

**04** Preaching The  
Depth of Depravity  
STEVEN J. LAWSON

**20** The Guilt of  
All Men  
JOHN MACARTHUR

**28** Adam's Fall  
and Mine  
R.C. SPROUL

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

AUTUMN 2021

*No. 36*



PREACHING

TOTAL

DEPRAVITY



PREACHING • TEACHING • TRAINING



---

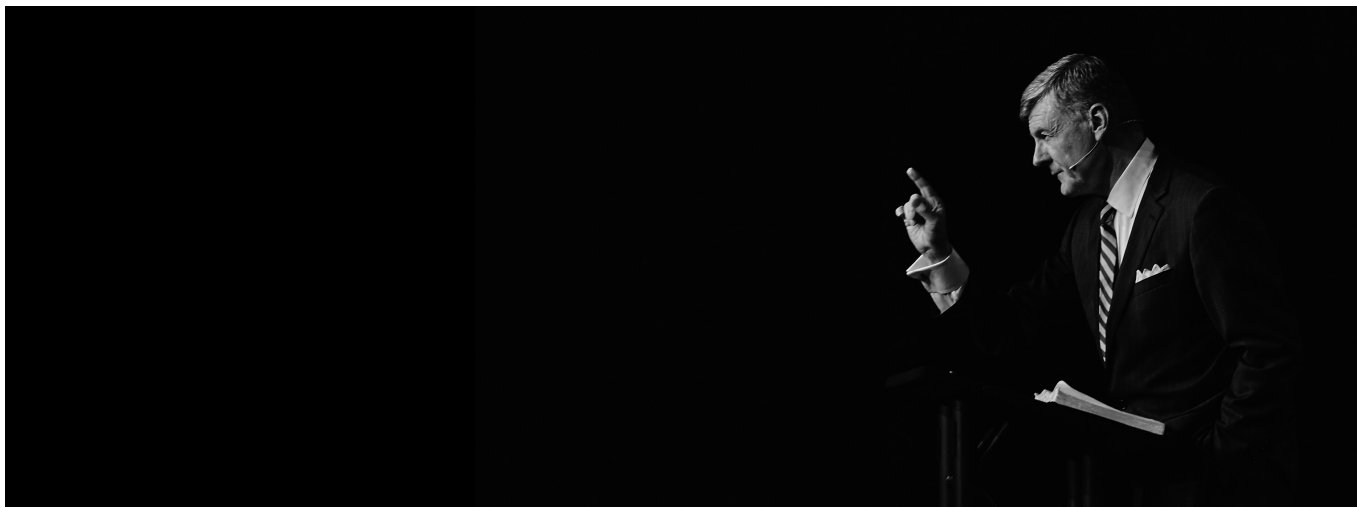
Join Dr. Lawson for a practical look into the life and ministry of the expositor.

**EXPOSITOR**  
*with STEVEN J. LAWSON* podcast



# THE BLACK VELVET BACKDROP

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



In this issue, we will focus our attention upon the preaching of the first of the five doctrines of grace—the truth of total depravity. This truth comes first because it shows the need for the other four doctrines that follow: sovereign election, definite atonement, effectual calling, and preserving grace. Once total depravity is understood and embraced, the other four truths become more apparent, both biblically and logically.

Many years ago, when I was preparing to ask my wife to marry me, I went into the jewelry store to purchase an engagement ring. The jeweler pulled out the diamond that he believed would best suit my needs and placed it before me. It looked all right, but I was unimpressed. Seeing my indifference, the jeweler pulled out a black velvet pad and laid it on the counter. Then, he placed the diamond on a black backdrop.

What a difference this made! It seemed like every beam of light in the store was pulled through the diamond. Instantly, the gemstone looked to be on fire. It sparkled with the brilliant radiance of the setting sun upon a glistening lake. This dramatic change in color was brought about because the diamond had been placed against a black velvet backdrop. It was the same diamond, but now its presentation was dazzling. I was now convinced of its beauty and

bought it right away.

Total depravity is like the black velvet backdrop upon which the diamond of God's sovereign grace may be placed. It is this darker truth that causes the other doctrines to shine so brightly. The darker the presentation of this truth, the brighter the luster of salvation will spark. This is why faithfully preaching this difficult doctrine is so important. Hard doctrine softens hearts.

In future issues of *Expositor*, we will lay out the diamond of God's saving grace. But we will only do so after we have first set in place this black backdrop—the biblical doctrine of total depravity. Specifically, our attention in this and subsequent issues will be upon *preaching* the doctrines of grace. The more we proclaim the radical depth of our corruption, the better our listeners will behold the glow of this glorious gem of grace.

I believe that these articles will be critical in your developing understanding of how to become an effective preacher of the full counsel of God. May you sharpen your pulpit skills as a result of these expositions. ♦

# BE

The Reformation Study Bible

Student Edition



# TRANSFORMED

GOD'S WORD,  
CLEARLY AND  
PRACTICALLY  
EXPLAINED  
FOR THE NEXT  
GENERATION.

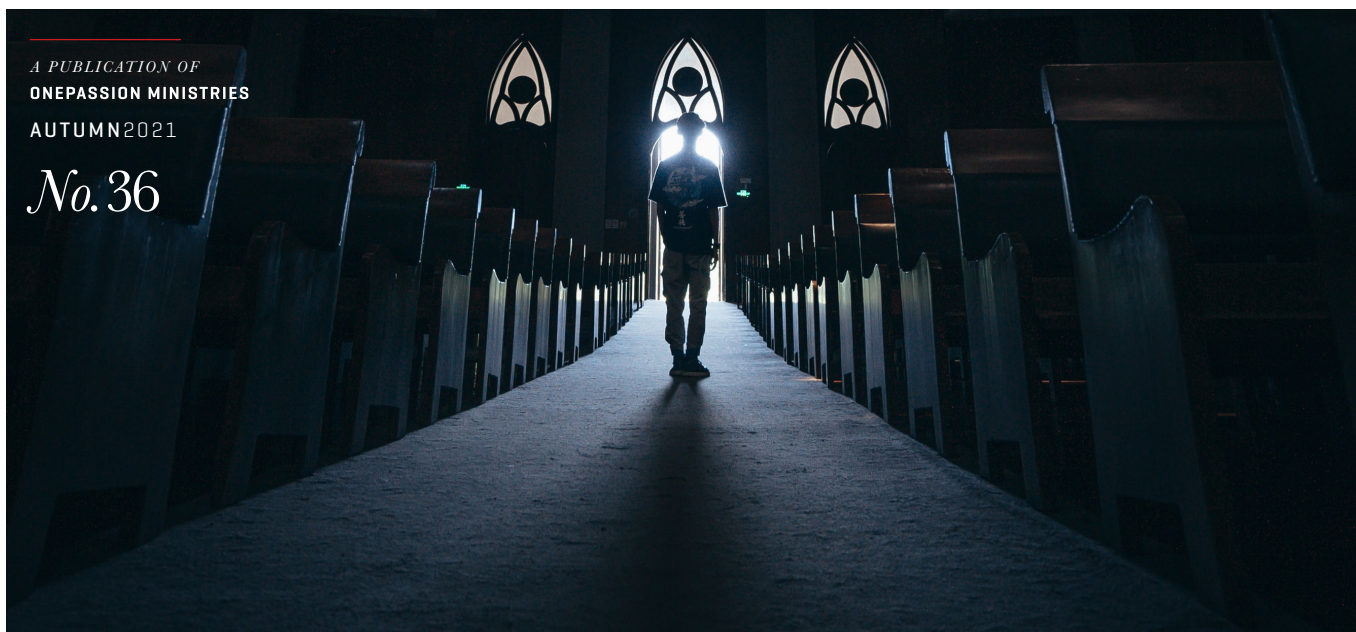


English Standard  
Version

LEATHER-LIKE  
Red

*Preorder yours today.*

ReformationStudyBible.com/student | 800-435-4343



A PUBLICATION OF  
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

AUTUMN 2021

No. 36

## Contents

### 04 PREACHING THE DEPTH OF DEPRAVITY

**STEVEN J. LAWSON** is founder and president of OnePassion Ministries. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, director of the doctor of ministry program at The Master's Seminary, and host of the Institute for Expository Preaching. He is the author of numerous books.

### 20 THE GUILT OF ALL MEN

**JOHN MACARTHUR** is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and president of The Master's College and Seminary. He has authored many books and is a regular contributor to *Expositor Magazine*.

### 28 ADAM'S FALL AND MINE

**R. C. SPROUL** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, FL, first president of Reformation Bible College, and executive editor of *Tabletalk* magazine. In addition, he was author of many books, including *Chosen By God*.

### 42 THE SINFULNESS OF MAN

**MICHAEL REEVES** is president and professor of theology at Union School of Theology in Bridgend, Wales, and Oxford, England. He is author of several books, including *Rejoice and Tremble*, *The Unquenchable Flame*, and *Delighting in the Trinity*.

**EXPOSITOR**  
ONEPASSION



AUTUMN 2021 ISSUE 36 © 2021 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES **EXECUTIVE EDITOR** Steven J. Lawson **EDITOR** Dustin W. Bengé  
**DESIGN DIRECTOR** Dustin W. Bengé **MARKETING DIRECTOR** Grace Anne Lawson **PROOFREADER** C. Rebecca Rine

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org)). **SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION:** Annual subscription price (4 issues): \$30.00. You can subscribe to *Expositor Magazine* by MAIL: *Expositor Magazine*, P.O. Box 461508, Escondido, CA 92046 ONLINE: [www.expositormagazine.com](http://www.expositormagazine.com) EMAIL: [expositormagazine@pcspublink.com](mailto:expositormagazine@pcspublink.com) PHONE: 855-492-1670. *Expositor* is published bi-monthly by OnePassion, Inc. P.O. Box 601649, Dallas, TX 75360. Postage Paid at Dallas, TX 75382 and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Expositor Magazine*, P.O. Box 461508, Escondido, CA 92046.



**PREACHING  
THE  
DEPTH OF  
DEPRAVITY**

---

**STEVEN J. LAWSON**



For any pulpit to be mightily used by God, the teaching of sound doctrine is absolutely necessary. One such theological truth found throughout the Bible is the total depravity of the fallen human nature. Wherever there is an absence of preaching about this sobering reality, genuine conversions will be few and the assurance of salvation rare. Without teaching on this vital truth, evangelism will be ineffective, and people will have a distorted view of the world. This crucial doctrine sets the stage for the necessity of the gospel and establishing a Christian worldview. Every faithful preacher should be a consistent expositor of total depravity.


Total depravity means that the entirety of a person's nature is radically corrupted by sin. Though every person is not as depraved as he or she could be, because of the fall of Adam, the pollution of original sin has spread to every part of every person. Charles Spurgeon said, "As the salt flavors every drop in the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature." In other words, our entire nature was ruined by sin. Our minds were darkened by sin, so we could not

understand spiritual truth. Our affections were defiled by sin, so we loved sin and hated God. Moreover, our wills were dead toward God, so we were unable to believe the gospel apart from the grace of Jesus Christ.

Though the truth of total depravity may seem harsh to preach and challenging for your listeners to hear, it is, nevertheless, clearly taught in Scripture. The good news of the gospel—that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners—will never be good news to your hearers until they know the bad news. Only then will the gospel be the greatest news they have ever heard.

J. C. Ryle rightly said, "It takes a whole Bible to make a whole Christian." This is surely true—and total depravity is an essential truth in proclaiming the full counsel of God. This potent doctrine must be preached if we are to see believers brought to greater spiritual maturity. Moreover, expounding this truth is essential in seeing sinners awakened from their spiritual slumber and soundly converted. To withhold this doctrine from our listeners would leave Christians with an incomplete understanding of their own





**For every Bible preacher, this core truth must be an essential part of his pulpit ministry. For an expositor to fail to expound this doctrine, given its prominence in Scripture, would require him to abandon the sacred text altogether.**

conversion and with a skewed view of the world.

Moreover, a neglect in teaching about total depravity leaves unbelievers with a flawed understanding of their true spiritual state. Without being taught the gravity of this truth, they would see themselves, spiritually speaking, as sitting in a walk-in medical clinic, merely needing prescription medicine in order to get better. But the truth is, they are spiritually dead, lying in a morgue, needing a resurrection to life.

The question before us is: how should we preach this truth of total depravity? The following directives will point our preaching in the right direction.

### **PREACH IT BIBLICALLY**

As with any doctrine, we must preach total depravity as it is found in the Scripture. This is the core commitment of *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone. We are charged to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). The doctrine of total depravity is a foundational truth taught throughout the Bible. The vile-ness of sin is not an obscure subject, hidden in the back

sections of a few books. Instead, it is prominently featured in the divinely inspired Word from cover to cover. To neglect this truth would be to neglect the Bible itself.

In the Old Testament, total depravity is explicitly taught in the Law (Gen 6:5; 8:21), enforced by Job and his friends (Job 15:14–16; 25:4–6), and confirmed by the psalmists (Ps 14:1–3; 143:2) and the wise sages (Eccl 8:11; 9:3). Further, it was condemned by all the prophets (Isa 1:5–6; 59:7; Jer 13:23; 17:9). In the New Testament, it was rebuked by John the Baptist (Matt 3:7–12), confronted by Jesus Christ (Matt 12:34–36; 15:11, 18–20; Luke 6:45), and judged by the apostles (Rom 3:10–18; Eph 2:1–3; 5:8). The storyline of the entire Bible ends with its proclamation (Rev 22:15). From beginning to end, this truth is plainly taught in Scripture.

For every Bible preacher, this core truth must be an essential part of his pulpit ministry. For an expositor to fail to expound this doctrine, given its prominence in Scripture, would require him to abandon the sacred text altogether. He would be preaching the Bible with one eye closed.

Every Bible preacher who faithfully expounds Scripture will discover this doctrine in virtually every portion of divine revelation.

### PREACH IT THEOLOGICALLY

As you teach this biblical doctrine, take care to show how it is connected to the larger framework of systematic theology. The theology of total depravity does not stand in isolation from the other major truths of the salvation of sinners. The whole Scripture stands together as one “body of divinity,” as the Puritans remind us. No individual truth contradicts the whole. Each doctrine is interrelated with every other truth of divine revelation. The entire Bible speaks consistently, with one voice.

For example, total depravity stands in perfect agreement with the doctrine of sovereign election. The former requires the latter, and the latter the former. Given that sinful man does not possess the moral ability to believe in Jesus Christ, God must exercise His divine will and choose whom He will save—or no one would be saved. The Apostle Paul states that God chose to set His heart of love upon His elect before the world began: “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). If any person was to believe in Christ, God *had* to take the initiative to exercise His selective will. Total depravity necessitates sovereign election.

In addition, total depravity is inseparably connected to the doctrine of sovereign regeneration. If human nature is radically corrupt, it follows that the new birth must be caused exclusively by the Holy Spirit. Because an unconverted man is marred by moral inability, he *cannot* believe the gospel by his own willpower. If a spiritually dead sinner is to exercise faith in Christ, this can only occur when God gives life to his dead soul. God must take out his heart of stone—which is stubborn and resistant toward Him—and give him a new heart of flesh that responds to Him. Further, the Holy Spirit must grant the gifts of repentance and faith, which enable him to believe in Christ. In short, total depravity necessitates monergistic regeneration.

### PREACH IT THOROUGHLY

In teaching total depravity, it is necessary to explain the comprehensiveness of this doctrine. It is essential to teach how Adam’s sin affects every aspect of every person’s human nature. Original sin has polluted all of humanity, touching every aspect of human personality—mind, affections, and will. As stated earlier, this is why this doctrine is called *total* depravity. The entirety of each person is suffering under the deadly ravages of sin—mentally, emotionally, and volitionally.

First and foremost, original sin has darkened the *thinking* of every person. The Apostle Paul writes, “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” (1 Cor 2:14). Sin always works in league with the devil. Again Paul writes, “Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:3–4). The Bible is clear that sin has rendered the minds of every unbeliever inoperative toward spiritual truths.

Further, original sin has defiled the *desires* of every person. From the moment of our birth, we have no desire for God. Instead, we are possessed by an insatiable appetite for sin. We hunger for what is unlawful and refuse the One who alone can satisfy. Everything in our hearts is twisted and reversed. The prophet laments, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9) This means no one can grasp the depths of the depravity of the human heart. The sad reality is that man “drinks iniquity like water” (Job 15:16)! Bottom-line: “There is none who seeks for God” (Rom 3:11).

Finally, original sin has paralyzed the *will* of everyone in their choices concerning God and the gospel. Unconverted man is so engulfed in sin that his will is held captive to sin. He cannot choose to follow Christ, because he is restrained by his sin nature. Jesus Himself said, “No one can come to Me” (John 6:44, cf. 65). “Can” is a word of ability, not permission. Being enslaved to sin, the lost sinner must obey the dominating, dictatorial rule of sin. Again, Jesus said, “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin” (John 8:34; cf. Rom. 6:16–17). The will of every unbeliever is held hostage by the chains of his sin nature.

For example, if you take a drop of cyanide and put it in a glass of water, that drop of cyanide will permeate all its contents. No matter what part of the glass you might drink from, the poison has found its way into the entirety of the water. In like manner, Adam’s sin has permeated every part of every person in the human race. Mind, emotion, and will are all subject to the pervasive, deadly poison of sin.

### PREACH IT VIVIDLY

As you preach total depravity, you should engage the many metaphors used in the Bible to describe this tragic reality. Effective preaching not only defines this truth, but also vividly pictures it. A wide range of images are found in the Scripture that clearly portray the radical corruption of unregenerate people. Wise is the preacher who uses these

figures of speech, painting them upon the canvas of his listeners' minds. A picture truly is worth a thousand words.


The major image used in Scripture for total depravity, as we have noted, is death—*spiritual* death. This picture perfectly conveys man's inability and unwillingness to come to God. What can a dead man do? He certainly cannot commend himself to God by any good works. Neither can he even desire to seek God. Paul writes, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1; cf. v. 5; Ezek 37:1–10; John 5:25; Col 2:13). A spiritual corpse has no capacity to raise himself from the grave of sin, much less to believe in Christ. A dead body can see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing, choose nothing, nor take any steps forward to respond to the gospel. So it is with the entombed sinner.

Other biblical metaphors represent the unregenerate

person as being spiritually blind (John 3:3), deaf (John 8:47), and enslaved (John 8:34; Rom 6:16). This means that the unconverted soul cannot see, hear, or receive the truth. They lack the understanding necessary to be converted (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:3–4) because they consider the gospel to be utter "foolishness" (1 Cor 1:18, 21, 23, 25). Such a person has a "heart of stone" (Ezek 11:19; 36:26), which is hardened toward God. He is lifeless, resistant, and stiff-necked (Jer 19:15), refusing to submit to Him.

#### **PREACH IT HISTORICALLY**

During the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), the five points of Calvinism were first officially drafted. These five categories were certainly not original with this gathering in Holland, having been previously defined and defended by



**Original sin has polluted all of humanity, touching every aspect of human personality—mind, affections, and will. As stated earlier, this is why this doctrine is called total depravity. The entirety of each person is suffering under the deadly ravages of sin—mentally, emotionally, and volitionally.**

Augustine in the fifth century. These core doctrines were formally written in response to the five points of Arminianism (1610), the man-centered theology of Jacob Arminius that elevated the ability of the human will. Within this framework, the free will of man had been enthroned as sovereign, impeaching God's divine will in salvation.

Given this attempted theological coup, the question must be raised: Does the human will, bound in an unregenerate state of sin, have the power and ability to believe upon Jesus Christ? The Arminian position states that it does. It claims that sin does not restrict man's freedom of choice. Those holding this position argue that fallen humanity is sick (not dead), near-sighted (not blind), and weak (not wicked). They contend that person with a sin nature retains the ability to repent and believe in Christ.

But the Bible declares the very opposite. Scripture teaches that sin permeates and paralyzes every part of the unregenerate nature of man. According to God's Word, man's will is not upon a throne as a sovereign, but is confined to a dungeon as a slave. Man continually sins because his nature is


completely evil. His nature, being bound in sin, is held in the shackles of unbelief. This is the biblical teaching of total depravity, and it gives glory to God's free grace.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther said, "Original sin is in us, like the beard. We are shaved today and look clean, and have a smooth chin; tomorrow our beard has grown again, nor does it cease growing while we remain on earth." You must declare to your congregants that the effects of original sin are evident within each unsaved person.

If the first man, Adam, suffered only slight repercussions from his sin, then the rest of the human race has suffered only minimal side effects. But if Adam did more than trip—if he actually fell beyond his own repair into a spiritual grave—then he took the whole human race down with him. This is surely the biblical position. Adam's one sin resulted in death entering the world and has spread to all men, resulting in condemnation to all (see Rom 5:12–21).

But the good news of the gospel is this: Jesus Christ, through His death, has reversed the devastating curse





**Every doctrine that God places into the Scripture is holy and right. Every biblical truth reveals His own sinless character. Consequently, we must never withhold any truth taught in the Bible. Neither must we ever apologize for it.**

of sin. Though the one act of disobedience by Adam has brought condemnation to all, the one act of obedience by Jesus Christ—dying for our sins, bearing our iniquities, absorbing God’s wrath—has brought salvation to all who believe upon Christ.


#### **PREACH IT BOLDLY**

Every doctrine that God places into the Scripture is holy and right. Every biblical truth reveals His own sinless character. Consequently, we must never withhold any truth taught in the Bible. Neither must we ever apologize for it. This is true of the doctrine of total depravity. You must not hide this teaching under a bushel. You must not censor

what God says in His Word. You must not attempt to tone down what His voice declares. You may not edit out of His Word whatever part you feel is unpleasant. Whatever God has spoken in the Scripture, you must proclaim it for all to hear.

You are called to be a megaphone for every truth in the Bible. This fact necessitates frankness of speech concerning total depravity.

Jesus certainly did not hide this truth from others. To the premier teacher in Israel, Nicodemus—the most religious and respected man in his day—Jesus bluntly said that his morality was not good enough to gain entrance into the kingdom of God. In a most direct manner, the Lord spoke,



**The lower that unregenerate man is seen to be, the higher God will be seen and praised. These two polar extremes—the depravity of man and the holiness of God—are to be held in stark contrast to each other. Tragically, though, the higher that man is raised in the minds of people, the lower God will be perceived. A weakening of total depravity demeans God and robs Him of the glory due His name.**

“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus stated that Nicodemus was spiritually blind and was born outside the realm of salvation. He could not enter the kingdom apart from this miraculous new birth. Nicodemus needed to have this truth preached to him, and Jesus did not hesitate to do so.

To the largely unconverted crowd in Galilee, Jesus announced, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). This is a clear statement of the complete inability of unbelievers to come to faith in Christ. To the unsaved crowd in Jerusalem, Jesus said the same: “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin” (John 8:34). They could not believe in Him, because they were enslaved by their own sinful desires. Again, Jesus said, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44). Moreover, “You do not hear [the words of God], because you are not of God” (John 8:47). Jesus knew nothing of withholding total depravity in His preaching to the public arena—and neither must you.

### **PREACH IT WORSHIPFULLY**

Every truth in the Bible should be preached for the glory of God alone. That includes teaching the total depravity of man. How is this so? We can see it clearly from this aerial perspective: the lower that unregenerate man is seen to be, the higher God will be seen and praised. These two polar extremes—the depravity of man and the holiness of God—are to be held in stark contrast to each other. Tragically, though, the higher that man is raised in the minds of people, the lower God will be perceived. A weakening of total depravity demeans God and robs Him of the glory due His name.

The noted expositor James Montgomery Boice spoke of the teeter-totter effect in preaching and how it has a direct effect on worship. Boice used the see-saw in the children’s playground as his object lesson. When one end of the board is up, holding a child, the other end will always be down. When the lower end goes up, the higher end goes down. Boice notes that both ends of the teeter-totter can never be up at the same time. So it is in preaching, he concluded. When God is exalted in the pulpit, man is lowered to the right place in the hearts of people. But when man is exalted in preaching, God is debased and dishonored.

If God is to be highly exalted in your preaching, you must faithfully preach this doctrine of total depravity. When you put unconverted man in his proper place, utterly devastated by sin, you will simultaneously exalt the greatness of God’s grace. The lower that unregenerate man is presented and the higher God is proclaimed, the greater will be the grace that had to span this otherwise uncrossable chasm.

In this way, preaching on total depravity inevitably exalts God, leading to the greater worship of His name.

### **PREACH IT PATIENTLY**

As you preach this truth of total depravity, you must do so patiently. Not everyone will buy into this truth immediately. Total depravity will sound completely counterintuitive to man’s natural way of thinking. When you face resistance for preaching this truth, you must be long-suffering with your troubled listeners. Even in the midst of brewing opposition, you must show the grace of forbearance with them. Rarely does someone embrace this truth the first time they hear it. The same may have even been true with you.

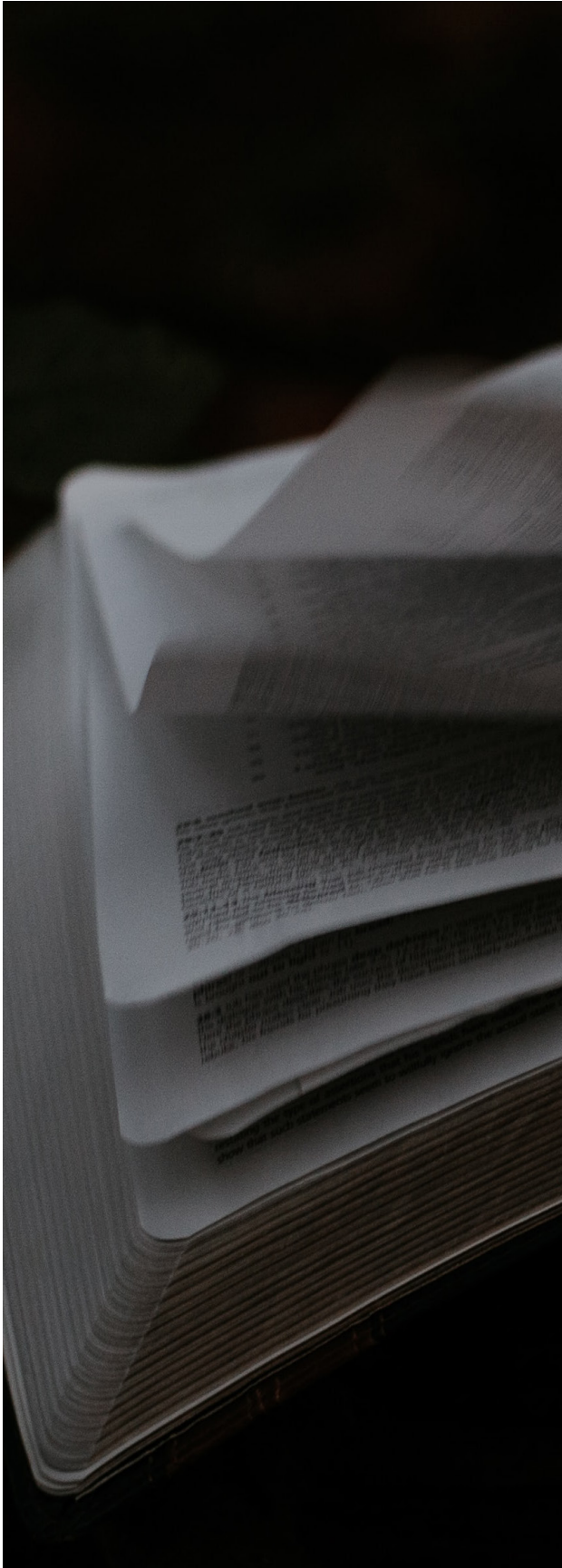
When the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy, he charges him: “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). In carrying this out, Timothy must do so “with much patience” (2 Tim 4:2). Having “patience” (*makrothumia*) means that despite whatever troubles and difficulties await him because of his preaching, he must remain steadfast. When thrown into the fires of affliction, Timothy must persevere with endurance and fortitude. This calls for his resilience when tough times come to his preaching ministry. Because truth is provocative, Timothy must show tenacity in the face of suffering.

Unbelievers will not believe this truth, because they cannot believe. How should you respond? Would you become angry at a blind man who cannot see oncoming traffic when he crosses the street? Instead of becoming exasperated, you would surely come alongside him with sympathetic aid. You would certainly be sympathetic and offer your help. Even so, we should be patient with those to whom we preach who are spiritually blind.

Sadly, though, there is even resistance from believers to the full magnitude of this truth. When we preach the radical corruption of lost mankind, Christians often bristle at this doctrine. In such cases, we must remain patient. We must “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 2:1). We must “suffer hardship” (v. 3) and “endure all things” (v. 10), knowing that “if we endure, we will also reign with Him” (v. 12). In other words, we must stay anchored to God in the storms of ministry and continue to fly the flag of truth.

### **PREACH IT PASTORALLY**

The doctrine of total depravity also offers much-needed pastoral care for those who sit under your preaching. Though this truth may seem to be a hardhitting hammer—and, admittedly, it is—it is also a shepherd’s staff to help care for the flock entrusted to you. There is much consolation to be offered to confused and hurting hearts through



preaching this truth. All truth has a pastoral element, and total depravity is no exception.

You may wonder, how so?

Only when we preach on the fall of Adam and original sin can our people make sense of what is wrong with the world. Apart from an understanding of total depravity, no one can make sense of the moral insanity in the world. In every corner of the culture, we see the crumbling of the moral foundations of our society. Apart from this essential doctrine, there is no explanation for the complete breakdown in human life all around us.

This doctrine gives much-needed understanding and clarity to those suffering unjust treatment at the hands of an unconverted spouse or unsaved boss. We cannot expect the children of the devil to act like children of God. Unbelievers will inevitably carry out their carnal desires. Admittedly, this does not take away the pain and wrongness of having suffered ill treatment. But it does help a Christian to not be surprised when they are exposed to this kind of suffering.

This truth can also help comfort Christian parents in dealing with unsaved, disobedient children. If your son or daughter is not yet converted, your actions as a parent can only address limited aspects of their behavior. The root problem lies much deeper, with the total depravity of the unsaved child. This realization helps to relieve any personal guilt a godly mother or father may be feeling. The solution to this difficulty with an unsaved child ultimately lies with the power of the cross to change lives. The only answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **PREACH IT EVANGELISTICALLY**


Teaching total depravity is a necessary part of evangelistic preaching. This truth is used by God to bring people under the conviction of their sins. This, in turn, drives the lost person to seek forgiveness from Christ.

Every individual must be confronted with the gravity of their sin before they will be led to seek the Savior. The disclosure of the dreadfulness of their sin is critical in bringing lost people to the end of themselves. Truly, no one can be saved until they know they are lost.

When total depravity is preached, the work of evangelism is well positioned to be rightly carried out. This doctrine is a needed safeguard from manipulating unsaved people into a premature confession of faith—or producing false converts. It helps restrain the use of worldly methods that trivialize evangelistic outreach. It guards against cheapening the presentation of the gospel. When you preach and teach total depravity, you are made more keenly aware of how dependent you are upon God for anyone to be saved. Moreover, the unconverted are more likely to be convicted of their sinful state and



---



**In our preaching, knowledge of total depravity promotes a greater dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This truth keeps us consciously aware that we cannot save anyone. It reminds us that we cannot induce labor to produce anyone's new birth.**

brought to a point of utter desperation before Christ.

In our preaching, knowledge of total depravity promotes a greater dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This truth keeps us consciously aware that we cannot save anyone. It reminds us that we cannot induce labor to produce anyone's new birth. No amount of arm-twisting can turn a dead heart toward Christ. No pressure tactics can bring anyone into the kingdom. No imposing of false guilt can cause the unconverted will to believe. We may knock on the door, but only the Holy Spirit has the key to swing it open.

In order for anyone to believe, God must work miraculously in the hearts and minds of those who are spiritually

dead, blind, and deaf. As one appointed to preach, you will need to ask the probing questions: Has this day of God's saving power come to your life? Has God dramatically intervened in your soul? Has God thrown open the barred doors of your heart? Has God opened the eyes of your heart and allowed you to see the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

As you preach the Word, may God overcome the depravity of unbelievers and bring enslaved sinners to faith in Christ. May He receive much glory through your teaching of total depravity as many trust in His glorious gospel. ♦





# The Bible Study

*with* **STEVEN LAWSON**

## **LIVE STREAM**

**Thursdays, 7:00am CST**

**Pending Dr. Lawson's Schedule**

**WATCH PAST EPISODES AND  
DOWNLOAD TRANSCRIPTS OF ROMANS STUDY**

**[onepassion.org/the-bible-study](https://onepassion.org/the-bible-study)**



---

# THE GUILT OF ALL MEN

---

JOHN MACARTHUR


Men like to believe they are basically good, and that belief is continually reinforced by psychologists, counselors, and a great many religious leaders. But deep in his heart man knows there is a problem with the way he is, that something is wrong. No matter whom or what he may try to blame for that feeling, he cannot escape it. He feels guilt not only about things he has done that he knows are wrong, but also about the kind of person he is on the inside.

The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca wrote that every guilty person is his own hangman. No matter how often a man tells himself he is good, he inevitably sees that he cannot help thinking, saying, and doing wrong things and feeling guilty about it. Guilt drives people to alcohol, drugs, despair, insanity, and more and more frequently, to suicide. After playing psychological games about blaming his environment or other people or society in general, man still cannot escape the feeling of his own guilt. People want

to get rid of their guilty feelings, but they do not know how. And the more they probe for solutions, the more guilty they feel.

Men *feel* guilty because they *are* guilty. The guilt feeling is only the symptom of the real problem, which is sin. All of the counseling in the world cannot relieve a person of his guilt. At best it can only make him feel better, superficially and temporarily, by placing the blame on someone else or something else. That, of course, only intensifies the guilt, because it adds dishonesty to the sin that caused the guilt feeling in the first place.

Man's guilt has only one cause—his own sin—and unless his sin is removed, his guilt cannot be. That is why the first element of the gospel is confronting men and women with the reality of their sin. The word *gospel* means “good news.” But the good news it offers is the way of salvation from sin, and until a person is convicted of his sin, the gospel has



# **In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul forcefully declares that both the pagan Gentile and the religious Jew are sinful and stand condemned before a holy God. But human nature strongly resists that truth.**

nothing to offer. The gospel therefore begins by declaring that all human beings are fundamentally sinful and that the greatest need of their lives is to have that sin removed through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul forcefully declares that both the pagan Gentile and the religious Jew are sinful and stand condemned before a holy God. But human nature strongly resists that truth. Donald Grey Barnhouse said:

It is only stubborn self-pride that keeps man from the confession to God that would bring release, but that way he refuses to take. Man stands before God today like a little boy who swears with crying and tears that he has not been anywhere near the jam jar, and who, with an air of outraged innocence, pleads the justice of his position, in total ignorance of the fact that a good

spoonful of the jam has fallen on his shirt under his chin and is plainly visible to all but himself.

The Apostle Paul was well aware of man's disposition to deny his sin. In Romans 3:10–17, Paul presents an appalling thirteen-count indictment against fallen mankind. To reinforce the inclusiveness of the indictment, he reiterates the fact that *all* of fallen humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, are under sin (Rom 3:9).

First, mankind is universally evil, there being absolutely no exceptions. Quoting from Psalms, Paul declares, “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10). The full text of Psalm 14:1 is, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.”

Paul is using the term “righteous” in its most basic sense of being right before God, of being as God created man to


be. Obviously, people are able to do many things that are morally right. Even the most vile person may occasionally do something commendable. But the apostle is not speaking of specific acts or even general patterns of behavior, but of man's inner character. His point is that there is not one single person who has ever lived, apart from the sinless Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:21), whose innermost being could be characterized as righteous by God's standard.

To prevent some people from thinking that they might be the exception, Paul adds, "not even one." Paul is here speaking of all men who are apart from Christ. In God's sight, there are no levels of righteousness as far as salvation is concerned. There is either perfect righteousness in Christ or perfect sinfulness apart from Christ. Without exception, mankind is universally evil.


Second, man is spiritually ignorant. Quoting from the Psalms, Paul says, "There is none who understands" (Rom 3:11; Pss 14:2; 53:3). Even if men somehow had the ability to achieve God's perfect righteousness, they would not know what it is or how to go about attaining it. Man has no

innate ability to fully comprehend God's truth or His standard of righteousness. From God's magnificent creation, man has sufficient evidence of His "invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature" to make every person "without excuse" for not honoring and glorifying God (Rom 1:20). But apart from the ability to see that general revelation of His power and majesty, man has no spiritual capacity to know or understand God, because the "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" (1 Cor 2:14).

Third, in addition to being universally evil and spiritually ignorant, fallen man is rebellious. Alluding again to Psalm 14:2, Paul declares, "No one seeks for God" (Rom 3:11). Judging from the vast number of religions in the world with millions of zealous adherents, one would think that a great many people are diligently seeking after God. But Scripture makes clear, in this passage and in many others, that all religious systems and efforts are, in reality, attempts to escape the true God and to discover or manufacture



**Jesus offers the divine promise that everyone who sincerely asks of Him will receive, that everyone who sincerely seeks Him will find Him, and that everyone who sincerely knocks on the door of heaven will have it opened to him (Matt 7:8).**



**I remember reading about a man who found a baby rattlesnake and decided to make a pet of it. He kept it in the house and played with it for a week or so, but then it disappeared for several months and could not be found. One day the man reached behind a piece of furniture to retrieve something he had dropped. When he felt a sharp stab of pain, he pulled back his hand, with the rattler hanging from it by its fangs. Man's sinful nature is equally untamable.**



false gods of one's own liking. God has given the absolutely assurance that anyone who seeks Him with his heart will find Him (Jer 29:13). Jesus offers the divine promise that everyone who sincerely asks of Him will receive, that everyone who sincerely seeks Him will find Him, and that everyone who sincerely knocks on the door of heaven will have it opened to him (Matt 7:8).

Fourth, Paul charges that men are naturally wayward. Continuing to quote from the Psalms, he declares that "all have turned aside" from God (Rom 3:12). The person who is naturally evil, naturally ignorant of God's truth, and naturally rebellious against God, will inevitably naturally live apart from God's will. In the original Greek, "turned aside" has the basic meaning of leaning in the wrong direction. In a military context it referred to a soldier's running the wrong way—in other words, deserting in the midst of battle. Speaking of the universal human inclination to go against God's way, Isaiah wrote, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isa 53:6).

Fifth, Paul charges that the natural man is spiritually worthless. "Together," that is, all of fallen mankind, "they have become worthless" (Rom 3:12). The Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term translated here as "useless" was often used to describe milk that had turned sour and rancid, thereby becoming unfit to drink or to be used to make butter, cheese, or anything else edible. In ancient Greek literature the word was even used of the senseless laughter of a moron. Apart from a saving relationship to Jesus Christ, a person is a spiritually dead branch, totally unable to produce any fruit. As such, it is lifeless and worthless, fit only to be thrown into the fire to be burned (John 15:6). Paul's letter to Titus emphasizes the same tragic reality when it reflects on the utter worthlessness of even religious men (Titus 1:16). The natural man is useless for the purposes of God and, much like the worthless dead branch, is destined for the fires of hell.

Sixth, the natural man is charged with being corrupt, which is both a repetition of the first charge and something of a summary of the previous five charges. "No one does good," Paul says, "not even one" (Rom 3:12). The term "does good" refers to what is upright, specifically to what is morally upright. Measured by God's perfect standard of righteousness, the natural man has no ability to do anything upright and good. Relative to other human beings, some people obviously are better behaved, but no human being has within himself either the desire or the capacity for the good that is holy, perfect, and God-glorifying by the divine standard.

The story is told of a man in Scotland who was walking

through a park one Saturday afternoon, carrying a small New Testament in a leather case. Thinking the case contained a camera, a group of young people asked him to take their picture. In response, he said, "I already have it." When the astonished youths asked him where and when he had taken it, he took out the Testament and read Romans 3:9–23. After saying "that is your picture," he took an opportunity to witness to them about Christ.

The seventh charge of Paul's indictment is that by nature, fallen mankind is spiritually dead, demonstrated by the metaphor of "their throat" being "an open grave" (Rom 3:13; cf. Ps 5:9). A spiritually dead heart can generate only spiritually dead words. The "throat" is to the heart as "an open grave" is to the corpse within it. Where embalming is not available, a corpse is placed in the ground and then covered up—not only to show respect for the deceased, but also to protect the passerby from viewing the disfigurement and smelling the stench of decay. But the natural man keeps his throat wide open, and in so doing, continually testifies to his spiritual death by the foulness of his words.

The eighth charge is that by nature, fallen mankind is deceitful: "They use their tongues to deceive" (Rom 3:13). The idea is that they keep deceiving; the verb has the basic meaning of luring and was used of baiting a hook by covering it with a small piece of food to disguise its danger. When a fish bites the food, thinking he will get a meal, he instead becomes a meal for the fisherman. The imperfect Greek tense of the verb indicates continual, repetitive deceit. For the natural man, lying and other forms of deceit are a habitual and normal part of his life. Psalm 5:9 describes flatterers, whose words of praise are really a means of serving themselves rather than the one they are praising. And because praise appeals to human nature, it also leads the flattered person into pride and false self-confidence. A flatterer therefore both uses and abuses others.

David declares that man's sinfulness can also lead to self-deceit and self-flattery. "Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For it flatters him in his own eyes, concerning the discovery of his inquiry and the hatred of it. The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit" (Ps 36:1–3).

Nine, Paul's indictment of the unconverted man is closely related to the previous one. Quoting from part of Psalm 140:3, he says of ungodly men that "the venom of asps is under their lips" (Rom 3:13). The psalmist precedes that charge with the observation that "they sharpen their tongues as a serpent." Because of the spiritually damning false doctrines and the deceitful character of most of the religious leaders in Jesus' day, both He and John the Baptist described them as broods of vipers (Matt 3:7; 12:34).

In describing “asps,” one writer says, “The fangs of such a deadly snake ordinarily lie folded back in the upper jaw, but when the snake throws his head to strike, these hollow fangs drop down, and when the snake bites, the fangs press a sac of deadly poison hidden under the lips, ejecting venom into the victim.” I remember reading about a man who found a baby rattlesnake and decided to make a pet of it. He kept it in the house and played with it for a week or so, but then it disappeared for several months and could not be found. One day the man reached behind a piece of furniture to retrieve something he had dropped. When he felt a sharp stab of pain, he pulled back his hand, with the rattler hanging from it by its fangs. Man’s sinful nature is equally untamable.

The tenth charge in the indictment continues the imagery of speaking, describing the ungodly as those with mouths “full of curses and bitterness” (Rom 3:14; Ps 10:7). The term “curses” carries the idea of intense malediction, of desiring the worst for a person and making that desire public through open criticism and defamation. “Bitterness” was not used so much in regard to physical taste as to describe openly expressed emotional hostility against an enemy. Such is the obvious meaning in this context.

David described cursing, bitter persons as those who “have sharpened their tongue like a sword . . . aimed bitter speech as their arrow, to shoot from concealment at the blameless; suddenly they shoot him, and do not fear” (Ps 64:3–4). Every age of mankind, our own certainly included, has been characterized by people who use their tongues as vicious weapons. Their attacks not only are against those they know well enough to hate but sometimes, as David seems to intimate, even against strangers, simply for the perverse pleasure of venting their anger and hatred.

The eleventh charge is that the ungodly are innately murderous: “Their feet are swift to shed blood” (Rom 3:15). Whether in peace or in war, man kills man. The mass extermination by the Nazis and Marxists in our own century have their counterparts in past history. The notorious terrorist Chang Hsien-chung in seventeenth-century China killed practically all the people in the Szechwan province. During the same century in Hungary, a certain countless systematically tortured and murdered more than six hundred young girls. Obviously, most people are far from possessing such extreme brutality. But Scripture makes clear that the seed of murder is one of the multitude of evil seeds that are universally found in the human heart and that, to some degree, inevitably grow and bear fruit.

The twelfth charge in the overall indictment is that of general destructiveness. Paul says, “in their paths are ruin and misery” (Rom 3:16). The manifestation of wanton

destruction, or ruin, is becoming more and more evident in much of modern society. Victims are often robbed or raped and then beaten or murdered for no reason other than sheer brutality. The terms “abused children” and “abused wives” have become common in contemporary vocabularies. Special divisions of many police departments and social service agencies are devoted specifically to dealing with the crimes and victims that those terms relate to. “Misery” is a general term that denotes the resulting harm that is always in the wake of man’s acts of destruction against his fellow man. His destructiveness inevitably leaves a trail of pain and despair.

The last charge in Paul’s indictment of condemned man is that of his peacelessness: “The way of peace they have not known.” Paul is not speaking of the lack of inner peace—although that is certainly a characteristic of the ungodly person—but of man’s essential inclination *away* from peace. This charge is therefore something of a counterpart to the previous one.

Peace has never been more highly extolled than in our own day. But few would argue that peace, whether personal or international, actually characterizes our times. Nevertheless, as in Jeremiah’s day, many modern leaders are trying to heal the brokenness of their people superficially, crying, “Peace, peace,” when obviously there is no peace (Jer 6:14). God’s Word gives much counsel as to what makes for peace, and those individuals and societies who have chosen to follow His guidance have experienced relative times of peacefulness. But Scripture makes clear that peace will never dominate human society until the Prince of Peace returns to establish His kingdom on earth.

Paul’s indictment upon mankind is clear. Mankind is universally evil, there being absolutely no exceptions. Man is also spiritually ignorant and rebellious. In that ignorant and rebellious state, men are naturally wayward and spiritually worthless. Paul also charges the natural man as being corrupt and spiritually dead. As a result, man is by nature deceitful, has venom in his tongue full of curses and bitterness, and is innately murderous, destructive, and peaceless. Mankind is in a miserable condition. As a result, unredeemed mankind has no defense whatever and is guilty of all charges. ✦



## A QUESTION WITH ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Have you ever been asked by a stranger, “Are you saved?” Many Christians use this question as an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus. But a common response to that question might catch us off guard: “Saved from what?” Until this essential question can be answered, we won’t be able to make sense of Christ’s sacrifice or explain it to others. In *Saved from What?*, Dr. R.C. Sproul reveals that the greatest danger we face is the holy wrath of God against our sin. But the glory of the gospel is that the One from whom we need to be saved is the very One who saves us. As we better understand the severity of our sin and the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, the truth of God’s grace will deepen our worship and drive us to make His salvation known.

BULK QUANTITY DISCOUNTS  
AVAILABLE FOR CHURCHES  
AND BOOKSTORES.

DIGITAL EDITIONS AVAILABLE



[Ligonier.org/books](http://Ligonier.org/books) | 800-435-4343



THE MASTER'S  
SEMINARY



# DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

TAKING YOU TO THE NEXT LEVEL

As a shepherd of God's flock, the pastor demonstrates his love for the church most clearly through expository preaching. The D.Min. program modular sessions provide a way for you to grow in your preaching ability while remaining in your current ministry. Modular sessions are just three weeks each year during the first two years of the program—one week in January and two weeks in July.



## GROW

Grow in knowledge of the Scripture, homiletics, and expository preaching.

## STUDY

Study in Los Angeles under faithful preachers and teachers who are known for their expertise.

## FELLOWSHIP

Fellowship richly with other pastors who share the calling to feed Christ's flock.

## PREACH

Preach in your current ministry context using concepts from each modular session.

LEARN MORE

**TMS.EDU**



---

# ADAM'S FALL AND MINE

—  
R. C. SPROUL

A difficult question that shrouds the doctrine of predestination is the question of how our sinful nature can be inherited from Adam. If we are born with a fallen nature, if we are born in sin, if we are born in a state of moral inability, how can God hold us responsible for our sins?

We remember that original sin does not refer to the first sin but to the result of that first sin. The Scriptures speak repeatedly of sin and death entering the world through “one man’s transgression.” As a result of Adam’s sin, all men are now sinners. The fall was great. It had radical repercussions for the entire human race.


There have been many attempts to explain the relationship of Adam’s fall to the rest of mankind. Some of the theories presented are quite complex and imaginative. Three theories, however, have emerged from the list as the most widely accepted. The first of these I will call the Myth Theory of the fall.

## **THE MYTH THEORY OF THE FALL**

The myth theory of the fall, as the name suggests, holds that there was no factual, historical fall. Adam and Eve are not considered historical persons. They are mythological symbols drawn to explain or represent the problem of man’s corruption. The story of the fall in the Bible is a kind of parable; it teaches a moral lesson.

According to this theory, the first few chapters of Genesis are mythological. There never was an Adam; there never was an Eve. The very structure of the story suggests parable or myth because it includes such elements as a talking serpent and such obviously symbolic objects as the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The moral truth communicated by the myth is that people fall into sin. Sin is a universal problem. Everyone commits sin; no one is perfect. The myth points to a higher reality: everyone is his own Adam. Every person has his



**I grant that to account for one innocent person's fall presents an enormous intellectual problem. But when we compound that difficulty by the billions of people who have fallen, the problem becomes several billion times more difficult.**

**We also grant that if one person created in the image of God could fall, then it is indeed possible that billions can likewise fall.**



own private fall. Sin is a universal human condition precisely because every person succumbs to his own private temptation.

The attractive elements of this theory are important. In the first place, this view absolves God entirely of any responsibility for holding future generations of people responsible for what one couple did. Here, no one can blame their parents or their Creator for their own sin. In this scheme, my fallenness is a direct result of my own fall, not of someone else's.

A second advantage of this view is that it escapes all need to defend the historical character of the beginning chapters of the Bible. This view suffers no anxiety from certain theories of evolution or from scientific disputes about the nature of creation. The factual truth of a myth never needs to be defended.

The disadvantages of this view, however, are more serious. Its most crucial failing is that it actually offers nothing by way of explanation for the universality of sin. If each one of us is born without a sinful nature, how can we account for the universality of sin? If four billion people were born with no inclination to sin, with no corruption to their nature, we would reasonably expect that at least some of them would refrain from falling. If our natural moral state is one of innocent neutrality, we would statistically expect that half of the human race would remain perfect.

I grant that to account for one innocent person's fall presents an enormous intellectual problem. But when we compound that difficulty by the billions of people who have fallen, the problem becomes several billion times more difficult. We also grant that if one person created in the image of God could fall, then it is indeed possible that billions can likewise fall. It is the statistical probability here that is so astonishing. When we think of one person falling, that is one thing. But if everybody does it, without exception, then we begin to wonder why. We begin to wonder if man's natural state is all that neutral.

The standard reply of the advocates of the myth view is that people are not universally born in an idyllic environment like Eden. Society is corrupt. We are born into a corrupt environment. We are like Rousseau's "innocent savage," who is corrupted by the negative influences of civilization.

This explanation begs the question. How did society or civilization get corrupt in the first place? If everyone is born innocent, without a trace of personal corruption, we would expect to find societies that are no more than half corrupt. If birds of a feather flock together, we might find societies where all the corrupt people band together and other societies where no evil is present. Society cannot be a

corrupting influence until it first becomes corrupt itself. To explain the fall of an entire society or civilization, one must face the difficulties we have already pointed out.

In another one of Jonathan Edwards's famous works, his treatise on original sin, he makes the important observation that because the sin of man is universal, even if the Bible said nothing about an original fall of the human race, reason would demand such an explanation. Nothing screams more loudly about the fact that we are born in a state of corruption than the fact that we all sin.

Another thorny question that arises concerns the relationship of sin and death. The Bible makes it clear that death is not "natural" to man. That is, death is repeatedly said to have come into the world as a result of sin. If that is so, how do we account for the death of infants? If all men are born innocent, with no innate corruption, God would be unjust to allow as-yet-unfallen babies to die.

The mythological view of the fall must also face the fact that it does radical violence to the teaching of Scripture. The view does more than merely interpret the opening chapters of the Bible as nonfactual. In so doing, the view sets itself in clear opposition to the New Testament view of the fall. It would take intellectual gymnastics of the most severe sort to argue that the Apostle Paul did not teach a historical fall. The parallels that he draws between the first Adam and the second Adam are too strong to allow this, unless we argue that in Paul's mind Jesus was also a mythological character.

We grant that the Genesis account of the fall has some unusual literary elements in it. The presence of a tree that does not follow the pattern of normal trees aligns with certain images of poetry. It is proper to interpret poetry as poetry and not as historical narrative. On the other hand, there are strong elements of historical narrative literature in Genesis 3. The setting of Eden is located in chapter 2 in the midst of four riverheads, including Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel (or Tigris), and Euphrates.

We know that parables can be set in real historical settings. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan is set in the geographical context of the road to Jericho. Therefore, the mere presence of real historical rivers does not absolutely demand that we identify this section of Genesis as historical narrative.

There is another element of the text, however, that is more compelling. The account of Adam and Eve contains a significant genealogy. The Romans, with their penchant for mythology, may have no difficulty tracing their lineage to Romulus and Remus, but the Jews were surely more scrupulous about such matters. The Jews had a strong commitment to real history. In light of the vast difference between

the Jewish view of history and the Greek view of history, it is unthinkable that Jewish people would include mythological characters in their own genealogies. In Jewish writing, the presence of genealogy indicates historical narrative. Note that the New Testament historian, Luke, includes Adam in the genealogy of Jesus.

It is much easier to account for a real tree serving as a focal point of a moral test and thereby being called a tree of the knowledge of good and evil than it is to accommodate genealogy to a parable or a myth. This, of course, could be done if other factors demanded it. But no such factors exist. There is no sound reason why we should not interpret Genesis 3 as historical narrative and multiple reasons why we should not treat it as parable or myth. To treat it as history is to treat it as the Jews did, including Paul and Jesus. To treat it otherwise is usually motivated by some contemporary agenda that has nothing to do with Jewish history.

### THE REALIST VIEW OF THE FALL


Remember the famous television series from the 1950s called “You Are There”? It took viewers, through the magic of television, to famous historical scenes. But, in fact,

no electronic device has yet been invented to transport us back in time, H. G. Wells notwithstanding. We live in the present. Our only access to the past is through books, artifacts of archaeology, and the memories of ourselves and of others.

I remember teaching a course on the Bible that involved a brief study of Roman soldiers. I mentioned the Roman standard that carried the initials S-P-Q-R. I asked if anyone knew what those letters stood for. A dear friend who was in his seventies piped up, “*Senatus Populus Que Romanus*, “The senate and the people of Rome.” I smiled at my friend and said, “You are the only person in this room old enough to remember!”

None of us is old enough to carry memory images of the fall of Adam. Or are we? The realist view of the fall contends that we are all old enough to remember the fall. We should be able to remember it because we were really there.

Realism is not an exercise in a Bridey-Murphy kind of reincarnation. Rather, realism is a serious attempt to answer the problem of the fall. The key concept is this: We cannot morally be held accountable for a sin committed by someone else. To be accountable, we must have been



**None of us is old enough to carry memory images of the fall of Adam. Or are we? The realist view of the fall contends that we are all old enough to remember the fall. We should be able to remember it because we were really there.**

# The realist view of the fall demands some kind of concept of the preexistence of the human soul. That is, before we were born, our souls must have already existed.

actively involved somehow in the sin itself. Somehow we must have been present at the fall. *Really* present. Hence the name *Realism*.

The realist view of the fall demands some kind of concept of the preexistence of the human soul. That is, before we were born, our souls must have already existed. They were present with Adam at the fall. They fell along with Adam. Adam's sin was not merely an act for us; it was an act *with* us. We were there.

This theory seems speculative, perhaps even bizarre. Its advocates, however, appeal to two pivotal biblical texts as warrant for this view. The first is found in Ezekiel 18:2–4 (NKJV):

“What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying:

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes,

And the children's teeth are set on edge’?

“As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel.

“Behold, all souls are Mine;

The soul of the father

As well as the soul of the son is Mine;

The soul who sins shall die.”

Later in this chapter, Ezekiel writes:

“Yet you say, ‘Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?’ Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” (18:19–20)

Here the realist finds a definitive text for his case. God clearly declares that the son is not held guilty for the sins of his father. This would seem to pose serious difficulties for the whole idea of people falling “in Adam.”

The second pivotal text for realism is found in the New Testament book of Hebrews: “Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him” (Heb 7:9–10).

This text is part of a lengthy treatment by the author of Hebrews concerning the role of Christ as our Great High Priest. The New Testament declares that Jesus is both our king and our priest. It labors the fact that Jesus was from the line of Judah, to whom the royal kingdom was promised.

Jesus was a son of David, who also was of the line of Judah.

The priesthood of the Old Testament was not given to Judah, but to the sons of Levi. The Levites were the priestly line. We normally speak, therefore, of the Levitical priesthood or the Aaronic priesthood. Aaron was a Levite. If this is so, how could Jesus be a priest, given that He was not from the line of Levi?

This problem vexed some ancient Jews. The author of Hebrews argues that there was another priesthood mentioned in the Old Testament, the priesthood of the mysterious figure named Melchizedek. Jesus is said to be a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

This lengthy portion of Hebrews is not satisfied, however, merely to prove that there was another priesthood in the Old Testament besides the Levitical priesthood. The major point of the argument here is that the priesthood of Melchizedek was *superior* to the priesthood of Levi.

The author of Hebrews rehearses a bit of Old Testament history to prove his point. He calls attention to the fact that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, not Melchizedek to Abraham. Melchizedek also blessed Abraham; Abraham did not bless Melchizedek. The point is this: in the relationship between Abraham and Melchizedek, it was Melchizedek who served as the priest, not Abraham.

The key thought to the Jew is cited in verse 7: “Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.”

The author of Hebrews continues to weave the thread of his argument. He argues that, in effect, the father is superior to the son. That means that Abraham is ahead of Isaac in the patriarchal pecking order. In turn, Isaac is ahead of Jacob, and Jacob ahead of his sons, including his son Levi. If we carry this out, it means that Abraham is greater than his great-grandson Levi.

Now, if Abraham is greater than Levi and Abraham subordinated himself to Melchizedek, that means that the priest Melchizedek is greater than Levi and the entire line of Levi. The conclusion is clear. The priesthood of Melchizedek is a higher order of priesthood than the Levitical priesthood. This gives supreme dignity to the high priestly office of Christ.

It was not the chief concern of the author of Hebrews to explain the mystery of the fall of Adam with all this. Yet, he says something along the way that the realists jump on to prove their theory. He writes that “Levi . . . paid tithes through Abraham.” Levi did this while he was “still in the loins of his father.”

The realists see this reference to Levi doing something before he was even born as biblical proof for the concept of the preexistence of the human soul. If Levi could pay tithes while he was still in the loins of his father, that must mean

that Levi in some sense already existed.

However, this treatment of this passage of Hebrews begs the question. The text does not explicitly teach that Levi really existed or preexisted in the loins of his father. The text itself calls it a “manner of speaking.” The text does not demand that we leap to the conclusion that Levi “really” preexisted. The realists come to this text armed with a theory they did not find from the text and then read the theory into the text.

The argument from the text of Ezekiel also misses the point. Ezekiel was not giving a discourse on the fall of Adam. The fall is not in view here. Rather, Ezekiel is addressing the commonplace excuse that men use for their sins. They try to blame someone else for their own misdeeds. That human activity has gone on since the fall, but that is about all this passage has to do with the fall. In the fall Eve blamed the serpent, and Adam blamed both God and Eve for his own sin. He said, “The woman whom *You* gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3:12, emphasis added).


Ever since, men have tried to pass the buck of their own guilt. Still, the realists argue, a principle is set forth in Ezekiel 18 that has bearing on the matter. The principle is that men are not held accountable for other people’s sins.

To be sure, that general principle is set forth in Ezekiel. It is a grand principle of God’s justice. Yet we dare not make it an absolute principle. If we do, then the text of Ezekiel would prove too much. It would prove away the atonement of Christ. If it is never possible for one person to be punished for the sins of another, then we have no Savior. Jesus was punished for our sins. That is the very essence of the gospel. Not only was Jesus punished for our sins, but His righteousness is the meritorious basis for our justification. We are justified by an alien righteousness, a righteousness that is not our own. If we press Ezekiel’s statement to the absolute limit when we read, “The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself,” then we are left as sinners who must justify themselves. That puts us all in deep weeds.

To be sure, the Bible speaks of God’s “visiting” the iniquities of persons on the third and fourth generations (see Exod 20:5–6; 34:6–7; Num 14:18). This refers to the “fallout” or consequences of sin. A child may suffer from the consequences of his father’s sin, but God does not hold him *responsible* for his father’s sin.

The principle of Ezekiel allows for two exceptions: the Cross, and the fall.

Somehow we don’t mind the exception of the Cross. It is the fall that rankles us. We don’t mind having our guilt



# We don't mind having our guilt transferred to Jesus or having His righteousness transferred to us; it is having the guilt of Adam transferred to us that makes us howl.

transferred to Jesus or having His righteousness transferred to us; it is having the guilt of Adam transferred to us that makes us howl. We argue that if the guilt of Adam had never been transmitted to us, then the work of Jesus would never have been necessary.

## **THE FEDERAL OR REPRESENTATIVE VIEW OF THE FALL**

For the most part, the federal view of the fall has been the most popular among advocates of the Reformed view of predestination. This view teaches that Adam acted as a representative of the entire human race. With the test that God set before Adam and Eve, he was testing the whole of mankind. Adam's name means "man" or "mankind." Adam was the first human being created. He stands at the head of the human race. He was placed in the garden to act not only for himself but for all of his future descendents. Just as a federal government has a chief spokesman who is the head of the nation, so Adam was the federal head of mankind.

The chief idea of federalism is that when Adam sinned, he sinned for all of us. His fall was our fall. When God punished Adam by taking away his original righteousness, we were all likewise punished. The curse of the fall affects us all. Not only was Adam destined to make his living by

the sweat of his brow, but that is true for us as well. Not only was Eve consigned to have pain in childbirth, but that has been true for women of all human generations. The offending serpent in the garden was not the only member of his species who was cursed to crawl on his belly.

When they were created, Adam and Eve were given dominion over the entire creation. As a result of their sin the whole world suffered. Paul tells us:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now (Rom 8:20–22).

The whole creation groans as it awaits the full redemption of man. When man sinned, the repercussions of the sin were felt throughout the whole range of man's domain. Because of Adam's sin, not only do we suffer, but lions, elephants, butterflies, and puppy dogs also suffer. They did not ask for such suffering. They were hurt by the fall of their master.

That we suffer as a result of Adam's sin is explicitly taught

in the New Testament. In Romans 5, for example, Paul makes the following observations:

“Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin” (v. 12).

“By the one man’s offense many died” (v. 15).

“Through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation” (v. 18).

“By one man’s disobedience many were made sinners” (v. 19).

There is no way to avoid the obvious teaching of Scripture that Adam’s sin had dreadful consequences for his descendants. It is precisely because of the abundance of such biblical statements that virtually every Christian body has composed some doctrine of original sin linked to the fall of Adam.

We are still left with a big question. If God did in fact judge the entire human race in Adam, how is that fair? It seems manifestly unjust of God to allow not only all subsequent human beings but all of creation to suffer because of Adam.

It is the question of God’s fairness that federalism seeks to answer. Federalism assumes that we were in fact represented by Adam and that such representation was both fair and accurate. It holds that Adam *perfectly* represented us.

Within our own legal system we have situations that—not perfectly but approximately—parallel this concept of representation. We know that if I hire a man to kill someone and that hired gunman carries out the contract, I can justly be tried for first-degree murder in spite of the fact

that I did not actually pull the trigger. I am judged to be guilty for a crime someone else committed because the other person acted in my place.

The obvious protest that arises at this point is, “But we did not hire Adam to sin in our behalf.” That is true. This example merely illustrates that there are *some* cases in which it is just to punish one person for the crime of another.


The federal view of the fall still exudes a faint odor of tyranny. Our cry is, “No damnation without representation!” Just as people in a nation clamor for representatives to ensure freedom from despotic tyranny, so we demand representation before God that is fair and just. The federal view states that we are judged guilty for Adam’s sin because he was our fair and just representative.

Wait a minute—Adam may have represented us, but we did not choose him. What if the fathers of the American republic had demanded representation from King George and the king replied, “Of course you may have representatives. You will be represented by my brother!” Such an answer would have spilled even more tea in Boston Harbor.

We want the right to select our own representatives. We want to be able to cast our own vote, not have somebody else cast that vote for us. The word *vote* comes from the Latin *votum*, which meant “wish” or “choice.” When we cast our vote, we are expressing our wishes, setting forth our wills.

Suppose we would have had the total freedom to vote for our representative in Eden. Would that have satisfied us? And why do we want the right to vote for our representative? Why do we object if the king or any other sovereign wants to appoint our representatives for us? The answer is obvious. We want to be sure that our will is being carried out. If the king appoints my representative, then I will





# At no time in all of human history have we been more accurately represented than in the Garden of Eden. To be sure, we did not choose our representative there. Our representative was chosen for us.

have little confidence that my wishes will be accomplished. I would fear that the appointed representative would be more eager to carry out the wishes of the king than my wishes. I would not feel fairly represented.

But even if we have the right to choose our own representatives, we have no guarantee that our wishes will be carried out. Who among us has not been enticed by politicians who promise one thing during an election campaign and do another thing after they are elected? Again, the reason we want to select our own representative is so that we can be sure we are accurately represented.

At no time in all of human history have we been more accurately represented than in the Garden of Eden. To be sure, we did not choose our representative there. Our representative was chosen for us. The one who chose our representative, however, was not King George. It was Almighty God.

When God chooses our representative, He does so perfectly. His choice is an infallible choice. When I choose my own representatives, I do so fallibly. Sometimes I select the wrong person and am then inaccurately represented. Adam represented me infallibly, not because he was infallible, but because God is infallible. Given God's infallibility, I can never argue that Adam was a poor choice to represent me.

The assumption many of us make when we struggle with the fall is that had we been there, we would have made a different choice. We would not have made a decision that would plunge the world into ruin. Such an assumption is just not possible given the character of God. God doesn't make mistakes. His choice of my representative is greater than my choice of my own.

Even if we grant that, indeed, we were perfectly represented by Adam, we still must ask if it is fair to be represented at all with such high stakes. I can only answer that it pleased the Lord to do this. We know that the world fell through Adam. We know that in some sense Adam represented us. We know that we did not choose him to be our representative. We know that God's selection of Adam was an infallible selection. But was the whole process just?

I can only answer this question ultimately by asking another question—one the Apostle Paul asked. "Is there unrighteousness in God?" The apostolic answer to this rhetorical question is as plain as it is emphatic. "God forbid!" (Rom 9:14, KJV).

If we know anything at all about the character of God, then we know that he is not a tyrant and that he is never unjust. His structure of the terms of mankind's probation satisfied God's own righteousness. That should be enough to satisfy us.

Yet we still quarrel. We still contend with the Almighty. We still assume that somehow God did us wrong and that we suffer as innocent victims of God's judgment. Such sentiments only confirm the radical degree of our fallenness. When we think like this, we are thinking like Adam's children. Such blasphemous thoughts only underline in red how accurately we were represented by Adam.

I am persuaded that the federal view of the fall is substantially correct. It alone of the three we have examined does justice to the biblical teaching of the fall of man. It satisfies me that God is not an arbitrary tyrant. I know that I am a fallen creature. That is, I know that I am a creature, and I know that I am fallen. I also know that it is not God's "fault" that I am a sinner. What God has done for me is to redeem me from my sin. He has not redeemed me from His sin.

Though the federal representational view of the fall is held by most Calvinists, we must remember that the question of our relationship to Adam's fall is not a problem unique to Calvinism. All Christians must struggle with it.

It is also vital to see predestination in light of the fall. All Christians agree that God's decree of predestination was made before the fall. Some argue that God first predestinated some people to salvation and others to damnation and then decreed the fall to make sure that some folks would perish. Sometimes this dreadful view is even attributed to Calvinism. Such an idea was repugnant to Calvin and is equally repugnant to all orthodox Calvinists. The notion is sometimes called "hyper-Calvinism." But even that is an insult. This view has nothing to do with Calvinism. Rather than hyper-Calvinism, it is anti-Calvinism.

Calvinism, along with other views of predestination, teaches that God's decree was made both *before* the fall and *in light of* the fall. Why is this important? Because the Calvinistic view of predestination always accents the gracious character of God's redemption. When God predestines people to salvation, He is predestinating people to be saved whom He knows really *need* to be saved. They need to be saved because they are sinners in Adam, not because He forced them to be sinners. Calvinism sees Adam sinning by his own free will, not by divine coercion.

To be sure, God knew before the fall that there would most certainly be a fall, and He took action to redeem some. He ordained the fall in the sense that He chose to allow it, but not in the sense that He chose to coerce it. His predestinating grace is gracious precisely because He chooses to save people whom He knows in advance will be spiritually dead.

One final illustration may be helpful here. We bristle at the idea that God calls us to be righteous when we are


hampered by original sin. We say, "But God, we can't be righteous. We are fallen creatures. How can you hold us accountable when You know very well we were born with original sin?"

The illustration is as follows. Suppose God said to a man, "I want you to trim these bushes by three o'clock this afternoon. But be careful. There is a large open pit at the edge of the garden. If you fall into that pit, you will not be able to get yourself out. So whatever you do, stay away from that pit."

Suppose that as soon as God leaves the garden, the man runs over and jumps into the pit. At three o'clock God returns and finds the bushes untrimmed. He calls for the gardener and hears a faint cry from the edge of the garden. He walks to the edge of the pit and sees the gardener helplessly flailing around on the bottom. He says to the gardener, "Why haven't you trimmed the bushes I told you to trim?" The gardener responds in anger, "How do you expect me to trim these bushes when I am trapped in this pit? If you hadn't left this empty pit here, I would not be in this predicament."

Adam jumped into the pit. In Adam we all jumped into the pit. God did not throw us into the pit. Adam was clearly warned about the pit. God told him to stay away. The consequences Adam experienced from being in the pit were a direct punishment for jumping into it.

So it is with original sin. Original sin is both the consequence of Adam's sin and the punishment for Adam's sin. We are born sinners because in Adam all fell. Even the word *fall* is a bit of a euphemism. It is a rose-colored view of the matter. The word *fall* suggests an accident of sorts. Adam's sin was not an accident. He was not Humpty-Dumpty. Adam didn't simply slip into sin; he jumped into it with both feet. We jumped headlong with him. God didn't push us. He didn't trick us. He gave us adequate and fair warning. The fault is ours and only ours.

It is not that Adam ate sour grapes and our teeth are set on edge. The biblical teaching is that in Adam we all ate the sour grapes. That is why our teeth are set on edge. 

---

Content taken from *Chosen by God* by R. C. Sproul. Copyright © 1986. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers. All rights reserved.

[www.tyndale.com/p/chosen-by-god/9780842313353](http://www.tyndale.com/p/chosen-by-god/9780842313353)



T H E R E I S  
M O R E  
T O O U R L I V E S T H A N  
“ N O W . ”

I F T H E R E I S N O T , T H E N E V E N  
T H E N O W I S M E A N I N G L E S S .

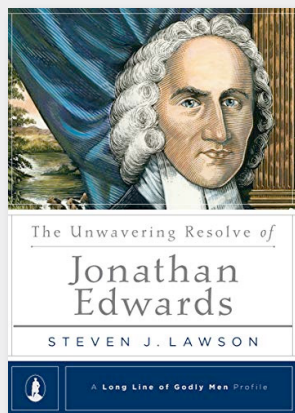
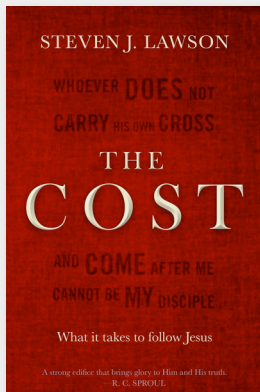
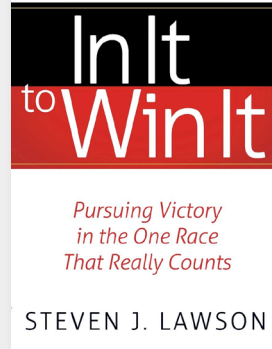
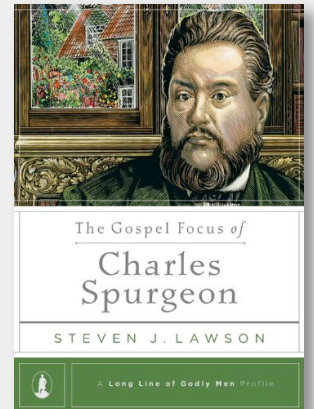
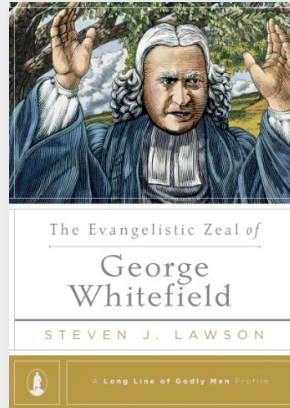
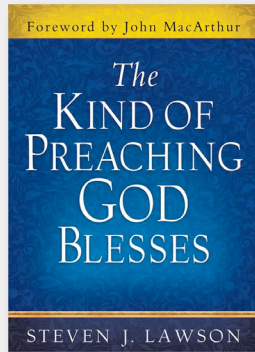
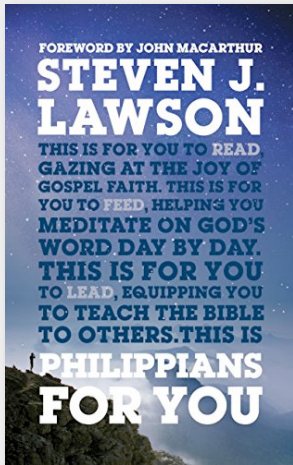
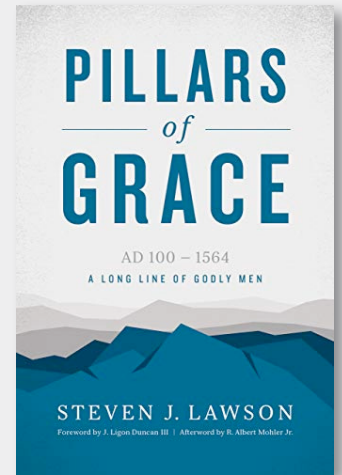
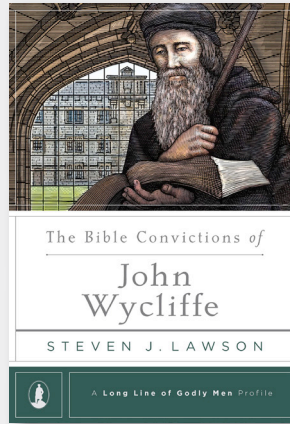
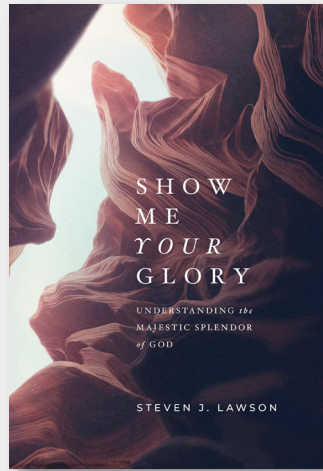
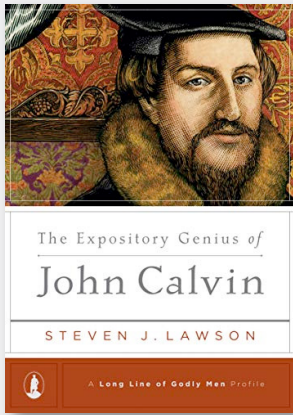
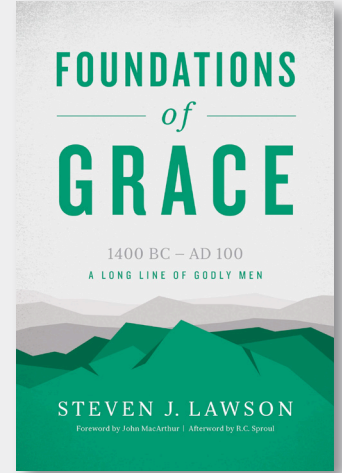
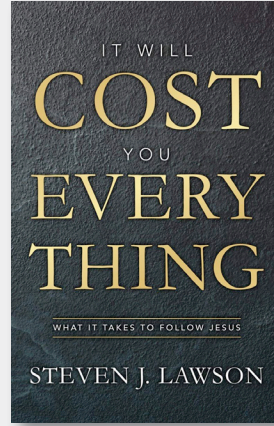
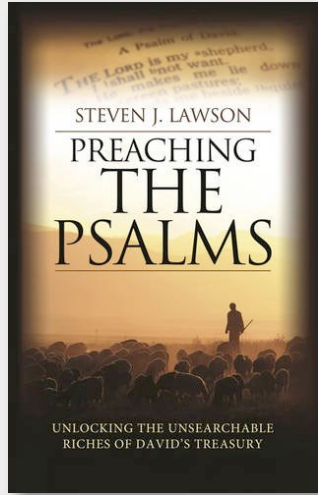
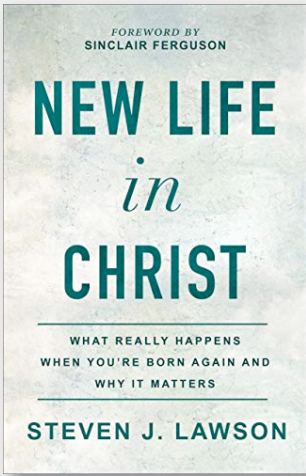
|  
*R.C. Sproul*

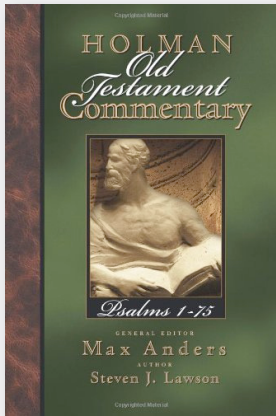
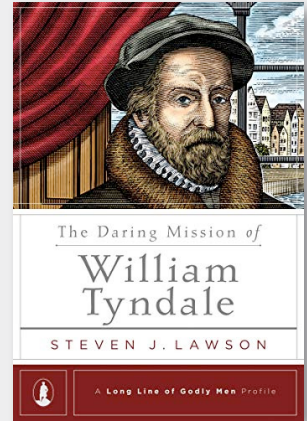
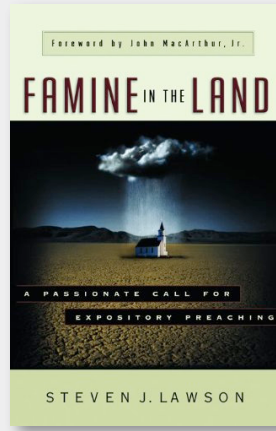
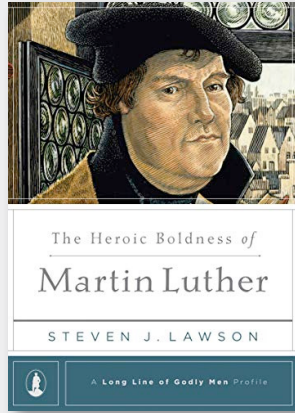
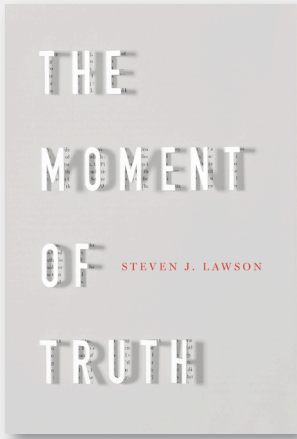
R I G H T N O W  
C O U N T S F O R E V E R

|  
I N V E S T I N Y O U R  
S P I R I T U A L G R O W T H T O D A Y .  
|

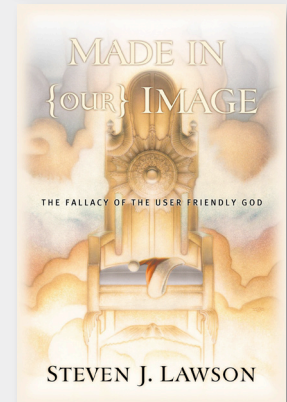
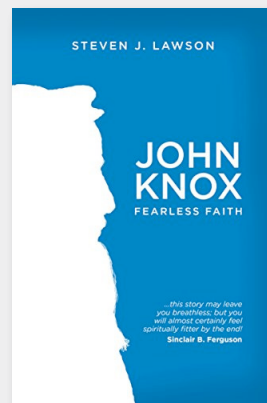
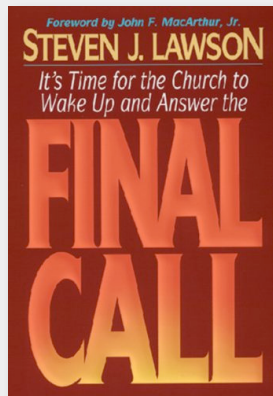
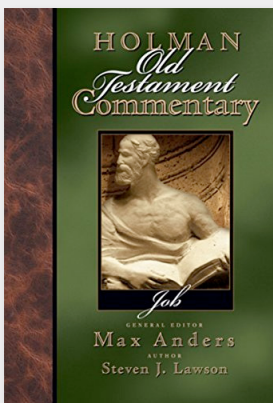
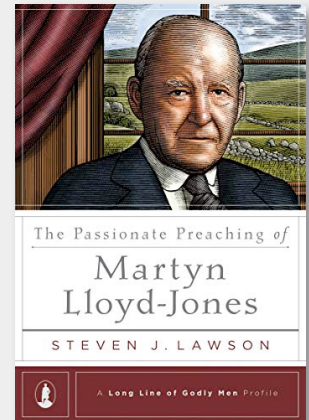
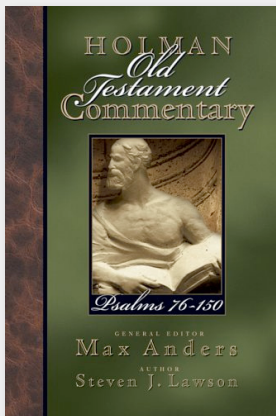
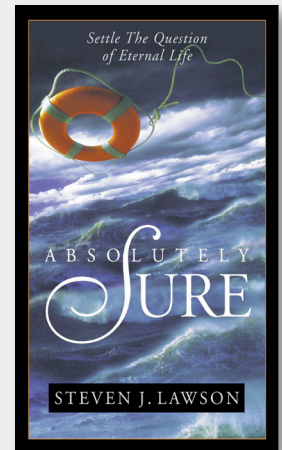


[LIGONIER.ORG/LEARN](http://LIGONIER.ORG/LEARN)





Books Available  
from  
Steven J. Lawson





---

# THE SINFULNESS OF MAN

—  
MICHAEL REEVES

Different views of sin have profound practical consequences. Here, we will look at the question of sin and how it can be understood.

Martin Luther grew up with a little view of sin. It wasn't that he refused to take sin seriously—quite the opposite. Sin, he was taught, is the weight that would drag us to hell; it is the cause of all misery, and its wages are death. Yet, while he knew it was a *severe* problem, he did not think it a very *deep* one.

This was a view that chimes well with today's cheery optimism about ourselves: today, we all know that we do some wrong things, but the suggestion that we might be rotten deep down strikes our culture as utterly repellent nonsense. Most believe we are good people muddling our way through. Of course, we slip up every now and again, but on the whole, sin is a small problem, easy to fix.


What Luther came to see, surprisingly, was that such

sunny stories of how basically good we are, so attractive in their cheeriness, are actually terrible, enslaving lies.

In Luther's day it was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle who summed it up and whose message was so widespread. "We become righteous by doing righteous deeds," he had claimed (or, "we become just by doing just acts"). It was a self-help, "fake-it-till-you-make-it" message. If you work at outward, righteous acts, and keep doing them, it claimed, you will actually become a righteous person.

For years Luther lived by the maxim "we become righteous by doing righteous deeds." As a monk, he desperately did all the righteous deeds he could imagine: fasting, praying, pilgriming, and monkery. What he slowly came to realize, however, was that the dream of becoming truly righteous by such simple change of behavior was just that: an elusive dream.

Holding its reward ever just out of reach, this tantalizing



**While doing all the outward acts of righteousness, Luther found that his efforts weren't making him upright in heart, full of love for the Lord; rather, in himself he found resentment snowballing for the God who demands so many deeds. Trying to sort himself out and become righteous by his own efforts was driving him deep down into slavery, despair, and hatred of God.**

proposal constantly promised righteousness without delivering it, all the time exacting a heavier and heavier behavioral demand. In other words, by dangling the hope of being righteous before him while repeatedly giving more deeds to do, this lie gradually enslaved him.

And even worse, while doing all the outward acts of righteousness, Luther found that his efforts weren't making him upright in heart, full of love for the Lord; rather, in himself he found resentment snowballing for the God who demands so many deeds. Trying to sort himself out and become righteous by his own efforts was driving him deep down into slavery, despair, and hatred of God. Sin, he began to see, was not so easy a problem to whisk away: it went deep down, deeper than he could reach by himself.

So it was, in 1517, that Luther decided to challenge Aristotle. A few weeks before posting his famous Ninety-Five Theses, he penned his Ninety-Seven Theses, in which he wrote:

We do *not* become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, *having been made righteous*, we do righteous deeds.

That is, our sin is not something we can sort out by ourselves by adjusting our performance. If we are to be righteous, we have to be *made* righteous.

So, how does that work? Luther continues:

The grace of God, however, makes righteousness abound through Jesus Christ because it causes one to be pleased with the law.

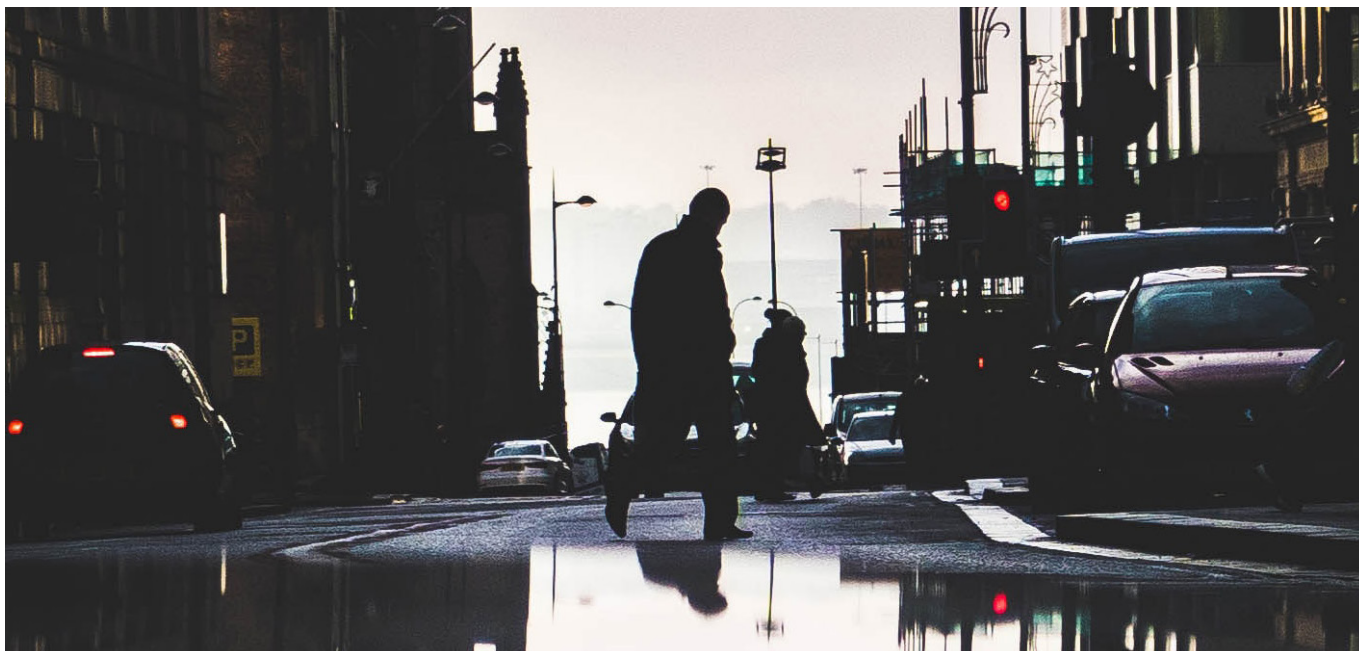
What we cannot do, the grace of God does. For God in His kindness is able to reach down where we cannot reach and change not just the superficial layer of our behavior, but our very hearts, causing us actually to *desire* ("to be pleased with") what is righteous. And that uprightness of the heart is the only true uprightness.

This is exactly the point at which many would part ways with the Reformation: God saving people out of His sheer loving kindness sounds wonderful, but people *needing* to be saved because they are otherwise helpless in their sin sounds less pleasing. And we don't like hearing bad news.

It was the same in Luther's day. In the early days of the Reformation, there were many who were vaguely sympathetic to the Reformation. They saw the need for some sort of reformation in the church; they wanted the corruption and mismanagement cleaned up; and men like Luther seemed to them to be stepping up to the task. One such admirer was Erasmus—at the time, the most celebrated scholar in the world, and the man who had published the Greek New Testament that had been a catalyst in Luther's conversion.

Yet, Erasmus' idea of reformation was like his view of Christianity: he believed that what the Roman Catholic Church needed in his day was a few improvements. It was dirty and needed a wash, but nothing radical or essential needed changing. Likewise with us all, he felt: we could and should do better, but that doesn't at all mean that we are *enslaved* to our sin.

So, in 1524, Erasmus wrote *On the Freedom of the Will*, arguing that sin is *not* something that affects us so deeply



or powerfully that it actually enslaves us. Luther saw this as an assault on the very vitals of the Reformation, and he replied with a blistering argument: *On the Bondage of the Will*.

The title Luther gave his work—*On the Bondage of the Will*—commonly throws people. “I make free choices, don’t I? Is Luther saying that I can’t do what I want?” they ask. “But that’s complete nonsense: I do what I want every day! My will seems very free.” Actually, Luther would agree: we *do* always do what we want. We freely choose to do the things we do, and in that sense our wills are entirely free. However, you do not choose *what* to want. For underneath our wills, directing and governing our choices, lie our hearts with all their inclinations and desires. “*In his heart a man plans his course*” (Prov 16:9, NIV 1984, emphasis added).


That is why we choose to sin. We do not neutrally weigh the odds of each decision (“Should I do the sinful thing here, or the righteous thing?”) and choose what seems most sensible. We choose sin because that is what we want: we are “carrying out the *desires* of the [flesh]” (Eph 2:3, ESV, emphasis added). We naturally *love* darkness (John 3:19) and so “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed *by his own desire*. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15, ESV, emphasis added).

What Luther had seen was that the problem of our sin goes as deep in us as it possibly could: all the way down into our hearts, shaping what we want and love. As a result, we never naturally want God. We freely choose to do the things we want—and that includes being able to live a life of outward morality and respectability—but left to ourselves, we will never choose God, because we do not naturally want Him.

Erasmus had taken it that our problem as sinners is basically sloth. That is, we are spiritually sluggish and sleepy, and what we need if we are to be righteous is to pull ourselves together and put in the proper effort. But Luther’s own experience had given the lie to that: all his extraordinary religious effort had left him sighing “I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.”

With that in his heart, he could strive as hard as he wanted and yet only find himself further than ever from actually fulfilling the law by loving the Lord his God. An outward *appearance* of righteousness he could achieve, but it would be nothing more than a hollow sham made of self-dependence, self-worship, and self-righteousness.

He was like a rotten tree producing rotten fruit. Sin was in his roots, in the very grain of his deepest self. What Luther



**We freely choose to do the things we want—and that includes being able to live a life of outward morality and respectability—but left to ourselves, we will never choose God, because we do not naturally want Him.**



needed—and what he came to see all sinners need—was a *radical* renewal: a new heart that would freely love and be pleased with God (John 3:3; Ezek 36:26–27; Mark 7:14–23). And that would only come about through “the love of God, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5). As he would later put it, “The heart must be made glad . . . The heart must grow warm and melt in the love of God. *Then* praise and thanksgiving will follow with a pure heart.” It is when someone tastes the love, grace, and glory of God through the gospel that their eyes are opened and their hearts turned: only then will they love God back with a pure heart.

The difference between Luther and Erasmus meant that they ended up with two quite different visions of Christianity. For Erasmus, the church is most like an army (one of his best-known works was entitled *The Manual of the Christian Soldier*). The important thing, then, for a Christian, is to keep the rules and do one’s duty.

For Luther, on the other hand, the church is first and foremost more like a family. *Knowing God the Father* is what matters above all. Sin is not just substandard behavior and a dereliction of proper duty: *to sin is to despise God*. The act of sin has its roots in the heart and reveals that something other than God has become the true object of the heart’s desire and adoration.

When played out in real life, the difference between those two visions becomes even more obvious. If right behavior is the goal, and if that is a goal everyone can achieve if they simply exert themselves properly, then the church *can* run just like an army. Pastors can serve as the sergeant-majors, drilling their troops into line. After all, for Erasmus, everyone is *capable* of getting into line.

But if we were made for a deeper purpose—to love, glorify, and enjoy God—and yet we *cannot* naturally love Him, being enslaved to sin, then merely to order people to do what they can’t would be cruel. In other words, anyone who comes to hold Luther’s deep view of sin must find their compassion swell and build. For people are not just naturally lazy; they are helpless. They need their very hearts to be dealt with, not simply their performance. Above all, they need the one thing with the power to turn and liberate their hearts: the gospel (Rom 1:16). “How shall a work please God if it proceeds from a reluctant and resisting heart?” asked Luther.

If hearts that are enslaved to the charming lies of sin are ever to be won to God, the glory of God in the face of Christ must be made known to them. He must be shown to be *better*, more desirable than our sin. And that was how Luther would minister to people. Compare, then, Erasmus’ stern counsel with this, from Luther:

I could not have faith in God if I did not think he wanted to be favorable and kind to me. This in turn makes me feel kindly disposed toward him, and I am moved to trust him with all my heart and to look to him for all good things . . . Look here! This is how you must cultivate Christ in yourself . . . faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ. If you see in these that God is so kindly disposed toward you that he even gives his own Son for you, then your heart in turn must grow sweet and disposed toward God.

Because sin is a slavery or addiction, Luther saw that he couldn’t simply hector or order people out of it. That might bring about behavior change, but it would only reinforce a deeper self-dependence. Ears need to be opened to the message of Christ and Him crucified so that eyes can open to the unfathomable kindness and glory of the living God. Only in that gospel light can true humility, goodness, and charity grow.

The Reformation’s “deep” view of sin looks initially unattractive. But, if sin is not much of a problem, Christ need not be much of a Savior, and we don’t need much grace.

Only if I see my plight is so bad I cannot fix it myself will I find true freedom in Christ, for only then will I stop depending on myself and depend on Him. Only then will I despair of my own efforts and look outside myself for hope. This is just what we see in the Gospels: it is the one with the great debt cancelled who loves most (Luke 7:40–43); it is the forgiven prostitutes and tax collectors who weep with joy, give away their wealth, and love Jesus. It is the Pharisees—those who think they have something in themselves on which to depend—who never find that liberation and transformation.

Historically, too, times of church reformation and revival have consistently been marked by a radical view of sin. It was on the lips of the preachers of the Great Awakening—men like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards—as much as it was in the mouths of the Reformers. Such men knew that calls for social improvement and better morality, while good things, never touch the depths of the human condition. Corrupted all the way down, we cannot fix ourselves. Our hearts must be renewed, and that can only happen through the gospel being preached and the glory of God being unveiled.

The Reformation’s radical view of sin is *why* we sinners would throw ourselves on God’s grace alone. ❖



## DISCOVER THE AWESOME ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

It's the most important question we can ask: Who is God? The wrong answer could spell our doom, but God has clearly revealed Himself and His majesty in His Word. Just as Moses asked the Lord on the summit of Sinai, we can approach God's Word with the ultimate request: "Show me Your glory."

In *Show Me Your Glory: Understanding the Majestic Splendor of God*, Dr. Steven Lawson takes us to the mountaintop of divine revelation by distilling the Bible's teaching about God Himself. Each chapter delves into the depths of God's awesome attributes, teaching that a deeper knowledge of our Creator can lead us into intimate fellowship with and reverent worship of the One who made us for Himself.

BULK QUANTITY DISCOUNTS  
AVAILABLE FOR CHURCHES  
AND BOOKSTORES.

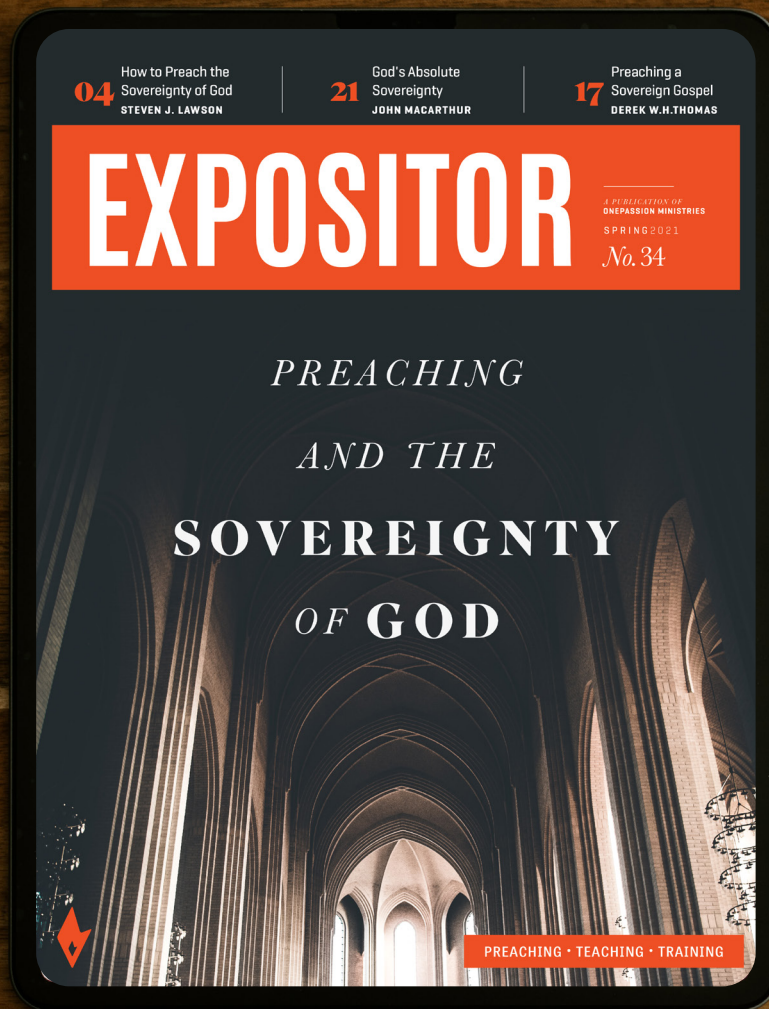
DIGITAL EDITIONS AVAILABLE



amazonkindle



Ligonier.org/store | 800-435-4343



# EXPOSITOR

## DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION

*Expositor* magazine is devoted to calling those who stand in pulpits to the high standard of biblical preaching. Every new subscriber joins with us in calling forth and training a new generation of biblical expositors. Subscribe to the **DIGITAL ISSUE** of *Expositor* and you will receive every issue sent to your mobile device.

[ONEPASSION.ORG/SUBSCRIBE](http://ONEPASSION.ORG/SUBSCRIBE)



# STEADFAST HOPE

*with STEVEN J. LAWSON*

**ONEPASSION MINISTRIES**

**LIVESTREAM**

**MONDAY, WEDNESDAY, & FRIDAY | 8:00 A.M. CST**

**[ONEPASSION.ORG/STEADFAST-HOPE](https://onepassion.org/steadfast-hope)**