

No One Is Good

Total Depravity, pt 1

Peter Ditzel

The LORD looked down from heaven on the children of men, to see if there were any who understood, who sought after God. They have all gone aside. They have together become corrupt. There is no one who does good, no, not one.

These two sentences, penned by David in Psalm 14:2–3, contain some powerful ideas. They say that none of the “children of men”—no one in all of humanity—does good, not even one. Now, if you read or watch the news you might be willing to admit that there are some bad characters in the world. But can it possibly be that no one does good? that everyone has “together become corrupt”? If this is true, if additional Scriptures support it, it might revolutionize your understanding of sin and salvation and even your entire worldview!

You might react very strongly to someone who says no one does good and all are corrupt or no good. After all, if someone falls in the street and a passerby helps him up, that is a good act. And we can all think of acts of kindness and charity by people of all faiths and even people of no faith.

To understand Psalm 14, we must grasp its perspective: Its perspective is that of the sinless, absolutely and perfectly righteous God looking to see if there are any who seek God. What does He see? No one does good in seeking God. They all sin. Even those who try to seek God do not meet His perfect standards of righteousness and are therefore unsuccessful.

Chances are, even though the Word of God says this (and I will cite many supporting Scriptures), this is not what is taught in churches you have attended and is, therefore, a new concept to you. I can say “chances are” because this is not what is taught in the majority of churches today. Contrary to what was usually taught until relatively recently in the history of the church, most churches teach that people have enough goodness in them that, if stirred up by the right evangelical message, anyone can and will seek after God. This is reflected in a number of teachings and practices of various churches, most visibly in altar calls.

In churches that have altar calls, the minister delivering the message believes it is his duty to so stir the unsaved among his listeners that he will persuade them to choose Jesus Christ as their Savior (seek after God). But the Bible, as we have seen, says that no one does good in seeking God. Therefore, if no one can successfully seek God, no one can choose Jesus Christ.

You might be thinking that Psalm 14:2–3 is an obscure Scripture from the Old Testament. But, in fact, in the New Testament the apostle Paul cites this same Scripture: “As it is written, ‘There is no one righteous; no, not one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks after God.

Copyright © 2001, 2009, 2019 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact. Unless otherwise noted, Bible references are from the World English Bible (WEB).

no-one-is-good.pdf

They have all turned aside. They have together become unprofitable. There is no one who does good, no, not so much as one” (Romans 3:10-12). But how has this come about? If no one can choose Jesus Christ as Savior, how does He become one’s Savior?

In the Beginning

To answer the first question as to how this has all come about, we must look back to the Creation. The Scriptures teach us that God gave Adam a command and warned of the punishment for breaking the command: “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die’” (Genesis 2:16-17).

Were Adam and Eve to eat of this tree, they would die. Apparently, if they did not eat of this tree, they would not die. The Serpent, Satan, lied to Eve by telling her she would not die if she ate from the tree (Genesis 3:4). Eve was taken in by Satan’s lie and ate. Adam was not deceived, but, perhaps weakly trying to please his wife and do anything to win her approval, he also ate (1 Timothy 2:14). So Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had forbidden to them (Genesis 3:6). This resulted in several things.

The most obvious are: 1) they realized their nakedness (verse 7), indicating that they had lost an innocence they possessed before their disobedience; and 2) they brought the death sentence on themselves. This gives some insight into Adam and Eve’s state before their Fall—that is, their state before they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Before their Fall, Adam and Eve were without sin. Not having ever sinned, they were in a state of innocence. After the Fall, Adam and Eve’s nature changed. They became sinful. This can be seen by their trying to hide their nakedness with fig leaves (verse 7). Doing so was a type of trying to cover their sins through human works. This was not effective. God had to cover their nakedness with animal skins that required the shedding of blood (verse 21), typifying the sacrifice of Christ. Adam and Eve’s sinful nature can also be seen in their hiding from God and in their not giving God a straightforward answer to His questions while blaming others for their sin (verses 8–13).

Also, before the Fall, Adam and Eve did not yet have the death sentence on them; if they had remained in their state of innocence, they would not have died.

God told Adam that he would die “in the day” he ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But, while the sentence for physical death occurred “in the day” they sinned, did they also experience death that day?

In Matthew 8:22, Jesus calls people who are physically alive “dead.” Paul also writes:

You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience; amongst whom we also all once lived in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, for his

great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

Ephesians 2:1-5

So we see that, because of their sin, Adam and Eve spiritually died on the day they disobeyed. And this spiritual death is passed on to all of their descendants.

Spiritual Death

Sin results in a death that reigns even while we are physically alive. In Isaiah 59:2, we find that sin separates us from God. This separation is spiritual death. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were separated from God. God sent them out of the Garden of Eden and prevented their access to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:22-24).

Now we must ask a key question, a question the answer to which has tremendous significance for all humanity: Was this spiritual death that occurred in the Garden of Eden passed to Adam's descendants? The answer is, Yes. Adam's sin is put on the account of—imputed to—everyone, and everyone enters into physical life already spiritually dead.

King David wrote: “Behold, I was born in iniquity. In sin my mother conceived me” (Psalms 51:5). If David was sinful at birth—even at conception—then that sin could not have been the result of his own actions. Adam was the father and representative of the human race. His sin fell upon all of us. Also, because we were, so to speak, in Adam's loins when he sinned, we also sinned with him (this principle of being in someone's loins can be found in Hebrews 7:10).

This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “Therefore as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Everyone was made a sinner and was condemned through Adam's sin: “So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life. For as through the one man's disobedience many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one, many will be made righteous” (verses 18-19). Therefore, all humans are from birth—or even conception—spiritually dead. They are spiritually separated from God and in need of being restored to spiritual fellowship with Him. This restoration of spiritual fellowship with God is often called reconciliation.

Adam and Eve had and lost immortality. All of their descendants who have not been saved through Jesus Christ possess only physical, biological life (1 John 3:15; 5:12). They are spiritually dead now—separated from God—and with their biological death their chance for salvation is gone (Ephesians 2:1, 12; Colossians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 3:13; 4:7; Luke 13:23-28; Matthew 13:41-43; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13). Therefore, with their death, they become eternally dead. This does not mean they do not have existence. Existence is not life. Life is either biological life or spiritual life (fellowship with God). The unsaved dead have neither. Although they exist in torment, they are dead because they are separated from God (Matthew 25:30-46; Mark 9:43-48; Revelation 20:15; 21:8, 27; 22:14-15). These biblical definitions of life and death help us to understand the hopeless, dead state of the natural man and thus the necessity for God's sovereign grace in man's salvation.

Saved Christians have physical life as do all people. Additionally, they have eternal life because their fellowship with God is restored; they cannot suffer eternal death, which is separation from God for eternity (John 17:3; 1 John 1:3; 5:11; Ephesians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; 5:10; Romans 8:38-39).

Total Depravity

Until someone is reconciled to God, he or she is dead in trespasses and sins, spiritually dead, separated from God, and unable to seek Him. Such a person is unable to reconcile him- or herself to God. As we have already seen, he or she cannot even accept Jesus Christ as Savior to bring about this reconciliation. This is called inability. We are unable to save ourselves; we are even unable on our own to accept Jesus Christ as Savior.

The corruption that causes this inability is called total depravity. Total depravity means every aspect of man's nature is corrupt, and because of corruption there is nothing man can do to win or earn saving favor with God. Like physical death and spiritual death, total depravity is a part of the penalty for sin. Depravity does not cause death, but goes hand-in-hand with death as part of sin's wages.

Total depravity is the first of the five doctrines of grace, which many call the five points of Calvinism. These five points or doctrines are: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance (sometimes called Preservation) of the Saints. The first letters of these points form the acronym TULIP.

Total depravity corrupts the image of God in man, that part of man that sets him apart from animals—his mind and rationality. Because of this corruption, we are sinners. Many people who answer altar calls are sorrowful for one or a number of sins they have committed. But they are unaware, because they have not been told, that they have more problems than just a few sins. They are sinners. Any biblically based dictionary that was really being honest would contain the following definition: "Human—a sinner." We do not just commit some sins. On our own, ever since Adam sinned, we are by nature sinners.

Please don't mistake me for saying that we are not responsible for our sin. Everyone sins willingly, and is, therefore, responsible. What I am saying is that this willingness to sin is a part of our nature. But this fact that we sin by nature does not make us less culpable. Adam's choosing to sin was, in effect, the entire human race's choosing to sin. Thus, our responsibility remains even though we are unable to do anything that God would consider good. Ever since Adam, humanity is in bondage to sin, no one has any inherent righteousness, and we are to blame.

By nature, a beaver gnaws down trees, builds dams and lodges, etc. It can do nothing that is contrary to its nature as that would be contrary to its very being. Likewise, an ant does only what it can do by nature. It is unable to do what a beaver does or what a firefly does. In the same way, unless first reborn into new creatures, humans can only do what humans do by nature; and from the standpoint of the perfectly righteous God, what they do is sin. None of the things people do that from a human point of view seem to be good measure up to God's perfect standard of righteousness. So, while someone may do good things, the doing of those things will never win him or her favor with God. Because all are sinners, everything everyone does is tainted in some way or other by sinfulness.

The natural man does not glorify God. For all his good works, his motive is wrong. Paul exhorts, “Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31), and, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen” (Romans 11:36). All that we do should be done for His glory, and if it is not—however good a work it may seem—it is sin.

In Isaiah 64:6-7 we read, “For we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteousness is like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have consumed us by means of our iniquities.”

We have already seen that David said he was conceived in sin and born in sin. One can hardly think of any more passive actions than being conceived and born; yet David said these were sin. And such sin, even the imputed sin of Adam, causes spiritual death. I want to emphasize that this is a death, not just a sickness. Sinners are not, as some say, sick and in need of a cure. They are dead and in need of new life.

In part 2 of this Total Depravity series, “The New Birth,” we’ll discuss how God can rescue us from our hopeless condition.