

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN'S IMPOTENCE

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

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Transcript

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The title of this second section of our book (Part II from Gleanings from the Scriptures; Man's Total Depravity) may occasion a raising of the eyebrows. That we should designate the spiritual helplessness of fallen man a "doctrine" is likely to cause surprise, for it is certainly not so regarded in most circles today. Yet this is hardly to be wondered at. Didactic preaching has fallen into such general disuse that more than one important doctrine is no longer heard from the pulpits. If on the one hand there is a deplorable lack of a clear and definite portrayal of the character of God, on the other there is also a woeful absence of any lucid and comprehensive presentation of the teaching of Scripture concerning the nature and condition of man. Such failure at either point leads to the most disastrous consequences. A study of this neglected subject is therefore timely and urgent. **TIMELY AND URGENT STUDY** It is of the utmost importance that people should clearly understand and be made thoroughly aware of their spiritual impotence, for thus alone is a foundation laid for bringing them to see and feel their imperative need of divine grace for salvation. So long as sinners think they have it in their own power to deliver themselves from their death in trespasses and sins, they will never come to Christ that they might have life, for "the whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." So long as people imagine they labor under no insuperable inability to comply with the call of the gospel, they never will be conscious of their entire dependence on Him alone who is able to work in them "all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power" (2 Thess. 1:11). So long as the creature is puffed up with a sense of his own ability to respond to God's requirements, he will never become a suppliant at the footstool of divine mercy. A careful perusal of what the Word of God has to say on this subject leaves us in no doubt about the awful state of spiritual serfdom into which the fall has brought man. The depravity, blindness and deafness of all mankind in things of a spiritual nature are continually inculcated and emphatically insisted on throughout the Scriptures. Not only is the total inability of the natural man to obtain salvation by deeds of the law frequently asserted, but his utter helplessness in himself to comply with the terms of the gospel is also strongly affirmed—not indirectly and occasionally, but expressly and continually. Both in the Old Testament and in the New, in the declarations of the prophets, of the Lord Christ, and of His apostles, the bondage of the natural man to Satan is often depicted, and his complete impotence to turn to God for deliverance is solemnly and

unequivocally set forth. Ignorance or misconception on the matter is therefore inexcusable. Nevertheless the fact remains that this is a doctrine which is little understood and rarely insisted upon. Notwithstanding the clear and uniform testimony of the Scriptures, the actual conditions of men, their alienation from God, their sinful inability to return to Him, are but feebly apprehended and seldom heard even in orthodox quarters. The fact is that the whole trend of modern thought is in the very opposite direction. For the past century, and increasingly so during the last few decades, the greatness of man—his dignity, his development and his achievements—has been the predominant theme of pulpit and press. The antisciptural theory of evolution is a blank detail of the fall and its dire consequences, and even where the Darwinian hypothesis has not been accepted, its pernicious influences have been more or less experienced. The evil effects from the promulgation of the evolutionary lie are far more widespread than most Christians realize. Such a philosophy (if it is entitled to be called that) has induced multitudes of people to suppose that their state is far different from, and vastly superior to, the fearful diagnosis given in Holy Writ. Even among those who have not accepted without considerable reservation the idea that man is slowly but surely progressing, the great majority have been encouraged to believe that their case is far better than it actually is. Consequently, when a servant of God boldly affirms that all the descendants of Adam are so completely enslaved by sin that they are utterly unable to take one step toward Christ for deliverance, he is looked upon as a doleful pessimist or a crazy fanatic. To speak of the spiritual impotence of the natural man is, in our day, to talk in an unknown tongue. Not only does the appalling ignorance of our generation cause the servant of God to labor under a heavy handicap when seeking to present the scriptural account of man's total inability for good; he is also placed at a serious disadvantage by virtue of the marked distastefulness of this truth. The subject of his moral impotence is far from being a pleasing one to the natural man. He wants to be told that all he needs to do is exert himself, that salvation lies within the power of his will, that he is the determiner of his own destiny. Pride, with its strong dislike of being a debtor to the sovereign grace of God, rises up against it. Self-esteem, with its rabid repugnance of anything which lays the creature in the dust, hotly resents what is so humiliating. Consequently, this truth is either openly rejected or, if seemingly received, is turned to a wrong use. Moreover, when it is insisted on that man's bondage to sin is both voluntary and culpable, that the guilt for his inability to turn to God or to do anything pleasing in His sight lies at his own door, that his spiritual impotence consists in nothing but the depravity of his own heart and his inveterate enmity against God, then the hatefulness of this doctrine is speedily demonstrated. While men are allowed to think that their spiritual helplessness is involuntary rather than willful, innocent rather than criminal, something to be pitied rather than blamed, they may receive this truth with a measure of toleration; but let them be told that they themselves have forged the shackles which hold them in captivity to sin, that God counts them responsible for the corruption of their hearts, and that their incapability of being holy constitutes the very essence of their guilt, and loud will be their outcries against such a flesh-withering truth. However repellent this truth may be, it must not be withheld from men. The minister of Christ is not sent forth to please or entertain his congregation, but to declare the counsel of God, and not merely those parts of it which may meet with their approval and acceptance, but "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). If he deliberately omits that which raises their ire, he betrays his trust. Once he starts whittling down his divinely given commission there will be no end to the process, for one class will murmur against this portion of the truth and another against that. The servant of God has nothing to do with the response which is made to his preaching; his business is to deliver the Word of God in its unadulterated purity and leave the results to the One who has called him. And he may be assured at the outset that unless many in his congregation are seriously disturbed by his message, he has failed to deliver it in its clarity. A RESENTED DOCTRINE No matter how hotly this doctrine of man's spiritual impotence is resented by both the profane and the religious world, it must not be withheld through

cowardice. Christ, our supreme Exemplar, announced this truth emphatically and constantly. To the Pharisees He said, "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matt. 12:34). Men's hearts are so vile, it is utterly impossible that anything holy should issue from them. They can no more change their nature by an effort of will than a leper might heal himself by his own volition. Christ further said, "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44). It is a moral impossibility—pride and humility are opposites. Those who seek to please self and those who sincerely aim at the approbation of God belong to two entirely different stocks. On another occasion the Lord Christ asked, "Why do ye not understand my speech?" to which He Himself answered, "Even because ye cannot hear my word" (John 8:43). There is no mistaking His meaning here and no evading the force of His solemn utterance. The message of Christ was hateful to their worldly and wicked hearts and could no more be acceptable to them than would wholesome food to birds accustomed to feed on carrion. Man cannot act contrary to his nature; one might as well expect fire to burn downward or water flow upward. "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do" (John 8:44) said the Saviour to the Jews. And what was their response? "Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil?" (v. 48). Sufficient for the servant to be as his Master. Now if such is the case with the natural man that he can no more break the bonds which hold him in captivity to Satan than he could restore the dead to life, ought he not to be faithfully informed of his wretched condition? If he is so helpless and hopeless in himself that he cannot turn from sin to holiness, that he cannot please God, that he cannot take one step toward Christ for salvation, is it not a kindness to acquaint him with his spiritual impotence, to shatter his dreams of self-sufficiency, to expose the delusion that he is lord of himself? In fact, is it not positively cruel to leave him alone in his complacency and make no effort to bring him face to face with the desperateness of his depravity? Surely anyone with a vestige of charity in his heart will have no difficulty in answering such questions. It is far from a pleasant task for a physician to tell an unsuspecting patient that his or her heart is organically diseased or to announce to a young person engaging in strenuous activities that his lungs are in such a condition he is totally unfit for violent exertions; nevertheless it is the physician's duty to break such news. Now if this principle holds good in connection with our mortal bodies, how much more so with regard to our never dying spirits. True, there are some doctors who persuade themselves that there are times when it is expedient for them to withhold such information from their patients, but a true physician of souls is never justified in concealing the more distasteful aspect of the truth from those who are under his care. If he is to be free from their blood, he must unsparingly expose the plague of their hearts. The fact of fallen man's moral inability is indissolubly bound up with the doctrine of his total depravity, and any denial of the one is a repudiation of the other, as any attempt to modify the former is to vitiate the latter. In like manner, the fact of the natural man's impotence to deliver himself from the bondage of sin is inseparably connected with the truth of regeneration; for unless we are without strength in ourselves, what need is there for God to work a miracle of grace in us? It is, then, the reality of the sinner's helplessness which provides the dark background necessary for the gospel, and just in proportion as we are made aware of our helplessness shall we really value the mercy proffered us in the gospel. On the other hand, while we cherish the delusion that we have power to turn to God at any time, just so long we shall continue procrastinating and thereby despise the gracious overtures of the gospel. William Shedd stated: A sense of danger excites; a sense of security puts to sleep. A company of gamblers in the sixth story are told that the building is on fire. One of them answers, "We have the key to the fire escape," and all continue the game. Suddenly one exclaims, "The key is lost"; all immediately spring to their feet and endeavour to escape.

Just so long as the sinner believes—because of his erroneous notion of the freedom of his will—that he has the power to repent and believe at any moment, he will defer faith and repentance; he will not so much as beg God to work these graces in him. The first office of the preacher is to stain the pride of all human glory, to bring down the high looks of man, to make him aware of his sinful perversity, to make him feel that he is unworthy of the least of all God's mercies. His business is to strip him of the rags of his self-righteousness and to shatter his self-sufficiency; to make him conscious of his utter dependence on the mere grace of God. Only he who finds himself absolutely helpless will surrender himself to sovereign grace. Only he who feels himself already sinking under the billows of a justly deserved condemnation will cry out, "Lord, save me, I perish." Only he who has been brought to despair will place the crown of glory on the only head entitled to wear it. Though God alone can make a man conscious of his impotence, He is pleased to use the means of the truth—faithfully dispensed, effectually applied by the Spirit—in doing so.

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