

## Wholly Incapable of Doing Any Good

*Text: Hebrews 3; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3*

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Lords Days 2–4 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* set forth man's sin and misery, and in doing so teach the biblical doctrine of *total depravity*. Lord's Day 3, Question and Answer 8, asks: "Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness?" And the answer: "Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." This is breathtaking: "*wholly incapable of good... inclined to all wickedness.*" The Reformed faith responds without hesitation, "*Indeed we are.*" This is not merely theoretical but is the *actual* state of mankind, even the flesh of the believer. Scripture, not psychology or sociology, gives us the true diagnosis.

Hebrews 3 develops this truth through the lens of Old Testament Israel in the wilderness. Despite great privileges—miracles, the presence of God, and constant divine guidance—they rebelled. They were the visible church. And yet the divine verdict remains: "They do always err in their heart" (v. 10). This passage, echoing Psalm 95, is not only a historical account, but a warning. It demonstrates that man at his best, in the church, with signs and ordinances, remains wholly incapable of good and inclined to all evil apart from regeneration. God's judgment on such a people is grief, wrath, and exclusion from His rest. But it also calls us to vigilance, faith, and exhortation. Let us therefore consider, first, the meaning, second, the judgment, and third, the calling.

### The Meaning

Wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness applies to the totality of fallen man. It means he is spiritually dead and utterly impotent toward righteousness. This is not a lack of education or opportunity, but *nature*. From the fall, every faculty is corrupt. Believers still carry this old man, and regarding that nature, even their best works are tainted. Never has fallen man produced a single good thought before God. Not one. Billions of people, thousands of years, and yet not one truly righteous word or deed without grace. Hebrews 3:10 says, "They do always err in their heart." To *err* is to deviate or to stray from the path of truth and holiness. *Always* means continuously and without exception. In their *heart*—this is the center of man, the wellspring of thoughts, desires, and actions (Prov. 4:23). Therefore, all thoughts, words, and

deeds are corrupt because they proceed from a corrupted *heart*. This is the essence of total depravity. It is not that men cannot perform civilly useful acts – that is, raising children, feeding the poor, obeying the law – but rather that nothing is done from faith, for God’s glory, or in accordance with His holy law. That is the standard.

And this applies even to believers, as far as they are not regenerated in their old nature. The flesh remains flesh and always errs. God says, “They do alway err in their heart,” and the believer says, “Yes, indeed I do, except by Thy Spirit.” This doctrine is proven not just by our experience and conscience, but supremely by God’s Word.

The clearest historical proof is Israel. Despite all advantages, they were always straying. Romans 9:4-5 lists their privileges: adoption, glory, covenants, law, service, promises, and the fathers. They were called God’s “son”, had the cloud and fire, and received the law at Sinai. No other nation enjoyed such things. Christ Himself was with them in the cloud, the Rock, and the manna. Yet they lusted, murmured, rebelled, and turned back in heart to Egypt. The plagues, the Red Sea, victories over Amalek and Og – none of it changed them inwardly. They remained totally depraved.

Isaiah 26:10-11 confirms it: “Let favour be shewed to the wicked, *yet will he not learn righteousness.*” Miracles and blessings do not change the reprobate heart. It only *hardens*. Some may object – what about the Song of Moses after the Red Sea? Or Israel saying, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do”? Or giving freely for the Tabernacle? But Hebrews 3:10 remains: “*They do alway err in their heart.*” These were outward, temporary responses. The core remained untouched. They were *awed*, not regenerated. Total depravity means that even at man’s best, he remains estranged from God.

## **The Judgment**

God’s judgment upon such depravity is presented in Hebrews 3. First, “I was grieved with that generation” (v. 10). This divine grief is not emotional change in God, for He is immutable and blessed forever. Rather, it is an expression of holy revulsion and judicial disapproval. God detests their sin and withdraws His favour.

Second, God declares, “They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways.” His judgment is not superficial. He sees the heart, the motives, the disposition. They were near to Him outwardly, but their hearts were far away. After forty years of miraculous guidance, they remained

strangers to His covenant ways. That is spiritual ignorance – not of facts, but of fellowship.

Third, “I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest” (v. 11). This is the divine oath. It is solemn, certain, and final. The *rest* here refers to more than the land of Canaan – it is ultimately God’s salvation. To swear in wrath means eternal exclusion. God’s wrath is not like man’s – uncontrolled or temporary. It is His settled opposition to sin. Those who remain in unbelief shall never enter His rest. There is no appeal, no reversal: only *judgment*.

Fourth, we see the outcome: “With whom was he grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?” (v. 17). Their bodies littered the desert. Two million died without entering Canaan. That wilderness became a graveyard of unbelief. And so it is with all who resist the Spirit, reject the Word, and harden their hearts. Many sit in churches, hear the gospel, and yet die in their sins. God says, “I swear in my wrath.” No sacraments, no church attendance, no moral life can overturn this decree. This is why funeral sermons that speak of heaven without fruit of repentance are not only wrong but blasphemous. Moses did not preach such lies. God’s wrath is not placated by sentiment.

Paul repeats this warning in I Corinthians 10. All were baptized into Moses. All ate and drank of Christ spiritually in Old Testament forms. Yet God was not well pleased, and they were overthrown. Baptism and communion do not save without faith. They perished as examples for us. Total depravity leads to judgment unless there is sovereign grace.

## **The Calling**

In the light of man’s utter corruption and God’s righteous judgment, Hebrews 3 calls us to vigilance. “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (v. 12). This is not just about ancient Israel. Every church member must examine himself. Are you departing? Is your heart growing cold? Is your attendance declining, your zeal fading, your affections set on the world? The departure may be slow, but it begins with unbelief. The church council must watch over the flock. Fellow saints must care for one another. It says, “Lest there be in any of *you*...” The danger is communal as well as personal.

Verse 13 adds, “But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” This is our mutual responsibility. Sin is deceitful – it promises what it cannot give, and conceals

what it truly is. It deadens sensitivity and strengthens resistance. We must exhort daily—not harshly, but earnestly. Encourage your spouse, your children, your fellow members. Speak of the Word, the Lord’s Day, and spiritual things. Do not wait. “Today” may be your last opportunity. Hardened hearts rarely recover!

Verse 14 comforts the believer: “For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.” Here is our privilege—union with Christ. Not merely a profession, but a real participation in Him. The One who was declared Son in chapter 1, made like unto His brethren in chapter 2, and is our faithful High Priest—He is *ours*. We partake of His righteousness, His Spirit, and His life. But we must persevere. If we hold fast. If we endure to the end.

This is not a call to works-righteousness, but to gospel perseverance. Grace enables what it commands. We must strive, but not in our own strength. Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. He will keep His own. But the warning is real. Many have begun well and fallen away. Let us not be among them.

This doctrine of total depravity is not meant to crush us but to drive us to Christ. If we see our incapacity, our need becomes evident. If we see God’s judgment, we will flee to mercy. If we hear His call, we must not harden our hearts. Scripture alone is our authority—*Sola Scriptura*. Not the opinions of men, not our feelings. “*They do alway err in their heart.*” But Christ came to save the erring, to give rest to the weary, and to grant a *new* heart.

*Our Father in heaven, we pray, Lord, against our own sinful natures and the hardness and deceitfulness of sin that steals up upon us; and we ask, Lord God, that Thou will quicken us by words of life and truth—powerful words that change us. Lord, increase our faith and help us, Lord God, to battle against sin and our sinful natures. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*