



Is Sin Inherited?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Is sin inherited? The doctrine of “inherited sin” is a popular doctrine among many churches today. However, is the doctrine according to the teachings of the Scriptures? Let’s evaluate.

What Is “Inherited Sin”?

“Inherited sin” is one of the five tenants of Calvinism. Calvinism is a system of religious beliefs that was popularized by John Calvin – although these doctrines likely did not originate with him. “TULIP” is the acronym that has been given to identify the five main doctrinal components of Calvin’s beliefs and teachings. The “T” in “TULIP” stands for the doctrine of “Total Hereditary Depravity,” the “U” for “Unconditional Election,” the “L” for “Limited Atonement,” the “I” for “Irresistible Grace,” and the “P” for “Perseverance of the Saints.” Each one of these doctrines are not supported by the Scriptures – as they are all rooted in a misunderstanding of God (i.e. His Sovereignty) and fails to fully recognize the free will of mankind.

Specifically, this study is focused on examining the doctrine of “Inherited Sin” – another name for the doctrine represented by one of Calvin’s teachings. Total hereditary depravity is the “T” in “TULIP.” Consider what each one of these words mean. “Total” is complete. “Hereditary” refers to something that is inherited by birth. And, “depravity” refers to being corrupted – here, in a spiritual sense of being corrupted in sin. So, the term “total hereditary depravity” refers to mankind being totally (completely) corrupted by sin from the time of birth. Therefore, this doctrine is also known by the terms “original sin” and “inherited sin.”

Those who believe in the doctrine of “total hereditary depravity” believe that we are born into this world having already inherited a sinful nature and, therefore, are already condemned in God’s sight when we are born. This sinful nature manifests itself in that we (in the view of Calvinists) are incapable of doing anything spiritually good, learning the message of the gospel, or doing anything that pertains to salvation.

Some consequences of this doctrine include: (1) The practice of “infant baptism” (if babies are condemned in the sight of God, there must be some way to make them right in God’s sight – “infant baptism” is one proposed solution). (2) The immaculate conception of Mary stems from the belief in inherited sin. This belief says that Mary was spared by God from the taint of original sin (this is necessary in order to save Jesus from the stain of sin He would have, otherwise, inherited – according to this doctrine). (3) Total hereditary depravity leads to the belief that man cannot understand the Bible because of his completely corrupted condition. (4) Since total hereditary depravity leads to the view that man cannot understand the Bible, it is claimed that God must directly operate on the heart of the sinner so as to cause him to be saved and accept His teachings.

Proof Texts

Those who advocate the doctrine of total hereditary depravity cite Bible passages as “proof” for their beliefs. Please consider a few of these passages with me.

(1) Psalm 51:5. The text says, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.”

Does this passage teach the doctrine of total hereditary depravity? First, consider that it says “in sin my mother *conceived* me.” Being conceived in sin is different than being born in sin. An individual *could* be “conceived in sin” by his parents committing the sin of fornication. Think about it: If a child said, “In wrath my father spanked me,” would the wrath belong to the father or to the son? Second, I believe that this passage is actually just a poetic way for David to express his remorse for his sin. Consider that the context of this passage is David’s prayer for forgiveness after his sin with Bathsheba. As David makes the statement in verse 5, it is simply a poetic way of expressing that he views himself as a complete sinner (that whenever he looks at his life, all he sees is sin). Therefore, this poetic expression of remorse is not to be taken literally – no more than the statement in verse 7 is to be taken literally. Verse 7 says, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” The truth is that this passage does *not* teach total hereditary depravity; instead, it is a poetic expression of remorse for sin.

(2) Psalm 58:3. This passage says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.”

Does this passage teach the doctrine of total hereditary depravity? First, consider that this passage continues to use poetic language (as the entire book of Psalms is a book of poetry). As was demonstrated previously, we must be careful not to force literal interpretations upon poetic expressions of Scripture. Doing so will force you to conclusions that are obviously incorrect. For instance, if you force a literal interpretation upon this passage in order to prove “inherited sin” (saying that we are, literally, wicked from the time we are born), you must also accept the fact that the passage says we go astray by “speaking lies” as soon as we are born. Obviously, newborn babies are not even capable of speaking, let alone speaking lies! Therefore, this is not a literal expression. Second, you must consider this passage in its context and in harmony with the way in

which it was written. It was written to express the great wickedness that exists in the world – and how quickly individuals go into paths of wickedness. Then, it expresses the cry of God for justice to be taken upon those who are practicing such wickedness!

(3) Romans 5:12-21. Please take time to read and consider this passage if it is unfamiliar to you. Time and space do not permit me to quote the passage in this lesson.

Does this passage teach the doctrine of total hereditary depravity? First, understand that whatever is taught in this passage is prefaced by verse 12: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Notice that death (spiritual death) spread to all men ***because all sinned***. The verse does ***not*** say that death spread to all men because all men have inherited their sin from Adam! Second, if this verse teaches that we are all born completely corrupt in sin because we have inherited our sin from Adam, the passage also teaches that we are all made righteous by Jesus Christ. Verse 18 demonstrates the truth that whatever Adam did, Christ counteracted: “Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.” The truth is that this passage does not teach total hereditary depravity – any more than it teaches that we are unconditionally and universally saved through Jesus Christ. Instead, both the sin and the gift are conditional (remember verse 12)!

The Bible VS. Total Hereditary Depravity

Now that we have answered a few “proof texts” for total hereditary depravity, please consider what the Bible says about this question in other passages. As we will see, the Bible directly contradicts the teaching of total hereditary depravity.

(1) Ezekiel 18:20. The passage says, “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” This passage clearly teaches that we are not held spiritually responsible in God’s sight for the wickedness of our parents – any more than we will be spiritually rewarded because of their righteousness.

(2) Deuteronomy 1:39. This passage tells how the children of the rebellious Israelites would not be held accountable for their parents’ sins – because they had no knowledge of good and evil at the time of their rebellion. It says, “Moreover your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.” Thus, they were spiritually pure and innocent. Similarly, in Romans 7:9, Paul describes this time in his life when he was spiritually alive without the law (prior to his knowledge of God’s law); but, when he became knowledgeable to God’s law, sin “came alive” (ESV) and he died. Everyone today who is without the knowledge of good and evil (i.e. infants, young children) are spiritually pure!

(3) 1 John 3:4. This text identifies what sin is: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” Sin is defined by God as acting against or contrary to God’s law! James 1:13-15 describes how sin comes about when an individual is enticed by his own desires and acts to fulfill those desires in unlawful ways. In the Bible, sin is *always* identified as being something that is done against God’s law. You simply *never* read in the Bible about sin being inherited or about a sinful nature!

(4) Matthew 18:1-4. In this passage, Jesus instructed His audience to become converted and become as little children, saying that this is necessary in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven. It says, “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’” So, Jesus saw little children as being pure and sinless. Otherwise, He is instructing us to become corrupted like little children are!

Actually, the message of the entire Bible demonstrates that “Inherited Sin” is a false religious doctrine – not just these few passages. The entirety of the Bible teaches personal responsibility for sin and consequences that result from your own personal decision to sin!

Conclusion

“Inherited Sin” is a false doctrine that has been invented by man. It is not the teaching that comes from God. And, as is typical with false doctrine, it has deceived many and has brought about even more corrupted religious practices (as identified earlier, i.e. “infant baptism”). Instead of following this false doctrine, please be encouraged to examine the Scriptures and only hold to the pure teachings and religious practice promoted in them!

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