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## Why We Believe in Total Depravity

A message preached by Rev Ivan Foster at a Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony meeting, London, May 24th, 2013.

"And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man," Mark 7:20-23.

May I say a little by way of defining what I mean by total depravity at the beginning of our study.

We can hardly do better than quote John Calvin's statement of the teaching of the Word of God on the natural spiritual state of unregenerate man.

One quotation will suffice for our purpose. He writes:

"...our nature is not only destitute of all good, but is so fertile in all evils that it cannot remain inactive. Those who have called it concupiscence have used an expression not improper, if it were only added, which is far from being conceded by most persons, that everything in man, the understanding and will, the soul and body, is polluted and engrossed by this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that man is of himself nothing else but concupiscence." Institutes, Vol. I, Bk. II, Chap. 1, Para. 8.

Our own Shorter catechism states the matter thus:

"Q18: Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?

The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called Original Sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it."

These statements of doctrine are, of course, but expositions of what the Bible teaches.

Look at these the verses.

- "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," Genesis 6:5.
- "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Jeremiah 17:9.
- "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man," Mk 7:21-23.
- These verses, taken in conjunction with James 3:10-13 clearly teach the total depravity of the human heart and its inability to produced good.
- "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh," James 3:10-12.

### **I. As a doctrine it is plainly taught in the Scriptures.**

#### **1. The Scriptural proofs given in the Shorter catechism illustrates this for us.**



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- "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous," Romans 5:19.
- "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one," Romans 3:10.
- "And you [hath he quickened], who were dead in trespasses and sins," Ephesians 2:1.
- "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me," Psalm 51:5.
- "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are [the things] which defile a man," Matthew 15:19-20.

**2. Furthermore, it is a doctrine which must be taught if we are to see sinners saved.** Men must be convinced of their need of a Saviour. David Clarkson, a Puritan, 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."

That states the matter plainly.

The Saviour put it this way. "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick," Matthew 9:12. A sinner must be made to feel his sickness before he will consider God's remedy. Hence the need to press the doctrine of man's lost and helpless condition. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool," Isaiah 1:18.

**3. It is a doctrine which extols the grace and mercy of God.** That the Lord should set His love upon those who are totally depraved and therefore without any merits or moral value, elevates and honours His tender grace. The doctrine of total depravity is the perfect background for magnifying the love of God to lost mankind. "Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound," Romans 5:20.

**4. It is a doctrine which exhibits the victory of grace in the saved.** As the raising of Lazarus from a grave stinking with the decay of man's corruption shows the glorious power of Christ, so the saving, preserving and glorifying of those whom Christ has rescued from the grave of total depravity exhibits wondrously the Saviour's great power. "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light," 1 Peter 2:9. "Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them," Ephesians 2:5-10.

### II. The Lord exercises a restraint upon depraved humanity

This has to be so, given the bottomless pit of man's sinfulness.

That there is divine restraint is clear, otherwise, like the Gadarene swine, mankind would long ago have



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rushed headlong into the abyss!

That restraint has been exercised from the very beginning of man's sinfulness. Consider the measures God took immediately after Adam's fall in order to stop him making things even worse by greater acts of sin. "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life," Genesis 3:22-24.

That same restraint was seen again at work in the days of man's rebellion at Babel. "And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth," Genesis 11:6-9.

In the Psalm 2, that little compendium of prophetic truth, we see a picture of the end-time rebellion against the Lord and against His Christ by the Gentile kings who serve Antichrist. Note what they say. "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us," Psalm 2:1-3. It is man rising up to cast away the restraints by which God has curtailed the wicked instincts and endeavours of mankind.

**1. The Lord exercises that restraint through His people and their witness.** "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid," Matt 5:14.

"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men," Matthew 5:13.

"Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah," Isaiah 1:9.

The salt of God's grace in the lives of His people and the light of their witness and testimony acts as a hindrance to the advance of corruption, a restraint upon the corrupt impulses of wicked men.

**2. The ongoing work of conversion acts as a restraint.** As the conversion and witness of the man of Gadara served as a check upon the spirit of the people living in his area so it is still today. In like fashion the resurrection of Lazarus from the grave had a wonderful saving impact upon his neighborhood. "Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus," John 12:9-11.

**3. The direct judgments of God have acted as restraints.** God has often cowed the spirit of rebellious defiant man by a manifesting of His wrath and judgment against sin. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness," Romans 1:18. Man may profess to utterly reject the existence of God but he swiftly casts aside such atheism when it pleases God to display His wrath and judgment. Man is thereby cowed and his wickedness suppressed by such displays. It has happened in the past in the days of Noah, in the days of Lot and in the days of the judgment of the Canaanite nations. It will happen most spectacularly in the day of Christ's return. "And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed



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as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" Revelation 6:12-17.

Here is the army of Antichrist defiantly taking the field of battle against Christ. But how swiftly that defiance and mutinous spirit evaporates in the face of the manifested glory of Christ?

In like manner, God has cowed the spirit of man by a mere glimpse of His judgment and wrath amongst the nations.

### **III. In the fulness of time God will permit a ripening of man's depravity and an entering upon a harvest of judgment**

**1. This is a day of restraint.** It has to be noted, however, that there are numerous signs of that restraint being lifted. The time of Psalm 2:1-3 is drawing near.

Paul taught about the time of the lifting of the divine restraint and the opening of the floodgates of man's depravity.

"And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved," 2 Thessalonians 2:6-10.

**2. God is holding the spirit of man's total depravity in check until that time which He has ordained to confront and overthrow man's rebelliousness forever.** This is illustrated for us in Zechariah. "And I said, What is it? And he said, This is an ephah that goeth forth. He said moreover, This is their resemblance through all the earth. And, behold, there was lifted up a talent of lead: and this is a woman that sitteth in the midst of the ephah. And he said, This is wickedness. And he cast it into the midst of the ephah; and he cast the weight of lead upon the mouth thereof. Then lifted I up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came out two women, and the wind was in their wings; for they had wings like the wings of a stork: and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heaven. Then said I to the angel that talked with me, Whither do these bear the ephah? And he said unto me, To build it an house in the land of Shinar: and it shall be established, and set there upon her own base." Zechariah 5:6-11. Here "wickedness", the very essence of man's depravity, is represented as a woman suppressed and confined within an ephah or jar until a base is established for it in the land of Shinar or Babylon or modern Iraq. Quite literally, God is keeping a lid on man's rebellion until His appointed time of Judgment.

**3. It is then the restraint will be lifted and iniquity will be permitted to take its course and reach its fulness under Antichrist and meet its destruction by Christ in the valley of Jehoshaphat.**

"Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause thy mighty ones to come down, O LORD. Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about. Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the fats overflow; for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining. The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will



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be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the LORD, and shall water the valley of Shittim. Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom shall be a desolate wilderness, for the violence against the children of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation. For I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed: for the LORD dwelleth in Zion," Joel 3:9-21.

**4. During the Millennial reign of Christ, man's depravity will be wondrously suppressed and kept under by Christ.** "Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him," Psalm 2:8-12.

"And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS," Revelation 19:11-16.

**5. But it is in the glorious realm which will follow the resurrection of the wicked and their eternal damnation in the lake of fire that human depravity will be forever banished without trace.** "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death," Revelation 21:8.

Here is the final demise of the depraved and their works.