

THE GOSPEL LESSON 14

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 2

TULIP – Total Depravity (Total Inability)

Isaiah 6:5-8; Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, 8 – ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips’... Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand... He touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’... And you were dead in your trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy... made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

Last lesson, we stopped examining a claim and examined a system. Before a single one of the five points can be weighed, Reformed Theology had to be stated accurately and in its own words, so we let its confessions and its own historians speak. Three things were discovered. First, the five points are not five free-standing findings; they are load-bearing beams in a larger confessional building, and by the system’s own account they “make very little sense” apart from it. Second, the doctrine is seventeenth-century and Dutch, fixed at the Synod of Dort in answer to the five Arminian articles; the acronym TULIP is twentieth-century and American, a teaching device and not a confession. Third, and most important for everything ahead, the covenantal hermeneutic, by its own advocates’ description, reads the whole Bible through a framework and permits doctrine to be established “by good and necessary consequence,” that is, by deduction, and then granted standing alongside what Scripture expressly states (WCF 1.6).

Our method has not changed and will not. We read each text literally in its normal sense, in its grammar, and in its historical and cultural setting, and we ask first who wrote it, to whom, when, and why. We move from the text toward conclusions and revise the conclusions when the text resists them. We hold ourselves to what the text states, and the author’s intent.

This lesson will first put all five points side by side so we can see the shape of the whole, and then it takes up the first point, Total Depravity, at length. And because the first point is where a doctrine of man is decided, we do more than refute; after we have read their texts we gather, at the end, a positive doctrine of depravity of our own, drawn from the whole of Scripture. The lessons that follow will take the remaining points one at a time.

I. TULIP

We use TULIP as our outline, with the caution we raised last time firmly in view: it is a device for remembering, not a creed. The Canons of Dort were written in Latin and there is no acronym provided; the acrostic first appears in a lecture in 1905 and was popularized in a book in 1932. We adopt it only because it is the form in which the doctrine actually circulates today. The five letters stand for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irrresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

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II. THE FIVE POINTS

Total Depravity (Total Inability). The fall corrupted the whole man: mind, will, and affections. The claim is not, in MacArthur's own careful words, that "unbelieving sinners are always as bad as they could be"; it is that no part of man is left untouched by sin, so that the natural man is spiritually dead and unable, of himself, to turn to God or to believe savingly, apart from a prior work of the Spirit.

Unconditional Election. Before the foundation of the world God chose a definite number of persons to save, not on the basis of any foreseen faith, merit, or condition in them, but according to the free good pleasure of His will.

Limited Atonement (Particular Redemption). Christ's death was designed to secure the actual salvation of the elect. It did not merely make salvation possible for everyone; it effectually purchased everything necessary for salvation, faith included, for those the Father had given Him.

Irresistible Grace (Effectual Calling). The inward call of the Spirit to the elect cannot finally be refused. The grace that regenerates infallibly accomplishes its purpose and brings the elect to faith.

Perseverance of the Saints. All whom God has elected, redeemed, and regenerated He keeps, and they will continue in faith and holiness to the end. Those who finally fall away demonstrate that they were never truly regenerate.

III. TOTAL DEPRAVITY (TOTAL INABILITY)

The Claim

As a consequence of Adam's fall, every faculty of the natural man is corrupted by sin, so that he is spiritually dead, at enmity with God, and unable of his own strength to turn to God, to do any saving good, or to believe the gospel unto salvation. This inability is not partial but total, reaching the understanding, the affections, and the will, so that the sinner will not, and indeed cannot, come to God until God first acts upon him.

The decisive conclusion, and the one that carries the whole system, is an order of events: regeneration precedes and produces faith, rather than faith preceding regeneration. R. C. Sproul states it without hedging: "We do not believe in order to be born again; we are born again in order to believe" (Chosen by God). Grudem draws the same line, that regeneration "comes before saving faith" and is the work that gives a person "the spiritual ability to respond to God in faith" (Systematic Theology). This is the claim in its strongest and most modern form, and it is the claim we will test.

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The Strongest Case for It

This point should be granted its full seriousness, because a great deal of what it asserts is simply true, and we will say so plainly. The case is stated most carefully by Calvin and the confessions and pressed most sharply by living teachers.

Calvin puts the condition of the will in the hardest terms: “The will, therefore, is so bound by the slavery of sin, that it cannot excite itself, much less devote itself to anything good” (Institutes 2.3.2). And he draws the conclusion: “When the will is enchained as the slave of sin, it cannot make a movement towards goodness... Every such movement is the first step in that conversion to God, which in Scripture is entirely ascribed to divine grace” (Institutes 2.3.5). The Canons of Dort state it confessionally: all men are “conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God” (Third and Fourth Heads, Article 3). And Westminster: “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation... a natural man... is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (WCF 9.3).

In the modern pulpit, MacArthur presses the same doctrine under the title “The Sinner Neither Able Nor Willing: The Doctrine of Absolute Inability,” and states its evangelistic edge bluntly: there is “nothing in a fallen, reprobate sinner that... is capable of responding in faith” (Faith Works). And Sproul frames the stakes so that there is no soft middle ground. To deny that regeneration precedes faith, he says, is semi-Pelagianism, the belief that fallen man retains “a little island of righteousness, a tiny deposit of spiritual power” by which he can respond to the gospel on his own.

The Reformed Theologian states that either regeneration comes first or man saves himself. This is a false dichotomy.

Key Scriptures Cited

The Westminster divines attached their own proof texts to the statement above, and they are the classic texts for this point, so we let the confession’s own citations set the agenda: Romans 5:6; Romans 8:7; John 15:5; Romans 3:10-12; Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 2:13; John 6:44, 65; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Titus 3:3-5. The whole tradition leans especially on four, and those four carry the weight: Ephesians 2:1-5 (dead in trespasses), Romans 3:10-18 (none righteous, none who seeks God), 1 Corinthians 2:14 (the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit), and John 6:44 (no one can come unless the Father draws him). We read the four.

Biblical Exposition

Begin with what must be affirmed, because our answer does not run where it is usually expected to run. We do not soften these texts. The natural man is genuinely dead in his

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trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). He is by nature a child of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). He is unable to save himself, unable to please God in the flesh (Romans 8:8), unable to produce one work that would commend him to God, and left to his own resources, he does not seek God at all (Romans 3:11). Every one of these we hold as firmly as any Reformed writer. Man contributes nothing to his salvation. The question this point forces is narrower and more exact, and the whole disagreement lives inside it: does “dead” and “unable” mean that the sinner cannot even be persuaded by the gospel, so that he must be regenerated before he can believe? Two claims are fused here and they must be separated. The first, that the natural man can do nothing to save himself, Scripture states everywhere. The second, that he cannot be persuaded of the gospel until God first regenerates him, so that regeneration precedes faith, Scripture states nowhere. The move from the first to the second is exactly the deduction we were told to expect. Watch for it as we read.

Ephesians 2:1–5. “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy... even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” The word *dead* (νεκρός *nekros*) is real, and we do not blunt it: apart from Christ, the sinner is separated from the life of God and is under wrath, and he can no more give himself spiritual life than a corpse can raise itself. The text is pressed, however, to prove more than it says. It is read as: the dead cannot respond to anything, the gospel included, and therefore must be made alive before they can believe. Two things forbid that reading. First, Jesus says, “an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25); the dead hear, and the hearing is the very means by which they live, not a faculty granted after life is restored. Second, the apostle who calls these readers dead told us in the first chapter of the same letter how they came to life: “after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed” (Ephesians 1:13). Heard, believed, sealed. He does not write “having been made alive, you then believed.” Nor does the sequence of 2:5 supply it; “made us alive” is Paul’s summary of the whole salvation he is praising, not a clock that puts regeneration a tick before faith, and he immediately defines the manner of it in 2:8, “by grace... through faith.” We noted previously that Ephesians 2:8 does not say God grants the ability or the function of belief; it says salvation is God’s gift, received through faith. The deadness is genuine; the conclusion that the dead cannot hear the gospel is imported.

Romans 3:10–18. “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE... THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.” This is a courtroom indictment, a chain of Old Testament texts Paul assembles to close the case against the whole race. Its purpose he states a few verses on: “so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God” (3:19). It proves, past argument, that no one is righteous, no one earns standing before God, and no one on his own initiative seeks Him. We affirm every word. But note what Paul does with the indictment. He does not

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conclude, “therefore no one can be persuaded of the gospel.” He concludes, in the very next breath, “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (3:21–22). The indictment exists to shut every mouth and drive the guilty to the free gift, not to prove the guilty cannot receive it. “None who seeks God” describes man left to himself; it is not a wall against the God who seeks man through the gospel.

1 Corinthians 2:14. “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” This is the hardest of the four for our reading, and we must pay close attention, because the whole weight rests on two verbs and the English of most translations quietly softens one of them. “Does not accept” is *δέχομαι* *dechomai*, meaning to welcome, to receive gladly. “Cannot understand” renders *γινώσκω* *ginōskō*, which is not the word for grasping a fact but the word for knowing by acquaintance, the knowing of relationship and experience. Had Paul meant that the natural man cannot cognitively comprehend the message, the words lay ready to his hand, *οἶδα* *oida* or *νοέω* *noeō*; he used neither. He set two relational verbs side by side: the natural man does not welcome, and cannot know by acquaintance, the things of the Spirit. Why not? Because they are “spiritually appraised” (*ἀνακρίνω* *anakrinō*), sifted by the Spirit’s own means. And which things? Not the bare gospel, but the deep wisdom Paul has been describing since 2:6, “the wisdom of God in a mystery,” “the depths of God” (2:10), “the things freely given to us by God” (2:12). The reception denied is the spiritual discernment of God’s deep wisdom, not the apprehension of the gospel proposition.

The gospel is the persuading instrument. So, 1 Corinthians 2:14 describes the natural man’s incapacity to reach and welcome God’s deep wisdom by his own resources; it says nothing against the Spirit persuading him through the preached word, which is precisely what the previous chapter says: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).

John 6:37-40, and the Johannine pattern. “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me... of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.” This paragraph, joined to “no one can come to Me unless the Father... draws him” (6:44) and “unless it has been granted him” (6:65), is the strongest single position the point holds, and it is doing triple service: the “giving” is read for unconditional election, the “will come” and “I lose nothing” for irresistible grace and preservation, and the “cannot come unless drawn” for inability. We will answer only the inability here and hold the giving for the lesson on Unconditional Election, where it belongs.

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On the inability, John defines his own terms, and we follow our practice of letting the speaker fix his meaning. First, “come to Me” and “believe in Me” are set in parallel one verse earlier: “he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst” (6:35). To come is to believe. Second, the “drawing” is not left undefined. “It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me” (6:45). The drawing is a teaching, and the one drawn is the one who has heard and learned, the language of revelation and persuasion, not of an operation performed on a passive object. Third, and most decisively, Jesus tells us the manner of the drawing later in the same Gospel: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself,” and John adds the interpreting aside, “But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (12:32–33). The drawing is by the cross. It reaches back to the serpent lifted up in the wilderness, “so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (3:14–15); looking at a serpent on a pole is persuasion, not resuscitation.

And the drawing runs through the Word of God.

The Problem with This Synthesis

The synthesis makes one move, and the whole of TULIP rests on it. It takes the Biblical truth that man is dead in sin and can do nothing to save himself (a truth we affirm without reservation) and fuses to it a second claim the texts never state, that the dead cannot be persuaded by the gospel until they have first been regenerated.

From that fused definition the rest follows with real logic: if faith is impossible before regeneration, then God alone determines who is regenerated, the cross secures regeneration for them alone, the regenerating grace cannot wait on a faith the dead cannot offer, and the regenerate are kept to the end. The chain is sound. The first link is the problem. It is built by “good and necessary consequence,” the method Westminster authorizes (WCF 1.6), and then read back into texts that describe man’s helplessness to save himself as his inability to be persuaded by the word God. This is the covenantal hermeneutic of our last lesson at work on a single doctrine: a conclusion the framework requires is treated as though the texts had stated it.

And Scripture states the order the other way. It does not present regeneration producing faith; it presents the word of truth heard, then faith, then the seal of the Spirit given the moment one believes (Ephesians 1:13; Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23). Even the Canons of Dort concede the instrument: what neither nature nor law could do, God performs “by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation... the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe” (Third and Fourth Heads, Article 6). The word is the means; the ones saved are “such who believe.” Remove the imported link, and every affirmation that remains is Biblical.

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Why This Matters

Picture a man who has just heard, for the first time, that Christ died for his sins and rose again, and is questioning the validity of the message. On the reading we have examined he must be told that his stirring toward Christ proves nothing and can do nothing, because unless he has already been regenerated, he is unable to believe, and whether he has been regenerated is a decision made about him before the world began and outside his hearing. The gospel offered to “all who believe” becomes, for him, a door he is told he cannot open and must wait to learn whether it was ever unlocked. That is not the invitation Jesus issued. We ask him the only question the gospel ever asks: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died for your sins and rose again, and He promised you eternal life. Do you believe this?

IV. BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF DEPRAVITY

We have refused their conclusions, but we do owe a doctrine of our own, gathered from the whole of Scripture, and it can be stated in two sentences that must be held together.

Man is absolutely unable to save himself by any effort, work, merit, wisdom, will, or religious imagination of his own. And that inability to save himself is not an inability to respond to the grace of God when God comes to him in the gospel.

The natural man is dead (Ephesians 2:1), his mouth stopped and the whole world accountable (Romans 3:19), unable to please God in the flesh (Romans 8:8), unable to reach God’s wisdom by his own resources (1 Corinthians 2:14), and, left to himself, not seeking God at all (Romans 3:11). He has no island of righteousness, no reserve of spiritual power, no fragment of the fall’s wreckage from which to launch his own rescue.

The dead man is met by grace, grace that comes from outside him in the word of the cross and the love of a savior. By that grace, not by any strength of his own, he is persuaded and believes. The power is entirely God’s; the initiative is entirely God’s; the means, the gospel, is entirely God’s and comes to the man from without. Nothing operates before grace being revealed in the salvation offer. The believer is truly His, because to be persuaded of the truth is not a work (Romans 4:5).

This is the pattern of the entire Bible, in which God takes gracious initiative toward ruined men, calls them to respond, holds them responsible for their response, and records the responses of faith. Grace to Noah, a promise to Abraham, a choosing of Israel, the gospel to the nations: grace moves first, man is summoned to answer.

Noah “found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8), grace before anything else, and then “by faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark... and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7). Grace found him; faith answered; righteousness was reckoned. Abraham was called out of Ur by sheer divine initiative, and “he believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him

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as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6), the very paradigm on which Paul builds justification. Lot is called “righteous” three times over (2 Peter 2:7–8) though his walk was a compromise and a grief, a believer whose standing rested on God’s grace received, not on a consistent life. David, a man after God’s own heart, fell into adultery and blood, and answered God again in faith and sorrow (Psalm 51) without his failures proving him a stranger to grace. And Isaiah gives us the whole doctrine in a single chapter. He sees the LORD and cries, “Woe is me, for I am ruined... a man of unclean lips” (6:5), total inability confessed in the presence of holiness. Then grace acts wholly from God’s side: a coal from the altar, “your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven” (6:7), atonement supplied, not achieved. Ruin, grace, response. That is the order everywhere.

A God who commands the ruined to respond, and holds them guilty when they will not, is not addressing creatures who are simply unable to respond to His grace; the universal call and the universal accountability would then be a form of words with nothing behind it. The call is real because the responsibility is real, and the responsibility is real because grace genuinely reaches all.

Total inability to save oneself, absolute and without exception. And, met by grace in the word of the cross, a real and responsible answer of faith, which is no work, no merit, no contribution, only the empty hand of a dead man persuaded to receive the life that the Son gives. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).