

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The Psalmist cries out, “What is man?” What we believe about human nature will stamp itself on all the rest of our beliefs. If we have no understanding of what man is, we will have no understanding - or a very poor understanding - of everything else in life, and especially in matters of religion. We therefore turn, with great seriousness and solemnity, to consider what the Bible says about man and man’s nature, and in particular what it says about man’s depravity or sinfulness.

The Bible’s teaching on this subject has been summed up in the phrase “total depravity”. A very forbidding phrase: but only because it deals with a very grim and sinister reality. We can express the doctrine in the words of our confession of faith, the great London Baptist Confession of the year 1689, which has (for more than 300 years now) served as a doctrinal platform for Reformed Baptists the world over. Let us listen then to the 1689 Confession, as it speaks on man’s total depravity:

“Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation, so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”

Such is the teaching of the 1689 Confession, and indeed of historic Protestant theology ever since the Reformation. This, in other words, was the view held by all the great Reformers of the 16th century, men like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Before them, it was held by many others, in a line of descent stretching back to the early church father, Augustine, and at

last, as we shall see, to the biblical prophets and apostles themselves.

The doctrine itself, then, is this. Man was originally created good. Adam and Eve, the first human beings, came from their Creator's hand innocent and free of all sin. But they fell from that state of goodness; they disobeyed the God who made them; they broke and lost their relationship with Him; and thereby they lost spiritual life, and became spiritually dead. Here is the tragic heart of total depravity: the spiritual death of the soul that has fallen away from God. As we are born into the world by nature, offspring of apostate Adam, it is not that we are merely spiritually sick, or spiritually impaired, or spiritually imperfect. It is far worse: we are spiritually *dead*. And as the dead are totally incapable of living action, so those who are spiritually dead are totally incapable of spiritual action. Our depravity in that sense is "total". Left to ourselves and our own sinful natures, apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are totally powerless to make any positive response to God.

And therefore, there is nothing at all any of us can do to save ourselves. That too is part and parcel of the doctrine: the total impossibility of self-salvation. How can a corpse bring about its own resurrection? Can the dead make themselves live? Can death give birth to life? The dead will remain quite dead - senseless, motionless, lifeless - unless some life-giving power from outside themselves intervenes, and flows upon them, animates them afresh, and raises them up miraculously from death into a new life. Had Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, been left to the power of nature after his death, he would have remained in his grave, and slowly rotted away. But when the all-powerful Son of God spoke the sovereign

word - "Lazarus, come forth!" - then life flooded back supernaturally into those decomposing limbs, and Lazarus rose and lived again. He came forth, reborn from the tomb, through the same almighty power which had said in the beginning, "Let there be light."

And so it is with us in a spiritual sense. Our falling away from God in the rebellion of Adam has left us spiritually without life. God Himself is the source and fountain of all spiritual life; He is the life of the soul. By breaking our relationship with Him, we therefore lost spiritual life, and became inwardly dead - dead to God, dead to His will, dead to His wisdom, dead to His holiness, dead to His love, dead to His beauty, dead to His glory: altogether frozen, insensitive, unresponsive, and dead to the things of heaven and the realities of eternity. Outside of Christ, therefore, we may be physically alive; indeed, we may be flourishing in bodily health. We may be mentally alive; indeed, we may have very lively and cultivated minds. But we are spiritually dead. The life of God is not in our souls; we are alienated, separated, cut off, from the one and only fountain of spiritual life in the entire universe, God Himself.

If you tore a limb from the human body, that limb would die. It would not go on living its own individual life. Sundered from the source of physical vitality in the body, the severed limb would be dead. No doubt it would still be a human limb; and perhaps by the application of preservative and cosmetic techniques, you could keep it from withering, and make it look beautiful. But it would be dead, incapable of true living activity. Likewise man, sundered from God, is dead in his spirit, incapable of true spiritual activity.

As fallen beings, then, children of sinful Adam, our souls exist in this awful condition of spiritual death. And as dead people, we can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves - nothing to redeem ourselves, nothing to recreate ourselves, nothing to regenerate ourselves, nothing to reconcile ourselves to God. As our confession of faith says, we have wholly lost all ability of will concerning any spiritual good that accompanies salvation, and we are not able by our own strength to convert ourselves, or even to prepare ourselves for conversion.

Such is the historic Protestant doctrine. Is it to be found in the Bible? Yes; there are many biblical passages which teach this doctrine. One of the clearest is **Ephesians 2:1-3**. Here the apostle Paul says this to the Ephesian Christians, describing what they had once been outside of Christ, before the Saviour had set them free from their fallen condition: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.”

The apostle Paul says that the Ephesian believers - before their conversion to Christ - were dead in trespasses and sins. The terrible description “dead” here refers to a spiritual condition of soul. Paul says in the next verse that the Ephesians used to “walk” in these trespasses and sins. In other words, sin was their whole way of life. They thought and felt, spoke and moved and acted, in an all-embracing atmosphere and context of sin. So, the apostle here speaks of a condition of personal existence. Outside of Christ, human beings are spiritually dead

in trespasses and sins. John Calvin comments:

“As spiritual death is nothing else than the alienation of the soul from God, we are all born as dead men, and we live as dead men, until we are made partakers of the life of Christ... While we remain in Adam, we are entirely devoid of life; and regeneration is a new life of the soul, by which it rises from the dead. Some kind of life, I acknowledge, does remain in us, while we are still at a distance from Christ; for unbelief does not altogether destroy the outward senses, or the will, or the other faculties of the soul. But what has this to do with the kingdom of God? What has it to do with a blessed life, so long as every sentiment of the mind, and every act of the will, is death? Let this, then, be held as a fixed principle, that the union of our soul with God is the true and only life; and that out of Christ we are altogether dead, because sin, the cause of death, reigns in us.”

Let us consider a number of other references to this doctrine in the Bible.

John 5:25 “Truly, truly, I say to you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”

This is not a reference to the resurrection of the body at the end of time. Christ says, “The hour is coming, and now is.” He is speaking therefore of a present reality. Also the bodily resurrection of the last day is described a few verses later, in **John 5:28-29**: “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth.” So the earlier verse, v.25, does not refer to this final far-off event, but to a present event, here and now. “The

hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of Christ: and those who hear shall live.” This is a description of Christ speaking His life-giving Word to those who are spiritually dead, with the blessed result that, hearing His voice, they rise up from their state of death to spiritual life. Sin, then, is a condition of spiritual death. It takes nothing less than the almighty resurrecting power of the Son of God to bring a sinner out of that condition, and make him alive to God.

Romans 6:13 “yield yourselves to God, as those that are alive from the dead.” Once again the apostle Paul says that the Christian has spiritually been raised from the dead. We can only yield ourselves to God in obedience as a result of His first having mightily delivered us from the death of sin.

Colossians 2:13 “And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” “Quickened” is an old-fashioned word for bringing to life. You were dead in your sins, Paul says, but God quickened you - God brought you to life. And how did God do this? He quickened you “together with Him” - that is, with Christ. It is in and through His Son Jesus Christ that God gives new life to those who, apart from Christ, are spiritual corpses, lifeless in sin, destitute of all spiritual sense and motion. I do not quicken myself; death cannot create life. Almighty God quickens me; and He quickens me by virtue of the saving grace and power that dwell in His beloved Son.

We can sum all this up in the words of Arthur Pink: “The sinner is dead in trespasses and sins, and can no more quicken himself than he can create a world. His heart is bound fast with the grave-clothes of worldly and fleshly lusts, and only

Omnipotence can raise it into communion with God.”

But we have not yet finished with Paul’s portrait of sinful human nature in Ephesians 2. We have seen how he says we are spiritually dead outside of Christ, and that as a result we walk in trespasses and sins. However, we also observe how he says that in this state of spiritual death, we are slaves of Satan: “who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience.”

Satan is here set forth under the title “the prince of the power of the air”. There is no need for us to inquire closely what this means; the important point is that Satan is depicted as a powerful prince. And this great and mighty prince is said to be “at work in the children of disobedience”. By nature, we are disobedient to God; but our disobedience, Paul says, is more than a merely human thing. Our disobedience is also the product of Satan’s work, as he works spiritually, by diabolical power, within the minds and hearts of those who do not know Christ as their Saviour, turning their thoughts away from God or against Him.

Other biblical passages teach the same dreadful truth. The Lord Jesus Christ once declared to some hostile, unbelieving Jews, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” (**John 8:44**). Like father, like son: as the devil is the great original rebel against God, so human beings follow him, swept up into his rebellion. Therefore, apart from Christ’s gift of salvation, we are in a spiritual sense children of the devil, carrying out his rebellious desires against our Creator.

Or again, the apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, tells Timothy to exercise humility in instructing opponents of the truth, “if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will” (**2 Timothy 2:25-26**). Those who oppose the truth are not free agents, as they may imagine themselves to be. Rather, they have been taken captive by the devil, ensnared by him to do his will; and their only hope lies not in their own ability to escape him, but in God, if perhaps He will grant them repentance, that they might know the truth.

Finally Paul thus describes the unsaved in **2 Corinthians 4:3-4**: “if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.” Why is there a veil over the minds of many, so that they do not believe the Gospel? Because, Paul says, the god of this age - Satan - has blinded their minds, thus preventing the light of the Gospel of Christ from shining upon them. So hopeless is fallen man’s predicament; so great is Satan’s power over the unconverted.

Does this not press home upon us how deep and how desperate is our need of a Saviour? Who but almighty God can deliver our souls from this fearful slavery to Satan and the powers of darkness? As the Puritan John Flavel says: “All the world by nature are in bondage and captivity to Satan; Christ comes with kingly power to rescue sinners as a prey from the mouth of the terrible one.”

The biblical picture, then, of sinful man's total depravity builds up before our eyes with a majestic awfulness. Apart from the grace of Jesus Christ, how lost we are, how dead we are, how deceived, how helpless, how impotent, how enslaved to sin and Satan, how utterly incapable of saving ourselves, or even truly desiring to be saved! For he who desires to be saved, desires to be made holy; but what unregenerate sinner, dead in trespasses and sins, and in bondage to the devil, truly desires holiness? Before we can desire holiness, Christ must already be at work in our hearts to give us that desire. Even so, the picture is still not quite complete; we must briefly look at one last aspect of the apostle Paul's bleak sketch of human depravity in Ephesians 2. He concludes in verse 3 by saying, "we were by nature children of wrath, just as the others".

Outside of Christ, prior to our conversion, "we" are all children of wrath. The Bible often uses this language, "children of", or "son of", to portray a person's dominant feature, to express either character or destiny or both. So Judas Iscariot is described in Jn.17:12 as "the son of perdition". Perdition means ruin, loss, destruction. It conveys both Judas's fate and also his worthiness of that fate. Judas is a son of perdition – he is destined to eternal ruin, loss, and destruction, and is supremely deserving of that terrible fate. By describing unregenerate human beings as "the children of wrath", Paul is saying that God's wrath is the prevailing quality, the distinctive attribute, of a sinner's existence. If outside of Christ we are all children of wrath, then the dominating feature of our life is exposure to God's holy displeasure as the Judge of the world. We are under judgment: such is the fundamental property of life outside of God's Son.

Further, Paul says, we are children of wrath "by nature". We

do not become children of wrath by practice, but it is our condition by nature. We are born this way. All a human being has to do to be a child of wrath, is to be born. Arthur Pink again:

“Many have insisted (contrary to the facts of common experience and observation) that children are corrupted by external contact with evil, that they *acquire* bad habits by imitation of others. We do not deny that environment has a measure of influence. Yet if any baby could be placed in a perfect setting and surrounded only by sinless beings, it would soon be evident that he was corrupt. We are depraved not by a process of development, but by genesis.... It is innate, bred in us. As Goodwin [Thomas Goodwin the Puritan] solemnly pointed out, ‘They are children of wrath in the very womb, before they commit any actual sin.’”

It is not our purpose tonight to consider the origin of evil in God’s universe. “How is it that we are by nature children of wrath, even from the womb?” The Bible has something to say on this; and men have had even more to say on it, as they have speculated almost endlessly on the matter. However, the words of the early church father Augustine are wise. “A man had fallen into a well, where the amount of water was enough to break his fall and save him from death, but not deep enough to cover his mouth and deprive him of speech. Another man approaches, and on seeing him, cries out in surprise: ‘How did you fall in here?’ He answers: ‘I beseech you to plan how you can get me out of this, rather than ask how I fell in.’” Augustine’s point is the futility of speculating on how and why it is we are born children of wrath by nature; the important and practical thing is to be delivered from a condition which, if left without remedy, will destroy our

capacity for happiness for ever.

Here, then, is the total depravity of unregenerate human nature outside of Christ. Man is spiritually dead; dead in sins and trespasses; the slave of Satan; by nature a child of wrath. Now we can see why our confession of faith says that in our natural state, as fallen sinners, we have wholly lost all ability of will concerning any spiritual good that accompanies salvation, and we are not able by our own strength to convert ourselves, or to prepare ourselves for conversion. No corpse can bring about its own resurrection. The dead cannot make themselves alive. No, the spiritually dead will remain dead - totally devoid of all heavenly sense, feeling, motion, and life - unless the life-giving power of God in Christ flows upon them supernaturally, and raises them up out of spiritual death to glorious newness of life in the Son of God.

Such is the biblical doctrine. Now let us move on to consider some further points. First, it is very easy to misunderstand the doctrine of total depravity. Although everything that has been said about man's utter deadness in sin is biblically true, it does not mean that every unconverted person is some kind of moral monster in his manner of life. We must distinguish carefully between man's *spiritual* condition and his *moral* condition. We shall notice in a moment how the Bible itself makes this distinction. Spiritual death in the soul does not necessarily carry with it moral death in the conscience, the feelings, or the conduct. I can be spiritually severed and sundered from God in my soul, cut off from the one source of spiritual life, and therefore spiritually dead, totally incapable of any saving response to God: and yet in the very midst of such a dreadful condition, I can still have an active conscience, that knows the essential difference between right and wrong, and humane

feelings towards my neighbour, and a decent moral life in the eyes of society.

All of that is quite consistent with my being spiritually dead. For the Bible recognises that there is a sense in which the spiritual is one thing, and the moral is another. While therefore some spiritually dead men are also morally atrocious in their conscience, feelings, and conduct, yet many are not. Not that anyone is morally perfect, even in the purely earthly realm of human relationships, and leaving out of account our relationship with God. But despite moral imperfection, most people show some qualities to which it would be unwise to deny the name “good”. The Scriptures clearly acknowledge this, as we shall see. However, despite the good moral qualities of unregenerate men, they are still spiritually dead towards God; they are still by nature incapable of any true response to the King of heaven, by way of saving faith in His Son, and the repentance that leads to eternal life.

Let us look for a moment at what the Bible tells us about the moral possibilities of the spiritually dead. We take *conscience* first. This is what the apostle Paul says about conscience in the unregenerate: “for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them” (**Romans 2:14-15**). The work of the law, that is, the ethical requirements of God’s law, are written in the human heart, says Paul. And therefore those who are outside of Christ still have a conscience. And their conscience not only accuses them; it also sometimes excuses them - sometimes testifies in their favour - sometimes pronounces that they have

done something morally right. So the apostle plainly says. Spiritual death does not normally obliterate the activity of conscience.

Next let us take the *feelings* of the unregenerate. What does the Lord Jesus Christ say? “What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (**Matthew 7:9-11**) Christ acknowledges here that men are evil: “if you then, being evil”. That is what we are by nature in relation to God: destitute of any faith, repentance, or love towards Him. But on the human level, Christ also fully accepts that men know how to give good gifts to their children. Natural affection usually survives despite spiritual death. A good father, a good mother, kind and caring: a person may be all this, while yet being spiritually devoid of life. Remember, there is a sense in which the spiritual is one thing, the moral is another. I can be utterly dead towards my Creator, yet have good feelings towards my fellow man.

Finally let us take the *conduct* of the unregenerate. Consider what the Bible says about king Cyrus of Persia. God worked in Cyrus’s heart to make him well-disposed towards His Old Testament people Israel. Cyrus decreed that they could return from their exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. It was a remarkable reversal of fortunes for Israel. Cyrus is even called the Lord’s shepherd and the Lord’s anointed in the prophecy of Isaiah. Yet Isaiah is equally clear that Cyrus is not a converted man; he is not godly, he is not a believer. As God says to Cyrus, **Isaiah 45:4-5** “For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel Mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I

have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known Me. I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside Me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me.” King Cyrus, then, was a friend and a protector to the people of God, and gave them justice and freedom, even though Cyrus did not know God personally. Our moral conduct towards our fellow men may in that sense be good, while yet we are spiritually dead towards our Creator.

Let me suggest two important lessons from these considerations. First, if we are Christians, let us not think the doctrine of total depravity means that all men are as wicked as they could be - that men are devils incarnate. Although the tendency of spiritual death is to undermine and destroy morality in the end, yet in the present life it is not generally so. By the common grace of God, despite the moral frailty and perversity of human nature, there is still much that is good in the conscience, feelings, and conduct of unregenerate men. If we fail to recognise this, we are not only putting ourselves at odds with the Bible; we are also gravely misunderstanding the nature of sin, as though sin meant nothing more than human immorality.

And if that is our serious misconception of sin, and we then experience human kindness or fairness at the hands of unconverted people, we will fast lose any real sense that they are sinners, and so lose any effective sense that they need Christ or salvation. Whatever their conscience, whatever their humane feelings, whatever their good conduct to others, the unconverted are spiritually dead in their hearts toward the one true and living God. That is why they need salvation; that is why they need Christ. Apart from the saving mercy of God in His Son, the unconverted will remain spiritual corpses, who

must finally be buried for ever in the spiritual graveyard which the Bible calls “hell”.

Second, if you are not yet a Christian, do not think your human morality, such as it may well be, means that you are spiritually alive. Remember that the Bible makes a certain distinction between the moral and the spiritual. You may have an active conscience, and yet be spiritually dead, as the Gentiles described by the apostle Paul in Romans 2. You may have humane feelings, and yet be spiritually dead, as the naturally affectionate parents described by Christ in Matthew 7. You may conduct yourself with probity and uprightness towards your fellows, and yet be spiritually dead, as king Cyrus was, who was good to Israel but did not know God.

Here is the true heart of the problem: if I am spiritually dead, I am alienated and estranged from God my Creator, the Lord of the universe. And if I am estranged from Him, then I am out of joint with the nature of the universe; I am at loggerheads with ultimate reality; I am utterly at variance with the purpose of my own creation; I am in revolt against the One Who made me, and made me for Himself, and without Whom the soul is bound to be spiritually empty, restless, disordered, bewildered, and lost. Therefore inevitably, when the shadows of this brief uncertain life are gone, and the light of truth shines on me at last, I will not be able to stand; I will be dazzled by that light, I will be blinded and confounded by it, and thrown down in anguish of spirit into a state of final darkness and everlasting death.

Only those who are spiritually alive can live in the presence of God. And by the law of our creation, it is our destiny either to live in His presence for ever, which is the only true

blessedness and happiness of the human soul; or else it is our destiny to suffer the final and irretrievable loss of that blessedness, banished from the light of heaven into what the New Testament calls “the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 13). So much hinges on whether we are spiritually alive or dead. Heaven is bound up in spiritual life; hell, in spiritual death.

Finally, in contemplating the total depravity of sinful man, let us observe how it throws us totally on the grace and power of God for salvation. If we were only imperfect spiritually, but not dead, there would be something we could contribute, however small, to our salvation - some flickering of our own will, some tiny movement of our own souls towards God. And then we would not be totally dependent on God for our salvation. We could not say unreservedly, “Thanks be to God for saving me.” We would have to reserve some thanks to ourselves and our own will for choosing to cooperate with God.

But this would be entirely foreign to the Scriptures. What does the apostle Paul say of the Roman Christians? “God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered” (**Romans 6:17**). God be thanked. We were slaves to sin, Paul says. We were in helpless bondage to the powers of darkness. But God be thanked, we obeyed from the heart when Christ was made known to us in the Gospel. That is the true note of Christian spirituality: God be thanked. Thanks be to God that I am a Christian. Thanks be to God that I know Christ. Thanks be to God that I trusted in Him. Thanks be to God that having saved me once, He will preserve me for ever. “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but to Your name give

glory, because of Your mercy and Your truth” (**Psalm 115:1**).

If you are not yet a Christian, you may at this point be thinking, “What then, is there nothing I can do?” There is something you *ought* to do. You ought to come to Jesus Christ and cry out to Him to save you from sin, death, Satan, and hell. You never *will* do it, unless God quickens you to do it. But that is what you *ought* to do, if you would escape the fearful bondage of sin. If you do not wish to escape, so be it; you have chosen your fate, and you will have nothing to complain of when it comes. But if you do wish to escape, and you know that Christ is the only Saviour, then be encouraged to hope that God has already begun to work in your heart to draw you to His Son. He who said this - “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (**John 6:44**) - also said this - “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (**John 6:37**). May God graciously rescue each one of us from spiritual bondage and death, and give us to know the liberty and life that are found only in His beloved Son, for our good and His glory.