

Romans (53) **The Promised Children of God**

Let us turn to Romans 9 in which we will continue to study what God has revealed to us regarding His grace in bringing salvation to His people.

The apostle had just expressed his great love for his Jewish brethren and of his great desire that they would be saved (Rom. 9:1-5). He would have traded places with them, choosing to be damned in their place, if it would result in their salvation from sin. For in spite of all their privileges and opportunities, they remained estranged from God.

What might explain why events had happened this way? Paul will provide reasons why history had fallen out in this fashion. He showed that what had occurred with respect to the Jews, in that only a remnant of them would be saved, was due to the sovereign will of God in history. As much as Paul desired their salvation, he would submit to the will of God; he would acknowledge the right and ability of God to determine the destiny of peoples.

We read the next paragraph before us, **Romans 9:6-13**.

⁶But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— ¹²she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Paul first dismisses the notion that some might have had respecting the majority of Israelites’ failure to believe on Jesus that their continued unbelief was a failure of the Word of God to convert them. There may be any number of reasons for their continued unbelief, but that the Word of God failed in its ability to save them was not one of them. The Word of God knows no failure. God Himself has declared that His Word is always fulfilled.

⁸For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:8-11)

Now here in **Romans 9:6** the nuance of meaning of “the Word of God” should be understood to refer to God’s promises to bring salvation to Israel. As **Thomas Schreiner** stated, “The word of God refers to the promises of God, specifically the promise that Israel will be saved... Most scholars affirm this.”¹ **John Murray** also affirmed this understanding of “the Word of God” within this context:

“The Word of God” should be understood in a more specific sense and not in the sense of Scripture as a whole or of the word or truth of the gospel. It is the word of the promise in the covenants alluded to in verse 4. Covenant in Scripture is synonymous with oath-bound promise and the statement here is to the same effect as saying “God’s covenant has not come to naught”.²

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 491.

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (two volumes in one) (Eerdmans, 1965) vol. 2, p. 9.

Paul is stating at the outset that God's promises to save Israel stands. He will explain at a later point how this will be realized, but here he is simply affirming that the promises of God remain intact and that God has not withdrawn them or failed in His effort to have them realized. Christ had not come so as the promises of God would fail, rather, Paul will later affirm: "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers" (Rom. 15:8).

God has been true to bring to pass all of His promises in His own time. Never has His word of promise failed. We can read of testimonies of this reality in Scripture. After Joshua had led Israel into Canaan and Israel had conquered and subdued the land, we read a statement of the faithfulness of God to His words of promise. **Joshua 21:43ff** read,

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that He swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. ⁴⁴And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as He had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵***Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.*** (Josh. 21:43-45).

Later still, much later, when Solomon was dedicating the temple that he had built in Jerusalem for the worship of God, Solomon commended God for His faithfulness to fulfill all of His promises to Israel. He declared before the people:

"Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised. ***There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised through His servant Moses***" (1 Kings 8:56)³

All of God's promises are fulfilled for God is faithful to His Word. And God's faithfulness to His promises is a cause of Christian assurance and should be a cause of diligence on the part of God's people. Consider these verses:

1 Corinthians 1:9. "***God is faithful***, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. ***God is faithful***, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

1 Thessalonians 5:23f. "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴***He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it***"

2 Thessalonians 3:1ff. "Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ²and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³***But the Lord is faithful.*** He will establish you and guard you against the evil one."

³ These two Old Testament passages, Joshua 21:43-45 and 1 Kings 8:56, both serve to show that God had completely fulfilled His covenantal promises that He had given to Israel. These verses affirm that God had fulfilled His promises completely in those early days of the nation. As Joshua recorded, "All came to pass." These verses discredit the dispensational teaching that Israel never fully occupied that land that God had promised it. Dispensationalists teach that the present state of Israel will in the future fully occupy the promised land.; that it belongs to them by God's promise. This wrong understanding of Scripture underscores many evangelicals' belief in a Zionist agenda for Israel to defeat and occupy the land of its surrounding Middle East neighbors. But God had once given them the land; Israel had occupied it. But their continued habitation of the land was contingent upon Israel keeping the Mosaic covenant. Israel broke that covenant, resulting in God excluding them from the land. Their return to Palestine after the Babylonian Exile was with view to the salvation of a remnant who would one day inherit a new heavens and a new earth, even a city whose Builder and Maker is God, as Abraham had long before anticipated (cf. Heb. 11:10).

Hebrews 10:23. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for *He who promised is faithful.*”

After Paul declared forthrightly that the failure of Israelites to believe on Jesus was not due to a failure of God’s Word, he gave the first valid reason that only some Jews had embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Paul wrote in **verses 6b** and **7**, “*For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”*” Here Paul distinguishes a spiritual Israel from physical Israel, believers and unbelievers. The first reference to “Israel” would be all of the physical descendants of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁴ Here Paul was declaring that God had not promised salvation to all ethnic Jewish people.

There is debate whether Paul intended in his reference to spiritual Israel here to include believing Gentiles also. Probably in this context Paul was just referring to those elect Jews of ethnic Israel that God had promised to bring salvation.⁵ It can be readily shown elsewhere that Gentile Christians are also members of spiritual Israel. But here, Paul is simply saying that only some Jews, those who believed on Jesus, were members of the true Israel that God had promised to save from sin. The point Paul was making is that God never promised that all of Abraham’s physical offspring would become saved. And so, if only a remnant of Jews are saved through Jesus Christ, it is not a violation of God’s justice or His purpose.

Notice here that Paul also distinguishes two different groups of people that may be defined as Abraham’s children. Not all of Abraham’s physical “children” are his “offspring.” Our Lord Jesus made this same distinction before unbelieving Jewish leaders.

³³They answered Him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the Son remains forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷*I know that you are offspring of Abraham*; yet you seek to kill Me because My word finds no place in you. ³⁸I speak of what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

³⁹They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “*If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did,* ⁴⁰but now you seek to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of My own accord, but He sent Me. ⁴³Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear My word. ⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. (John 8:33-43)

Now earlier in Romans 4 Paul declared that all believers, whether they are Jewish or Gentile believers, those who have the same faith as Abraham are his spiritual children, and it was to them that God promised salvation.

¹³For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to *all his offspring*--not only to the adherent of the law but *also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all*, ¹⁷as it is written, “I have made you *the father of many nations*”--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

⁴ “Its is not necessary to identify “Israel” here as Jacob specifically.” Murray, *Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 2, p. 9.

⁵ “Identifying the precise referent in the second use of the term ‘Israel’ is controversial. Paul almost certainly labels the church ‘the Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16, and this follows from the fact that the church is the true circumcision (Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3) and the true family of Abraham (Rom. 4:9-25; Gal. 3:7, 14, 29). Moreover, Gentiles in Christ, therefore, would harmonize nicely with Pauline thought. Nonetheless, it seems more likely that in this particular context that the second use of ‘Israel’ is restricted to ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah.” Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 494f.

¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become *the father of many nations*, as he had been told, “*So shall your offspring be.*” (Rom. 4:13-18)

But here again in Romans 9:7, Paul was probably only referencing *some* of Abraham’s physical descendants were his “children” that would inherit the promise of God of salvation.

Paul next calls upon Scripture to support his assertion. Again, **verse 7** reads, “and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “*Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.*” This is a statement of God assuring Abraham that he should send away his first son⁶, Ishmael. We read the account as follows:

⁸And the child (young Isaac) grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” ¹¹And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for *through Isaac shall your offspring be named.* ¹³And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. (Gen. 21:8-14)

Paul was reasoning that God had never intended His promise of salvation to be bestowed upon all of Abraham’s physical descendants. God himself indicated this when H told Abraham to send his son Ishmael away from his household.

Paul explained what God’s statement regarding Isaac meant. **Verse 8** reads, “*This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.*” God had not promised Ishmael to Abraham, but he did promise that Isaac would be born to him through His wife Sarah. But Isaac is not only in view, for he is set forth as one of a race of “children of promise.” What Paul meant by “the children of promise” was that God had elected certain descendants of Abraham to be the recipients, that is, the beneficiaries of God’s promise of salvation to Abraham.

Now elsewhere Paul argues that all true believers in Jesus Christ are Abraham’s children that God had promised to him. In other words, those who have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are regarded by God to have been promised children to Abraham, just as Isaac had been. We read in Galatians

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” ³¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Gal. 4:28-31)

Paul was writing to the churches within the region of Galatia (which is located today in the heart of the country of Turkey). Many of these church members were Gentile believers. Paul identified them, indeed, all true believers as “children of promise.” In other words, Abraham’s promised children who would inherit salvation along with him. By the way, verse 8 states that being the physical offspring of Abraham guarantees nothing from the Lord. Those who are born of the flesh are as Ishmael, born due to Abraham’s fleshly efforts to fulfill the purpose of God through his own ingenuity and capability. In contrast, Isaac is typical of all the elect who are saved by God’s grace alone apart from their “flesh”, or works.

Paul then identifies in **verse 9** specifically what the term “of promise” means within this context. It is God’s promise to Abraham that Isaac would be born to him through Sarah. “*For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”* Isaac was a type of all the elect of God, to whom he promised that Abraham would be their spiritual father.

⁶ Notice I used the term “first son” rather than “firstborn” son. The firstborn son was the one who inherited the father’s name, position, and legacy, and domain. Although Ishmael was the first son born to Abraham, actually Isaac would have been regarded as his “firstborn son.”

Now some Jews might take issue with Paul's argument. After all, everyone knows that God rejected Abraham's offspring born through Hagar. But the Jews were descendants of Isaac! But Paul would dispel this reasoning by his next argument from Scripture. We read in **verses 10** through **12**:

¹⁰*And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,*
¹¹*though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—*¹²*she was told, "The older will serve the younger."*

Paul narrows further the physical descendants of Abraham to whom God would bestow the blessing of Abraham. Not all of Isaac's sons are inheritors of Abraham's blessing. Both Jacob and Esau had the same parents, Isaac as their father and Rebekah as their mother. God intended to demonstrate that salvation is by His grace alone, which is freely bestowed upon His people whom He chose solely by His sovereign grace. He therefore told the mother of these twin boys that contrary to cultural convention in which even the first twin born would be designated the eldest (firstborn) son, God told Rebekah that He had chosen Jacob, the second born twin son to be the one to whom God's blessing of a covenantal relationship with Himself would be established.

Our Arminian friends, who teach that people are saved by their free will rather than by God's free grace, argue that God simply knew beforehand that Jacob would believe and that Esau would not believe, therefore, based upon this foreknowledge God chose Jacob over Esau. But this is denial of the intention of Paul to show that there was nothing about these two men that they did, would do, could do, did not do, could not do, that moved God to choose one over the other. *He chose Jacob rather than Esau in order to prove that salvation is due to God's unconditional election of some sinners to be saved by His grace and that He takes the initiative to call them unto Himself.*

God chose Jacob according to His sovereign grace that he would be the head of the household, the promised heir of Isaac who was the promised heir of Abraham. God chose that Jacob would be the recipient of His grace unto salvation.

The paragraph concludes with another quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures in order to substantiate Paul's doctrine. We read in **verse 13**, *"As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"* This is a quotation from **Malachi 1:1** and **2**, which reads:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. ²"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. ***"Yet I have loved Jacob***
³***but Esau I have hated.*** I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

This statement of God in which He declared that He loved Jacob and hated Esau was at the end of the Old Testament record, perhaps 1,000 years after Jacob and Esau had lived. In the context of Malachi God was speaking of the nations, Israel and Edom, that came forth from these two men. He was speaking of His love for Israel and His hatred toward Esau, in other words, the nation of Edom, which existed in the region east of the Dead Sea. God had intended to decimate the nation of Edom, for He hated them; they were under His wrath. But He intended to save His people Jacob, whom He loved, to whom He would send the Redeemer. But even though in Malachi God was speaking of the collective peoples of Jacob and Esau, what was true of the nations was first true of the progenitors of those nations. God had loved Jacob but He had hated Esau. Paul was proving that God had all along intended to save His chosen people because He loved them.

Let us draw some implications and applications of our passage.

First, as Paul was disappointed that God had not saved His people, so there may be times in our own Christian experience when we have desired something for ourselves or for someone we loved, perhaps we desired a good thing, but God in effect said to us, "No. It will not be so." God may bring us to the place where we must yield our hearts and will, and acquiesce to His sovereign will, saying, "Not my will, but Thine be done." God had told Abraham that He had purposed to fulfill His promise of salvation through his yet unborn son, Isaac. But Abraham already had a son, one whom he loved. His response to God was a plea that God would show favor toward Ishmael, not to his yet unborn son of Sarah. We read of this in Genesis 17:15ff.

¹⁵And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before you!*" ¹⁹God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

God is sovereign in the dispensing of His salvation. He saves people when He extends His grace toward them. He is the cause of salvation for everyone who comes to know Him.

Second, this passage of Romans 9 sets forth God's purpose of grace in His election of sinners that cannot be refuted by those who hate the doctrine of election. And there are those that hate election. They resist and react to any notion that God is sovereign in the dispensing of salvation to the ones that He had chosen in eternity and whom He had promised to His Son to be His people. "Of all the doctrines of the Bible, none is so offensive to human nature as the doctrine of God's Sovereignty" (J. C. Ryle).

Charles Spurgeon argued that he knew his gospel was biblical and of God because people naturally hated it.

We are sure that the gospel we have preached is not after men, because men do not take to it. It is opposed even to this day. If anything is hated bitterly, it is the out-and-out gospel of the grace of God, especially if that hateful word "SOVEREIGNTY" is mentioned with it.

Dare to say, "He will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will have compassion on whom he will have compassion" (Rom. 9:15), and furious critics will revile you without stint.

The modern religionist not only hates the doctrine of sovereign grace, but he raves and rages at the mention of it. He would sooner hear you blaspheme than preach election by the Father, atonement by the Son, or regeneration by the Spirit. If you want to see a man worked up till the Satanic is clearly uppermost, let some of the new divines hear you preach a free-grace sermon.

A gospel which is after men will be welcomed by men; but it needs a divine operation upon the heart and mind to make a man willing to receive into his inmost soul this distasteful gospel of the grace of God.

My dear brethren, do not try to make it tasteful to carnal minds. Hide not the offence of the cross, lest you make it of none effect. The angles and corners of the gospel are its strength: to pare them off is to deprive it of power. Toning down is not the increase of strength, but the death of it. Why, even among the sects, you must have noticed that their distinguishing points are the horns of their power; and when these are practically omitted, the sect is effete.

Learn, then, that if you take Christ out of Christianity, Christianity is dead. If you remove grace out of the gospel, the gospel is gone. If the people do not like the doctrine of grace, give them all the more of it! Whenever its enemies rail at a certain kind of gun, a wise military power will provide more of such artillery. A great general, going in before his king, stumbled over his own sword. "I see," said the king, "your sword is in the way." The warrior answered, "Your majesty's enemies have often felt the same." That our gospel offends the King's enemies is no regret to us.

Third, this shows how indebted we are to the grace of God in order to see sinners come to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Mankind does not have the capacity to repent of sin and believe on Jesus Christ. Because of sin, fallen man is unable and unwilling to come to Christ. This is the biblical and reformed doctrine of the *total depravity* of all human beings.

If people get this biblical doctrine right in their thinking, it would save them from much error. On the other hand, if one is wrong here, he will be wrong on what follows. **J. C. Ryle** wrote,

There are very few errors and false doctrines of which the beginning may not be traced up to unsound views about the corruption of human nature. Wrong views of the disease will always bring with them wrong views of the remedy. Wrong views of the corruption of human nature will always carry with them wrong views of the grand antidote and cure of that corruption.

If the disease can be diagnosed to be a terminal matter, then the number of possible treatments becomes very few. Get this first matter right, and the other four points will come along easily.

This is a matter that perhaps needs proclaimed above all others. But it is not. Man's condition is not commonly described as hopelessly lost, but rather he is only damaged a bit. He does not need redemption, but rather understanding and some assistance. It is no wonder that Christianity is so powerless in our land when the pastor of the largest evangelical church (i.e. Joel Osteen), so called, refuses to mention the word "sin." In contrast to his approach, listen to the words of Charles Spurgeon

The withholding of the doctrine of the total depravity of man has wrought serious mischief to many who have listened to a certain kind of preaching. These people do not get a true healing because they do not know the disease under which they are suffering; they are never truly clothed because nothing is done towards stripping them. In many ministries, there is not enough of probing the heart and arousing the conscience by the revelation of man's alienation from God, and by the declaration of the selfishness and the wickedness of such a state. Men need to be told that, except divine grace shall bring them out of their enmity to God, they must eternally perish; and they must be reminded of the sovereignty of God, that He is not obliged to bring them out of this state, that He would be right and just if He left them in such a condition, that they have no merit to plead before Him, and no claims upon Him, but that if they are to be saved, it must be by grace, and by grace alone. The preacher's work is to throw sinners down in utter helplessness, that they may be compelled to look up to Him who alone can help them.⁷

Now, does the Bible support the Arminian position that man is not totally fallen into sin, but that he has only been damaged somewhat with respect to his nature? Or does the Bible present a sad and serious picture of the condition of man, that he is hopelessly lost and undone, unable to raise himself from his condition unless Christ sets him free? I think the answer is obvious to anyone who has a lick of sense about the teaching of Scripture.

God declares man's sinfulness throughout Scripture. For example, in **Romans 3:9-20**, the apostle states a truth and then substantiates that truth through the quotation of Old Testament Scripture. Paul had previously laid out a case to prove the universal sinfulness of man. Gentiles were guilty before God. But Jews also were equally guilty. He stated the conclusion of the matter in **Romans 3:9**.

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jew and Greeks that they are all under sin.

Are Jews better than Gentiles? "Not at all." "All are *under* sin."

The Bible describes the sinfulness of men in four respects. **First**, Man is a sinner in his *actions*. God has given mankind His law and man violates that law continuously. **Romans 3:23**, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." **Second**, man is a sinner in his *nature*; his very being is sinful. **Romans 7:18**, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find." **Third**, man is a sinner through *imputation*. In other words, each of us is guilty before God because the guilt of Adam's sin has been imputed to us. We sinned when Adam sinned, and God has condemned us along with the entire human race due to Adam's sin. **Romans 5:12**, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death spread to all men, because all sinned", that is, all sinned in Adam's sin. He was the representative of the human race. The expression that is commonly used is that he is our federal head. What he did, he did on behalf of us. And **fourth**, we are sinners in that we are "under sin" as stated here in Romans 3:9. We are dominated by sin and we are under its condemnation.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 24.

In Romans 3 Paul cited Old Testament Scripture to demonstrate that what he has asserted is consistent with God's Word. **First, we read of man's general depravity. Six charges of guilt** are leveled against mankind. They are taken from Psalm 41.

1. Verse 10, "As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one." This is a declaration that no one is right **with** and **before** God apart from God's own provision in Jesus Christ.
2. Verse 11a, "There is none who understands." Man's thinking has been adversely affected by sin. His mind is darkened to the true knowledge of God. He is ignorant of many truths. He is in error respecting many others. Man's **mind** is under sin.
3. Verse 11b, "There is none who seeks after God." Man's desires are corrupted by sin. He may seek a god of his own invention, one that he has carved out for himself, but he will not seek the one true God. None seeks after God. Man's **desires** are under sin.
4. Verse 12, "They have all gone out of the way," We see that their intentions have been corrupted by sin. Man has chosen not to walk in the way of God's law. He has gone out of **the way**. Man's **will** is under sin.
5. Verse 12b, "They have together become unprofitable." They have nothing which commends them to God. They bring no benefit to God for Him having made them. Their value has been rendered a liability. Man has rendered his life **worthless** under sin.
6. Verse 12c, "There is none who does good, no, not one." Nothing that fallen man can do pleases God. He neither does all that God has commanded him, nor has he denied himself of all that God has forbidden him. Man is guilty, **under** sin.

Second, in Romans 3 we read of specific manifestations of man's depravity. It is as though the Great Physician were giving a diagnosis of man's condition. Eight ailments are identified. They are cited from Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, and Psalm 10:7. The first four describe sins of the **tongue**, of speech. The second set of four are sins of **violence**. These 8 descriptions are taken from Isaiah 59:7 and Psalm 36:1.

1. Verse 13a. "Their **throat** is an open tomb."
2. Verse 13b. "With their **tongues** they have practiced deceit."
3. Verse 13c. "The poison of asps is under their **lips**" {from Psa. 140:3}
4. Verse 14. "Whose **mouth** is full of cursing and bitterness" {Psa. 10:7}
5. Verse 15. "Their **feet** are swift to shed blood."
6. Verse 16. "**Destruction** and **misery** are in their ways."
7. Verse 17. "And the way of **peace** they have not known."
8. Verse 18. "There is no **fear** of God before their eyes."

God's law had exposed mankind to its sinfulness. It renders man guilty and without excuse, as verses 19ff declare: **Verse 19**, "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." Man is left condemned and helpless to raise himself from his condition. "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (3:20).

Here is a definition of the biblical teaching of man's total depravity:

Man was created originally in the image of God, perfect in holiness in His nature, being free from sin. But he transgressed the command of God and fell, resulting in him and his posterity becoming sinful in nature, subjects to satan and servants of sin, incurring the wrath of God whereby they suffer misery and death forever, incapable of recovery unless the Lord Jesus sets them free.

A few clarifying statements are in order. First let us clarify what the doctrine does *not* mean.

1. Total depravity does *not* mean that every man is at the worst state he can be, that every man expresses the full extent of his evil nature as much as possible at all times. And so, the doctrine is not *utter depravity*, or *absolute depravity*.

But as Christians we know that it is only due to the grace of God that we are not worse than we are. If it were not for the common grace of God each of us and all in society would manifest evil in our lives to the fullest measure. God has given us society, laws, a legal system, fear of man's opinion of us, and fear of temporal consequences. These things prevent us from manifesting our sinful natures more than what we do. It is not because of a love of God and righteousness that fallen man does not live more wickedly, it is because God restrains him from going further in his sin. We read in Romans 1 what occurs when God lets go of a person or a society. When man has rejected God's restraints that He has placed upon him, we read of the result.

²⁴Therefore **God also gave them up** to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. ²⁶**For this reason God gave them up** to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. ²⁷Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. ²⁸And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, **God gave them over** to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; ²⁹being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, ³⁰backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, ³¹undiscerning, untrustworthy, without natural affection, unforgiving, unmerciful; ³²who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, now only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Rom. 1:24-32)

Christians who are taught in their Bible and have some sense of their own depravity understand that they are capable of the most despicable of sins. Therefore they watch themselves. Moreover, they have pity on those fallen into the depths of sin, for the sentiment is known by them to be true, "There but for the grace of God, am I."

2. Total depravity does *not* mean that man is incapable of human good. **Arthur Pink** said it well:

The solemn doctrine of total depravity does not mean that there are no parents with genuine love for their children, and no children who respectfully obey their parents; that there are none imbued with a spirit of benevolence to the poor and kind sympathy for the suffering; that there are no conscientious employers or honest employees. But it does mean that, where the unregenerate are concerned, those duties are discharged *without* any love for God, any subjection to His authority, or any concern for His glory. Parents are required to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and children are to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph. 6:1, 4). Servants are to serve their masters "in singleness of heart, as unto Christ." Do the unconverted comply with those injunctions? No, therefore their performances not only possess no spiritual value, but are polluted. Every act of the natural man is faulty. "The plowing of the wicked is sin" (Prov. 21:4) because it is for selfish ends. Then is it better not to plow at all? Wrong, for slothfulness is equally sinful. There are different degrees of enormity, but *every* act of man is sinful.

The condition of the natural man is such that in the discharge of his first responsibility to his Maker he is utterly unfaithful. His chief obligation is to live for the glory of God and to love Him with all his heart; but while he remains unrenewed he does not have the least spiritual, holy, true love for Him. Whatever there may be in his domestic and social conduct which is admirable in the eyes of others, it is not prompted by any respect for the divine will. So far as man's self-recovery and self-recuperation are concerned, his depravity is total, in the sense of being decisive and final.⁸

⁸Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 124.

3. Total depravity does *not* mean that unsaved man is incapable of discerning the distinction between good and evil. That he can and does is one cause of his aggravated condemnation. He has been given a conscience by which right and wrong can be distinguished. However, because of sin, even his conscience is corrupted so that he cannot discern the presence of all of his sin or the exceeding sinfulness of his sin.

What then does this doctrine mean?

1. Total depravity *does* mean that he is incapable of doing anything so as to merit God's favor with respect to salvation. All his good deeds are performed without a view of glorifying God.

2. By total depravity we mean that man is as bad off as he can be, that there is no part of him which has been unaffected by the fall--his mind with its understanding, his heart with its affections, his will with its purposes and intentions. His loyalty is supremely to himself and satan.

3. Total depravity means in his natural state he is incapable of doing anything or desiring anything pleasing to God. It means that his loves and loyalties lie in things other than God and His will. He loves darkness rather than light. He chooses to serve self rather than God.

4. Total depravity means apart from a work of God's grace in regeneration, he will continue in this state, for he is both unwilling to change and incapable of remedying his condition. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "***Most assuredly***, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

5. Total depravity means that although free offers of pardon and salvation may be presented, because his will is so bent on ordering his own existence and he is unwilling to be subject to the law of God, if left to himself, will reject offers of mercy and persist in his self-directed existence to his own destruction.

6. Total depravity means that man does not have a "free will" if what is intended by that term that he is free and able in and of himself to choose to respond to God's commands apart from being born again.

It follows that if he is to be saved, God must choose him, for if left to himself, he cannot and will not choose God. And so, Paul stated that the failure of the Jews to be saved was not due to the failure of God to fulfill His promises, it was ultimately due to the refusal of God to save them by His grace. Paul will continue in Romans 9 to show that God is sovereign in the dispensing His mercy and grace to save sinners.

Let us conclude with this reality before us: How dependent we are on the sovereign grace of God to bring people to salvation! How prayerful we should be! How faithful we should be to proclaim God's Word faithfully so that He might choose to bless His preached Word to the conversion of His chosen people.

And then finally, let us who believe on Jesus go forth from here with a sense of overwhelming goodness and mercy for the love that God set upon us in eternity that He would choose to save us from our sin. God be praised for His unspeakable gift! But for those who may not know Jesus Christ savingly, may you go forth with a sense of need and dependence upon God acting on Your behalf to bring to you the gift of repentance and faith, so that you may believe savingly upon Jesus Christ.