

# THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCE

## Chapter 2 REALITY

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### Transcript

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Chapter 2

REALITY

The spiritual impotence of the natural man is no mere product of theological dyspepsia, nor is it a dismal dogma invented during the Dark Ages. It is a solemn fact affirmed by Holy Writ, manifested throughout human history, confirmed in the conscious experience of every genuinely convicted soul. The moral powerlessness of the sinner is not proclaimed in the pulpit today, nor is it believed in by professing Christians generally. When it is insisted that man is so completely the bondsman of sin that he cannot move toward God, the vast majority will regard the statement as utterly unreasonable and reject it with scorn. To tell those who consider themselves to be hale and hearty that they are without strength strikes them as a preposterous assumption unworthy of serious consideration. OBJECTIONS OF UNBELIEF When a servant of God does press this unwelcome truth on his hearers, the fertile mind of unbelief promptly replies with one objection after another. If we are totally devoid of spiritual ability, then assuredly we must be aware of the fact. But that is far from being the case. The skeptic says we are very much aware of our power to do that which is pleasing in God's sight; even though we do not perform it, we could if we would. He also contends that were we so completely the captives of Satan as is declared, we should not be free agents at all. Such a concept as that we will not allow for a moment. Another point of the skeptic is that if man has no power to do that which God requires, then obviously he is not a responsible creature, for he cannot justly be held accountable to do that which is beyond his powers to achieve. We must establish the fact of man's spiritual impotence and show that it is a solemn reality; for until we do this, it is useless to discuss the nature of that impotence, its seat, its extent or its cause. And it is to the inspired Word of God alone that we shall make our appeal; for if the Scriptures of truth plainly teach this doctrine, then we are on sure ground and may not reject its testimony even though no one else on earth believed it. If the divine oracles affirm it, then none of the objections brought against it by the carnal mind can have any weight with us, though in due course we shall endeavor to show that these objections are as pointless as they are groundless. In approaching more definitely the task now before us it should be pointed out that, strictly speaking, it is the subject of human depravity which we are going to write on; yet to have so designated this section would be rather misleading as we are going to confine ourselves to only one aspect of it. The spiritual impotence of the natural man forms a distinct and separate branch of his

depravity. The state of evil into which the fall has plunged us is far more dreadful and its dire consequences far more wide-reaching than is commonly supposed. The common idea is that though man has fallen he is not so badly damaged but that he may recover himself, providing he properly exercises his remaining strength or with due attention improves the help proffered him. But his case is vastly more serious than that. A. A. Hodge said: The three main elements involved in the consequences entailed by the sin of Adam upon his posterity are these: First, the guilt, or just penal responsibility of Adam's first sin or apostatizing act, which is imputed or judicially charged upon his descendants, whereby every child is born into the world in a state of antenatal forfeiture or condemnation. Second, the entire depravity of our nature, involving a sinful innate disposition inevitably leading to actual transgression. Third, the entire inability of the soul to change its own nature, or to do any thing spiritually good in obedience to the Divine Law.

**GOD'S WORD ON THE SUBJECT** Let us consider some of the solemn declarations of our Lord on the third of these dire consequences of the fall. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Until a man is born again he remains in his natural, fallen and depraved state and so long as that is the case it is utterly impossible for him to discern or perceive divine things. Sin has both darkened his understanding and destroyed his spiritual vision. "The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble" (Prov. 4:19). Though divine instruction is supplied them, though God has given them His Word in which the way to heaven is plainly marked out, still they are incapable of profiting from it. Moses represented them as groping at noonday (Deut. 28:29), and Job declares, "They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night" (5:14). Jeremiah depicts them as walking in "slippery ways in the darkness" (23:12). Now this darkness which envelops the natural man is a moral one, having its seat in the soul. Our Saviour declared, "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matt. 6:22-23). The heart is the same to the soul as the eye is to the body. As a sound eye lets in natural light, so a good heart lets in spiritual light; and as a blind eye shuts out natural light, so an evil heart shuts out spiritual light. Accordingly we find the apostle expressly ascribing the darkness of the understanding to the blindness of the heart. He represents all men as "having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18). While sinners remain under the entire dominion of a wicked heart they are altogether blind to the spiritual excellence of the character, the works and the ways of God. "Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not" (Jer. 5:21). The natural man is blind. This awful fact was affirmed again and again by our Lord as He addressed hypocritical scribes thus: "blind leaders of the blind," "ye blind guides," "thou blind Pharisee" (Matt. 15:14; 23:24, 26). Paul said: "The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (2 Cor. 4:4). There is in the unregenerate mind an incompetence, an incapacity, an inability to understand the things of the Spirit; and Christ's repeated miracle in restoring sight to the naturally blind was designed to teach us our imperative need of the same divine power recovering spiritual vision to our souls. A question has been raised as to whether this blindness of the natural man is partial or total, whether it is simply a defect of vision or whether he has no vision at all. The nature of his disease may best be defined as spiritual myopia or shortsightedness. He is able to see clearly objects which are nearby, but distant ones lie wholly beyond the range of his vision. In other words, the mind's eye of the sinner is capable of perceiving natural things, but he has no ability to see spiritual things. Holy Writ states that the one who "lacketh these things," namely, the graces of faith, virtue, knowledge, and so forth, mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-7, is "blind, and cannot see afar off" (v. 9). The Book therefore urges him to

receive "eyesalve" from Christ, that he may see (Rev. 3:18). For this very purpose the Son of God came into the world: to give "deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). Concerning those who are the subjects of this miracle of grace it is said, "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). This is the fulfillment of our Lord's promise: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). God is light, therefore those who are alienated from Him are in complete spiritual darkness. They do not see the frightful danger to which they are exposed. Though they are led captive by Satan from day to day and year to year, they are totally unaware of his malignant influence over them. They are blind to the nature and tendency of their religious performances, failing to perceive that no matter how earnestly they engage in them, they cannot be acceptable to God while their minds are at enmity against Him. They are blind to the way and means of recovery. The awful thing is that the natural man is quite blind to the blindness of his heart which is insensibly leading him to "the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 13). That is why the vast majority live so securely and peacefully. It has always appeared strange to the godly why the ungodly can be so unconcerned while under sentence of death, and conduct themselves so frivolously and gaily while exposed to the wrath to come. John was surprised to see the wicked spending their days in carnality and feasting. David was grieved at the prosperity of the wicked and could not account for their not being in trouble as other men. Amos was astonished to behold the sinners in Zion living at ease, putting the evil day far from them, lying on beds of ivory. Nothing but their spiritual blindness can explain the conduct of the vast majority of mankind, crying peace and safety when exposed to impending destruction. MAN'S OPPOSITION Since all sinners are involved in such spiritual darkness as makes them unaware of their present condition and condemnation, it is not surprising that they are so displeased when their fearful danger is plainly pointed out. Such faithful warning tends to disturb their present peace and comfort and to destroy their future hopes and prospects of happiness. If they were once made to truly realize the imminent danger of the damnation of hell, their ease, security and joy would be completely dispelled. They cannot bear, therefore, to hear the plain truth respecting their wretchedness and guilt. Sinners could not bear to hear the plain teachings of the prophets or Christ on this account; this explains their bitter complaints and fierce opposition. They regard as enemies those who try to befriend them. They stop their ears and run from them. That the natural man—even the most zealous religionist—has no perception of this spiritual blindness, and that he is highly displeased when charged with it, is evident: "Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind. And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? And Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:39-41). God's Son became incarnate for the purpose of bringing to light the hidden things of darkness. He came to expose things, that those made conscious of their blindness might receive sight, but that they who had spiritual sight in their own estimation should be "made blind"—judicially abandoned to the pride of their evil hearts. The infatuated Pharisees had no desire for such an experience. Denying their blindness, they were left in their sin. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). He cannot see the things of God because by nature he is enveloped in total spiritual darkness; even though external light shine on him, he has no eyes with which to see. "The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). When the Lord of life and light appeared among them, men had no eyes to see His beauty, but despised and rejected Him. And so it is still; every verse in Scripture which treats of the Spirit's illumination confirms this solemn fact. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). This giving of light and knowledge is by divine power, being analogous to that power by which

the light at the first creation was provided. As far as spiritual, saving knowledge of the truth is concerned, the mind of fallen man is like the chaos before God said "Let there be light." "Darkness was upon the face of the deep," and in that state it is impossible for men to understand the things of the Spirit. Not only is the understanding of the natural man completely under the dominion of darkness, but his will is paralyzed against good; and if that is so, the sinner is indeed impotent. This fact was made clear by Christ when He affirmed, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). And why is it that the sinner cannot come to Christ by his own unaided powers? Because he has no inclination to do so and, therefore, no volition in that direction. The Greek might be rendered "Ye will not come to me." There is not the slightest desire in the unregenerate heart to do so. The will of fallen man is depraved, being completely in bondage to sin. There is not merely a negative lack of inclination, but there is a positive disinclination. The unwillingness consists of aversion: "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). And not only is there an aversion against God, there is a hatred of Him. Christ said to His disciples, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). This hatred is inveterate obstinacy: "The Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people" (Exodus 32:9). "All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people" (Rom. 10:21). Man is incorrigible and in himself his case is hopeless. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Ps. 110:3) because they have no power whatever of their own to effect such willingness. Since we have demonstrated from the Scriptures of truth that the natural man is utterly unable to discern spiritual things, much less to choose them, there is little need for us to labor the point that he is quite incompetent to perform any spiritual act. Nor is this only a logical inference drawn by theologians; it is expressly affirmed in the Word: "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). There is no denying the meaning of that terrible indictment, as there is no likelihood of its originating with man himself. Jeremiah said, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (10:23). All power to direct our steps in the paths of righteousness was lost by us at the fall, and therefore we are entirely dependent on God to work in us "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Little as this solemn truth of man's moral impotence is known today and widely as it is denied by modern thought and teaching, there was a time when it was generally contended for. In the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (to which all her ministers must still solemnly and formally subscribe) the Tenth reads thus: The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 6 begins thus: Our first parents being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

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