



## The Total Depravity of Man

By Gerald E. Cumby

The title of this paper has a very negative connotation to it. In fact, the subject matter, as the reader might see it, portrays man without hope, without a possibility of reprieve, and without a future in which to better or sustain himself. It places man in the estate with practically the lowest of life. At least the world knows the final outcome of a plant or animal; that is, dead...with no hope of an afterlife. Humanity knows that animals live, procreate, and die; the cycle of life continues, but only because life produces life...only to return back to dust. Man, however, has a soul. He does live and die; but, that is not all for man. The body of man (physical/carnal man), as an animal carcass, turns to dust. The soul and spirit of man, however, goes on in an estate of either peace or pain, jubilation or separation for the rest of eternity. To the reader, the subject is quite a contrast to all the promises of God that would have been more pleasing and uplifting. On the other hand, *“medicine is proverbially unpleasant, but there are times when all of us find it necessary and beneficial.”*<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, an understanding that the subject matter presented here, although presenting man as wretched, selfish, and totally corrupt, will culminate and lead to the ultimate love scene

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<sup>1</sup> Website: <http://www.pbministries.org>, *Man's Total Depravity*, (Granbury, Texas: Desktop Publications, Revised 2005), page 1.

(agape love) between man and His Creator, i.e. like man having a heart transplant in order that life may be sustained. It takes the life of one in order to preserve another. The Son of God laying down His life for a totally depraved creature called “man” (Mark 10:45; John 10:15; John 15:13).

Depraved man is not just a figment of one’s imagination. Much is heard concerning “the world getting better and better” and that man, because of the impact of world-renown philosophers, doctors, counselors, politicians, and others in all the various scientific fields with prestigious degrees and worldly knowledge, is making great strides in achieving peace, medical breakthroughs in curing various disease, and business success increasing prosperity world-wide. However, the facts are...sin is rampant; there are more murders, rapes, ungodliness and selfish acts occurring today than anytime in the history of man. Man, left alone, will annihilate himself because man cannot handle knowledge...and worldly knowledge always has and always will lead eventually to depravation.

The Word of God is clear as to where man is in relationship to his Creator. Man was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). No other creature has had the impact on God like man. God created man and gave him dominion over every creature on earth (Genesis 1:26-28). Man communicated with his Creator; the Creator saw that what He had created was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). But, God’s creation failed to live up to the high position God intended for him to achieve. Man, although loved and cared for by a patient and loving God who longed for fellowship with His created masterpiece, rebelled and disobeyed their Creator. This wrong and dreadful choice plunged man into an estate that has plagued him and his descendants ever since.

Just as no heart can adequately conceive, no speech or man’s tongue can sufficiently express the state of wretchedness and total ruin that sin has placed miserable and despicable man.

In sin, man is separated from God and is severed from the only source of happiness, joy and holiness. The depraved state of man has made him love sin and hate God.

One of the most humbling states for man to arrive is to understand the doctrine of the total depravity of man. It is one thing to believe in the doctrine; it is another to realize the devastation and degradation man's state is in...left to himself. Man is truly lost and spiritually dead. He is incapable of bettering himself and thus, exposed to the wrath of God...unable to perform one single work in which God can find acceptance. Russell Penney, in his Discipleship Manual "Equipping the Saints" states, "*Depravity means that as a result of the Fall (Genesis 1-3) 'corruption has extended to all aspects of man's nature, to his entire being; and Total Depravity means that because of that corruption there is nothing man can do to merit saving favor with God.'*"<sup>2</sup> The possibility of man gaining the approval of God through or by works of his own is null and void...and unscriptural. "*The Bible teaches with complete unanimity that the race is depraved—apart from the saving grace of God—and it is equally evident that no time can be indicated when this came to pass other than the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Depravity as a doctrine does not stand or fall on the ground of man's estimation of himself; it rather reflects God's estimation of man.*"<sup>3</sup> Man would not write on the fallen and depraved estate of man if it was left to him. There would be a prejudiced, partial, and even a seriously flawed biased attitude by man when his importance to life and existence is questioned. Man, left alone, would have no sufficient perspective in which to base his conclusion. Only the Word of God is sufficient and capable of addressing the sin issue. God's sovereignty is always questioned when man gets in to the picture of what God's grace, mercy, regeneration, and redemption is like. God

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<sup>2</sup> Russell Penney, *Equipping the Saints—Discipleship Manual*, (Fort Worth, Texas: Tyndale Theological Seminary, 1997), page 60.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publishing Co., 1948), page 218-219.

can only define and understand the principles and the purpose set out from the foundations of the world. As man, all he can do is humble himself and claim along with Paul, *“Oh, what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 7:24:25a); It is truly and assuredly *“by grace are we saved, it is the gift of God....not of works lest any man should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8). Man is forever lost without the grace and workings of God in man’s heart. Man can only believe...and it is God’s grace in which He alone accepts that belief.

As stated previously, from the time Adam sinned his first sin, he started experiencing a downward spiral to a degenerate and depraved state. A developing process started to take place in which he experienced a fallen nature that is contrary to God. This fallen nature was obviously prone to evil. Adam experienced a change take place that altered his constitution; thus, becoming a wholly different creation from the one God had formed and created. Adam (representing man as Father of the human race) was the first to ever become a sinner by sinning. Every human being except Adam, however, was and is a born sinner. It is important at this point to understand the difference between sin as an act of evil...and sin as an evil nature. *“By a sinful act Adam acquired a sinful nature, whereas all members of his family are born with that nature.”*<sup>4</sup> Because of disobedience and falling into Satan’s trap, Adam and Eve sinned and thus, tried to hide themselves from God. Sin separates man from God. In the case of Adam and Eve, they had experienced a change in their constitution that literally excommunicated themselves from God’s wholesome and pure relationship.

The fall of man in the Garden of Eden began a downward spiral toward total depravity. The last known battle between good and evil that the Bible declares will be at the end of a millennium of peace. Even after seeing what utopia looks and feels like, just like Adam, man

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 217.

will project his true identity; that of being rebellious, unthankful for God's protection and love, and do battle with God's principles and powers. Man challenges God out of pure depravity, following Satan to his death...even to "the 2<sup>nd</sup> death, which is the lake of fire (Revelation 20). Thus God is not mocked...and His Word never comes back void. Man, left to himself, is totally depraved and will utterly come to destruction with no hope. **But, the Christian that believes and is "in Christ" will never be forsaken.** He can stand with Paul and declare, "*I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels or principalities, or demons of the air, nor height or depth, or any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Romans 8:38-39).

Man's understanding and conclusions on the subject of the total depravity of man determines his viewpoint on other major doctrines. When the theologian or lover of God's Word desires to stand by Scripture alone, then it should be clearly perceived that it is impossible for man to improve himself...and that it is only "in Christ" that there is hope for him as well as all mankind. Understanding Jesus Christ's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 is very relevant. When Jesus stated to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," He was saying to Nicodemus that all mankind is born "in sin" through the 1<sup>st</sup> Adam and now must be born "in Christ" to inherit eternal life. The statement by Jesus, "*Whosoever believeth in Him will have everlasting life*" (John 3:16b) is a very revealing statement of the character of God that man can get to know. The door is open to "whosoever" and those who believe in the Son of God will receive eternal life. Knowing that God is sovereign, He knows his sheep and the sheep will know Him. "...For as many as received Him (Jesus) gave them the power to become the sons of God; even to those that believe in His name" (John 1:12).

Sadly to say, man's depraved condition and separation from God are seldom heard in today's pulpit. As a consequence of the silence on the depravity of man and man's great need of a Savior, a generation of churchgoers is ignorant of the basic truths of the Bible. Hundreds, if not thousands, of "so-called" preachers are giving the news of the day and how his (or her) congregation can better serve humanity in getting involved in local politics and local charities. Instead of focusing on the trouble of mankind (total depravity) and telling their congregation that there is only one way out of the sinful state they are in, that of believing in the only Begotten Son of God, they are substituting the truth for the lies and conniving schemes of Satan who "goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." "The wolf is coming into the sheep pen and the false shepherd or, in some cases deceived shepherd, is "leading his flock to slaughter."

The doctrine of the "Total Depravity of Man" is of great practical value as well as spiritual importance. The foundation of all humility for man lies in the correct view of himself and his vileness...and a scriptural belief in God and His grace. Without understanding the depravity of man, it would be hard to calculate and appreciate the genuine abhorrence of evil or true repentance one must have to fully grip the saving mercy of God and the genuine faith in Christ Jesus. Therefore, it is a most necessary doctrine. There have been times when God's servants have spoken strongly and expressively of the dreadful state of man through his apostasy from God...and then being challenged for getting to depictive of the darkness of the human heart. The fact is, however, 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 his condition without Christ. The doctrine is vital in some cases 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 affect 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.*"<sup>5</sup>

“God hath made man upright” (Ecclesiastes 7:29); but man, even at his best, perverts the pure and wholesome truth. Adam chose to disobey God and, in turn, man has followed in his footsteps. The only thing different from the time in which Adam fell...is that his off-spring has continually developed even more evil and conniving ways in which to blaspheme and profane the God who created them. The world is not a better place. The world is deteriorating and man continues to “thumb its nose” in the face of God. According to the Word of God, “there is none good; no, not one” (Romans 3:12b). Both Jews and Gentiles are under sin....and “there is none righteous, not even one; ...there is none who seeks for God” (Romans 3:9b, 10, 11b). Man is a fallen creature. He has departed from his original state and moral purity. Man has descended (plunged head-first) from the elevated and honorable position in which God created and placed him. We cannot legitimately place the sinful state of man on the God that created him. To do so would be mockery of God's Word and would have to be considered as total blasphemy. For it is impossible that such darkness would come from the Father of Light...or that sin should come from the perfect, upright, Holy One. The truth is that man is not at present as God made him. Man has lost the crown and glory of his creation. By his own perversity, man has wrecked and maimed himself and placed a consequence of degradation on his posterity.

There are some things exceedingly noteworthy in the statement that was recorded in God's Word that identifies God's intention to bring man into existence, “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Man was to be the masterpiece of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, <http://www.pbministries.org>, *Man's Total Depravity*, page 4.

God...His divine workmanship, His perfect and Holy design planned and purposed from the foundations of the world. *God is a trinity in unity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit), and so is the man He made, consisting, in his entirety, of "spirit and soul and body" (I Thessalonians 5:23)*<sup>6</sup>.

“The image of God” in which man was made refers to his moral nature; a nature in perfect accord with God’s divine law. To create one of his creations “in His image”, God would have had to place within him His holiness. This idea of man’s holiness placed in him by His Creator is observed in Ecclesiastes 7:29, “God hath made man upright.” God is not “now” making man upright...God made man upright in the beginning; and this means that he was conforming to the will of God. Psalm 25:8 depicts the same for God... “good and upright is the Lord.” God not only endowed Adam with righteousness and holiness, creating him to fulfill the end of his creation by glorifying the Author and Finisher of his being, God bestowed on man the gift of reason. This distinguished and elevated man above all the other creatures and created things on earth, giving him dominion over all of God’s creation. God brought man into a beautiful and pure environment. God placed man in the Garden of Eden “to dress it and to keep it.” In man’s holiness and uprightness, God gave something for man to do.

**Although Adam was made in the image of God and had the ability to communicate with his maker, he still was capable of falling into sin. Adam’s liability to falling is due to the fact that he was:**

- **Just a creature.** As a creature, Adam was dependent on God “who holds our soul in life” (Psalm 66:9). As to Adam’s spiritual life, he stood only as long as he was divinely upheld (protected). Adam was finite...God is infinite. Adam did not possess invincible

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 6.



power to repel strong opposition apart from God. As a creature, Adam was not endowed with omniscience and therefore could not see the deceiver's true intentions.

- **Not immutable.** God does not change; however, man can and does. God alone is without variableness or shadow of turning (James 1:17). Immutability and impeccability (non-liability to sin) are qualities distinguishing the Creator from the creature.
- **Free to choose (free-will)**—Adam and Eve had the freedom of will that consisted in a power of choosing or embracing what appeared agreeable and good according to their understandings...or.. in refusing and avoiding what was evil. It is important to note that there was no constraint or force placed on them to act contrary to the dictates of their heart...their own wills. Involuntary or compelled action is opposed to freedom of will. Their will, then...was self-inclining and self-determining in the acting...or it would not be free-will. They chose to sin...they did rebel...and thus, mankind is born in sin after the first Adam.

Since Adam's rebellion in the Garden of Eden, sin has been the contributing factor for all of the evil in this world. Sin is "*the condition of estrangement from God as a result of breaking God's law.*"<sup>7</sup> It is a deliberate transgression toward God's authority. Sin is a spiritual debilitating (flaw) in man's character. Thus, "*sin is not only violation of the divine law which is an expression of God's will; more profoundly, it is violation of the expression of God's holy character. It is corruption of the goodness which God originally imparted to His creatures; especially it is the corruption of the godliness with which God originally endowed man when He*

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<sup>7</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, (Boston/New York/London, 1991), page 1142.

*created him in His own image...sin may then be defined ultimately as anything in the creature which does not express or which is contrary to the holy character of the Creator.”<sup>8</sup>*

Being fallen, man is at present by necessity to nature inclined to sin, and is noted as “the servant of sin” (John 8:34). The first parents of man-kind had a freedom of will, or power to retain their integrity. Adam and Eve’s transgression left man as a slave to sin...entirely under the domination of sin. Adam was more than just the father of the human race. It was by divine constitution that he was made the covenant head of all his natural seed. In contrast, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is now the covenant Head of all His spiritual seed...acting and communicating on their behalf.

Since Adam’s transgression, it has become a solemn and most humbling fact that whenever God has placed anything in the hands of human responsibility, man has proved unfaithful. When God has given or bestowed special favors on man, it is not long before man has sadly abused those favors. For example:

- Noah failed soon after judgment came on earth and he was the new “father of the human race.” He defiled the privilege and brought a curse on his own son (grandson)...Genesis 9:21-25.
- The Israelites in a matter of a few days after they entered into a covenant with Jehovah at Mount Sinai, sinned greatly with the horrific sin of idolatry. Even the Lord made a statement that the Israelites had “turned aside quickly out of the way which I (He) commanded them...(Exodus 32:8)
- Paul acknowledged that there was a sin nature within him that wanted to rebel...”do what he knew he should not do...and not do what he should do” (paraphrase of Romans 7:15-

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<sup>8</sup> James Oliver Boswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 1:263-264.

17). Paul, however, knew that the only thing that could save him from the terrible plight of sin is “through Jesus Christ.” Man must fall humbly (spiritually speaking) at the feet of Jesus and believe that He has paid the penalty for his sin. God planned, God brought, and God bought man’s salvation. Man miserably failed himself, his generation, his future generations, and his God. God, in His mercy and love for His creation, provided the means in which man can be reconciled to God. If it were not for God and the offering of salvation, man would be not only a miserable failure, but also a creation without hope.

Genesis 3 is an important chapter in God’s revelation to man (The Word of God). This chapter should be studied and meditated on frequently with prayerful hearts. In this chapter, the great drama commences which is now being enacted on the stage of human history. Although not fulfilled, this chapter starts the divine explanation of what is happening to this present degrading, debased, and pitiful condition of the world. It shows man how sin entered into the world, along with its present effects on God’s creation and the dire consequences of that sin. It reveals Satan’s true character and how man has permitted and is still permitting this great enemy of our soul, the devil to gain advantage over mankind. However, this same chapter also reveals God’s grace and mercy toward His favored Creation...that of assuring to the believer that the head of the serpent will be crushed by the Seed of the woman (Romans 16:20). This blessed chapter tells the Christian that even in wrath, **God remembered mercy from the very beginning** (Omniscience and love of God).

Evil’s entrance into the domain of God is a mystery, but it does not mean that God leaves mankind without an explanation of this mystery. The idea that the fall of Satan and his angels or the wrong choice of our first parents (Adam and Eve) took God by surprise and devastated His plans...is totally contrary to the Word of God (His truth given to the world). God designed in

His eternity that this planet called “earth” would be the “stage on which He would display His perfections.” He would do this...and is completing this plan in His creation, in His providence and His redemption. For God foreordained everything which has come to pass, is at present taking place, and will come to pass (future), Ephesians 1:4-6; 1:11, “...He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

God is not casually observing us from a far-distance at the happenings of this earth. He is ordering and shaping everything to proclaim the ultimate promotion of His glory. In spite of the opposition of men and Satan’s many schemes, God is using even their devastating and evil tactics to serve His purpose. For wise and holy reasons, God foreordained to allow His mutable creatures to fall. This was done to afford the occasion for God, in His Holy and foreordained plan, to make a fuller exhibition of His attributes. Before God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the Holy God of Creation knew exactly how the appointed testing of man would eventuate. But, this does not make God the Author of sin. Clearly it was the divine will that sin should enter this world, or it would not have done so. God had the power to prevent it. Nothing ever comes to pass except what He has decreed. However, God’s decree did not excuse the wickedness of our first parents or exempt them from the punishment of their sin. Adam and Eve were left entirely free to the exercise of their nature, and therefore were fully accountable and were to blame for their actions. The cause of man’s sin lay in their voluntarily ceasing to be in subjection to the will of their Creator and

Lord. God is the Author of whatever works of holiness men perform, but He is not the Author of sin.

There are three things man must believe if the truth is not to be repudiated:

1. That God has foreordained everything that comes to pass,
2. That God is not to blame for any of man's wickedness, and
3. That God has provided a way in which man can be placed back in "the right relationship" with His Creator.

In summary, one cannot defend any other perspective of the total depravity of man other than "man is lost and undone without a Savior." The writer of this term paper cannot express man's depravity and God's redemptive plan better than the precious hymn "At Calvary." With that thought, we will end this paper on a positive note:

## **At Calvary**

### **Words by William R. Newell**

*"Years I spent in vanity and pride, Caring not my Lord was crucified,  
Knowing not it was for me He died...on Calvary.  
Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me,  
There my burdened soul found liberty—At Calvary.*

*By God's Word at last my sin I learned—Then I trembled at the law I'd spurned,  
Till my guilty soul imploring turned...to Calvary.  
Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me,  
There my burdened soul found liberty—At Calvary.*

*Now I've given to Jesus every thing, Now I gladly own Him as my King,  
Now my raptured soul can only sing...of Calvary.  
Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me,  
There my burdened soul found liberty—At Calvary.*

***O the love that drew salvation's plan! O the grace that brought it down to man!  
O the mighty gulf that God did span...at Calvary.  
Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me,***

*There my burdened soul found liberty...At Calvary.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration, (Waco, Texas, Word Music, 1986), page 338