



Is “Original Sin” Biblical? What does Psalm 51:5 mean?

Description



As with many things, the question “Is Original Sin biblical?”

depends on how you define “original sin”. There isn’t a universally agreed upon definition, which can muddy the waters. Therefore we’ll start by looking at the three different understandings of original sin. Then we’ll examine each of those understandings in the light of scripture.

Without further ado, we’ll begin.

Defining original sin

“Original sin” refers to the effect that Adam’s “original sin” in the Garden of Eden had upon his descendants. There are three basic understandings of this, and the Christian apologetics website gotquestions.org has a good definition of them. However, while the definitions are correct, **the labels to the definitions aren’t necessarily correct.**

There are plenty of non-Arminians who believe what they call the Arminian view, and many non-Calvinists who believe what they call the Calvinist view. A slightly shortened version of those definitions is below for an overview.

Pelagianism: This view says that Adam’s sin had no effect upon the souls of his

descendants other than that he provided a sinful example. Adam's example has influenced those who followed him to also sin. But, **according to this view, man has the ability to stop sinning if he simply chooses to.**

Arminianism: Arminians believe Adam's original sin has resulted in the rest of mankind inheriting a corrupt, sinful nature, which **causes us to sin in the same way that a cat's nature causes it to meow—it comes naturally.** According to this view, man cannot stop sinning on his own

Calvinism: The Calvinistic doctrine of original sin states that **Adam's sin has resulted not only in our having a sin nature, but also in our incurring guilt before God for which we deserve punishment.** ... Not only was Adam found guilty because he sinned, but **his sin was imputed to us, making us guilty and deserving of his punishment (death) as well.**

([Source.](#))

To sum up, the three basic ideas are this:

1. Adam's sin had no effect on us
2. Adam's sin made us inclined to sin by nature
3. Adam's sin made us inclined to sin by nature, and made us guilty of Adam's sin from the instant of conception

Now, **most people have the Calvinist understanding in mind when they mention "original sin"**. Not always, but usually. It's usually a good idea to clarify what the other person means because I've heard the phrase "original sin" to refer to both of the non-Pelagian understandings.

We'll examine each idea in turn.

The Pelagian understanding of Original Sin

We won't spend a long time here. [Pelagianism](#) is a heresy that has been around since Pelagius (355-420AD). Pelagius held that man could become sinless on his own without God's grace, as the quote below indicates:

Pelagianism: This view says that **Adam's sin had no effect upon the souls of his descendants** other than that he provided a sinful example. Adam's example has influenced those who followed him to also sin. But, **according to this view, man has the ability to stop sinning if he simply chooses to.**

This article could become quite long while disproving Pelagianism, but I don't think that's necessary. I'm merely going to quote one verse to disprove it and thereafter you can do your own research. It's

widely regarded as heresy, and many others have done a fine job of disproving it.

Romans 5:19

For just as **the many were made sinners through the disobedience of one man**, so also the many will be made righteous through the obedience of One man.

The rest of Romans 5 and much of the New Testament disproves Pelagianism, so we'll move on from here.

The “Calvinist” understanding of Original Sin

This view arguably generates the most controversy.

Again, we'll look at the definition, but this time we'll look at the full version. It's important to remember that **this view did not originate with John Calvin**, despite it usually being associated with him. It's also important to note that many non-Calvinists also hold to this understanding.

Calvinism: The Calvinistic doctrine of original sin states that **Adam's sin has resulted not only in our having a sin nature, but also in our incurring guilt before God for which we deserve punishment**. Being conceived with original sin upon us (Psalm 51:5) results in our inheriting a sin nature so wicked that Jeremiah 17:9 describes the human heart as “deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” **Not only was Adam found guilty because he sinned, but his sin was imputed to us, making us guilty and deserving of his punishment (death) as well** (Romans 5:12, 19). There are two views as to why Adam's sin should be imputed to us. The first view states that the human race was within Adam in seed form; thus, when Adam sinned, we sinned in him. This is similar to the biblical teaching that Levi (a descendant of Abraham) paid tithes to Melchizedek in Abraham (Genesis 14:20; Hebrews 7:4–9), even though Levi was not born until hundreds of years later. The other main view is that Adam served as our representative, and so, when he sinned, we were found guilty as well.

Calvin taught that every single person was guilty from the moment of conception. So the moment that the sperm meets the egg, that person is already guilty. He taught that there was no point at which man is **not** guilty of sin. Calvin argued that a baby was guilty from the very moment of conception; not guilty of his own sin, but guilty of Adam's sin.

Verses supporting the Calvinist position

The primary text that Calvin and others use to support their view of original sin is Psalm 51:5.

Psalm 51:1-7

For the choir director. **A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.**

1 Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

4 Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

5 **Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.**

6 Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.

7 Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

At first glance, this does indeed seem to be absolute proof that the Calvinist understanding of original sin is correct... but only at first glance. There's an important thing that's often overlooked and two relevant verses that are rarely discussed.

The important thing:

Poetry is hyperbolic by nature.

I have said before that it's unwise to draw theology from the Psalms because of this, and this a perfect example. Now, the first rarely discussed verse dovetails nicely into the first point by proving it, and it also adds context to Psalm 51:5.

Job 31:16-18

16 "If I have kept the poor from their desire,
Or caused the eyes of the widow to fail,

17 Or eaten my morsel by myself,

So that the fatherless could not eat of it

18 (But from my youth I reared him as a father,
And **from my mother's womb I guided the widow**);

Does anyone really think that Job was guiding widows while he was still in his mother's womb?

I mean, really? Now, this isn't a problem if you understand that poetry is hyperbolic by nature. The Bible's poetic books are full of imagery that would be very strange if you took them literally.

For example, here's a drawing of what the woman in Song of Solomon would look like if you took the description **literally**:

The Song of Solomon Illustrated

(For our literalist friends.)



Yeah, it's not a good idea to understand biblical poetry literally, and this is also the case with Psalm 51:5, which Job 31:18 demonstrates quite well.

Remember that David wrote Psalm 51 right after he was confronted about his sin with Bathsheba. His son was either dying or had just died, and he was likely feeling pretty awful and his poetry indicates this. Remember too that Uriah was one of David's "mighty men" who'd been with him since before he was king of Israel. (1 Chronicles 11:41) He probably writes about being conceived in sin because he felt so sinful.

But remember that it's still poetry, which is hyperbolic by nature.

If David really was guilty from his mother's womb, then Job was also leading widows from his mother womb. (*If you're going to be literal, you should at least be consistent.*) Just to make the parallelism clear, here are the two verses side-by-side

Psalm 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, **And in sin my mother conceived me.**

Job 31:18 (But from my youth I reared him as a father, **And from my mother's womb I guided the widow**)

So, if you hold that Psalm 51:5 teaches the Calvinist understanding of original sin, then please leave a comment detailing how Job could lead widows while still in his mother's womb.

Verses which argue against the Calvinist position

The clearest verses refuting this are both in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 28:11-12 and 15

11 Again the word of the LORD came to me saying,

12 "Son of man, **take up a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,**

"You had the seal of perfection,
Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

...

15 "**You were blameless in your ways**
From the day you were created
Until unrighteousness was found in you.

Now, in context there's clearly some poetic hyperbole in the passage (*especially verse 13*). However, *at the very least* one could argue that the poetic hyperbole here is certainly enough to "cancel" the poetic hyperbole in Psalm 51:5, and make it clear that they are *both* poetic hyperbole.

Fortunately, God does speak about the topic without poetic hyperbole.

In fact, **God actually and literally devoted an entire chapter of the Bible to refuting the Calvinist interpretation of original sin.** No I'm not kidding; there is an entire chapter about it: Ezekiel 18. You can [read the whole chapter online](#) (*link opens in new tab*) but for the sake of space I'll just quote the one verse. The entire chapter is in this same vein though, *with examples*, so I recommend you read it.

Ezekiel 18:20

20 “The person who sins will die. **The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity**, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the **wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself**.”

Let me repeat that for the sake of clarity:

“The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity”

Period.

Full stop.

In [my article on Critical Race Theory \(CRT\) and Social Justice](#), we started by defining biblical justice. It boils down to “each man getting **his due**, whether good or bad.” Notice, each man doesn’t get someone else’s due; he gets his own due. This idea is all over the Bible, especially the New Testament. Consider all the passages which proclaim that God will “*repay each man according to his deeds*“. The focus is always on repaying each man for his own sin.

Again, “*The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity*” and “*the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself*.”

That verse alone seems to be absolute proof that the Calvinist understanding of original sin is wrong.

Paul makes a pretty clear argument about this too.

Romans 5:12

Because of this, just as **sin entered into the world through one man**, and death through sin, so also **death spread to all men, because all have sinned**.

Why did death spread to all men? Not because of one man’s sin, but instead “because all have sinned.” Notice Paul’s focus. He – like Ezekiel and the rest of the Bible – says our death is the result of our own sin. Not someone else’s sin, our own sin.

We all sin.

That sin brings death, both physically (*eventually*) and spiritually through separation with God. Our sin did that. My own sin separated me from God just as your own sin separated you from God. Thankfully Jesus went to the cross to deal with this. God’s mercy and grace fixed the problem, and the problem is that we are guilty of our own sin, but not someone else’s.

Again:

Ezekiel 18:20

20 “The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”

Paul reaffirms this when he says that all died “because all have sinned.” Our own sin causes our death, not Adam’s sin.

Addendum to this section

There is a time in every person’s life before they have sinned. This is hinted at in Isaiah, and explicitly stated in Romans

Isaiah 7:15-16

14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

15 By the time He knows enough to reject evil and choose good, He will be eating curds and honey.

16 For before the boy knows enough to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

This verse in Isaiah is noteworthy because it speaks of Jesus. Therefore, there was a time during the incarnation that Jesus didn’t know to choose evil vs good (*and still didn’t sin*). Romans is more clear:

Romans 9:10-11

10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac;

11 for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls

There are other verses which allude to this as well.

Ecclesiastes 7:29

29 “Behold, I have found only this, **that God made men upright**, but they have sought out many devices.”

Despite this, God makes it **absolutely clear** in Romans 3:23 that we always sin.

Romans 3:23

23 for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The Bible is clear that every single person who ever lived sins. Every single one *without exception*.

Romans 3:9-10

9 What then, are we better? Not at all! For we previously brought an accusation against both Jews and Greeks *that **all are under sin***.

10 Just as it is written: “**There is none righteous, not even one**.”

Thankfully, Jesus dealt with our sin at the cross. ?

The “Arminian” understanding of Original Sin

Just as the “Calvinist” idea of original sin predated John Calvin, so also the “Arminian” idea predated James Arminius by quite a long time. While Arminius is the most famous person to promote this understanding, he certainly wasn’t the first. And to be clear, I’m not promoting Arminianism or Calvinism. (*I disagree with both on various points*)

But sometimes, even Arminianism and Calvinism agree.

(*Shocker right?*)

As far as I can tell, both Calvinism and Arminianism agree that Arminianism is right on Original Sin; Calvinism just takes it further.

Here’s the Calvinism definition again:

Calvinism: The Calvinistic doctrine of original sin states that **Adam’s sin has resulted not only in our having a sin nature**, but also in our incurring guilt before God for which we deserve punishment.

The first part in **red** lines up perfectly with the Arminian understanding:

Arminianism: Arminians believe **Adam's original sin** has resulted in the rest of mankind inheriting a corrupt, sinful nature, which **causes us to sin in the same way that a cat's nature causes it to meow—it comes naturally. According to this view, man cannot stop sinning on his own;**

Arminianism says we inherited an inclination to sin from Adam, and Calvinism agrees. In fact, that's what the "T" in [the Calvinism's "TULIP" acronym](#) stands for: Total Depravity. Calvinism then goes beyond Arminianism by saying that we're guilty of sin from conception. However, Calvinist doctrine absolutely agrees that we inherited a sin nature from Adam. They agree that because of Adam's sin, sin comes as naturally to man as breathing does.

Again, Calvinists and Arminians agree that man sins because it comes naturally to us.

In fact, the only people who disagree with this are those who hold to Pelagian ideology. Everyone else agrees. Seriously; literally every other Christian denomination and theological system I've ever heard of agrees with this. *(If you've heard of one that doesn't include this understanding (besides Pelagianism), leave a comment and I'll update the article.)*

One primary verse used to support this understanding is in Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:3

3 Among them **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.

The verse above makes this idea of being children of wrath "by nature" make a lot of sense. We are children of wrath "by nature" because sin comes naturally to us.

While Calvinists and Arminians disagree on almost everything else regarding sin and salvation, they agree on this.

In fact, all Christians seem to agree on this.

This isn't dissimilar to the Hebrew understanding either.

However, traditional rabbinic understanding of human nature is shaped to a large degree by the presence of two inclinations – the **yetzer ha tov (the good inclination)** and the **yetzer ha ra (the evil inclination)**.

[\(Source.\)](#)

Depending on the rabbinic source, many ascribe the “good inclination” to the fact that man is made in the image of God. As far as I know, all ascribe the evil inclination to Adam’s sin nature being passed to us, which is consistent with the Christian understanding.

That gives us over 3000 years of continuous theological agreement on this topic.

Now, some may add to this understanding (*like saying we’re conceived guilty*) but virtually no one denies it. It also appears to be clearly taught from the scriptures too.

Genesis 8:21

The Lord smelled the soothing aroma; and the Lord said to Himself, “I will never again curse the ground on account of man, **for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth**; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.

Therefore, I’d say it’s a safe bet.

Biology supports this understanding too

Have you ever heard of Epigenetics?

“Epi” is a Greek word that means “over” or “on/upon”, and obviously the “genetics” portion of the word is recognizable. Epigenetics is what goes “over” genetics and changes the expression of our DNA. It doesn’t change the DNA itself, but it does change which parts expression themselves; i.e. which genes are used and which are ignored.

Thus, epigenetics can influence a person’s behavior

There’s [a fascinating article on the topic of epigenetics](#) that serves to illustrate this well, and it’s more layman friendly than the research papers on the topic. I’ll copy/paste some excerpts below to give you a snapshot.

For those who survived, the harrowing experiences marked many of them for life. They returned to society with impaired health, worse job prospects and shorter life expectancy. But the impact of these hardships did not stop with those who experienced it. **It also had an effect on the prisoners’ children and grandchildren, which appeared to be passed down the male line of families.**

While **their sons and grandsons** had not suffered the hardships of the PoW camps – and if anything were well provided for through their childhoods – they **suffered higher rates of mortality than the wider population.**

...

Costa and her colleagues studied the health records of nearly 4,600 children whose fathers had been PoWs, comparing them to just over 15,300 children of veterans of the war who had not been captured.

The sons of PoWs had an 11% higher mortality rate than the sons of non-PoW veterans. Other factors such as the father's socioeconomic status and the son's job and marital status couldn't account for the higher mortality rate, the researchers found.

Some research was done on mice that confirms this, and it's fascinating. From the same article:

Controlled experiments in mice have allowed researchers to hone in on this question. A 2013 study found that there was an **intergenerational effect of trauma associated with scent**. The researchers blew acetophenone – which has the scent of cherry blossom – through the cages of adult male mice, zapping their foot with an electric current at the same time. **Over several repetitions, the mice associated the smell of cherry blossom with pain.**

Shortly afterwards, these males bred with female mice. **When their pups smelled the scent of cherry blossom, they became more jumpy and nervous than pups whose fathers hadn't been conditioned to fear it.** To rule out that the pups were somehow learning about the smell from their parents, they were raised by unrelated mice who had never smelt cherry blossom.

The grandpups of the traumatised males also showed heightened sensitivity to the scent. Neither of the generations showed a greater sensitivity to smells other than cherry blossom, indicating that the inheritance was specific to that scent.

This sensitivity to cherry blossom scent was linked back to epigenetic modifications in their sperm DNA. Chemical markers on their DNA were found on a gene encoding a smell receptor, expressed in the olfactory bulb between the nose and the brain, which is involved in sensing the cherry blossom scent. When the team dissected the pups' brains they also found there was a greater number of the neurons that detect the cherry blossom scent, compared with control mice.

Basically, we can inherit behaviors from our fathers.

This matches up perfectly with the idea of an “evil inclination” to sin as the Jews thought, and Christians after them affirm. This tendency can even be confirmed through biology!

Talk about science validating the Bible!

Notice too that it's passed through the male line, not the female line. This lines up well with the Bible assertion that it was Adam's sin that cause the world to fall, not Eve's sin.

Romans 5:19

For just as **the many were made sinners through the disobedience of one man**, so also the many will be made righteous through the obedience of One man.

Romans 5:12

Because of this, just as **sin entered into the world through one man**, and death through sin, so also death spread to all men, because all have sinned.

Even though Eve sinned first, Adam is blamed. Could that be because of epigenetics? Could it be that this “evil inclination” to sin is actually passed on biologically through fathers and not spiritually? Could this evil inclination have been passed down through the ages epigenetically?

That would make a lot of sense to me.

[Click here to expand my rambling thoughts on how inherited sin works, or continue to the conclusion below](#)

This is my own personal understanding, worth every cent you paid for it. ? Free free to adopt it or discard it as you see fit.

Man is made in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 5:1-2, 1 Corinthians 11:7, and James 3:9 make abundantly clear. This is still the case, as the use of the present tense in 1 Corinthians 11:7 and the perfect tense in James 3:9 make clear. Man never stopped being made in the image of God.

Ever.

However, Adam sinned.

Once he had sinned, he possessed not only the “image of God”, but also the “evil inclination” as Judaism puts it, which ultimately means “*the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth*”. Two natures are now at war within man, just as Paul explains:

Galatians 5:17

For the flesh craves *what’s* contrary to the Spirit, and *the* Spirit *what’s* contrary to the flesh. For these *two* stubbornly oppose one another, so you don’t do those *things* which you desire.

We are all Adam’s descendants, and were born in Adam’s image and likeness, as Genesis makes clear:

Genesis 5:3

When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son **in his own likeness, according to his image**, and named him Seth.

Since we are descended from Adam just as Seth was, we are also born in Adam's image and likeness. This means we are born with the image and likeness of God, because Adam's image and likeness was the image and likeness of God. But Adam's nature changed because of sin. He had the two natures warring within him, both of which we inherited.

Thus – because we are born in Adam's image – we inherited **both** the image and likeness of God, **and also** the evil inclination. (*yetzer ha ra*)

That evil inclination overpowers our desire to do good, just as Paul says. This guarantees that everyone *without exception* will fall prey to sin since "*the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth*". As Romans testifies, "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*". An unbeliever can do good things, but he can never merit salvation because of his sin. He needs Jesus's work on the cross for that.

Nothing else will do.

There is no other remedy.

None.

Salvation comes only comes by God's goodness and mercy which was displayed by Christ on the cross, and applied to us through faith.

Nothing else will do.

Nothing.

Ever.

Fortunately, God already has a plan in place to defeat this sin nature; this "evil inclination" that we inherited from Adam. Paul says the following of our glorified bodies that we'll one day receive:

1 Corinthians 15:51-54

51. Behold, I tell you a mystery. We won't all be put to sleep, but we'll all be changed
52. in an instant – in the blink of an eye – at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised **incorruptible**, and **we will be changed**.
53. For the **corruptible** must clothe itself in **incorruptibility**, and the mortal clothe itself in immortality.
54. And when the corruptible has clothed itself in incorruptibility, and the mortal has clothed itself in immortality; then it will happen, the word which was – and is – written,

“Death was swallowed in victory.”

We inherited a corruptible body with an “evil inclination” from Adam. But when “*the corruptible has clothed itself in incorruptibility*” I believe that this will be taken away. I believe that on the New Heavens and New Earth, our evil inclination will be “swallowed up in victory” because we’ll have incorruptible bodies.

Having *incorruptible* bodies means that we won’t struggle with our evil inclination any more.

What a great and glorious hope that is!

Conclusion

When you read Psalms 51:5 in the light of Job 31:18 and Ezekiel 28:15, it becomes clear that it’s merely poetic hyperbole. Ezekiel chapter 18 – and especially verse 20 – makes it 100% perfectly crystal clear that a son cannot be punished for his father’s sins. Ever. Thus, the idea that Adam’s sin made us all guilty and worthy of punishment is patently unbiblical, for a son cannot be punished for his father’s sin.

However, the Bible is clear that Adam’s sin did affect us. It left us with an “evil inclination”, and thus God says “*the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth*“. Thus we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, and thus all deserved to be punished by God who will “*render to each according to his deeds*“.

Thank God that Christ’s work on the cross solved this for us. ?

(And if you accept my position, this evil inclination will be removed in the New Heavens and New Earth with our incorruptible bodies, and thus we’ll struggle against sin no more.)