

Psalms 51:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Analysis

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

This verse has generated enormous theological discussion, touching on original sin, human depravity, and the transmission of Adam's guilt. David traces his sin to conception, acknowledging a sinful nature inherited from birth, not merely acquired through bad choices.

"Behold" (הִנֵּה/hen) commands attention: 'Look! Consider this important truth!' David isn't making excuses ('I couldn't help it—I was born this way') but explaining: his specific sins of adultery and murder flow from deeper corruption present from conception. He's not merely a sinner because he sins; he sins because he's a sinner by nature.

"I was shapen in iniquity" (יָצַנְתִּי בְּחַלְלֵי/be'avon cholalti) indicates his formation (chul—to writhe, bring forth, be born) occurred 'in iniquity' (avon). The preposition 'in' (be) indicates the state or condition of his formation—he was formed in a state of iniquity. This doesn't mean the act of conception is sinful (procreation is God's good gift), but that fallen humanity transmits a sinful nature to offspring.

"And in sin did my mother conceive me" (וַיַּחַמְתִּי בְּחַטָּא/uvechet yechemalthni immi) parallels the first clause. Yacham (conceive, be warm) refers to conception. Again, this isn't condemning the marital act or David's mother personally but acknowledging he inherited sinful nature from conception. From the beginning of his existence, he was marked by sin.

This accords with Paul's teaching in Romans 5:12-21: 'by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.' Adam's sin is imputed to his descendants; we inherit both guilt and corruption. Psalm 58:3 says, 'The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.' David isn't unique; all humans inherit sinful nature.

Yet this verse doesn't teach fatalism or remove responsibility. David doesn't use inherited sin to excuse his actions but to acknowledge the depth of his need for divine grace. If he's been sinful from conception, only God's creative power can transform him—hence the prayer, 'Create in me a clean heart' (v.10). Acknowledging total depravity leads to complete dependence on grace.

Historical Context

Augustine developed the doctrine of original sin partly from this verse. Against Pelagius (who denied inherited sin, claiming humans are born morally neutral), Augustine argued Scripture teaches all humanity inherits Adam's guilt and corruption. We're conceived and born with sinful nature inclining us toward evil. This doesn't remove responsibility (we willingly sin) but explains why all sin inevitably.

The Reformed tradition particularly emphasized total depravity: every aspect of human nature (mind, will, affections, body) is affected by sin. We're not as bad as possible but as thoroughly corrupted—unable to save ourselves, inclined toward evil, spiritually dead apart from grace (Ephesians 2:1-3). This wasn't pessimism but biblical realism preparing people to appreciate salvation's wonder.

The Council of Orange (529 AD) affirmed original sin against semi-Pelagianism: 'If anyone says that Adam's sin harmed only himself and not his descendants...he contradicts the apostle who says, By one man sin entered the world, and death by sin.' The Western church universally confessed inherited sin, though debating its exact nature and transmission.

The Westminster Confession (1646) states: 'Our first parents...being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity.' This explains why all humans sin—not merely through imitation of bad examples but through inherited corruption.

This doctrine has pastoral implications: it humbles pride (we're sinners from conception, not self-made righteousness), magnifies grace (if we're hopelessly corrupted, only God can save), and provides realistic expectations (Christians aren't perfected in this life; sanctification is progressive). It also explains why regeneration must be God's work—we can't transform our nature any more than we could choose our genetics.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does this verse support the doctrine of original sin—that all humans inherit a sinful nature from Adam?
2. Is David making an excuse for his sin ('I was born this way, so I couldn't help it'), or is he doing something different?
3. How does acknowledging we're sinful from conception lead to greater appreciation of God's grace rather than fatalism or excuse-making?
4. What does this verse teach about human nature that challenges modern optimistic views of inherent human goodness?

Interlinear Text

הֵן	בְּעוֹן	חוֹלָה לִתִּי	וּ בְּחַטָּא	יִחַמַּ תְּנִי	אִמִּי:
H2005	in iniquity	Behold I was shapen	and in sin	conceive	did my mother
	H5771	H2342	H2399	H3179	H517

Additional Cross-References

Romans 5:12 (Sin): Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:

Job 14:4 (Parallel theme): Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.

Psalms 58:3 (Parallel theme): The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.

Ephesians 2:3 (Parallel theme): Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

John 3:6 (Parallel theme): That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Genesis 5:3 (Parallel theme): And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth:

Genesis 8:21 (Parallel theme): And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.