

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

August 30th, 2026

Sermon Title: Total Depravity: Who Needs a Sovereign God, Anyway?

Sermon Text: Romans 9:10-13

Rom. 9:10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,

Rom. 9:11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—

Rom. 9:12 she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

Rom. 9:13 As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Main Point: We desperately need a sovereign God because our total depravity (by which sin corrupts every aspect of our being) leaves us entirely incapable of saving ourselves.

Outline:

1. Our Minds are Blinded
2. Our Wills are Enslaved
3. Our Affections are Corrupted

Introduction

There is a hymn by Isaac Watts, published in 1707. Originally it was called “How Sweet and Awful Is the Place.” And while in the 1700s “aweful” meant “full of awe,” we just think it means horrible. So our own hymnal has changed the word

“aweful” to “awesome.” In fact, we sang this song last week during the Lord’s Supper.

But I wonder, when we sing it, what you think of this particular stanza:

“Why was I made to hear Thy voice/
And enter while there’s room/
When thousands make a wretched choice/
And rather starve than come?”

So in the hymn Isaac Watts is saying here that God “made” him to hear God’s voice. God caused him to enter while there’s room. Isaac Watts is asking a question about the sovereignty of God in his own individual life, because he has come to Christ by faith – when others have not.

We are a Reformed church, and the Reformed have long taught a set of doctrines found in scripture called the “doctrines of grace.” I think that this is the appropriate place in our Romans series for us to make camp for a while here as we deal with the themes and ideas that Paul teaches in Romans 9. And at this base camp we are going to talk about the doctrines of grace, introduce them, show how the Scripture clearly teaches them. And as we do that I think that this will help us understand much of what Paul is doing in Romans 9.

What are the doctrines of grace? Put simply, the doctrines of grace are the teaching of God’s word that God is sovereign in the salvation of human beings, that he is Lord of salvation and that apart from him and his work in our hearts we would not be made to hear God’s voice.

And I want to begin talking about this subject by asking a question. And it’s the title of today’s sermon: “Who Needs a Sovereign God Anyway?” In other words, why does God need to be sovereign for us to experience salvation? Can’t we just hear the gospel and believe it for ourselves? Why do we need a God who can “make” us hear his voice, or change our hearts?

And the the Bible’s answer to this is that there is something deep and personal that is wrong with each and every one of us, from our head through our heart to our feet. And the theological term for this is “total depravity.” Total depravity doesn’t just mean that we’re fallen. It means that the fall has touched every aspect

of our very selves from our body to our mind to our heart, and to our will. Nothing in us is unaffected by the fall, which is why it is “total.”

If we’re going to understand why sinners need a sovereign God in the first place, we have to see how deep our need really is.

I want to help you see that the Bible teaches three fundamental truths about the state of our own hearts, all of which will open our eyes to what total depravity is, and what it means.

First, total depravity means that by nature and apart from God’s grace, our minds are blinded to the truth. We’ll talk about what that means. Second, it means that our wills are enslaved. And then third, it means that our hearts and desires are corrupted. We don’t think rightly about God, we don’t want the things of God, and we don’t love the things of God.

And because this is the natural state of all human beings, we need the grace of a sovereign God. We need him to do a miracle. We need him to raise us up, and as Watts says, “make” us to hear his voice. Let me show you these things from the Bible today.

1. Our Minds are Blinded

The first aspect of total depravity and what it means for us is that our *minds* are blinded. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul says something that is helpful for understanding this:

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is *not able* to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

Before we get very far into this topic, we need to know that what we are saying here about total depravity is true about all of us, by nature. Paul uses this word “the natural person” to describe who he is talking about. Keep in mind: he’s talking to the church. These are people who do accept the things of God and don’t think that the things of God are foolish.

Here, Paul is talking about the natural person who hasn't been born again by the Spirit. So know as we look at all three of these points today: God is not just helping us to see what God has done for us. He's also helping us to understand the unbelief that we see around us. He is giving us tools to help us come to terms with why not everyone believes, hears his voice, or enters in.

But notice what Paul says about the natural person. They don't "accept" the things of God. He's talking here about an intellectual "disability" in a sense if I can use that word. In fact, the word I would really use is "inability." Because Paul says that the natural person is "not able" to understand the things of God. It's not just that he won't understand, but he can't.

Here's what that means in practice. People so often think that if they could only know the truth, that would be enough. There's this mistaken thought that what the world needs is just more education, more knowledge.

But Paul seems to be saying, that's not the full story. It turns out, the human intellect is *not* a ladder we climb to reach God. When faced with the cross, the highest human intellect simply sees foolishness. It is true that Christ is Lord and trusting in him will save us. But by nature we see that truth and we say, "That's stupid. How can someone die for someone else's sins. That's crazy. Why would God put his own son to death?" And we endlessly will find intellectual excuses to say no.

This doesn't mean that the brains of unbelievers don't work, of course. The minds of people who haven't been born again can do all sorts of things: they can build bridges, split atoms, and write beautiful poetry, but the blindness is spiritual. Apart from God's work in our hearts and minds, we're fundamentally blind to the glory of Christ. The gospel does not look like a life raft to the natural mind; it looks like foolishness. It's not a life raft to them: it's something that won't even float.

And this means that no amount of mere human logic or clever argumentation can debate a person into the kingdom of God. Have you ever tried that before? Arguing a person into becoming a Christian?

I am not saying that there's no place for apologetics and giving people good evidence and reasons for coming to Christ. God can use those arguments to

change our hearts. But you can give the best argument ever; it can be perfectly sound, and yet it can land on deaf ears. And the reason is because what the Bible tells us is that it is the Holy Spirit who must remove the blinders. We can't do it, and the arguments on their own won't be able to do it.

We are almost always unaware of this. This blindness that we all have from the womb is something that operates *beneath* the surface at the level of things that we assume about the world and don't even think about. Apart from God's spirit, we suppress the truth in ways that are "pre-theoretical" if I could use that phrase. Our hearts are engaged in an *unconscious* repression of the reality of God. We are so used to the dark that our minds instinctively flinch away from the light when it confronts us.

This means that sin even touches our minds. The way we think. This is why Paul says in Ephesians (4:18) that

"they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."

Do you notice how Paul says here that our heart and mind are connected. They're not independent.

Our minds don't understand spiritual things because we don't *want* to understand them by nature. Because of our heart commitment, our mind is blinded. He says we are naturally ignorant to spiritual things "due to [our] hardness of heart." We make a mistake if we set the mind up on too high of a pedestal.

Our mind is important, but our greatest problem in spiritual things isn't intellectual. Our mind is not the thing that we should put our hope in.

Years ago, I was living in Phoenix, and several nights each week, my best friend and I would go to this all night coffee place and we would sit around and debate and argue with people. We'd set a Bible on the table, and people would come up and have conversations with us. And at the time, my wife was really wrestling with some of these things that we're talking about here today. She struggled with the idea of election and predestination. Like many people, she found the doctrine hard to believe and offensive. And one night we came home and she said, "I now realize that the doctrine of election is real. Because you guys answered every single

question that those kids asked you, and it didn't move them at all. And I realized, the only way they would ever come to Jesus is if God did the same in their heart that he did in your heart and in my heart."

So she saw that you could perfectly answer the intellectual challenge, and that it still wouldn't move the person. Have you experienced that before?

You could answer every question and objection for someone (or even have your own questions answered if you're an unbeliever) but apart from a heart change, performed by God, people will find continually find reasons to say no.

That's the first thing I want us to see: total depravity means our minds are blinded.

2. Our Wills are Enslaved (the volition)

The second aspect of total depravity that we see in the Bible is that not only is our mind blinded, but also our wills are enslaved.

Now, this is hard for us to believe, because we *feel* free. We sort of *intuit* that whenever we do something or make a choice we're doing it because we want to. And because we want to do everything that we do, we think that we're free.

But that freedom is an illusion because even our choices are made within the constraints of the desires of our heart. It's like what we just saw a moment ago: Paul said that sinners are ignorant because of their hardness of heart. We already saw that our mind is impacted by our hard heart. And so is our will... the aspect of our selves that makes choices.

Look at this: In John 8:34 we're told that

"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.'"

This crowd Jesus is talking to thinks that they're free because nobody is holding a sword to their necks. But Jesus redefines freedom: if you practice sin, you are owned by it. And if your owned by sin, you're not free.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't make choices. We actually do make free choices every day. We choose what we eat, what we wear, and yes, how we sin. But we

only ever choose according to our desires. The tragic irony of the natural will is that it *feels* free because it is doing exactly what it wants, but it is entirely oblivious to the fact that its “wants” are dictated by a tyrant. The will is enslaved not because it is forced to sin against its desires, but because its desires are completely held captive by sin.

Think of this. If you have found yourself hooked on Instagram or Facebook or Twitter or whatever, you might relate. You open your phone and tell yourself, “I have total free will; I can watch whatever I want.” But you don’t realize, the algorithm has already studied your habits, your weaknesses, and your deepest desires. It serves you a custom feed designed specifically to keep you doomscrolling and checking in. You *feel* completely free as you sit there staring at the glass and swiping. After all, you are *voluntarily* clicking every video, right?... ..but in reality, your choices are entirely constrained and manipulated by a system that knows exactly what your nature will respond to. You are a slave to your own clicks. You feel free, but you’re being manipulated by subconscious and unseen forces.

It’s the same thing with our will. We make the spiritual choice to say no to God, unaware that we’re saying no because of the algorithm of our own hearts, which have been trained from birth to flee from God.

Why are we like this, fundamentally? Well in Romans 8:7–8 Paul tells us why we can’t just break our own chains. Paul says this:

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

The hostility of our own heart stems from a natural precommitment against the Lord who made us.

I mentioned before that so much of this is subconscious. Most people, if you ask them will say, “Yeah, if God shows himself to me or talks to me I’d believe it.” People fool themselves into thinking that they’re extremely fair, clear-headed and neutral. People just do not see how hostile they really are.

Imagine someone sitting down to read an article written by a politician they absolutely despise. If you ask them, “Are you going to be fair?” they’ll immediately say, “Of course! I’m totally open-minded; I’m just going to read the facts.”

But watch what their mind actually does while they read. They aren't reading neutrally at all; their brain is acting like a heat-seeking missile looking for flaws. They skim right past the good points, they interpret every ambiguous sentence in the worst possible way, and they demand an impossible standard of proof for every claim. They *feel* like they are being a detached, objective intellectual, but in reality, their mind is functioning as an active defense attorney against the author.

That is what the natural mind does to God. People love to tell themselves that they are neutral and open-minded about religion—“I just need more evidence,” or “I’m a fair-minded skeptic.” But Paul is saying that there is no such thing as a neutral observer when it comes to God. The unregenerate mind is hostile. It doesn't examine God objectively; it actively looks for reasons to reject Him, suppress His truth, and justify its own autonomy, all while wearing the mask of open-mindedness.

This brings us to what Paul says a little later here in Romans 9:16:

“So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

Paul doesn’t deny that we have a will or that we make choices. But look at how Paul downplays the will, actually. “It does not depend on human will or exertion.” Think about this. Ask yourself: “If my will is a slave, and if my flesh is completely incapable of submitting to God, what happens if my salvation is left up to me? What happens if God just leaves me to my ‘free will’?” Paul’s answer is that we would all willingly and freely run straight to hell.

Salvation doesn't depend on us exerting or trying or willing the right things; it depends entirely on a sovereign God who works to override our hostile wills with His irresistible mercy.

3. Our Affections are Corrupted (the heart/desires)

So, we've seen that not only is our mind blinded... not only is our will enslaved, but third today, the Bible tells us that our affections are corrupted. Sin reaches deeply even to the level of our hearts and desires. Let's start in John 3:19. Look at what Jesus tells us:

“the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”

Jesus is saying that when people reject the gospel, it is not just that they don't believe, but the disbelief is really a fundamental heart matter. People “love” darkness rather than light.

St. Augustine famously said that sin is a problem of “disordered loves.” Sin is not just breaking a rule, it's misplaced affection. We don't love what we should love, and we love what we shouldn't love.

The world likes to think that if you just give people enough education—give them enough light—that they will naturally choose what is good.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves, and he shatters that humanistic optimism. He says the Light of the World stepped directly into our darkness, and the natural human response was not belief or gratitude, but it was hostility. This is a heart problem. Look at Jeremiah 17:9:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Think of those two words when the Bible describes our hearts: “deceitful” and “sick.” A sick organ needs medicine that it doesn't naturally produce for itself. And a deceitful organ convinces a patient that they are perfectly healthy.

God's word is telling us that our heart is the ultimate con artist. It leaves us convinced that our selfish motives are actually noble, that our pride is just self-respect, and that our love for darkness is actually good and that it is really true freedom. That's why God asks in Jeremiah 17:9, “Who can understand it?” And that's a rhetorical question. Only God can truly know the depths of our heart.

There's one more piece to this that I want us to see. Some people might say, "Okay, I get it. The heart is bad. The mind is bad. But the real problem is the bad things that people do. If people just treated each other better, the world would be a better place." But of course, that's far too shallow a solution. The world around us is happy to deal with presenting symptoms rather than the real fundamental problems. But think of what Jesus says in Matthew 15:19:

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."

People often blame their bad behavior on external circumstances: their upbringing, their stress, society, or bad influences. But Jesus says that really all human misery comes from inside of us: "Out of the *heart* come..." The heart is a geyser, a factory of rebellion. Murder, adultery, and slander do not originate out in the world and infect us; they originate in our own corrupted desires and spill out into the world. We don't simply have a behavioral problem that needs behavior modification; we have a heart problem that requires God to change our hearts.

Naturally speaking, apart from God's grace, our affections are so poisoned that only the resurrecting power of the Holy Spirit can cause a person to truly desire God. And that is why next week we're going to focus on the next doctrine of grace, where we see how it is that God changes and overcomes the natural problems of our heart that we've seen here today.

Conclusion

But as we close, think of what we've seen here today: Naturally speaking, our *minds* are actively hostile to the truth. Naturally speaking, our *wills* are enslaved to our hostile minds. Naturally speaking, our *hearts* are deeply in love with the darkness that enslaves us.

Who needs a sovereign God anyway? The same God that Paul is showing us here in Romans 9 in the coming weeks? **The answer is simple: We do!**

I mentioned the Isaac Watts hymn in the beginning. And I talked about how the doctrines of grace had this effect on Watts of humbling him and causing him to rejoice in the power and mercy of God.

When you take these things that God's word tells us about the doctrines of grace and think about yourself, it has this way of bowling you over (as we'll see in the coming weeks) because you won't be thinking, "well of course I'm saved. I was one of those who was smart enough, good enough, wise enough to come." Instead, we say, "Why *was* I even made to hear your voice at all? Thank you, God, for showing me mercy when you didn't owe it to me." It's incredibly humbling. I have nothing in myself that would make me worthy of this. It's all from him, and all of grace.

But then going back to the hymn, Isaac Watts does something really incredible in the next stanza of this hymn. He moves from the grace God has shown to *me*, and expands into God's global mission:

"Pity the nations, O our God,/
Constrain the earth to come/
Send Thy victorious Word abroad,/
And bring the strangers home."

It's bigger than just us. And this is what I want to close with: God has given his church a mission of taking the gospel outside of our walls into the world. And take this with you this week. Our hope is not that people will have clear minds. It's not that people will have neutral and fair wills that consider the things of God fairly. And it's not that people will just naturally see how great God is and love him.

Our hope is in the sovereignty of God over the human heart. Our hope is in those words we saw before: "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." Maybe you felt a little bummed out to be told you don't have the hope within yourself naturally. That's the whole point of the good news of the gospel. You are not your great hope. God is the great hope. God is the savior.

And not just your hope, but this is the world's hope, too.

The doctrines of grace – are the guarantee that God can do this. That he can and will "constrain the earth to come," that he can and will send missionaries out to "send thy glorious word abroad," and that he will keep his promise to gather in the nations "and bring the strangers home."

Let's Pray.