

## Lesson 13: Questions 21 and 22

In Lesson 12 we considered Adam as the federal head of mankind and saw that, in his first transgression, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation sinned in him and fell with him (Q19) and that the Fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery (Q20). This lesson presses one step deeper. It asks not only *whether* man fell, but *what that fallen estate now consists of*. What is sinful about it? What is miserable about it? The catechism's answer is *searching*, but it is also *clarifying*, because it teaches us to diagnose the human condition with precision.

21-22

### Question 21: What is Original Sin?

- Q. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?
- A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.

This is one of the most important definitions in the catechism because it forces us to think beyond surface behavior. The question is not simply, "Why do men do sinful things?" The question is, "What is sinful about the estate itself?" In other words, what is true of man now that he is fallen? The answer is not short because the ruin is not simple. The catechism identifies four parts of this sinfulness:

1. The guilt of Adam's first sin
2. The want of original righteousness
3. The corruption of the whole nature
4. All actual transgressions that proceed from that corruption.

We begin with the *first*: the guilt of Adam's first sin. The catechism does not leave Q19 behind and move on as though federal headship were a passing detail. It brings Adam's first transgression directly into the description of *our present condition*. We are sinful, in part, because *Adam's guilt is ours*.

**Romans 5:12** says, "*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*". In the rest of this chapter, Paul traces the entrance of sin and death into the human race through one man. Adam's first sin was *not* a private mistake with private consequences. It was the transgression of a *representative head*, and its guilt extends to his posterity.

That matters because many people are willing to admit that they sin *personally*, but they resist the idea that they are born *guilty in Adam*. Yet Scripture is not embarrassed by this doctrine. Men do not begin life morally neutral, as if they stand where Adam once stood and choose their own course. Men begin life already fallen in Adam. That is why the human problem is deeper than bad habits or poor examples. There is a legal dimension to our ruin from the very beginning.

*Second*, the catechism also says that the sinfulness of this estate consists in "the want of original righteousness". The old word "want" simply means *lack*. Fallen man does not merely *possess* guilt. He *lacks* something he ought to have. Adam was created upright. He was created in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, but that original righteousness did not pass to his posterity in the state of the Fall. What once adorned man in creation is now absent by nature in fallen man.

This is an important distinction. Sin is not merely the *presence* of evil; it is also the *absence* of good. Fallen man is not only polluted. He is emptied of that original righteousness in which he was first made. He does not begin from a morally full condition and then add a few sins on top. He begins lacking what he ought to possess before God. That is one reason why *the gospel must do more than erase guilt*. The sinner does not need pardon *only*. He needs righteousness. He needs to be counted righteous in Christ because he has none of his own.

This also explains why external morality can be so deceptive. A man may appear orderly, disciplined, and respectable *before other men*. His actions may look good outwardly, but if not done from faith, from a renewed heart, and unto the glory of God, they are not righteous. That is why we must not confuse social decency with spiritual health. Apart from Christ, fallen man does not merely do some sinful things; all his works are corrupted by sin.

Third, the catechism says that the sinfulness of this estate consists in “the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin”. Here the focus shifts from legal standing and lost righteousness to inward condition. Man is not only guilty in Adam and lacking the righteousness he once had. He is corrupt in the whole of his nature. This phrase must be handled carefully. The catechism does not mean man is as wicked as possible. It does not mean every sinner expresses every form of evil to the highest degree. God restrains sin by His common grace. But the catechism does mean that no part of man is untouched by the Fall. The corruption is total in extent, not maximal in degree. The mind is darkened; the will bent; the affections disordered; the conscience defiled. Even the body is subject to weakness, decay, and death. The ruin runs through the whole man.

Ephesians 2:1-3 speaks with painful clarity here: “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked ... and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*” Notice the language Paul uses. He does not say merely that men become sinful by imitation. He says they are dead in sins and “*by nature children of wrath*”. That is not a description of a spiritually healthy person who simply needs better information. It is a description of a person ruined at the root.

This is why Scripture speaks of the necessity of the new birth. Fallen man does not need a little encouragement added to an otherwise healthy moral core. He needs to be made alive. He needs a new heart. He needs the Spirit of God to bring him to life. The doctrine of original sin is not an abstract puzzle for theologians. It explains why salvation must be supernatural from beginning to end.

James 1:14-15 shows how this inward corruption gives rise to outward sin: “*But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin.*”

Temptation is not merely an external pressure. It draws strength from something already present in us. Sin progresses because our desires have been bent out of shape; it is not merely around us, but in us.

Our Lord confirms the same truth in Matthew 15:19: “*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*” That verse is devastating because it makes clear that sin is not merely a contamination from the outside. It comes from the heart. Wicked acts have a wicked source. A corrupt fountain produces corrupt streams.

Fourth, that leads to the last part of the answer: “together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.” The catechism is careful not to leave sin at the level of inherited guilt or inward corruption only. It says actual transgressions proceed from original sin. In other words, the fallen estate shows itself. Actual sins in thought, word, and deed are the fruit of a sinful nature.

This matters because some people will speak very readily about brokenness in the abstract while avoiding personal guilt in the concrete. They are willing to say man is fallen in some general sense, but hesitant to say, “I have actually sinned against God.” The catechism will not permit that distance. Original sin gives rise to actual sins, and those actual sins are truly ours. We do not merely suffer from Adam’s fall. We participate in its pattern every day.

This answer also helps us think properly about repentance. Real repentance is not merely being sorry for a handful of isolated actions. It is agreeing with God about the depth of the problem. It is confessing that sin is not just what I have done, but what I am by nature in Adam. It is not less than sorrow over actual transgressions, but it is more. It is the acknowledgment that the tree is bad and not merely that the fruit is blemished.

There is something pastorally steadying about the catechism’s precision here. It does not flatter us, but neither does it leave us confused. It tells us why the human problem is so deep and why Christ must be such a complete Savior. If guilt is part of our ruin, we need pardon. If lack of righteousness is part of our ruin, we need a righteous standing. If corruption is part of our ruin, we need renewal. If actual transgressions proceed daily from that corruption, we need ongoing cleansing and sanctification. Christ answers the whole condition, not just one sliver of it.

## Question 22: What is the misery of natural man's estate?

Q. What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?

A. All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.

If Question 21 exposes the *sinfulness* of the fallen estate, Question 22 opens up its *misery*. This answer is not repeating the last one. It is showing us what sin has brought upon man. The structure is important. First *sin*, then *misery* (see Q20). First *rebellion*, then *consequence*. The catechism is teaching us that misery is not random. It is the bitter fruit of a broken relationship with God.

*First*, the answer begins with the deepest misery of all: "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God". That is first for a reason. Man was made for fellowship with God. He was not made *merely* to exist, nor *merely* to work, nor *merely* to enjoy created things. He was made to know God and live before His face. But by the Fall that communion was lost.

**Genesis 3:8,10** show the change immediately. "*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day*", and instead of delight there is dread. Adam says, "*I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid*". Sin turned the presence of God from joy into terror. The One Whose fellowship should have been man's blessedness became the One from Whom man hid.

**Genesis 3:24** completes the picture: "*He drove out the man*". The expulsion from Eden was more than a change of address. It was a visible sign of broken fellowship. Man was barred from the garden because man had lost communion with God. This is the root misery beneath all other miseries. When fellowship with God is lost, everything else comes apart in time.

*Second*, the catechism says that fallen man is under God's wrath and curse. That language is severe, but it is necessary. **Ephesians 2:2-3** says that we "*once walked*" according to this world and were "*by nature children of wrath*". **Galatians 3:10** says, "*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse*". This is not the language of inconvenience. It is the language of judgment.

We need to understand this rightly. God's wrath is not sinful temper. It is His holy and settled opposition to evil. His curse is not petty spite. It is His righteous sentence against sin. Fallen man is not merely in trouble. He stands under divine displeasure. That is a far more serious thing than many are willing to admit.

This is one reason why modern people often prefer to speak of *pain without guilt*, or *trauma without judgment*. Those categories *can* describe real aspects of human suffering, but *they do not go deep enough*. The catechism insists that the misery of our estate cannot be understood unless we reckon with God's wrath and curse. If we remove judgment from the picture, we may still talk about brokenness, but we will no longer be talking about the Fall in a biblical way.

*Third*, the answer says that fallen man is made liable "to all miseries in this life". That is a broad phrase, and intentionally so. It gathers up the whole field of sorrow, pain, disorder, weakness, frustration, and grief that marks human life in a fallen world. Disease, decay, fear, toil, conflict, bodily suffering, inward turmoil, and the countless burdens of life east of Eden all belong here.

**Lamentations 3:39** says, "*Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?*" That does not mean every specific sorrow can be traced neatly to one specific personal sin. Scripture is more careful than that. But it does mean that human misery belongs to a world under judgment. Suffering is not an alien category unrelated to sin. It is part of life in a fallen order.

This truth should make Christians *sober*, but also *tender*. The doctrine of the Fall does not train us to be hard toward the suffering. Just the opposite. We *know* why the world groans. We *know* why grief cuts so deeply. We *know* why frustration clings to human labor and why the human heart so often feels heavy. The catechism teaches us to look at suffering with *seriousness*, but never with *coldness*.

**Fourth**, the catechism says that man is liable “to death itself”. **Romans 6:23** states it plainly: “*For the wages of sin is death*”. Death is not *merely* a biological fact. It is a judicial wage. It is the public sign that sin has entered and that judgment stands. That is why death feels *wrong* even when it feels *common*. It is not native to the creation as God first made it. ***It is an enemy.***

Every funeral bears witness to the truthfulness of this answer. No matter how ordinary death may appear in a fallen world, it remains terrible. It tears lives apart, reminding man that he is dust under sentence. The catechism singles out death because death is the great visible proof that the Fall was no small matter.

***This is not to say that death cannot be a friend to believers in certain circumstances.***

**Fifth**, and heaviest of all, the answer says that fallen man is liable “to the pains of hell for ever.” This is the furthest reach of misery under judgment. **Matthew 25:41** speaks of “*the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*”, and **Matthew 25:46** says, “*And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*” The catechism does not soften this because Scripture does not soften it.

Hell is ***not*** a metaphor for temporary regret. It is ***not*** a passing consequence. It is ***everlasting punishment*** under the righteous judgment of God. The catechism includes it here because it wants us to see the full seriousness of the fallen estate. If we stop short of judgment to come, we have not yet spoken as plainly as Christ Himself spoke. And yet this answer, severe as it is, is meant to serve the gospel. It shows us what Christ has come to save His people from.

- He ***restores*** communion with God.
- He ***delivers*** from wrath.
- He ***redeems*** from the curse.
- He ***sustains*** His people through the miseries of this life.
- He ***conquers*** death by His own death and resurrection.
- He ***saves*** from the judgment to come.

Question 22 is dark, but in a way that prepares the eye to see the brightness of the Redeemer.

We should not hear this answer as though its purpose were to frighten. It should sober us, yes. But its deeper purpose is to make us truthful, and therefore ready for grace. ***A small view of misery will produce a small view of salvation.*** But when we see what has really been lost and what judgment really hangs over fallen man, then the saving work of Christ appears in its proper magnitude.

## Conclusion

Questions 21 and 22 take us below the surface. They show us that the fallen estate is not defined merely by a few sinful acts or a few painful consequences.

Its ***sinfulness*** consists in: ***guilt, lost righteousness, inward corruption, and actual transgressions.***

Its misery consists in: ***lost communion with God, His wrath and curse, the sorrows of this life, death itself, and everlasting judgment in Hell.***

The catechism is teaching us to be precise. Our problem is not *merely* that we do wrong things now and then. Nor is it merely that life is hard. We are fallen men and women in Adam, and our ruin reaches both inward and outward, both now and for eternity. That is why Christ must be received as a whole Savior. We need ***reconciliation.*** We need ***righteousness.*** We need ***rescue.***

So take these questions with you this week in two ways.

- ***First***, let them deepen your ***honesty.*** Do not speak of sin as though it were something light, occasional, or external only. Let Scripture teach you how deep the wound really goes.
- ***Second***, let them deepen your ***gratitude.*** If you are in Christ, then He has not merely improved your condition. He has begun to reverse the whole ruin of the Fall and will bring that work to completion in ***your*** glorification at the end of days.

In Adam, sin and misery define our estate.

In Christ, grace and life define our hope.