

## PELAGIUS ON NATURE

Reconstructed by Rev. Daniel R. Jennings

Synopsis: This book was written by Pelagius and given to two of his disciples, Timasius and Jacobus, who later compared it with some of the writings of Augustine and discovered discrepancies. They then forwarded a copy to Augustine and he replied with a treatise entitled *On Nature and Grace* from which these fragments come. The purpose of Pelagius' work, according to Augustine, was to substantiate the possibility, not the reality, that a man could have lived without sin from his birth to his death. Nowhere did Pelagius claim to have been one of these people or that those who did sin could receive forgiveness from any other source than the grace of God. No exact title appears to exist for the work and it has been aptly entitled *On Nature* as this is a central theme of the work and Augustine, in his polemic against it chose the name *On Nature and Grace* perhaps because he felt that Pelagius was emphasizing nature too much and grace too little. A word of caution must be expressed as these fragments are coming down to us from the pen of an enemy of Pelagius (Augustine) who in the introductory paragraph to his work against it admits that "The book which you sent to me, my beloved sons, Timasius and Jacobus, I have read through hastily."

I now submit to you for the first time that I am aware of the fragments of *On Nature*.

"It is one thing to inquire whether a thing can be, which has respect to its possibility only; and another thing, whether or not it is."

"We are treating of possibility only; and to pass from this to something else, except in the case of some certain fact, we deem to be a very serious and extraordinary process."

"I once more repeat my position: I say that it is possible for a man to be without sin. What do you say? That it is impossible for a man to be without sin? But I do not say that there is a man without sin; nor do you say, that there is not a man without sin. Our contention is about what is possible, and not possible; not about what is, and is not."

"'No man indeed is clean from pollution'; and, 'There is no man that sinneth not'; and, 'There is not a just man upon the earth'; and, 'There is none that doeth good'. There are these and similar passages in Scripture but they testify to the point of not being, not of not being able; for by testimonies of this sort it is shown what kind of persons certain men were at such and such a time, not that they were unable to be something else. Whence they are justly found to be blameworthy. If, however, they had been of such a character, simply because they were unable to be anything else, they are free from blame."

"He is not condemned; because the statement that all sinned in Adam, was not made because of the sin which is derived from one's birth, but because of imitation of him."

"'A man,' you will say, 'may possibly be [without sin]; but it is by the grace of God.' I thank you for your kindness, because you are not merely content to withdraw your

opposition to my statement, which you just now opposed, or barely to acknowledge it; but you actually go so far as to approve it. For to say, 'A man may possibly, but by this or by that,' is in fact nothing else than not only to assent to its possibility, but also to show the mode and condition of its possibility. Nobody, therefore, gives a better assent to the possibility of anything than the man who allows the condition thereof; because, without the thing itself, it is not possible for a condition to be."

"But, you will say, 'you here seem to reject the grace of God, inasmuch as you do not even mention it.'"

"Now, is it I that reject grace, who by acknowledging the thing must needs also confess the means by which it may be effected, or you, who by denying the thing do undoubtedly also deny whatever may be the means through which the thing is accomplished?"

"Whether he confesses it to be by grace, or by aid, or by mercy, whatever that be by which a man can be without sin,-every one acknowledges the thing itself."

"If I were to say, man is able to dispute; a bird is able to fly; a hare is able to run; without mentioning at the same time the instruments by which these acts can be accomplished-that is, the tongue, the wings, and the legs; should I then have denied the conditions of the various offices, when I acknowledged the very offices themselves?"

"[Certain persons allege] that some sins are light by their very frequency, their constant irruption making it impossible that they should be all of them avoided. [It was] proper that they should be censured even as light offences, if they cannot possibly be wholly avoided."

"[It was proposed to me] are you even yourself without sin? [To this I answered] it is rather to be imputed to my own negligence that I am not without sin [as opposed to personal weakness]."

"[I have been told in refutation to my beliefs] that it is nowhere written in so many words, [that] 'A man can be without sin'." [We need to keep in mind] that the question here is not in what precise words each doctrinal statement is made."

"[The Apostle James writes] 'But the tongue can no man tame.' [We need to keep in mind as we interpret this that it must be interpreted] as if it were written by way of reproach; as much as to say: Can no man then, tame the tongue? As if in a reproachful tone, which would say: You are able to tame wild beasts; cannot you tame the tongue? As if it were an easier thing to tame the tongue than to subjugate wild beasts."

"[Concerning sins of ignorance] a man ought to be very careful to avoid ignorance; and that ignorance is blame-worthy for this reason, because it is through his own neglect that a man is ignorant of that which he certainly must have known if he had only applied diligence."

"sins which have been committed do notwithstanding require to be divinely expiated, and that the Lord must be entreated because of them [that is, for the purpose, of course, of obtaining pardon] because that which has been done cannot be undone [by the] power of nature and will of man."

"We have first of all to discuss the position which is maintained, that our nature has been weakened and changed by sin. I think that before all other things we have to inquire what sin is, - some substance, or wholly a name without substance, whereby is expressed not a thing, not an existence, not some sort of a body, but the doing of a wrongful deed. I suppose that this is the case; and if so how could that which lacks all substance have possibly weakened or changed human nature?"

"this sickness [of sin] ought not to have been contracted by [our forefather Adam committing] sins, lest the punishment of sin should amount to this, that more sins should be committed."

"Why seek Him [for infants?]? They are whole (i.e. not affected with an inescapable controlling sinful nature to which they are powerless because of Adam's sin) for whom you seek the Physician. Not even was the first man condemned to die for any such reason [as having an uncontrollable nature], for he did not sin afterwards."

"As to his (Adam's) posterity also not only are they not more infirm than he, but they actually fulfilled more commandments than he ever did, since he neglected to fulfill one."

"The very matter of sin is its punishment, if the sinner is so much weakened that he commits more sins."

"Sin ought not so to have been punished, that the sinner, through his punishment, should commit even more sins."

"[I have actually heard that it was taught that] man was so formed as to be able to pass from righteousness to sin, and yet not able to return from sin to righteousness."

"the Lord was able to die without sin."

"no evil is the cause of anything good."

"[The logical conclusion of assuming that men of necessity must sin is that] sin was necessary in order that there might be a cause for God's mercy."

"God, no doubt, applies His mercy even to this office, whenever it is necessary because man after sin requires help in this way, not because God wished there should be a cause for such necessity. But just in the same way it is the duty of a physician to be ready to cure a man who is already wounded; although he ought not to wish for a man who is sound to be wounded."

"[There are those who say that] it was really necessary to man, in order to take from him all occasion for pride and boasting, that he should be unable to exist without sin. [This doesn't make sense. It is] the height of absurdity and folly, that there should have been sin in order that sin might not be; inasmuch as pride is itself, of course, a sin."

"But God is able to heal all things."

"What shall I say more than this [in response to the argument that sin can be cured by sin], that we may believe that fires are quenched by fires, if we may believe that sins are cured by sins?"

"But how shall we separate pride itself from sin? To sin is quite as much to be proud, as to be proud is to sin; for only ask what every sin is, and see whether you can find any sin without the designation of pride."

"Every sin if I mistake not, is a contempt of God, and every contempt of God is pride. For what is so proud as to despise God? All sin, then, is also pride, even as Scripture says, Pride is the beginning of all sin."

"Then again, how can one be subjected to God for the guilt of that sin, which he knows is not his own? For his own it is not, if it is necessary. Or, if it is his own, it is voluntary: and if it is voluntary, it can be avoided."

"[Certain persons advanced against me that I was teaching] that man is placed on equality with God, if he is described as being without sin [but this is not the case]."

"[I resist those who have said to me that] 'What you assert seems indeed to be reasonable, but it is an arrogant thing to allege that any man can be without sin.' [If what I am alleging is true then it cannot be said to be arrogant.] On what side must humility (the opposite of arrogance) be placed? No doubt on the side of falsehood, if you prove arrogance to exist on the side of truth."

"How must we suppose that those holy men quitted this life, with sin, or without sin?"

"[Following is a list of those] who not only lived without [recorded] sin, but are described as having led holy lives, - Abel, Enoch, Melchizedek, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joshua the son of Nun, Phinehas, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Joseph, Elisha, Micaiah, Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael, Mordecai, Simeon, Joseph to whom the Virgin Mary was espoused, John, Deborah, Anna the mother of Samuel, Judith, Esther, the other Anna, daughter of Phanuel, Elisabeth, and also the mother of our Lord and Saviour, for of her we must needs allow that her piety had no sin in it."

"But perhaps they will ask me: Could not the Scripture have mentioned sins of all of these? This might be rightly asked of those whom Scripture mentions neither as good nor as bad; but of those whose holiness it commemorates, it would also without doubt have commemorated the sins likewise, if it had perceived that they had sinned in anything."

"But, granted that it has sometimes abstained, in a numerous crowd, from narrating the sins of all; still, in the very beginning of the world, when there were only four persons in existence, what reason have we to give why it chose not to mention the sins of all? Was it in consideration of the vast multitude, which had not yet come into existence? Or because, having mentioned only the sins of those who had transgressed, it was unable to record any of him who had not yet committed sin? It is certain that in the earliest age Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel their sons, are mentioned as being the only four persons then in being. Eve sinned, - the Scripture distinctly says so much; Adam also transgressed, as the same Scripture does not fail to inform us; whilst it affords us an equally clear testimony that Cain also sinned: and of all these it not only mentions the sins, but also indicates the character of their sins. Now if Abel had likewise sinned, Scripture would without doubt have said so. But it has not said so, therefore he committed no sin; nay, it even shows him to have been righteous. What we read, therefore, let us believe; and what we do not read, let us deem it wicked to add."

"What we read, therefore, let us believe; and what we do not read, let us deem it wicked to add; and let it suffice to have said this of all cases."

"[My opponents have presented to me the words of the Apostle when he writes] 'All have sinned.' [What we need to understand is that] the apostle was manifestly speaking of the then existing generation, that is, the Jews and the Gentiles." [In regards to the passage which states 'By one man sin entered the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men; in which all have sinned. As by the offence of one, upon all men [came a bringing] to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of One, upon all men [came a bringing] unto justification of life (Rom. 10:3-4).' I teach that] there can be no doubt that not all men are sanctified by the righteousness of Christ, but only those who are willing to obey Him, and have been cleansed in the washing of His baptism [thus there can be no doubt that not all men are sinners, but only those who are willing to disobey him.]"

"Well, be it so, I agree; he testifies to the fact that all were sinners. He says, indeed, what they have been, not that they might not have been something else. Wherefore if all then could be proved to be sinners, it would not by any means prejudice our own definite position, in insisting not so much on what men are, as on what they are able to be."

"[We must accept] that God is as good as just, and made man such that he was quite able to live without the evil of sin, if only he had been willing."

"That proceeds not from a man's will which he can do by nature."

"As far as the present question is concerned, it is not pertinent to inquire whether there have been or now are any men in this life without sin, but whether they had or have the ability to be such persons."

"But you will tell me this is what disturbs a great many, - that you do not maintain that it is by the grace of God that a man is able to be without sin. What blindness of ignorance,

what sluggishness of an uninstructed mind, which supposes that that is maintained and held to be without God's grace which it only hears ought to be attributed to God!"

"Now, when it is said that the very ability is not at all of man's will, but of the Author of nature, - that is, God, - how can that possibly be understood to be without the grace of God which is deemed especially to belong to God? That this may become still plainer, we must enter on a somewhat fuller discussion of the point. Now we affirm that the possibility of anything lies not so much in the ability of a man's will as in the necessity of nature. Take for instance, my ability to speak. That I am able to speak is not my own; but that I do speak is my own, - that is, of my own will. And because the act of my speaking is my own, I have the power of alternative action, - that is to say, both to speak and to refrain from speaking. But because my ability to speak is not my own, that is, is not of my own determination and will, it is of necessity that I am always able to speak; and though I wished not to be able to speak, I am unable, nevertheless, to be unable to speak, unless perhaps I were to deprive myself of that member whereby the function of speaking is to be performed."

"Whatever is fettered by natural necessity is deprived of determination of will and deliberation. We may perceive the same thing to be true of hearing, smelling, and seeing, - that to hear, and to smell, and to see is of our own power, while the ability to hear, and to smell, and to see is not of our own power, but lies in a natural necessity."

"[Allow me to use an illustration to explain my point.] In like manner, touching the possibility of our not sinning, we must understand that it is of us not to sin, but yet that the ability to avoid sin is not of us. [However if we accept this then we are constrained to say that] inasmuch as not to sin is ours, we are able to sin and to avoid sin. [However, if we take the opposite side we will say that] inasmuch as, however, it is not of us to be able to avoid sin; even if we were to wish not to be able to avoid sin, it is not in our power to be unable to avoid sin." [I think that this illustration will show the logical conclusions of both sides.]

"No will can take away that which is proved to be inseparably implanted in nature."

"[Some have asked me] 'Why do you affirm that man without the help of God's grace is able to avoid sin?' [To this I answer] 'The actual capacity of not sinning lies not so much in the power of will as in the necessity of nature. Whatever is placed in the necessity of nature undoubtedly appertains to the Author of nature, that is, God. How then can that be regarded as spoken without the grace of God which is shown to belong in an especial manner to God?'"

"[It must be understood of the nature of man] that it has an inseparable capacity [to do the right thing.]"

"But you will tell me that, according to the apostle, the flesh is contrary to us (Gal 5:17). How can it be that in the case of any baptized person the flesh is contrary to him, when

according to the same apostle he is understood not to be in the flesh? For he says, `But ye are not in the flesh.'"

"[We see from these numerous passages of the Apostle Paul] that the flesh is often mentioned by him in such a manner as proves him to mean not the substance, but the works of the flesh."

"Who made man's spirit? God, without a doubt. Who created the flesh? The same God, I suppose. Is the God good who created both? Nobody doubts it. Are not both good, since the good Creator made them? It must be confessed that they are. If, therefore, both the spirit is good, and the flesh is good, as made by the good Creator, how can it be that the two good things should be contrary to one another?"

"See what a man will say, who is unwilling to cry out with the apostle, "'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'"

"[The Apostle says in Romans 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'] But why should I so exclaim, who am already baptized in Christ? It is for them to cry out thus who have not yet received so great a benefit, whose words the apostle in a figure transferred to himself, - if indeed even they say so much."

"As we remarked, the passage in which occur the words, `The flesh lusteth against the Spirit,' must needs have reference not to the substance, but to the works of the flesh."

"[Some oppose what we are saying because the plain truth is that] the devil opposes us. We must resist him, and he will flee. `Resist the devil,' says the blessed apostle, `and he will flee from you.' From which it may be observed, what his harming amounts to against those whom he tees; or what power he is to be understood as possessing, when he prevails only against those who do not resist him."

"[Some indeed will ask] 'And who would be unwilling to be without sin, if it were put in the power of a man?' [To this I answer] that by this very question they acknowledge that the thing is not impossible; because so much as this, many, if not all men, certainly desire."

"[Let us now turn our attention to other Christian writers who agree with what I am proposing. Lactantius has said] 'It behooved for the Master and Teacher of virtue to become most like to man, that by conquering sin He might show that man is able to conquer sin.'"

"[Again Lactantius says] 'And again, that by subduing the desires of the flesh He might teach us that it is not of necessity that one sins, but of set purpose and will.'"

"[Hilary has said that] It is only when we shall be perfect in spirit and changed in our immortal state, which blessedness has been appointed only for the pure in heart, that we shall see that which is immortal in God."

"[Again Hilary has said] 'This Job had so effectually read these Scriptures, that was because he worshipped God purely with a mind unmixed with offences: now such worship of God is the proper work of righteousness.'"

"[Hilary, likewise, while expounding that passage of the psalm in which it is written, 'Thou hast despised all those who turn aside from Thy commandments,' says:] 'If God were to despise sinners, He would despise indeed all men, because no man is without sin; but it is those who turn away from Him, whom they call apostates, that He despises.'"

"[Ambrose of Milan has said] 'Inasmuch as the Church has been gathered out of the world, that is, out of sinful men, how can it be unpolluted when composed of such polluted material, except that, in the first place, it be washed of sins by the grace of Christ, and then, in the next place, abstain from sins through its nature of avoiding sin?'"

"[Remember that John Chrysostom has said] 'that sin is not a substance, but a wicked act. And because it is not natural, therefore the law was given against it, and because it proceeds from the liberty of our will.'"

"[Remember what Xystus, bishop of Rome and martyr, has once said] 'God has conferred upon men liberty of their own will, in order that by purity and sinlessness of life they may become like unto God?' [and] 'A pure mind is a holy temple for God, and a heart clean and without sin is His best altar.' [Xystus has also said] 'A man of chastity and without sin has receded power from God to be a son of God.'"

"[Jerome has written] 'Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.' These are they whom no consciousness of sin reproves. The pure man is seen by his purity of heart; the temple of God cannot be defiled.' [He has also said] 'God created us with free will; we are drawn by necessity neither to virtue nor to vice; otherwise, where there is necessity there is no crown.'"

"Bishop Augustine also in his books on Free Will has these words: 'Whatever the cause itself of volition is, if it is impossible to resist it, submission to it is not sinful; if, however, it may be resisted, let it not be submitted to, and there will be no sin. Does it, perchance, deceive the unwary man? Let him then beware that he be not deceived. Is the deception, however, so potent that it is not possible to guard against it? If such is the case, then there are no sins. For who sins in a case where precaution is quite impossible? Sin, however, is committed; precaution therefore is possible.'"