

What Is Total Depravity? The Biblical Doctrine Explained

Does fallen man still possess the ability to choose God on his own? This article explains the doctrine of total depravity and why sinners need the grace of God to believe the gospel.

What is total depravity?

Recently, some theologians have proposed the term "total inability" to refer to the concept of *total depravity*. This avoids giving the impression we think people are as bad as demons.

Total depravity vs utter depravity

Total depravity does not mean sinners are as wicked as possible or even want to be. Man has not fallen to the level of demons. Such a state would be utter depravity. We believe God's benevolence prevented man from falling to those depths.

By *total*, we mean that sin infects and dominates all human faculties, including free will.

By *depravity*, we mean that nothing in a sinner is acceptable to God, including good works or virtues, because these originated in a corrupted source: man's sinful heart.

Why sinners need grace

Total depravity means that the sinner is unable to will or do anything to convert himself to Christ or prepare himself for conversion because of the controlling power of sin. Only a miracle of God through the gospel can enable the sinner to choose Christ.

Total depravity vs total inability

This doctrine is wonderfully interesting because it touches on elements of human nature such as free will, the mind, and perceptions. Moreover, *total depravity* intertwines with other biblical teachings like the fall of Adam, regeneration, and election.

However, the terminology could be misunderstood. Some may assume God is the source of the inability when, in fact, it is the corruption of man. "Depravity" and "inability" are interchangeable as terms, though both require explanation.

We recommend *total depravity* to counterbalance the current influence of humanism that asserts man's innate goodness. It strikes deliberately at pride and self-righteousness. In view of biblical teaching about man's sinfulness, this term seems appropriate.

The fall of Adam and human nature

Reformed and Arminian views

The issue: Did Adam fall beyond his ability to believe and repent on his own initiative? The two main branches of theology, Reformed and Arminian,¹ differ sharply on this point.

The Arminian view claims God stopped the fall short of the point where man would lose the ability to generate faith, love, and repentance out of his own free will. The reformed doctrine of total depravity sees man as fallen beneath that point. We will examine the evidence.

See [Does Foreknowledge Explain Election?](#)

Romans 5 and the effects of the fall

Paul describes the fall of Adam in Romans Chapter Five. The word "Adam" means "mankind" in Hebrew. He mentions four things we inherit from Adam: sin, death, judgment, and condemnation.

No human faculty escaped these effects. This includes man's will. Paul did not find it necessary to single out the will of man in order to show that it, too, became enslaved by sin. He demonstrates through the text that the entire human organism is fallen.

Spiritual Death in Ephesians 2

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. Eph 2:1-3

Bondage of the will

Paul apparently alludes to the divine threat to Adam in Genesis 2:17 "... for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Though Adam did not die physically that day, he died spiritually in his relationship with God and in his ability to obey Him. Free will after the fall, in the sense of moral ability, was lost. Paul describes this condition as a true enslavement. Notice his words...

- Following the conduct of the world.
- Controlled by Satan.

- • "Fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind." (Greek literally: *doing the will of the flesh*.) This means the flesh determines the condition of the will. The term "mind" here, NOOS includes perceptions. Paul alludes to the perceptions of the mind as controlled by sin, so the mind perceives the lusts of the flesh as preferable. The will follows suit.
- A nature deserving the wrath of God.

The intent of the passage is to show why a sinner is no more able to escape from his condition than a dead man can resurrect himself.

For more on this point, see [Free Will: Biblical vs. Humanist](#)

Enslavement of the mind

Scripture depicts the mind as enslaved and controlled by sin and Satan. We can deduce that this includes the will, as the will is a function of the mind.

The natural man cannot perceive the things of God

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Cor. 2:14

Satan has blinded the mind of unbelievers

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers. 2 Cor 4:4

Their understanding is darkened

They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God... Eph 4:18

The carnal mind is unable to submit to the law of God

...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Rom 8:7

The sinner's will is bound by the devil

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. 2 Tim 2:25-26

The mind of the sinner has a perception problem the Bible expresses as "darkness" or "blindness." The devil controls the sinner's will by controlling his perceptions. The

sinner perceives the things of God as foolish because he is blinded to his own moral condition.

Romans 3 and human corruption

Paul addresses the condition of all unsaved people as being under sin, meaning they are under the *power* of sin.

Without Christ...

Good works are meaningless

Even the good works of the unsaved are as *filthy rags*, unacceptable to God.²

No sinner who understands his own moral condition. Here, the Greek term "understand" refers to *insight*. None have spiritual insight into their condition without Christ, although they may understand the fundamentals of the gospel.

No one seeks God

Religious types are in fact seeking to establish their own righteousness. Romans 10:3

No such thing as a good sinner

The New Testament defines *good* as obedience to God. Sinners do good works to substitute God's requirement, rather than as a sign of their submission to Him. All the works of sinners, however good they may be in themselves, proceed from a corrupted source: their sinful nature. If a sinner *really* wanted to be virtuous, he would do the first thing God commands him to do...repent and believe in Jesus.

None fear God

If they truly feared Him, they would seek to please Him.

No peace for sinners

Drowning themselves in pleasures is a false peace.

Paul is talking about sinners before God draws them through the gospel. When God draws a sinner, his perceptions change. Occasionally we encounter a sinner who says he is seeking God. Such claims could be sincere. God may be drawing them closer by opening their perceptions through the gospel.

Conclusion

From the weight of biblical evidence, we conclude the unsaved cannot will or do anything to contribute to their salvation or prepare themselves for conversion. Their will chooses wrongly because their perceptions are blinded by sin and controlled by Satan. Therefore, they perceive themselves as good, the things of the Spirit as foolishness, and

God as not worth seeking. They see no reason to fear God and think their lack of peace is due to a lack of pleasures.

From this article we learn...

- Without God working through the gospel, sinners are unable to will or do anything to contribute to their salvation.
- Through Adam's fall mankind inherited sin, death, judgment, and condemnation.
- Sin and Satan blind the mind of man, including his perceptions and will, so he cannot choose submission to God.
- The carnal nature of man contains no quality that could lead him to obey God.
- None of the good works of a sinner are ultimately good because they are generated from a corrupted source, his carnal nature.
- Sinners will do good works of all sorts. Without grace, they will neither repent nor believe the gospel.

¹. Arminianism is a system of theology invented by a Dutch pastor in the 16th century, Jacob Arminius, in opposition to the Reformation. His views are followed today by several evangelical denominations or movements such as Methodist, Nazarene and pentecostal.

². See Isaiah 64:6

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