

Reading *Original Sin*

A Study Guide to Jonathan Edwards' Classic on the Nature of Inborn Depravity

SAMPLE

Table of Contents

FOREWORD

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

PART ONE: EVIDENCE OF ORIGINAL SIN IN EXPERIENCE, SCRIPTURE, AND THE ASSERTIONS OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE THE DOCTRINE

- Chapter One: Evidence of Original Sin from the Sinfulness of Mankind in General
 - Section One: Historically, all people sin and, apart from God's grace, are subject to God's judgment
 - Section Two: Universal sin proves a sinful propensity
 - Section Three: Man's propensity to evil indicates a corrupt soul
 - Section Four: All sin as soon as they are capable of sinning
 - Section Five: Man sins, in heart and practice, far more than he is righteous
 - Section Six: Innate depravity is displayed by a high degree of foolishness in religion
 - Section Seven: Throughout the ages, most people have been wicked
 - Section Eight: Great efforts to oppose wickedness and promote virtue have had little success
 - Section Nine: Several arguments against original sin considered
- Questions and Points for Discussion
- Chapter Two: Universal Mortality, Particularly the Death of Infants, Proves Original Sin
 - Questions and Points for Discussion

PART TWO: SCRIPTURAL PROOFS FOR ORIGINAL SIN

- Chapter One: Observations from Genesis 1-3
 - Section One: Adam and Eve were created righteous
 - Section Two: The death threatened to Adam and Eve was eternal death
 - Section Three: Evidence from Genesis 1-3 that God dealt with Adam as the representative of the human race
- Questions and Points for Discussion
- Chapter Two: Proofs of Original Sin, Primarily from the Old Testament
 - Questions and Points for Discussion
- Chapter Three: Proofs of Original Sin, Primarily from the New Testament
 - Section One: John 3:6 in relation to other passages
 - Section Two: Romans 3:9-24
 - Section Three: Romans 5:6-10, Ephesians 2:3, and Romans 7
- Questions and Points for Discussion
- Chapter Four: Romans 5:12
 - Section One: Responses to Dr. Taylor's explanation of Romans 5:12-21

Section Two: Observations concerning Romans 5:12-21 and reflections on the evidence for original sin
Questions and Points for Discussion

PART THREE: THE REDEMPTION OF CHRIST AS EVIDENCE FOR ORIGINAL SIN

Chapter One: Proofs from Christ's Accomplishment of Redemption
Questions and Points for Discussion

Chapter Two: Proof from the Necessity of Being Born Again
Questions and Points for Discussion

PART FOUR: ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS TO ORIGINAL SIN

Chapter One: "To be born in sin is inconsistent with the nature of sin."
Questions and Points for Discussion

Chapter Two: "If man is born sinful, then God, who formed us, is to blame."
Questions and Points for Discussion

Chapter Three: "The imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity is unjust because Adam and his posterity are not the same."
Questions and Points for Discussion

Chapter Four: Miscellaneous Objections
Questions and Points for Discussion

CONCLUSION

Foreword

Original Sin? The very words strike most 21st century ears as horribly outdated, overly pessimistic, and grimly medieval. After all, this is the era of the computer chip and the space shuttle. And haven't the most learned psychologists and sociologists assured us that people are by nature good, having been turned to their evil ways not by some inner instinct, but through the influence of a deviant culture and substandard education?

Opposition to the doctrine of original sin, however, is far from a modern phenomenon. There is a longstanding history of disdain for the notion, perhaps beginning most famously with Pelagius and his resistance to all things Augustinian. One of the lesser known but decidedly more vocal and strident voices in objecting to the reformed doctrine of original sin belongs to John Taylor (1694-1761) of England. His views were made explicit in a volume he wrote in 1735 entitled, *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin*. Certainly the best testimony to the influence of Taylor's work was that provided by Jonathan Edwards:

“According to my observation, no one book has done so much towards rooting out of these western parts of New England, the principles and scheme of religion maintained by our pious and excellent forefathers, the divines and Christians who first settled this country, and alienating the minds of many from what I think are evidently some of the main doctrines of the gospel, as that which Dr. Taylor has published against the doctrine of original sin.”¹

Taylor's disdain for the reformed doctrine of imputation and original sin was grounded upon one foundational principle that he held to be inviolable: *sin and guilt are entirely personal*. One person's sin is his alone and cannot be reckoned or charged to the account of another. Neither can guilt in any sense be corporate apart from the voluntary consent of all persons involved. “A representative of moral action,” said Taylor, “is what I can by no means digest. A representative, the guilt of whose conduct shall be imputed to us, and whose sins shall corrupt and debauch our nature, is one of the greatest absurdities in all the system of corrupt religion.”² Concerning Adam and Eve, he insisted that as the sin “they committed was personal, done only by them; so also must the real guilt be personal, and belong only to themselves; that is, no other could, in the eye of justice and equity, be blamable and punishable for that transgression, which was their own act and deed, and not the act and deed of any other man or woman in the world.”³

Taylor argued that only the person who has a “consciousness” of sin can justly be held guilty for it. It is absurd to suppose that an infinitely righteous God would charge with a crime persons who had no hand or choice in its execution, indeed, a crime committed before they even existed. Such is possible only on the “purely imaginary”⁴ supposition that one man's consciousness, and therefore liability of guilt, is transferable to another. To charge God with such an act is “highly profane and impious.”⁵

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 102.

² John Taylor, *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin, Proposed to Free and Candid Examination*, and the *Supplement* (London: M. Waugh, 1767), 108-109.

³ Taylor, *Scripture-Doctrine*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

Finally, in a statement that fairly shook with indignation, Taylor sums up his feelings concerning the reformed doctrine of original sin:

“But that any man, without my knowledge or consent, should so represent me, that when he is guilty I am to be reputed guilty, and when he transgresses I shall be accountable and punishable for his transgression, and thereby subjected to the wrath and curse of God, nay further that his wickedness shall give me a sinful nature, and all this before I am born and consequently while I am in no capacity of knowing, helping, or hindering what he doth; surely anyone who dares use his understanding, must clearly see this is unreasonable, and altogether inconsistent with the truth and goodness of God.”⁶

We must be honest and concede that Taylor’s objections are unsettling. For many people, they are decisive in the debate over original sin. The only reasonable conclusion, or so they say, is that we must forever put to rest the notion that, in Eden, Adam stood as the representative head of the human race. Any concept of “imputed” guilt, as well as the inherent moral depravity of human nature, must be rejected as unreasonable if not patently immoral.

Is imputation immoral? Is it unjust? Is it wrong for God to hold us accountable for the sin of Adam? Are all humans conceived and brought forth in iniquity, enslaved to the corruption of nature that flowed from Adam’s transgression? Many have responded to these questions, but none with more creativity and depth than Jonathan Edwards. Yet few have invested the requisite time and intellectual energy to read his magisterial treatise, written largely in response to Taylor, in which the traditional reformed notion of original sin is biblically explained and rationally defended.

This is why I am so pleased to see that Craig Biehl has provided us with a detailed and comprehensive study guide to Edwards’ volume, *Original Sin*. Like much else in the Edwards corpus, this volume poses a challenge to the contemporary reader both in terms of its prose and the theological argumentation that he provides. Biehl’s book, though short, will prove to be an extremely valuable aid for those who embrace the task of reading Edwards and evaluating his perspective. As best I can tell, no one has attempted anything similar to what Biehl has accomplished in this volume. Following upon his earlier study guide to the *Religious Affections*, this small book will go a long way in facilitating the study of Edwards and thus enlightening the modern mind to the reality of original sin and the importance of this doctrine to the Christian faith.

Dr. Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, OK

⁶ Ibid., 385. For a more in depth interaction with Taylor and Edwards’ response, see C. Samuel Storms, “Is Imputation Unjust? Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Original Sin” in *Journal of Reformation & Revival*, Volume 12, Number 3, Fall 2003.

Author's Preface

In introducing the purpose of his treatise, Edwards states the importance of the doctrine of original sin as follows:

I look on the doctrine as of *great importance*; which everybody will doubtless own it is, if it be true. For, if the case be such indeed, that all mankind are by nature in a state of total ruin, both with respect to the moral evil they are subjects of, and the afflictive evil they are exposed to, the one as the consequence and punishment of the other, then doubtless the great salvation by Christ stands in direct relation to this ruin, as the remedy to the disease; and the whole gospel, or doctrine of salvation, must suppose it; and all real belief, or true notion of that gospel, must be built upon it.⁷

For Edwards, the Gospel is built upon the doctrine of original sin as the cure is built upon the disease. A misdiagnosis of the disease leads to an improper prescription of the cure.

Edwards was biblical and systematic in his theology, understanding the mutually interdependent nature of all Scriptural truth. And while some interpreters of Scripture can easily miss the important implications of doctrines they may view as esoteric, technical, or unessential, Edwards saw every doctrine as part of a comprehensive whole, mutually dependent and inextricably linked as an expression of the coherent mind of God. His theology, therefore, was consistent, a veritable tapestry of multi-colored threads, united to form a beautiful picture of God and His works. Few, in the history of the church, were as careful as Edwards to see the implications of the details of any doctrine upon the whole of biblical truth.

Many, however, are not so careful. The implications and impact of many proposed doctrines upon other critically important doctrinal truths, including the Gospel itself, are not always understood. Consistency is not always appreciated. For instance, the doctrine of original sin is sometimes denied by those who otherwise speak rightly of the necessity of Christ's saving work and the necessity of the Holy Spirit to produce saving faith. Others may see that all people are sinful, while denying that people are born with the depraved tendency to sin, even though the tendency to sin is universal and infants who are not taught to behave properly grow up to be spoiled tyrants. Others are more consistent in denying original sin and the bondage of the will, while affirming the ability of all people to accept or reject the Gospel as they please, apart from the absolute necessity of electing and saving grace. As one's view of the problem determines one's view of the solution, so the denial of original sin leads to the compromise of the absolute necessity of God's grace in every aspect of our redemption.

Yet, despite its fundamental connection to the necessity of the grace of the Gospel, the importance of the doctrine of original sin is not always appreciated. Edwards, however, saw its importance and labored with great care to defend and explain it. Many of Edwards' most significant works bear directly or indirectly upon the doctrine and its implications, such as *Freedom of the Will*, *The Nature of True Virtue*, *Justification by Faith Alone*, and *The Religious*

⁷ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *Yale Works*, 3:103; See also, Jonathan Edwards and Sereno Edwards Dwight, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, vol. 1 (1974; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1834), 145. All quotes from *Original Sin* within this study guide will be taken from either volume 3 of the Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, hereafter cited as "Yale"; or, from volume 1 of the Banner of Truth edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, hereafter cited as "BT." Citations from one edition will be cross-referenced to the other edition.

Affections.⁸ For Edwards, the doctrine of original sin is fundamental to a right understanding of the Gospel. And while the doctrine of *depravity* may be the most empirically supported doctrine of Scripture (at least for those who have lived on earth for any length of time or driven on a freeway), its connection to *innate depravity* is not always understood. Edwards, however, shows us the unmistakable and necessary connection. For those looking to further a comprehensive Christian worldview and coherent and consistent understanding of theology, or a better understanding of the necessity and importance of the Gospel of grace in Christ, few books will be as helpful as Edwards' *Original Sin*.

As noted in the Preface to the study guide to *The Religious Affections*,⁹ the greater difficulty than reading Edwards' 18th Century English is following the comprehensive and exacting nature of his arguments. Edwards' definitions and explanations are detailed, exhaustive, and weighty. His works are not for the casual reader who is unwilling to think them through. At the same time, in *Original Sin*, Edwards defends and clarifies the difficult doctrine with some of the simplest and most helpful of illustrations.

The study guide was developed for use in a classroom setting and is not intended to replace the reading of *Original Sin*, yet it also lends itself well to personal study or as a stand-alone resource. The format highlights the structure, logic, and flow of Edwards' arguments, providing a handle to better grasp the depth of his thought. And while some may lack the time to read and digest the fine nuances of Edwards' argumentation, every serious Christian should understand the doctrine of original sin and be well-acquainted with the biblical and theological evidence for it. My hope is that this study guide will help meet that need, in addition to giving aid to the direct study of *Original Sin* in churches, colleges, and seminaries.

Following Edwards' outline, the guide is divided into four main parts, with subchapters and sections. Part One presents evidence of original sin in experience, Scripture, and the assertions of those who oppose the doctrine. Part Two presents scriptural proofs for original sin. Part Three gives evidence for the doctrine in the nature of the redemption of Christ. And, Part Four answers objections to the doctrine. Questions and points for reflection and discussion will follow each chapter to help teachers and students better understand the importance, relevance, and applicability of the doctrine to their own Christian life and worldview.

Quotations from *Original Sin* are taken from volume three of the Yale edition and volume one of the Banner of Truth edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* ("Yale" and "BT in

⁸ See Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); "The Nature of True Virtue," in Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 537-627; "Justification by Faith Alone," in Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, vol. 19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 147-242; Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John Edwin Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959). The above works are also found in Jonathan Edwards and Sereno Edwards Dwight, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, vol. 1 (1974; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1834). See also the paperback Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986). All of the above works are easily accessed and searched online at edwards.yale.edu, the website of The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. References to *The Religious Affections* will be cited hereafter as *Affections*, Yale; *Affections*, BT, *Works*; and, *Affections*, BT, paperback, respectively.

⁹ Craig Biehl, *Reading Religious Affections: A Study Guide to Jonathan Edwards' Classic on the Nature of True Christianity* (Pelham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2012).

footnotes, respectively). Citations from one edition will be cross referenced to the other, while the edition from which a quotation is taken will be listed first.¹⁰

I am grateful to Kenneth Minkema of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University for his encouragement and ongoing assistance with my various Edwards projects. Many thanks are also due to Sam Storms for his excellent foreword to the guide, and to Michael Gaydosh of Solid Ground Christian Books for his commitment to publish sound, but not necessarily popular theological works for the benefit of the church and the honor of Christ. Special thanks to my beloved wife, Angelica, without whom I could not have written this study guide. Ultimately, all thanks belong to our great God and Savior, whose great power, wisdom, and love has provided for us an infinite remedy for our great need. May a greater understanding of our need for Christ increase our appreciation of salvation in and through Christ. To Christ be all the glory.

SAMPLE

¹⁰ The BT and Yale versions sometimes differ in small, inconsequential ways, such as slight adjustments to grammar, or in which words are italicized or written in capital letters for emphasis.