

# OpenTheo

## How Can We Truly Love God in Heaven if We Won't Have the Free Will to Reject Him?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether regeneration counters total depravity in the Reformed view and how it could be that we'll truly love God when we're in Heaven, where we can't reject him, if real love requires the free will to reject him.

\* In the Reformed view, does regeneration counter total depravity, or is a regenerate person still totally depraved?

\* If we have free will to reject God because one cannot love someone without the choice to reject, wouldn't we then not have the ability to truly love God in Heaven?

## Transcript

We'll have a good time. Welcome to Stance Reasons #STRSQPodcast. I'm Amy Hall and with me is Greg Cogle.

Good morning, Amy. Good morning, Greg. Alright, let's go to our first question.

This one comes from Robert. In the Reformed view, does regeneration counter total depravity? Is a regenerate person still totally depraved? If so, in what way can Paul say we are "new creatures" in 2 Corinthians 5-17? Well this is something you could probably speak to more precisely than I can, Amy, but total depravity is a term that is used to describe man in his fallen state. And it doesn't mean that he, every single thing is as bad as it could be.

It means that every aspect of being human, all faculties and capabilities, all of these things are influenced by sin. It isn't like your body is influenced by sin, the flesh, but your soul is not or your will is not, everything is influenced. The depravity is total in its extension, not in a certain sense in its depth or in its sense.

So that's the first thing to keep in mind. When we are rescued by God and the concept of total depravity implies the need for God to intervene in a dramatic way, to overcome our

native rebellion as a result of all aspects of ourselves being fallen and our wills being in rebellion against God and our desires in rebellion against God. And so this is something that God needs to overcome in order for us to respond to him and to turn to him.

He's got to do work in us and overcome that depravity. By the way, this notion that all areas of ourselves are affected by sin, I don't know that that's a reformed doctrine as much as it is a biblical doctrine. I would think even Armenians acknowledge that unless you're Pelagian or semi-Pelagian, which is not good because Pelagius was a heretic.

But the question is how much work does God do and how much do we do in response to God's work to bring us to salvation? That's where I think the differences are between the reformed of the Armenian perspective, the way I've characterized it as God works in all people to bring them halfway. And then we break the tie, so to speak, and in the reformed view, God works in some people to bring them all the way and he lets the rest of them in their own rebellion. But certainly in either case, regardless of one's understanding about how election works, the new birth is transformative.

Now, it doesn't change the flesh, but it does vivify our spiritual nature. So we have a spiritual capacity that to use a metaphor is unplugged from God. And when we are plugged back in, that spiritual regeneration, that's what it means to be born again.

If we are unplugged from the spiritual life of God, and the way I look at it, what a machine is unplugged, it can't plug itself back in. Somebody else has got to plug it in. And I think we're not machines, but there's a sense in which that's true.

We have a native in capability of doing that ourselves. And so God is the one who regenerates and gives us the gift of faith. That's the way Ephesians 2, 8, 9, by gracious saved through faith.

And that, not of yourselves, it's a gift of God. A gift of God, lest any man boast. And there's other indicators God opened Lydia's heart to receive the gospel.

The consistent declaration of the work of God seems to be on individuals, okay? And not just kind of on an empty category of people who choose to get into that category themselves when I read Ephesians 1, for example, in Christ, in Christ, in Christ. I don't think Paul is talking about those who get in the streetcar named Jesus, then gets the benefit of the streetcar. These are individuals that are united with Christ and therefore have the benefit of Christ.

They're not united individually, not just in a sense accidentally or incidentally because they happen to jump into this category called in Christ. And that's kind of a classic way for our minions to characterize it. Regardless how one caches out the issue of salvation, that we are all lost without Christ is orthodoxy.

That we have a native rebellion to God is orthodoxy. That God is necessary to overcome

the native rebellion is orthodoxy. But the new life plugs us in once again spiritually and reconnects us with God and and vivifies a whole bunch of capacities that we have but are not that are incapacitated because of sins.

That's orthodoxy too. So there's no inherent contradiction between any understanding of a full complete total depravity and the new birth which changes significant aspects of that. Yeah, I agree with what the distinction you made, Greg, between the depravity touching all areas of our lives and being as depraved as you could possibly be.

So Paul talks- In other words, it's not the second but the first. Right, correct. Thanks for reminding them of that.

Okay. In Romans 6 through 8, he talks about all of these things. He talks about how when we die with Christ, we're raised with him.

So there's a sense in which our old person dies. We're raised with Christ. This doesn't mean that we are completely in the resurrection.

What he says is we'll have our bodies will be completely regenerated and we will have no more sin. Because of now, we're still in depravity, but we are new creatures. We've died and raised with Christ.

And here's what starting in verse 10 of chapter 8 in Romans, if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you. So then brethren, we are under obligation not to the flesh to live according to the flesh.

For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die. But if by the spirit, you are putting to death the deeds of the body you will live. So the difference now is that we have the spirit.

And this is the point he's made from chapter 7 to now. The fact that the law cannot enable us to follow God. It cannot enable us to bear fruit for God.

Therefore, as new creatures with the Holy Spirit, we now have the ability to put our sin to death and to bear fruit for God. So if you read through chapters 6 through 8, he goes through all of these steps and I think that clarifies the difference between them and now. And just keep in mind that, I mean, I'm talking to the listeners, not to you Amy, this is an ongoing process and it is a struggle until you die.

All right, it's going to be a struggle until you die. The issue here is trajectory, putting to death the deeds of the flesh. The Paul calls that according to the spirit, living according to the spirit in Romans 8 rather than according to the flesh.

Those are trajectories. It isn't a life of utter sin versus a life of utter perfection. Those who have the spirit, Paul says in Romans 8, are in the process of putting to death the deeds of the flesh, which is what he means by the phrase led by the spirit.

Almost universally misunderstood because people just repeat the phrase the way they hear other people using it and they don't study that phrase in its context. That's what Paul is talking about. So this is going to be a struggle.

And this is why I think it's, you know, I have often heard, I just heard it again a couple of days ago, read it in a book, 1 John 1:9, if we confess our sins, he's faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This I do not think is John's offer of an antidote for Christians. I'm not saying that confession is not important, but this is not what he's talking about there.

If you read John 1:1, he is talking about, he's giving a testimony about Jesus and his personal experience and his invitation that we have fellowship with him, the way he has fellowship with Christ, the way he has fellowship with Christ. And then he says, if we say we have no sin, if we deny our need and our sinfulness, then the truth is not in us. We make God to be an hour.

But if we confess our sin, and I think the point is that we confess that we have sin, that we are sinners and in need of him, then God provides forgiveness. Then the next chapter, first verse, it says, little children, I write these things so you do not sin, but if you do sin, you have an advocate with the Father in Christ Jesus, who is the propitiation for our sin. So what's interesting is I always hear 1 John 1:9 as a verse for keeping cleansed before God.

That's how we deal with sin. But of course, that verse says, if we confess, then we're forgiven, it's a conditional. In other words, if we don't confess, then we're not forgiven, it seems that would follow from the point.

And I think according to the point he's making, it's right. If we are not coming to God as unregenerate people confessing sin, that we are sinners before him, we will not receive forgiveness. But then, but I almost virtually never hear chapter 2 verse 1, it evoked on behalf of Christians.

But that is the specific verse that John evokes regarding Christians. And by the way, there's, I know of no place else in the New Testament that offers the kind of confession people talk about in 1 John 1:9 as the antidote for sin and our lives. And if this was the functional antidote for sin and our lives, why do we have to wait for John to write his first epistle to get that piece of information when it's not anywhere else? Now, once again, I'm not saying that forgiveness, I mean, the confession isn't important.

It is, but in a whole different sense than what I think John is describing there in that

passage. Okay, let's go into a question from Todd. Okay.

I understand we have free will to reject God because one cannot love someone without the choice to reject instead. In heaven, believers will not have the capacity to reject him anymore. Wouldn't we then not have the ability to truly love him then? Because we cannot reject him then? Well, this, if the first part of the equation is true, then the second part of the equation is true.

If not only that, then God can't love either, it seems to me because God hasn't, he doesn't have the, well, I guess if you're just saying love requires the free will to reject, well, God can reject who he wants, you know, so, but the key thing just applying to the question is yes, then we can't love in heaven. So something's wrong and the thing that's wrong is the first step. It is not true.

It is, it is demonstrably not true that love requires free will and all one has to do is look at the loving relationships they have in their lives. And when I'm talking about loving relationships, I'm not talking about here the will to love because I don't think that's what the writer here is talking about. Having love for someone, I ask people, do you love your son or your daughter, your children? Yes, of course.

When did you start loving? When they were born, when I first encountered them, did you make a choice then to love them? No, it just happened. When people are drawn to each other in a way that drives them romantically to get married, they're not making choices to love. Not the emotion is something that happens in virtue of the nature of the circumstances.

Okay. Now, when one is in a committed kind of relationship, whether it's as a parent or as a spouse, then there are times when we are to act loving when we don't feel like it. Now that is an act of will.

But you're not going to have to act against your feelings when you get to heaven because your feelings aren't going to be sinful. Your actions are going to be consistent with your desires. But the desires, and here specifically the desire about love is not something that you choose.

Sometimes to be moral, you must choose against your desires. Just like when two people who are married to someone else, they fall in love and they feel, "Oh, well, I didn't want this. It just happened." Yes, it just happened.

But that, of course, doesn't justify the behavior that follows or dwelling on it or pursuing that kind of relationship. This question, to me, reflects a profound misunderstanding in the body of Christ when it comes to this issue. And I have friends who make the same point.

If you don't have the freedom to reject God, then you can't love Him properly. It just,

these are not true statements because the answer, the alternative to freedom to reject God is not mechanistic machine-like behavior. That's the presumption.

If you can't have a choice to love, then you must be a machine. And that's not true love. Most of the time, the people we deeply emotionally love are not, that does not represent feelings we chose to have.

It was a function of the circumstances that generated this love. Okay? And if that's the case, and to me it's demonstrably obvious, all people have to do is think about their relationships, where they're feeling love. Something happened.

They were drawn into this by a set of circumstances. Now, if that's the case, it seems to me that God could do that easily without violating people's free will. He woos and draws, and I was explaining this to someone, and they said, "Well, doesn't he do that with everybody?" And the answer is no, not according to John chapter 6. He woos and he draws those that he will, and that act of drawing creates a circumstance where they end up desiring and loving God.

And this is, I think it's very kin to the kinds of relationships we have with people we are drawn to and begin loving in virtue of the circumstances, the nature of relationship. We would never disqualify our love for our children. Our emotional love for our children is not real love, because we didn't make an act of will when we retrieved our children from the hospital and then started feeling that way to them.

No. We loved them from the outset, and it was not a choice. And so if that's the case, even if we have no freedom to sin in heaven, we still are released in a certain sense by the change in our nature to fully love God.

That's a freedom. It's not a restriction of our freedom. It's a freedom to do what's good and right, which we didn't have a freedom to do consistently, even when we were regenerate, because we're battling the flesh.

Once the flesh is gone and the flesh doesn't survive the resurrection, then we are going to have an inability to sin. And that doesn't in any way shape or form compromise our genuine actual love for God and for each other. And by the way, if the inability to sin compromises or disqualifies real love, then God can't love because he has no ability to sin.

So Greg, just since you said the flesh won't survive, I just want to make clear that you're not saying that we're not going to have bodies. You're saying that our fallen bodies are not. I'm talking about flesh in terms of the carnal nature.

The fallen blood like flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. That would be natural cells, so we need new bodies and a renewed body or resurrected body in order to inherit the kingdom. So this is what Todd has asked here is exactly why I don't think this

is a good answer to the problem of evil because I think that's what people are using this for to explain the existence of evil.

But as he says in heaven, we are not going to turn away from God. I mean, period, God has made it clear. There's going to be no sin.

There's going to be no suffering. So we know that's not the case. So to me, I agree, Greg, that that proves that the first one is wrong.

And I thought you did explain a lot here. So I don't know that I have much to add except that I just want to emphasize the idea that when we are born, we are by nature, children of wrath. So 51, sorry, and institutions.

Yeah, both testament make this point. So therefore we are not choosing God because of who we are, because of our own inclinations, because we are broken. So when God fixes us, he regenerates us so that we can see him the way he truly is.

We love him. Not because God is forcing us to love him in the way we would use the term force, but because he's freeing us from that nature that hates God so that we're free to rightly love God as we were created to do. I just had a thought here about this.

Forget about God for a moment. Think about Christians and maybe even our listeners who had already nasty attitude towards people and when they were regenerated, they changed their attitude towards people and their approach towards people and their feelings towards people. It didn't just change their ability to act in a different way using their will.

Something changed on the inside that changed their affective response to other people. There's a parallel here. It seems like every regenerate person understands what he just described and what you didn't get was just another, a more, what's the word I'm looking for? A stronger will to will things when you regenerate.

Your nature has changed so you feel differently towards others. That's a change that God. And who would say that that's not genuine? That's not real? That's not authentic? When now we love people we used to hate because of the regeneration that God created.

But it's not an act of our will. There are times we act in a loving way. I'm not denying that.

But this is not what we're talking about. We're talking about an affective element, a feeling element, an approach to other people. And I think Todd asks here, he says, "Will we not have the capacity to reject him anymore?" And I think then you have to look at the word capacity.

So are we talking about God stopping us from what we want to reject him but God stops us or he physically restrains us? That's not what's going on here. It's not like there's some sort of outside influence keeping us from doing something, like a physical disability or stopping us from doing what we want. We're still doing what we want and what we want is to love God.

So it's not like I want to choose against God but he stops me from that. I want to choose God because I've been changed to want to choose God. And the way this capacity is discussed here, it sounds like a positive attribute that is now being taken away.

It is not a capacity that causes us to sin. It is a broken capacity. It is an incapacity that results in our sinning.

It's something broken inside of us and God fixes that. It reminds me of people who have said, I think without really thinking through it, "Well, if I can sin in God can't, then I can do something that God can't do." No, you've got it upside down. To say that I can sin is to describe something I can't do which is to be good and God can be good.

So it is in a sense a positive way of stating a negative quality. We don't have a capacity to sin that is taken away from us and so somehow we're now limited by an act of God that we have an incapacity to do what's good and that incapacity is now healed and restored. It's like a lame person doesn't have a capacity to fall down.

They have an incapacity that causes them to fall down. When they're healed, then they don't fall down because the incapacity has been repaired. We did answer a question, I can't remember how many episodes ago it was, but we did answer the question about God not being able to change and we talked about this in capacity and capacity thing.

But again, all we have to do is look at the Trinity and the persons of the Trinity who love each other and can't not love each other. Once again, that doesn't mean that they don't have true love just because they will always love and they don't have the capacity to sin against each other by not loving each other. They're not broken.

Exactly. They have the capacity to all these things and they have no broken capacities. They have no inabilities.

Well, thank you for those questions, Robert and Todd. We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question for us, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk or you can go through our website at [str.org](http://str.org). Just go to our hashtag #STRAskPage and you'll find a link there to send your question.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

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