

# HUMAN DEPRAVITY

By J. R. Graves

*"Wherefore, as by one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." - Romans 5:12.*

THE discussion of this theme, as you readily perceive, leads me directly upon controverted ground; *i.e.*, human depravity; commonly styled "total depravity."

As no truth of our holy religion is so debasing and humiliating to the carnal heart, as that it is *totally* or wholly corrupt and depraved, so no doctrine of the Bible has been so bitterly assailed and violently opposed by the founders and supporters of human-invented systems of religious faith, from the period of the first schism until now. Nor is this strange. Human systems of religion are constructed to please the world and to gain popularity. And what is so pleasing and complimentary to a wicked and depraved heart as the flattering insinuation that it is not naturally sinful or depraved but, on the contrary, naturally perfect and holy? What religious doctrine is so well calculated to win the ear and gain the assent of man as that which praises him? Hence the first sentence that Arian, or Pelagius, wrote in their creed was: "There is no original sin," *i.e.*, that mankind naturally are as pure and holy as the angels.

As it was of the ancient, so it still is the first article in the creed of the modern, Pelagians among us. "No original sin" is still the watchword and ready reply they receive from the world. Save the divinity of Christ, no doctrine of the Bible receives so much of their ridicule and abuse. They direct the attention of the world to the preachers and believers of the doctrine of original depravity as the defamers of their character and natures, and thereby gain favour to their cause. We can easily see why they can so conveniently dispense with the divinity of Christ. For if the disease is superficial, the remedy may be trivial. If the garment be perfectly sound and well finished, only a little dusty from wear, there is no need of having it renovated and renewed; a little brushing, "an external application of water will do." So if the heart of man is naturally holy, but only the inclinations of it a little warped, then he needs but recall his aberration, regain his natural bias, and have a perfect example to assist him (which they believe was the object of Christ's mission), and all will be well!

But if the Bible teaches the doctrine of original depravity, shall we cower, be ashamed, or afraid to assert it, regardless of the displeasure of the world, or the sneers and attacks of our opposers? God forbid. Did we find one doctrine in our creed that was not repulsive and displeasing to the carnal heart, would we strike it out? Christ never preached such a doctrine, or the apostles, nor the martyrs; and he who does is "Maranatha," saith our God. Be this our touchstone. In discussing our subject we wish to notice the *extent*, *source*, and *depth* of this depravity.

## Proposition I

### ***All men are sinners and consequently depraved.***

1. "The wages of sin is death," saith the apostle. If then death is the penalty of depravity and sin wherever it is found, is it the wages of anything else? Of being first instituted as the penalty of depravity

and sin, has it now dominion over the innocent? Not so. Every nature that is sinful and depraved must endure death, and none other. "Death hath passed upon all, for all have sinned" - all are regarded as sinners. "The soul that sinneth [or is sinful] shall die," is the sentence passed upon a sinful race. Then none but sinners or depraved persons die. But all die - the young and the old, childhood and age. Therefore, all are regarded as sinners and of depraved natures.

Cast your eyes over our sad, fallen world, and behold the millions of the human race, the entire population of the globe, paling and vanishing before the sickle of the great reaper, Death, and say, Have not all sinned? Without sin, man might ever live. The vigour of manhood, and hope of youth, ever swell his breast, and the warm bounding blood of childhood dashes through all his veins. Never would we behold the plague spot upon the cheek of the young and lovely - nor the forms of our fathers, and the noble of the land withering from the blighting touch of consumption, the upas of diseases. No longer would our atmosphere be pregnant with death, nor every breeze that fans our brows bear on its wings a pestilence. But what a different scene does earth present - a vast grave-yard, a mighty Golgotha! In every brother we see a dying man. Have not all sinned?

2. It is declared by the apostle (Romans 3:20) that "by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." Now, if there was a child of Adam that was sinless or ever should be, he could be justified by the law. So all have sinned.

3. "Except a man be born again," says Christ (John 3:3), "he cannot see the kingdom of God." This implies that all are depraved - morally unfit for holy associations. If there was a person on earth not depraved, he could enter heaven without regeneration.

4. Christ came to save the lost. Therefore all saved by Him were in a lost state - those not saved by Him will be damned, and of course lost. The former, saved from sin; the latter perish for sin.

5. The laws of all nations are proofs of man's awful depravity. Bolts, bars, jails, and dungeons, bonds, deeds, and contracts, are so many sad proofs of the depravity of man. Law is executed upon the fact that man is woefully depraved, and it casts a suspicion upon all. Have you selected the most upright and honest man of your state for your governor? The law will not trust him to execute the duties of his office without the most solemn oath. The law suspects the judge himself, who sits on the bench and administers it. The President of the republic and the monarch of a kingdom are alike under its restraints.

6. The religion of all nations substantiates the truth of our proposition. No nation was ever yet found without its altar of sacrifice and priests. The religion of all nations is propitiatory.

7. The conversation of all nations. No man but what will say his neighbour is a depraved man - a sinner. So every man will correct his neighbour. If he tells the truth, our proposition stands. If he does not, of course it stands. Conceiving this point fully established, we will, in considering the source of this depravity, advance.

## **Proposition II**

***This universal depravity is the result of education, imitation, or a naturally vitiated nature.***

1. It cannot result from education or imitation; otherwise, it would not be universal. Nothing which is the result of either is so general and widespread. It would be more or less in one country than another,

as the knowledge of the sciences and arts are; or painting, mathematics, etc. But depravity is universal in extent and degree, in every discovered land and island.

2. If it results from either, who taught the first persons or community, in each and every land, in all the unnumbered species of wickedness and crime? It must of course have been natural to their first teachers, and their number must have been many millions, to have rendered instruction to the whole world and made it popular, if mankind were as hard to be instructed in sin as in holiness - which would have been if not biased. Then, the impossibility of original depravity and sin being removed, is it more rational to believe that a few were thus, and the rest initiated into it, or that all are naturally inclined to do wrong?

3. But, granting that it is the result of education or imitation, or both, then there must be a natural love for sin, and a natural adaptedness of the human faculties to commit it; otherwise, every person on earth, young and old, in all climes, would not love it equally, or have learned it alike readily, and become alike perfected in it. Is it so with the arts and sciences, or anything that is learned?

4. It cannot be either; for children that have been placed out of the reach of vicious persons, to corrupt or teach them, and, moreover, have been most carefully taught the principles of religion and ever breathed the atmosphere of piety and prayer, have invariably evinced an aversion to holiness; and having once broken away from restraints, have plunged deepest into vice and become leaders in iniquity.

5. Finally, and conclusively, it cannot result from either education or imitation, for the most atrocious crimes and acts of wickedness on record have been perpetrated by those who had no example. Where lived the fratricide before the days of Cain? Had he heard of one who had stained his hands in fraternal gore? Who taught him, but his own wicked disposition, to raise the murderous club, and strike the innocent to the earth? Therefore, if it cannot be from either education or imitation, it must be from a naturally vitiated and depraved nature. We adduce, in proof of this latter:

(1) The opinions of the most eminent and distinguished philosophers of antiquity. They saw this universal malady - this leprosy of the heart which rendered the whole human family unclean - and studied diligently for its origin, and have left us their reasonings and conclusions. No human opinions are superior to them. Allow me to quote briefly:

Plato, the godlike, asserts that no one is born without sin. He names this proneness to sin *Kakophuia*, i.e., natural sin or depravity - defining it, *kakia en phusei* - an evil nature. We hear Horace, the prince of Roman poets, acknowledging and lamenting it, breaking forth in language like this:

"Eheu!

*Quam temere in nosmet lagem sanctimus iniquam*

*Nam vitiis nemo sine nascitur?"*

- (Satyr Li, Sec. 3, v. 63.)

"Alas!

Man with vile and corrupted nature born

Is soon expert in every shade of crime."

Plutarch says: "There is a fatal portion of evil in all when born, from whence results the depravity of the soul, diseases, death, etc. *Unicuique dedit vitium natura creata.*" Cicero "laments that man should be brought into life by nature as a stepmother, with a naked, frail and infirm body, and with a mind naturally depraved and prone to vice."

(2) The Scriptures leave us not to the conclusions of human philosophy; but shed the clearest light upon it. With what confidence does it ask us, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one" (Job 14:4). Can a pure, sinless, and holy nature proceed from an unholy and depraved one? John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh, is flesh" - carnal - corrupt. And the prophet testifies (Jeremiah 17:9) that the heart is the bitter fountain of all pollution and of all things the most deceitful, and desperately wicked. The Saviour tells us that "out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, blasphemies"; *i.e.*, that the natural heart is to commit these things, and delights in them.

Again, "If the root be holy, so are the branches." Conversely, if the root be unholy, so are the branches. If the root of mankind was of corrupt and diseased nature, will not all the branches, the descendants of that stock be of like nature? Unholy? Corrupt?

(3) Finally, upon this point: That the natures of mankind are vitiated and depraved, we prove from the fact that infants and children, who never committed actual transgression, die. This could never be unless they were sinners or of sinful and depraved natures. When sin entered into the dominions of God, he summoned the most malignant of the lost spirits from the world of darkness, and gave him permission to dwell upon earth until the end of time, and become the executioner of the penalty of sin: "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" - hence he was called Death. His commission was: Upon whatever being he found the mark of depravity, or the sign of sin, he might seize it for his prey.

Death went forth upon his mission of destruction; thousands on thousands fell daily before him, from the ranks of manhood and age. One day, as he drew near to touch with his ice-pointed finger the heart of a mother on whom he discovered his sign, he saw, sleeping upon her breast, a picture of beauty and innocence. There was a look of such purity and angel loveliness about it that he started back; he dared not blight one beauty, nor cause one petal of that fair floweret to fall to earth. He watched it with a strange interest, but ere long it awoke from its slumber with cries and writhing with pain. Death gazed some moments in astonishment. He remembered his instruction. Where there is no sin, there is no pain or distress. Then drawing from his quiver his finest and most polished shaft he sped it to the infant's heart, and bore it in triumph into his dark dominion; by this deed setting his seal to the truth, - As the father, so the child.

The young viper, though harmless and innocent, possesses naturally the venomous disposition and poisonous nature of its species, and requires only time to mature and develop it. Will our modern theologians who defend infant holiness assert that the young basilisk is not naturally a basilisk?<sup>1</sup> We leave this proposition, so fully substantiated, to notice the depth of human depravity, which will constitute:

### **Proposition III**

#### ***That mankind are wholly depraved.***

<sup>1</sup> "I would not be understood to advocate infant punishment. By an act of God's free grace, they are saved. 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.'"

The hatred and opposition of our enemies to this doctrine is so great that, not satisfied with abusing us for believing and teaching it, they continually and wilfully misrepresent us; imputing to us sentiments we never countenanced or upheld. For instance, that by human or "total" depravity (the name under which it is most commonly treated) we mean that every man is by nature as sinful as he possibly can be; so that neither association with the vicious, or the practice of iniquity, can add one shade to the hue of his depravity. Therefore, for the thousand and one times, we again declare to them and to the world, *that we do not, nor ever did, as a denomination, secretly believe or openly publish any such dogma.* We abhor and repel it. We then state, negatively:

(1) That we don't understand by "total" depravity, that man is a sinner to the extent of his abilities, *i.e.*, as great a sinner as he can be. Because reason, experience, and revelation teach that men do become more and more hardened in sin, and adept in iniquity. Nero, when he was first required to sign the death warrant of a murderer, was so affected with the idea that his signature authorized death, that he wept like a child, and wished that he had never learned to write. Yet, after a few short years, he could without remorse, fire the eternal city, enact the mountebank with the violin amidst its sweeping conflagration; crowd thousands into a temple and fire it, to enjoy the hideous yells and shrieks of the consuming victims; cover Christians with tar, mixed with light combustible, and set them on fire for his amusement and pastime; and every other deed of depravity that could delight a demon incarnate.

(2) Nor are men wicked to the extent of their wishes. They are restrained from doing very many things which are sinful and wrong, because they would thereby draw upon themselves the odium of public opinion. If they commit this or that act, they would forever ruin their characters, and become outcasts from society. Those whom neither public opinion, or the rules of society, serve to restrain from vice and crime, the civil law steps in, with its arm clothed with a thousand terrors, to terrify the daring trespasser.

(3) But how deep shall we fix the dye of this depravity? Will the history of man give the faintest idea? If so, think of the deep corruption and licentiousness of the antediluvian world, swept from earth with the besom of waters. Go ask the Dead Sea's flood what ruins slumber 'neath its waveless depths. 'Twould answer, the fragments of those cities whose deep pollution heaven's fire and brimstone alone could cleanse. Go ask the god of war the almost countless millions of *frater* victims man has immolated at the shrine of battle, and hear his answer: "Forty times more human victims have they sacrificed to me in war, than inhabit the globe today!" Their bodies piled one upon another would wall this mighty continent to the heavens. Collect but their blood, and it would form a sea in which the navies of the earth might ride at anchor; or let the blood and bodies be conglomerated into one globe and swung in our heavens, it would form a planet that a few hundred miles from our earth would vie with the earth in magnitude. Add but to this the fratricide, individual and secret murders, parricides, suicides, infanticides, and what a picture has earth to present! A vast slaughter yard - a mighty Golgotha - a place of skulls. This has all been caused by human depravity! What, then, is its due? Of the blackest conceivable shade!

(4) Therefore, we do most unhesitatingly declare that man by nature is wholly and totally depraved and tainted with sin. We use the term totally or wholly, because we are acquainted with no better one to express our idea. We have been scouted and ridiculed for using the word "total," when we did not mean that man was as depraved as he could be. But no term could be more appropriately used. What is "total," but the sum of all the parts? Is not the mind, considered as a unit, composed of many parts, *i.e.*,

powers, faculties? What other idea can total depravity convey, to any intelligent mind, than that the sum total - all the powers and faculties of the mind - are vitiated?

Let us illustrate. Into a glass of water throw one spoonful of arsenic, and dissolve it; now is not this water wholly or "totally" poisonous? *i.e.*, is not each particle and atom (for water is composed of atoms and particles) impregnated with poison? Most assuredly. But does that imply that the water cannot be made more poisonous? By no means. Cast in another spoonful, and it is twice as poisonous as before. This briefly illustrates what we mean by "total" depravity; that there is not a faculty of the soul that is untainted - naturally prone to purity and holiness. We do not pretend to say to what extent; but this much we can truly say, that it is to man's utter ruin under God and to his entire disqualification for heaven.

We do not teach that the judgment and reasoning faculties of man are destroyed, or his will, so that he can neither reason, or wish for what is good; but that all the affections of the sinner's heart are under the control and keeping of the evil one, as completely as the goods were under the power of the "strong man armed" - that the whole man is in the slavery of sin. "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" says Paul to the Romans (6:16). Have not sinners yielded themselves servants to sin to do the works of the devil? And now are ground down in vilest bondage? But cannot the slave wish for freedom and release? The slave may wish in vain, but the sinner has a deliverer to rescue him when he wishes. So to him the freedom of thought and of choice is still left.

### **Reflections**

1. Of what a heinous nature is sin! It has caused all the pain, misery, and death that has ever cursed our race. It has swept the countless millions of earth into untimely graves. It has murdered all our relations, even our fathers and mothers. We are all orphans - the children of the slain. Sinner, would you not take the life of your father's murderer? Assuredly. Sin has been the murderer of all the friends and relations you have lost, and now lurks, an assassin, to plunge the dagger of the second death into your own heart; and you love it, caress it, roll it as a sweet morsel under your tongue, make it your bosom companion. Oh, what delusion! What fatuity! Spirit of the living God, break the spell with which sin holds the sinner's soul.

2. We learn our lost and undone state by nature.

3. The force of those words of our Saviour to Nicodemus: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ye *must* be born again."