

## ***Original Sin and Depravity***

*Lecture by Steve Gregg*

### ***I. Original sin: What is it?***

A. Term not found in scripture—Primarily based upon Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12 & 1 Cor.15:21-22

*“Death spread to all men because all men sinned. Does this mean that all have sinned in their personal lives (which is apparently the meaning of the words in 3:23) or that all sinned in Adam’s primal sin? In support of the latter it might be argued that human beings are mortal before they commit any sin, so that the mortality of the race is the result of the original racial sin...The construction, with the underlying thought, is paralleled in 2 Corinthians 5:14: ‘one has died for all; therefore all have died’ ...It is not simply because Adam is the ancestor of mankind that all are said to have sinned in his sin (otherwise it might be argued that because Abraham believed God all his descendants were necessarily involved in his belief); it is because Adam is mankind.” (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, pp.122f*

*“Death is visited on all men today, not just because all men have sinned like Adam, but because all men sinned in Adam...the reason why [people prior to the law] died is not because they deliberately transgressed like Adam and died for their transgression, but because they and the whole of humanity (Christ only excepted) were included in Adam, the head of the human race.” (John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8*, p.25)*

B. Definition of term not agreed upon among theologians. Does it mean:

1. Inherited sinful nature [taught by Irenaeus (170 AD), Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican]
2. Inherited guilt of Adam’s sin [taught by Augustine (354-430 AD) & Reformers (Luther, Calvin)]
3. Neither— [taught by Pelagius (354-418 AD) Condemned as heretic by Western Church, vindicated by Eastern Church]

C. Total depravity? (Genesis 6:5/ Jeremiah 13:23; 17:9/John 8:44<sup>1</sup>/ Romans 7:18<sup>2</sup>)

### ***II. Ramifications:***

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<sup>1</sup> The first four of these references are speaking of specific groups, not all of mankind necessarily.

<sup>2</sup> This may be hyperbole, since “good things” were found in some unregenerate people (1 Kings 14:13/ 2 Chron.16:9/ Job 1:1/ Luke 1:6/ Acts 10:1-4; 13:32). Compare hyperbole in John 1:11-12; 3:32-33

A. Infant guilt and damnation "in Adam" (Romans 5:12)<sup>3</sup>

*"Everyone, even little children, have broken God's covenant, not indeed in virtue of any personal action but in virtue of mankind's common origin in that single ancestor in whom all have sinned."* (Augustine, *The City of God* 16:27)<sup>4</sup>

B. All men born haters of God—Romans 1:30<sup>5</sup>

C. Men incapacitated even from believing and repenting—"Dead in sin" (Col.2:12)<sup>6</sup> see also John 6:44; 10:26; Rom.3:10-12; 8:7-8<sup>7</sup>

D. Did Jesus inherit the sinful nature?

*"If the souls of all men are derived from that one which was breathed into the first man ... either the soul of Christ was not derived from that one, since he had no sin of any kind or, if his soul was derived from that first one, he purified it in taking it for himself, so that he might be born of the virgin and might come to us without any trace of sin, either committed or transmitted."* (Augustine, Letter 164)

### **III. Examination of relevant Scripture:**

A. "Sinful nature"

1. There is evidence in scripture and experience of sin in our nature

"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child..." (Prov.22:15)

"Slaves of sin" (John 8:34; Rom.6:16-23)

"Sin in my members" (Rom.7:14-25)

"By nature children of wrath" (Eph.2:2-3)

The state of the pagans (Eph.4:17-19)

2. There is very little in scripture that speaks of inheriting this nature at birth

Seth born "in the likeness and image of [fallen] Adam" (Genesis 5:1-3)

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<sup>3</sup> Why, then, did Jesus say of little children "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt.19:14)?

<sup>4</sup> This disagrees with earlier fathers, e.g., Hermas (100-160 AD): *"all infants are honored before God and are in first rank before Him"* (IX:xxxi:3); Aristides (130 AD): *"And when a child has been born to one of them [Christians], they give thanks to God; and if it should die as an infant, they give thanks the more, because it has departed life sinless."* (Apology 15:11); Athenagoras (175-180 AD): *"Although all human beings who die are resurrected, not all those resurrected are judged. If justice in the judgment were the only cause of the resurrection, it would follow, of course, that those who have not sinned nor done good, namely quite young children, would not be resurrected."* (On the Resurrection 14); Irenaeus (170): *"Who were those who were saved and received the inheritance? Those, obviously, who believed in God and kept their love for him...and innocent children, who have no sense of evil."* (Against Heresies IV.xxviii.3)

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1 does not profess to describe all men, only those who suppress the truth (v.18)

<sup>6</sup> "Dead" does not refer to a specific inability, but of a status in relation to God. The prodigal son was "dead" in this sense, to his father. In that condition, he still was able to repent and to return to his father (Luke 15:24)

<sup>7</sup> Each of these requires analysis in their contexts—often yielding different meanings than expected.

“the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21)  
“in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5)  
“The wicked are estranged from the womb...speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3)

#### B. Adam’s guilt and ours

1. There is evidence in scripture that God does not blame children for their fathers’ sins  
Deut.24:16/ Jer.31:29-30/ Ezekiel 18:20/ 1 Kings 14:12-13
2. There is such a thing as suffering consequences of a father’s sins, without the guilt  
Exodus 20:4-5/ Egypt’s firstborn/ Canaanite infants/ 2 Samuel 12:14
3. There is no scripture that specifically affirms inherited guilt (Psalm 51:5? Rom.5:12?)

#### ***IV. How did Adam bring death upon all people?***

A. Man created a mortal, potentially immortal, species (1 Timothy 6:16/ Rom.2:6-7/ Gen.3:22)

B. Access to the tree of life was interrupted due to Adam’s sin, consigning the race to mortality

*Q. Is individual death the penalty for personal sin, or is it the natural consequence of being born without access to the tree of life?*

C. Birthright of a relationship with God interrupted

D. Human self-centered (animal-like) instincts cannot be overcome without God

1. “Dead” or “Sick”? (Matt.9:12-13/ Isaiah 1:5-6/ 1 Peter 2:24-25)
2. Flesh is said to be “weak”(Matt.26:41/ Rom.8:3-8)
3. “Sin” means “Missing the mark” or “falling short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23)
4. Total depravity (where it exists) is an acquired condition—an advanced stage of the disease  
(Rom.1:21-22, 24, 26, 28; Prov.29:1; Jer.13:23; Matt.13:15; Eph.4:17-19)

#### **V. Views of the earliest Christians**

Gerald Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, p.130:

*“Many Fathers found it difficult to accept any concept of what we would call inherited guilt. To most of them disobedience was a personal act, repeated in each individual but not directly inherited from Adam in a way that would make us responsible for his disobedience.”*

Irenaeus (c. 180, E/W —born Smyrna; served Lyons, France), 1.493.

“By means of our first parents, we were all brought into bondage by being made subject to death.”

Irenaeus (c. 180, E/W)

“And disobedience to God entails death. For that reason, they came under the penalty of death. From that [moment], they were handed over to it. Thus, then, in the day that they ate, in the same day they died. For they became death’s debtors.”

Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.301, as quoted by Leontius.

“God ordained that, if man kept this, he would partake of immortal existence. However, if he transgressed it, his lot would be just the opposite. Having been made in this manner, man soon went towards transgression. And so he naturally became subject to corruption. Therefore, corruption became inherent in nature. So it was necessary that He who wished to save us would be someone who destroyed the essential cause of corruption... For if, as you suggest, He had simply warded off death from us by a simple nod, indeed death would not have approached us—on account of His will. However, we would have again become corruptible, for we carried about in ourselves that natural corruption.”

Theophilus (c. 180, E), 2.104.

“Because of his disobedience, man extracted, as from a fountain, labor, pain, and grief. At last, he fell prey to death. God showed great kindness to man in this, for He did not allow him to remain in sin forever. Instead, by a kind of banishment, as it were, He cast man out of Paradise. God did this so that man could expiate his sin through punishment, within an appointed time. Having been disciplined, man could afterwards be restored.”

Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E), 2.573.

“He says, ‘Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain.’ For so also we lie under Adam’s sin because of similarity of sin. “

Tertullian (c. 191, W), 3.111.

“And the entire human race went over to death on account of his sin. For they were tainted in their descent from him. They were made a channel for transmitting his condemnation.”

Tertullian (c. 191, W), 3.118.

“Fallen as the soul is, it is the victim of the great adversary’s machinations. Yet, it does not forget its Creator.”

Tertullian (c. 201, W), 3.303.

“Since God placed on man a condition for life, so man brought on himself a state of death. And this was neither through infirmity nor through ignorance.”

Tertullian (c. 201, W), 3.306

“Thus God’s prior goodness was from nature. His subsequent severity was from a cause. The one was innate; the other, caused by external factors. The one was His own; the other was admitted by Him.”

Tertullian (c. 210, W), 3.219.

“The attributes that belong to its own proper condition are namely immortality, rationality, sensibility, intelligence, and freedom of the will. All of these endowments of the soul are bestowed on the soul at birth.”

Novation (c. 235, W), 5.646.

“The only food for the first men was fruit and the other produce of the trees. But afterwards, man’s sin transferred his need from the fruit trees to the produce of the earth, when the very attitude of his body attested the condition of his conscience. For although innocency raised men up towards the heavens to pluck their food from the trees so long as they had a good conscience, yet sin, when committed, bent men down to the earth and to the ground to gather its grain. Moreover, afterwards the use of flesh was added, the divine favor supplying for human necessities the kinds of meats generally fitting for suitable occasions. For while a more tender meat was needed to nourish men who were both tender and unskilled, it was still a food not prepared without toil, doubtless for their advantage, lest they should again find a pleasure in sinning, if the labor imposed upon sin did not exhort innocence. And since now it was no more a Paradise to be tended, but a whole world to be cultivated, the more robust food of meat was offered to men.”

Commodianus (c. 240, W), 4.209.

“Adam was the first man who fell.... And he conferred on us also what he did, whether of good or of evil. For he was the chief of all who were born from him. As a result, we die through his means. For he, receding from the divine, became an outcast from the Word.”

Methodius (c. 290, E), 6.312

“It from the time when man went astray and disobeyed the law, from then on sin dwelled in him. It received its birth from his disobedience. As a result, a commotion was stirred up. We were filled with agitations and foreign imaginations. We were emptied of the divine inspiration and filled with carnal desires, which the cunning serpent infused into us. For that reason, God invented death for our sakes—that he might destroy sin. Otherwise, if we were immortal and sin rose up in us, sin would be immortal as well. “

Ambrosiaster: *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles.* (c. 366)

*(Cited frequently by both Pelagius and Augustine)*

“For it is clear that all have sinned in Adam as though in a lump. For, being corrupted by sin himself, all those whom he fathered were born under sin. For that reason we are all sinners, because we all descend from him. He lost God’s blessing because he transgressed and was made unworthy to eat of the tree of life. For that reason he had to die. Death is the separation of body and soul. There is another death as well, called the second death, which takes place in Gehenna. We do not suffer this death as a result of Adam’s sin, but his fall makes it possible for us to get it by our own sins.”

John Chrysostom (347-407 E) *Homilies on Romans* 10

“Paul inquires as to how death came into the world and why it prevailed. It came in and prevailed through the sin of one man and continued because all have sinned. Thus once Adam fell, even those who had not eaten of the tree became mortal because of him.”

Pelagius (354-418), *Commentary on Romans*

“Those who oppose the idea of the transmission of sin try to attack it as follows: “If Adam’s sin harmed even those who were not sinners, then Christ’s righteousness must help even those who are not believers. For Paul says that people are saved through Christ in the same way or to an even greater degree than they had previously perished through Adam.” Secondly, they say: “If baptism washes away that ancient sin, those who are born of two baptized parents should not have that sin, for they could not have passed on to their children what they did not possess themselves. Besides, if the soul does not exist by transmission, but only the flesh, then only the flesh carries the transmission of sin and it alone deserves punishment.” Declaring it to be unjust that a soul which is born today, not from the lump of Adam, bears so ancient a sin belonging to another, these people say that on no account should it be accepted that God, who forgives a man his own sins, imputes to him the sins of someone else.”

Augustine (354-430 W), *Against Julian* 6.20.63

“These words [Rom.5:12] clearly teach that original sin is common to all men, regardless of the personal sins of each one.”

Theodoret of Cyrrihus (393-458 E): *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans*.

“Thus death came to all men, in that all sinned. But each person receives the sentence of death not because of the sin of his first ancestor but because of his own sin.”

John Cassian (360-435 E), *Conference XIII*, ch.11:

"These two then; viz., the grace of God and free will seem opposed to each other, but really are in harmony, and we gather...that we ought to have both alike...for when God sees us inclined to will what is good, He meets, guides, and strengthens us: for 'At the voice of thy cry, as soon as He shall hear, He will answer thee'...And again, if He finds that we are unwilling or have grown cold, He stirs our hearts with salutary exhortations, by which a good will is either renewed or formed in us."

Oecumenius (990 E) *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*.

“So that no one can accuse God of injustice, in that we all die because of the fall of Adam, Paul adds: “and so all have sinned.” Adam is the origin and the cause of the fact that we have all sinned in imitation of him.”

John Fergusson (cited by Wikipedia: “Pelagius”) wrote:

“If a heretic is one who emphasizes one truth to the exclusion of others, it would at any rate appear that [Pelagius] was no more a heretic than Augustine. His fault was in exaggerated emphasis, but in the final form his philosophy took, after necessary and proper modifications as a result of criticism, it is not certain that any statement of his is totally irreconcilable with the Christian faith or indefensible in terms of the New Testament. It is by no means so clear that the same may be said of Augustine.”

Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p.128

“[The writings of the earliest Greek fathers] show a manifest affinity with the later teachings of Pelagius rather than with those of Augustine. In a measure, it may be said, they prepared the way for

*Pelagianism...Adam could sin and did sin, and thus came under the power of Satan, death, and sinful corruption. This physical corruption was propagated in the human race, but is not itself sin and did not involve mankind in guilt. There is no original sin in the strict sense of the word. They do not deny the solidarity of the human race, but admit its physical connection with Adam. This connection, however, relates only to the corporeal and sensuous nature, which is propagated from father to son, and not to the higher and rational side of human nature, which is in every case a direct creation of God. It exerts no immediate effect on the will, but affects this only mediately through the intellect. Sin always originates in the free choice of man, and is the result of weakness and ignorance. Consequently infants cannot be regarded as guilty, for they have inherited only a physical corruption.*

*It should be noted, however, that there were some departures from this general view. Origen admitting that a certain hereditary pollution attached to everyone at birth, found the explanation for it in a pre-natal or pre-temporal fall of the soul, and came very close to a doctrine of original sin. And Gregory of Nyssa came even nearer to teaching this doctrine. But even the great Athanasius and Chrysostom scrupulously avoided it."*