

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 2 – Chapter 1

BY THE FALL AND REVOLT OF ADAM THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE WAS DELIVERED TO THE CURSE, AND DEGENERATED FROM ITS ORIGINAL CONDITION; THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

With this chapter we begin a new section of Calvin's Institutes; one which deals with redemption – why we need it and how we receive it.

**Summary:** Calvin begins this section by returning to his argument that we know not only who we once were (perfect pre-fall) but also who we have become (sinful post-fall). This knowledge will not only destroy any self-confidence we have (of being good people, but will also teach us why we need redemption. He puts it this way. *"But knowledge of ourselves lies first in considering what we were given at creation and how generously God continues his favor toward us...secondly, to call to mind our miserable condition after Adam's fall; the awareness of which, when all of our boasting and self-assurance are laid low, should truly humble us and overwhelm us with shame."* (pg. 242) This knowledge is necessary, according to Calvin, because human beings have an amazing capacity for self-deception. *"For since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, they are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in themselves that deserves to be considered hateful. Thus even with no outside support the utterly vain opinion generally obtains credence that man is sufficient of himself of himself to lead a good and blessed life."* (pg. 243)

At this point Calvin launches into this discussion of what he terms, Original Sin. He begins with Adam's sin. He writes that *"Adam was denied the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to test his obedience and to prove that he was willingly under God's command."* (pg. 245) Adam, unfortunately was not up to the task. Instead *"ambition and pride, together with ungratefulness arose"* (pg. 245) all of which led Adam to disobey. This was *"a monstrous wickedness"* because Adam, having been made in the image of God, believed that he could attain *"equality with God."* (pg. 245) This choice was the original sin which is passed down to all subsequent generations. *"Therefore, after the heavenly image was obliterated in him, he was not the only one to suffer the punishment...but he also entangled and immersed his offspring on the same miseries."* (pg. 246) This original sin is a spiritual "defect" which is inborn in all humans. Calvin rejects any notion that human beings are either born without sin and simply catch it by being part of the human race. This sin is also not passed down by any physical act or agent (some theologians had speculated that sin was carried in the blood) but was passed down because it had been so ordained by God. Calvin concludes this section by telling his readers that human beings are *"abominable to God"* and that they are naturally *"depraved and faulty."* (pg. 254)

**Reflection:** For those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this concept of original sin and the utter fallenness of human beings is a difficult one to absorb. We live in a society which teaches that there is an inherent goodness in human beings which is misshapen after birth by family, culture or society. Interestingly enough this was also a prevalent view not only in Calvin's time, but even before, which is why he argues against it. I have often joked that original sin makes sense is to sleep deprived parents of newborns because the newborns never say, "Hey you look tired. Why don't you go back to bed and I will lay here in this dirty diaper." Even so, it is hard for most of us to never ask, "Where did sin and evil come from?" It confronts us daily in both large and small ways. We see it on the news and we experience it in person. In a pre-scientific age it made sense. We are born with it. Today I think we can offer a wider and for many, a more compelling set of possibilities. Yet within the history of Christian theology, Original Sin still holds a place which we ought to consider.

**Questions:**

1. What are your thoughts on original sin?
2. How do explain the presence of evil in the world?
3. What do you think of the idea that sin is passed down from generation to generation?