

“Help! I’ve Fallen and I Can’t Get Up:”
An Examination of Total Depravity in Psalm 14:1-3
By Pastor Vincent C. Nicotra

Few theological subjects evoke as much emotion as the doctrine of total depravity, yet it remains to this very day a watershed theological issue - the linchpin which holds the other doctrines of grace together. Historically, the church has been quite divided in its attempts to reconcile the degree to which man has fallen with what appears to be his apparent ability to do some good. How are we to understand the fallen nature of man? How far did Adam fall in the garden? When he fell, did he corrupt his entire progeny, dooming the entire human race to not only physical, but spiritual death? Did it affect man’s ability to come to know God, or to be pleasing to Him? If man is born totally depraved, then how is he able to do apparent good deeds? The theological import to these questions is weighty, and, in fact, constitutes the backdrop for the topic of this paper. The depravity of man which King David expressed in Psalm 14:1-3 leads to three conclusions about the nature of human depravity and man’s ability to please God (1) Man’s sin is personal, (2) God’s sight is perfect, and (3) Man’s situation is perilous. These three conclusions will be explained in more detail throughout the remainder of this paper.

Man’s Sin is Personal

David begins the psalm by saying that “the fool has said in his heart, ‘there is no God.’” This statement immediately forces one to ask, “Who is the fool?” A brief survey of the various terms for the “unwise” may provide some assistance in understanding the author’s choice of words here. The “unwise” appear as those who are simple or naïve (פְּתִי) (Prov. 14:15), silly or stupid (קְסִיל) (Prov. 10:8), madmen (הַוִּילֵל) (Prov. 26:18), and fools (אֲוִילִי) (Prov. 7:22). In other words, the “unwise” can range from the lower end of the scale, being simple or naïve, to outright madmen. Somewhere in the middle of the scale lies the term which is used here, “fool” (נָבֵל). This word carries the idea of “relaxed, or powerless,” in a sense describing man’s powerlessness to do anything worthwhile before God. In the text under consideration, it is employed by David to describe apostates who refuse God.¹ Both intellect and morality are contained in the meaning of this word. Thus, the fool’s rejection of God is not only an intellectual rejection, but it is also one which makes him morally culpable as well. In other words, he does not merely lack information, but refuses to acknowledge God’s authoritative rule over his life. In the vernacular, he “shakes his fist in God’s face.”

The fool’s depravity manifests itself inwardly by an obstinate rejection of God in the depths of his heart (v. 1),² then outwardly in his actions (Isa. 32:6).

¹ It is not that fools don’t know that God exists. They simply refuse to acknowledge His rule to which they are accountable.

² For a helpful discussion of the “heart,” see George Zemek, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace* (Little Rock, AR.: B.T.D.S.G., 2002), 16-33.

Thus, in the second half of v. 1 the psalmist goes on to say that “they are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good.” The psalmist again chose his words carefully in order to convey the graphic nature of man’s offenses against God. The word “corrupt” generally carries the idea of “ruined,” “destroyed.”³ Thus, their deeds are “abominable,” or morally wicked (Isa. 64:6). Importantly, no longer is the subject simply the “fool,” but now all of mankind is encompassed in the evaluation. There is no one who does good according to the psalmist.⁴

In summary, the psalmist’s evaluation of the “fool” is that his personal rejection of God internally, results in his commission of wicked deeds externally, rendering him personally culpable and guilty before His Creator. Thus, it is not simply the fool, but all of unregenerate mankind who are guilty before God. All of them are equally condemned because of the thoughts and intentions of their hearts.

God’s Sight is Perfect

While the fool evaluates things from his perspective in v. 1 and concludes, “There is no God,”⁵ the psalmist ironically, and poetically, envisions God looking down upon the sons of men from His window in heaven and evaluating mankind’s “goodness” in v. 2.⁶ God’s divine name is placed forward in this verse to emphasize this contrast in evaluators. Fools may evaluate God and deny Him, yet at the same time God is scrutinizing men from His holy sanctuary to see if there are any who “understand, who seek after Him.” This is not the first evaluation of sinful mankind by God. The imagery hearkens back to accounts of God’s past evaluations which warranted temporal judgments such as the flood (Gen. 6:5-8), the confusion of the languages (Gen. 11:5), and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20).

This is really the crux of the issue in our understanding of human depravity. Our own estimation does not seem to be so terrible when we compare ourselves to the rest of fallen humanity. Comparative self-evaluation, however, is not the point which the psalmist is making. The significance of the psalm lies in God’s perspective and evaluation of mankind, in that He has evaluated mankind to see

³ The thorough devastation which *תִּשָׁח* denotes makes it apt vocabulary for pronouncements and descriptions of divine judgment. Cornelius Van Dam, “שָׁחַת” *NIDOTTE*, ed. by William VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1997), 4:92-93.

⁴ Importantly the Psalmist now expands from the anarthrous singular to the plural, expanding his thought to include all who reject God, not simply a particular fool. Additionally, the last part of the phrase is actually in construct and may well be rendered “not a doer of good” in its literal sense.

⁵ Ironically, the Hebrew particle of non-existence employed by the fool in his evaluation of God is picked up by God Himself in the result of His evaluation of mankind (v. 3), where He uses it twice for emphasis.

⁶ The verb *רָאָה* means to look forth, by bending one’s self forward and is being used as an anthropomorphism. It is the proper word for looking out of a window (2 Kings 9:30). In other words, it pictures God leaning forward, surveying lost humanity, searching for those who seek Him. Unfortunately, his conclusion is that there aren’t any.

if there is any who understand or who seek after Him and His searching produces no positive results. Charles H. Spurgeon dramatically and insightfully illustrates God's search for a good individual in the following, "Behold the eyes of Omniscience ransacking the globe, and prying among every people and nation, He who is looking down knows the good, is quick to discern it, would be delighted to find it; but as He views all the unregenerate children of men His search is fruitless, for of all the race of Adam no unrenewed soul is other than an enemy to God and goodness."⁷

The graphic imagery depicts God tearing apart the globe in His search for a single good person. The stark reality is that we may compare ourselves to the rest of mankind and find that we come out looking pretty good, but unfortunately God evaluates our goodness in comparison to His own, and in such a comparison, there is none who makes the grade, or who can live up to His scrutinizing gaze.

Man's Situation is Perilous

The results of God's evaluation of mankind are stated in v. 3. From God's perspective the news is not promising. The results are in, and God's conclusion is that all have turned aside from His ways and together they have become corrupt. The language here causes one to envision a caravan going off the trail and getting lost. The word "all" is not only placed forward for contrastive emphasis in this verse, but significantly also has a definite article (literally, "the whole"). In other words, the result of God's evaluation of mankind is that the "whole of them" have turned aside. This essentially means that unregenerate man as a whole has taken a different path, or gone a way other than God's way. The *niphal* form of the verb which the psalmist uses for becoming corrupt (xl;a') explicitly states the behavior of the fool, who himself is representative of all of unregenerate mankind. The word for "corrupt" here differs from v. 1. This is a graphic term which means to "become sour, rancid, or putrefied." Aside from its use here, it occurs in only one other place in the entire Old Testament.⁸ In both occurrences it contrasts man with God. Not only this, but the all encompassing adverb "altogether" (יחדו) emphasizes that mankind has become corrupt in some sort of cooperative venture, expressing the solidarity of mankind's involvement in his crimes against God, thus establishing the universality of his guilt and the totality of his depravity.

This totality of mankind's corruption is summarized in the phrase "there is no one who does good, not even one" (cf. v. 1c). Unfortunately, the grammatical emphasis is lost in the English translations in favor of a more readable flow. However, in the Hebrew, two uses of the particle of nonexistence appear in this phrase (אין), dramatically emphasizing the totality and solidarity of mankind's corrupt position before God. *There is not a single* doer of good, *there is not even one* (italics added for emphasis)! These two particles not only function in parallel

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 3 volumes (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 1:162.

⁸ The verb also appears in Job 15:16 where it contrasts with moral purity and righteousness. David W. Baker, "אין" *NIDOTTE*, ed. by William VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1997), 1:410.

with the particle of nonexistence in v. 1, but they stand in contrast to with the particle of existence or being in v. 2 (וְ). In other words, God evaluates His creation and responds, “How do I know if there are any righteous? Because I have personally looked for them and I haven’t found any!”

These verses are repeated in Psalm 53:1-3,⁹ which was also penned by King David. Considering the devastating condemnation of mankind found in them, it stands to reason that the Apostle Paul would pick up on them under divine inspiration and use them as part of the universal indictment of all mankind (both Jews and Gentiles), in Romans 3:10-18. In fact, Paul uses these words to lead off a long litany of fourteen specific counts of crimes against God forming a full and complete indictment against mankind. There, in addition to Psalm 14:1-3, Paul compiles several Old Testament texts (Ps. 5:9; Ps. 10:7; Isa. 59:7; Ps. 36:1; Ps. 140:3), to show that all men are “under sin.” To be under sin means that mankind is under the dominion of sin. Such an indictment can only leave one to conclude that human beings are incapable of understanding their own plight or helping themselves in any way out of their predicament. In other words, they have fallen so hard and so severely that they are incapable of “getting up” on their own initiative. Their hearts are corrupt resulting in ungodly deeds and rendering them incapable of pleasing God or earning any sort of merit before Him, or improving their standing with Him. They simply possess nothing with which to commend themselves to God.

In God’s eyes mankind is “down for the count.” Men cannot understand that education and psychology are not enough to change their whole nature. Help must come from the outside by a power which is sufficient to break through the vicious circle of depravity. In Adam, mankind fell to such a degree, that only the grace of God expressed in His unmerited favor is able to overcome the deceitfulness and treachery of the human heart (Jer. 17:9), and bring to life that which is spiritually dead. Thus, unregenerate mankind is not as bad as he could be, but he is certainly as “bad off” as he could be and stands guilty before the judicial bench of Almighty God, necessitating deliverance from an outside source, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ the Righteous.

We trust that this short study has been profitable for you and contributes to your obedient walk of faith. *Psalm 119:105*

This article is copyright 2008 by Vincent C. Nicotra. This article may be quoted, in part or in whole, without permission.

You may contact the author through: <http://www.christianfallacies.com/contact.php>

⁹ While the beginning verses of the two psalms are almost identical there are some grammatical differences in the use of the divine name. Psalm 14 uses “YHWH” in the beginning of verse two, whereas Psalm 53 uses “Elohim.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnold, Bill T., and John H. Choi. *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Baker, David W. "xla," In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. 5 vols. Ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren, 1:410. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms*. 3 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998.

Culver, Robert D. *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*. Great Britain: Mentor, 2001.

Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988.

Kautzsch, E., ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English ed. Trans. and rev. by A. E. Cowley. Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1910.

McClain, Alva. *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*. Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1973.

Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980.

Perowne, J. J. Stewart. *Commentary on the Psalms*, 2 vols. in 1. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1989.

Putnam, Frederic Clarke. *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student's Guide*. Quakertown, Pa.: Stylus Publishing, 1996.

Spurgeon, Charles. *Treasury of David*. 3 vols. 1:162. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988.

Tate, Marvin E. *Psalms 51-100*. Word Biblical Commentary 20. Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, Publisher, 1990.

Van Dam, Cornelius. "txv," In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*. 5 vols. Ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren, 4:92-93. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

Watson, Wilfred G. E. *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, 2nd ed. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 26. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986, revised 1995.

Zemek, George. *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace*. Little Rock, AR.: B.T.D.S.G., 2002.