

# Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

## Day 16

### What Is Original Sin?

Within a hard-to-deal-with theological topic is a sub-topic that also is very hard to understand and come to grips with: *original sin*. The term basically refers to all people being born with a sin nature; each one of us is born a sinner. As noted in chapter 15, we are not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because we are (born) sinners. The nature precedes the behavior; the acts flow from the condition.

It is called “original sin” because it traces back to the original sin of Adam. His sinful nature was passed on to his children and their children and therefore to all of humanity—as such, this is sometimes called “inherited sin.” The Bible says, for example, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (**Psalm 51:5; see also 58:3**). In the New Testament we find:

*All of us also lived among [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature [that is, from birth] deserving of wrath.*

**Ephesians 2:3**

This means that at the point of conception, we all have the predisposition or inclination toward sin (see day 15). But not only do we have this propensity toward sin, God also rightly considers all of us guilty of sin. This is due to the imputation or transfer of Adam’s guilt to the rest of humankind. Paul discusses this in **Romans 5:12–19**, beginning with

*Sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—to be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account [transferred, imputed] where there is no law.*

**Romans 5: 12–13**

## He concludes with

*Consequently, just as one trespass [Adam's sin] resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act [Jesus' sacrifice] resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*

**Romans 5:18–19**

Paul is saying that when Adam sinned, it's as if we all sinned; and just as Adam is guilty for that sin, so we all are guilty—for that sin. But how can that be? We are living thousands of years after the original sin, so how could God consider us guilty for that? Furthermore, how could this result in our being in a sinful condition from the first moment of our lives? These are tough questions without easy answers.

## Two Views on Original Sin

Some believe that Adam represented the rest of humanity in his life and specifically in his sin. This is called the **federal head view** of original sin. The U.S. has a federal government; for its legislative branch, we the people elect representatives to Congress. Their vote for or against a law is *their* vote, but it affects *us* as their constituents. In the same way, Adam is humanity's federal head. It was *his* act of sin, but as he is our representative, it affects us all.

Others believe that as God reckons things, when Adam sinned, all the rest of humanity was right there sinning along with him. So it is not only that his sin affects us because he represents us, but that his sin was our sin as well. This is called the **natural or realistic view** of original sin.

A fascinating passage that provides a biblical basis for this view is **Hebrews 7:1–10**, where the author reflects back on Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek (**see Genesis 14**). He concludes with "One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor" (vv. 9–10). Levi was three generations down the road from Abraham—many years from being born—yet it was just as if Levi himself had given this tithe, even though Abraham actually did. Why? Because "he was still in the body of his ancestor" just as we were "in the body of our ancestor, Adam," when he sinned.

No matter how we understand it, it seems clear that from God's perspective, as a result of the first sin, every individual is born sinful and thus guilty.

A little history may help us here. Augustine was one of the earliest Christian thinkers to develop the doctrine of original sin. The view just described is essentially what he believed and taught. Thus his view was that all people are totally unable to help themselves and so are totally dependent upon the grace of God. This has come to be a tenet of Calvinism, but it is a hard position to embrace.

### **Another View (or Two or Three) on Original Sin**

At the other end of the theological continuum, a British monk named Pelagius, a contemporary of Augustine, became convinced of just the opposite: Adam's sin did not affect the rest of us in any way. Rather, *Pelagianism* says we are sinners because we sin. Furthermore, Pelagius believed that because God commanded all people to be holy just as he is holy (**Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:15–16**), it must be possible. God wouldn't command us to do something we could not do. It is hypothetically possible, according to Pelagius, for a person to live a perfect and sin-free life.

Pelagius and Augustine battled it out through their writings, and Augustine "won" when the Council of Carthage condemned as heresy the teachings of Pelagius in AD 418. However, Augustine's view was still a bit too extreme for some, so a mediating position arose. *Semi-Pelagianism* denies that we are *totally* unable to do anything about our own sinful condition, but still, we *are* in pretty bad shape and need a lot of help from God. If *we* initiate and reach out to God, he will respond. This cooperative view of salvation—the individual participates, God participates; together, salvation results—is the historic view of the Roman Catholic Church.

As the debate continued, yet another mediating view arose. Like semi-Pelagianism, *semi-Augustinianism* holds that we are not *totally* powerless; however, we are unable to reach out to God for help, so *God* must take the initiative. When he provides the help we need, then we can and must respond. This is basically the Arminian view.

As hard as it may be to understand and accept, the Bible does not paint an encouraging picture of our sinful condition and our ability to do anything about it. Sin has had devastating effects on all of us. As much as we might resist acknowledging this about ourselves, it is

absolutely necessary that we do; it is the only way we can be saved. We must depend upon the grace of God *alone* through the work of Christ *alone*.

#### **INTERESTING FACT**

Many reject the idea that Adam's sinful act could so unavoidably affect the rest of us. It sounds unfair, and people don't like the idea of being guilty for what someone else has done. But according to **Romans 5:12–19**, the sacrificial act of one person, Jesus, also can thoroughly affect the rest of us—for righteousness! He died for sin, and through him we *all* can be right with God. To be consistent, if we reject universal human guilt coming from what Adam did, we must also reject the availability of righteousness being fully granted to us from what Christ did. We can't reject the first and accept the second; both are based on the same principle.