

## The Doctrine of Total Depravity

Part Two  
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*This is the second article on the doctrine of total depravity. Last month we covered what we believe, and what we do not believe when we speak of total depravity. Perhaps it would be good to repeat the outline.*

### Review From Last Month

What does the phrase "total depravity" mean?

I. Negative. Let us note what we do NOT mean by "total depravity."

A. We do not mean that man is without a conscience or any sense of right or wrong.

B. Total depravity does not mean that every sinner is devoid of all the qualities that are both pleasing to men and useful to society when those qualities are judged only by a *human standard*.

C. We are not saying that every sinner is prone to every form of sin.

D. We do not mean that every sinner is as intense as he can be in his sin.

II. *Positive*. What we DO mean by "total depravity." What DOES the Bible itself teach?

A. Every sinner, including you and me, is destitute of, or without, that love to God which constitutes the fundamental and all-inclusive demand of God's law.

B. Total depravity means that every sinner is guilty of elevating some *lower affection* or desire above regard for God, His Law and the Gospel.

C. That "something else" that all men love is an idol called "self" or "me."

D. Every sinner is possessed with a nature, inherited from Adam's fall, that is completely hostile toward God.

E. By total depravity, we mean that *every part* of man's being and nature has been affected by sin.

F. Man has a nature that will not permit him to choose God or righteousness.

A Complete "Spiritual" Examination

We will now continue our study where we left off last month. We will begin by giving man, the depraved sinner, a complete and thorough "spiritual examination." We will use the Bible to test man spiritually the same as medicine and science test a man physically. We will look at all of man's faculties exactly as they are each described in the Bible. We are not concerned with how man looks at himself. We will not consult philosophy, psychology, medicine, sociology or popular sentiment. What does the Word of God say about the spiritual condition of man? We will use the following procedure:

(1) *The Physician's Report.* After Doctor Bible carefully examines each part of man, the conclusion will be irrefutable. "The patient is totally unable to respond to any spiritual stimulus in any of his faculties. He is blind, deaf, dumb, no pulse, can't breathe, mind totally gone, etc. Not one spiritual organ is functioning."

(2) *The Coroner's Report.* The coroner administers every known test and cannot find any evidence of life. "There is absolutely no question, the man is spiritually dead."

(3) *The Autopsy Report.* The dead sinner is opened up and each part of his being is examined. The autopsy report establishes that the man died because of the cancer of sin. "Every part of his being was infected and ruined by sin. Not one part was left untouched and uncontaminated. He was totally depraved by sin."

## I. The Physician's Report

Doctor Bible is going to examine seven individual faculties of the sinner. In each case the result will show *total inability*. Here are seven things that God says a sinner cannot do. It is essential that we see that the Holy Spirit uses the word "cannot" in all seven instances. To say, "Well, the sinner really can do these things if he only wants to," is to not only misunderstand the Bible, it is to flat out contradict it! As we shall see later, man's "will not," or his refusal to repent and believe the gospel, is the direct effect of the "cannot" of total depravity. More about this in a moment.

First, the man is totally BLIND.

A lost man CANNOT see! "*I tell you the truth, no one CAN SEE the kingdom of God unless he is born again*" (John 3:3). The "see" means to realize, or to experience, or to appreciate. Christ is saying that man does not have the spiritual ability to even *desire* the kingdom of God until he is *first "born again."*

We must understand the relationship between "sight" and "seeing." Once we see that, we will understand the relationship between the new birth and faith. Do you get sight by seeing, or do you see because you have sight? Which is the cause and which is the effect? For instance, does it help a blind man to see if we shine a 1,000 watt bulb in his eyes instead of a 100 watt bulb. I am sure you will say that is a stupid question. We all know that the problem is not the *amount of light*, the problem is in the man's eyes. He needs *sight* before he can see. Of course we must have light to see, but people who are blind need more than light. They need the gift of sight.

The sinner's problem is the same. He needs far more than light simply because he is spiritually *blind*. He is not near sighted. He does not have defective vision that can be corrected by an act of his will. He needs the gift of sight. Jesus said that sinners cannot even *see* the kingdom of God unless he is first born again or regenerated. We agree that man needs the light of the gospel. It is true that no one can see spiritual reality without the light of the gospel. However, the sinner is *blind* until God gives him the spiritual ability to "see" in regeneration. The problem is with his spiritual eyes. Every regenerate believer can say a hearty "amen" to these words of Christ: "But blessed are your eyes because they see . . ." (Matt 13:16).

Second, the man is mentally deranged.

He CANNOT UNDERSTAND a single thing that is spiritual. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither CAN he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor 2:14). Again we must notice the cause and effect. The word "because" in this text is very important. The natural, or unregenerate man, *cannot* understand spiritual things *because* those things are spiritually discerned and the lost man *does not have the Spirit until he is "born of the Spirit."*

When we trusted Christ because we found Him to be most desirable, it was not our old blind mind that gave us that knowledge. That understanding came from the new nature given to us in regeneration. If we carefully compare I Cor 1:18-29 with II Cor 4:4-6, we will see that God's shining in the darkness at the first creation is the same as His shining into our dark and dead hearts to *give us the knowledge* of salvation. Can the old heart and depraved, incurable affections ever give us spiritual knowledge and desires? The will cannot choose something that the mind cannot truly understand and the affections truly desire.

Third, the man is stone deaf.

He CANNOT HEAR any spiritual truth. This is verdict of Christ Himself. "*Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word*" (John 8:43). Again we have the same cause and effect relationship. Jesus is more emphatic this time and adds the word "even." Why did the Jews not understand our Lord's words? He said it was *because* ye cannot. Just as the ability to see is the gift God, so is the ability to hear. All men are not given that ability. See Matthew 13:9-18.

I am sure we have all seen a dog responding to a special dog whistle. No human ear can hear the sound because our ears do not have the ability to hear that kind of pitch. A dog hears easily. So the sinner does not have ears to hear the gospel. He considers it nonsense (I Cor 1:18), but the Christian hears, understands and gladly believes by the grace and power of God.

I remember preaching at a picnic attended by deaf people. The interpreter and I were the only ones who could hear. The park was near the Toronto airport and a large jet plane came in to land while I was preaching. The noise was so loud that the interpreter could not hear my voice so I stopped speaking and waited for the plane to land. I was facing the airport and the congregation, because their backs were toward the airport, did not see the plane. Because they were stone deaf, they did not hear the roar. They kept watching the interpreter's hand and then looking at my lips. They began to look at each other with a look of bewilderment. I pointed up to the sky and as they turned around, they looked up and saw the plane. Having seen the plane they smiled and nodded their heads in understanding.

My friend, that is the same way it is with an unregenerate sinner. The wrath of God against sin is clearly revealed from heaven and roars with its terrible threats. The gospel bells of promise and joy ring loudly and with clarity. Yet the sinner is totally deaf to both the law and the gospel until God, in regeneration, opens his ears.

Fourth, the man is completely powerless.

He CANNOT even want to *receive spiritual help*. A comparison of two verses of Scripture will establish this awful fact. The first verse shows us *why* a lost sinner cannot receive truth and grace.

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. (John 14:17)

Notice the following in this text:

(1) The world cannot receive the Spirit *because* they cannot *see* Him or *know* Him. They are without spiritual sight and cannot perceive, or know, any spiritual reality.

(2) Every Christian has *seen* (spiritually) and *knows* (experientially) the ministry of the blessed Holy Spirit. Remember that sight and knowledge were given in regeneration.

The second verse of Scripture is Jude 19. This is the best verse I know of that gives us the essence of man's total depravity and inability.

These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit. (Jude 19)

Notice the following in this verse:

(1) The lost man is totally *sensual*. That does not mean in a sexual sense. It means the sum total of the man's knowledge and experience is that which comes to him through his physical senses.

(2) He does not have the Spirit. The life of God, which is the Holy Spirit of God, left man when he sinned in the garden of Eden. Man's whole experience is now totally controlled by his fleshly nature and its senses. However, you do not know God through your eyes,

ears, mouth, fingers, etc. God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit. Since the unsaved person is "sensual" and does not have either the Spirit or a spiritual nature, he cannot see or experience God until he is first "born of the Spirit." He can only receive that which he is capable of "seeing" (John 14:17).

Let me illustrate this truth. Right this very moment there is probably an airplane flying right through the room where you are sitting. There may also be a large ship, a herd of buffalo, and a line of pretty chorus girls dancing. If you look around, you will see none of those things. If you turn on a TV set and turn the channel changer, you will draw all of those things out the air and "see" them. All of those TV waves are present even though unseen. God did not build a TV receiver into our heads. In the same way, there is a spiritual world and a real Savior that is just as real as the air we breathe. The unregenerate man does not see, hear or feel a single evidence of that spiritual reality. The sum total of his potential experience is what he can taste, touch, feel and smell and God is not known or experienced through the physical senses.

Fifth, the man is a spiritual mute. He is unable to speak.

He CANNOT even "call on the Lord" until renewed by grace. See I Cor 12:3, Rom 10:9,10, and Mt. 16:13,17.

Sixth, the man is unable to move a spiritual muscle.

He CANNOT even "come to Christ" until He is given spiritual life. The following two verses of Scripture should never be separated. The first one shows the total inability of the sinner apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The second shows the certainty of repentance and faith in every single instance where the Holy Ghost does effectually call.

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. (John 6:44,45)

Verse 44 states what *no* man *can* do *unless* God does something first. No man *can*, is able to, come to Christ unless the Father deliberately *draws* that individual by the power of the Spirit. That is human inability.

Verse 45 states what *every* man is *certain* to do *when* the Father does draw him. *Everyone*, without exception, who "hears" and is "taught by the Father" (the same thing as "draw" in verse 44) "*comes* (always) to me." Do you see the clear contrast. *No* man *can* -- *unless*, but *everyone* will -- *when*. Verse 44 is teaching inability and verse 45 is teaching irresistible grace.

Seventh, the man is incapable of any kind of positive spiritual response.

He CAN ONLY act out his nature of spiritual death. As we noted in last month's article, the indelible mark of the lost man is his hatred of God's authority and the mark of a

believer is a delight in God's truth. A lost man can no more give a spiritual response to spiritual truth than a physically dead man could respond to a ham sandwich.

We cannot leave this section until we at least mention another aspect of truth. Even though the above seven things are clear as crystal in Scripture, the following things are also true:

(1) Every sinner is invited, commanded and encouraged by God to do all of the above things which he *cannot* do.

(2) Every sinner is held totally responsible for *not* doing all of the above things.

(3) Every saved man has done all of these seven things and done them all *most willingly!* Cf. John 15:5 and Phil 4:13. The first verse shows inability and the second verse shows the power of grace.

(4) God has never commanded a sinner to do *anything* that the sinner is *capable of doing!* No, I did not say it wrong or backward. I said exactly what John 15:5 says, "without me you can do NOTHING." The "nothing" in that verse really means *nothing*. The flesh can produce nothing that profits. Whenever a person does any of the above seven things, he does it only because he has been born of God and given spiritual life or ability.

## II. The Coroner's Report.

After the coroner has made every known test, he gives the following report. "The man is without a single evidence of spiritual life. He is DEAD" (Eph 2:1-5).

There is an old saying, "Where there is life there is hope." When it is discovered that someone is desperately sick, we rush them to the hospital in the hopes of keeping them alive. When they are dead, all hope is gone, and we take them to the grave yard. A lost sinner is not "sick nigh unto death," he is really spiritually dead. He is not a hospital case who might respond to the right treatment. He is dead to righteousness and alive to sin. He loves his death in sin and hates both the doctor and the medicine. The sinner would rather perish than admit he is a sinner. He is a grave yard case that needs a life giving miracle.

I sometimes try to picture the scene in John 11. I see the stone rolled away from the grave of Lazarus and three men are there. The first one is looking into the dark tomb and passionately pleading with the dead Lazarus inside. "Lazarus, if you will only give God a chance, He will give you life. If you just take the first step, then the Holy Spirit will make you come alive. God honestly wants to make you live, but its all up to you. Lazarus, this is a great deal that God is offering but your 'free will' must decide to take advantage of it. You must get up and take that first step in faith." That may be just a bit of a caricature, but not much. That is exactly the way some free-will preachers talk.

I am reminded of a story told by C. H. Spurgeon about the Catholic saint whose head had been cut off. The man is supposed to have picked up his head, put it under his arm and

walked 10,000 miles back to Rome. Spurgeon said, "I would have no trouble believing that to be true, *if the man could take that first step!*" If man's will can enable him to get up out of the tomb of death, then he surely does not need any help to keep on going.

The second man I see at the tomb of Lazarus is what we call a *Hyper-Calvinist*. He is sitting down and calmly writing a treatise of the futility of preaching to dead sinners. This pathetic creature never preaches or witnesses the gospel and he discourages and condemns those who do. Since Lazarus is "dead" this man concludes that it is a waste of time to address the dead sinner in any way.

The third man is a preacher of the biblical gospel. While the second man sneers and the first man gasps for breath, the third man cries out, "Sinner, believe! Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus walks out of the tomb. If we interviewed the third man, the questions might go as follows:

"Were you fully aware that Lazarus was totally dead in that tomb?"

"Of course I was. Is not that what Scripture says?"

"Did you think that Lazarus had the ability to hear and respond to your message?"

"Not for a moment. How can a dead man respond to my voice?"

"Why did you command him to believe when you knew he was unable to comply because he was dead?"

The man would smile and say, "Friend, my confidence was neither in my ability to preach and invite, nor was it in the supposed (wrongly) power of Lazarus' 'free will.' My whole confidence was in the power of the Words that I spoke. I spoke the Words of Christ believing that Christ Himself has the power to wake the dead and give them faith."

My friend, the gospel is the power of God that can "wake the dead" when it is attended by the power of the Holy Spirit. See John 5:21-25.

### III. The Autopsy Report.

The corpse is now sent to the morgue for an autopsy. After cutting open the sinner and examining every part, the report shows the cause of death. "The man was destroyed by SIN. Sin penetrated every part of the sinner's being and left him in a state of total inability." The report listed the following:

(1) *The Mind* -- "It was vain . . . dark . . . blind . . . deliberately ignorant." See Eph 2:3; 4:17-19; II Cor 4:4-6 for a detailed description of the symptoms.

(2) *The Heart* -- "It was saturated with a love of sin that could not be cut out. Sin had so entangled itself around the heart that it was incurable and inoperable." See John 3:19; Jer. 17:9 for the symptoms.

(3) *The Will* -- "The will was literally chained to sin and the love of sin in an indestructible union. The two had grown together so that they were not even distinguishable." See John 5:40 and II Tim 2:24-26 for expert testimony and illustrations.

If the autopsy report had a check-off list, the words "totally destroyed by sin" would appear after each of the items on the list. (*See Check-Off List on page 12.*)

IV. The Final Verdict: The sinner is totally depraved in sin and totally unable to do anything to help his recovery from sin and its effect.

We may think or reason in any manner we choose, but we dare not come up with conclusions that emphatically state that a sinner can, "if he only wants to," do things that the Bible specifically declares the sinner CANNOT DO! The foregoing biblical facts are God's diagnosis of man's spiritual problem and man's true state. All the sentiment and sophistry in the world cannot change the Word of God and its final verdict.

V. The Big Problem: Moral *responsibility* versus moral *ability* or free *will* versus free *moral agency*.

Let us list several biblical facts that *appear* to be contradictory:

A: An unrenewed sinner may come to Christ for salvation, but an unrenewed sinner cannot come to Christ in true repentance and true faith until he is first born of the Spirit. See our tract, *God's Part and Man's Part in Salvation*. We are not "fussing over words" when we insist that "may not" and "cannot" are two entirely different things. One means *permission* and the other means *ability*. A lawyer friend tried to teach his son correct grammar. When the boy asked, "Can I go out and play?", his father would reply, "You *may* go out and play if you are big and strong enough to be *able* to do so." That is more than proper grammar. That is solid theology.

B: Adam is the only man that every had a truly "free will" in that he is the only man, apart from Christ, that ever had the spiritual *ability*, or power, to love and obey God. Adam *used* his free will to disobey God and forever lost the ability (free will) to love and obey God. See the chart on page 4 for a clear comparison of the difference in Adam's will at different periods.

C: If you can see three clear biblical facts, then you will clearly understand the doctrine of total depravity and man's responsibility.

(1) Every sinner is "free" (is at liberty as a free moral agent) to obey God's commandments. Yea, he is *commanded* by God to do so, and is condemned by God for not obeying them. He is both guilty and responsible even though unable to do his duty.

(2) No sinner is "free" (has the *moral ability*) to obey God's commandments. The sinner can only live to please himself. He cannot choose God over sin and self.

(3) The sinner, not God, is responsible for his *spiritual inability* to love and obey God's commandments. Man was not created a sinner. He became a sinner by an act of pure free will. He cannot "undo" the effects of his sinful nature by an act of will. Adam did not fall and stub his toe, he jumped off a cliff and cannot "will" his way back up the cliff.

(4) Man is only as *free* as his own sinful nature permits. Man can not rise above his nature, or change his nature, by an act of will. See Matt. 12:3335. A man may choose between the pieces of treasure in the chest (his heart), but he cannot by an act of will turn pieces of glass into diamonds, nor can he create a new treasure chest. The sinner can choose between sins but he cannot choose between self and God. See the last issue (Vol. 4 No. 3) of *Sound of Grace*.

## VI. Man Is Free To Do As He Pleases.

In no sense whatever is man ever forced to do anything *against his will* whether it is committing sin or believing in Christ. Every man is free to choose and act as "he pleases" within the limits of his ability and nature. See Proverbs 21:4; Acts 2:2426; Mt. 27:1526.

"What else can freedom or liberty be than to do as we please? However, we must carefully note that liberty is not identical with ability. Confusion of these two distinct things accounts for much false thinking on the subject of free will. Many people really mean ABILITY when they say LIBERTY. They speak of man being free to do good or evil when they really mean to say that men are able to do good or evil. In this they seriously err. For the Bible clearly and consistently teaches (1) that man is free to do good or evil, that he is at liberty to do either, but (2) it also clearly and consistently teaches that man is able only to do evil because of his fallen condition." G.I. Williamson -- Westminster Confession for Study Classes.

Man's "freedom" is like the freedom of water to run down hill. No one has to "force" it to run down hill. It does that naturally. However, it takes a power totally outside of the water itself to make it run up hill.

Man's freedom is like the bondage (freedom) of a mother's love. Give a mother a butcher knife and tell her to stab her child. She says, "I cannot." We say, "Of course you can. You have everything physically that is necessary. You do not mean *cannot*, but you mean you *will not*. You have the physical strength and ability. You just do not *want* to." She would reply, "In this case, 'cannot' and 'will not' mean exactly the same thing. I cannot *want* to kill my child because I love her." In other words, the woman is in bondage to her mother's nature. Before she could ever kill her child, her nature would have to change. She would have to become totally insane and act contrary to her nature.

The sinner is in the same situation. He is controlled by his nature of sin. He cannot act contrary to that nature. The most revolting and impossible thing a sinner could imagine would be to renounce his self righteousness and bow to the sovereign authority of Christ. His nature must be changed before he can even consider such a thing.

## Autopsy Report

### Check-Off List

|          |                            |              |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Body     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Phil<br>3:21 |
| Head     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Isa 1:5      |
| Throat   | "totally destroyed by sin" | Rom<br>3:13  |
| Tongue   | "totally destroyed by sin" | James<br>3:6 |
| Mouth    | "totally destroyed by sin" | Rom<br>3:14  |
| Lips     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Rom<br>3:13  |
| Feet     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Rom<br>3:15  |
| Ears     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Mark<br>8:18 |
| Eyes     | "totally destroyed by sin" | Isa<br>53:2  |
| Hands    | "totally destroyed by sin" | James<br>4:8 |
| Heart    | "totally destroyed by sin" | Jer<br>17:9; |
| Thoughts | "totally destroyed by sin" | Psa<br>56:5  |
| Bones    | "totally destroyed by sin" | Job<br>2:11  |