

ARE BABIES BORN SINFUL?

The Calvinistic Doctrine of Total Hereditary Depravity

by Denny Wilson

The Bible declares, "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10). "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The consequence of our sin is death (Romans 6:23). Sin occurs when we violate the commandments of God: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). God's word is our guide in all that we do as individuals and as the church. When we fail to keep the will of God, we have sinned. Therefore, one who has not reached the mental maturity to be able to understand God's will and be able to control their actions has not sinned.

Unfortunately, there is a doctrine that is being taught in the world that declares that everyone is born a sinner, guilty of sin from birth. This destructive doctrine is sometimes called Total Hereditary Depravity. "Augustine taught that, because of the fall of Adam, all humanity, even infants, are totally depraved. According to Augustine, this condition destroyed the human will and left men in the position of being helpless servants of sin."¹ Easton's Bible Dictionary declares, "Our first parents being the root of all mankind, the guilt of their sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature were conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation" (1090). F.W. Robertson stated, "In our best estate and in our purest moments there is something of the Devil in us, which if it could be known, would make men shrink from us. The germs of the worst crimes are in us all." It has been said by those who support this erroneous doctrine that each person is born with the "original sin" of Adam, making each of us a sinner from birth.

A passage that is used by proponents of Total Hereditary Depravity to support their doctrine (though falsely applied) is Psalm 51:5. David wrote, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." Regarding this passage, John Calvin (from whom the term "Calvinism" is derived) wrote, "He (David) now proceeds further than the mere acknowledgement of one or of many sins, confessing that he brought nothing but sin with him into the world, and that his nature was entirely depraved. He is thus led by the consideration of one offense of peculiar atrocity to the conclusion that he was born in iniquity, and was absolutely destitute of all spiritual good . . . we are cherished in sin from the first moment that we are in the womb" (*Calvin's Commentaries*).

Did David mean that he was born with "original sin," that he was a sinner from birth? Regarding this question, brother B.J. Clarke offered three possible explanations to the understanding of the passage:

1) David is simply saying that he was born into a world of sin." Yet, one could be born into a world of sin without being born a sinner. 2) It is also possible that David considers himself to be "shapen in iniquity" because of the sins and sinful activity of his ancestors (Genesis 38:13-20; Deuteronomy 23:2 - Judah and Tamar). 3) A third interpretation of the passage is that David was using poetic language (hyperbole) to express his deep anguish over his sins (in regard to Bathsheba and Uriah).

With regard to this third possibility, Carl Garner wrote,

David expounds upon and confesses the depth of his sinfulness. Such sin as had been committed did not deserve forgiveness. Such consequences of sin could only come from one who had been surrounded by sin and influenced by iniquity for too long. Like a stain that has been "set" in a garment, he recognized that he had given "place" to the devil (Ephesians 4:27) . . . David overstates the expression of his sin to show that he is confessing and not hiding his wickedness.

Psalm 51:5 does not declare that David was born a sinner and there are reasonable options for the interpretation of the passage.

The Bible teaches that each person is responsible for his/her own sins. "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee" (Ezekiel 28:15). "Perfect"-what a wonderful way to describe a newborn! Each child is born into this world pure and free from sin. Children do not inherit the sin of their parents. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Ezekiel 18:20). "Sin is by definition, individual in nature, being either a violation of transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4), or a refusal to bring oneself into harmony with the behavior God prescribes for His people (James 4:17)" (Garner). Our spirit came from God and will return to Him (Ecclesiastes 12:7). God formed our spirit within us (Zechariah 12:1). We are His offspring (Acts 17:29).

God doesn't give an impure, sinful nature to His spiritual offspring. Consider also the words of Christ in Matthew 19:14, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." In Matthew 18:3-4, Jesus declared, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as the little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Our Lord and Savior declared that if we want to go to heaven, we must become like little children. Jesus would not ask us to be more like a sinner in order to go to heaven. Children are innocent of sin until they are able to reach a certain level of maturity.

Since a baby does not even know his right hand from his left (Jonah 4:11), how can he/she commit sin by not doing what he/she is incapable of doing? . . . Sin is a violation of our conscience (Romans 14:23). How can a child sin against

a conscience that has yet to be developed? (B J. Clarke).

Each soul is responsible for his/her own sin. "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James 1:14-15). Our sins are a result of our own lust and desires, not because of the sin of Adam. There is a day coming when we will answer for our sins. We will not be able to blame our sins on Adam. Our eternal home will be determined by how we live. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The false doctrine of Calvinism will cost men their souls. Friends, man is not born in sin. We each sin when we violate the will of God. Our sins will cost us our souls unless we believe in Christ (John 8:24), repent of our sins (Luke 13:3), make the good confession (Romans 10:9,10), are baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16), and live faithfully until death (2 Timothy 4:6-8; Revelation 2:10). Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to everyone who obeys Him (Hebrews 5:9). Rather than trusting in a doctrine developed by men, let us put our trust in God, and faithfully follow His will each day.

1 B J. Clarke, "Total Hereditary Depravity," in Calvinism, ed. David P. Brown (Spring, TX: Houston College of the Bible, 1998), p.314-331.

2 Carl Garner, "Restoring the Joy of Salvation," in The Book of Psalms, vol. 1, ed. Bill Jackson (Austin: Southwest church of Christ, 1989), pp.314-316