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TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Genesis 6:5; 8:21, & other Scriptures

By

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TOTAL DEPRAVITY
Genesis 6:5; 8:21

A few years ago boxer Macho Comacho was being interviewed on TV. He was bragging about his wild past--a father at age 15, drugs, loose living. The sportscaster said to him, "But don't you believe that as a sports hero, you have an obligation to be a model for our youth?" Comacho shot back, "Look, I did my dirt, but I ain't no Hitler."

Comacho's response is the typical human response to the biblical doctrine of total depravity: "I may have my faults, but I'm *not totally* depraved!" It's not surprising that the world thinks that way, since Satan "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (2 Cor. 4:4). But it is disturbing that the evangelical church has greatly diluted and, in some cases, denied this fundamental doctrine, the total depravity of every person since Adam and Eve's fall into sin.

For example, one popular author and speaker attacks the idea that Christians are to view themselves as sinners or even as sinners saved by grace. He asks rhetorically, "Is that who you really are? No way! The Bible doesn't refer to believers as sinners, not even sinners saved by grace. Believers are called saints—holy ones—who occasionally sin" (Neil Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* [Harvest House], p. 44).

Another example: A community magazine ran a piece on a growing evangelical church in our town. It said, "And just why do people keep coming to [x] Church? Pastor [x] believers it's the upbeat, animated atmosphere inside. 'I think I bring excitement to the Gospel,' he says. 'People are tired of hearing about the sin in their life; they need to hear about the joy that is out there as well'" (*Mountain Living Magazine* [2/99], p. 60).

The popular James Dobson waters down the biblical emphasis on human depravity. In promoting his recently reissued book, *Hide or Seek*, subtitled, "Building Self-Esteem in Your Child," he tells of an elderly missionary who was taught of her worthlessness. Then he states, "That teaching did not come from the Scriptures. Jesus did not leave His throne in heaven to die for the 'worms' of the world."

He argues that “true love for others is impossible until we experience a measure of self-respect” (March, 1999, newsletter, p. 4).

Many pastors are buying into the idea that to reach people, we’ve got to sugar-coat the message by toning down the biblical emphasis on sin. Even those who preach the biblical gospel see the numbers of people who flock to these “seeker-sensitive” churches and are tempted to join this trend.

Nathan Hatch, saw this trend years ago. He wrote (“Purging the Poisoned Well Within,” *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], pp. 14-17):

The thriving evangelical book market offers a steady diet of positive inspiration, spiritual uplift, and successful Christian living. Evangelical visionaries, building multi-million dollar enterprises in television, church growth, and education, have latched onto an upbeat style that is more than vaguely reminiscent of Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie. One of these pastors recently defined faith as building self-confidence, resisting negative thoughts, and tapping the limitless possibilities within ourselves. In a similar vein, a prominent evangelist explained that what keeps people away from Christ is not hardness of heart but simply a misunderstanding of what he has to offer (p. 14).

Hatch goes on to point out that this view of human nature differs greatly from what Christians of the past believed. Men like Luther, Wesley, Whitefield, and Edwards “believed that human nature was fallen, and that the Bible’s view of man forsook glib moralism and took seriously ‘the chartless darkness of the human heart’” (p. 15).

I argue that one of the most important truths that needs to be re-emphasized in our day is the doctrine of the total depravity of the human heart. If we do not properly understand the Bible on this matter, then we cannot fully understand the gospel for ourselves, let alone make it plain to others. Nor will we understand what the Bible teaches about sanctification (growth in holiness) if we are not clear on the evil that lurks within our hearts, even as regenerate people.

That doctrine could hardly be stated more emphatically than it is in Genesis 6:5: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his

heart was only evil continually.” We are not basically good, decent folks who will do what is right if we’re only given the chance. The very core of our being, “every intent of the *thoughts of our hearts*,” is “only evil continually.” It’s not just that people have a mean streak or that we occasionally sin. God’s declaration is that “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil continually*.” In case we missed it or are inclined to apply it only to the Hitler’s of the world, God repeats the assessment after the flood with reference to the most godly man on earth, Noah, and his descendents, “the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (8:21).

Because the doctrine of total depravity is often misunderstood, I first will *define* it. Because it is often disbelieved, minimized, or attacked, I then will *defend* it biblically. And, because we live in a day that often disparages doctrine as irrelevant and impractical, I will *apply* it.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY DEFINED:

1. What total depravity is not:

Total depravity does not mean that people are as wicked and sinful as they could be. Nor does it mean that sinful people are incapable of doing good deeds. Even those who have never heard of Jesus Christ are able to love their children and even sacrifice their own lives for the sake of family, friends, or sometimes even for strangers. Many people who do not know Christ are honest, even when it costs them. Total depravity does not mean that there are not relatively good people who do good deeds.

2. What total depravity means:

Total depravity refers to the *nature* of fallen persons, not to their deeds. The word “total” refers to the *total person*, that every aspect of the person—mind, will, emotions, body—is corrupted by sin; and to the *total human race*, that every person since Adam and Eve, except for Jesus Christ, has been born with a nature that is alienated from God and in rebellion against God. Also, depravity must be *viewed in relation to God*, not by comparing men with men. With reference to God, total depravity means that no one is able in and of himself to do anything to choose God, to seek God, to please God, to love God, to glorify God, or to merit His salvation. Left to himself, every person will seek the things of self and sin.

We are as unable to seek God as a corpse can choose to get up and walk (Eph. 2:1-3). The Westminster Confession states it clearly. Speaking of Adam and Eve it says (VI:II, III, IV),

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

So total depravity refers to the extent of the damage, not necessarily to the degree. To illustrate, if you put a drop of deadly bacteria in a glass of water, it contaminates the entire glass. You may add a spoonful of bacteria, which makes it more potent, but the little drop is enough to pollute it all. Adam's transgression was imputed to his posterity, so that all are polluted by sin.

Adam was the representative of the human race, so that his sin was charged to all that followed. Some will protest, "That's not fair!" But several things must be said. First, there is nothing unfair about the concept of representation. Our entire government is built on it. The decisions that our elected officials make affect us. But you may still protest, "I didn't vote for Adam to represent me." But, God did! God determined that Adam's choice would represent the human race. We have no reason to believe that we would have acted any differently had we been there ourselves. When our representative fell into sin, the human race was linked to him, so that all are born in sin. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because by nature we are sinners. That is what total depravity means.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY DEFENDED:

We can only look at a few of the many verses in both the Old and New Testaments which defend this doctrine:

In *Psalms 51:5*, David laments, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." We are born in sin.

Isaiah 64:6: "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" The word "sick" is used of an incurable wound; here, the meaning is metaphorical of sin that is beyond human hope of fixing. We're terminal!

The doctrine is also inherent in *Ezekiel 36:25-27*, when the Lord promises, "I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." The sinner cannot follow God unless God performs a heart transplant and gives him His Spirit.

Jesus taught the depravity of our hearts in *Mark 7:20-23*: "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

In *John 8:34*, Jesus taught that "everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin," and that only He could set us free. Jesus goes on (8:43-44a), "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father."

Paul, quoting from the Old Testament, spells it out forcefully in *Romans 3:10-18* (citing only 10-13 here): "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."

In *Romans 8:7-8*, he emphasizes the inability of the sinner to follow God: "... 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." (Italics added.)

In *1 Corinthians 2:14* Paul states that the natural man not only does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, but *cannot* under-

stand them, because they are spiritually appraised. In *2 Corinthians 4:4* he explains that Satan, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, ...”

In *Ephesians 2:1-3*, he says that we were all dead in our trespasses and sins and that by nature we are children of wrath. In *Ephesians 4:18*, he states that unbelievers are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their hearts.”

If you compile all these and many other verses, we see that fallen man is incurably wounded; blind; ignorant, unable, and unwilling to know; born in sin and with a nature oriented to sin; hard-hearted; enslaved to sin; polluted at the very core of his being; and, dead. The Westminster Confession (IX:III) sums it up: “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”

OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY:

In spite of the overwhelming biblical evidence of man's total inability to do anything about his state of alienation from God, man's proud flesh keeps inventing ways around this doctrine. Many deny it outright and insist that people are basically good at heart. Obviously, this contradicts Scripture, so I will not spend time refuting it.

Some evangelicals deny that believers are depraved. Neil Anderson (and others) argue that as new creatures in Christ, we do not have two natures, one regenerated and one fallen. We only have the new creation, created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. While Anderson agrees that believers still have to do battle against the flesh, the effect of his teaching is to minimize the threat of it. He goes so far as to say that we are not to view ourselves as sinners in any way, but only as saints who occasionally sin. In defending his views against a critical review that I wrote, Anderson even told one of my former elders that Calvin never taught the depravity of the believer. But even in the first chapter of *The Institutes*, Calvin brings up the examples of Job, Abraham, and Elijah (who were clearly believers) to show that when we contemplate God's wisdom, power,

and purity, we will be overwhelmed with our own “stupidity, impotence, and corruption.” He surmises, “And what can man do, who is rottenness itself [Job 13:28] and a worm [Job 7:5; Ps. 22:6], when even the very cherubim must veil their faces out of fear [Isa. 6:2]?” (1:1:3).

While believers are freed from sin's penalty and from sin's power, so that we can now live to please God, our sin nature (or, “the flesh”) is not eradicated until we are with the Lord. *Romans 7* clearly teaches this, as do many other verses, such as *1 John 1:8*, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” While I realize that Martyn Lloyd-Jones taught that the believer does not have two natures, I think he would be aghast at where Anderson and others have taken his teaching. On his deathbed, Lloyd-Jones called a friend back as he was leaving the room and said, “Remember I am only a sinner saved by grace” (*D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The Fight of Faith*, by Iain Murray [Banner of Truth], p. 743).

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the doctrine of total depravity comes from those who insist that fallen men have the “free will” to choose God, and thus be saved. But this gives man a part in God's work of salvation and a ground for boasting, which contradicts many Scriptures:

John 1:13: “Who were born [spiritually] not of blood, *not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man*, but of God.”

Romans 9:16: “So then it does *not depend on the man who wills* or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”

Philippians 2:13: “For it is God who is at work in you, both *to will and to work* for His good pleasure.”

1 Corinthians 1:27-31, where three times Paul stresses that salvation rests on the fact that “*God has chosen*,” so “that no man should boast before God. But by *His doing* you are in Christ Jesus, ...”

Those who argue in favor of so-called “free will” say that it is pointless and absurd for God to command men to believe in Christ if they are not able by their own free will to believe. This objection was soundly refuted by Martin Luther in his diatribe against the Roman Catholic scholar, Erasmus, *The Bondage of the Will* [Revell], where he argues, rather, that by commanding us to do what no fallen sinner

can do, God brings us to something we proud sinners deny, namely, the knowledge of our utter impotence, pride, and independence from God. In his words, “by thus breaking him down, and confounding him in his self-knowledge, he may make him ready for grace, and send him to Christ to be saved” (p. 162). Or, in the words of Augustine (1,000 years before Luther), “God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know what we ought to seek from him” (cited by Calvin, *Institutes* [11:V:7]).

Of course, before Augustine the Apostle Paul dealt with this same objection. In *Romans 9*, after arguing that man cannot choose God by his free will, but that salvation depends on God’s choosing men according to His sovereign mercy, he states (9:19), “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” Note carefully Paul’s inspired answer, because it strikes at the very root of human depravity: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” (9:20). In other words, our very question shows the arrogance of our sinful hearts! If the righteous God chooses to damn the entire race of rebellious sinners, that is His just prerogative. If He chooses to save some who otherwise would helplessly perish in their sin, that is His right. But no one can boast by saying, “I chose God by my own free will.” Scripture is clear that if God had not rescued us by His sovereign grace, we all would have perished in our willful, proud rebellion against Him.

In the same vein, the Lord Jesus Christ stated (*Matt. 11:25-27*) that God had hidden spiritual truth from the “wise and intelligent,” and that no one knows God except “anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Then He proceeded to command men to do what He just stated they cannot do: “Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Henry Thiessen, in his *Lectures in Systematic Theology* [Eerdmans], argues for a subtle modification of the Arminian view of human ability to choose God. He agrees with the Calvinists that God must take the initiative if man is to be saved, but then he contends that common grace “restores to the sinner the ability to make a favorable response to God” (p. 155). He cites Titus 2:11 in support, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,” and then argues that the many exhortations in Scripture to turn to God imply that the human will is free to do so. He hedges this from the full

Arminian position by saying that sinners do not have the ability to change the permanent bent of their will toward God nor to quit all sin and make themselves acceptable to God. But he argues that they “can make an initial response to God, as a result of which God can give him repentance and faith” (p. 156).

But, as I’ve pointed out, the exhortations in Scripture to repent and believe do not imply that sinful men are able to do so. Jesus told the Jews who were hostile toward Him, “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep” (John 10:26). As cited earlier, in Romans 8:8-9 and in 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul clearly asserts that the natural man is not able to respond favorably to spiritual things because he lacks the capacity to do so. Sinners are *responsible* to repent and believe, but they are *not able* to do so or even to begin to do so until God sovereignly draws them to Christ. If they were able to make any move toward God, you can be sure that they would boast in their ability, even if God gave that ability to all men. But Thiesen’s scriptural support is lacking. In Titus 2:11, Paul simply means that the offer of salvation is available to all—all races and nations, all classes, and all sinners, no matter how terrible their sin.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY APPLIED:

The doctrine of total depravity is at the very heart of the gospel, and thus the applications are many. I will briefly mention seven:

1. The doctrine of total depravity should cause me to despair completely of myself, my ability, my merit, and my will, and to cast myself completely upon Christ alone for salvation.

If my salvation depends upon my choosing Christ, it is most shaky, because I may decide to walk away from Christ and go my own way. But, if it depends upon Christ’s choice of me, wretched in my sin, with absolutely no merit of my own, then it is as certain as the promise of God who cannot lie. Scripture is abundantly clear, you can do nothing to save yourself from God’s rightful judgment. Only Christ can save, and He has promised to save all who trust in Him. If you say, “But I cannot even trust in Him,” you are right! Call out to Him for mercy and faith, with the man who said to Jesus, “I do believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Or again, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

2. The doctrine of total depravity humbles my pride.

Ever since Eve thought that she could be like God, the human race has been infected with pride. Even many who profess Christ dislike the doctrine of depravity, because it removes every ground for boasting. Luther said it well (*Bondage of the Will*, p. 100, 101),

God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realises that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another—God alone. As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident and does not utterly despair of himself, and so is not humbled before God; but plans out for himself (or at least hopes and longs for) a position, an occasion, a work, which shall bring him final salvation. But he who is out of doubt that his destiny depends entirely on the will of God despairs entirely of himself, chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work in him; and such a man is very near to grace for his salvation.

So these truths are published for the sake of the elect, that they may be humbled and brought down to nothing, and so saved. The rest of men resist this humiliation; indeed, they condemn the teaching of self-despair; they want a little something left that they can do for themselves. Secretly they continue proud, and enemies of the grace of God.

In *The Institutes*, Calvin often comes back to this important theme of humility as one of the main benefits of the doctrines of grace. In fact, it was reading Calvin that showed me how far off track from Scripture the modern self-esteem teaching is.

3. The doctrine of total depravity helps me to witness to sinners as a fellow sinner.

It may be inadvertent, but many of us Christians come across to unbelievers as if we are better than they are. Hopefully, we are in the process of sanctification, and thus do live more godly lives than unbelievers do! But we should always be cognizant of God's

sovereign grace that, in the words of John Newton, “saved a wretch like me.” Keeping this in mind should help me relate to and not look down on those who are still the slaves of sin. Witnessing has rightly been described as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

Also, if I keep the doctrine of total depravity in view, I won’t be fooled into thinking that people who seem to be nice, decent folks are not in need of salvation. Whether a person is outwardly a scoundrel or a law-abiding citizen, he desperately needs the gospel of grace so that he can be saved.

If a person is trusting in his own goodness to get him into heaven, we err, I think, to tell him that God loves him as the opening point of the gospel. There is no example of such an approach in Scripture. The proud sinner needs to hear and, through the conviction of the Holy Spirit through God’s holy law, to *feel* the depths of his depravity so that he will sense his need for the Savior. I believe that much modern evangelism, being Arminian in its approach, glosses over the doctrine of depravity. The result is, we have many in our churches who love little because they wrongly think that they’ve been forgiven little. A proper understanding of depravity would help us to be more effective in proclaiming the gospel. Fallen sinners are not basically decent people who just need to hear about God’s love so that they can make a decision for Christ. They aren’t predisposed to believe if we would only tell them. They are dead in their sins and need to be raised from the dead through the mighty power of God.

4. The doctrine of total depravity causes me to fear trusting in myself and drives me to trust totally in the Lord.

As I grow to know my own heart, and the sin that still indwells me, I realize that if I am to know victory over sin, I must not trust in myself at all, but only in the Savior who said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The Apostle Paul warned, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). He affirmed from his own experience, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10), because when he was aware of his own weakness, he relied totally upon God’s grace and power, not at all on himself. Thus a proper understanding of my own depravity as revealed in Scripture is essential for the process of sancti-

fiction. Knowing how sinful I am drives me to walk in the Spirit and trust in God for deliverance from sin's power.

5. The doctrine of total depravity enables me to bear up under suffering without complaint.

Modern Christian psychology encourages Christians to get all their rage out toward God because He allowed them to be abused as children or to go through some terrible tragedy. People are being told, "God knows how you feel, and He can take it. So go ahead and let it all out." Behind all this sort of counsel are the unbiblical notions that it is psychologically healthy to vent anger and that we do not deserve such abusive treatment from God. There is even a book titled, *Forgiving God*, by a woman who lost a toddler in death. The terrible implication of the title is that God somehow wronged this woman by taking her child!

The Book of Job soundly refutes all such psychobabble. While there is a proper sense in which Job (and later, the psalmists) complained to God about their situation, the whole point of the book is that the most righteous man on the earth had no legitimate basis to challenge the holy God when He allowed him to go through terrible suffering. At the climax of the book, God calls Job before Him, shows him some of His handiwork in creation, and in effect says, "You as a creature have no basis to question what I as the Creator do." Job gets the message and responds, "I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? ... I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 40:4; 42:6).

If we would see the depths of the depravity from which God has saved us, we would not whine about His treatment of us. The fact that He lets us draw another breath is sheer mercy! If He takes away my family or my possessions or my health or my life, He is righteous, because I deserve none of those blessings. A proper view of depravity enables us to respond submissively to suffering, knowing that we deserve far worse.

6. The doctrine of total depravity gives me greater love and forgiveness toward those who wrong me.

The doctrine of depravity helps me to remember that those who wrong me are sinners just as I am. Why am I shocked by what they did? If it were not for God's grace, I would wrong them,

too. But, as one who has received mercy, I must show mercy. I can sincerely pray that God would be gracious in saving them. I can treat them with greater compassion, knowing their fallen condition. This does not mean that I absolve a sinner of responsibility for his sin. He may need to be brought to justice or to make restitution for wrongs done. But I should be able to understand why he wronged me and show him a small token of the love and forgiveness that God has shown to me.

7. The doctrine of total depravity moves me to greater love and devotion to God for His amazing grace.

One of the problems of the weak gospel being preached today, the gospel that does not wound and totally disable the proud sinner from thinking that he has anything he can bring to God, is that those who profess faith in Christ have no idea of the awful pit from which He rescued them, and of that fact that He did it in spite of their sin, not because they were "worthy." The truth is, even the best of us were worthy a million times over of spending eternity in the lake of fire! Forgiven little, such "Christians" love little!

The Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, said, "Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed." (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:54). When we see the utter depravity of our sinful hearts, and then realize the abundant grace and mercy of our Lord and Savior, we will be caught up in wonder, love, and praise to Him for His glorious, sovereign grace! Thus the doctrine of total depravity, as with all sound doctrine, should lead us to worship our glorious God! I pray that God will impress on each of us the biblical doctrine of total depravity and use it to the glory of His sovereign grace!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer someone who said, "It is not fair of God to condemn the human race because of Adam's sin"?
2. Is it mockery to call upon lost sinners, who cannot believe by their own power, to believe in Christ? Why/why not?
3. If men are totally depraved, why do many unbelievers do good deeds? Do these good deeds disprove the doctrine? Why not?
4. What Scriptures would support the view that unbelievers have a "free will" to believe in Christ? Which Scriptures deny it? How do you harmonize the two?

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