### Original Sin

Having given definition to the concept of sin, we now ask, “How did sin originate among humans?” The technical term for sin’s origin is “original sin.” It locates the beginning of sin’s destructive course to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. As a result of their original sin, all humans inherit from Adam a sinful nature, or “depravity,” as well as a share in Adam’s guilt. In addition, the natural world, which God originally intended to furnish people with only blessing, has now become hostile to humanity. The human body, consequently, is now subject to death and decay.

**1. Concept of Corporate Personality**

The biblical teaching of original sin is better understood in light of the concept “corporate personality.” Corporate personality refers to the phenomenon, often encountered in Scripture, when God deals with an entire group as with one entity. According to this system, the fate of a representative of the group becomes the fate of the entire group. The theologian possibly championing this theory more than any other, H. Wheeler Robinson, defined it thusly: “The whole group, including its past, present, and future members, might function as a single individual through any one of those members conceived as representative of it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This principle of solidarity stands behind the edict in Ex 20:5-6 (Deut 5:9-10): “…visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” It also compromises the foundation for God’s covenantal system. He makes a covenant not with one individual, but also with that one’s descendants as well

The Old Testament abounds with examples of this phenomenon. In Numbers 16:27-33, we learn of the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram, whose families perished along with them in their rebellion. When Hiel disobediently rebuilt Jericho, it was not he who perished, but his sons (Josh 6:25; 1 Kin 16:34). Moreover, when Achan sinned, his entire family shared in his tragic fate (Josh 7:1-5, 24-26). When David conducted an “illegal” census of his people, He did not suffer for it, but the people of Jerusalem did instead (2 Sam 24:15-17; 1 Chr 21:3).

We can cite other examples. Because Amalak “set himself against him (Israel) on the way while he was coming up from Egypt,” Saul was commissioned to “strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has” (1 Sam 15:2-3). Moab and Ammon suffered similarly (Neh 13:1-3). In 2 Samuel 21, Yahweh punished Israel in the days of David with a three-year famine for sins that Saul committed previously.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, Canaan was cursed for Ham’s transgression (Gen 9:25). Rehoboam lost most of his kingdom because of his father Solomon’s sin (1 Kin 11:11-12). All the sons of Jeroboam perished because of Jeroboam’s rebellion.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, we must qualify that those under corporate punishment could escape it by means of personal devotion to the Lord. This was so in the case of Rahab, who should have perished along with the other inhabitants of Jericho (Josh 2:8-14; 6:22-24). Yet, she was delivered because she feared God. In addition, the Moabites were excluded from the assembly of Israel, yet Ruth was welcomed due to her faithfulness. Therefore, we cannot claim that corporate punishment is inevitable.

By far, the most significant example of the principle of corporate personality, which affects us all, is the transmission of sin and its consequences from Adam to all his descendants. In Romans 5:12, we read, “Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin.” Later, Paul writes in verse 17, “By the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one.” The theme continues in verses 18-19:

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

Adam’s sin has repercussions for all his descendants of all generations. Therefore, Robinson in correct in regarding this as another clear example of corporate personality:

The most familiar of all examples of this representative value is seen in the thoroughly Hebraic contrast of Adam and Christ made by the apostle Paul, which draws all its cogency from the conception of corporate personality.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Acknowledging that solidarity exists between Adam and humanity in sin, death, and condemnation, we must next raise the question of the mechanism of this solidarity. Two theories are advanced: federalism and realism. According to the theory “federalism,” Adam was humanity’s representative in Eden. Consequently, what Adam did in the Garden affects us all. Adam violated his covenant with God and thereby brought on all his offspring, who were included in that covenant, the curse of the Fall.[[5]](#footnote-5) In “realism,” people somehow actually participated in Adam’s transgression, since they were “in him” when he ate of the forbidden fruit.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In defense of realism, some appeal to Hebrews chapter 7. Here, the author asserts that Melchizedek is greater than Levi because the latter was in the “loins” of Abraham when he paid tithes to Melchizedek. Therefore, Levi participated in that act. In a similar manner, all humanity was in the “loins” of Adam in the Garden when he sinned and therefore participated in the act. We may include Tertullian and Augustine as adherents of this theory.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Realism, though, encounters various problems. If all people became sinners by being “in Adam” when he sinned, then why did only Adam’s first sin affect his offspring? All of his subsequent transgressions should have influenced humanity as well. In addition, why do we not suffer for the sins of our other ancestors, “in whom” we were located as well when they sinned? Others note that Jesus was born of Adam’s race, but did not inherit the consequences of his sin. Finally, in Romans 5:14 we read that those who sinned after Adam and before Moses did not sin “in the likeness of the offense of Adam.” This implies that they did not participate in his actual sin.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The theory “federalism” claims that God appointed Adam the representative of the entire human race. Therefore, what Adam did in the Garden affects all humanity, since he was its representative. Adam violated his covenant with the Lord and in this way brought a curse on all who were included in the covenant. Unlike realism, human depravity is communicated not by physical descent, but as a punishment from God for covenant violation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One may defend federalism in the following way.[[10]](#footnote-10) First, Hosea 6:7 speaks of a covenant between God and Adam. Second, Genesis 3:17 states that God cursed the earth as a punishment on humanity’s representative, which may imply that humanity itself was cursed as a punishment on its representative as well. Third, some argue that Jesus avoided inheriting Adam’s sin since He belonged to a different covenant with the Father. Finally, the word אָדָם (*adam*) is used in the Hebrew text both for Adam’s personal name, and also for humanity in its entirety (e.g. Gen 6:6-7). This correspondence may indicate Adam’s role as humanity’s representative.

Finally, it is worth commenting on several passages that seem to contradict this principle of solidarity. In Deuteronomy 24:16, Moses wrote, “Fathers shall not be put to death for {their} sons, nor shall sons be put to death for {their} fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.” In recognition of this command, Amaziah refrained from punishing the children of those who assassinated his father (2 Chr 25:3-4). Moreover, in certain passages the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel stress personal responsibility before God:

- In those days they will not say again, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.’ But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge (Jer 31:29-30).

- “What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, ‘The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge’? As I live,” declares the Lord Yahweh, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die” (Ezek 18:2-4).

However, Robinson notes that in other passages from these prophets, they also recognized corporate solidarity. Jeremiah speaks of new covenant “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). He also prays in accordance with this principle to Him “who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them” (Jer 32:18). Ezekiel, in turn, prophesied about the restoration of the house of Israel (Ezek 37: 1-14), the reunification of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, and the appointing of King Messiah over them (v. 24-28).

Other passages that indicate the continuation of solidarity include Jeremiah 16:11-13, where through the prophet God rehearses the guilt of Israel’s ancestors. Even after the return from Babylon, we witness instances of enforcement of corporate responsibility (see Neh 13:1-3; Est 9:6-10).[[11]](#footnote-11) We might explain God’s command in Deuteronomy 24:16 about not enforcing corporate punishment by assuming that the Lord was forbidding His people from taking initiative themselves to apply this principle. Nonetheless, God Himself frequently so acted in the course of Old Testament history.

In conclusion, Robinson claims, “It is quite wrong to place the individualism of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in direct antithesis to the group conception which had hitherto prevailed. The group conception still remained dominant.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Possibly, verses that appear to refute the principle of solidarity may be intended to correct a misperception among God’s people about personal responsibility. Some Jews may have begun to think that all the hardship they endured was the fault of their ancestors, and that they were guiltless. We can see this attitude reflected in the saying, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (see Jer 31:29; Ezek 18:2).

Because of this misunderstanding and abuse of the solidarity principle, God brought this corrective through Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[[13]](#footnote-13) Eichrodt affirms that such an emphasis on personal responsibility “does not stand in mutually exclusive opposition to, but in fruitful tension with, the duty of solidarity, and such affects the individual and motivates his conduct.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The most likely option is that Jeremiah and Ezekiel began to show that the system of corporate personality was soon to fade out. It was meant to operate until the coming of Messiah to prepare people to conceptualize their position of solidarity with Christ (see chapter 8). Thus, the principle remains in force now only in a limited fashion in the believer’s union with Christ as well as in God’s ongoing covenant with the descendants of Abraham.

**2. Inherited Depravity**

**а. General Considerations**

Let us examine in more detail the three elements of original sin, the first being inherited depravity. Human sinful nature, or “depravity,” is the distortion of human nature so that it has an innate tendency to sin. When we speak of “nature,” we mean how an object acts “naturally,” that is, when no outside factors are exerting an influence on it.

Concerning fallen human nature, it sins “naturally.” Paul testifies, “We too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (Eph 2:3), and, “All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom 3:12). Jeremiah reveals that sinful humans cannot liberate themselves from their fallen condition: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? {Then} you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer 13:23). Similarly, the Proverbs assert, “Who can say, ‘I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin?’” (Prov 20:9). David adds, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Ps 50:5). James speaks of “your pleasures that wage war in your members” (Jam 4:1).

The Bible reveals that people’s problem is within, in the heart. Jesus knew what the human heart was like (Jn 2:25), that it is hardened (Matt 19:8). A bad tree cannot bear good fruit (Matt 7:18). Jesus taught, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting {and} wickedness, {as well} {as} deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride {and} foolishness” (Mk 7:21-22). Jeremiah concerns, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). In Ecclesiastics, we read, “The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives” (Ecc 9:3).

The Bible, then, concludes that the fallen humans are dead in relation to God (Col 2:13; Matt 8:22). They are slaves to sin (Jn 8:34) and love “darkness rather than light” (Jn 3:19). Since all people are polluted by sin, we can characterize the entire race as “a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15), which is in rebellion against God (Acts 4:25-26). Moreover, Jesus testifies that the world’s “deeds are evil” (Jn 7:7).

The book of Proverbs devotes much attention to the “wicked.” It characterizes them as deceitful (Prov 12:5), perverted (10:32; 21:8), arrogant (21:29), haters of God (14:2) and people (21:10), especially the righteous (29:10, 27), unconcerned about the poor (29:7), lovers of violence (13:2), and perverse in speech (19:1). They slander (15:28; 11:9-11; 19:28), walk in darkness (4:19), do not understand justice (28:5), sew discord (Prov 6:14; 17:19), act disgustingly and shamefully (Prov 13:5), even mistreat animals (12:10).

One can educate sinners, medicate them, apply remedial punishment, but they nonetheless remain sinners. People are born with a sinful nature and in order to resolve the dilemma, they must experience a new birth.

The term most often used in the New Testament to designate fallen human nature is σάρξ (*sarks*), usually translated “flesh.” The word σάρξ (*sarks*) has many meanings. It can refer to that which covers the bones, i.e., “meat,” as in Luke 24:39: “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” A second meaning is the body as a whole. Ephesians 5:29 is an example: “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.” Third, σάρξ (*sarks*) can apply to the entire person. John 1:14 reveals that the “Word became flesh,” that is, the Son of God became a human person – in soul as well as in body.

A fourth definition is heredity or origin. Romans 4:1 declares, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?” Here, σάρξ (*sarks*) points to Abraham as the forefather of the Jewish nation. A further meaning is human judgment: “You judge according to the flesh” (Jn 8:15). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in that they judged based merely on externals, not understanding the essence of the matter.

A sixth application of σάρξ (*sarks*) is human weakness or inability. In 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, we read, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, or the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful.” Paul is comparing what humans can do in their own strength with what they can do in God’s strength. Another example is Mark 14:38, where Jesus prayed while the disciples slept. He reprimanded them with the words, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Most likely, the disciples desired to pray, but their bodies were weak. Again, σάρξ (*sarks*) characterizes human weakness. This will be key to understanding “flesh” as sinful nature.

Paul is foremost in using σάρξ (*sarks*) to denote human depravity. In Galatians 5:19-21, he enumerates the works of the flesh: “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,” etc.

Many people, unfortunately, wrongly associate the idea of “flesh” as sinful nature with “flesh” as the human body. Due to this error, the body is thought to be the root and source of human depravity. Therefore, victory over sin supposedly consists in suppression of the physical aspect of life. However, Scripture contradicts this view. Looking at Galatians 5:19-21, we note a number of vices that do not involve physical desire, such as jealousy, anger, dissentions, and others. We also recall the words of Jesus, “From within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting {and} wickedness, {as well} {as} deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride {and} foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mk 7:21).

Therefore, the Bible does not teach that the body is the source of sin. This idea arose in Greek philosophy. The basic premise of Greek thought is that the mind or soul is good, but the body is evil. Salvation for the Greek comes from suppression of the body and development of the mind. Unfortunately, this type of thinking continues to have a significant effect on the Church today.

A more appropriate association is to connect the connotation of σάρξ (*sarks*) as “sinful nature” with the idea of “human weakness.” The term σάρξ (*sarks*) in relation to depravity merely indicates human weakness in regard to moral living – a person “in the flesh” cannot refrain from sin.

Having shown that all persons inherit moral depravity from Adam, it becomes clear why all persons sin. Paul confirms this in Romans 3:23: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Solomon also recognized, “There is no man who does not sin” (2 Chr 6:36), and, “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who {continually} does good and who never sins” (Ecc 7:20). Isaiah writes, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isa 53:6). The psalmist testifies, “For in Your sight no man living is righteous” (Ps 143:2). Jesus taught that all people are evil (Lk 11:13) and that only God is good (Lk 18:18-19).[[15]](#footnote-15) Consequently, the Bible summons all to repentance (Lk 24:47).[[16]](#footnote-16)

We may gain insight by comparing the moral condition of humans before and after the Fall. Before Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, they possessed the potential not to sin and not to die. After the Fall, however, they became sinful and mortal, that is, became unable not to sin and unable not to die. Some thinkers theorize that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, they would have become confirmed in righteousness. In other words, they would have become unable to sin and unable to die and would have continued in that state eternally. This position, though, is only theoretical.[[17]](#footnote-17)

As noted above, human depravity is “inherited.” Peter comments on this, “You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers” (1 Pet 1:18). The inheritance of human depravity traces back to the first man – Adam.

In describing human depravity, we gain insight by drawing a parallel between theology and genetics. We are familiar with the phenomenon in nature called a “mutation.” When the chromosome experiences some sort of insult, a mutation may occur that can lead to a physical deformity in one’s offspring. Similarly, Adam’s disobedience resulted in a “spiritual mutation” in his moral nature. Now, just as children may receive a physical defect from a mutation in their parents, humanity in general inherits this “moral mutation,” or human depravity, from Adam.

Thus, we conclude that sin is not some sort of substance or power. It has no material existence. It is, rather, a distortion or perversion of what God created good. When a physical mutation occurs, nothing new is added to the chromosome – only the structure is altered. Similarly, when Adam sinned, nothing new was “added” to his human composition. His nature merely was altered and became sinful.

Augustine concurs with the idea of depravity as a distortion of the original human condition. He writes, “Original sin in not the nature itself, but… an accidental defect and damage in nature.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The Lutheran theologian Mueller agrees, “Sin is not positive in the sense that it is a material substance, which subsists of itself… but is an accidental matter.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

**b. Pelagianism**

The following sections will deal with the degree of human depravity, that is, how deeply is sin rooted in human nature? Can a fallen person do any good at all? If so, to what degree? Three theories predominate: Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and total depravity.

Pelagianism claims that Adam’s sin has no effect on human nature at all. This theory was advanced by in the fourth century by Pelagius. It also found expression in the post-reformation movement “Socinianism.”

Pelagius taught that persons are born with free will, untainted by slavery to sin. The human spirit is created directly by God. The human being has inherited no sin nature from Adam. If one objects that humans have indeed inherited mortality as a consequence of Adam’s sin, Pelagius would respond that God intentionally created humans mortal. Even without any effect from the Fall, the human body was appointed to die.[[20]](#footnote-20)

According to Pelagianism, human “depravity” arises from a lack of education. People do not need deliverance from a sinful nature, but better educational opportunities. In addition, “depravity” is mistaken for simply bad habits that people develop. However, with application of sufficient will-power, people can break bad habits. Finally, sin can result from imitating the bad habits of others. One merits eternal salvation by doing good works. Pelagius felt that the fact that God gave commandments implies that we can observe them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

However, the Bible refutes Pelagius’ views. They clearly contradict Paul’s teaching in Romans chapter 5 of the tragic consequence of Adam’s sin for all humanity. In addition, the New Testament categorically rejects the idea of salvation by good works: “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16).

Furthermore, the Bible abounds with texts that affirm human sinfulness. We have already cited some in this chapter. Finally, one must consider the purpose for Jesus’ sacrificial death. The witness of the New Testament and our Lord Himself is that He died for the sins of the world, which indicates that people are in need of God’s grace for salvation. The Early Church aptly condemned Pelagius’ teaching as heresy.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Some seek to justify Pelagius by claiming that his opponents exaggerated his views. Lamberigts states, “Pelagianism was for the most part created by his opponents. Pelagius himself would not recognize this teaching as his own.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Pelagius’ supporters also claim that some documents attributed to him are not actually his. Moreover, Pelagius is said to have been pursuing a noble goal – to defend the Church from the teaching of determinism, which he felt would weaken its moral fiber. Pelagius’ main opponent, Augustine, did in fact hold to determinism, claiming that God controls a person’s behavior. Pelagius saw in determinism no motive for striving for holiness. If God controls everything, why should we strive? Pelagius’ defenders also claim that he did not specifically deny original sin or the operation of supernatural grace. He affirmed that God’s grace was present in creation, revelation, and the forgiveness of sins.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In response to this defense of Pelagius, we note that the issue is not so much his actual teaching – that is merely a historical question. We are resisting the teaching called “Pelagianism,” which is errant, whatever one may name it, or wherever it may have come from.

**c. Semi-Pelagianism**

Semi-Pelagianism is a moderate view between “Pelagianism” and “total depravity.” According to this point of view, people do indeed inherit depravity from Adam, but are still able to do some good.[[25]](#footnote-25) This teaching traces back to a fourth-fifth century monk named Cassian. We can include among its adherents Philip Melanchthon, some adherents of Arminianism, the Roman Catholic Church, and some Eastern Orthodox.[[26]](#footnote-26)

As mentioned above, in semi-pelagian thought, persons inherit depravity from Adam, but still retain sufficient will-power to resist sin to a certain degree. Yet, all people eventually sin. No one is able to totally resist temptations to sin. Therefore, salvation is by grace through the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the sinful nature.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Exponents of Semi-Pelagianism appeal to Scripture for support. In Matthew 7:11, Jesus taught that even “evil” people are able to do good to their children. In addition, if we presume that in Romans chapter 7, Paul is speaking from the perspective of unbelievers, then they can still “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (v. 22). Moreover, Jesus spoke of some sinners as “sick,” and others as “healthy” (Matt 9:12). Does this indicate different gradations of depravity? Paul also wrote, “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law…” (Rom 2:14). It seems here that Gentiles can indeed fulfill the Law to some degree.

This theory has the advantage of being able to more easily explain why some sin more brashly than others do. Additionally, this system offers a better explanation for the good behavior of Old Testament saints (assuming that the new birth was not yet available to them).

On the other hand, we encounter some difficulties as well. First, we will soon examine a substantial number of biblical texts that point to the total depravity of the human nature. Second, we know from experience that seemingly “good” people often react with hostility to the preaching of the gospel and to those who preach it. Finally, the sixth-century Council of Orange declared, “The sin of the first man has so impaired and weakened free will that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought or believe in God or do good for God's sake, unless the grace of divine mercy has preceded him.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

**d. Total Depravity**

In agreement with Semi-Pelagianism and in distinction from Pelagianism, the theory “total depravity” claims that we do indeed inherit a sinful nature from Adam. Unlike Semi-Pelagianism, though, this position asserts that depravity effects every aspect of the human condition, and that every thought, desire, intention, and choice of a fallen person is sinful. It may appear that unregenerate persons are doing good, but their motives are thought to be amiss. True obedience and an expression of genuine love must come from a heart with pure motives. In addition, fallen persons cannot deliver themselves from this curse or alter the condition of their hearts.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Supporters of this theory offer the following clarifications to their position. First, although all people are enslaved to sin, they do not necessarily participate in all manner of sins. Second, people may sin to different degrees or grow more sinful. Even John Calvin, a staunch supporter of this view, felt that fallen people retain “remnants of original dignity…. Total depravity, for Calvin, does not mean that human beings are as bad as they could be, but that original sin has corrupted every good gift.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Two theories are proposed in order to explain how unregenerate persons sometimes do good. Possibly, these works just appear good before other people, but God, who sees the heart, knows the sinful roots of these actions (see Prov 16:2; 21:2). Others posit that God gives to fallen people a certain measure of so-called “general grace,” which enables them to do some good. One example would be the care parents show to their children, or leaders to their subjects. It is thought that without God’s intervention in these ways, life on this planet would be impossible.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The following Scripture texts support total depravity. From Romans 3:9-18, we learn, “There is none who seeks for God.” Therefore, the Father must take the initiative to draw sinners to Christ (Jn 6:44). Moreover, fallen persons are described as “dead in sin,” i.e., unresponsive to God (Eph 2:3; Col 2:13). Additionally, according to 1 Corinthians 2:14, “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.” In other words, unregenerate people lack spiritual perception. Sinners “walk in darkness” (Eph 5:8; Jn 1:5), are “slaves to sin” (Rom 6:17, 20), are not able to subject themselves to God’s Law (Rom 8:7), and have “given themselves over to sensuality” (Eph 4:18-19). It appears dubious that such a person can genuinely do good.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The leading theologians of both sides of the predestination debate, John Calvin and Jacob Arminius, both held to total depravity. Both affirmed that God’s grace was necessary for a sinner to turn to Christ. These schools of thought, though, diverge as to the nature of this grace. Calvin insisted that God extends this grace only to the elect, while Arminius taught that He does so for all people. Calvin called this grace “irresistible,” since the elect cannot refuse it or resist being drawn to Christ. Arminius, however, named this grace “prevenient,” since it does not compel conversion, but merely makes it possible by softening sinners’ hearts so that they can make a free decision to accept Christ.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**3. Inherited Guilt**

The second element of original sin is inherited guilt. This means that we inherit from Adam not only a sinful nature, but also the guilt resulting from his transgression. In other words, from birth people are already guilty and worthy of condemnation because of what Adam did.

The teaching of inherited guilt is, in general, derived from Romans chapter 5. There, we read, “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” (v. 12). It is important to note here that death entered the world through Adam’s sin. Death was the punishment that God proscribed for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned Adam and Eve, “For in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” (Gen 2:17).

Verse 13 declares that although sin was in the world after Adam, it was not reckoned as such until the Law came into effect. Verse 14 becomes key. Paul argues that death afflicted those who had not sinned as Adam did by eating of the forbidden fruit. If people after Adam had no guilt for personal violations of the law and did not sin as Adam did, then why did they die? Paul’s conclusion – they sinned in Adam.

Later in chapter 5, Paul further expands his thought. Adam’s sin results not only in his offspring becoming subject to death, but also subject to condemnation: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (ст. 18-19). This is the basis for the doctrine of inherited guilt.

Several mechanisms are suggested for how Adam’s guilt is transmitted to all humanity. We recall our earlier discussion about “realism” and “federalism.” According to realism, we were organically “in Adam” when he sinned, while federalism teaches that Adam was our representative before God. By either mechanism, we can understand how Adam’s guilt could be passed on to us. A third view, “mediate imputation,” claims that guilt is based on the fact that Adam’s descendants possess a sinful nature – even before they commit actual sins.[[34]](#footnote-34)

A certain theological movement among Arminians, called “Wesleyan arminianism,” teaches that people inherit Adam’s guilt, yet God unilaterally applies to all people justification from his guilt. To receive justification from personal sins, however, one must personally come to Christ for forgiveness. Since God has already provided justification for all through Christ’s sacrifice, He is free to apply it in this way.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Some commentators, however, totally reject the proposition that we inherit guilt from Adam’s transgression. We can include in their number some Arminians and the Eastern Orthodox.[[36]](#footnote-36) These Arminians insist that we inherit from Adam only depravity, but not guilt. Our condemnation is based solely on the sins we personally commit, but not on Adam’s sin. Such thinkers object that to be condemned because of someone else's sin is unfair.

Defenders of the doctrine of inherited guilt respond that if Adam’s offspring inherit death and depravity as a result of his sin, why would one object if guilt was inherited as well? In all three cases, parties suffer due to the fault of another.

One must also consider that the redemptive work of Christ corresponds to all aspects of original sin in Adam. The new birth is God’s answer to depravity. Resurrection overcomes death. Our justification in Christ is God’s solution for the guilt inherited from Adam’s sin. Mueller comments, “Scripture teaches the imputation of Adam’s guilt to his descendants in such a way that, if the imputation of guilt is denied, also the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to Adam’s descendants is also denied.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

It is interesting to note that when we read about the Last Judgment, Adam’s sin as a basis for condemning sinners is not mentioned. Instead, we read, “The dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev 20:12), not according to Adam’s deeds. Thiessen explains this puzzle by saying, “By sin of nature we refer to the guilt of inborn sin, but there is a greater guilt when we have allowed the sin of nature to cause us to commit acts of personal transgression.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Consequently, Revelation 20 does not mention inherited guilt since the guilt of personal transgression is more grievous.

Another objection to inherited guilt is the fate of infants and toddlers who have never committed personal sin. Are they nonetheless condemned because of Adam’s sin? We respond that, as an expression of God’s mercy and grace, He applies the redemptive work of Christ to their lives unconditionally should they die before reaching the age of accountability. If we presume that infants and toddlers are saved based on their own innocence, then God ceases to be the Savior of all people in the full sense of the word. Yet, 1 Timothy 4:10 teaches us that God “is the Savior of all men, especially believers.” A more extensive discussion of this topic is found in chapter 24.

The final objection that we will entertain comes from Romans 7:9-10, where Paul “died” when the commandment came. If the word “died” refers to the moment he incurred guilt before the Lord, then people become guilty only when they personally sin.[[39]](#footnote-39) On the other hand, Paul’s goal here is not to pinpoint the moment when people first become accountable for sin. His goal is simply to demonstrate the effect law has on persons – it prompts them to sin.

Eastern Orthodoxy holds the view that people inherit from Adam neither depravity, nor guilt, but only mortality. People become accountable for sins in the same way that they obtain salvation – by personal choice.[[40]](#footnote-40) In Meyendorff’s words, “As we have seen, the patristic doctrine of salvation is based, not on the guilt inherited from Adam and from which man is relieved in Christ, but on a more existential understanding of both ‘fallen’ and ‘redeemed’ humanity.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Orthodox theology fails to emphasize a person’s judicial status before God. Therefore, they show little interest in the question of inherited guilt. Meyendorff describes the Orthodox approach to justification as follows: “Byzantine theologians never succumbed to the temptation of reducing sin to the notion of a legal crime, which is to be sentenced, punished, or forgiven.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Comparing the Catholic view (and the subsequent Protestant view) with the Orthodox understanding yields the following results. For Catholics and Protestants, the primary spiritual need is being justified before God and in a proper judicial relationship with Him. Because of the Fall, humanity has lost that status before the Lord and must regain in through an act of justification. In Orthodoxy, though, the main issue in our relationship with God is not restoration of status, but spiritual growth with the goal of attaining deification. Orthodox theology, then, pays little attention to the doctrine of justification or the issue of guilt inherited from Adam.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**4. Mortality**

The third element of original sin is mortality. As we well know, all living organisms in the material world will eventually die. It is an inescapable part of human existence. The apostle Paul informs us of the origin of human mortality, “In Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22).

In Scripture, the term “death” applies not only to physical death. Spiritual death is the absence of God’s life in the heart of an individual. Scripture also speaks of eternal death, which is eternal exclusion from God’s presence and kingdom. All these experiences have the common element of “separation.” Physical death is separation of soul from body. Spiritual death is separation from the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit. Eternal death is eternal separation from the Lord, who is the source of all good (Rev 20:14).

We can delineate the relationships between these types of death. All individuals are born in the condition of spiritual death, that is, without the presence of God’s Spirit in their hearts. If a person crosses over into physical death without experiencing the new birth by the Spirit, they enter into eternal death.

**а. Physical Death**

The world of medicine defines death as the cessation of brain or circulatory function. The Bible offers an alternate version – the separation of the soul/spirit from the body. James writes, “The body without the spirit is dead” (Jam 2:26). Genesis 2:7 reveals that Adam became a living being after receiving the breath of life from God. In a similar way, when the breath of life departs, death results. In addition, when Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, “her spirit returned, and she got up immediately” (Lk 8:55). In other passages, death is described as the spirit’s exit (Lk 12:20; Ps 146:4). Finally, when Jesus expired, He “yielded up His spirit” (Matt 27:50; сf. Acts 7:59).[[44]](#footnote-44)

Other biblical texts employ the term “departure” to describe physical death. Both Paul (2 Tim 4:6) and Peter (2 Pet 1:15) describe their deaths this way, and the term is employed for Jesus’ as well (Lk 9:31). Other expressions include, “gathered to his people” (Gen 25:8), “depart in peace” (Lk 2:29), “sleep” (Matt 9:24; 1 Thes 4:13), and “to go to his own place” (Acts 1:25).[[45]](#footnote-45)

Before we go on to investigate the true origin of death, we will briefly mention some invalid theories. As we discussed above, the fifth-century heretic Pelagius taught that people are born in a normal spiritual condition without inherited depravity or mortality from Adam. Nevertheless, God created people with a mortal body. This is the origin of death. We encounter another false view on death’s origins in the theory “progressive creationism,” which claims that God used the process of evolution to make all living creatures. Therefore, death existed long before Adam lived, and by the process of natural selection, the Lord progressively developed humans from apes. However, in light of the biblical witness, which we will soon examine, both these theories are found wanting.

According to the Bible, death arose as a result of Adam’s sin. Because Adam disobeyed God in the Garden, the entire world and humanity as well received the curse of mortality. Both Old and New Testaments confirm this truth (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12; 6:23; 1 Cor 15:21-22). For example, Paul specifically states that death came into the world “through one man” (Rom 5:12) and that “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:21-22).[[46]](#footnote-46)

Mantzaridis incorrectly proposes that death is not punishment for Adam’s sin, but a natural consequence of broken fellowship with God. He observes that all the curses for sin, listed in Genesis chapter 3, are stated in the passive voice.[[47]](#footnote-47) On the other hand, Paul concretely speaks of death as the “wages of sin” (Rom 6:23).

The Bible also speaks of the inevitability of death. Hebrews 9:27 declares, “It is appointed for men to die once.” The book of Ecclesiastics concurs, “There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked” (Ecc 9:2). The psalmist claims, “What man can live and not see death?” (Ps 89:48; сf. Ps 49:12).

The psalmist also stresses the transient nature of human life: “In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew; toward evening it fades and withers away” (Ps 90:6; сf. 103:15-16), and, “My lifetime as nothing in Your sight” (Ps 39:5). No one can “by any means redeem {his} brother” from death (Ps 49:7). Death is “the way of all the earth” (1 Kin 2:2) and “the covering which is over all peoples” (Isa 25:7). In fact, in all of human history we know of only two individuals who escaped death: Enoch and Elijah.

In light of the fact that death is inevitable and that ”our days on the earth are like a shadow” (1 Chr 29:15), one must “take {it} to heart” (Ecc 7:2) and act wisely, making full use of the time one has. The psalmist prays, “Teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12; сf. Ecc 9:10).

We will now touch on the time of one’s death. A very popular conviction is that God has appointed a certain moment of time for each person’s death, and that time is fixed and immovable. In His foreknowledge, God does know, of course, the number of our days (Ps 139:16; Job 14:5). Yet, that does not invariably mean that our behavior has no effect on our lifespan.

The Bible clearly declares that long life is a blessing from the Lord (Ps 128:5-6; Ps 91:16).[[48]](#footnote-48) In addition, Scripture delineates specific things that can lengthen life: honoring parents (Eph 6:2; сf. 5:16); attentiveness to God’s Word (Prov 3:1-2; 4:10, 22) and its practice (Deut 6:2; Ps 34:12-14; 1 Kin 3:14); fear of the Lord (Prov 10:27); and even care for animals (Deut 22:7). On the other hand, sin can shorten one’s life (Ecc 7:17; Ps 55:23). Having said that, it is problematic to establish a fixed principle here since “there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs {his life} in his wickedness” (Ecc 7:15).

It is fascinating to note that men of God often knew the time of their departure, such as Jacob (Gen 49:29), Moses (Deut 32:49-50), Aaron (Num 20:23-26), Hezekiah (Isa 38:1-5), Jesus (Jn 12:23), Peter (2 Pet 1:15), and Paul (2 Tim 4:6). Paul was certain that he would not die as long as he was still useful to the Church (Phil 1:24-25).

However, from these examples we cannot conclude that God will reveal everyone’s time of death. In many cases, “man does not know his time” (Ecc 9:12) and has no “authority over the day of death” (Ecc 8:8). Nevertheless, there are a significant number of instances in Scripture where people did know the time of their departure.

The Bible testifies that death is a temporary state. Even the Old Testament predicts, “He will swallow up death for all time” (Isa 25:8). Christ has conquered death (1 Cor 15:22) and now has the keys of hell and death (Rev 1:18). Yet, only in the future will we see the full realization of his victory (1 Cor 15:23-26), when death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:14). The new earth will be free of death’s curse (Rev 21:4).

For believers in Christ, death holds no fear. The Bible asserts, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56). However, in Christ we are delivered from the curse of death and slavery to the Law. We are now among those who once “through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives,” but are now liberated from that slavery by the One who rendered “powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14-15).

**b. Question of Euthanasia**

In connection with the biblical teaching on death, we can venture some comments on a more contemporary issue – euthanasia, which translates, “good death.” Evangelical believers stand in opposition to so-called “active euthanasia”, that is, when one party intentionally ends the life of another, even with the latter’s permission.[[49]](#footnote-49) Yet, it is valuable to look more closely into the question of “passive euthanasia,” which is when one party simply allows a dying person to die of natural causes.

Many consider passive euthanasia acceptable under the following conditions. First, the medical prognosis must give no hope for recovery. Second, death is already imminent. Third, the ill person, if possible, must agree to the act. If his or her condition does not allow him or her to decide (as in a coma), then a close relative may make the determination.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Furthermore, we must specify how the act of euthanasia may be performed. One means is to disconnect a life-support system that is artificially sustaining life, for example, a respirator. A more aggressive method is to withhold food or drink that is artificially administrated. Not all, of course, would agree on exactly which methods are appropriate.[[51]](#footnote-51)

However, two vital questions remain. First, if the ill party is not able to give permission, is it acceptable for a relative to decide his or her fate? Second, if the ill party is an unbeliever, it seems crucial for the sake of that person’s eternal destiny to prolong life as long as possible.

**c. Death’s Power in Creation**

Death takes its toll not only on the human body, but also on the entire planet. Death in nature expresses itself in various natural disasters and the destruction tendencies of nature. The curse of death in nature traces back to Adam’s sin, as God spoke to him, “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen 3:17).

Why did Adam’s sin result in a curse on the earth? First, Yahweh gave Adam and Eve authority over the planet. In Genesis 1:26, God said of humanity, “Let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Consequently, when Adam received the consequences of his transgression, those consequences spread to all that was under his charge, i.e., planet Earth. Another possible explanation is that by cursing the earth, God was punishing the first people for their disobedience.

We will again find helpful, as we did in our study of human depravity, a comparison with genetics. Just as Adam’s sin produced a “moral mutation” in his human nature causing its perversion, his transgression also somehow caused a “mutation” in the natural world resulting in the death and decay of all living organisms. The passage of Scripture that best of all brings out this truth is Romans 8:20-21: “For the creation was subjected to futility… the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” We will give special attention to the words “futility” and “corruption.”

“Futility” translates the Greek term ματαιότης (*mataiotes*), meaning the “state of being without use or value, *emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness.*”[[52]](#footnote-52) The natural world no longer fulfills its purpose. God determined that nature would promote life, health, and well-being. However, it fails to do so in all cases. Therefore, Paul can describe it as “futile.”

The second term, φθόρα (*phthora*), means the “breakdown of organic matter, *dissolution, deterioration, corruption.*”[[53]](#footnote-53) It is used in 1 Corinthians 15:42 to describe the mortal human body. This term indicates that all nature is moving toward degradation. Interestingly, scientists are unable to uncover the reason for aging. Yet, the Bible explains it as a consequence of the Fall. So then, Romans 8:20-21 aptly describes the condition of the natural world since the Fall – it is under the curse of death.

From our experience, we are aware of the present tragic condition of the natural world. Yet, since there still remains in nature a remnant of God’s creation order that supports life on this planet, we may still enjoy the beauty and benevolence of God’s creation. Nonetheless, eventually we all encounter the dark side of nature and the destructive powers it exerts. Therefore, we appropriately called nature “wild.”

1. Robinson H. W. Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel. – Rev. ed. – Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980. – P. 25. We must qualify, though, that the concept of corporate personality presented in this chapter differs somewhat from Robinson’s understanding. Robinson focused more on solidarity as a feature of Hebrew culture. He wrote, “The group possesses a consciousness which is distributed among its individual members and does not exist simply as a figure of speech or as an ideal” (Robinson, p. 30; also see p. 45-46, 57). However, we will focus on corporate personality as a judicial position before God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Many other examples exist, such as Lam 5:7; Job 27:14-15; Ps 109:10, 14; 1 Kin 9:6-7; 2 Kin 5:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robinson, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Berkhof L. The History of Christian Doctrine. – London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969. – P. 147-149; Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 262-263; Marino B. The Origin, Nature, and Consequences of Sin // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 300-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berkhof, p. 143; Thiessen, p. 264-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Berkhof, p. 143; Thiessen, p. 265. Marino, p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Berkhof, p. 147-149; Thiessen, p. 262-263; Marino, p. 300-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Thiessen, p. 264-265. Marino, p. 300-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kaminsky J. S. Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible // Clines D., Davies P. R., eds Supplemental Series of the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, no. 196. – Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995. – P. 138, 142-143. Yet, in these examples the principle was applied not directly by God, but by people. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Robinson, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Allen L. C. Ezekiel 1-19 // Hubbard D. A., Barker G. W. Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 270ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Eichrodt W. Theology of the Old Testament / Baker J. A. trans. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967. – V. 2. – P. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Also see: 1 Kin 8:46; Prov 20:9; Rom 3:9-12; Gal 3:22; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10 (Thiessen, p. 185). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Also see: Lk 13:1-5; Jn 3:5-6; Acts 17:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Berkhof, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Berkhof, p. 132-133, 149; Thiessen, p. 260-261. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Berkhof, p. 132-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lamberigts M. Pelage: La réhabilitation d’un hérétique. Author’s translation [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Berkhof, p. 138-139, 148-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a description of the Orthodox position, see Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. М.: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – P. 150; Florovsky G. Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eight Centuries / Trans. Raymond Miller, et al. – Postfach: Buchervertriesansstalt, 1987. – P. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Berkhof, p. 138-139, 148-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. https://www.crivoice.org/creedorange.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Berkhof, p. 135, 148; Thiessen, p. 267-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Horton M. Traditional Reformed Response // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R. Enderlein S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle ed., 3185-3190. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Berkhof, p. 135, 148; Thiessen, p. 267-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mueller, p. 236ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Berkhof, p. 188-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Marino, p. 299-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Berkhof, p. 155-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Berkhof, p. 150; Thiessen, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Mueller, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Thiessen, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Marino, p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Meyendorff J. Byzantine Theology. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Meyendorff, p. 193; also see Mantzaridis G. I. The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Meyendorff, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Fairbairn D. Partakers of the Divine Nature. – 1991. – P. 47-48. Chapter 9 provides a more throughout treatment of the Orthodox view of justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Mueller, p. 613. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., p. 613-614. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Mueller, p. 615; Thiessen, p. 256-257. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Mantzaridis, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Horton S. The Last Things // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 687. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. We can cite a biblical example here, when at Saul’s request an Amelekite ended the mortally wounded Saul’s life (2 Sam 1:6-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Dr. John Kilner. Trinity International University. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 621. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., p. 1054. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)