

Inherited Sin

Summary of the Concept

We are born with a corrupt nature, inclined toward evil from birth. This depraved nature is inherited from our parents. All sin performed later in life is a consequence of this nature which remains with us even when we are forgiven.

Related Doctrines

- Since we are born sinful, babies require baptism. At least two explanations of how Jesus escaped this inherited sin are popular. Either explanation makes it hard to explain how Jesus was "tempted in all points just as we are" (Hebrews 4:15).
 - The Catholic Church teaches that Mary did not have this sinful nature, so she could not pass it on. They do not explain how Mary escaped inheriting sin.
 - Others teach that sin is inherited only through the male parent. Since Jesus did not have an earthly father, He was not born sinful. No Scripture addresses this.
- Since we retain this sinful nature even after being redeemed, the children of those who have been reckoned as righteous still inherit that sinful nature. Therefore, Satan caused something God cannot fix.

Supporting Scriptures

Psalm 51:5 "In sin did my mother conceive me" - *In sin* modifies *mother*, not *me*, so the psalmist is either acknowledging his mother's sin, or the fact that his mother lived in a sinful world. This is part of an hyperbole. The psalmist laments that not only does he sin on his own, he was born into a sinful world. Proof that it is a figure of speech is in verse 7, where the cure for sin is found in a branch of hyssop. The author's point is that he has been very sinful for a long time. His purpose was not to describe inherited sin. Psalm 22:10 expresses the opposite view (also by David) that he was "cast upon Thee from the womb." In that psalm, David is describing his lifelong commitment to the Lord.

Psalm 58:3 "The wicked are estranged from the womb." - The next few lines reveal that this also is hyperbole, since the "wicked" are said to *go* astray, which involves choosing, and *speak* lies, which requires the ability to speak.

Exodus 20:5 "Visiting the impurity of the fathers on the children." - Either this teaches inherited sin or inherited consequences, and one must have a reason to choose the figurative consequences rather than the literal sin. Ezekiel 18 (the whole chapter) specifically addresses the concept of inherited sin, denying that any such transfer of guilt from father to son is possible with God. So, if Exodus 20:5 teaches inherited sin, Ezekiel was wrong.

Genesis 8:21 "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." - In the Bible, a youth is anyone under thirty. Soldiers and bridegrooms have been described as youths. A youth is one who can make decisions, so a case for inherited sin cannot be made here.

Isaiah 48:8 "You have been called a transgressor from the womb." - Verse 1 of the chapter identifies the transgressor as the nation of Judah. From Old Testament history, it is quite true that the nation was sinful at its birth. But that has no connection to inherited sin in people.

Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" - This line is in the midst of repeated comparisons between the righteous and the wicked. This one line cannot be taken out of its context to apply to all people since God applied it to only one of two groups.

Romans 5:12 "So death passed upon all men." - Reading the whole sentence, death passed to all men because they sinned, not because they inherited it. Secondly, the death that Adam introduced was spiritual death, not physical.

Ephesians 2:3 "We are by nature children of wrath." - Many have wished to dispose of the word *nature* by redefining it as "long standing habit or custom." The literal meaning has no such connotation. It is used as we use it: that which is a part of our inherited make-up, including both physical attributes and instincts. So, the New Testament speaks of natural functions, natural branches, natural affection, divine nature, the nature of angels, and being by nature uncircumcised. (There is no equivalent Hebrew word, so there can be no Old Testament references.) This nature is not all bad, since "the Gentiles do by nature the things of the Law" (Romans 2:14), meaning that morality is instinctive. So, this nature in Ephesians is either literal and we are born with an instinct for sin or it is figurative, expressing the extremeness of our sin. If sin is instinctive and morality is instinctive, we are made with an inner conflict. But that is exactly the explanation used by many for Romans 7 (although the explanation requires circular logic and falls apart if one also reads Romans 8). Since the word *nature* is used only 14 times in the New Testament, it is difficult to determine if a figure of speech based on that word is intended. However, Galatians 2:15 seems to be such an example of figurative usage. Paul describes his relatives as "Jews by nature." Although one did become a member of the Kingdom of Israel by birth, Paul's point in that paragraph had to do with the works of the Law, which are certainly not instinctive. This alone is not proof that Ephesians 2:3 is figurative, but at least the possibility exists. In Ephesians 2, Paul's point is that Jews were no different than Gentiles in that they were equally sinful. To create a doctrine from one phrase of a paragraph not about inherited sin, in direct contradiction to an entire chapter of Ezekiel which was written specifically to that seems at least tenuous.

Questions

- Where did Adam's sinful nature come from?
- What does Ezekiel 18 teach?
- Why don't the children of the redeemed inherit their righteousness?
- If God created us with an inclination to sin, how can we be condemned?