the first sin of Adam. Others use this language to refer to *inherited* sin, the idea that all humans are born morally corrupt and spiritually alienated from God.^[1] Finally, by *original sin* some are referring to the causal relationship between Adam's sin and our sin. In this chapter we will be touching on all three elements.

The Contribution of Romans 5:12–21

The key text for our study of original sin is Romans 5:12–21. A central point to keep in mind in studying this passage is that Paul's thought is distinctly *corporate* in nature. Douglas Moo explains:

All people, Paul teaches, stand in relationship to one of two men, whose actions determine the eternal destiny of all who belong to them. Either one "belongs to" Adam and is under sentence of death because of his sin, or disobedience, or one belongs to Christ and is assured of eternal life because of his "righteous" act, or obedience. The actions of Adam and Christ, then, are similar in having "epochal" significance. But they are not equal in power, for Christ's act is able completely to overcome the effects of Adam's. Anyone who "receives the gift" that God offers in Christ finds security and joy in knowing that the reign of death has been completely and finally overcome by the reign of grace,

righteousness, and eternal life (cf. vv. 17, 21).^[2]

Here is what Paul says:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned — for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:12–21)

There are five phrases in verse 12 that call for comment.

- 1.** In verse 12 Paul says that “through one man” sin came into the world. Adam was a historical figure. He had a mind, a body, and a spirit, just as we do. He lived in space-time history, just as we do, in a geographical location no less than you or I (see Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Tim. 2:13–15).
- 2.** Through this one man, says Paul, “sin entered into the world.” Literally, sin *invaded* the world. This does not mean Adam was the first sinner; Eve was. It does not mean that sin began its existence at that time in the garden of Eden. Paul says sin *entered*, not that it began to be. Sin already existed as a

result of Satan's rebellion. This text speaks of sin's inaugural entry into the world of humanity. Sin, therefore, is portrayed as an *intruder*. It was not a constituent element in the original creation.

3. The next important phrase reads, "and death through sin" (see Gen. 2:17; Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; James 1:15). Paul's point is that sin is the cause of death. Thus, death is a penal evil; it is punishment. Death was not inevitable for Adam and Eve. It was the punishment for rebellion. Death in Scripture may be portrayed in three ways. There is, first of all, *spiritual death* (the alienation of the soul from God and the subsequent spiritual corruption of the whole person; cf. Eph. 2:1–2). Second is *physical death*, which needs no explanation. Finally, there is the *second death*, which is the perpetuation of spiritual death into eternity. The second death entails eternal separation and alienation from God (cf. Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). The remedy for spiritual death is regeneration or the new birth. The remedy for physical death is the bodily resurrection. There is no remedy for the second death. It is irremediable, irrevocable, and eternal.

4. This death, says the apostle, "spread to all men." In other words, Adam's sin and its consequences did not stop with him. Physical death as a penal sanction is universal. But why do all die? The answer is found in our fifth important phrase.

5. The declaration "because all sinned" is surely the most difficult statement in this complex paragraph and has been interpreted in a number of different ways. We will focus on the major views.

First, is the doctrine of *Pelagianism*. According to this view the only reason people die is that they themselves personally sin. It is true, of course, that we die because we sin. But this view argues that the only link or connection between Adam's sin and us is that he *set a bad example*, which we have unwisely followed. We each individually reenact Adam's transgression in our own experience. As for Paul's statement in Romans 5:12, Pelagius insisted that we sinned in Adam only in the sense that we imitated his decision to rebel against God. Consequently, all men come into being in the exact condition as Adam's before the fall. Pelagius believed each soul is created immediately by God and thus cannot come into the world contaminated or corrupted by the sin of Adam.

The doctrine of *transmitted sin*, says Pelagius, is blasphemous. Sin cannot be

passed along from one person to another. It cannot come upon another by propagation from an ancestor. Sin is not born with man but only committed afterward by man. Sin is not a defect in human nature, he insists, but consists solely in freely chosen acts of our will. Thus, according to Pelagius, an infant is not born in sin, nor does he or she possess any innate moral characteristics. Such are obtained only by the exercise of the will and the habits that develop from it. In other words, we are “socialized” to sin or “conditioned” to sin because of continual exposure to a family and society that are themselves sinful for the same reasons.

There are several problems with the view advocated by Pelagius. For one thing, it is historically and experientially false: not all die because they voluntarily sin (e.g., infants). Also, in Romans 5:15–19 Paul says six times that only *one* sin, the sin of Adam, is the cause of death. Furthermore, if all die because they are guilty of actual transgression, then they die because they sinned as Adam did. But verse 14 says some did *not* sin that way. This interpretation would also destroy the analogy or parallel that Paul draws between Adam and Jesus in verses 15–21. If this view were correct, Paul would be saying that since all men die personally because they sin personally, so also men become righteous personally because they personally obey (which, by the way, is precisely what Pelagius himself believed!). But the point of these verses is that just as we died because of the sin of one, so also we live because of the obedience of one (namely, Jesus). Finally, as Moo points out, “this interpretation fails to explain why it is that, as Paul makes clear, *everyone* does, in fact, sin. Surely there must be *something* inherent in ‘being human’ that causes everyone, without exception, to decide to worship idols rather than the true God (cf. 1:22–23).”^[3]

A second view is known as *realism* and asserts that “human nature” existed in its unindividualized unity in Adam. This organic, physiological solidarity of the race in its natural head, according to which the human nature of the latter is numerically and specifically one with that of the former, is the ground on which the guilt of Adam is imputed to his posterity.^[4] In other words, this view asserts that all of humanity were present in Adam naturally, biologically, physically, or seminally. It is from Adam and Eve that all have descended; thus it may be said that we were all in his loins (much in the same way that Levi, being in Abraham’s loins, paid tithes to Melchizedek — Heb. 7:10). Thus, when Adam sinned, you were *really* present, being *in* Adam, and thus

you participated in his transgression. When *he* partook of the fruit, *you* partook of the fruit. Augustine advocated this view based on his reading of Romans 5:12 in the Latin translation of the New Testament. In that version, the final phrase of verse 12 is rendered “*in whom* [a reference to Adam, the “one man” of v. 12] all sinned,” not “*because* all sinned.”

Thus, according to Augustine, all men *really* and *actually* sinned when Adam sinned, not as individual persons but as participants in the generic human nature that existed in Adam. Infants, therefore, because they participated in the common human nature present in Adam, are born guilty of his (*their?*) sin and subject to that corruption of nature to which it gives rise.

Contrary to Pelagius, Augustine argued that Adam’s nature and that of all his posterity became subject to corruption and evil principles. The penalty pronounced on Adam was pronounced on them; the corruption of his nature became the corruption of their nature. Thus, in Adam the whole human race became “a mass of perdition” (*massa damnata*). Therefore, sin is universally present in all, not by way of imitation (Pelagius) but by way of generation.

Although this is certainly an improvement on the view of Pelagius, there are a number of problems with it. For example, how can we *act* before we *exist*? In other words, how can we personally and individually sin before we are individual persons? If this view were correct, would we not also be guilty of all Adam’s subsequent sins? Again, according to Paul, it is the sin of *one* man, not of all men in Adam, that accounts for death. Realism says that all die because all really sinned in Adam, but this again destroys the parallel in verses 15–21. Surely it cannot be said that all live because all personally obeyed (contra Pelagius). We were not physically or seminally in Christ when he obeyed. The point of verses 15–21 is that just as men are justified for a righteousness not their own, so also are they condemned for a sin not personally their own. Paul’s point is that death came by one man so that life might come by one man. As for the appeal to Hebrews 7:9–10, observe that if this were taken literally, “all actions of all progenitors would have to be ascribed to each of their descendants, which is nearly absurd.”^[5]

We come now to the third view, known as *federalism* or *covenant representation*. This view does not deny the reality of a seminal or realistic union of the species in Adam. Nor does it deny that the sinful disposition is transmitted from Adam to his posterity by means of natural propagation.

However, advocates of what is called the “representative” or “federal headship” doctrine do deny that this natural solidarity is sufficient to explain the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. The representative view insists that by divine appointment, in addition to being the *natural* head of the species, Adam was constituted the *covenant* head of his posterity. Therefore, the ground on which the guilt of the first sin is imputed to the species is that divinely ordained representative principle on the basis of which the species is reckoned to have stood its probation in Adam.

Thus the issue between these two schools of thought is not the existence of a seminal, or natural, union. Both acknowledge the validity of that notion. The point of dispute, rather, is this:

Was Adam a person in whom human nature existed as an entity, a specific and numerically one entity (that is, all the individuals who come from Adam are specifically one [belong to the same species], and at one time in Adam they were numerically one, but now by propagation have become individualized into a multitude of persons), or was Adam by divine ordination a representative person who stood the probation for his posterity?[6]

The view of covenant headship points to verse 12 of Romans 5, where Paul says all die because all sinned. But in verses 15–19 Paul says all die because *Adam* sinned. In both statements Paul is saying the same thing. But how can it be that the sin of *one* man, Adam, is also the sin of *all* men? The answer is that there is some kind of union or solidarity between Adam and us. It can’t simply be a physical or natural union, as the realists contend. It must be a *legal* or *representative* union, that is, a *covenant union*. God entered into covenant with Adam as representative head of the human race. God dealt with Adam as with all his posterity.

Thus, we became guilty of Adam’s sin and suffer its penalty not because we personally committed a sin like Adam’s sin, as the Pelagians argue, or because we sinned in Adam as our physical or biological root, as the realists insist, but because Adam served in the capacity as covenant head of the human race. Similarly, we become righteous because of Christ’s obedience, and experience the life it brings, not because we personally obeyed, but because our covenant head, Jesus, obeyed (see 1 Cor. 15:21ff.).

Two Men, Two Deeds, Two Destinies

What the doctrine of original sin means is that whereas Adam ruined us, Christ renewed us. As we are condemned for the sin of the first Adam, we are justified for the obedience of the last Adam. This is why Adam is called the *type* of Christ in Romans 5:14. According to this view, God has not dealt with men as with a field of corn, each standing for himself, or as pebbles of sand on the shore, each person isolated and independent of all others. Rather he has dealt with men as with a tree, all the branches sharing a common root. While the root remains healthy, the branches remain healthy. When the axe cuts and severs the root, all die.

The primary objection to this view is what appears to be the injustice of it. To hold all of the human race eternally accountable for the sin of one of its members *seems* morally inconceivable. But let's give the apostle Paul a chance to vindicate himself!

When we turn to verses 13–14 we see that Paul's point is to demonstrate that personal death is not always the result of personal sin. He has in mind that period in Old Testament history stretching from Adam to the Mosaic law. During this period people certainly sinned. But in the absence of law, their sin was not imputed to them (v. 13). Nevertheless, *they died*. But why did they die if God did not impute their sins against them? The answer would seem to be that they died because of the sin of another, someone who *had* indeed violated a divinely revealed law. That other person, of course, would be Adam.

Moreover, says Paul, death reigned even over those who did not sin like Adam did. In other words, there is a class of people who never sinned voluntarily and personally as Adam did, as the majority of the people during this period did, *but they still died!* Whom does he have in mind? Infants, most likely. But if infants don't sin voluntarily and personally, why do they die? If death comes only as a penalty for sin, why do infants, who commit no sin, still die? It must be because of the sin of another. It must be that those who die in infancy, before they commit conscious, personal sin, die because of the sin of their representative head, Adam.

The parallels and ethical contrasts in verses 15–21 between Adam and Jesus are crucial to Paul's argument.

- The offense of one brought death; the obedience of one brought the free gift of grace (v. 15).
- One sinned, bringing condemnation; one obeyed, bringing justification (v. 16).
- Through one offense death reigns; through one act of obedience life reigns (v. 17).
- The offense of one brings judgment; the righteousness of one brings justification (v. 18).
- By virtue of one man's disobedience men are made sinners; by virtue of one man's obedience men are made righteous (v. 19).
- Through Adam sin reigned unto death; through Christ righteousness reigns unto life (v. 21).

So, before you object to the doctrine of covenant or representative headship, remember this: *only if Adam represents you in the garden can Jesus represent you on Golgotha*. It was on the cross that Jesus served as your representative head: his obedience to the law, his righteousness, and his suffering the penalty of the law were all the acts of a covenant head acting in the stead and on behalf of his people. If Adam stood for you in the garden, Christ may also hang for you on the cross. If you insist on standing your own probation before God, instead of submitting to the covenant representation of Adam, you must also stand on your own in regard to righteousness. And how do you think you will fare? In other words, if you fall individually and by your own doing, it would appear you must be saved individually and by your own doing.

We need to take note of one more issue in verse 18. Adam's act has brought condemnation to all men. Must we not also conclude, as this verse seems to assert, that Christ's act has brought justification and life for all men? In other words, does this verse teach the doctrine of *universalism*? Moo's answer is helpful:

Paul's point is not so much that the groups affected by Christ and Adam, respectively, are coextensive, but that Christ affects those who are his just as certainly as Adam does those who are his. When we ask who belongs to, or is "in," Adam and Christ, respectively, Paul makes

his answer clear: every person, without exception, is “in Adam” (cf. vv. 12d–14); but only those who “receive the gift” (v. 17; “those who believe,” according to Rom. 1:16–5:11) are “in Christ.” That “all” does not always mean “every single human being” is clear from many passages; it is often clearly limited in context (e.g., Rom. 8:32; 12:17, 18; 14:2; 16:19), so this suggestion has no linguistic barrier. In the present verse, the scope of “all people” in the two parts of the verse is distinguished in the context, Paul making it clear, both by his silence and by the logic of [Rom. 5] vv. 12–14, that there is no limitation whatsoever on the number of those who are involved in Adam’s sin, while the deliberately worded v. 17, along with the persistent stress on faith as the means of achieving righteousness in 1:16–4:25, makes it equally clear that only certain people derive the benefits from Christ’s act of righteousness.^[7]

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the notion of original sin serves to confirm what we already know from experience: we are by nature, from birth, universally wicked. The so-called enlightened man of the twenty-first century may prefer not to think of himself in this way, choosing instead to dismiss what we’ve seen in this chapter as an overly pessimistic and outmoded view of human nature. But it is only when we fully realize and acknowledge in personal confession that “in Adam’s fall, we sinned all,” and that we are indeed morally corrupt and spiritually alienated from God that the salvation provided in Christ Jesus will be appealing to our souls.

There is, however, one more gut-wrenching issue that must be addressed. If our portrayal of the human condition at birth is that we are, in the words of Paul, “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), what becomes of those who die in infancy? To that question we turn in the next chapter.

Addendum: An Alternative Interpretation of Romans 5:12–14

One of the principal issues in the interpretation of Romans 5 is Paul’s statement that death spread to all men “because all sinned.” On this reading, Paul’s point would be that all men die because, when Adam sinned, they were reckoned by God to have sinned in him, their representative head.

An alternative reading has recently been proposed by Tom Schreiner, first in his commentary on Romans^[8] and more recently in his treatise on the

theology of Paul.^[9] Schreiner contends that we should translate this enigmatic phrase not “because” but “upon the basis of which.” His point is that the sinning of all people is a *consequence* or *result* of that death which entered the world through Adam. He writes:

As a result of Adam’s sin death entered the world and engulfed all people; all people enter the world alienated from God and spiritually dead by virtue of Adam’s sin. By virtue of entering the world in the state of death (i.e., separated from God), all human beings sin . . . Our alienation and separation from God are due to Adam’s sin, and thus we sin as a result of being born into the world separated from God’s life.^[10]

Paul’s point is not that we sinned when Adam sinned, whether “seminally” or by virtue of his representative role, as a result of which we died spiritually. Rather, Adam’s sin brought spiritual death into the world, as a result of which death we sinned personally. The objection to this view is that Paul often argues that death is the result of sin, whereas Schreiner is arguing here that sin is the result of death. The resolution of this problem, notes Schreiner, is not difficult.

We should not opt for an either-or answer here. Paul does indeed claim that people die because of sin, but he also insists that they sin because they are dead (i.e., separated from God [and he points particularly to Eph. 2:1–3 as proof of this]). All human beings enter the world alienated from God, and as a result of this alienation they sin. It is also true that they will experience eschatological death if they sin.^[11]

If Schreiner is correct, what is the meaning of Romans 5:13–14? Contrary to the view explained earlier, Paul is not suggesting that people between Adam and Moses died solely because of Adam’s sin and not because of their own personal rebellion. Romans 2:12 makes this clear, for there Paul asserts that “those who sin without the law perish without the law.” Schreiner explains:

It would be inconsistent for Paul to assert in Romans 2:12 that Gentiles without the law perish because they transgress the unwritten law and then to say in Romans 5:13–14 that sin is not charged to the account of those without the Mosaic law. Moreover, Paul was well aware of the early chapters of Genesis in which the world was destroyed by a flood and those building the tower of Babel were judged. Such punishments would be indefensible if judgment was only valid after the law of

Moses was disseminated. The judgment of the flood generation and Babel fits with the Pauline principle that those who sin without the law will perish without the law (Rom. 2:12).^[12]

What, then, does Paul mean in 5:13 when he says that “sin is not counted when there is no law”? He does not mean that people aren’t punished for their personal sin simply because the law of Moses had not yet been given. His point is simply that sin committed before the Mosaic law is not *technically* reckoned as sin. In other words, “there was not a technical register of sin; sin was present, just like heat and cold are present whether we have a thermometer or not. But one could not, in a sense, *measure* sin before the giving of the law.”^[13] It’s true that people between Adam and Moses didn’t sin as Adam did in that they did not violate a revealed commandment. But this doesn’t mean they weren’t held accountable by God for their actions. It simply means their sin couldn’t be measured as sin without the violation of written commandments.

Paul’s point, then, is that death reigns or exercises its power over people even if no explicit and divinely encoded law exists, for even in the absence of the law sin is still sin and will be punished. Once that written law is revealed, the seriousness of sin increases “in the sense that the sin is now more defiant and rebellious in character.”^[14]

Two brief observations are in order, neither of which is a critique of Schreiner. First, if Schreiner is correct, the sinful plight of the human race is *still* traceable to Adam and his sin. Whether we die spiritually because we are reckoned to have sinned in Adam or we sin personally because of the spiritual death that came from Adam’s sin, the fact remains that it is “by the transgression of the one,” Adam, that “the many died” (5:15, NASB). Second, if Schreiner is correct, he has provided a helpful way of understanding Romans 5:12–14, but not one that is any more successful than the earlier view in addressing the ethical dilemma of how the human race can find itself sinful, not ultimately because of personal, conscious sin, but because of the sin of another, Adam.

From the book *Tough Topics: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions*
by Sam Storms

Recommended Reading

Blocher, Henri. *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Jacobs, Alan. *Original Sin: A Cultural History*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.

Plantinga, Cornelius, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

FOOTNOTES:

- [1] This is what John Calvin had in mind when he wrote: “Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls ‘works of the flesh’ [Gal. 5:19].” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2.1.8.
- [2] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 315.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 324n51 (emphasis his).
- [4] The best defense of realism as a theory of original sin is provided by William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2 (1889; repr., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979), 3–257. For a critical assessment of this view, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 436–48.
- [5] Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 115.
- [6] S. Lewis Johnson, “Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 309.
- [7] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 343–44.
- [8] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- [9] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).
- [10] Schreiner, *Romans*, 275–76.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 276–77.
- [12] Schreiner, *Paul*, 147.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 148.
- [14] Schreiner, *Romans*, 279; cf. Paul’s statement to this effect in Rom. 7:7–11.