

CONTENTS

Editor's Preface	7
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Part 1

The Doctrine of Human Depravity

1. Introduction	11
2. Origin	19
3. Imputation	49
4. Consequences	73
5. Transmission	97
6. Nature	105
7. Impact	123
8. Enormity	139
9. Extent	155
10. Ramifications	177
11. Evidences	199
12. Corollaries	215
13. Remedy	239
14. Summary	265

Part 2
The Doctrine of Man's Impotence

15. Introduction	277
16. Reality	283
17. Nature	291
18. Root	319
19. Extent	327
20. Problem	341
21. Complement	363
22. Elucidation	387
23. Affirmation	407
24. Opposition	431
25. Exposition	439
Index of Subjects	449
Index of Scripture	463

Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The subject which this chapter is designed to introduce is likely to meet with a decidedly mixed reception. Some readers will probably be very disappointed when they see the title of this book, considering the subject quite unattractive and unedifying. If so, they are to be pitied; we hope that God will bless the contents to them. Medicine is proverbially unpleasant, but there are times when all of us find it necessary and beneficial. Others will be thankful that, by divine grace, we seek to glorify God rather than please the flesh. And surely that which most glorifies God is to declare “*all his counsel,*” to insist on that which puts man in his proper place before Him, and to emphasize those portions and aspects of the truth which our generation is most in need of. As we shall endeavor to show, our theme is one of immense doctrinal importance and of great practical value. Since it is a subject which occupies so prominent a place in God’s Word, no apology is needed for our engaging in such a task.

AVITAL CONTEMPORARY QUESTION

It is our deep conviction that the vital question most requiring to be raised today is this: Is man a totally and thoroughly depraved creature by nature? Does he enter the world completely ruined and helpless, spiritually blind and dead in trespasses and sins? According as is our answer to *that* question, so will be our views on many others. It is on the basis of this dark background that the whole Bible proceeds. Any attempt to modify or abate, repudiate or tone down the teaching of Scripture on the matter is fatal. Put the question in another form: Is man now in such a condition that he cannot be saved without the special and direct intervention of the triune God on his behalf? In other words, is there any hope for him apart from his personal election by the Father, his particular redemption by the Son, and the supernatural operations of the Spirit within him? Or, putting it in still another way: If man is a totally depraved being, can he possibly take the first step in the matter of his return to God?

THE SCRIPTURAL ANSWER

The scriptural answer to that question makes evident the utter futility of the schemes of social reformers for “the moral elevation of the masses,” the plans of politicians for the peace of the nations, and the ideologies of dreamers to usher in a golden age for this world. It is both pathetic and tragic to see many of our greatest men putting their faith in such chimeras. Divisions and discords, hatred and bloodshed, cannot be banished while human nature is what it is. But during the past century the steady trend of a deteriorating Christendom has been to underrate the evil of sin and overrate the moral capabilities of men. Instead of proclaiming the heinousness of sin, there has been a dwelling more upon its inconveniences, and the abasing portrayal of the lost condition of man as set forth in Holy Writ has been obscured if not obliterated by flattering disquisitions on human advancement. If the popular religion of the churches—including nine-tenths of what is termed “evangelical Christianity”—be tested at this point, it will be found that it clashes directly with man’s fallen, ruined, and spiritually dead condition.

There is, therefore, a crying need today for sin to be viewed in the light of God’s law and gospel, so that its exceeding sinfulness may be demonstrated, and the dark depths of human depravity exposed by the teaching of Holy Writ, that we may learn what is connoted by those fear-

ful words “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). The grand object of the Bible is to make God known to us, to portray man as he appears in the eyes of his Maker, and to show the relation of one to the other. It is therefore the business of His servants not only to declare the divine character and perfections, but also to delineate the original condition and apostasy of man, as well as the divine remedy for his ruin. Until we really behold the horror of the pit in which by nature we lie, we can never properly appreciate Christ’s so-great salvation. In man’s fallen condition we have the awful disease for which divine redemption is the only cure, and our estimation and valuation of the provisions of divine grace will necessarily be modified in proportion as we modify the need it was meant to meet.

David Clarkson, one of the Puritans, pointed out this fact in his sermon on Psalm 51:5:

The end of the ministry of the Gospel is to bring sinners unto Christ. Their way to this end lies through the sense of their misery without Christ. The ingredients of this misery are our sinfulness, original and actual; the wrath of God, whereto sin has exposed us; and our impotency to free ourselves either from sin or wrath. That we may therefore promote this great end, we shall endeavour, as the Lord will assist, to lead you in this way, by the sense of misery, to Him who alone can deliver from it. Now the original of our misery being the corruption of our nature, or original sin, we thought fit to begin here, and therefore have pitched upon these words as very proper for our purpose: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCTRINE

This subject is indeed a most *solemn* one, and none can fitly write or preach on it unless his own heart is deeply awed by it. It is not something from which any man can detach himself and expatiate on it as though he were not directly involved in it; still less as from a higher level looking down on those whom he denounces. Nothing is more incongruous and unbecoming than for a young preacher glibly to rattle off passages of Scripture which portray his own vileness by nature. Rather should they be read or quoted with the utmost gravity. J. C. Philpot stated:

As no heart can sufficiently conceive, so no tongue can adequately express, the state of wretchedness and ruin into which sin has cast guilty, miserable

man. In separating him from God, it severed him from the only source of all happiness and holiness. It has ruined him body and soul: the one it has filled with sickness and disease; in the other it has defaced and destroyed the image of God in which it was created. It has made him love sin and hate God.

The doctrine of total depravity is a very *humbling* one. It is not that man leans to one side and needs propping up, nor that he is merely ignorant and requires instructing, nor that he is run-down and calls for a tonic; but rather that he is undone, lost, spiritually dead. Consequently, he is “without strength,” thoroughly incapable of bettering himself; he is exposed to the wrath of God, and unable to perform a single work which can find acceptance with Him. Almost every page of the Bible bears witness to this truth. The whole scheme of redemption takes it for granted. The plan of salvation taught in the Scriptures could have no place on any other supposition. The impossibility of any man’s gaining the approbation of God by works of his own appears plainly in the case of the rich young ruler who came to Christ. Judged by human standards, he was a model of virtue and religious attainments. Yet, like all others who trust in self-efforts, he was ignorant of the spirituality and strictness of God’s law; when Christ put him to the test, his fair expectations were blown to the winds and “he went away sorrowful” (Matt. 19:22).

It is therefore a most *unpalatable* doctrine. It cannot be otherwise, for the unregenerate love to hear of the greatness, the dignity, the nobility of man. The natural man thinks highly of himself and appreciates only that which is flattering. Nothing pleases him more than to listen to that which extols human nature and lauds the state of mankind, even though it be in terms which not only repudiate the teaching of God’s Word but are flatly contradicted by common observation and universal experience. And there are many who pander to him by their lavish praises of the excellency of civilization and the steady progress of the race. Hence, to have the lie given to the popular theory of evolution is highly displeasing to its deluded votaries. Nevertheless, the duty of God’s servants is to stain the pride of all that man glories in, to strip him of his stolen plumes, to lay him low in the dust before God. However repugnant such teaching is, God’s emissary must faithfully discharge his duty “whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear” (Ezek. 3:11).

This is no dismal dogma invented by the church in “the dark ages,”

but a truth of Holy Writ. George Whitefield said, "I look upon it not merely as a doctrine of Scripture—the great Fountain of truth—but a very fundamental one, from which I hope God will suffer none of you to be enticed." It is a subject to which great prominence is given in the Bible. Every part of the Scriptures has much to say on the awful state of degradation and slavery into which the Fall has brought man. The corruption, the blindness, the hostility of all Adam's descendants to everything of a spiritual nature are constantly insisted upon. Not only is man's utter ruin fully described, but also his powerlessness to save himself from the same. In the declarations and denunciations of the prophets, of Christ and His apostles, the bondage of all men to Satan and their complete impotence to turn to God for deliverance are repeatedly set forth—not indirectly and vaguely, but emphatically and in great detail. This is one of a hundred proofs that the Bible is not a human invention but a communication from the thrice Holy One.

It is a *sadly neglected* subject. Notwithstanding the clear and uniform teaching of Scripture, man's ruined condition and alienation from God are but feebly apprehended and seldom heard in the modern pulpit, and are given little place even in what are regarded as the centers of orthodoxy. Rather the whole trend of present-day thought and teaching is in the opposite direction, and even where the Darwinian hypothesis has not been accepted, its pernicious influences are often seen. In consequence of the guilty silence of the modern pulpit, a generation of churchgoers has arisen which is deplorably ignorant of the basic truths of the Bible, so that perhaps not more than one in a thousand has even a mental knowledge of the chains of hardness and unbelief which bind the natural heart, or of the dungeon of darkness in which they lie. Thousands of preachers, instead of faithfully telling their hearers of their woe-ful state by nature, are wasting their time by relating the latest political news.

It is therefore a *testing* doctrine, especially of the preacher's soundness in the faith. A man's orthodoxy on this subject determines his viewpoint of many other doctrines of great importance. If his belief here is a scriptural one, then he will clearly perceive how impossible it is for men to improve themselves—that Christ is their only hope. He will know that unless the sinner is born again there can be no entrance for him into the kingdom of God. Nor will he entertain the idea of the fallen creature's free will to attain goodness. He will be preserved from many

errors. Andrew Fuller stated, "I never knew a person verge toward the Arminian, the Arian, the Socinian, the Antinomian schemes, without first entertaining diminutive notions of human depravity or blameworthiness." Said the well-equipped theological instructor, J. M. Stifler, "It cannot be said too often that a false theology finds its source in inadequate views of depravity."

It is a doctrine of great *practical* value as well as spiritual importance. The foundation of all true piety lies in a correct view of ourselves and our vileness, and a scriptural belief in God and His grace. There can be no genuine self-abhorrence or repentance, no real appreciation of the saving mercy of God, no faith in Christ, without it. There is nothing like a knowledge of this doctrine so well calculated to undeceive vain man and convict him of the worthlessness and rottenness of his own righteousness. Yet the preacher who is aware of the plague of his own heart knows full well that *he* cannot present this truth in such a way as to make his hearers actually realize and feel the same, to help them stop being in love with themselves, and to cause them to forever renounce all hope in themselves. Therefore, instead of relying upon his faithfulness in presenting the truth, he will be cast upon God to apply it graciously in power to those who hear him and bless his feeble efforts.

It is an exceedingly *illuminating* doctrine. It may be a melancholy and humiliating one, nevertheless it throws a flood of light upon mysteries which are otherwise insoluble. It supplies the key to the course of human history and shows why so much of it has been written in blood and tears. It supplies an explanation of many problems which sorely perplex and puzzle the thoughtful. It reveals why the child is prone to evil and has to be taught and disciplined to anything that is good. It explains why every improvement in man's environment, every attempt to educate him, all the efforts of social reformers, are unavailing to effect any radical betterment in his nature and character. It accounts for the horrible treatment which Christ met with when He worked so graciously in this world, and why He is still despised and rejected by men. It enables the Christian himself to better understand the painful conflict which is ever at work within him, and which causes him so often to cry, "Oh, wretched man that I am!"

It is therefore a most *necessary* doctrine, for the vast majority of our fellowmen are ignorant of it. God's servants are sometimes thought to speak too strongly and dolefully of the dreadful state of man through his

apostasy from God. The fact is that it is impossible to exaggerate in human language the darkness and pollution of man's heart or to describe the misery and utter helplessness of a condition such as the Word of Truth describes in these solemn passages: "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:3–4). "Therefore they could not believe, because . . . He hath [judicially] blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them" (John 12:39–40). This is yet more evident when we contrast the state of soul of those in whom a miracle of grace is wrought (see Luke 1:78–79).

It is a *salutary* doctrine—one which God often uses to bring men to their senses. While we imagine that our wills have power to do what is pleasing to God, we never abandon dependence on self. Not that a mere intellectual knowledge of man's fall and ruin is sufficient to deliver from pride. Only the Spirit's powerful operations can effect that. Yet He is pleased to use the faithful preaching of the Word to that end. Nothing but a real sense of our lost condition lays us in the dust before God.