



Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.
by Don Hooton

Lesson 3 | Sin and the Fall with Augustine's "Original Sin"

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The subject of sin is seamlessly connected to the subject of the Bible story of redemption. We have looked at its presence in Genesis in the first two lessons and now in this lesson, we will consider the impact of the changing views of sin and the fall through the development of the doctrine of "Original Sin".

Original sin is the term that defines the doctrine that the nature of mankind's sinful condition has been inherited from Adam's fall. It teaches that all humans are corrupted by Adam's sin *through natural generation*, by which—together with Adam's imputed condemnation—we all enter the world guilty before God. **Original Sin says that we sin because we are sinners (not we are sinners because we sin).** Original Sin teaches that all mankind is joined to Adam in both the guilt and the corruption of his first sin (through natural generation and/or by his covenantal headship). As people from birth corrupted by sin, we share in Adam's guilt before God; a guilt that has been imputed to us. Hence, humans are so corrupted morally and spiritually by our natural union with Adam that we are totally depraved. Augustine will have an enormously influential role in shaping religious thought about this subject of human nature.

Sometimes "**Ancestral Sin**" is connected to the "Original Sin" doctrine. However, Ancestral Sin is summed up by the Orthodox church (Eastern Church): "Instead of original sin, which is used in Western Christianity, the Orthodox Church uses the term ancestral sin to describe the effect of Adam's sin on mankind. We do this to make one key distinction; we didn't sin in Adam (as the Latin mistranslation of Romans 5:12 implies). Rather we sin because Adam's sin made us capable of doing so."

The doctrine of "original sin" is a "theological construct," which *means it isn't explicitly laid out in the Christian scriptures*, but rather derives from quilting together various passages. Augustine popularized the idea in the fourth century and by the time of the Reformation it had become widespread in the West and was even more refined in expression by the Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther. Not all of them said the exact same things – but many of the things they said overlapped.

While the early church talked about sin as *an action*, Augustine and others in the west shifted language of sin to that of an inborn sin *nature*. Once that happened, all the theological focus went toward trying to fix the problem of sin in our nature, rather than in our behaviors, and as a result, the cross and the gospel came to be seen differently. Salvation became primarily about how God managed the sin nature in human bodies that became suspect, and on and on. Original sin has been called "**the red sock in our theological laundry**" because it discolors everything it touches.

Scripture certainly talks about the universal reach of sin. But no passage or verse in scripture speaks *definitively* to the concept that sin and its guilt is *inborn*. David said, "Behold, I was brought forth in guilt, And in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:4) but he did not say my mother conceived me to be a sinner. The poetry of the words can be understood in other ways.

However, we can take sin seriously without going there. After all, Jesus didn't teach anything that suggests anything like original sin. In fact, early disciples and the early church didn't either. **Every church historian demonstrates the development of the idea into the second and third century – rather than its clear presence in the Bible.** What we see in scripture is a story of people sometimes behaving terribly and people sometimes behaving righteously. They have the Spirit (Psalm 51:11) in their walk while confessing sin. And it is often the same people. Some call that a sin nature. We simply call it *human nature*. It is what humans were originally – capable of choosing what God did not want for them.

The articulation of the doctrine of Original Sin begins with Augustine. We should understand the significance of its widespread sweep and influence beyond the religious circle. We find the ideas perpetuated to American Colonies in a New England Primer textbook (1688) by Benjamin Harris with words to be read to develop reading that said, "In Adam's Fall, we sinned all" (Wikipedia.org).



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In future lessons we will address the passages offered to support the doctrine of Original Sin (and Calvinism); In this lesson, however, we want to trace what led to this Augustinian view of our sin that has held sway in traditional teaching all these centuries. If you do further studies, you will find the Original Sin doctrine distinguished this way:

1. **The Augustinian Theory**, also called the Theory of Adam's Natural Headship and the Realistic Theory. This theory affirms that, by virtue of organic unity, the whole human race existed in Adam at the time of his transgression. It says that Adam's will was the will of the species, so that in Adam's free act, the will of the race revolted against God, and the nature of the race corrupted itself. All men existed as one moral person in Adam, so that in Adam's sin we sinned, we corrupted ourselves, and we brought guilt and merited condemnation upon ourselves.
2. **The Federal Theory**. This theory is also called the Theory of Condemnation by Covenant and the Immediate Imputation Theory. It had its origin with Cocceius in the 17th century A.D. According to this theory, God made a covenant with Adam, agreeing to bestow upon all his descendants eternal life for his obedience, but making the penalty for his disobedience to be the condemnation of all his descendants. Since our legal representative or federal head did sin, God imputes his sin, guilt, and condemnation to all his descendants.
3. **The Theory of Mediate Imputation**. This theory is also called the Theory of Condemnation for Depravity. This is the theory formulated by Placeus in the 17th century A.D. Placeus originally denied that Adam's sin was in any way imputed to his posterity. But when his first view was condemned by the Synod of the French Reformed Church in 1644, he published this later view. According to this view, all men are born with a depraved nature and are guilty and condemnable for that nature. They are not viewed as being guilty because of the sin of Adam, as in the Federal Theory. Instead, it is the corrupted nature which they inherit from Adam that is sufficient cause and legal ground for God to condemn them.

The more deeply you dive, the more you'll find the effective way that these sub-views adequately disproved each other. But if it is false, where did it come from and how did it come to be received as a Christian doctrine? American Revivalist, Charles Finney, wrote of the doctrine: "It is a relic of heathen philosophy, and was foisted in among the doctrines of Christianity by Augustine, as everyone may know who will take the trouble to examine for himself." To be fair, however, there were other church fathers who spoke similar ideas into life as they struggled with sin and human nature.

Augustine appealed to **Irenaeus** in support of his view.

- "For it is too absurd to maintain that he who was so deeply injured by the enemy [Satan], and was the first to suffer captivity, was not rescued by Him who conquered the enemy, but that his children were – those whom he had *begotten in the same captivity*." (*Against Heresies*, Book III, chapter XXIII).

He does not spell out whether that **bondage** consists of the *tendency* to sin, or *guilt* for Adam's first sin. However, it appears to me that he saw it more as *a tendency* in Adam's descendants who have all inherited the mortality of Adam's sin. Since we have been born into a world full of sin and its consequent death, it is only natural that we will sin. Individuals, societies and systems within societies constantly sin. When we, as children, are surrounded by these actions we cannot help but succumb to them ourselves, which further perpetuates the system of sin. It isn't merely environmental – but it is a learned nature. This is, to me, the "original sin" Irenaeus speaks of.

Tertullian who first spoke of it from birth.

- "Every soul, then, *by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ*; moreover, it is unclean all the while that it remains without this regeneration; and because unclean, it is actively sinful, and suffuses even the flesh with its own shame." (*On the Soul*, XL).

Origen too believed that sin is rooted in the human nature of man and later assumed the existence of a hereditary sin originating with Adam because he, like Augustine after him, supposed that there was an *inherent pollution and sinfulness in sexual union*. Also, he went as far as to say that, although conjugal intercourse was permitted by Paul, it was still nevertheless sinful. His idea that each infant received this sin previous to the present life comes from his view that sin is propagated through the marriage union, that sexual desire is sin and that sexual lust in procreation transmits sin. Augustine built his doctrine of original sin upon this premise that sexual lust in procreation transmits sin.



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But there was more to the development of this in Augustine than these three men. Augustine of Hippo was born on November 13, 354, in the town of Thagaste, on the northern coast of Africa, in what is now Algeria. Augustine's father, Patricius (or Patrick), was a *decurio*, a minor official of the Roman empire, and a pagan. A *decurion* was required to act as a patron for his community and to make up any shortfalls in taxes collected from the region and may be the reason Augustine asserts that his family was poor. Augustine had at least one brother, Navigius, and at least one sister, but little information is available about his siblings. Augustine's mother, Monica (sometimes spelled Monnica), had been raised as a Christian. Although Patricius was only lukewarm about Christianity, he allowed Monica to raise the couple's children as Christians, and he finally converted to Christianity before his death. Augustine was sent to Madaura for further studies, but a lack of money forced him back home to Thagaste for a year, while his father tried to save more money for tuition. Augustine describes himself as a dissolute young man, unrestrained by his parents, who were more concerned with his success in school than his personal behavior.

When Augustine was about 16, his parents sent him to the university at Carthage. There he studied literature and poetry, in preparation for a career as a public speaker and teacher of rhetoric. Soon after, his father died, leaving Augustine as the nominal head of the family. In Carthage, he set up a household with a concubine, the mother of his son, Adeodatus, born about 372. During this period, he read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which he says inspired him with the desire to seek the truth. In Carthage, Augustine also encountered Manichaeism. Augustine was attracted to Manichaeism's clear dividing line between good and evil, its highly intellectual mythology, and its strict moral standards. Encouraged by wealthy Manichee friends, he moved on to Rome in 383, hoping to advance his career.

In 384, Augustine moved to Milan, where he heard the preaching of Bishop Ambrose. Augustine had always considered Christianity intellectually lacking, but Ambrose's application of Neo-Platonic ideas to the interpretation of Christian scripture, presented with Ambrose's famous eloquence, captured Augustine's interest. His mother had followed him to Milan, and arranged marriage to a Christian girl from a good family, requiring Augustine to send his concubine away.

In the fall of 386, his "conversion experience" convinced him to renounce his career and marriage prospects in order to dedicate his life to God. In 387, he was finally baptized by Bishop Ambrose. On their way back to Africa, his group of friends and family was delayed at the coastal city of Ostia, where Monica fell ill and died. The account of Augustine's life as set out in the *Confessions* ends there, when Augustine was about 35 years old. In 391, he visited the city of Hippo Regius, about 60 miles from Thagaste, in order to start a monastery, but he ended up being drafted into the priesthood. In 395, he became the bishop of Hippo and spent the next 35 years there.

During this period, churches in north Africa were divided into opposing factions, Donatists and Catholics. After some Christians had publicly renounced their beliefs to escape torture and execution in the early 300s in Roman persecutions, while others accepted martyrdom for their faith, the question of addressing the repentance of those who renounced their faith. Catholics re-admitted those Christians who made public repentance for having renounced their faith. But Donatists insisted that anyone wanting to rejoin the church would *have to be rebaptized*. Furthermore, they refused to recognize any priests or bishops except their own, believing that the Catholic bishops had been ordained by traitors. By the 390s, the conflict had erupted into violence. Augustine tried diplomacy with the Donatists but they refused his overtures; Then, he began to support the use of force against them. By 405, the Roman government banned Donatism in 405. In 411, Donatist and Catholic bishops met in Carthage before the imperial commissioner Marcellinus, Augustine's friend and a Catholic. Augustine eloquently argued the Catholic position and Marcellinus decided in their favor.

During the Donatist controversy, in the year 410, Rome was looted and burned by the armies of the Visigoths, northern European barbarian tribes. Many people throughout the empire believed that the fall of Rome marked the end of civilization. In response, Augustine began writing his greatest work, *The City of God*, which he worked on for 15 years. In *The City of God*, Augustine placed the heavenly and eternal Jerusalem, the true home of all Christians, against the transitory worldly power represented by Rome, and in doing so, he articulates an entirely new Christian world view.



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About the same time, a movement called Pelagianism began calling for a fundamental renewal of spiritual and physical discipline. Its founder, a British monk named Pelagius, had read Augustine's plea to God in the Confessions, "Grant what you command and command what you will" (10.29) and was horrified by the Augustine's statement implying such apparent human helplessness. "If human beings were incapable of being good without God's assistance, then what use was human free will?" Pelagius argued that human beings could choose through sheer force of will — and not only that they could, but that they must. Augustine, on the other hand, argued that no human being could expect to achieve anything like moral perfection; human will was irrevocably tainted by original sin.

Once again, Augustine presented the argument that won: Pelagius was officially condemned in 416 and sent into exile though Pelagianism remained influential. Augustine spent his final years locked in these debates with Julian of Eclanum. They also clashed on the nature of human sexuality. Augustine said sexual desire began with human disobedience, and hence, Adam and Eve's original sin tainted all humankind. Julian, however, insisted that sexual desire was simply another of the bodily senses, and that the justice of God would not inflict punishment on the entire human race for the disobedience of one person..

In review, it started with the way he interpreted the Bible. Augustine believed that no one could understand the Bible simply by reading. Like many philosophers before him, he was always grasping for deeper meaning and came to view the Bible as a series of allegories or narratives in which the characters and events have a deeper meaning. The text becomes a coded message... The Bible, he said, was a work for philosophers, not laypeople, to understand. For Augustine, the goal of understanding was to rise above the material matters of life to meet God as an "ineffable presence in the minds of the wise men, when their spirits are soaring above matter" (The City of God 9.16). The philosophical approach, especially Neoplatonism with its allegorical perspective, became the means of understanding Christianity.

Augustine was deeply involved and enamored with the Manichaeans, a Gnostic-Christians sect, that taught, among other things, that all matter is inherently evil. Because of this view, they also taught that Christ's bodily manifestations were only apparent, and that he did not actually come in the flesh. They denied the real incarnation of Christ, as well as his bodily resurrection. His nine years with them accustomed him to regard human nature as essentially evil and human freedom as a delusion.

Augustine was influenced by "Neo-Platonism." These philosophers are Philo of Alexandria (30 BCE – 50 CE), Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria (176-242), Plotinus (205-270), Porphyry (234–305 C.E.) disciple of Plotinus, Amelius disciple of Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, and Apuleius. It was through Neoplatonism that Augustine conceived of spirit as being immaterial and viewed evil as an *unreal substance* (contrary to Manichaeism).

Later, he will write, "For it is not as certain Platonists have thought, **because every such infant is thus requited in his soul for what it did of its own willfulness previous to the present life,** as having possessed previous to its present life, as having possessed previous to its present bodily state a free choice of living either well or ill; since the apostle Paul says most plainly, that before they were born they did neither good nor evil." [Anti-Palagian Writings, Book 2, Chapter 36].

Yet Bible passages say:

- **Genesis 6:11** | "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with wickedness.[e] 12 God saw how corrupt the earth was, for every creature had corrupted its way on the earth. 13 Then God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to every creature, for the earth is filled with wickedness because of them; therefore, I am going to destroy them along with the earth."
- **Psalms 14:1-3** | "The fool says in his heart, "There's no God." They are corrupt; they do vile deeds. There is no one who does good... 3 All have turned away; all alike have become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one.
- **Ecclesiastes 7:29** | "Only see this: I have discovered that God made people upright, but they pursued many schemes."