

THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY VINDICATED

by Elder James H. Oliphant - 1883

The nature, extent and degree of human depravity is a subject of the first importance. We can not have a correct understanding of the remedy unless we fully understand the disease. No effort is necessary to prove that sin exists among us, but the power that it possesses to control men and women, the deep-seated hold it has in the human heart and affections, are what but few understand. For one to know the real evil of his own heart is sure to be attended with humility and distrust of self.

Our first parents was made in the image of God - Gen. 1:16, but "by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin, so death is passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" - Rom. 5:12. I suppose the one man here referred to is Adam. He was made in God's image (morally), but we are informed that he sinned and death was the result of that sin, not only death to himself but death "is passed upon all men for that all have sinned." In some way his sin affects us all. By reading Romans 5:12, 19, it will be plain to you that all the long race of Adam was involved in his guilt and made subject to death by it. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners." Here the disobedience of one had the effect to make many (persons) sinners.

This is a deep subject and much controverted. The justice of God in entailing upon the unborn millions of Adam's posterity the fatal results of his sin may not appear clear to all, but there are many passages of scripture that plainly teach the doctrine. It becomes us to confess the justice of all his actions, whether we are able to understand it or not. Whether it would be safer to us and more merciful in God to leave our destiny to our own uprightness or allow Adam to represent us all, is a question of some importance, and has been ably discussed by many; for my part, I feel sure that there is as much mercy in the system that allows one man to represent us all, and even more; he was good, with no bias to evil, and knew the Lord. I say the probabilities for our safety were greater with our destiny suspended upon his action than if left suspended upon our own. If the scriptures teach that we all became sinners by his sin, we need not labor to show the justice of the affair. It is enough for us to know that we are involved in the sin and guilt of the great head of our species. If we were not involved in the guilt we would not be in the penalty, which is death, but we all, from the unborn infant to the oldest man, are exposed to death, which at least is (if only temporal death) a part of the penalty, and if it be right to entail on us a part of the penalty, it would be equally right to entail the whole penalty upon us. So that when you find the principle upon which God is just in entailing temporal death (a part of the penalty) upon us, from the infant to the oldest, I am persuaded that you will be able to

show his justice in passing the whole curse upon the entire race.

This curse includes eternal death, as appears from the words, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Here death is set in pair with eternal life in such a way as to show that death and life are of equal duration. So, upon the whole, we are "by nature the children of wrath" - Eph. 2:3. We are exposed to the wrath of God so that he may, in justice, at any time require our lives and consign us to eternal misery. In support of the above positions I will cite a few passages of scripture: "What is man that he should be clean, and he that is born of a woman that he should be righteous" - Job 15:14. From this text to know that one is born of a woman is sufficient to prove that he is unholy. To this point the same writer testifies again: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" Again: "How can he be clean that is born of a woman?" These passages do not trace our sins to our own evil actions, but to our birth, showing that we are unclean from birth. I know that these positions have been disputed, but how we can do justice to the scriptures cited, allow to them their fair meaning, and yet maintain that we are not unholy from birth, is what I can't see. "Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." This certainly shows that we are sinful from birth; the birth of the flesh, even though it be of the highest parentage, confers upon us a sinful nature, exposes us to God's tremendous curse, and certainly entails upon us the whole train of evils incident to our species.

In Romans 3:9 to 19, Paul gives a careful description of ourselves, "none righteous, no, not one." Also, see Isaiah 59:3 to 11, 14, the same sentiment plainly set forth. This corruption of nature is universal, it has its seat in every human heart. Isaiah 64:6: "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags." The whole race is set down as an unclean thing. Gal. 3:22: "But the scripture hath concluded all under sin." No one of our species since Adam ever escaped death except Enoch and Elijah, nor has any one been found free from sin. Now I ask why this universal corruption of nature unless we received it from Adam, our common head?

No proposition can be demonstrated to my mind if the whole race of men, from Adam down, from the old man to the unborn infant, is not corrupt and sinful. We say that gravity draws every weighty object to the earth's center, and none deny it, although there are thousands of objects that have never been tested. Now, I say that all men are depraved, that all are sinful, and exposed to death. I appeal to the bible, and it testifies to the truth of my assertion. I appeal to facts, and find that every human being has been a witness of the truth of what I say, for "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "There is none righteous, no, not one." I think we have found this depravity to be universal, and to belong to every one of our

species. I think we have seen that it seizes us in our conception and birth, gives shape to our lives and characters as a tree gives quality to its fruit.

Our disease is not altogether in our actions, which are evil, but it consists in an "evil heart," a sinful "nature," and "enmity against God," our "tongues," "lips," "mouths," "feet," "hands." Yea, from the sole of the feet even to the head, all is evil. It is not more certain that water runs down hill than it is that we by nature do evil. What parent has not seen this fixed tendency in his children ? Who is so blind that they can't see this tendency in all classes, the rich and poor, the wise and simple ? You have but to open your eyes and you are confronted with evidences of the awful depravity of our nature. Yea, you may close your eyes and see in your own heart a sinfulness so deep, so uncontrollable that unless you are born again you never can enter the peaceful presence of God. The world's history is a commentary on human depravity; men in all ages have shown a ferocity to each other that exceeds the animal kingdom; how often have hundreds of thousands of our species met in battle array with weapons of death in hand, thirsting for each others' blood ?

Wickedness has stained every step of our history; fraud and deceit are in our ways; civil government is established to control the corruption's of our nature; jails, penitentiaries and the gallows are aids to keep in check the head long torrent; but how often does sin boil over in our legislators, who, under its force, legalize fraud and thief ? and how often are the judicial and executive departments overrun with sin, so that juries give in wicked decisions, judges are bribed, judgment perverted, and civil government proves a failure.

It may be asked, Do not some sinners love their children, pay their debts, visit the sick, make good neighbors, etc., and, if so, are they entirely corrupt and depraved ? I grant that there are some men, and even many men, who are unregenerate whom we esteem as well-disposed people, but in determining how much their acts of kindness are worth before God, we of course must be governed by the word of the Lord. The Savior, in Matt. 22:37, says: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Here the whole duty of man is reduced to two propositions - duty to God and duty to man. All our right actions that are prompted by other motives are evil. We are not only tried by what we do but by what we would do.

I have read the third chapter of Romans, from 10 to 19, and thought the case too bad to apply to all our race. The words "There is no fear of God before their eyes" seemed too strong; also, "Their throat is an open sepulcher," and "Their mouth is

full of cursing and bitterness." These words seem to deny the existence of anything good in man, and yet we see traits in the unregenerate that we admire. We see natural affections in some men to a very great degree. Some infidels have been men of great natural kindness. Also, some men have been great lovers of human liberty and justice among men that were, nevertheless, destitute of love to God. Although these qualities are admirable to us, yet they are but natural qualities, nor do they have God's glory for their object, nor are they prompted by love to God; hence they are worthless in God's sight.

It is difficult to determine the degree of depravity that we possess, but I think it safe to say that we are as guilty in God's sight of all sin that we are hindered from committing by civil law as if we had actually committed it. See Matt. 5:28. Here our Lord charges guilt upon the man who looks upon a woman with lust. Also Rom. 7:7: "I had not known lust except the law had said thou shalt not covet." These references show that God looks not so much upon what we do as what we would do. A little thought will make it plain that many things besides love to God lead men to uprightness of life, and yet no actions are truly valuable in God's sight except those prompted by love to God. God has a just right to the undivided affections of all our hearts, and to our constant and untiring service.

For a mortal man to deny these to his Maker is rebellion. To have our hearts set on the creature, or self, or anything aside from God is treason, and it is no apology to say that we are honest among men, or that we are kind to the needy, or that we love anybody or thing. God claims as his our affections. It is no excuse for thieves that they are honest among themselves, nor for traitors that they love each other; neither need we fancy that we have found something truly good in fallen man when we find some that are financially honest or some remains of human kindness among them. The thing required is pure love to God. Is there any of this in the unregenerate heart? if not he is **TOTALLY DEPRAVED**, totally destitute of the essential good that his Maker requires; he may speak with the tongue of men or angels, or give all his goods to feed the poor, or give his body to the flames, and yet he is nothing. God sets no value upon any action of men except what arises from love to him, and has his glory for its object. Hence, if we knew what men would do if all civil law were abolished and every sense of danger of future punishment was removed, then we might see man as God sees him. If all those feelings of self respect in men that lift them above many low, base acts were destroyed; if every restraint were removed from our world save the one, "Love to God," and men were left to act out what is in them, and we could contemplate man in this condition, we would see him as God sees him, we would see that "there is none good," "they are all gone out of the way." Paul's language would not be too hard for us - **TOTAL DEPRAVITY** would be a term sufficiently mild to describe our case.

I confidently believe that there is not a solitary human being on the face of the earth that has any goodness about him save those who love God, and I as confidently believe that none love God save those who have been born of him. "He that loveth is born of God" ** No wonder our Lord taught the necessity of a new birth. The whole mass, the whole race is ruined. Every imagination of the thoughts of the heart is only evil, and that continually. ** Every thought is wrong. "His heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things; who can know it." Perhaps some reader will say, "I am not so bad as all this; I surely think I would not do so bad as some have done." So Peter thought when he said, "Though I should die with thee yet will I not deny thee" - Matt. 26:38, and when the temptation came he fell under it as grass before the keen-edged scythe, and so would you and I, dear reader, were we left to ourselves, and hence our prayer is, "Lord keep me as the apple of thine eye" ** Our Lord teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil."

When the prophet made known to Hazael what he would do to Israel, that he would "set on fire their strongholds, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash their children and rip up their women with child." Hazael replied, "Is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing" - 2nd Kings 8:13-14. But so he did, as his subsequent history shows. So perhaps you would be astonished if you knew what evil things you would do if left to yourself. Hazael seemed to be insulted when he was plainly told of what he would do; and if I tell you that your own evil nature would ride you into the basest of crime if all restraints of grace and of providence were removed, perhaps you will say it is not true. No human being need dare temptation, for he will fall under it as sure as it is presented to him and he left to himself. This the Christian feels, and hence his prayer is, "Lead us not into temptation."

God's word assures us that we are defiled in thought, heart, in body, in mind - every faculty is against God, the whole man is undone. "His heels are where his heart should be and his heart where his heels should be." His heart is on this earth and his heels against God. Oh, reader, hast thou ever seen thyself in this condition ? If thou hast known the pollution of thine own nature, thou wilt not complain of what I have written as too hard. Many a man has groaned and cried for grief when his true state was known to him. "God be merciful to me a sinner." "Oh, wretched man that I am !" "Lord save, I perish !" Such prayers are but expressions of what a truly sensible sinner feels and knows to be true; but have you ever wept over your own sins ? not only your sins, but have you not wept to see how prone you are to sin ? It is hard to tell which grieves us most, our actual sins or our awful proneness to sin. One said, "Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did," and another smites upon his poor, guilty breast, and says, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

At one time you are grieved over your actions, at another you mourn over a sinful nature; by closely observing your heart you perceive there is a fountain of sin within that spoils your devotion, your prayers are ruined and every effort spoiled. Oh, to be stripped of all good and know it; to stand naked before God; to confess that in me there is no good thing, is what we never can forget if we have been there, and yet this is the real condition of every one. Reader, have you this knowledge of your self ? If so, you should ever bless and praise God that you know what it is to be a sinner. You can bear to have your wounds probed to the bottom, and though it be painful and grieves you to know how vile you are, yet you love the man or book that fairly tells you how bad, how corrupt, how rotten, and deceitful you are.

It is not a pleasant task but a painful duty to thus arraign our race before God, and so earnestly plead against mankind as being destitute of any and everything that is good in God's sight; to contend that the whole mass is an unclean thing in the sight of the living God; that my own children and near relatives are by nature utterly void of any good quality; that "dead in sins" describes every unregenerate sinner. I do not thus argue because I want to be singular, or because I want to be unpopular, but duty and sincerity demand that I deal plainly. If we are to do any good by preaching to the people, which I hope to do, it will certainly be by preaching truth. The doctrine of the total depravity of our nature I sincerely believe to be taught in the bible, and to be sustained by the history of man, and to accord with Christian experience, and with sound reason.

The positions above are sustained by the Seventh Article of Faith in the Methodist Discipline, page 19: The Methodists agree with me that this corruption is naturally engendered of the off-spring of Adam. It is not the following of Adam in sinful acts that lies at the bottom, but it is ENGENDERED corruption by which his own nature is inclined to evil, and that CONTINUALLY. If he is continually inclined to evil there is no inclination to good in him, no bias to good, every tendency is to evil. It is his nature to pursue sin, to pursue good is above nature, it is unnatural, and hence no man can, or RATHER WILL pursue good unless he is first born of the spirit, and thus made spiritual. Such seems to be the doctrine entertained by the Methodist.

The Regular Baptist says the same thing, using different words. Article III: "We believe in the total depravity of human nature, and the recovery from that situation is wholly and entirely of the sovereign, free, unmerited grace of God in Christ Jesus." (I quote from the articles of the White River Association, to which I belong). This language is equally as strong as the Methodists use in setting forth the depravity of our nature. I might call attention to the confessions of faith of most all the prominent denominations to show that the wisest

and best men of the world have been convinced that men in nature are wholly inclined to sin with no love to God, no will to serve him, and hence no power to do so.

This great truth ought to be pressed upon the people from the press and the pulpit. Those who plainly preach it now are considered hard and uncharitable, yet it is more desirable to be regarded as an un-charitable preacher than to be an unfaithful one. Let us plainly tell the real condition of fallen man. When it is understood, it makes clear the need of a new birth; it tends to lead saints to God in prayer in behalf of others, with a full assurance that no power save that of God can give life to the dead or regenerate or quicken into life the poor, depraved children of men. It gives us just conceptions of the word grace in the New Testament. It shows the "riches of God's mercy" in the salvation of others as well as ourselves. It forever destroys all grounds of boasting and fills us with the thought that we have no valuable quality, or grace, but what we have received from God.

Oh, reader, had you and I been left to our own choice by nature we would still have been enemies to God, unconcerned about our eternal interest; but such was God's love to us, "even when we were dead in sin," that he quickened us into life, opened our eyes to see how vile we were, removed the enmity of our hearts, and implanted within us his love and fear; and so he leads us through this world, amid trials and crosses of every kind. Though we were once hateful and disobedient, now we do sincerely love God and His people. How ardent ought our love to be to him that thus loved us in our guilt and sin, and brought us to his own fold, cured all our unwillingness and opposition by his own grace, filled our hearts with the joys of pardon. Should we not serve him and honor him in our lives by walking uprightly among men? Let us never forget the hand that broke the fetters of sin that once bound us, and cured that fearful enmity that held us. I would earnestly pray God to bless what I have written under this head to the good of the reader; if it should lead you to investigate the real condition of a sinner, to try your own case seriously.

If you be unregenerate and unconcerned, what think you of what I have written ? Are you sure that your case is not so bad as I have here described ? Is it true with you that there is no fear of God before your eyes ? Is your heart on the things of this world that must pass away ? Oh, dear reader, do not flatter yourself that this disease is anything but fatal. There is but One Physician in the whole universe who can cure you. I may faintly describe your disease, and you will find it as bad as I describe before you are through with it, but I can't cure it. It must be treated by the Physician himself. It can not be treated by letter or prescription, as some say, but by his own presence. Let me ask you seriously to think on what I have written, compare it with the word of God, and may God Almighty grant you grace

and wisdom to know what is true. This fatal indifference that you now manifest must be cured. Your self-sufficient confidence must be broken. But if you have seen and felt yourself to be thus corrupt and evil, so that you long to be free from sin; if you have thirsted for a Savior's love and longed for righteousness, I must say truly that these are good signs of recovery. If your sins fill your heart with grief, and your eyes with tears, and you are led in secret to confess your awful guilt before God, it is a hopeful sign.

Never did God ultimately cast away a poor wretch who sought pardon at his hands. His invitations are to the ends of the earth, and such are you; the hungry, and thirsty, and the lost, and such are you. You will, if you have been killed to sin, one day rejoice in God as a Savior. Oh, how sweet the name of Jesus sounds to those who know the real nature of sin. The whole plan of salvation is full of importance to you. Let us ever adore the God of all grace; that life and immortality have ever been brought to light, and may it be the privilege of the reader and writer to enjoy the full benefits of a crucified Savior in vast eternity. J.H.O.