

Transcript 188

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me again today is Jeff, the administrator of bibleref.com, and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. Today, we're going to be continuing our series on Calvinism. So the first episode was kind of a general introduction of what is Calvinism? Why is this important? Why is it so controversial? So today and then for the next few episodes, we'll be covering the five points specifically of Calvinism. So today it's the first one, total depravity. What is total depravity? What does it mean? What are the implications? What is the biblical basis? What or maybe the arguments against it? And ultimately, why is this important?

Shea Houdmann

To start off this intro with I've never really liked the term total depravity because most people, when they hear that term, they think it means that human beings are absolutely, totally depraved as they could be. And that's not what it's saying at all. I think a much more accurate way to describe it would be total inability. That is the fact that human beings are so utterly impacted by sin. Every fiber of our being is impacted by sin that we are not even capable of trusting in Christ on our own. That God has to do a work in our hearts, on our minds to somehow enable us to be able to trust Christ. The vast majority of Christians believe in some sort of total inability because we believe it's a biblical doctrine and we'll discuss some of the scriptural basis for that. But ultimately the question is not, are we able to believe on our own? It's to what extent does God have to help? Is that the God has to completely regenerate us, give us spiritual life, basically make us born again, enabling us to believe? Or is God's work just a not just as if it's a little thing. That are opening our eyes, softening our hearts, drawing us to faith in Christ like a John 6:44 where it says, no one can come to Christ unless the father who sent me draws him.

Shea Houdmann

With total depravity, the first passage that comes to my mind is Romans 3. I'll be reading Romans 3 versus 10 to 18 because if there's any passage in the Bible that describes total depravity and sense of so utterly impacted by sin. I think this passage does it. So as it is written, none is righteous no, not one. No one understands God. No one seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceit. The venom of asps is on their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. In their paths are ruin and misery. And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. I think the best summary of this is no one righteous, no, not one, and none seeks for God. All have turned aside. This is a good summary of what total gravity teaches, that on our own our own devices, none of us are seeking after God. God has to seek us, and so ultimately the doctrine of total depravity is that God has to do a work in us to enable us to believe. So Kevin, won't you continue on that point as as you study Scripture, what are what do you see in Scripture that supports the idea of total depravity?

Kevin Stone

Well, sticking in the book of Romans, I think that Romans 8 and verse 7 really sums it up very clearly. Romans 8:7 says the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God, nor can it

do so. And so we have both an act of the will here it the the mind that's governed by the flesh does not submit to God. You know, it refuses to submit to God. But then even further than that, this speaks to ability because the last clause here is, nor can it do so. So we in our, in our natural state, when our mind is being governed by the flesh and not by the spirit. The the fleshly mind is hostile to God. It it it does not submit to God and it cannot submit to God. So there's an inability there and that's total depravity, total inability. That's what we're talking about here today.

Kevin Stone

One of the wrong ideas that people get about total depravity is that it somehow means that everybody is as is, as sinful as they possibly can be, and that's not what the doctrine teaches. The doctrine of total depravity, teaches that every part of a person has been affected by sin in some way. So our our heart, our mind, our will, our affections, our desires, our ability to think critically, everything has been affected in some way by by sin. It doesn't mean that everybody is as evil as they possibly could be. But everybody has been affected by evil. We've all been affected by the fall of man. We have that sinful nature. I've heard it illustrated this way that if you take a a glass of water and you add a a drop of poison to it, you you add just one drop of poison to it, it's going to affect the whole cup. Now you could add a whole spoonful of poison to the cup and you'd end up with a much more potent mixture. But even the one drop is going to contaminate the whole thing. So one drop of poison in the cup, that water is not as deadly as it could possibly be, but it's it's still not good to drink. It's still affected by the poison, that poison has permeated the whole cup. And so that's what we mean by total depravity. The the the sinful nature has entered into us at at some level. So total depravity doesn't necessarily speak of degree of evil, but it does speak of extent of evil. It has affected all parts of us, even the one drop of poison in the cup is is enough.

Jeff Laird

Looking at how it relates, I think it's also very important when we look at this idea of total depravity, one of the things that we we realize is that as we're trying to understand what does a particular person mean when they say that, that these other doctrines of grace that we've talked about with Calvinism, to some extent, these all have some interaction with this. In other words, none of these in the tulip acronym are completely by themselves. There's nothing in there that's completely independent, completely separate. So your view on something like total depravity is going to affect and influence what you believe about things like unconditional election and things like that. So one thing to keep in mind is that when we talk about this, there's really no way to avoid looking at some of the connections that come in there. And that's one of the reasons you get a sort of a spectrum of how people look at the depravity issue. You've got one side of it, which is to say that human beings have essentially no depravity, that we are born innocent. We don't have a sin nature. That that's just how we are. That what makes us sinners is just when we make the choice to sin. A little step past that is the idea that we're we're tainted with sin, that we have some kind of a sin nature, but we are still able to seek God completely on our own with our own will. Then you've got the idea that we have a sin nature that makes us incapable of wanting God. In our own. But then we still have enough will that if we want to resist when God reaches out to us, that depravity still kicks in. Then you've got the idea that we are so completely and utterly tainted by sin that every single aspect of our being, almost to the point where like the very image of God within us has been completely obliterated by sin. So there's this wide spectrum of ideas.

Jeff Laird

I think from what we're seeing here is there is a biblically valid place to land in those and it's not on one of those extremes. You really cannot read the Bible and believe that we're born truly innocent. You can't believe that we don't have some kind of sin nature. On the other hand, God still speaks of this like we have responsibility like we have value, that we are still interesting and human to him. So the idea that we have been so obliterated by sin that we're not even morally capable anymore. I mean, that would make us animals because animals have no concept of moral reasoning. So I think the biblical thing that we've fallen is somewhere in that idea that says that look, every part of who we are is corrupted with sin. Sin is going to affect our mind, our will, our body, our spirit. Everything about us is going to be affected and that's going to make things like self salvation, that's going to be impossible. There is just no possible way that any human being can save themselves because two sides of the coin are true. We sin because we are sinners and we're sinners, because we sin. Neither one of those is independent of the other. Neither one is false. They are both equally true. It is in our nature to sin. So looking at the spectrum of how this goes, there are different ways that we can look at this. There's things we can debate about what it means and what it doesn't mean. What we want to do is be careful that we don't take some extreme that winds up eroding other things that Scripture says. For example, saying we're so depraved that there's no value to a human being. Or saying that we are so in control of our own choices that we don't really need God to tell us or to convince us or to move us in some certain direction.

Kevin Stone

Jeff, you are speaking of the personal responsibility that goes along with what's on the spectrum somewhere. And in Psalm 7, Psalm seven is another passage that is used in support of total depravity because it shows the need for well it shows the reality of God's judgment against sin. But couched in this judgment passage is human responsibility. Psalm 7, verses 11 through 13, and I'm reading from the New American Standard version. God is a righteous judge and a God who has indignation every day. If a man does not repent, he will sharpen his sword. He has bent his bow and made it ready. He is also prepared for himself deadly weapons. He makes his arrows fiery shafts. So here is the picture of God preparing for battle, preparing to judge the world. And he is indignant against the wickedness of the world every day. But then we have this, have this conditional clause in here. If a man does not repent. So there is a universal call to repentance. We all need to repent because we're all sinners. Every one of us has that responsibility before God to repent of sin. And if the repentant doesn't come, then God's judgment come. I just, I like this passage and the balance that it gives.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, there's there's a lot of things we can see in Scripture that remind us that and and as a reminder to everybody, we have to remember that when we look at any of these systems, even just one doctrine like a total depravity, this is this is us as human beings struggling to put some sort of human understandable framework around these things. We we don't ever want to be in a position where we think that however, we've defined this is the be all end all. There's always going to be some some fuzz and some flex in this. We're never going to be able to understand this exactly the way that God does. But to what you're saying, we do see that there is there is both of those things in there. So whatever we decide we think about total depravity. You're right. We cannot take the the view of saying I am completely irresponsible, IE I'm I'm born in sin. This is the way I was made. I'm so corrupt. That means that I'm not really responsible for my sin. That's not what it means. Because we have, we still retain some moral

sense. We still know that these things are wrong and we're evil. That's why we say we sin because we're sinners and we're sinners because we sin. The scripture also makes the point that what we know and what we understand does seem to mean something. Where I think in John Chapter 9 Jesus makes a comment to the Pharisees where he talks about, you know, if you, if you were ignorant, then you wouldn't have sin in this particular area. But because you claim, you know, then your sin remains. And that implies that God does get the idea that you know you, He's not going to unfairly hold us responsible. So his judgment comes on us for sin because we are rightly responsible for those things. We really do choose to sin in that sense, and we can't claim that we're doing anything sinful and say no, I didn't have a choice. I had no option. I had no way. I had no anything. Believer or non believer, God gives us enough of a moral choice that we can make the decision, but our depraved nature means if you give us a chance to sin, sooner or later we will. So here's one of those connections to the other doctrines. You have a doctrine like perseverance of the Saints or what we call eternal security, once saved, always saved. If total depravity is correct, that means that if I could lose my salvation, sooner or later I will. Because it's just a matter of time. Sooner or later my depraved nature is going to make me do something that's contrary to God's will. So a lot of things to think about. A lot of things that kind of fold in together. But it's interesting to see how scriptures have a couple different angles to look at everything at.

Shea Houdmann

You two are exactly right, and many of the things, all the things you pointed out. Just the implications of Calvinism, or even the the directions that people go when they think about Calvinism, is often a bigger problem than what Calvin specific teaches. It's not saying that Calvinism is a perfect system. We clearly we don't believe that. And see episode one for that conversation. But in terms of adoption, like total depravity, we will say it at its core we think it's biblical. But when you start looking at the implications, OK, if this is true, then this if this is true then that that's when it starts getting difficult.

Shea Houdmann

One verse that Calvinist love to point to, I would consider myself a moderate Calvinist, is like Ephesians 2:5 which says that we're dead in trespasses and sin. OK, well, what exactly does that mean? I mean full Calvinists or Hyper Calvinist would, however, you want to describe the five point Calvinist would say, dead in trespasses and sins means literally dead. In terms of your spirituality, you are a corpse. And how, how do you make a corpse believe? Well, a dead person can't do anything. A dead person can't believe at all. So the only way for God to take someone who's spiritually dead and make them able to believe is to give them life. So that's referred to like verification or regeneration. That full Calvinist will believe that you're actually regenerated to enable you to believe. Then you believe, even if it all happens instantaneously, still the regeneration comes before faith because if you're spiritually dead, if you're a corpse, he has to do that. Well other people who believe in a form of total depravity say no, you're not dead like a corpse. I mean, human beings have a body, soul and spirit. Could we actually function if part of our being was literally dead in that sense. They interpret the dead as unable to connect with God. Separated from God, and that is the definition of death throughout the Bible is separation. They view spiritual dead, meaning we are separated from God and nothing we can do can rectify that situation. So is the work that God has to do is actually regeneration? No, it's actually God just has to enable us to believe whether that's opening eyes, softening hearts, convincing, drawing, whatever you want to describe it. But it's not a full regeneration that's necessary. So even though a verse like that is relatively

simple, dead in trespasses and sin, well, what does that mean about? How does that impact total depravity, and how does that impact the next step?

Shea Houdmann

And Jeff, you mentioned the connection between total depravity, unconditional election well, if it requires regeneration for us to believe, well then everyone who God regenerates is going to ultimately believe, then it's not everyone believes so clearly God only regenerates those who he has elected, so therefore Jesus did not die for everyone. The Third Point of Calvinism. And so you see how the points are all connected. But if you view total of gravity being spiritually dead as you're in a state of unable to connect with God. The state of separation from God that requires a lesser degree of assistance from God, then the the other points and the implications of those change as well. So I guess Calvin doesn't all five points are related, but also when you study scripture you start seeing how, OK, well, that doesn't have that isn't the only possible explanation of that. Therefore, the intermingling of the five points can look different for different people. And so I find Calvinism fascinating. I love to discuss it, but like as we talked about episode one, we are not in the business at Got Questions of promoting Calvinism. We do not. It's not our goal to convince everyone in the world to become Calvinist. It's like, no, we think there are some truths in Calvinism that are important for people to know and understand and believe. But at the same time you don't have to believe a certain way about the points of Calvinism in order to be a believer. And that's the tension we're kind of communicating here with, yes, we believe in total depravity, but not necessarily in every single way that all Calvinists believe in total depravity.

Jeff Laird

These conversations typically move in that sort of direction, which is when we, we focus on the systems and we focus on the vocabulary, then there seems to be a tremendous amount of disagreement. And actually other than the fringes, the really clear stuff, the things that we need to know, we need to understand. Typically if you take most people who take the Bible seriously and you ask them about the important things, like the things that come down to the practical things, how do we evangelize? How do I live? How do I study the Bible? You get broad agreement on these. So with total depravity, you will see this agreement of saying we can't say that we're sinless, we cannot save ourselves. We cannot claim that we can avoid all sin, you know, completely without God. We are in need of the savior, no matter who we are. So the things that actually matter for the gospel and how we live, there really is sort of a common mindset behind those. Where it starts to get a little bit separated is when we start trying to look behind the curtain and see behind the veil and understand the mind of God a little more directly. And that's where we start to get bigger differences between these. So I think it's worth pointing out that even as we discuss these things for most Christians who treat the Bible with respect, most of the disagreements that we have on these things are exactly that. They're like in-house debates. They're interesting, but they're not ultimately critical to faith.

Kevin Stone

Yes, and I'm, I'm glad that you bring that up, Jeff. I lived across the street from a Wesleyan pastor and we used to get together and pick each other's brains about about this kind of stuff. And, and so what the Wesley and the Armenian position actually allows for total depravity. They they believe in total depravity. They just have a a different view of how God overcomes that. They teach prevenient grace is not saving grace but it's it is the grace of God that comes into a heart that overcomes the depraved

nature partially, to an extent that the person then is able to respond to the gospel. And so there is still depravity. There's still the need to be saved. There is. But then God gives grace to allow the person to make that choice to be saved. However, God does it you know, we we are dead in our trespasses and sins, and and Christ must give us new life. He must raise us to life. We are lost. We are sheep who have gone astray. And the Good Shepherd must find us and and bring us into the fold. We are blinded and sitting in darkness, and we need to have the light shine on us. And so, so many other metaphors in scripture that are true pictures of our spiritual condition before and after Christ. And however it is that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to bring us to that place of saving faith, we praise God for it, and we will not be saved without Christ.

Jeff Laird

I like to think sometimes that you can make analogies to things that are common experience. So if you look at something like a car. You know, most of us can pretty well maintain a vehicle without knowing a tremendous amount about how it works. So if I if I don't happen to know whether my car that I drive has a carburetor or a fuel injector or direct injection and things like that, some people hear those words and they go, what, what does that even mean? Well, yeah, that's the point. You're you don't really know what those things mean, and for most people, it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference. But there can be times when certain things about the way the car is running or not running, you do need to have a better understanding to really get in and diagnose those things. And that's another place where some of these things come in. For most people some of these are just utterly meaningless, moot points. I mean, beyond the very basics, but there can be things about the way we think about morality, theology and salvation that in certain circumstances, yeah, that knowledge does come in handy for being able to diagnose the issue. So it's not something that's so out there that it's useless, but it's also something that for most people, in most cases, it's it doesn't really have a day-to-day applicability.

Kevin Stone

I like the simplicity of this quote from John Newton. Mr. Newton, of course, the author of the the Hymn Amazing Grace. And later in life John Newton said this. My memory is nearly gone, but two things I remember, that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior. That just says it so simply and however all the five points of Calvinism fall into place, we do remember this I'm a great sinner and Jesus is a great savior.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, yeah. Well said, Kevin. I've seen like in person, strong Calvinist debate, strong Armenians on this point, especially with the whole, which precedes what regeneration or faith. And listening to these guys like argue and ultimately they were arguing about something that happens behind the scenes. And what point do the two truths touch each other? They're talking about milliseconds of time we where regeneration and faith or or meeting resulting in new birth, resulting in salvation of the person. That's like, are are we really spending this much time arguing about how much work God has to do and ultimately that's really not our concern. And since yes, God has to do something, that's something we should all agree on. The Bible is very clear about. But our our responsibility is to believe, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you'll be saved. No where in scriptures anyone worrying about has God done enough work in me to enable me to believe. Well, no. That's if. If you're believing in Christ, God has done enough work in you to enable you to believe. But the the amount of time spent arguing over

really, really small point that we can't even see, we can't witness, we can't control. We don't ultimately know.

Shea Houdmann

I mean, my conviction is that, no, that regeneration doesn't precede faith as I'm not convinced that being spiritually dead means what full Calvinists think it means. But ultimately I don't know how much God had to do in me to enable me. I know God did it work. I know I went from unbelief to belief. I went from an embrace of sin to an embrace of Christ. I know I went from hating God to loving God. I know God did a work in my heart. But how big of a work happened at the moment of salvation versus has happened since then, those are details that I don't know know and ultimately can't. I just I trust what Scripture says that no one could come to Christ unless God draws them. And that's the reality of my life. I can see times of Christ drawing me to him. I know at the moment that I truly and fully understood the gospel and trusted in Christ what was going on behind the scenes in my heart, theologically speaking, ultimately, I don't know. This is where something like totals of gravity is important. Because we definitely need to understand there were sinners separated from Christ and nothing we can do can ultimately make us acceptable God, our our righteous acts are filthy rags, and the heart desperately wicked who can know it. We need to understand that, and that's part of total depravity. But ultimately the the finer points of what does that actually mean in terms of how much work it has to do to enable us to believe? That's something we can agree to disagree on and still lead us to the point that we are great sinners in need of a great savior, as you said. Kevin.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me as always for this interesting conversation. Why, it's like I said at the beginning, maybe total depravity is one of the less controversial points of Calvinism, and since that most Christians believe some variation of it. Once we're diving into unconditional election and then definitely limited atonement, our next two conversations are some of the more controversial ones. They'll be interesting to pick up from here, so this has been the Got Questions podcast on what is total depravity. Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.