

## Total Depravity

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#### Romans 3:10-12

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

#### Romans 3:10-26

As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable: there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for I here is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that lie might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

## **TOTAL DEPRAVITY**

### **Third Head of Doctrine: Of The Corruption of Man.**

Sin? What a laugh. The mere suggestion of the fact of sin is often considered a throw-back to the superstitions of antiquity. This was early 20th Century religious thinking in America. Nineteenth Century European rationalism had been imported and was making itself felt. Man did not sin. The evils in man were but a vestige of the beasts from which man had developed. Man was guilty of ignorance. Sometimes men were maladjusted. But sin? Ludicrous!

As for the future, man would conquer the vestige of the beast, his ignorance and his maladjustments. The future was bright. Man would rise above his present limitations. Socially, economically, and politically, man would solve his own problems. God? If there were a God, man had little need for Him.

It did not work out that way. The "Great Depression" of the late twenties and the early thirties struck a frightening blow. Man's confidence in himself was shaken. World War II struck man's confidence in himself a second staggering blow.

If more convincing proof were needed of man's inability to guide his own destiny successfully, it came with the advent of nuclear fission. Scientists who had scoffed at religion pled with religious thinkers to provide moral guidance.

Still man clung to a wisp of faith in himself. This faint hope was epitomized in the United Nations. Through this instrument man would be capable of solving his problems, at least at the international level. It was characteristic of man's tottering but still unsundered faith in himself that God was ruled out of the United Nations, for there would be no acknowledgment of God, no place of worship, no place of prayer.

As a sop to people of Christian conviction a "meditation room" was provided as an after thought, with the express provision that no religious symbols would be permitted in the furnishing of the room. The Christian Faith of the United States, such as it may have been, was not only compromised but unconditionally surrendered to the dialectic materialism of the Communists. Man could make peace with man if God were excluded from the deliberations.

But there was no peace. All over the world the "Cold War" threatened to become a "Hot War." The Korean Conflict and the Suez Crisis highlighted the folly of man's abortive attempt to find a solution to his own problems.

The situation is not different today, nor shall it be. One requires no prophetic insight to offer the prognosis that man is not now capable of solving his own problems, nor shall he ever be. This is the lesson of recurrent history.

Professor Quincy Adams of the University of Chicago has produced a monumental two-volume work entitled *Study of War*. His research encompasses a 461-year period from

1480-1941. Professor Adams' analysis indicates that during this 461-year period there have been no less than 278 wars. Further, if one were to divide this period into 12 year time segments, he would discover that, on the average, eleven years were spent at war for each year that was spent in peace. The last peace time year, that is, the last year in which the entire world was at peace, was the year 1911.

To what end do we cite these facts? For one purpose, to indicate that man's inability to live at peace with man is symptomatic of the problem which exists within man himself. Oh, men have sought to avoid this conclusion. Each generation has raised up its own scapegoat. Napoleon Bonaparte, Kaiser Wilhelm, Benito Mussolini, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin are but a few who have borne the label of the "beast."

But all thinking people realize that neither a Hitler, nor a Mussolini, nor a Stalin nor any other man could perpetrate an international conflagration except for one fact: the whole world was ripe for it. This is not to seek justification for any of these men in their dastardly deeds, but it is to take note that what they did was to take advantage of the world situation as they found it. What they found was a world populated with people like you and me, people who were not strong enough, nor wise enough, nor courageous enough, nor, above all, godly enough to avert a world-wide catastrophe. Within our own breasts lay the seeds of disaster. World villains have done nothing more nor less than to provide the spark which ignited a waiting powder keg.

The symptoms of man's problems, or "The Human Predicament" as Professor D. Elton Trueblood prefers to call it, may be found not only closer to home but at a more clearly individualistic level. Divorce, the broken home, juvenile delinquency, crime, violence, vandalism, alcoholism, psychoses, neuroses — these and a host of other afflictions are commonly labeled the "ills of society." But what is society? Society is nothing but individual people, people like you and me, in the aggregate. The ills of society are your ills and my ills. We are not only affected by them, but we are in due measure responsible for them. If these ills were not found in you and me and in people like us as individuals, they would not be found among us collectively.

We must face up to the fact that it is you and I and people like us who are at fault in these things; not somebody else, but you and I. You and I must accept our proportionate burden of guilt, nor is there any exception to the rule.

The Holy Scriptures put it this way, "There is none righteous, no, not one." The common expression which admits of this truth while seeking to minimize it is this, "We all have our faults." You have heard these words spoken a thousand times in a thousand places; you too may have employed this expression. The implication is that, while the problem is universal and found among all men, men's faults are not very large faults, not very serious faults. Bear this fact in mind, however: it is the sum total of all these so-called little faults which adds up to the miserable world in which we live. It is the sum total of these so-called little faults which breeds a world situation in which war is not only possible and potential but virtually inevitable. It is the sum total of these so-called little

faults which gives rise to a situation which breeds divorce and broken homes, which breeds delinquency and crime, which breeds alcoholism and all the rest.

Now take the next logical step. It is the step which many in the past era of human optimism have refused to take. Perhaps the present generation has the intellectual integrity, moral courage and spiritual acumen to face the truth. The next logical step, the next inevitable step is the realization that these so-called little faults, to which everyone admits, are not little faults at all. Quite to the contrary, they are large and grievous and heinous. They are in the aggregate large enough and grievous enough and heinous enough to turn the whole world upside down, and to keep the race of men in unrest and turmoil.

We must also pay heed to a further fact: These so-called little faults, which are in reality very grave, are symptoms. They are not the disease. They are the external eruptions, the outward appearances, the symptoms of the disease.

What is the true nature of the disease? It is the corruption of human nature. The Scriptures declare that we are “born in sin and conceived in iniquity”; that is, we are born with a corrupt, depraved, sinful nature. Again the Scriptures declare, “If any man says that he has no sin, he is a liar and the truth is not in him.” The Belgic Confession of Faith points out that we have from birth a nature which is “wicked, perverse and corrupt.” The Canons of the Synod of Dort leave no doubt but that human nature is totally depraved. The Westminster Confession of Faith, time-honored doctrinal standard of Presbyterianism, requires its confessors to acknowledge that man is by nature “prone to hate God and his neighbor.”

Briefly, Arts. I, II, & III of the *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine* describe man’s condition and, equally important, how man came to this condition. “Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and his will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole Man was holy; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in (all) his affections.

“Man after the fall begat children in his own likeness. A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring. Hence all the posterity of Adam, Christ only excepted, have derived corruption from their original parent, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature (in consequence of a just judgment of God).

“Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation.”

I know well enough what some will say. They will say, "Oh, come now, human nature is not that bad. I am not that bad. My nature is not vicious and corrupt. I am not totally depraved. I am not prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor."

The proof of the pudding, however, is in the eating. To put it another way, the evidence of history is against you, the evidence of economic history, of political history, of sociological history, of world history — the evidence of all these is against you, if you would argue that the nature of man is anything less than "vicious and corrupt."

Would you dare to suggest that a world of men which all through its history has erupted in war, bloodshed and killing is anything less than vicious and corrupt in nature? Bearing in mind that society is nothing more or less than individuals in the aggregate, would you dare to suggest that a society such as ours, a society in which every law of God and man is violated, a society in which the divinely ordained marriage relationship is flouted and broken, a society in which the divinely ordained day of the week is desecrated and perverted, a society in which everyone from United States senators to street sweepers profane the name of God — I ask you: Would you dare to suggest that people like these are anything other than vicious and corrupt by nature?

We must not lose sight of the fact that man engages in these sins and perversions because of what he is. Man does what he does, because he is what he is. It is the nature within man which lies at the root of the problem.

The nature of man is descriptively and definitively set forth as "totally depraved." But what precisely do we mean when we say that man is totally depraved? Do we mean that no good whatsoever is to be found in him? Not at all. Man retains "the glimmerings of natural light whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for the maintaining of an orderly external deportment." *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine*, Art. IV.

But all this can be very deceptive, especially when man has cloaked himself with education, culture and sociability. It is deceptive enough that man disregards the further fact, which is, that every element of his being has been touched and impaired by corruption.

Yet the corruption of every facet of man's being can be readily perceived. Physically, the seed of death resides in his body from birth; one day he must inevitably die. His mind is impaired to the degree that now "he sees but through a glass darkly." His thoughts are not God's thoughts, and his ways are not God's ways. His emotions are such that he is plagued by the lusts of the flesh, and the imaginations of his heart are evil.

How did all this come to pass? It came to pass through the initial act of rebellion against God by the world's first parents. When the father and mother of the human race sinned against God, violating His commandment, two extremely serious consequences

resulted. First, the image of God in man was impaired, twisted, scarred, corrupted, warped, wrecked. God had created man in His own image; man was holy; man was pure; man was righteous. By an act of his will man forsook all this. In the doing of it, he did more than a sinful deed. There were internal consequences within his own being; he wrecked the pure and holy nature with which he was created.

Secondly, he lost contact and fellowship with God. He was cut off, separated from God. God had warned the parents of the human race that should they disobey His commandment, they would surely die, and so they did. And this is the meaning of death, to be cut off from God. I trust that you are not deceived by the fact that Adam and Eve lived on physically after their sin. The flower that is plucked from the plant and placed in a bowl to decorate the dinner table has all the appearances of life. But it is dead; it was destined to wither and die the moment that it was plucked, for in that moment it was cut off from the source of its life. So, man, in the moment that his sin cut him off from God, was destined to wither and die.

This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that the natural man is dead in trespasses and sin. He is cut off from God; he is separated from God; and therefore, he is cut off from the very source of his life. And when man is cut off from God, the source of life, the source of all goodness and purity, his nature is withered and crippled. Every element in his being is withered and corrupted as if by spiritual dehydration.

It is this corrupted, depraved nature which is passed along from parent to child. The children to whom we give birth do not come forth with the pure, unsullied nature with which God created man in the beginning. In elementary high school biology, one of the first rules which the student learns is that "like begets like." Just as the parent transmits to the child certain physical and mental characteristics, so the parent transmits to the child his spiritual condition. Thus the Word of God declares that we are born in sin and conceived in iniquity; that is, the corrupt nature of the parent is transmitted to the child.

Out of that corrupt and depraved nature are born man's problems, his personal problems, his family problems, his social problems, his economic problems, his political problems, his national and international problems. More important yet is the fact that this is the root of his alienation from and rebellion against God.

This fact should point to two important considerations for our generation and for all generations past and future. Any corrections of man's ills, from the personal to the international, must take place within the man himself.

This means that man will never solve his problems by changing only his environment. This statement will cut many to the quick. The professional do-gooders and those who rejoice in spending public and philanthropic money on their sociological and socialistic schemes don't like to lace this fact.

There is a theory abroad that all evil can be abated if one can alter the external circumstances of people's lives. Put a family in a better home in a better residential

district, put a choicer variety of food upon their table, put a larger automobile in their garage and a larger TV screen in their living room, give the children parks, playgrounds and grade A milk, and, so we are told, all will be well.

The truth is, it hasn't worked. Never in the history of the world has a nation of people been blessed with the material standard of living as we have in America. We have most of the world's plumbing, most of the world's bathtubs and telephones, most of the world's radio and TV sets, most of the world's automobiles — but the problem situations have by no means been solved or even alleviated. On the contrary, every available statistic points to the fact that the moral and spiritual situation in America is suffering a frightening decline.

Why hasn't it worked? Because the basic problem is within man, not around him. The basic problem is in his own soul, gnawing away at the core of his being. Orange juice and grade A milk may strengthen the bones and give tone to the muscles, but they do not touch the heart of man's problem, which derives from the fact that he is a spiritual being, and his spirit is withered and stunted.

How, then, shall man's problem be solved? What is the solution to the human predicament? He must be restored to the source of all life which is God. This can be accomplished only through Jesus Christ who is able to bring the spiritually dead to spiritual life, who is able to reconcile man to God, who is able to restore man to the divine family through redemption, who, through the working of the Spirit of God, is able to restore to man the image of God.

This is set forth in the *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine*, Art. VI, "What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of his Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation: which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament."

When the Spirit of God flows into the life of man, it rejuvenates his soul. He is born again, that is, a new life is implanted within him. The corrupt and depraved nature is replaced by a new and holy nature. He is a new man. He builds for himself a new life, and to the degree that he becomes an instrument of God for bringing the new life to others, and to the degree that he exerts his Christian influence on the society round about him, he builds a new society and a new world.

There remains one last fact of consummate importance. The new man owes his new nature entirely to God who made it possible by the operation of the Holy Spirit. An attribute of the natural man's depravity is his pride. He wants to be known as solver of his own problems, the savior of his own soul. Even after God has implanted the new life in his soul, man must take care lest his pride continue to afflict him. Man wants to believe that he has had something to do with his new condition. Man wants to believe that he has had a hand in his own salvation.

This is sheer folly. Recall that the natural man is spiritually dead; he is dead in trespasses and sins. Like the flower cut from the plant, the source of life has been severed. He is a spiritual corpse.

To this end the Word of God provides us with a dramatic picture in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Ezekiel recounts that he was granted a vision of a great valley strewn with the dry and whited bones of men long since dead. As Ezekiel looked upon the valley strewn with dry and whited bones of dead men, the Lord asked of him, "Ezekiel, can these dry bones live again?" The prophet answered: "Lord, thou knowest."

The obvious lesson is that only God, exercising the power of God, can bring the dead back to life. The corpse does not arise from his coffin. Only a supernatural act can lift him up and bring him forth.

So with man in the matter of salvation. The spiritual corpse cannot rise, unless God puts life within him. This Jesus asserted when He said, "It is the Spirit which giveth life . . . No man can come unto me except it be given him of the Father" (John 6:63-65). Again He said, "No man cometh unto me, except the Father which sent me draw him" (John 6:44). And why not? Because only God has power to reactivate the spiritual corpse.

Jesus also set this truth forth in other terms. He said: "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). And such we learn are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

Scarcely can this fact be stressed too much. You may ask: Does it make so much difference how man finds salvation and life? Yes, indeed it does. For the new man is a humble man. He must know that his salvation did not come of works; he must know that he cannot boast of so much as having made a decision apart from the working of God. He must know that he came from spiritual death to spiritual life by the power of God. He must know that, only because, in grace, God gave to him the Spirit, was he able to feel sorrow for his sins and repent of them. He must know that, only because, in grace, God put faith within his heart was he able to know and feel and express faith in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of his soul. And then he will do what man was created to do: Glorify God.

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