

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## HAMARTIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of Sin*

*The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us*

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### UNIT 5: TOTAL DEPRAVITY THE EXTENT OF THE FALL

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#### Lesson 14

### Total Inability

#### The Sinner's Utter Helplessness Before God

*Dead in Sin, Not Merely Sick in Sin*

*"As a consequence of total depravity, no dead man, no blind man, no slave can save himself — only the Emancipator can set the captive free"*

*Key Texts: Ephesians 2:1–5; John 6:44, 65; 8:34; Romans 8:7–8; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 2:14; John 3:3, 6*

*"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ."*

**Ephesians 2:1–2, 4–5, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

Lesson 13 established the doctrine of total depravity, that sin has corrupted every faculty of the human person without exception, reaching the mind, the will, the affections, the conscience, and the body. This lesson takes the next essential step: what does that comprehensive corruption mean for the question of salvation? The answer is both simple and devastating: it means that the unregenerate person is utterly helpless to save herself. Total inability is not a separate doctrine standing alongside total depravity; it is total depravity's direct soteriological implication. If every faculty is corrupted, then the faculty of spiritual receptivity, the capacity to hear the gospel as truth, to receive Christ as necessary, to repent with genuine sorrow and believe with genuine faith, is equally corrupted. And a person with a corrupted capacity for saving faith cannot generate saving faith by the exercise of that same corrupted capacity.

The precise character of the incapacity is captured with remarkable clarity by three biblical metaphors that Scripture employs for the unregenerate person's condition. The first is the metaphor of death: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1, NASB 1995). The second is the metaphor of slavery: "Every one who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34, NASB 1995). The third is the metaphor of blindness: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:4, NASB 1995). Each metaphor illuminates a different dimension of the same fundamental incapacity, and together they constitute the most comprehensive account of total inability available in the New Testament. More importantly, each metaphor points toward a specific type of rescue that only an outside agent can provide: the dead require a resurrection, the slave requires an emancipator, and the blind require the gift of sight. None of these rescues can be accomplished by the person who needs them, which is precisely the point.

This lesson is organized around these three biblical metaphors, with each receiving its own section of sustained theological development. Section I examines the metaphor of death in Ephesians 2:1–5. Section II examines the metaphor of slavery in John 8:34–36 and Romans 6:17–20. Section III examines the metaphor of blindness in 2 Corinthians 4:4–6 and 1 Corinthians 2:14. Section IV develops the cluster of "cannot" texts in John 6:44, 65; Romans 8:7–8; and John 3:3, 6, establishing the specific grammatical and theological weight of the language of constitutive incapacity. Section V examines the theological implication toward which all four preceding sections point: that salvation must be entirely a work of God. Section VI develops the pastoral and doxological significance of the doctrine.

A clarification that must be maintained throughout: total inability does not eliminate genuine moral responsibility for unbelief. The unregenerate person who hears the gospel and does not respond in saving faith is genuinely morally accountable for that non-response, because the incapacity that prevents the response is itself a moral incapacity, the expression of the fallen nature's constitutive hostility toward God, for which Adam's race bears genuine covenantal responsibility. The inability does not excuse; it explains. The person who is enslaved to sin is genuinely responsible for the sins the enslavement produces; the person who is spiritually blind is genuinely responsible for the unbelief the blindness generates. The coexistence of genuine incapacity and genuine responsibility is the content of the Reformed doctrine of compatibilism, and it must be held firmly against both the Pelagian error (denying the incapacity in order to preserve the responsibility) and the antinomian error (denying the responsibility because of the incapacity). Both the incapacity and the responsibility are real; the gospel addresses the incapacity; the judgment addresses the responsibility.

The theological stakes of this doctrine are not merely academic. They determine how one prays for the lost, how one preaches the gospel, how one understands the work of the Spirit, and how one ascribes the glory of every conversion. If total inability is true, then the decisive work in the conversion of any sinner is not the quality of the evangelist's presentation, not the favorable circumstances of the encounter, not the sincere effort of the sinner's own will, but the sovereign, prior, creative work of the Holy Spirit who raises the dead, frees the enslaved, and illuminates the blind. And if the decisive work is the Spirit's sovereign act, then the entire credit and the entire glory of every conversion belongs to the triune God. *Soli Deo gloria* is not merely a Reformation slogan; it is the specific doxological conclusion that the doctrine of total inability demands and the gospel's work of sovereign grace displays.

## I. Dead in Trespasses and Sins

*Ephesians 2:1–5 and the Resurrection Model of Conversion*

### A. The Precision of the Death Metaphor

Of the three biblical metaphors for total inability, the metaphor of spiritual death is the most theologically decisive, because it is the most radical statement of helplessness imaginable. Paul's choice of the word "dead" (nekros) in Ephesians 2:1 is not hyperbole or rhetorical flourish; it is the most precise available description of the unregenerate person's condition before God. The alternatives, sick, wounded, weakened, impaired, sleeping, would all imply some degree of remaining capacity, some residual vitality that grace might assist or enhance. The word "dead" admits of no such implication. A dead person has no residual vitality that can cooperate with external assistance. A dead person requires not the strengthening of remaining life but the creation of new life from outside herself. The metaphor is chosen with the specific purpose of eliminating every possible foothold for the synergistic interpretation of conversion.

The specific character of the spiritual death that Paul describes in Ephesians 2:1–3 is important to understand with precision. Paul does not merely say that the unregenerate person is dead; he describes the specific condition of the dead person in verses 2–3: walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, living in the lusts of the flesh, by nature children of wrath. The dead person is active, mobile, and engaged with the world. What she lacks is not biological activity but spiritual orientation: she is alive to the world, to the flesh, and to the devil while being dead to God. The spiritual death is not the absence of all consciousness or desire but the absence of genuine spiritual life, of the love for God, the desire for God, the capacity to seek God savingly, and the ability to receive the gospel as the truth that it is. She is, to use Augustine's formulation, dead to God while alive to everything else.

The raising of Lazarus in John 11:38–44 is the paradigm case for understanding what the Spirit's work of regeneration does in response to this death. Jesus stands before a sealed tomb, four days after Lazarus' death, confronting the full and irreversible reality of the biological death that is the natural image of the spiritual death the gospel addresses. And Jesus commands: "Lazarus, come forth" (verse 43). The command does not presuppose any remaining capacity in Lazarus for self-initiated response; it creates the capacity. Lazarus does not first partially revive and then cooperate with Jesus' invitation; the call itself produces the life that makes the response possible. When he comes out (verse 44), his coming is genuinely his own, a real, volitional, bodily act, and it is entirely the fruit of the prior sovereign act of the One who created the life that now responds. This is the structure of regeneration in response to spiritual death: the Spirit's sovereign creative call produces the new life from which genuine, free, personal faith flows.

### B. But God: The Gospel's Answer to Death

Ephesians 2:4–5 delivers the most glorious pivot in all of Paul's letters: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (NASB 1995). The "But God" is the theological hinge of the entire passage, the point at which the comprehensive diagnosis of verses 1–3 (dead, enslaved to world and devil and flesh, children of wrath) is met by the comprehensive provision of verses 4–10 (made alive, raised up, seated in the heavenly places, created for good works). Every element of the provision corresponds to a specific element of the diagnosis, and the whole transaction is framed by the parenthetical declaration that drives the entire letter: "by grace you have been saved."

The theological precision of "made alive together with Christ" (suzoopoiesen, verse 5) is essential for understanding the resurrection model of conversion that total inability demands. The making-alive is God's act, with God as the unambiguous subject: "He made us alive." The "even when we were dead" establishes the temporal priority of the divine act: it did not wait for signs of residual spiritual life or for the exercise of pre-existing faith; it occurred while the condition was one of death. And the "together with Christ" establishes the covenantal and Christological ground of the making-alive: the same resurrection power that raised Christ from the dead is

the power by which the spiritually dead person is made spiritually alive, through union with Christ who is the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20). The resurrection model of conversion, grounded in the physical resurrection of Christ and applied spiritually through the Spirit's regenerating work, is the theological framework that the death metaphor of Ephesians 2:1 demands.

*"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."*

**Ephesians 2:4–6, NASB 1995**

## II. Every One Who Commits Sin Is the Slave of Sin

*John 8:34–36 and the Emancipation Model of Conversion*

### A. The Precision of the Slavery Metaphor

The metaphor of slavery addresses total inability from the specific angle of the will's bondage. If the death metaphor addresses the incapacity for spiritual life as a whole, the slavery metaphor focuses specifically on the will's inability to turn from sin to God by its own decision. Jesus' statement in John 8:34 is absolute and universally scoped: "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is the slave of sin" (NASB 1995). The double "truly" (amēn amēn, the distinctive Johannine formula for the introduction of a solemn and authoritative declaration) emphasizes the gravity of the claim. And the universality is unrestricted: every one who commits sin, without exception of moral seriousness, religious devotion, or sincere desire for freedom, is the slave of sin. The human being who sins is not a free agent who has made a bad choice; she is a slave whose moral acts express the bondage of her nature to the master of sin.

The slavery metaphor is precise in what it does and does not say. It does not say that the slave is prevented by external force from doing what she would freely choose to do otherwise. The slave of sin commits sin voluntarily, willingly, in accordance with her own desires. The bondage is not external compulsion but internal constitution: the enslaved will always chooses in accordance with the nature that enslaves it, and its nature is constitutively directed toward sin rather than toward God. This is the Reformed doctrine of bondage of the will: not that the will is externally prevented from choosing God by the overpowering force of sin, but that the will never desires God savingly because its desires are formed by a nature that is constitutively oriented away from God. The will is free in the compatibilist sense, it acts according to its own desires without external compulsion, but those desires are the desires of the enslaved nature, and they are not free in the libertarian sense of being genuinely neutral between godly and ungodly choices.

Paul's development of the slavery theme in Romans 6:17–20 adds the historical and redemptive dimension: "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." The past tense ("you were slaves") is the testimony of the regenerate person looking back at her pre-conversion condition: slavery to sin was her constitutive condition, not a temporary lapse. The transition from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness is not the product of the slave's own decision; it is the result of being "committed" (literally "handled over," *parēdōthēte*) to a different form of teaching, a passive verb, indicating that the handing-over was not the slave's own act but was done to her by an external agent. The emancipation from sin's slavery is God's sovereign act, prior to and the cause of the obedience that follows.

### B. If the Son Makes You Free: The Emancipation Model

Jesus' provision in John 8:36, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed", is the gospel's specific answer to the slavery of John 8:34, and it establishes the emancipation model of conversion that the slavery metaphor demands. The freedom that the Son provides is not the restoration of a neutral libertarian free will that the slave will then exercise by making the right choice; it is the emancipation of the enslaved will from the bondage that

prevented it from desiring and choosing God. The freed will is not a neutral will but a genuinely free will, freer than the unfree will of the sinner precisely because it has been freed from the bondage that constrained it. The regenerate person's desire for God, love of God, and trust in God are not the products of a will that has been left to choose freely without any prior divine act; they are the fruits of the specific, sovereign emancipatory work of the Spirit that has freed the will from bondage and redirected its desires toward the God it was made to love.

The practical pastoral implication of the slavery metaphor is identical to that of the death metaphor: the conversion of any sinner requires a specific, prior, sovereign act of the God who is the only possible Emancipator. The evangelist who understands that she is speaking to slaves, not merely to free persons who have made bad choices but to persons whose wills are constitutively directed away from the God she is proclaiming, will preach with both urgency and humility: urgency because the slaves genuinely need the freedom that only the gospel provides, and humility because the transformation of the will from slavery to freedom is not within the power of the most persuasive proclamation but requires the sovereign work of the One who has the authority to say "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

*"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'"*

**John 8:34–36, NASB 1995**

### III. The God of This World Has Blinded the Minds

*2 Corinthians 4:4–6 and the Illumination Model of Conversion*

#### A. The Precision of the Blindness Metaphor

The metaphor of spiritual blindness addresses total inability from the specific angle of the mind's incapacity for spiritual perception. Paul articulates this incapacity in 2 Corinthians 4:4 with a double attribution: "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." The blindness is both spiritually constitutional (the natural consequence of original corruption's darkening of the understanding) and actively reinforced (the god of this world has blinded, an active verb indicating satanic agency in the perpetuation of the incapacity). Both dimensions are real and both must be addressed by the sovereign illuminating work of the Spirit.

Paul develops the same incapacity from a different angle in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "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." The phrase "not accept" (*ou dēchetai*) describes the active rejection of what is offered, while "cannot understand" (*ou dūnatai gnōnai*) describes the constitutive incapacity that underlies the rejection. The natural man's rejection of the gospel is not the result of a fair intellectual evaluation that has found it wanting; it is the expression of a mind that lacks the spiritual faculty required to perceive the gospel's truth as truth. The gospel is "foolishness" to the natural man not because it is objectively foolish but because the natural man's mind is constitutively incapable of the spiritual apprehension that would reveal it as the divine wisdom it actually is.

The blindness metaphor highlights what might be called the epistemological dimension of total inability: not merely the moral incapacity of the will or the constitutional incapacity of the whole person, but the specific cognitive incapacity of the mind for the spiritual perception that genuine faith requires. This dimension of total inability has direct implications for the understanding of apologetics and evangelism: the evidence for the gospel is not the problem (the evidence is clear, as Romans 1:18–20 establishes), and the intellectual quality of the presentation is not the decisive factor (the gospel can be proclaimed in the plainest and most straightforward terms and the spiritually blind mind will still fail to perceive it savingly). The decisive factor is the Spirit's sovereign illumination, which addresses the specific cognitive incapacity of blindness by giving the mind the spiritual faculty of perception that no natural process can generate.

## B. *Let Light Shine Out of Darkness: The Illumination Model*

The gospel's answer to spiritual blindness is one of the most magnificent theological statements in all of Paul's letters: "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6, NASB 1995). Paul draws the explicit parallel between the creation of light in Genesis 1:3 and the illumination of the spiritually blind mind by the Spirit: the same God who called light out of darkness at the beginning of creation calls light out of the darkness of the unregenerate mind in the act of illumination. The parallel is not accidental or merely rhetorical; it is the theological claim that the illumination of the spiritually blind mind is a sovereign, creative, ex nihilo act of the God who creates rather than improves, who calls into existence rather than enhances what already exists.

The specific content of the illumination is equally precise: "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." The illumination does not produce a vague spiritual awareness or a generic religious experience; it produces the specific knowledge of the specific glory of the specific God in the specific face of the specific Christ. The illuminated mind does not merely become more open to religious ideas in general; it sees Jesus Christ as the glory of God incarnate, as the fulfillment of the divine self-revelation, and as the only adequate object of the faith and love and trust that the illuminated heart now desires to direct toward Him. The illumination model of conversion is the most christologically specific of the three metaphors: the Spirit's work of illumination produces a seeing of Christ that the natural mind could not achieve by any exercise of natural intellectual capacity.

The creation-light parallel in 2 Corinthians 4:6 also establishes the monergistic character of the illumination: God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The darkness did not cooperate with the creation of light; it did not partially illuminate itself and then receive the supplement of divine illumination. The light was created from outside the darkness by the sovereign word of the Creator. In the same way, the illumination of the spiritually blind mind is a sovereign creative act that comes entirely from outside the mind, prior to any exercise of the mind's natural capacities, as the specific work of the God who creates light from darkness. The person who has been illumined did not first illuminate herself and then receive the supplement of divine light; the light came from God, entirely, sovereignly, and graciously, and the seeing of Christ that followed is the specific fruit of that specific creative act.

*"For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

**2 Corinthians 4:6, NASB 1995**

## IV. The "Cannot" Texts

*The Language of Constitutive Incapacity in the New Testament*

### A. *John 6:44, 65 and Romans 8:7–8: The Absolute Inability*

Beyond the three metaphors, the New Testament reinforces the doctrine of total inability through a specific cluster of texts that use the language of constitutive incapacity, "cannot," "not able," "no one can", rather than the language of disinclination. The distinction is theologically crucial: a text that says people "do not" choose God describes their behavior; a text that says they "cannot" choose God describes their condition. Jesus' double statement in John 6:44 and 65 employs the language of constitutive incapacity twice in the same discourse, using the Greek *oudeis dūnatai* ("no one is able") to establish the universal scope and constitutional character of the inability: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (verse 44) and "No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (verse 65).

The force of the word "can" (*dūnatai*) in these verses is the force of a statement about constitutional capacity rather than circumstantial opportunity. Jesus is not saying that coming to Him is very difficult, that people are generally disinclined to come, or that the conditions are currently unfavorable. He is saying that coming to Him is impossible for anyone whose coming has not been enabled by the Father's sovereign drawing. The word "draws"

(helkuō, verse 44) is not the language of attractive persuasion that the free will is invited to embrace or resist; as we examined in Lesson 12, it carries in every New Testament use the force of a compelling, effectual movement. And the phrase “unless it has been granted him” in verse 65 extends the incapacity to the most fundamental level: it is not merely the act of coming that requires divine enablement but the capacity to come, and that capacity is itself a divine grant, not a human endowment.

Romans 8:7–8 brings the “cannot” texts to their most theologically concentrated formulation: “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (NASB 1995). Four statements of increasing precision: hostile (active orientation), does not submit (behavioral description), not even able (constitutive incapacity), cannot please God (comprehensive scope). The phrase “for it is not even able to do so” (oudē gar dūnatai) is the most explicit statement of constitutional inability in the entire New Testament. Paul is not describing a will that is strongly disinclined toward submission to God’s law; he is describing a mind constitutively incapable of it. And the extension in verse 8, “those who are in the flesh cannot please God”, extends the incapacity from the specific case (submitting to the law) to the general case (pleasing God in any spiritual dimension).

### **B. John 3:3, 6 and the Categorical Principle**

Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:1–10 provides the “cannot” texts that establish the categorical principle underlying all the others. Verse 3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (ou dūnatai idein). Verse 5: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Verse 6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” And verse 7: “You must be born again.”

The categorical principle of verse 6 is the theological engine that drives all the specific “cannot” statements: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” What is generated from one ontological category belongs to that category and cannot produce what belongs to a higher, different category. The natural human person, born of the flesh (natural human generation), belongs constitutively to the category of flesh and cannot by any natural process produce the spiritual life that belongs to the category of spirit. This is not the statement that flesh is evil; it is the statement that flesh is categorically insufficient for the generation of spirit. The incapacity is not moral but categorical: flesh and spirit are different kinds of thing, and the former cannot generate the latter any more than darkness can generate light.

The necessity of the new birth (verse 7: “you must be born again”) follows directly from the categorical principle: it is not that the new birth is one available option among others, or that it is the recommended path for those who find the natural path insufficient. It is the only possible path, because only the Spirit can generate what belongs to the category of spirit, and the natural person’s generation of her own spiritual life is as categorically impossible as the flesh’s generation of spirit. The wind metaphor of verse 8, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is every one who is born of the Spirit”, establishes the sovereignty and inscrutability of the Spirit’s regenerating work: like the wind, it comes where God sends it, not where human manipulation directs it, and its effects are evident before its source is understood.

## **V. The Theological Implication**

*Salvation Must Be Entirely a Work of God*

### **A. The Single Inescapable Conclusion**

The three metaphors and the “cannot” texts all converge on a single inescapable theological conclusion: if the unregenerate person is spiritually dead, enslaved to sin, and spiritually blind, then salvation must be entirely a work of God. The logic is as simple and as inexorable as each metaphor suggests. Dead people cannot cooperate with their own resurrection: the resurrection must come from outside, prior to any cooperation, as the sovereign act of the One who gives life to the dead. Slaves cannot emancipate themselves: the emancipation must come

from outside, prior to any act of the slave, as the sovereign act of the Emancipator who has the authority to set the captive free. Blind people cannot choose to see: the restoration of sight must come from outside, prior to any act of the blind person, as the sovereign act of the One who gives sight to the blind. In each case, the rescue is entirely the work of the Rescuer; the rescued person contributes nothing to the rescue except the condition that makes the rescue necessary.

Paul states the theological implication with lapidary precision in Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The salvation is by grace, not by human effort; through faith, but the faith itself is the gift of God rather than the human contribution; and the explicit purpose of the entire arrangement is the elimination of boasting. The “so that no one may boast” is Paul’s own stated purpose for the monergistic character of grace: if salvation were a joint work of God and the human will, if the decisive factor were the person’s own exercise of libertarian free choice in response to universally available grace, then the person who makes the right choice has something to boast about. The doctrine of total inability, in establishing that the decisive factor is the sovereign work of God rather than the human choice, ensures that the boasting is eliminated, precisely as Paul’s text requires.

The practical pastoral outworking of this theological implication is not the passivity or fatalism that critics of total inability sometimes suggest. The conviction that salvation is entirely a work of God produces the most active, the most urgent, and the most theologically grounded evangelism and intercession that the church knows. The evangelist who believes that the decisive factor in conversion is the sovereign work of the Spirit is the evangelist who preaches with the freedom of one who knows she is the instrument rather than the generator of saving faith, and who prays with the urgency of one who knows that only the Spirit can address the incapacity that stands between the sinner and the gospel. The church that takes total inability seriously is the church that prays for the lost most specifically, most persistently, and with the most accurate understanding of what the Spirit needs to do in the hearts of those for whom it prays.

## B. *The Glory of Sovereign Grace*

The most profound theological implication of total inability is the one that stands at the end of every genuine conversion: the entire credit belongs to God. If the decisive factor in my conversion was not my choice but the Spirit’s sovereign act of illumination, not my wisdom but the Spirit’s creative opening of my blind eyes, not the strength of my will but the Spirit’s emancipation of my enslaved will, then I have nothing to boast about and everything to be grateful for. The Reformed tradition’s insistence on *solī Deo gloria* in the context of salvation is not a theological abstraction; it is the specific, personal, doxological response of the person who has understood what total inability means and has received the gospel’s provision of sovereign grace with the wonder it deserves.

Paul’s doxological eruption in Romans 11:33–36, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”, is the appropriate response of a person who has understood the depth of the human incapacity that total inability describes and the height of the divine provision that sovereign grace has provided. The “unsearchable judgments” are the judgments of the God who chose to raise the dead, free the enslaved, and illuminate the blind, not because the dead were already stirring, the enslaved were already reaching for freedom, or the blind were already straining toward the light, but “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4) in the eternal, sovereign, gracious purpose of the God who gives what He commands and commands what He gives. The doxology is the only adequate response to a grace that is not the supplement of human effort but the substitute for it: “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36, NASB 1995).

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”*

**Ephesians 2:8–10, NASB 1995**

## VI. Pastoral and Doxological Implications

*What the Doctrine of Total Inability Does for Ministry and Worship*

### A. For Prayer: Naming What Only God Can Do

The doctrine of total inability transforms the content of intercessory prayer for the lost in a way that no other theological conviction can replicate. The person who understands that the unregenerate person before her is dead, enslaved, and blind knows exactly what to ask the Spirit to do: to raise, to free, and to illuminate. The prayer is not merely “Lord, help my friend see” but “Lord, you who called light out of darkness, who raised Lazarus from the tomb, who set the prisoner free, do for my friend what only You can do: call her out of the death of her trespasses, free her from the slavery of her sinful nature, and shine the light of the knowledge of Your glory in the face of Jesus Christ into her spiritually blind mind.” This specificity of intercession, this theological precision in prayer, is the practical fruit of a doctrine that has been properly understood and personally received.

The confidence of intercessory prayer is also grounded in total inability’s implication. If the decisive work in conversion is the Spirit’s sovereign act, then the prayer for that sovereign act is not a prayer for the supplementation of human effort but for the deployment of omnipotent divine power. The God who is being asked to raise the dead, free the enslaved, and illuminate the blind is the God who has done all of these things before, who raised Lazarus, who freed Israel from Egypt, who called light from darkness at creation. He is not being asked to do something beyond His power; He is being asked to do what He does, in the specific life of the specific person, for the glory of His own name and the good of the person who needs the rescue that only He can provide.

### B. For Preaching: The Freedom and Urgency of the Proclamation of Total Grace

The doctrine of total inability liberates the preacher from the most crippling anxiety in the entire homiletical repertoire: the anxiety that the quality of her performance determines whether any specific person comes to faith. The preacher who has not understood total inability is, in a real sense, playing God: she believes that if she presents the gospel in just the right way, with just the right emotional appeal, with just the right argumentation, she can produce saving faith in her hearers. This is an enormous and unsustainable burden, and it produces a kind of preaching that is fundamentally self-focused, focused on the preacher’s technique, performance, and persuasive power, rather than Word-focused and Spirit-dependent.

The preacher who understands total inability is freed from this anxiety because she knows that the decisive factor is not her performance but the Spirit’s sovereign work. She is not the generator of faith; she is the instrument through which the Spirit works to generate faith. She is not responsible for producing what only the Spirit can produce; she is responsible for faithfully proclaiming the Word through which the Spirit ordinarily works. This freedom produces a different kind of preaching: not performance-driven but Word-centered, not technique-focused but Spirit-dependent, not primarily concerned with emotional impact but primarily concerned with the faithful, clear, theologically precise proclamation of the gospel that is the specific instrument the Spirit has appointed. And paradoxically, it produces a preaching of greater urgency, not less: precisely because the Spirit works through the means of the proclaimed Word, every opportunity to proclaim the gospel is an opportunity for the Spirit to raise the dead, free the enslaved, and illuminate the blind, and no such opportunity can be treated with anything less than the seriousness that the Spirit’s work through it deserves.

### C. For Doxology: The Wonder of a Grace That Does Everything

The doxological implication of total inability is the most personal and the most searching of all. Every believer who has understood total inability must eventually ask the question: why am I here and not there? Why am I among the dead who have been made alive, the enslaved who have been freed, the blind who have been illumined, rather than among those whose death, slavery, and blindness remain unaddressed? The answer that total inability requires is not one that flatters the converted person’s self-image: it is not that she was more spiritually receptive, more morally earnest, or more intellectually honest than those who have not yet believed. It is that the sovereign God, in His incomprehensible mercy and grace, opened her heart before she opened it herself, illuminated her

mind before she sought the light, freed her will before she desired freedom. The entire credit for the conversion belongs to God, from first to last, and the only appropriate response is the Pauline doxology of Romans 11:33–36: the wonder at the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, the acknowledgment that His ways are unfathomable, and the final ascription of all things to Him.

This is the most personal, most humbling, and most joy-producing form of the Reformation's *solus Deo gloria*. Not the abstract philosophical affirmation that God is the ultimate cause of all things, but the specific, personal, experiential recognition that my conversion, this specific event, in this specific life, at this specific moment, was from Him, through Him, and to Him. He raised me. He freed me. He illumined me. I was dead; He made me alive. I was enslaved; He set me free. I was blind; He gave me sight. And the wonder of those three statements, received in all their theological weight, is the inexhaustible fuel of the worship, the gratitude, and the love for God that the gospel of sovereign grace is designed to produce in every heart it has reached. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:36, NASB 1995).

*"That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."*

**Ephesians 4:22–24, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

| Term                             | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Total Inability (Defined)</b> | The soteriological doctrine that, as a direct consequence of total depravity, the unregenerate person is constitutively incapable of any genuine movement toward God in saving faith, of seeking God truly, understanding spiritual truth savingly, or generating the repentance and faith that conversion requires, apart from the sovereign, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Total inability is not a separate doctrine from total depravity but its necessary implication applied to the question of salvation. The biblical vocabulary of spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1), slavery to sin (John 8:34), and spiritual blindness (2 Corinthians 4:4) together establish that the unregenerate person's incapacity is not circumstantial (unfavorable conditions that could be improved) but constitutional (a condition of the person herself that only a prior divine act can address). Total inability does not deny genuine human responsibility for not believing; it explains why that responsibility must be discharged by the sovereign, effectual, regenerating work of the Spirit rather than by the natural resources of the fallen will. |
| <b>Spiritual Death (Nekros)</b>  | The condition of the unregenerate person described by Paul in Ephesians 2:1 as being "dead in your trespasses and sins." Spiritual death is not the annihilation of consciousness or the absence of all activity but the constitutional incapacity of the soul for genuine spiritual life, for loving God, trusting God, seeking God savingly, and responding to the gospel with genuine faith. The death metaphor is chosen with theological precision: it establishes total inability most vividly by contrasting what a dead person can do (nothing, in relation to her own resurrection) with what the spiritually dead person can do (nothing, in relation to her own spiritual regeneration). The resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:38–44) is the paradigmatic image of the Spirit's work in addressing spiritual death: the call itself creates the life from which the response flows, establishing that regeneration is prior to and the cause of faith rather than subsequent to and the consequence of it.                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Slavery to Sin (Douleia)</b>  | The condition described by Jesus in John 8:34 ("Every one who commits sin is the slave of sin") and by Paul in Romans 6:17–20, in which the unregenerate will is bound to the service of sin as a slave is bound to the service of a master. The slavery metaphor establishes total inability from the angle of the will's freedom: a slave does not possess the freedom to choose a different master simply by deciding to; she requires an emancipator. The specific incapacity that the slavery metaphor names is the will's inability to turn from the service of sin to the service of God by its own decision, however sincere. Only the liberation accomplished by Christ ("If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed," John 8:36) can address this specific incapacity, by producing through the Spirit's regenerating work the new nature whose dominant desire is no longer sin but God.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Spiritual Blindness</b>       | The condition described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4 ("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") and in 1 Corinthians 2:14 ("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"). Spiritual blindness establishes total inability from the angle of the mind's capacity for spiritual perception: a blind person cannot choose to see simply by deciding to; sight must be given from outside. Paul's answer in 2 Corinthians 4:6 is the creation-light metaphor: "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." The illumination of the spiritually blind mind is a sovereign, creative act of the same God who called light out of darkness at creation.                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>The "Cannot" Texts</b>        | The specific biblical texts that use the language of constitutive inability (cannot, not able, no one can) rather than mere disinclination (does not, will not, chooses not) to describe the unregenerate person's relationship to God and spiritual things: Romans 8:7 ("it is not even able to do so", oudunātai); Romans 8:8 ("those who are in the flesh cannot please God," ou                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

| Term                                         | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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|                                              | <p>dūnantai); John 6:44 (“No one can come to Me unless the Father... draws him,” oudeis dūnatai); John 6:65 (“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father”); John 3:3 (“the one who is not born again cannot see the kingdom of God,” ou dūnatai); John 3:5 (“the one who is not born of water and Spirit cannot enter the kingdom of God”); 1 Corinthians 2:14 (“he cannot understand them,” ou dūnatai). The recurring Greek construction ou dūnatai is the language of constitutive incapacity, distinguishing the specific inability of total inability from the broader category of moral disinclination.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>The Natural Man (Psuchikos Anthropos)</b> | <p>Paul’s term in 1 Corinthians 2:14 for the person who lives according to the unregenerate soul (psuchē) rather than the Spirit (pneuma): “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.” The natural man is not a special category of especially irreligious persons; it is the condition of every unregenerate person, regardless of moral seriousness or religious activity. The natural man may be morally admirable, culturally sophisticated, and sincerely religious while nonetheless being constitutively incapable of receiving the gospel as the spiritual wisdom it is. The specific incapacity, “cannot understand”, is not a failure of intelligence but of spiritual faculty: the natural man lacks the spiritual capacity of reception that the Spirit’s illuminating work alone can provide.</p>                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>That Which Is Born of the Flesh</b>       | <p>Jesus’ statement in John 3:6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”, establishes a principle of categorical incapacity: what is generated from one category of existence belongs constitutively to that category and cannot generate what belongs to a different and higher category. The natural human person, born of the flesh (born of natural human generation into Adam’s race and bearing his original corruption), belongs constitutively to the category of “flesh” in Paul’s and John’s usage. She cannot by any natural process or voluntary effort produce the “spirit”, the spiritual life that the new birth creates. Just as flesh cannot produce spirit by the exertion of natural processes, the unregenerate person cannot produce saving faith by the exertion of natural will-power. The new birth is necessary (verse 7: “you must be born again”) precisely because the new birth produces what the old birth cannot.</p>                                                                        |
| <b>Satanic Blinding (2 Corinthians 4:4)</b>  | <p>Paul’s description of spiritual blindness in 2 Corinthians 4:4 includes the agency of Satan: “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.” The satanic blinding does not eliminate human responsibility for unbelief (the unbelieving are still morally accountable for the rejection of the gospel that their blindness produces) but identifies the spiritual dimension of the incapacity: the blindness is not merely the natural consequence of original corruption but the active work of the enemy who has a vested interest in preventing the light of the gospel from reaching those he holds in spiritual captivity. The Reformed tradition has argued that satanic blinding and the natural blindness of total depravity are cooperating causes rather than alternatives: Satan exploits and reinforces the natural blindness that original corruption has produced, making the sovereign illuminating work of the Spirit not merely helpful but indispensable.</p> |
| <b>Sovereign Illumination</b>                | <p>The work of the Holy Spirit by which the spiritually blind mind is given the capacity to receive the gospel as the wisdom and truth that it is. Paul describes this work in 2 Corinthians 4:6 through the creation analogy: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The illumination is (1) sovereign, it is the work of God, not the natural capacity of the mind; (2) creative, it corresponds to the creation of light from nothing at the beginning, not the improvement of an existing capacity; (3) specific, it produces the specific “knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,” the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ; and (4) effectual, it produces the response of faith and repentance in those to whom it is given. Sovereign illumination is the Spirit’s specific answer to the specific incapacity of spiritual</p>                                                                                       |

| Term                                                  | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
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|                                                       | blindness, and it corresponds to the convicting and enlightening work described in the Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition of effectual calling (Q. 31).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>The Theological Implication of Total Inability</b> | The single, inescapable soteriological conclusion to which the three biblical metaphors of death, slavery, and blindness all point: if the unregenerate person is spiritually dead, enslaved, and blind, then salvation must be entirely a work of God. Dead people cannot cooperate with their own resurrection; slaves cannot emancipate themselves; blind people cannot choose to see. Each metaphor independently establishes that the decisive work in conversion must come from outside the sinner, prior to any response on her part, as the sovereign act that creates the very capacity for response that the incapacity has eliminated. This theological implication is the specific foundation of the Reformed doctrine of monergism, the conviction that regeneration is entirely the work of God alone, and of the biblical insistence in Ephesians 2:8–9 that salvation is “not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The absence of boasting is Paul's own specific statement of the implication: if the dead were made alive entirely by God, the enslaved entirely freed by God, and the blind entirely illuminated by God, then the entire credit belongs to God. |

## Practical Application

### A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the three biblical metaphors for total inability, death, slavery, and blindness, are not rhetorical exaggerations chosen for dramatic effect but precise theological descriptions of the unregenerate person's actual condition before God. Each metaphor selects a specific dimension of the incapacity: death names the absence of spiritual life and the impossibility of self-generated resurrection; slavery names the bondage of the will and the impossibility of self-initiated emancipation; and blindness names the incapacity of the mind for spiritual perception and the impossibility of self-generated illumination. Together they constitute the most comprehensive account of total inability available in Scripture, and together they point to the single inescapable conclusion: salvation must be entirely a work of God.

We must also believe that the "cannot" texts of John 6:44, 65; Romans 8:7–8; and John 3:3, 6 are genuine statements of constitutive incapacity rather than strong statements of disinclination. The Greek *ou dūnatai* is not merely the language of "is very reluctant to" or "is extremely disinclined to"; it is the language of constitutional inability, the same language that would be used of a blind person's inability to see or a dead person's inability to respond. To weaken these texts from the language of incapacity to the language of disinclination is to weaken the doctrine of total inability at its most specific and most explicit biblical foundation, and to do so is to open the door to precisely the synergistic theology of salvation that Paul's "so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:9) specifically and intentionally closes.

### B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The doctrine of total inability should produce in the believing heart the most personally searching and the most personally humbling question available in the entire Christian theological vocabulary: why do I believe and my neighbor does not? If the answer is not "because I was more spiritually receptive, more morally earnest, or more intellectually honest" but "because the same God who raised Lazarus and called light from darkness raised me, freed me, and illumined me before I sought any of those things", then the humility and the gratitude that answer produces are the deepest and most stable available to the human heart. They are not the humility of performance-failure ("I am not as good as I should be") but the humility of received gift ("I have nothing that I did not receive," 1 Corinthians 4:7). And they are not the gratitude of relief ("I am glad the crisis is over") but the gratitude of rescue ("I was dead and He made me alive, enslaved and He set me free, blind and He gave me sight").

Desire, above all, that the wonder of this rescue, this sovereign, gracious, unmerited resurrection from spiritual death, emancipation from spiritual slavery, and illumination from spiritual blindness, would never become routine or familiar. The doxology of Romans 11:33–36 is the Spirit's testimony that the doctrine of total inability, fully received in its personal dimensions, terminates in the worship of the God whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are unfathomable. Pray that your understanding of total inability would drive you, regularly and urgently, to the same wonder: that the One from whom all things come, through whom all things proceed, and to whom all things return has chosen to expend His sovereign, creative, omnipotent power on the raising of your dead soul, the freeing of your enslaved will, and the illuminating of your blind mind. This is the most astounding fact in the universe, and the doctrine of total inability is the precise theological instrument that reveals its full dimensions.

### C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Work through the three biblical metaphors for total inability, death, slavery, and blindness, as a spiritual autobiography. For each metaphor, answer the following: (1) In what specific form did this incapacity characterize your own pre-conversion condition? What was your spiritual death, your spiritual slavery, and your spiritual blindness? (2) What did the Spirit do to address each specific incapacity in your specific conversion? When and how did He call you from death, free you from slavery, and open your blind eyes? (3) How does the specific rescue corresponding to each metaphor shape the specific gratitude you bring to your worship and prayer? This is not an exercise in introspective morbidity but in theologically grounded

doxology: the most specific understanding of what you were is the preparation for the most specific gratitude for what the Spirit has done.

- Study the “cannot” texts in their original Greek context, paying attention to the specific grammatical form *ou dūnatai* and its function in each text. For each text, ask: is the language describing disinclination (the person could do this but chooses not to) or constitutional incapacity (the person is constitutively unable to do this regardless of how much she might wish to)? The distinction is grammatically available in Greek (*boulōmai* for “I will, I intend” vs. *dūnamai* for “I am able, I can”), and the consistent use of *dūnamai* in the inability texts is a significant indicator of their precise theological meaning. This lexical work is not pedantry; it is the specific exegetical foundation for the distinction between total inability and mere moral disinclination that the entire doctrine depends upon.
- Practice explaining the theological implication of total inability (salvation must be entirely a work of God) from each of the three metaphors separately, as though you were speaking to a thoughtful person who has never encountered this doctrine. The goal is to be able to move from the specific biblical metaphor (death, slavery, blindness) to the specific model of rescue it demands (resurrection, emancipation, illumination) to the specific theological implication (the decisive work is God’s, not the sinner’s) in a way that is both exegetically grounded and pastorally compelling. Each of the three paths through the doctrine should be well-worn in your theological and pastoral vocabulary, so that you can engage the specific form of the incapacity that is most real for the specific person you are addressing.
- Review your own intercessory prayer list for the lost and evaluate whether your prayers reflect the specificity that the doctrine of total inability makes possible. Are you praying merely “Lord, save my friend” or are you praying with the theological specificity that total inability equips you for: “Lord, raise my friend from spiritual death; Lord, free my friend from the slavery of his specific besetting sin; Lord, illuminate my friend’s darkened mind with the specific light of the knowledge of Your glory in the face of Christ”? The doctrine of total inability is not merely a theological conviction to be held; it is an instrument of pastoral prayer to be deployed, naming with precision what the Spirit needs to do and asking the omnipotent God to do exactly that in the specific lives of the specific persons you love and serve.
- Meditate on the creation-illumination parallel of 2 Corinthians 4:6 as a source of confidence for evangelism and prayer. The God who said “Let there be light” and called light from darkness by sovereign command is the same God who illuminates the spiritually blind mind by the sovereign work of the Spirit. This means that no mind is too dark for the Spirit to illumine, no will is too enslaved for the Spirit to free, and no soul is too dead for the Spirit to raise. The darkness of Genesis 1:2, formless, empty, and void, offered no more resistance to the divine creative word than any spiritually dead, enslaved, and blind person offers to the sovereign work of the Spirit. Let this confidence inform your evangelism: you are not speaking to people who are merely difficult to reach; you are speaking to people who need the same sovereign, creative, light-from-darkness act of God that every conversion has always required. And the God who performed that act for you is the God you are asking to perform it for them.

**Key Texts:** *Ephesians 2:1–10; John 8:34–36; 2 Corinthians 4:4–6; 1 Corinthians 2:14; John 6:44, 65; 3:3–8; Romans 8:7–8; 6:17–20; Romans 11:33–36; John 11:38–44*

## Study and Discussion Questions

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### Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, if someone had asked you to describe the condition of an unregenerate person in relation to the gospel, would you have used words like “dead,” “enslaved,” and “blind,” or words like “wounded,” “resistant,” and “distracted”? What is the theological significance of the difference between these two sets of descriptions? And how has the lesson’s development of the three biblical metaphors for total inability changed, confirmed, or nuanced your prior vocabulary for describing the unregenerate condition?

### Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Ephesians 2:1–10 carefully and identify every description of the unregenerate condition in verses 1–3 and every description of the gospel’s provision in verses 4–10. For each description in verses 1–3, identify the corresponding provision in verses 4–10. What is the specific divine act in verse 5 (“made us alive together with Christ”) and who is its subject? What does the placement of “even when we were dead” establish about the temporal relationship between the divine act and the human condition? And what does the parenthetical “by grace you have been saved” in verse 5 add that would be missing without it?
3. Read John 8:31–36 in its full narrative context. What specific claim leads Jesus to make the statement about slavery in verse 34? What is the significance of the double “truly, truly” (amēn amēn) that introduces verse 34? How does the contrast between the slave (verse 34–35) and the son (verse 35–36) develop the metaphor? And what does “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (verse 36) establish about the source and the character of the freedom that the gospel provides, is it the restoration of a neutral will, or is it the emancipation of an enslaved will?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 4:3–6 as a unit. What is the relationship between the “veiled gospel” of verse 3 and the blindness of verse 4? Who has done the blinding in verse 4, and why? What is the specific content of what the blind mind cannot see (“the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”, verse 4)? Then read verse 6 and identify the parallel Paul draws between the creation of light in Genesis 1 and the illumination of the mind. What specific features of the creation-light parallel establish the sovereign, creative, monergistic character of the illumination?
5. Read John 3:1–10 and pay particular attention to the “cannot” statements in verses 3 and 5, the categorical principle of verse 6, and the sovereignty of the Spirit in verse 8. What does the word “must” (dei) in verse 7 (“you must be born again”) establish about the necessity of the new birth, is it a strong recommendation, a preferred path, or an absolute requirement? How does the categorical principle of verse 6 (“that which is born of the flesh is flesh”) ground the necessity of the new birth? And what does the wind metaphor of verse 8 establish about the locus of sovereignty in the new birth?
6. Read Romans 8:5–10 and identify the specific contrasts Paul draws between “the mind set on the flesh” and “the mind set on the Spirit.” What is the specific language Paul uses for the flesh-mind’s inability in verses 7–8 (hostile, does not, not even able, cannot)? How does this progression from behavioral description to grammatical incapacity establish the specific force of the doctrine of total inability? And how does verse 9’s statement “you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” establish the regenerate person’s new condition as the specific contrast to the condition of total inability described in verses 7–8?

### Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson presents the three biblical metaphors for total inability, death, slavery, and blindness, as illuminating different dimensions of the same fundamental incapacity rather than three separate and independent incapacities. Evaluate this claim. Does each metaphor add a genuinely distinct dimension to the total inability doctrine, or do they all ultimately describe the same thing from different angles? What specific dimension does each metaphor contribute that the others do not? And is there a particular

metaphor that you find most theologically decisive for establishing the monergistic conclusion, that salvation must be entirely a work of God, and why?

8. The lesson argues that the “cannot” texts of John 6:44, 65; Romans 8:7–8; and John 3:3, 6 use the language of constitutive incapacity (ou dūnatai, not able) rather than mere disinclination (ou thelei, does not wish to). Evaluate the exegetical basis for this distinction. Is the distinction between “cannot” and “does not” genuinely established by the Greek text in these specific cases, or is it being read into the text from a prior theological framework? What are the specific Arminian responses to these texts, and how does the Reformed tradition respond to those responses?
9. The lesson draws the explicit parallel between the creation of light in Genesis 1:3 and the Spirit’s illumination of the spiritually blind mind, using 2 Corinthians 4:6 as the Pauline basis for the connection. Evaluate the theological freight this parallel is made to bear. Is Paul explicitly making the creation-illumination parallel in 2 Corinthians 4:6, or is he using the creation imagery more loosely? If the parallel is explicitly intended, what specific features of the creation of light (sovereignty, ex nihilo character, effectuality) carry over to the description of the illumination? And what pastoral implications does the explicit creation-illumination parallel generate that the looser use of the imagery would not?
10. The lesson maintains that total inability is compatible with genuine human responsibility for unbelief, that the inability explains rather than excuses the non-response of the unregenerate person. Evaluate the coherence of this claim. How can a person be genuinely responsible for a response that she was constitutively incapable of producing? The Reformed answer (compatibilism: genuine responsibility requires only that the person acts according to her own nature without external compulsion) is presented in the lesson. Is this philosophically satisfying? Does it adequately address the moral intuition that genuine responsibility requires the genuine ability to have done otherwise?
11. The lesson concludes with the claim that total inability produces the most personally searching and the most personally humbling question in the Christian theological vocabulary: “Why do I believe and my neighbor does not?” Evaluate the practical and spiritual force of this question. Does the experience of genuine Christians confirm that those who understand total inability tend to be more humble, more grateful, and more doxologically oriented than those who do not? Is the question “why do I believe and my neighbor does not?” genuinely unanswerable apart from the sovereign grace of God, or are there natural, circumstantial, or psychological explanations that might account for the difference without reference to divine election and sovereign calling?

### ***Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)***

12. The lesson presents the three biblical metaphors (death, slavery, blindness) as providing specific content for the intercessory prayer of those who believe in total inability. Apply this framework to your actual prayer life. Choose one specific person for whom you are currently interceding. Which of the three metaphors best describes the specific form of their spiritual incapacity, death (the absence of all spiritual interest or response), slavery (the bondage to a specific pattern of sin that prevents genuine consideration of the gospel), or blindness (the specific cognitive or philosophical barrier that prevents them from seeing the gospel as true)? And what specific petition does the diagnosis of their specific form of incapacity suggest to you as the most targeted and appropriate request to make on their behalf?
13. The lesson argues that the doctrine of total inability produces freedom from anxiety for the evangelist who understands it, freedom from the belief that the quality of her performance determines whether any person comes to faith. Evaluate this claim against your own experience of evangelism. Do you find that you experience anxiety about your evangelistic performance, feeling responsible for the results in a way that suggests a synergistic rather than monergistic understanding of conversion? If so, what specific aspect of the doctrine of total inability would most directly address that anxiety? And what specific changes to your approach to evangelism would the freedom that total inability produces suggest?

14. The three biblical models of rescue that the three metaphors demand, resurrection (for death), emancipation (for slavery), illumination (for blindness), each have specific analogues in Christian experience and spiritual discipline. Identify at least one spiritual discipline or pastoral practice that corresponds to each model of rescue: a practice oriented toward the experience of spiritual resurrection, a practice oriented toward the ongoing experience of emancipation from sin's slavery, and a practice oriented toward the ongoing experience of the Spirit's illumination. How does the doctrine of total inability, applied to the believer's continuing battle with remaining sin, shape the character and the urgency of each of these practices?
15. The doctrine of total inability is sometimes accused of undermining the sincerity of the gospel offer, the charge being that it is hypocritical to invite all people to come to Christ if they are constitutively unable to do so without the prior work of sovereign grace. Evaluate this charge. Is the gospel offer genuine if not all who hear it have the capacity to respond to it? What is the Reformed response to this objection, and how does the distinction between the external call (genuinely offered to all who hear) and the effectual call (sovereignly applied to the elect) address it? Is there a way to maintain both the genuine universality of the gospel offer and the specific sovereignty of the effectual call without creating a contradiction?
16. The doxological implication of total inability, that the entire credit for every conversion belongs to God, because the decisive factor in every conversion is the Spirit's sovereign work rather than the sinner's choice, stands in tension with the contemporary evangelical emphasis on the importance of the human decision in conversion. How does your own congregation's theology and culture of evangelism relate to this tension? Is the human decision to receive Christ presented as the decisive factor in conversion, or is it presented as the genuine but not decisive response to the Spirit's prior, decisive work? What specific changes in language, in evangelistic practice, and in the culture of discipleship would bring your congregation's understanding and practice into greater alignment with the doxological implication of total inability?

## Prayer Focus

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Open this lesson's time of prayer by reading Ephesians 2:1–10 slowly, allowing the full weight of the diagnosis (verses 1–3) to settle before receiving the full weight of the provision (verses 4–10). Read verses 1–3 not as a description of some especially wicked category of persons but as the Spirit's authoritative account of what every person, including you, before the Spirit's work of regeneration, was: dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, living in the lusts of the flesh, by nature a child of wrath. Allow each phrase to land with its specific theological weight: dead (not merely sick, not merely wounded, but dead, with all the absolute incapacity the word implies); according to the prince of the power of the air (under the direction of the one who actively reinforces the blindness that total depravity has produced); by nature a child of wrath (constitutively in the condition of those for whom the holy displeasure of God is the natural, principled, inevitable response). This was your condition. This is the condition of every person outside of Christ whom you know and love.

Then read verses 4–10 and receive each provision in the light of the specific incapacity it addresses. "But God, being rich in mercy", the inexhaustible resource of the One who addresses the absolute incapacity. "Because of His great love with which He loved us", the motivation that precedes and requires no merit in its object. "Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ", the resurrection that addresses the death; the sovereign, prior, creative act of the One who raises the dead. "Raised us up with Him", the exaltation that follows the resurrection, the new standing of the made-alive person in the presence of God. "Seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus", the final position of the once-dead, once-enslaved, once-blind person in the presence of the God from whom sin had separated her. Receive each of these provisions with the specific gratitude of one who knows the specific incapacity from which each provision has rescued her.

Pray in the structure of the three metaphors, moving through each dimension of total inability and its corresponding gospel provision as a deliberate act of Spirit-led self-examination and theological doxology. First, pray through the death metaphor: confess the remaining spiritual death, the specific areas of your own life where the deadness of the unregenerate condition still finds expression in remaining sin, habitual inertia toward spiritual discipline, or the gradual dulling of spiritual sensitivity that progressive hardening produces. Then receive the provision of spiritual life and ask the Spirit to apply it specifically to those areas: "Lord, who made me alive when I was dead, continue your work of life-giving in the areas of my remaining deadness." Second, pray through the slavery metaphor: confess the remaining bondage, the specific sinful patterns that still exert a slave-like power over your desires and choices despite the Spirit's regenerating work. Then receive the provision of emancipation: "Lord, who freed me from the slavery of sin, continue your work of liberation in the areas of my remaining bondage." Third, pray through the blindness metaphor: confess the remaining blindness, the specific areas of theological misunderstanding, pastoral misjudgment, or spiritual imperception that suggest the continued operation of the noetic effects of sin in your own regenerate mind. Then receive the provision of illumination: "Lord, who called light from darkness in my heart, continue your illuminating work in the areas of my remaining blindness."

Pray for specific persons in your ministry sphere, naming them and applying the three metaphors to your understanding of their specific spiritual conditions. For each person, identify which of the three metaphors most accurately describes the character of their spiritual incapacity, and frame your intercession accordingly. For the person whose primary incapacity is death (no spiritual interest, no sense of need, no response to any gospel presentation you have made), pray: "Lord, you who raised Lazarus from the tomb, raise my friend from his spiritual death. Call him out of his grave by the same sovereign word that called Lazarus." For the person whose primary incapacity is slavery (a specific pattern of sin that holds them in bondage and prevents genuine engagement with the gospel), pray: "Lord, you who set the prisoner free, free my friend from the specific slavery that is preventing her from hearing the gospel. Break the chains that you alone can break." For the person whose primary incapacity is blindness (a specific intellectual or philosophical barrier that prevents him from receiving the gospel as truth), pray: "Lord, you who called light from darkness, shine the light of the knowledge of your glory in the face of Christ into my friend's darkened mind. Give him the sight that no argument of mine can produce." This specificity of

intercession is the most direct pastoral application of the doctrine of total inability, and it is the form of prayer that the doctrine both enables and demands.

Close with a reading of Romans 11:33–36 as the doxological terminus of the entire doctrine of total inability. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” The unsearchable judgments are the judgments of the God who chose to raise the dead, free the enslaved, and illuminate the blind, not because they deserved it but because He “is rich in mercy” and because of “His great love with which He loved us.” “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?” Who told Him which dead persons to raise, which slaves to free, which blind eyes to open? No one: these were the sovereign choices of the God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.” The death, the slavery, and the blindness were the conditions of all of us; the resurrection, the emancipation, and the illumination were entirely from Him; the ongoing work of sanctification is entirely through Him; and the final glorification in which every trace of the remaining death, slavery, and blindness is permanently removed will be entirely to Him. “To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

*“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!... For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”*

**Romans 11:33, 36, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Ephesians 2:1–10; John 8:34–36; 2 Corinthians 4:4–6; 1 Corinthians 2:14; John 6:44, 65; 3:3–8; Romans 8:5–10; 6:17–20; Romans 11:33–36; John 11:38–44; Ephesians 4:22–24

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## ***Soli Deo Gloria***

*To God Alone Be the Glory*

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## **FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

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