

The Total Depravity of Man Chapter 5

TRANSMISSION

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

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In introducing this aspect of our subject we cannot do better than set before the reader what A. A. Hodge pointed out in *Outlines of Theology* as ...the self-evident moral principles which must ever be certainly presupposed in every inquiry into the dealings of God with His responsible creatures. (1) God cannot be the Author of sin. (2) We must not believe that He could consistently with His own perfections create a creature *de novo* (anew, originally) with a sinful nature. (3) The perfection of righteousness, not bare sovereignty, is the grand distinction of all God's dealings. (4) It is a heathen notion that the "order of nature" or "the nature of things" or "natural law" is a real agent independent of God, limiting His freedom or acting with Him as an independent concause (joint cause) in producing effects. (5) We cannot believe that God would inflict either moral or physical evil upon any creature whose natural rights had not been previously forfeited.

State the two distinct questions thence arising, which, though frequently confused, it is essential to keep separate. First, how does an innate sinful nature originate in each human being at the commencement of his existence, so that the Maker of the man is not the cause of his sin? If this corruption of nature originated in Adam, how is it transmitted to us? Second, why, on what ground of injustice, does God inflict this terrible evil, the root ground of all other evils, at the very commencement of personal existence? What fair probation have infants born in sin enjoyed? When, and why, were their rights as new created beings forfeited? It is self-evident that these questions are distinct and should be treated as such. The first may possibly be answered on physical grounds. The second question, however, concerns the moral government of God and inquires concerning the justice of His dispensations. In the history of theology, of all ages and in all schools, very much confusion has resulted from the failure to emphasize and preserve prominent this distinction.

Guilt of Adam's Posterity The why has been discussed by us at some length: the guilt of Adam's offense was imputed to all his posterity because he served as their covenant head and federal representative. Since they were legally one with him, the punishment passed upon him falls on them too, involving them in

all the dire consequences of his crime. One of the most terrible of those consequences is the receiving of a sinful nature, which brings us to consider the how of the great human tragedy. We do not propose to make any attempt to enter into a philosophical or metaphysical inquiry as to how God can be the Creator and Maker of our beings (Job 31:15), the "Father of spirits" (Heb. 12:9), and yet not be the Author of the sin now inhering in our natures. Rather we shall confine ourselves to an examination of the bare facts which Scripture presents on the subject. Nowhere in the Word of God is the pollution of fallen man ascribed to the holy One; it is uniformly attributed to human propagation: by natural generation a corrupt offspring is begotten and conceived by corrupt parents. It was a divinely instituted law of the original creation that like should produce like, which plainly appears in that clause "whose seed is in itself" (Gen. 1:11-12), and in that oft repeated expression "after his kind" (vv. 21, 24, 25). That law has never been revoked—as the biology of every department of nature demonstrates. Hence it follows that since the whole human race sinned in its covenant head, and since every member of it receives its nature from him, when the fountain itself became polluted, all the streams issuing from it were polluted too. A corrupt tree can bring forth nothing but corrupt fruit. Since the root became unholy, its branches must also be unholy. All of Adam's offspring simply perpetuate what began in him; from the first moment of their existence they become participants of his impurity. Though our immediate parents are the occasion of conveying a depraved nature to their children, that nature is derived originally from the first man. In other words, the present relation of father and son is not that of cause and effect, but that of an instrument or channel in transmitting the sinfulness of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 5:3 we are told, "Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image." That occurred after his fearful defection, and the statement is in designed and direct contrast with the declaration of verse 1: "In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him." Adam did not communicate to his descendants the pure nature which he had originally by creation, but the polluted one which he acquired by the fall. It is very striking to note the precise place where this statement is made in the sacred narrative: not at the beginning of Genesis 4 in connection with the begetting of Cain and Abel, but here, introducing a lengthy obituary list—showing that dying Adam could only beget mortals. The image of God included both holiness and immortality, but since Adam had lost them and become sinful and mortal, he could propagate none but those in his own fallen likeness, which had in it corruption and death (I Cor. 15:49-50; cf. v.22). The copy answered to the original. Adam could not beget in any other way than in his own image, for a clean thing will not issue from an unclean. A depraved parent could produce nothing but a depraved child. Born in Adam's fallen likeness, not only in substance but in qualities also, all of his posterity are but a continuous repetition of himself. This is remarkably intimated in the opening verse of Psalm 14 which has for its theme the awful depravity of the human race. John Owen pointed out: There is a peculiar distinguishing mark put upon this Psalm, in that it is found twice in the book of Psalms. The fourteenth and fifty-third Psalms are the same, with the alteration of one or two expressions at most. And there is another mark put upon its deep importance in that the apostle transcribed a great part of it in Romans iii.

Psalm 14 opens with the statement "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." The careful reader will notice that the words "there is" have been supplied by the translators—unnecessarily, we feel. The fool does not say in his head, "There is no God"; rather he says in his heart, "No God for me. I decline allegiance to Him." It is not intellectual unbelief denying the existence of Deity, but the enmity of a rebel who refuses to practically own or be in subjection to God. "The fool hath said in his heart, No God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works" (Ps. 14:1). Most significant and noticeable is that change of number in the pronouns, though for some strange reason it appears to have escaped the notice of the commentators—at any rate none whom we have consulted makes any reference to it. As stated above, the verses which follow give a full description of the deplorable condition of all mankind, and that is

prefaced with a statement about "the fool." Nor is there the slightest difficulty in identifying him. Who is the fool of all fools? Adam was the arch-fool. His heart had become devoid of wisdom. Thus was the father of our race. What could his children be like? Our verse answers, "They are corrupt," and prove themselves to be so by doing abominable works. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). This is the sad confession which every one of us makes. Born in the likeness of Adam as a fallen creature, all of his descendants are but replicas of himself. And since moral corruption is transmitted by him to them according to a fixed law of heredity, that corruption dates from the very beginning of their existence. Because by being Adam's children they are depraved, it necessarily follows that they must be so as soon as they are his children. David was the son of lawful and honorable marriage, yet from his parents he received Adam's vitiated nature with all its evil dispositions. Note that he was careful to intimate that it was not by divine infusion, but by natural generation and human propagation. He mentioned it, not to excuse his fearful fall but to concede it. Matthew Henry states that David said in effect, "Had I duly considered this before I should not have made so bold with the temptation, nor have ventured among the sparks with such tinder in my heart." The realization that our whole being is horribly degenerated from its pristine purity and rectitude should make us thoroughly distrustful of self and cause us to walk most warily. Because our very nature is contaminated, we enter the world a mass of potential wickedness, which is one reason why Job declared, "I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: to the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister" (17:14). Hervey tells us the Hebrew word there for worm signifies a grub, which is bred by and feeds upon putrefaction. I commenced my existence with all sorts of impurity in my nature, with every cursed propensity to evil, with everything earthly, sensual, devilish in my mind. That depraved nature is the source of all other miseries, the root from which proceed all evil actions. This solemn and sad fact is demonstrated by antithesis. Why was it necessary for Christ to be incarnated supernaturally by the miracle of the virgin birth? So that what was born of Mary should be "that holy thing" (Luke 1:35), which would not have been the case if He had been begotten by natural generation from a man. Though this doctrine of original sin, of antenatal defilement, is purely a matter of divine revelation, it explains what nothing else does, namely, that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21)—in every instance, Christ alone excepted. "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent" (Ps. 58:3-4). There are three indictments here made against fallen human nature. First, that from the beginning of his existence man is alienated from God, divorced from His favor, cut off from fellowship with Him. Second, that he evidences his deplorable state as soon as he enters this world, manifesting his sinfulness in the cradle. Third, that he turns to his own way, and the very first steps he takes are in that broad road which leads to destruction. Why? Because his very being is poisoned and poisonous, malicious; he is at odds with God and goodness and his fellowmen—"hateful, and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). This poison "is like the poison of a serpent." The serpent does not acquire his venom, but is generated a poisonous creature. Poison, deadly poison, is its very nature from the outset, and when it bites it only acts out that with which it was born. Though its poison is hidden, it is lurking there, ready for use as soon as it is provoked. B.W. Newton stated: Antecedent to all trespasses and acts of sin, before any apprehension of good or evil has dawned upon our hearts, before any notion respecting God has been formed in our souls, before we have uttered a word or conceived a thought, sin—essential sin—is found to dwell within us. Bound up with our being, it enters into every sensation, lives in every thought, sways every faculty. If the senses, by means of which we communicate with the external world, had never acted: if our eye had never seen, and our ear had never heard; if our throat had never proved itself to be an open sepulchre, breathing forth corruption; if our tongue had never shown itself to be set on fire of hell; still sin would have been the secret mistress of that world of thought and feeling which is found within us, and every hidden impulse there would have been

enmity against God.

When therefore Scripture speaks of men as sinners, it refers not only to their practice but chiefly to their evil nature—a nature which is conveyed by Adam and transmitted from parent to child in successive generations. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Prov. 22:15). This foolishness is not merely intellectual ignorance but a positive principle of evil, for in the book of Proverbs the "fool" is not the idiot but the sinner. This corruption is deep-rooted. It does not lie on the surface, like some of the child's habits, which may easily be corrected. That moral madness, as Matthew Henry pointed out, "is not only found there, but bound there; it is annexed to the heart." It is rooted and riveted in him from the first breath he draws. This is the birthright of all Adam's progeny. "The little innocent" is a misnomer of fondness and fancy. John Bunyan said: I do confess it is my opinion that children come polluted with sin into the world, and that oft-times the sins of youth, especially while they are very young, are rather by virtue of indwelling sin than by examples that are set before them by others; not but they may learn to sin by example, too, but example is not the root, but rather the temptation to sin.

The rod of correction (not of caprice or passion) is the means prescribed by God, and under His blessing it will prevent many an outburst of the flesh. "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Prov. 29:15). C. Bridges agreed: "Discipline is the order of God's government. Parents are His dispensers of it to their children. The child must be broken in, to 'bear the yoke in his youth' (Lam. 3, 27). Let reproof be tried first; and if it succeed, let the rod be spared (Prov. 17, 10). If not, let it do its work." If parents fail to do their duty, there will be sad consequences. The "mother" only is mentioned as being brought to shame, because she is usually the most indulgent, and because she normally feels most keenly the affliction brought upon herself by her own neglect. But fathers too are disgraced. Eli gave reproof but spared the rod (I Sam. 2:22-25; 3:13), and paid dearly for his folly. What dishonor was brought upon David's name and what poignant grief must have filled him because his perverted fondness brought his sons to their ruin—one excused while in the most aggravated sin (II Sam. 14:28-33; 15:6; 18:33), another not corrected by even a word (I Kings 1:5-9). As E Hopkins said, "Take this for certain, that as many deserved stripes as you spare from your children, you do but lay up for your own backs." A child does not have to be taught to sin. Remove all inhibitions and prohibitions and he will bring his parents to the grave in sorrow. If the child is humored and no real efforts are made to counteract its evil propensities, it will assuredly grow more self-willed and intractable. How far the Scriptures are from flattering us! A "transgressor from the womb" (Isa. 48:8) is one of the hereditary titles of everyone entering this world. We are transgressors by internal disposition before we are so in external acts. Every parent is the channel of moral contagion to his offspring, who are by nature "children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). Original sin is transmitted as leprosy is conveyed to the children of lepers. That is one reason why the corruption of nature is designated our "old man": it is coeval with our beings. Our very "heart," the center of our moral being, from which are "the issues [outgoings] of life," is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked from the very first moment of its existence. Some argue that if corruption is passed to all men from their first parents, then why are not all equally corrupt? They contend that some people are not subject to inordinate affections, but are respectable and law-abiding citizens. There are two answers to that objection. First, although, everything else being equal, such a conclusion is logical, it will not necessarily follow that all men will manifest the corruption in the same manner, or even to the same extent. When we say "everything else being equal," we include such things as the watchful care of pious parents, the discipline of a good education, the demands and effects of a refined environment, the positions and circumstances in which one and another may be placed. For while none of these things, nor all of them combined, can produce any change in a person's nature, they are factors which exert an

influence on his outward conduct. Nevertheless, though one man may have less dissolute manners than another, still his imaginations are not pure; and though his bodily lusts may be under better control, he may yield more to the lusts of the mind. There are diversities in men's lives, but original sin has the same defiling effects upon all hearts. Second, though all men are made in the likeness of fallen Adam, God restrains, in different ways and in varying degrees, the outbreakings of the corruption which has been transmitted to them. Nowhere is the sovereignty of God more evident than in His disposing of the lot of one and another: denying to some the opportunity to satisfy their evil desires, hedging up their way by poverty or ill health, or putting them in isolated places; others are given up to their hearts' lusts and God so orders His providences that they fatten themselves as beasts for the slaughter. Some men's callings draw out their sins more than do those of their fellowmen, so that they are subject to frequent and fierce temptations. Various dispositions are excited to action by the conditions in which they are placed, as Jacob was induced to trick his father by an unscrupulous mother, or as a sight of the spoils of Jericho stirred up the cupidity of Achan. It was for this reason that Agur was moved to pray, "Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. 30:8-9).

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