



---

Conducted by  
James Gardiner

---

**“WHAT is ‘original sin’ and what justification is there in the scriptures for the doctrine of original sin”?**

To the best of my knowledge and belief “Original Sin” is a theological doctrine which propounds that every man and woman born into the world is not only born totally depraved but has also inherited at birth the guilt of Adam’s sin. “Original sin” is imputed sin—God imputing to us the sins of other men—principally Adam’s. In my view there is absolutely no justification in the scriptures for such a doctrine—rather the reverse. The theory of “imputed sin” or “original sin” is very often used in justification of baby baptism, the idea being that because babies are sinners when born they must immediately be baptised to appease God. There are many scriptures quoted in support of the doctrine, some of which we shall look at in a moment. But perhaps the main text is found in Romans 5:12. This verse says “wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned...” The whole of the chapter must be read to get the verse in its context, of course; and verse 12 taken in conjunction with the other verses, especially verse 19, is reckoned to give a basis for the theory of imputed sin. Verse 19 says “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous”. Anyone desiring to study Romans 5 will find that many volumes have been written (on both sides of the issue) by theologians over the centuries, and that the subject is too complex to be dealt with in this brief column. What can be said, however, is that other scriptures apart from Romans 5 show beyond doubt that God does not impute sin and that each of us will answer on the Day of Assize for our own personal transgressions and for no one else’s. Again in Rom. 5:12 the language, to my mind, clearly shows why each man stands in jeopardy with God—“for all have sinned”. This verse is talking of adults who have sinned, not babies born with Adam’s guilt “imputed” to them. Sin is a violation of the laws of God, either by commission or omission. Concerning *commission* of sin we read “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law” (1st John 3:4) Newly born babies are incapable of sin as meant by this definition. Concerning *omission* we read (James 4:17) “To him therefore that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin”. Again infants are unable to sin by this definition. Actual sin cannot be attached to newly-born babies. How then can they be classified as sinners? We are informed that because of Adam’s sin all men and women born into the world have his sin upon them, according to Romans chap. 5. As a matter of interest a clergyman here is writing upon this subject just now in a local paper, and describes babies as

"guilty, hell-deserving sinners". Such is the doctrine. To use Rom. 5:12 as a basis for the theory that babies are born with Adam's sin imputed to them, is in my view, a failure to distinguish between the *consequences* and the *guilt* of Adam's sin. The verse says that because of Adam's sin *death* passed upon all men; it does not say that *sin* passed upon all men. Thus the *consequences* of Adam's sin (the legacy we have inherited) is death; physical death. Thus we all shall die. It is quite another matter to say that we all inherit *the guilt* of Adam's sin and are thus sinners (at birth) in the sight of God. Nowhere does the Bible say, as far as I know, that we inherit *the guilt* of any man's sin. An illegitimate child inherits the *consequence* of its parents' sin (*i.e.* illegitimacy) and so the child must go through life in that condition and could suffer in various ways (even through having no legal status). However, although the child suffers the *consequences* it does not share in *the guilt* of the parents' sin (in having an illegitimate child). Thus it is quite easy to inherit the consequences of another's sin without inheriting the guilt. In like manner we inherit death as a consequence of Adam's sin, but we do not share in the guilt. It is as groundless in scripture as it is repugnant to the mind.

The "Original Sin" doctrine is allied to the doctrine of "Total Depravity" and often the two are confused. The following "proof verses" advanced in support of the "Original Sin" concept are often advanced by those who believe in the total depravity of man. Space allows for only a brief notice:—

*Psalm 51:5*: "Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me". This is by far the favourite text. It of course was an anguished cry from the tortured conscience of the Psalmist, David.

David's parents could have been offended at his words, for David had a good pedigree and was the offspring of lawful and honourable marriage; his mother being a "handmaid of the Lord". David here is referring to man's evil propensities from the very earliest age. His late dreadful fall evinced the depravity of which he was capable. Man certainly has a bias to evil, and sin is thoroughly ingrained in his nature.

The apostle Paul says something similar in Eph.2:3: "...and were by nature the children of wrath, even as the rest." Man by reason of his physical nature has the inclination to sin but, at the same time, it is not true to say that man is totally depraved or entirely evil, for Paul also says (in Rom.2:14) that the Gentiles "do by nature the things of the law." They had not received God's law, as the Jews had, but by their own good nature had endeavoured to observe the wholesome laws of God. Man indeed has a tendency to evil from even the tender years of infancy but he is certainly not *guilty* of sin until he commits it.

*Psalm 14:2,3*: "Jehovah looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek after God. They are all gone aside, they are together become filthy there is none that doeth good, no not one."

This is another verse which is reckoned to show man's total *hereditary* depravity. But surely the verse shows that the children of men *went astray* — they were not born that way. They were not wayward or filthy *at birth*. "They are all gone aside..." "They are together *become* filthy..."

*Psalm 58:3*: "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies."

The obvious comment is that this verse should not be applied to new-born babies because they can't, at that stage, "speak lies". The verse refers to "the wicked", not to everyone and to persons old enough to consciously tell lies.

*Gen. 8:21*: "Jehovah said in His heart, I will not again curse the ground for man's sake, for that the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Again the

meaning confronts us and merely reiterates the tendency of man to go astray and rebel against God. Man has a bias to evil which no sane person would deny, but this is a quite different thing from saying that man is *born* in that condition, and is a condemned sinner before he can open his eyes or walk on his own two feet. This verse says that man's heart is evil from *his youth*, not his birth.

There are, of course, various other "proof texts" employed in support of the doctrine under discussion, but they certainly are no better than those already quoted. On the other hand, we might for our part quote some passages of scripture which certainly would seem to deny the theory of original sin or total hereditary depravity. For instance, Jesus said in Matt 18:3, "Except ye be converted *and become as little children* ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" Jesus also said, "Suffer the *little children* to come unto me for *of such* is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 19:14)

If little children are totally depraved, is Jesus advocating that we become as little children – *i.e.* totally depraved? Surely Jesus was referring to the innocence of little children.

Paul, in Acts 17:28, referring to God says "for we are also His offspring". Are the offspring of God totally depraved? Man has a propensity *to do good*, just as he has a tendency to do evil. Paul talks of the constant war in his members between evil *and good* (Rom. 7:15-24).

Jesus was deity yet he was as human as any other man – he was born in a manger, of his mother Mary. When He died He was without sin. When he challenged His accusers and asked who was able to convict him of sin, no one answered. No one, apparently, had heard of "original sin" or the theory of "total hereditary depravity". No sin of Adam's was imputed to Jesus because He was born of Adam's race, and in like manner no such sin will be imputed to us. The New Testament is plain and emphatic concerning the scope of our responsibility on Judgement Day: *i.e.* each man will answer for *his own sins only*, and Paul even envisages that some men will be adjudged "good" on that day. "For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done *in his body*, according to that he hath done, whether it be *good* or bad." (2 Cor. 5:10).

There appears to be little support in the scriptures for the doctrine of "Original sin", and to my mind the idea has arisen from failure to draw a distinction between the *consequences* of Adam's sin and the *guilt* of it. Man is not guilty of sin until he has committed it.