

Behold, I was Shapen in Iniquity (Ps. 51:5)

The theme for this introduction, *Behold, I was shapen in iniquity*, from Psalm 51, perhaps in some ways takes on special significance, because in 2017 we commemorate a monumental event that occurred five centuries ago: Martin Luther "published" the Ninety-five Theses and, according to tradition, posted these on the door of the Wittenberg Church. It is an event widely recognized as marking the commencement of what we call the Reformation. Although we can gaze back to that time 500 years ago and be thankful that God allowed that work to take place, it was nonetheless, a time of great turmoil and difficult spiritual warfare. Among the key issues at the forefront of battle was the question of man's basic nature. Is man basically good or evil? Is man a creature of complete free will or is he bound in some way to fate? These, as well as numerous other questions, dotted the landscape of that era, and I think in many ways laid the pathway for the future progression of God's kingdom, the continued proclamation of the living gospel and the visitations that would come to many nations and tongues all the way up to the present.

Some 2500 years before the Reformation, the author of Psalm 51, King David, had in a profound way personally experienced man's true nature – and found that nature to be utterly corrupt, even to the point of experiencing spiritual death. Fortunately, at the preaching of Nathan, David by God's grace was also able to experience the life-giving sweetness of repentance and forgiveness, which is the work of God through the Holy Spirit enabling one to believe and to hold in the heart the promise of eternal life! In reference to Psalm 51, Luther wrote: "Where is there a man who could speak about repentance and the forgiveness of sins the way the Holy Spirit speaks in this Psalm?"¹

Shapen in iniquity

As clearly as perhaps any place in Scripture, Psalm 51 speaks about sin and human sinfulness, for example, when we take a look at the full 5th verse where David declares: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). The declaration is a powerful statement about the depth of inherited sin – specifically, the inherited sinfulness that resulted from man's Fall in the Garden of Eden.

In some ways the recognition of this concept or the idea of complete sinfulness – a sinfulness that remains and works in mankind even after he has become a partaker of God's grace – can be a harsh reality. The sinfulness to which this Psalm refers is not simply committed sins, or actual sins (Luther calls them "elicited acts"), but rather the complete sinfulness that is inherited in man's basic nature. Human reason itself (or our carnal portion) does not want to accept this truth, but as Luther explained, unless a person is taught by the Holy Spirit, one cannot really understand the nature of repentance, sin, or grace. In other words, as Luther points out, such an understanding of complete sinfulness is revealed and given from heaven.²

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, Psalm 51 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 304.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, Psalm 51 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 303.

In Psalm 14, the writer describes the depth and completeness of sin rooted in man's basic nature: "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:2-3). Each of us, born of man and woman possess the same extent of complete sinfulness that David described. Jesus, on the other hand, was born without inherited sin: He was conceived by the Holy Ghost. In this Jesus' nature was like Adam's had been prior to the Fall. Therefore Jesus is called the second Adam³, and unlike the first Adam, Jesus overcame temptation and did not fall into sin, having become a perfect and pleasing sacrifice for our sin. Unspeakable joy it is that, even though inherited sin dwells in all born of the seed of man and woman, by faith Christ is our righteousness!

Original sin and actual sin

Holy Scripture bears out that, on the basis of inherited sin, man is completely corrupt. Even blessed Mary, the mother of Christ, recognized her lowliness. In her humility she expressed: "For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" (Luke 1:48).⁴

Apostle Paul, who was a diligent worker, especially called into the work of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles wrote to Timothy this way concerning himself: "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim 1:15).⁵ Paul also wrote of himself: "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom 7:17-18).

Compared to inherited sin, actual sin seems to be somewhat easier for us to readily recognize because we so frequently commit actual sins. We describe actual sins as a falling away of the heart from God, or transgressing God's will. However, it is specifically because of the original sin remaining in us, that we all inevitably commit actual sins⁶: sins against others, sins that are our own personal faults and failings – all of which really are sins against God. David confessed, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified" (Ps 51:4).

Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans concerning Adam and inherited sin: "... by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). However, in the same passage Paul also described grace that comes only by living faith: "... if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many" (Rom 5:17).

Consequences of sin

Included in God's instructions to Adam and Eve in the Garden was the command: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen 2:16-17). So as a consequence of sin, death came. Adam and Eve, of course, faced temporal death which we as humans subsequently face. In addition to temporal death we also recognize two other kinds of death – which, frankly are also related to sin: spiritual and eternal death. Spiritual death is the

³ Ref: Romans Chapter 5.

⁴ Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 10, Psalm 51 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 239.

⁵ Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 10, Psalm 51 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 239.

⁶ Olavi Voittoinen, The Voice of Zion, Introduction: Sin and Its Consequences, p.2, (LLC, Loretto, MN: March 2009).

separation of a person from God, while eternal death results when one passes away from this earth in unbelief.

The Bible assures us that, after the Fall into sin in the Garden, God promised to send His Son to give His life on our behalf (Gen. 3:15). Jesus, during His ministry, described that promise to Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Old Covenant believers had journeyed with that hope. New Covenant travelers likewise journey believing the same promise, just as Apostle Paul proclaimed one time in a synagogue at Antioch: "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things" (Acts 13:38-39). The gospel, of which the essence is the forgiveness of sins, is the freeing word preached through the power of the Holy Ghost that, when believed, promises eternal life through faith.

Juhani Uljas describes living faith this way: "Faith is being in the righteousness of Christ and living in forgiveness every moment."⁷ We're saved only by faith, which is the grace gift of God. But as a result of our inherited sinfulness we stumble. Sin presses on the conscience and the journey becomes slow. In the 32nd Psalm David wrote: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long" (Ps 32:3). The child of God so often experiences the need to hear the reassuring gospel. Apostle Paul wrote that the gospel is: "... the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes" (Rom 1:16).

God's grace

Even though Psalm 51 speaks so plainly about sin and our human sinfulness, God through the writer doesn't leave us with only bitter chastisement over our innate sinfulness and corruption. The Psalmist concludes with uplifting comfort: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities" (Ps 51:7-9). The Psalm helps teach us that one cannot properly understand grace if one does not properly understand sin. Luther wrote: "... the one who is most attractive in the eyes of God is not the one who seems most humble to himself, but the one who sees himself as the most filthy and depraved."⁸ The weakest, the poorest.

David was able to express his own great joy over God's marvelous grace, and then reveal in a remarkably prophetic way, how the living Word has been and still is preached to the poor: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee" (Ps. 51:12-13).

We yet experience joy in the proclamation of the gospel – the same joy that David experienced. We travel as a believer journeying simultaneously as righteous and as a sinner, therefore we live of God's grace and endeavor on the way holding faith and a good conscience.

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⁷ Juhani Uljas, *The Treasure Hidden in a Field*, p. 79, (LLC, Loretto, MN: 2003).

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 10, Psalm 51 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 239