

The Blueprint: What We Believe and Why Total Depravity

Introduction: Sadly, when Moses wrote Genesis, the first book of the Bible, he couldn't get far before he had to address the elephant in the room—man's sin! After two beautiful chapters, the first of which illustrates the authority and power of God in creation and the second of which highlights the genuine love of God for man, the book takes a horrifying turn. In Genesis chapter three, we read,

"1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, ..." (Genesis 3:1-6a)

Notice that although each of these reasons could be seen of themselves as "good," when put in the context of God's very clear instructions to man, it is impossible for them to be right. It doesn't matter what Eve's perspective was on the matter; it was already established that God was the authority over all things, and as the authority, God gave a very clear instruction in Genesis 2.

"16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17)

Eve not only justified her rebellion against God, but she then gave the fruit to her husband, Adam, the man God had actually directly given the instruction to, as well as the expectation of leading all of creation to obey His instructions. Before Adam was ever faced with what he would do with the fruit, he had already failed to do his job as the head of what God had created because he passively stood there and watched his wife disobey an unambiguous instruction from God. He did nothing to interfere or even attempt to rescue her! Therefore, to no surprise, the cataclysmic event that ripped the fabric of the entire universe in half happened with an unmistakable amount of passive uneventfulness. The Bible says,

"... and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." (Genesis 3:6b)

There was no dramatic music in the background to create a moment of emotional tension, and there was no hesitation with Adam. He rejected God's authority, sided with the rationality of his wife, and ate the fruit. It was as simple as sin always is. A choice was

made to reject the authority of God and, as such, make themselves the authority. It was a choice that, at the moment, seemed dramatically undramatic. But,

“7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”

This was truly earth-shattering! The knowledge they gained changed their conscience from purity to impurity. An experience creation itself had no prior knowledge of was now flooding into their reality. God had given Adam and Eve the power to create life, but instead, Adam chose to create death. What was pure and undefiled was now stained with something they couldn't get off. What was done could not be undone; it could not be unseen; it could not be forgotten. Two people who had only ever seen themselves and each other in pure holiness now, without explanation, suddenly felt shame and needed to cover themselves.

But far worse than this new emotion concerning themselves and each other was the emotion they felt when they heard the voice of God. Instead of running out to Him as young children run to greet their parents, they hid themselves in an attempt to avoid Him! Adam and Eve had never experienced anything but oneness with God, but now an unavoidable sense of guilt, shame, and fear had infested every aspect of their reality. They were not only no longer able to view themselves or each other with purity and holiness, but they suddenly couldn't even stand in the presence of God, the one who had made them with His own hands and with whom they had only ever known confidence!

However, this still is not the most horrifying part of the story. The experience of death flooding into their reality was still only, at this point, seeping in around their feet. They had no idea it would hit them like a tidal wave and sweep them out to sea. Skipping ahead to verse 23 in chapter three, we see its full implication. Sin did more than add the experience of guilt, shame, and fear into their lives. Death was the judgment of God on man for his sin and fundamentally transformed our reality. The Bible says,

“23 therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:23-24)

God permanently removed man from the place He made for man to dwell with Him forever and eliminated any possibility of man making his way back to it. Mankind could not only no longer dwell in the place God had made for him to live in fellowship with Him, but he could also no longer access the tree that symbolized all he needed to experience life as God created it—the tree of life. God's judgment on mankind was precisely what He told Adam it would be. Man was now condemned to live in a reality of his own choosing, a fact not only inseparably impacted by the context of his environment but also inseparably impacted by

the context of his own conscience. Humanity was now incapable of experiencing eternal life because mankind no longer had access to what the Tree of Life provided; the life Jesus defined this way,

“3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

Eternal life is knowing God not in a factual sense but in how God created Adam and Eve to abide in Him! Therefore, when God cast humanity out of the Garden, the place He made for that relationship to take place, He was not simply casting Him out of a truly holy place, but more importantly, he was being cast out of the relationship God had made man to experience with Him—eternal life! As you continue to read the story of Genesis, you see that the loss of eternal life affected every aspect of humanity. Our relationships with one another, and even ourselves, are no longer possible in the way God designed them to function in the Garden. From that moment forward, everything in the universe was stained by sin and death, and by placing angels at the gates, God was pronouncing the judgment He promised (death) was official. Humanity was no longer capable, nor even allowed to access, the life he had in the garden. Adam and Eve used to dwell in a state of pure innocence, but now they and all their descendants would dwell in a state without even a concept of it.

Humanity’s reality that was once pure oneness with God, one another, and himself was now totally removed from man’s possible achievements, and the chapters that follow it demonstrate the new reality of man with alarming horror. In the church, we call this new reality “total depravity,” and here’s how I define it,

Because Adam disobeyed God, Adam and all of humanity with him were condemned by God to exist in the curse of sin that leaves us spiritually dead and thus incapable of achieving or sustaining the abiding relationship we were created to have with God, one another, and ourselves. Although humanity is capable of good as defined by human standards, we are nonetheless spiritually dead and, as such, incapable of good as defined by the righteous standard of God.

Proposition: My definition of the doctrine of depravity answers three key questions about what the Bible teaches on the subject.

The first question my definition of depravity answers about what the Bible teaches on the subject is,

(1) Why are we totally depraved? – “Because Adam disobeyed God, Adam and all of humanity with him were condemned by God to exist in the curse of sin ...”

- A.** Now, I’ve already shown you the answer to this question from Genesis 3; however, what proves that I’m correctly teaching you that passage? How can I teach what I just taught with such confidence? Well, it’s because the New

Testament makes it clear how we should understand the story in Genesis 3. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 5,

B. “12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned--13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.” (Romans 5:12-14)

1. To sin is to miss the mark of God’s expectations. God’s primary expectation of Adam was to live in genuine fellowship with Him, but that can’t be done if we don’t also live in submission to Him. God can never stop being God. Therefore, when Adam disobeyed God, he missed the mark of the submission God requires to be in fellowship with Him, and as such, he was cast out into separation from God and the life that is only experienced in fellowship with God. It left Adam and all his descendants in a new reality called death.
2. This reality of being born separated from fellowship with God in the reality of death is why Paul pointed out that those who sinned before Moses did so even though they had no specific rules like the ones given by God to Moses for the Hebrew people or even to Adam in the garden. From Adam on, all born of Adam are born into the reality of being cast out of the garden/fellowship with God and thus into the condition of being in a state of separation from God and thus in a state of sin. We weren’t born in the garden and then got ourselves kicked out like Adam, but instead, we are born already alienated from fellowship with God, and the older we get, the more we prove it!
3. We will get into the good news parts of the passage next week, but this week, I want to highlight the bad news parts that form the contrast with the good new parts and further demonstrate the sinful reality we are born into. Look at how Paul describes the depraved reality and how we ended up in it.

C. “16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. 18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, as sin

reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:16-21)

- D. The key is that we are not depraved because of a decision we made, but we are born depraved because of the judgment of God. The world isn't jacked up because God isn't paying attention but because He did pay attention! God judged the world to be this way. We are all sons and daughters born outside of the garden, not in some symbolic way, but in actuality. We are not only born with the genetic proclivity to sin; we are born under the authority of that which reigns in the reality of being separated from God's life, of being born in the reality of death instead of the reality of His life. Sin reigns in death, and thus, we who are born in this reality of death are born under sin's control and authority—AKA totally depraved!

The second question my definition of depravity answers about what the Bible teaches on the subject is,

(2) What does it mean to be totally depraved?

Well, there are two main Biblical characteristics of our depravity that make it total. The first main Biblical characteristic is that we are,

- A. “ ... condemned by God to exist in the curse of sin that leaves us spiritually dead ...”
1. The Westminster Confession puts it this way,
 2. **“By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.”¹**
 3. The most direct place to see this in the Bible is in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. He wrote,
 4. **“1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:1-3)**
 - a. “Sons of disobedience” is a reference to being descendants of Adam who disobeyed God.

¹ <http://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/chapter-6>

- b. "Children of wrath" means we are born under the curse of sin that leaves us, by nature, sinners who rebel against God.
5. The point is that to be dead means to be incapable of anything associated with life. Therefore, to be spiritually dead means we are incapable of doing anything associated with living in fellowship with God. We have no ability to live the life Adam and Eve were given with God in the Garden. That life is totally dead to us, and thus, we have no ability to manifest that life in and of ourselves. For instance, we cannot manifest in our lives the love, joy, and peace that are only experienced in fellowship with God; that is only experienced if you have His life in you! We have no ability to know or live in His life because we are completely removed from the only one that gives that life.

This takes us to the second main Biblical characteristic that makes our depravity total. It's a product of the first (being spiritually dead). Therefore, my statement reads,

B. "and thus incapable of achieving or sustaining the abiding relationship we were created to have with God, one another, and ourselves."

1. People wonder if they can do something that gives them the right to have eternal life. That is, are there enough good deeds they can do that will outweigh their evil deeds and earn the right to be let back into the Garden? Now, we've already established that it's impossible because God has judged the world to be under condemnation. God didn't leave it open as something to earn our way out of! There is no parole board to present your case to. But let's say there was. For argument purposes, let's pretend God had a parole board so that you and I could present a case for how good we've been while living under the curse of sin to try and demonstrate why we should be justified in being saved. To that idea, Paul writes,
2. **"10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." 13 "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." 14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 in their paths are ruin and misery, 17 and the way of peace they have not known." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes." 19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ... 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10-20, 23)**

3. So, in other words, even if there was a parole board with God, we would still be left with the reality that all our works are unmistakably stained by sin and fall short of His standards! How, then, do we ever escape the curse of sin? The answer is contained in something we call the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we will start walking through it next week when we talk about how Christ's penal substitutionary death justified us to be saved by God's grace!
4. However, even after we are saved, we are still marred by our depravity. The Westminster Confession states it this way,
5. **"This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be through Christ pardoned and mortified, yet both itself and all the motions thereof are truly and properly sin."**²
6. Therefore, to those who think they can maintain and grow their relationship with God by meeting God's standards after they are saved, you need to know that still can't happen! It's why Paul wrote,
7. **1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)**
8. In the coming weeks, we are going to talk more about how we can walk in and thrive in the life God has saved us into now, but the idea that there is some religious deed I can perform that allows me to prosper in the spiritual life that is only found in union with God is just as impossible after being saved as it is prior! No religious deed, including Baptism and Communion, empowers a believer to access, keep, or thrive in eternal life. Religion doesn't work before or after salvation because religion is our efforts, and those efforts are always incapable of meeting the righteous standards of God. We are totally depraved and thus totally and utterly dependent on His grace, so much so Paul wrote,
9. **"20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)**

² <http://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/chapter-6>

This, however, leads us to the third question my definition of depravity answers about what the Bible teaches on the subject, and it brings important clarity to the context of the word “total.”

(3) Does total depravity mean we are incapable of any good at all?

- A. Some Biblical scholars and even historical creeds lack what I believe to be essential context to the statement that man is totally depraved. They seemingly translate total depravity to mean man is incapable of doing anything good at all on any measure. However, Paul wrote,
- B. **“20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20)**
- C. My point is that even though the goodness of God can’t be defined by our lives or the things of this world, nonetheless, all that God created, including our sinful selves, still demonstrates the beauty, power, and goodness of the God who created us. As such, man still does good for one another; it’s just always stained with the reality that we can do nothing as anyone else other than who we are—sinners stained with sin!
- D. Think about it this way. If you asked me to paint a room in your house and I agreed to do it, it would undoubtedly get painted. However, I’m a deplorable painter, and the best job I could do would look nothing like what an actual painter would be capable of doing. I was once helping to paint a homeless shelter for people who had no homes, and one of the volunteers who was staying there because they were homeless asked me to go outside and help pull weeds out of the natural areas instead—something I was more than happy to do! I’m not only bad at painting, I hate doing it!
- E. In the same way, it’s not that we are incapable of doing good; we are, after all, still made in God’s image. As such, we can pick the paintbrush up and do works that demonstrate it was God who made us. But those works, no matter how good they may be in comparison to the works of darkness in this world, are still eternally short of the standards of God and what we would do if we were not totally depraved and incapable of doing them!
- F. Another example of this truth is in Matthew. Jesus said,
- G. **“20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)**
- H. Notice that Jesus didn’t say they had done nothing good; as a matter of fact, he said they had achieved a measure of righteousness; it’s just that the measure of

righteousness they achieved still didn't meet the standard that earns a relationship with God or even deserves to be associated with His presence! There is no need to lessen what the Pharisees did and say there was nothing good in it to make God's goodness shine brighter because Jesus didn't. Jesus said what they did had a measure of righteousness, but that righteousness was compared to the standards of man and not God! No matter how loving something appears in this world that is filled with so much hate, there is still no love in this world that even begins to compare with the love that is not of this world—HIS! It's why Isaiah wrote,

- I. **“6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” (Isaiah 64:6)**
- J. Therefore, in defining the doctrine of total depravity, I wrote,
- K. **“Although humanity is capable of good as defined by human standards, we are nonetheless spiritually dead and, as such, incapable of good as defined by the righteous standard of God.”**
- L. Why is it important for me to clarify this in my statement? Why not align with those who say mankind is capable of nothing good by any measure of goodness? The reason is that for us to have an honest and objective conversation about total depravity, we need to understand why people who perfectly practice religious righteousness are still unworthy of the salvation of God, and it's not by saying the good things they did are somehow void of anything good. Rather, the answer is to say, with Isaiah, they are polluted by the fact a sinner who does righteous things can never do them in full righteousness because he isn't capable of it, in the same way that I am clearly not capable of painting a wall with any sort of artistic excellence! The answer is not to say they didn't do good to somehow make God's good better, but rather that they can't do good enough because the measure of God's good is so much better! As such, our goodness is never a comparison to the goodness of God. Our greatest, most impressive righteousness is never even somewhat like His, which takes us right to our challenge.

CHALLENGE: Are you living in the truly depraved lie that you can earn salvation and favor from God?

There was a man in the Bible who thought his deeds had earned a status with God. As a matter of fact, God himself called him righteous. However, this truly righteous man who had been declared so by the only way anyone is ever declared righteous by God (by grace through faith – Romans 4) had a massive crisis of faith after he received the news that his business had been destroyed and all of his children were dead! He was flat-out angry at God to the point he felt like God was being unjust. He looked around and saw people who had nowhere near the measure of faithfulness to the Lord he had, yet they were not going

through any of the pain he was suffering. His name was Job, and his life was a mess until he realized the God he was declaring his righteousness to, the God he was angry with and accused of being unjust towards Him, could not be instructed or persuaded by the perceived righteousness of our reasoning or deeds. He finally realized he could not earn the favor of God or even declare He deserved it. God's holiness and authority are not measurable or attainable by the things of this world, including us! It wasn't that he had not done good, nor that he had even failed to live by faith in God, but rather that we are all incapable of earning or deserving anything from God!

If the man whom God himself said was a righteous man had no right to the favor of God as he wanted it, then why do you and I think we are somehow the exception, that we can somehow do enough good to deserve to be exempted from the curse we are all born in, to be exempt from life in this world, or to somehow do something so void of sin that God is obligated to honor us in the way we feel we should be honored.

The thief on the cross that Jesus promised to save didn't receive that promise because he accomplished something. What he had achieved had led to him being justly crucified! I'm convinced that the thief didn't even understand what was taking place beside him, but what the thief did realize was that somehow the Christ, the promised Son of God, was being unjustly crucified, and as such, the thief said to the thief that was mocking Christ,

"40 ... 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' 42 And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 43 And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:40-43)

So today, will you repent of the arrogant rebellion that you deserve God's favor, much less God? Will you repent of your efforts to earn God? Will you stop trusting in yourself and your senses of righteousness, fall on your face before the mighty God, and cry out for his mercy? Will you finally stop the charade and say to the Lord what one of the most righteous prophets in the entire Bible said,

"5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5)

Because if you will, then you will experience what happened to Isaiah next,

"6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:6-7)

You say, "How will God take away my guilt?" Well, come back next week when we talk about the penal substitutionary death of Christ and how we are justified by grace through

faith because of it, but for now, just be like the thief on the cross who knew Jesus was enough and repent and surrender your totally depraved life to Him! Stop acting as if your goodness is somehow better than somebody else and that you're good enough to deserve what Adam lost in the Garden.