



# Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.  
by Don Hooton

## Lesson 4 | Sin and the Fall with “Total Hereditary Depravity”

March 29, 2023

**The subject of sin is seamlessly connected to the subject of the Bible story of redemption.** We have looked at its presence in Genesis in the first two lessons. Last week, we reviewed the development of the doctrine of “Original Sin” that was brought to fruition by Augustine and has influenced all of Catholic Dogma on sin. Today, we will jump about a millennium to the reformation movement and the influence of protestant leaders who, affected by the presence of perennial teaching about Augustine’s Original Sin, developed their own wording and understanding – particularly in John Calvin.

Born in France in 1509, John Calvin was a theologian, ecclesiastical leader and statesman. He has been regarded in history as Martin Luther’s successor as the preeminent Protestant theologian – though they never met. Like Augustine, John Calvin made a powerful impact on the fundamental doctrines, but his influence was in Protestantism. The bulk of his influence as a French theologian, pastor and reformer is in the landmark text *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He went undercover around 1533 when he began to sympathize with protestant ideas and by 1536, fled France for Switzerland. He died in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1564. Calvin’s religious teachings emphasized the sovereignty of the scriptures and divine predestination—a doctrine holding that God chooses those who will enter Heaven based His omnipotence and grace. And was anchored on his view of the nature of man which we will discuss momentarily.

Even in Catholic sources do we find this assessment of him: ‘We may sum up Calvin as a scholastic; he gives articulate expression to the principles which Luther had stormily thrown out upon the world in his vehement pamphleteering; and the “Institutes” as they were left by their author have remained ever since the standard of orthodox Protestant belief in all the Churches known as “Reformed”’ (newadvent.org).

There are also interesting details about him: John Calvin allowed no art in worship other than music, and even that could not involve instruments. In the first five years of John Calvin’s rule in Geneva, 58 people were executed and 76 exiled for their religious beliefs. Ironically, no one knows where John Calvin is buried.

‘Calvinism’ is a term, however, that is used to designate, not necessarily the opinions of one individual, but certainly the mode of religious thought or a system of religious doctrines from which the person whose name it bears was its more eminent presenter.

Archibald Alexander Hodge, an American Presbyterian leader, and principal of Princeton Seminary (1878-86) has said, “There have been from the beginning only three generically distinct systems of doctrine, or modes of conceiving and adjusting the facts and principles understood to be revealed in the Scriptures (in regard to the nature of humanity, dh): the **Pelagian**, which denies the guilt, corruption and moral impotence of man, and makes him independent of the supernatural assistance of God. At the opposite pole is the **Calvinistic**, which emphasizes the guilt and moral impotence of man, exalts the justice and sovereignty of God, and refers salvation absolutely to the undeserved favor and new creative energy of God. Between these comes the manifold and elastic system of compromise once known as Semi-Pelagianism, and in modern times as **Arminianism**, which admits man’s original corruption, but denies his guilt; regards redemption as a compensation for innate, and consequently irresponsible, disabilities; and refers the moral restoration of the individual to the co-operation of the human with the divine energy, the determining factor being human will.”



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While we don't want to get too deep into a theology, of any of the above that we feel the need to brand ourselves with, I think it's important to understand basic ideas to distinguish them (hence the quote above). While Arminianism asserts that God is sovereign, it believes that human will is compatible with that sovereignty and can "cooperate" with God in salvation, atonement and grace, which can potentially be lost. Arminius taught that Calvinist predestination and unconditional election make God the author of evil. Instead, he taught that God elected believers who had faith and argued that God did not determine each person's decisions.

We will, however, discover that both Arminianism and Calvinism both believe and teach total depravity but with distinct differences. Methodists (Arminian) argue for three stages of grace: Prevenient (where God initiates the process of Salvation); Justifying grace (where God restores us through the Atonement) and Sanctifying grace (where God enables to maintain fellowship in our lives). Pelagianism (from Pelagius) stressed the essential goodness of human nature and the freedom of the human will. He argues that original sin did not taint human nature and that by God's grace, humans have free will to freely choose the completeness God commands of them.

Today, let's review the teaching of total depravity.

*"Neither reason nor free-will points to Him" was Martin Luther's assertion that man's choice was not in bondage but that the Whole Man was in Bondage. In a dispute over the subject of the nature of humanity with Erasmus, Luther wrote, "Who will believe" (you say) "that God loves him?" I reply, Nobody! Nobody can! But the elect shall believe it; and the rest shall perish without believing it, raging and blaspheming, as you describe them. So, there will be some who believe it. You say that a flood-gate of iniquity is opened by our doctrines. So be it." He would go on to say that "The stain of sin [has corrupted] us physically, emotionally, psychologically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. That doesn't mean ... we are all brute savages who always carry out every possible evil; it does mean that there is no island of purity from which we might mount a campaign to save ourselves." And Luther was famous for his quote to say that "Inherited sin in a man is like his beard. Though shaved off today so the man is very smooth, it will grow back tomorrow morning."*

In John Calvin's, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he presents a view of man that is very much like Luther's view above. He used texts such as Genesis 6:5—"The Lord 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"—and Romans 3:10ff—"None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one"—to prove that man is totally depraved through the fall of Adam and Eve. His conclusion from these texts and others was to say, "The will is so utterly vitiated and corrupted in every part as to produce nothing but evil" (*Institutes*, bk. II, ch. II, para. 26). According to John Calvin, even those who have been justified by Christ *"cannot perform one work which, if judged on its own merits, is not deserving of condemnation"* (*Institutes*, III, 9, 9).

However, he struggled with the subject of free will in the *Institutes* when he wrote, *"In this way, then, man is said to have free will, not because he has a free choice of good and evil, but because he acts voluntarily, and not by compulsion,"* he also wrote that, *"So depraved is [human] nature that he can be moved or impelled only to evil."* But then again, when discussing Augustine's use of the term "sexual desire" 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*



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*and engrossed by this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that man is of himself nothing else but concupiscence” (Institutes, II, 1, 8)*

When churches of the reformation met in Autumn of 1618 at the General Synod of the Reformed Churches to consider the Arminians, the five points of doctrine often presented by the Arminians were found to be contrary to Scripture and were rejected. But as an answer to these statements, at the Great Synod of Dordrecht, they set forth five doctrines which they considered to be the Scriptural and Confessional answer to the position of the Arminians. These doctrines have been put into the five Canons of Dordt and have become known as the five points of Calvinism. The very fact, however, that these doctrines were called the five points of Calvinism *proves that our fathers at Dordrecht did not consider these doctrines to be original with them.* They were not, at that Synod, making any claims to developing doctrine.

So, first, when we come to total depravity, most Calvinists will distinguish this view of “total depravity” from “utter depravity.” While the term *total* is a synonym for utter or completely, Calvin did not ultimately intend to mean, they would say, that every human being is as wicked *as they could possibly be.* Rather, it means that the fall is so serious *that it affects the whole person,* just as Luther is noted as saying above. This total depravity “captures and grips our human nature and affects our bodies—affects our minds and our thinking even though we still have the capacity to think. But they would say all we are capable of things is what is darkened and weakened (Romans 1:21). The will of man is no longer in its pristine state of moral power as was Adam and they would say that the will is now in bondage, enslaved to the evil impulses and desires of our hearts (John 8:34).

What say we?

- **Genesis 4:6-7:** *“Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you furious? And why do you look despondent? If you do what is right, won’t you be accepted? But if you **do not do** what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but **you must rule** over it.”*
  - After Cain became angry because God had accepted Abel’s offering and had not accepted his offering, God told Cain that sin was knocking at the door and that he should not allow it to rule over him, least it become his master. God did not deal with Cain as if he were totally depraved. On the contrary, God instructed Cain to rule over this sin that was knocking at the door. The Bible tells us that Cain murdered his brother not because he was totally depraved, but because his deeds were evil and the deeds of his brother were righteous.
- **1 John 3:10-12:** *“This is how God’s children and the devil’s children become obvious. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother or sister. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another, unlike Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.”*
  - If all humanity were totally depraved, then this would include Abel, yet the apostle John *tells us that Abel’s works were righteous.* The Bible never describes Abel as depraved. On the contrary, the Bible repeatedly describes Abel and his works as righteous.
  - If Cain and Abel had been totally depraved, Cain would have been unable to rule over the sin knocking at the door, and Abel would not have done that which was righteous.
  - Even in the gospels Jesus spoke of that “righteous Abel” (Matthew 23:35) and the writer of Hebrews tells us: “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith” (Hebrews 11:4).
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- No matter how you stack it, the statement, “Abel obtained witness that he was righteous,” completely dismantles any concept of total depravity: a theology that does not take into account the testimony of scripture concerning the real people who lived for God.
- **Genesis 5:24:** “*Enoch walked with God.*”
  - The author of Hebrews tells us: “*By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away.[e] For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God.*” (Hebrews 11:4).
  - Jude tells us that Enoch prophesied of the coming of the Lord as well (Jude 1:14).
- **Genesis 6:8-9:** “*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. . . . Noah was a righteous [“just”] man, blameless in his generation*”
  - Was Noah inherently and totally depraved? Did God make them capable of good before He found favor with them? Did faith that he had (c.f. Hebrews 11:7, by faith Noah... was moved with fear...).
- **Ecclesiastes 7:29:** “*See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.*”
- **Isaiah 53:6:** “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way*”
- **Romans 5:12,19:** “*Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...*”
- **Ezekiel 18:4,20:** “*Look, every life belongs to me. The life of the father is like the life of the son—both belong to me. The person who sins is the one who will die.... The person who sins is the one who will die. A son won’t suffer punishment for the father’s iniquity, and a father won’t suffer punishment for the son’s iniquity. The righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him.*”
- **2Peter 3:9:** “*The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.*”
  - If God is the will behind it all, and Calvinism be true, then God alone wills and brings about His will. If it is His will that all men may be saved, then who is hindering God now? If Calvinism is true, then according to this verse, then *all men should be saved*, since God desires all men to be saved. Obviously, this is contrary to other plain passages (Luke 13:23-24; Matthew 7:13-14).
  - Even Calvin recognized that this was contrary to his doctrines and explained it as follows: “For His will that they should come to repentance cannot be used in any other sense than that which is uniformly employed. Conversion is undoubtedly in the hand of God, whether He designs to convert all can be learned from Himself, when He promises that He will give some a heart of flesh and leave to others a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26)” and, “But I hold that no man approaches God unless previously influenced from above. And if repentance were placed at the will of man, Paul would not say, ‘If God peradventure will give them repentance’ (2Timothy 2:25)” (Institutes, II, 255-256).

So when we turn to the main example of faith used by Paul and Peter of faith that justifies: “[Abraham] believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6), was Abraham capable of belief?