

Total Depravity

The Biblical Portrait of Fallen Man

By Nick Bibile

The doctrine of Total Depravity stands as one of the most vital and sobering truths in all of Scripture. It is not a peripheral point of theology but the very foundation upon which the entire edifice of salvation rests. To misunderstand man is to misunderstand grace. To minimize sin is to minimize the Savior.

This booklet examines what Scripture—and the great Reformed theologians who have faithfully expounded it—teaches about the fallen condition of humanity. Our aim is not to disparage mankind, but to magnify the sovereign mercy of God that rescues sinners from a state of total spiritual ruin.

The word depravity means corrupt, wicked, and sinful. When we say that fallen man is totally depraved, we do not mean that he is as evil as he could possibly be, nor that every person expresses sin to the maximum degree. Rather, we mean that sin has corrupted every part of man's being—his mind, heart, will, and affections. No faculty has escaped the fall's ravage.

Man is alive physically, but morally and spiritually he is dead toward God. He does not merely struggle toward God—he is hostile to Him. His will is not neutral; it is opposed to God's will. As a result, fallen man has no desire, ability, or inclination to seek the true God

apart from divine grace.

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Before we can understand redemption, we must understand ruin. Scripture is remarkably candid about the moral state of humanity after the fall of Adam. This is not theological pessimism—it is divine diagnosis.

The Origin of Sin

Man was originally created holy, righteous, and without sin, possessing true freedom to obey or disobey God. He was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), crowned with glory and honor. But Adam broke God’s command, and through that one transgression, sin entered the entire human race (Romans 5:12). The consequences were catastrophic and universal.

Scripture’s Verdict on All Mankind

- *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)*
 - *None is righteous, no, not one (Romans 3:10)*
- *All have turned aside; together they have gone astray (Romans 3:12)*

These are not descriptions of the especially wicked. They are the

Spirit's inspired verdict on every son and daughter of Adam. The natural man, born into this world, is born as an enemy of God.

“The natural man is not merely sick, but dead; not merely wounded, but slain.”

— **John Owen**

Leaving him utterly unable to save himself.

Spiritual Death and Total Inability

The gravity of man's fallen condition is expressed in Scripture with a single devastating word: death. Not weakness. Not illness. Death.

Dead in Trespasses and Sins

The natural man is dead in sin, dead toward the living God. This is not rhetorical exaggeration but doctrinal precision.

- *Genesis 2:16–17 — God warned Adam: “In the day you eat of it you shall surely die.”*
- *Ephesians 2:1–3 — “You were dead in trespasses and sins.”*
- *Colossians 2:13 — “And you, being dead in your sins, He has made alive together with Him.”*

Death means total inability. A dead man cannot respond, cannot reach out, cannot choose life—unless life is first given to him from without. This is the condition of every natural man until regenerated by the sovereign grace of God.

Spiritual death means fallen man lacks not merely the desire but the very capacity to turn to God. Regeneration must precede faith.

The Corrupt Heart of Man

*“The heart is deceitful above all things, and
desperately wicked; who can know it?”*

— **Jeremiah 17:9**

Scripture returns again and again to the heart as the seat of man’s corruption. The problem is not primarily environmental, educational, or circumstantial. The problem is internal—a deep, pervasive corruption of the very center of the person.

Jesus’ Diagnosis

In Mark 7:21–23, the Lord Jesus cuts away every external excuse and places the blame precisely where Scripture places it: within. Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are not merely behaviors. They are symptoms of a diseased nature.

The Rhetorical Questions of Scripture

Holy Scripture poses questions that expose the impossibility of self-reform:

- *“Who can say, I have made my heart clean?” (Proverbs 20:9)*
- *“Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.” (Job 14:4)*
- *“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23)*

The implied answer in each case is: No one. The fallen heart cannot reform itself any more than a leopard can change its spots. Moral transformation requires divine intervention, not human effort.

“You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary.”

— Jonathan Edwards

Inability to Love or Come to God

Man’s inability is not merely external. It is not that he is prevented from coming to God by outward circumstances. The corruption runs deeper—into the mind and the will themselves.

- *1 Corinthians 2:14 — “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

The Religious Man Is Not Exempt

Perhaps the most sobering application of this truth is to the religious person. The Jews of Jesus’ day were deeply, fervently religious. They had the Scriptures, the temple, the law, the traditions. Yet Christ looked upon them and said:

“I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you.”

— **John 5:42**

Religion without regeneration is dead orthodoxy. It may produce impressive external morality, but it cannot produce love for God, because the heart is not yet made alive. A man can know all the creeds and still be a stranger to Christ.

The Idolatry of the Fallen Heart

When man does not worship the true God, he does not cease to worship. He worships himself. He redirects his religious instincts toward created things, toward comfort, status, pleasure, and self.

- *1 John 2:16 — “For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”*

These are not isolated incidents of weakness. They are defining characteristics of fallen humanity’s orientation. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life together constitute a portrait of the heart that has exchanged God for self.

“Every sin is a turning from God to self.”

— **Thomas Watson**

The Manufactured God of Modern Religion

Because fallen man cannot tolerate the true God—who is infinitely holy, perfectly just, and absolutely sovereign—he manufactures a more comfortable deity. A god who overlooks sin. A god who affirms rather than confronts. A god who adapts to man’s preferences.

“You thought that I was altogether like yourself.”

— **Psalm 50:21**

This is the god of much modern religion. He is the projection of fallen man’s desires—not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is a consuming fire.

Restraining Grace and the Mercy of Limitation

The Role of Common Grace

When we observe fallen men and women living moral, civic, and even generous lives, we must not conclude that they are less depraved than Scripture says. Rather, we must recognize the restraining hand of God holding back the full expression of sin in society and in individuals.

“Sin would break forth as fire, were it not for God’s restraint.”

— **John Owen**

Romans 3:13–18 paints a terrifying picture of what man becomes when that restraint is fully removed. The throat that is an open grave. The tongue full of deceit. Feet swift to shed blood. No fear of God before the eyes. This is the natural direction of fallen humanity, held back only by divine mercy.

We Are No Better Than the Worst

This is a humbling truth that must penetrate every proud heart.

There is no moral ground on which we may stand and look down upon Judas, Pharaoh, Herod, or the most depraved criminals in history. Apart from the restraining and renewing grace of God, we are exactly what they are.

The only difference between you and the worst sinner you can name is the grace of God. This is not pessimism—it is the foundation of gratitude.

False Submission

Outward reverence and apparent submission to God can be entirely counterfeit. Psalm 66:3 speaks of enemies who “feign obedience” to God because of His overwhelming power—not because their hearts have been changed.

“Through the greatness of God’s power, His enemies submit themselves—not willingly, but by force.”

— **John Calvin**

“You cover your enmity with a painted veil.”

— **Jonathan Edwards**

Judgment Reserved

Though the wicked may prosper now, and though restraining grace may make them appear decent and successful, Scripture is clear that judgment awaits:

- *Job 21:30 — “The wicked is reserved for the day of doom.”*
- *Psalm 37:20 — “But the wicked shall perish; the enemies of the LORD... shall vanish.”*

“The prosperity of the wicked is but a preparation for slaughter.”
— Thomas Boston

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