

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Man: Sin-Death

"In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1:4-5)

"...the darkness comprehendeth it not." John makes a categorical statement about the darkness of which he writes. Despite the shining of the light, the darkness does not comprehend it. The Geneva Bible footnote to this verse reads, "(1) The light of men is turned into darkness, but yet there is enough clearness so that they are without excuse. (2) They could not perceive nor reach it to receive any light from it, no, they did not so much as acknowledge him."

In our last study we reviewed some historical views of man, sin, and the fall that reject this idea. They taught—and advocates of these ancient errors still teach—that mortal man in his unsaved sinful state is quite capable of comprehending the light and by this act of comprehension transforming themselves from sinful people into saved people. The fundamental idea that grew out of the Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian error, and was further developed in the teachings of Molina and Arminius is that, despite the impact of sin, man's will remains unfallen and therefore fully as capable as Adam's will prior to the fall to obey and please God. Rather than salvation being viewed as a recreation of the person, it is viewed by advocates of this school as a decision, a fresh start, a new opportunity to do better. This school of thought views salvation as a change of mind, not a change of essential nature and being. In this study we shall examine both man's will and his ability to respond in his unsaved state to God.

Prior to exploring a number of passages that deals with this question of man's ability and will, I emphasize that every human is born under God's moral law and is commanded to respect and obey it. Sinful humans who shall face God in the final Day of Judgment and hear the sentence, "Depart," shall be judged in that Day by that moral law. It honors God as Creator for an unsaved man to live a moral life, and to practice honorable and honest ethics in his career. However man in his unsaved and sinful

state cannot in or of himself reverse or neutralize the impact of Adam's sin on his spiritual state before God. I do not advocate that Adam was created a saved spiritual man and fell from that state. I advocate that he was created a noble moral creature in the image of his noble and moral Creator, fully capable of keeping the law that God gave to him. His decision to break that law was not the result of a divine decree or robotic orchestration; it was his free moral choice, and God immediately held him accountable for that decision. Just as God warned when He gave the law to Adam, immediately upon eating the forbidden fruit, he died to moral innocence, to fellowship with his Creator. He lost the ability and the inclination to obey God fully and without severe limitations.

Let's examine a number of Scriptures that deal with these two factors in sinful, fallen man; his will and his ability to act in a manner that honors God from a spiritual perspective. Notice the distinction that I draw between man's will and ability as a natural, though fallen, creature and his will and ability as a spiritual being, having the spiritual nature and life of God. The question in man's ultimate salvation is not one of decisions and actions, but of basic spiritual nature. Within their existing nature and intelligence, humans may choose various actions, or make changes in their conduct. However, no creature possesses the ability to change its fundamental nature. Only God can change man's nature, precisely what He does in the new birth. For this reason Jesus introduced the concept of birth, the beginning of a new life, to Nicodemus in the third chapter of John, rather than a new lease on life or merely a "new beginning" as contemporary Semi-Pelagian, Molinistic, and Arminian theologians sometimes describe the salvation process.

Unsaved Man's Will

"And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life." (John 5:40, KJV) This verse

specifically addresses the character of an unsaved person's will. Sinful man does not "will" to come to Christ for spiritual life. Occasionally advocates of the ancient errors that we've examined ridicule the idea that unsaved man is "dead," attempting to extrapolate mortal life—and death—from the analogy of Scripture. Since man breathes and goes about the ordinary processes of daily living, it is obvious that he is not "dead." However, in this verse living humans clearly refuse to "will" to come to Christ that they might have life. Their conduct is the result of a state of spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1 and context).

"Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it." (John 8:44, KJV) Not only does unsaved humanity refuse to will favorably toward God; they also possess a moral bent toward sin, "...the lust of your father ye will do...." The unsaved person's fallen will expresses itself in deliberate—willful—acts of sin.

Unsaved Man's Ability

"All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." (Matthew 11:27, KJV) In this verse Jesus confronts man's inability to "know" either the Father or the Son, and further to know what the Son reveals to His own children.

"He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God." (John 8:47, KJV) In this verse Jesus confronts both man's ability and his actions. To "hear" in the sense of embracing or believing God's words, claiming them as one's own, is outside man's inclination and ability. The person who is "not of God," who does not have God as his spiritual Father and Savior, does not hear, claim as his own, the words of God.

"But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you." (John 10:26, KJV) Jesus specifically attributes the actions of these people, not believing in Him, the Good Shepherd, to the fact that they were not His

"sheep," a common Biblical metaphor for children of God. The verse deals with their actions, but it also surfaces the premise of ability—or lack thereof.

"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14, KJV) In this verse—and its greater context—Paul specifically deals with the unsaved person's inability and his subsequent conduct. He does not receive the things of God, spiritual things, such things as are presented in the Scriptures and the gospel. In fact Paul specifically affirms that the unsaved man *lacks the ability* to "know" these things because they are "spiritually discerned." To "know" spiritual things such as the gospel teaches requires prerequisite spiritual life. Without spiritual life a mortal lacks both the inclination and the inherent ability to "know," a word that Paul chose from four possible words that refers to knowledge based on personal experience. Alien and hostile to God, unsaved man has no frame of personal experience by which to know God in terms of spiritual existence. I do not deny—in fact I strongly affirm—that unsaved mortal humans have the intellectual ability to examine the wonders of nature and reason to the conclusion that God exists, perhaps even come to some basic concepts of morality based on this perception. However any such knowledge does not at all relate to man's salvific state. It is as reasonable for a granite boulder to comprehend Einstein's theory or relativity as for an unsaved person to comprehend God's spiritual nature and being.

In these verses we have seen a consistent rejection from Scripture of the idea that man's will remains in an unfallen state. Quite the opposite, we see in these passages the truth that man in his unsaved state lacks both the ability and the spiritual inclination to do anything pleasing or honorable to God from a spiritual perspective. At the moment that Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they died to moral innocence, and they further *died to the ability* to correct their moral and spiritual problem with God.

Theologians refer to this state of man as "total depravity." The doctrine of total depravity rejects the idea that man's will—or any part of him—was not corrupted by the fall. Total depravity does not mean that unsaved people

are as sinful and mean as they can possibly be. Rather it means that in all of their faculties—will included—abilities, and inclinations unsaved people are fallen and dead to the spiritual nature and character of God. In fact Paul (Romans 3) will affirm that unsaved fallen humans are actively hostile against God and His moral character.

We are beginning to touch the reason that John would open his gospel with the specific affirmation that mortals in their spiritual and morally dark state of existence simply did not comprehend, grasp, or take to themselves the light. Darkness in the natural world represents the absence of light. Darkness never conquers light; light always conquers darkness. The same principle is true in the spiritual world of God's saving grace. He shined and overcame darkness in the Incarnation, but the darkness that remained—then and now—refused to comprehend Him. "*For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:*" (Ephesians 5:8, KJV). Here Paul did not assert that the Ephesians were at one time "*in*" darkness. Rather he asserts that they *were* darkness. However, he also asserts that they *are* now light in the Lord, not just "*in*" the light of God. He takes his point to their inner nature, not merely to their external environment.

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