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Psalm 51:5 NIV

The KJV in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me," and the NIV in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me," are both accurate translations. Literally David's Hebrew words say: "Behold! In iniquity I was born, and in sin she conceived me, mother mine."

Literally David's words are false. The doctrine of inherited sin contradicts plain passages of Scripture (as, Matthew 19:14), and it slanders the Creator, for if "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), he does not afflict a baby with the guilt of Adam's sin.

True, being akin to Adam, every baby inherits the consequences of Adam's sin: physical death is passed down to all people, "even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam" (Romans 5:14). All of us sin representatively, "so to speak," and "thus death" has "spread to all men" (Romans 5:12; Hebrews 7:9).

Since God is "holy" (1 Peter 1:16) and "without iniquity" (Deuteronomy 32:4), every human being, from the moment of his conception nine months before birth, is "perfect" until he himself commits "iniquity" (Ezekiel 28:15). A person's own sins separate him from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). Sin is personal and is not transferable: "each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

Psalm 51:5 never was meant to be understood literally. A preacher friend has the right idea: "David does say he was born in sin, but only as a hyperbole. David is exaggerating for the sake of emphasis." In Psalm 51:5 we see David's soul, sincerely penitent, overwhelmed in grief, holding nothing back, making no excuses, writing words true only figuratively.

In the same psalm David used other words not literally true: "Against you, you alone," he told God, "I have sinned" (Psalm 51:4), when in fact he had also sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah. David prayed, "Cleanse me with hyssop" (Psalm 51:7), a plant that "springs out of the wall" (1 Kings 4:33), a prayer David did not mean literally. He also said that God had "broken" (KJV), "crushed" (NIV), his "bones" (Psalm 51:8), but God had not. Don Jackson wrote: "David used hyperbole to describe his sin as so great that it was as though he had been sinful from his very conception" (GOSPEL ADVOCATE, 10-15-1987).

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