



TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Its source, spread, extent and expression

ABSTRACT

Total depravity is the condition of mankind before regeneration. It is a miserable condition which expresses itself in opposition to God in all His ways of holiness; yet can be subtle and diabolical.

Beale, Jim (US-KOP)

Total depravity

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (Rom 5:12)

We start at the beginning in our study this week. We're going to look at total depravity, or the character of mankind apart from God in Christ, its source, its transmission, its extent and its expression in the heart of man. Our verse for today covers the main points: the first sin by Adam is really the first sin of each of us, and death spreads to everyone because we all sinned – IN ADAM. Everyone is born in a spiritually-degenerate condition, opposed to God by nature, and that this is spiritual death. It affects everyone and everything done by everyone. So let us begin at the beginning.

Adam and Eve were created perfectly righteous, holy with knowledge. "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25). Everything was perfect in every way. "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gen 1:31). This glorious creation was perfect in every way when God created it. However, it wasn't long before Satan fell and took man along with him. The Scriptures tell us that Satan's fall was due to pride (1 Tim 3:16) – but he was not as great as he thought he was. His purpose became to take mankind along with him in his fall and in this he succeeded marvelously. Scripture tells us Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression (1Ti 2:14). Adam was not deceived but he chose to sin, he chose to be with his wife in sin than with God in glory. And for this, the word which the Lord had spoken to Adam: of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Gen 2:17) became the miserable lot of all his descendants. The very day that Adam and Eve consumed of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they died but spiritually first and then physically and then eternally. The threat of God includes not just spiritual death but eternal death as well but now is invoked only spiritual death while the creatures remain alive. Following death there is the threat of eternal damnation which is for those who are not redeemed through Christ.

We're interested in the spiritual condition of Adam and Eve after the fall. They were the only ones who experienced the righteousness and holiness of God, they were the only ones who knew the glory of the created state. But perhaps their experience of it was too short to remember and they lived their lives and died their death in the misery which is our common lot. Yet his life was long: all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died" (Gen 5:5). Yet each of Adam's children was born with the same sin nature. We are all by nature the children of wrath, even as are others (Eph 2:3). Cain slew Abel, his brother, and so exemplified the new nature: hatred, anger without a cause, murder. This nature came to him at birth, by birth in human nature, the fallen nature of Adam. Abel had it too. And Seth was born in Adam's image. And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth (Gen 5:3). Seth lived and Seth died – there is the plague of sin among men. No one is exempt from its clutches.

So we are all born with a sin nature. We already cited Eph 2:3 -- We are all by nature the children of wrath, even as are others – and from this we learn that everyone, every single person, is born a child of wrath. The only one excluded is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ who did not have a human father. Then we all, regular humans, are born with a sin nature because we are children of wrath – children subjected to God's to wrath by nature – and therefore we are all guilty before God. How does this work?

There are two camps: the realist and the representationist. The realist W.G.T. Shedd says that, "the doctrine of the specific unity of Adam and his posterity removes the great difficulties connected with the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity, that arise from the injustice of punishing a person for a sin in

which he had no kind of participation.” [Dogmatic Theology, II, p. 30] And conversely, he says about the representative view, that, “to impute Adam’s first sin to his posterity merely and only because Adam first sinned as a representative in their room and place, makes the imputation an act of sovereignty, not a righteous judicial act which carries in it an intrinsic morality and justice” [ibid, p. 36]. The realist is asserting that there is a human nature which commits the first sin,

This unity commits the first sin: “all sinned” (Rom 5:12). This sin is imputed to the unity that committed it, inheres in the unity, and is propagated out of the unity. Consequently, all the particulars regarding sin that apply to the unity or common nature apply equally and strictly to each individualized portion of it. [ibid, 43]

Shedd is simply saying that there must be a reason for the imputation of sin and that that reason must be because there was a thing called human nature which was affected by the Fall and each person is a small portion of this human nature. We all sinned because we are all derived from that human nature.

Those of the representative camp assert that just as Christ is our Mediator, He is the Second Adam. For instance, in 1 Cor 15 it says,

22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. [...]

45 And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. (1 Cor 15:22,45)

As our relationship with Christ is clearly representative, why cannot our relationship with Adam also be representative? There is clearly a natural generation from Adam, such that each of us is a human being because of our relationship to Adam. Those who are outside of Christ have no relationship to Him at all, but those who are inside are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and are in union with Christ, their righteousness. And so, why cannot our relationship with Adam be likewise spiritual

According to this idea, one might assert that we were counted as guilty because we were “in Adam”, as per Heb 7:5,

And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham: (Heb 7:5)

And there is some sense in this. But John Murray expresses the ultimate point of all this,

It may not be questioned that there is something severely unique and distinct in our involvement in the sin of Adam. The sin imputed is the one sin of Adam. If the relationship to Adam were simply one of seminal union, that of being in his loins, this would not provide any explanation why the sin imputed is the first sin alone.

For human nature has been the subject of countless sins and Adam’s participation in the sins of human nature consisted in his first, second, third, etc. Every sin committed by Adam would be reflected in the human nature which he carried and passed on to his progeny. But the Scriptures only count Adam’s first sin as having any significance. And it is Adam’s first sin which bears consequence, under which we are all guilty. So, it seems that the relational approach is correct.

This brings us to the idea of the covenant. We must touch upon the idea to give a framework for our ideas. The covenant provides the general structure of all of God's dealings with men and are especially critical in the overall view which we require.

The Covenant of Work and the Covenant of Grace

The Covenant of Works is that God will repay the actions of those who meet the stipulation(s) of the covenant. The action of the covenant is very straightforward: person X does Y and they receive Z. If Adam had kept the commandment, he would have received everlasting life. But he did not. And so not only he but all his descendants are born under the curse of the covenant.

The Covenant of Grace involves a Mediator who fulfills the Covenant of Works and provides the blessing of the covenant to those who are unworthy. Here there are multiple aspects: there is Christ, who kept the law and satisfied the wrath of God standing in the place of condemned sinners. There is the law itself which is formed on the inside of believers – the law is written on the heart. It is the death of Christ which takes away the sins of mankind and His life and righteousness which is imputed to those who are in union with Him. Union with Christ is the essential position of one who benefits from this covenant. It is union with Christ which makes us accepted in the Beloved and conforms us to His image. There is still the Covenant of Works but it is satisfied by another – by Christ – and then our union with Christ is in His life, in His perfect, righteous, glorious life before God. Christ kept the commandment, and He gives life to whomsoever He wills.

Now when we go out on the streets we meet many who are in the first category. They are unregenerate. They do not understand the gospel. They are born in sin and continue in it non-stop – they don't know anything else. But they are of a variety of conditions. They are of such great variety that it is hard to express the commonality among them. But let it be expressed like this – they are outside of Christ. We were all like them, living in sin and malice. For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, [and] hating one another. (Titus 3:3) These are the people we are going to consider today. Those who are unregenerate.

The Old Testament

We're going to spend the remainder of our time today considering the lost, what makes them lost, what is the essence of the lost condition. We're going to begin in the Old Testament and then proceed to the New.

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man [was] great in the earth, and [that] every imagination of the thoughts of his heart [was] only evil continually. (Gen 6:5)

And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart [is] evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. (Gen 8:21)

Moses here expresses that the thoughts of mankind were so evil that the Lord would not merely chastise the creatures of the earth, but put them to death. Moses expresses the condition of men's hearts, that the imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. Every intention or purpose of each man's thoughts was only evil continually. That is the condition into which we have fallen. Our

thoughts not only do not honor God, they make up all manner of false gods. “The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts” (Psa 10:4). And lest we suppose that the flood carried away all the wicked men and that Noah and his family were righteous, we read in ver 8:21 that the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth and this includes Noah and his family, the only ones left alive to whom it might apply. Every conception, every human purpose is framed in such a way as to make it contrary to the Lord, opposed to God and His purposes. This is the position from which we will develop our verses today – that original sin in all its affect on the human psyche is absolutely and completely negative. That means that what is left is altogether sinful and has no good in it whatsoever.

The Larger Catechism says

Q. 27. What misery did the fall bring upon mankind? A. The fall brought upon mankind the loss of communion with God, his displeasure and curse; so as we are by nature children of wrath, bond slaves to Satan, and justly liable to all punishments in this world, and that which is to come.

These are the categories in which we must process the elements of our experience. And we can all bring our personal experience to bear as we look into these questions, unless you were converted as a child, you are aware of the condition of your heart before being saved.

14 What [is] man, that he should be clean? and [he which is] born of a woman, that he should be righteous? 15 Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight. 16 How much more abominable and filthy [is] man, which drinketh iniquity like water? (Job 15:14-16)

Here is the description of Eliphaz the Temanite to Job, that man is utterly wicked and cannot stand before the Lord. The heavens are not clean in the sight of God, how much less is man? It is said of him that he drinks up evil like water. The figure implies that he lusts after sin, and that it becomes a necessity of his nature, and is to his nature what water is to the thirsty. Thus, the nature of sin is a necessary one, the nature of sin covers every aspect of our character.

1 The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. 2 The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, [and] seek God. 3 They are all gone aside, they are [all] together become filthy: [there is] none that doeth good, no, not one. (Psalm 14:1-3)

The heart, in the Bible, is the seat of thoughts and emotions and the source of the will. We, nowadays, have emotions in the heart and thoughts in the head. But in Scripture, the heart is the single seat of the affections and the thoughts and the fool expresses himself in his heart where he denies the existence of God. This is a genuinely foolish person, completely captivated by this world. But then the Scripture goes on to say that the Lord looks down from heaven upon all the children of men. Not one, not even one, seeks the Lord. Not one, not even one, does good.

We struggle with this. We think that men and women do some good but mostly evil. But Scripture denies this. There is not one who does good, therefore all do evil continually. It’s not as if we mostly do good but fail from time to time. No! We never do good, we never seek to do good, we never seek the Lord’s

will but are continuously filthy, continuously doing our own will. This is the condition of men before regeneration. They may dress well, they may go to church, but inwardly they are ravening wolves, utterly devoid of the consciousness of God and completely turned against Him.

For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue. (Psalm 5:9)

Here is another picture of the ungodly person. The inward part is wickedness yet they flatter with their tongue. Inwardly men and women are turned away from the Lord but outwardly they can appear to be godly; they flatter with their tongue. The inward part is noisome, mischief, a perverse thing, and very wickedness. Yet the outward-facing seems good, it is flattery that is conducted from a wicked heart, but it is flattery, nonetheless.

Speaking of God's people in the Old Testament, Scripture affirms their utter ruin. By this, then there is judgment brought against everyone since God's people are the only one's who could possibly be good before the Lord. The rest are fallen into utter loss.

4 Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. 5 Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even unto the head [there is] no soundness in it; [but] wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. (Isa 1:4-6)

And he continues,

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:6)

But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hidden [his] face from you, that he will not hear. (Isa 59:2)

6 But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses [are] as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. 7 And [there is] none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. (Isa 64:6-7)

Here is the sad story in the book of Isaiah. This is a miserable condition for a person to find himself in, but this was everyone. The best and the worst were alike in their rejection of God. These people have forsaken the Lord, these people have provoked the Lord to anger. This part addresses the people as full of sores – putrifying sores – and not bound up, not mollified with ointment. Their rejection of the Lord ends up with their condition being miserably degenerate. How miserable! From the sole of the foot to the head there is no soundness in the body because there is complete and utter rejection of the Lord. The one immediately leads to the other.

“All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way” – there is the condemnation. We can express it as saying that the whole human race would have perished unless the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Moreover, what is the nature of this “going astray” the Prophet states more plainly. It is, that everyone has followed the way which he had chosen for himself, that is,

has determined to live according to his own fancy; by which he means that there is only one way of living uprightly, and if anyone “turn aside” from it, he can experience nothing but “going astray.” [Calvin]

Isaiah 59:2 states that God does not even hear sinners. Our sins have hidden God’s face from us and that he will not hear. Our iniquities have separated ourselves from God. Of course, in God is all goodness and righteousness, outside of God there is none of these things. To be, in this sense, separated from God is to be separated from all that is good, all that is right. This defines the structure of the ungodly man’s thoughts – they are, as a whole, entirely and exactly contrary to God.

Finally, Isaiah 64:6-7 states that we are all as unclean thing. That our righteous deeds are as menstrual rags (that is what the word **עֲדָה** means) and we fade like a leaf and our iniquities take us away. This is devastating to the natural man. There is none that calls upon God, none that stirs himself to take hold of Him. The answer is again because God has hidden his face from them, and the consumption is said to be from Him. Our iniquities separate us from God and keeps us from returning to God. When the Lord’s face is hidden from the people, there is nothing they can do – they cannot even know there is something to be done.

The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jer 17:9)

Jeremiah calls out the wickedness of the human heart which is said to be deceitful above all things. That is, there is nothing more deceitful than the human heart because it is desperately wicked. No one can know it – that is the question: who can know it? Our hearts are utterly wicked – desperately wicked – and therefore cannot be known. A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin (Pro 21:4). The plowing of the wicked is sin because their hearts are proud. Their hearts are proud because they are desperately wicked. And they are desperately wicked because they are alienated from God.

New Testament

The NT is full of expressions of total depravity. We merely select a few which highlight the topic.

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: (Mat 15:19)

21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22 Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: 23 All these evil things come from within, and defile the man. (Mar 7:21-23)

Christ’s expression here is of the things which flow from the heart. Our wicked actions are what we see but wickedness begins in the heart. “For from within” means the inner thoughts, inner feelings, inner dispositions that work their way out into becoming all those things listed. Every evil work begins as an evil thought. And every evil thought begins as an evil disposition, as a way of being contrary to God. The inner nature is where the problem is – not with outer behavior first and foremost but with the heart.

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: 11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. 12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. 13 Their throat [is] an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps [is] under their lips: 14

Whose mouth [is] full of cursing and bitterness: 15 Their feet [are] swift to shed blood: 16
Destruction and misery [are] in their ways: 17 And the way of peace have they not known: 18
There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Rom 3:10-18)

Here is a key passage for us. In Romans 3, Paul includes everyone under sin: the Jew and the Gentile. He collects passages from the Old Testament which express the utter hopelessness of mankind, that there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none that does good, no, not one. This is the abysmal condition of mankind before God.

14 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. (1 Cor 2:14)

Here is the man who is endowed with nothing but the things of the natural life. He might have these in abundance yet this Scripture asserts that the gospel is foolishness to him. It is not that the gospel is too complicated that it is rejected. The natural man may have much earthly wisdom and may even have a comprehension of the gospel in intellectual terms but his heart will be far from the gospel. The gospel is of the Spirit and the natural man is devoid of the Spirit.

1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; 2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: 3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. (Eph 2:1-3)

In this passage, the condition of the natural man before regeneration is set forth with perfect clarity. The apostle declares that men and women were dead in trespasses and sins and that therefore they needed to be quickened before they could respond. And not only did we walk according to the principles of this world, we walked according to Satan, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience. And Paul goes on to state that we all had our conversation – we are BY NATURE children of wrath. This is the very essence of what it means to be IN ADAM – by nature a child of wrath.

But we press on,

25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; 26 And [that] they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will. (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. (1 John 5:19)

In this final passage, though there are dozens more that could be considered, we will consider the control by Satan. We saw also in Eph 2:2 that Satan controls the wicked, here it is made even more explicit. Those who do not believe the gospel are taken captive by Satan and they do his will.

Conclusion

The section of Scripture with which we began our study is Romans 5:12-21. What is expressed there is so marvelous that I want to return to it as we close out. Note that Romans 5:12 is broken off, incomplete in its expression,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—

The next couple of verses say that death reigned over those who did not sin as Adam sinned. Read in 5:13-14,

13 (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (Rom 5:13-14)

This goes to show that the sin of Adam, the one sin of Adam, was responsible for their death. Take it, for example, as infants dying in infancy – they did not sin according to Adam, nor had they any guilt of their own, per se. But they died, nevertheless. That means that they bore the responsibility of Adam's sin and the guilt that comes from it caused their death.

We come to the completed comparison in Rom 5:18,

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. (Rom 5:18)

And I want you to take this hope with you – that even though through Adam's offense judgment came upon all men, including you and me, yet through Christ the free gift of eternal life came to us. Romans 5:14 says that Adam was a type of Him who was to come. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45).

Then, those who are in Christ are set free from the condemnation of the law -- For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23). These wages of sin are part and parcel of who and what we are by nature. Those who are outside of Christ live lives which run the gamut, covering every possibility of person: atheist, church-goer, Muslim, JW, supposed Christian, etc. These are everything but regenerate and when you dig down into their belief of the gospel, it may be apparent or it may not that they are unsaved.