

Original Sin **Depravity Infects Everyone**

J. I. Packer

(from *Concise Theology*)

"Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5)

Scripture diagnoses sin as a universal deformity of human nature, found at every point in every person (1 Kings 8:46; Rom. 3:9-23; 7:18; 1 John 1:8-10). Both Testaments have names for it that display its ethical character as rebellion against God's rule, missing the mark God set us to aim at, transgressing God's law, disobeying God's directives, offending God's purity by defiling oneself, and incurring guilt before God the Judge. This moral deformity is dynamic: sin stands revealed as an energy of irrational, negative, and rebellious reaction to God's call and command, a spirit of fighting God in order to play God. The root of sin is pride and enmity against God, the spirit seen in Adam's first transgression; and sinful acts always have behind them thoughts, motives, and desires that one way or another express the willful opposition of the fallen heart to God's claims on our lives.

Sin may be comprehensively defined as lack of conformity to the law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence. Scriptures that illustrate different aspects of sin include Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 12:30-37; Mark 7:20-23; Romans 1:18-3:20; 7:7-25; 8:5-8; 14:23 (Luther said that Paul wrote Romans to "magnify sin"); Galatians 5:16-21; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:17-19; Hebrews 3:12; James 2:10-11; 1 John 3:4; 5:17. Flesh in Paul usually means a human being driven by sinful desire; the niv renders these instances of the word as "sinful nature." The particular faults and vices (i.e., forms and expression of sin) that Scripture detects and denounces are too numerous to list here.

Original sin, meaning sin derived from our origin, is not a biblical phrase (Augustine coined it), but it is one that brings into fruitful focus the reality of sin in our spiritual system. The assertion of original sin means not that sin belongs to human nature as God made it (God made mankind upright, Eccles. 7:29), nor that sin is involved in the processes of reproduction and birth (the uncleanness connected with menstruation, semen, and childbirth in Leviticus 12 and 15 was typical and ceremonial only, not moral and real), but that (a) sinfulness marks everyone from birth, and is there in the form of a motivationally twisted heart, prior to any actual sins; (b) this inner sinfulness is the root and source of all actual sins; (c) it derives to us in a real though mysterious way from Adam, our

first representative before God. The assertion of original sin makes the point that we are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are sinners, born with a nature enslaved to sin.

The phrase total depravity is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God's eyes. We cannot earn God's favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.

Total depravity entails total inability, that is, the state of not having it in oneself to respond to God and his Word in a sincere and wholehearted way (John 6:44; Rom. 8:7-8). Paul calls this unresponsiveness of the fallen heart a state of death (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13), and the Westminster Confession says: "Man by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto" (IX. 3).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).