

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Original Sin

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” —Romans 5:12

A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **“Sin.”** Many different terms in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament are used to communicate the multifaceted nature of sin. A few in the Greek New Testament include: *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία), which means “missing the mark”; *adikia* (ἀδικία), which means “unrighteousness”; and *paraptōma* (παράπτωμα), which means “a violation of moral standards, a trespass.”

In sum, sin is “any lack of conformity to God’s will in attitude, thought, or action, whether committed actively or passively. The center of all sin is autonomy, which is the replacing of God with self” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 454). Sin is “essentially rebellion, an expression of autonomous revolt against God, the image-bearing creature’s renunciation of God as Creator” (Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 34-35).

Sin is the response, “My will be done” rather than “Thy will be done.”

2. **“Original sin.”** Theologians use this term to describe the sin that originated our sin. The doctrine of original sin therefore includes two related aspects:

- (a) A consideration of the first sin which Adam committed at the beginning of human history. This single act occurred at a particular moment in time and included particular circumstances. The key text of Scripture: Genesis 3.
- (b) A consideration of the effect this first sin had on all of Adam’s descendants. The key texts of Scripture: Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

The doctrine of original sin seeks to answer the question, “What is the relationship between Adam’s sin and my sin?” It answers such questions as, “Did I *become* a sinner when I began committing sin, or was I *born* a sinner?” “For what am I guilty and why am I suffering—for my sin alone, or the sin of Adam?”

The doctrine of original sin is foundational in Christianity, for it accounts for the presence of sin in humanity and explains the need for a Savior. But it is vitally important that this doctrine be established *biblically*, and not according to human logic or intuition. The history of controversy in the Christian Church over this issue is a history of the failure to submit all reason and intuition to God’s word.

“While we are also judged because of our own sin, according to Paul our sinful condition is God’s antecedent judgment on the entire human race thanks to the sin of the representative man, Adam. This is the doctrine of original sin” ~ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.75

“Original sin explains everything and without it we cannot explain anything.” ~ Joseph de Maistre

B. Sin’s Entrance into Humanity

Key text: Genesis 3. Some observations:

- 1. The purpose of Genesis 3 is to give an account of the origin of sin in the human race, not to explain the origin of sin in the ultimate sense.

- The “serpent” (the tempter) merely appears on the scene (3:1), indicating that there is an untold backstory. But we can conclude that at some point *after* God finished his creative activity (which was pronounced “very good,” 1:31), but *before* the temptation of Adam and Eve (3:1ff), there was a fall among angelic beings in the heavenly realm.
- 2. The purpose of Genesis 3 is to emphasize humanity’s relationship to sin. Humanity’s sin problem cannot be blamed on God; God did not create Adam and Eve as sinful but as “very good” (1:31). He placed them in an ideal context. Adam alone bore responsibility for his failure.
- 3. The purpose of Genesis 3 is to explain the essence of Adam’s sin—it was the rejection of God’s authority and the taking into one’s own hands the right and capacity to determine what is good and what is evil.

“By violating the command of God and eating of the tree, they would make themselves like God in the sense that they would position themselves outside and above the law and, like God, determine and judge for themselves what good and evil was.” ~ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.33.

- 4. The purpose of Genesis 3 is to provide the basis for understanding the consequences of Adam’s sin, which include *guilt* (3:7-8), *condemnation* (3:14-19), *more sin* (4:1-16) and *death* (5:5, 5:8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31). These consequences impact man both spiritual and physically.

C. Sin’s Transmission to Humanity

Key texts: Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. Romans 5:12 in particular summarizes the transmission of Adam’s sin to humanity. Five observations must be made from this text:

1. **“just as through one man”** – Paul treats Adam as a real, historical figure. Adam is not a metaphor.
2. **“sin entered into the world”** – The term “world” here refers specifically to the “human race.” Sin entered humanity (“the world”) precisely through Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden.
3. **“and death through sin”** – The experience of death came as a consequence to Adam’s sin. Death never existed before Adam’s sin.
4. **“and so death spread to all men”** – The consequence of Adam’s sin was not limited to him. It automatically spread to all who would be his descendants.
5. **“because all sinned”** – The clause explains the previous one. The reason why “death spread to all men” is because “all sinned.”

But what does it mean that “all sinned”? In what way? What is the relationship between the sin of Adam’s descendants (the “all” in Romans 5:12) and the sin of the “one man” (Adam)? The meaning of this fifth point in Romans 5:12 has been fiercely debated. There are four main views:

1. **View #1: A Bad Example**

- This view was famously advocated by the British monk Pelagius (c. 360-418). He argued that the only relationship that exists between our sin and Adam’s sin is that of *influence*. Adam left his descendants a *bad example*.
- Thus, all children are born with the same innocent nature that Adam possessed before the Fall (*tabula rasa*). Sin is always a free moral choice made by a neutral will, though certainly sinful tendencies can develop if sin is practiced enough. The only “original sin” is the sin you first commit.

- If human beings are God's image-bearers, they must have "free-will," since free-will is the ultimate expression of the image of God.

2. View #2: Inherited Nature

- This view was advocated by Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). He and the many others who hold to his view do not deny a real connection between Adam's sin and our sin. They agree that Adam has passed on to all his descendants a corrupt nature.
- But this corrupt nature is only sick and weakened; it is not dead.
- Moreover, Adam's descendants do not bear any guilt for Adam's sin; they only bear guilt and judgment for their own conscious acts of sin.

3. View #3: Physical Solidarity

- This view was famously advocated by Augustine (354-430). It is sometimes called the "seminal" view or "realism."
- Augustine argued that we were all present in Adam when Adam sinned. We were "in his loins" (to use the idea of Heb 7:9-10 that Levi—a descendant of Abraham—was "in the loins" of Abraham). Analogously, we were "in the Garden" with Adam when he fell because we were in Adam's "loins."
- All human beings are morally culpable because their physical and spiritual "DNA" were "in" Adam. Therefore, every descendant of Adam bears both the sin and guilt of Adam's sin.
- Augustine asserted that we are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are already sinners. Moreover, the universal reality of death—even of infants—witnesses to the fact that we are all inherently guilty.

4. View #4: Representational Headship

- This view has been advocated by a large number of Reformed theologians.
- It does not deny the fact that we inherit a sinful nature from Adam (View #3 above; Psalm 51:5), but sees Adam's role as much more than a mere procreator of a sinful nature.
- Adam was not a normal, private individual; he functioned as the *head* of humanity. Adam was humanity's legal representative.
- After all, Eve was the one to sin first, but the transmission of sin is not tied to Eve. Rather, as the head of the human race, Adam's failure is automatically and directly passed down to each of his descendants.

View #4 is the correct view, and it is based particularly on the Adam-Christ parallelism present in the key texts, as well as its related concept of imputation. See especially Romans 5:18-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

ADAM → sin (disobedience) → condemnation (judgment) → death (consequence) → sinner.

CHRIST → righteousness (obedience) → justification (vindication) → life (consequence) → believer.

"In sum, both men—Adam and Christ—are seen as representatives of humanity, and for both, the effects of their actions are placed on others. Adam is the representative of sinful humanity, and Jesus is the presentative of righteous humanity." ~ MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 465

D. How Can Original Sin Be Part of God's Plan?

Various responses have been offered to the undeniable reality of original sin:

- Some say God was caught off guard; God did not know Adam would sin when he created him. This view denies God's *omniscience*.
- Some say God knew Adam would sin, but he could not prevent the possibility. In order to create man in his image, God was required to surrender some of his control. This view challenges God's *sovereignty*.
- Some say God knew Adam would sin, but just didn't care. This view denies God's *benevolence*.

These views all downplay some aspect of the testimony of Scripture about the character of God. Indeed, God is never the author of sin (James 1:13). His character contains no taint of evil (1 John 1:5). But Scripture also asserts that God is *all-knowing*, that he is *all-sovereign*, and that he is *all-good*.

Indeed, there is a great mystery involved in this question. God has not explained to us how he can ordain the fall of Adam and yet remain perfectly righteous at the same time.

But this is sure: apart from the fall of Adam and the spread of those consequences to the entire human race, we would not be able **to know God as Savior**. This is the most precious knowledge of all.

"He willed it so that in it and against it he might bring to light his divine attributes."

~ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.64

"Grace, we might say, is a response, an application of God's character and attributes, to human rebellion. . . . In short, if the world did not exist and had never fallen, God could not be said to be gracious." ~ Trueman, *Grace Alone*, 24-25

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Romans 5:12

Recommended Reading: MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 451-468.

Homework:

- Review the notes—and the audio, if necessary—for this lesson. In your own words, define "original sin" and explain its two related aspects. How would you explain it to a child? Come ready to test your definition next week in the discussion group.
- What are the key texts that must be considered for both aspects of "original sin"?
- View #4 (representational headship) is stated as the correct way to understand our relationship to Adam's sin. How would you respond to the views of critics who say that this view is "unfair" or "contrary to logic"?
- To whom do you belong? Who is your "head"? Is it still Adam, or is it now Christ?
- If there never had been a fall, could you know about God as a *Savior*? Could you praise him so deeply and personally for his grace and mercy?
- Take time this week to read/sing through the hymns we sang at tonight's meeting: "God Be Merciful to Me" (*Hymns of Grace* #390); and "All I Have Is Christ" (*Hymns of Grace* #389). Use them as tools to help you acknowledge to God your past sinful state and worthiness of judgement, but also his offer of grace and cleansing as a saving God.

Hymns: "God Be Merciful to Me" (*Hymns of Grace* #390); "All I Have Is Christ" (*Hymns of Grace* #389).

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: September 18 ("Total Depravity")