

“You Were Dead” | Ephesians 2:1-3
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(Discussion questions on page 8)

In an effort to curtail theological errors of the late medieval church, leaders in sixteenth century England produced a book of sermons known as **The Book of Homilies**. Published in 1547, this book of twelve sermons was given to ministers across England to preach from on Sundays. This way, a largely uneducated clergy could begin to re-educate the people according to sound doctrine.

If you were writing and arranging these twelve sermons, I wonder what passages and themes you’d cover?

The first sermon is on **Scripture**, reminding listeners that God speaks through the Bible, and the Bible is, therefore, the final authority over the church. The second Homily’s theme, however, may surprise modern ears. It is titled, **“Of the misery of all mankind,”** and aims not to build our self-esteem but whittle it down. Thomas Cranmer, the sermon’s author, opens:

THE Holy Ghost, in writing the holy Scripture, is in nothing more diligent then to pull down man’s vain glory and pride, which of all vices is most universally grafted in all mankind, even from the first infection of our first father Adam. And, therefore, we read in many places of Scripture, many notable lessons against this old rooted vice, to teach us the most commendable virtue of humility, how to know our selves, and to remember what we be of ourselves.¹

Cranmer spends several pages showing from Scripture this painful point, that “we are of our selves” are “very sinful, wretched, and damnable”

Most people who become pastors do so because they want to help and encourage people. Our natural inclinations on a Sunday morning are to make you feel better. But in submission to God’s Word, sometimes the way we must go about this is counterintuitive. Like Cranmer’s Homily, Scripture suggests that, at times, the best tonic for a weary soul is not flattery, but a reminder of just how bad things would be outside of the mercy of God. To recall our natural state apart from grace, is to remind the recovering patient just how lucky he is to have such a good doctor.

As we return to our study in Ephesians chapters 1-3, we pick up in the beginning of **chapter 2**. In this first section of the chapter, **Ephesians 2:1-10**, Paul is explaining to the Ephesians what exactly happened to them in salvation. His main goal is for his readers to feel the greatness of God’s grace, as summarized in verses 4-5:

¹ The Book of Homilies, “Of the misery of all mankind.”

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:4-5).

But he knows that if they believe they were only saved from bad health, or inadequate social systems, or an immoral culture, or bad leaders, they won't fully appreciate just how amazing the grace of God is. So, Paul spends the first three verses painting, in vivid colors, the misery and wretchedness of our condition apart from the grace of God.

We will spend this sermon considering this pre-salvation account of humanity in three parts: **(1) The Diagnosis, (2) The Transmitters, (3) How This Bad-News Is Good-News.**

I. The Diagnosis: Dead

Prior to God's intervention, what was our condition? Paul does not say we were sick, sad, or misfortunate. He says "You were dead." This is the diagnoses of those who live outside of God's mercy. A sick person may get well, a sad person become happy, a misfortunate person's luck may turn. But a dead man is dead—barring an absolute miracle, he is without hope.

How should we understand this deadness? Paul goes on, "*dead in your trespasses and sins*" (2:1).

This is something different than *physical* death. The dead person is "walking" in these sins (v.2) and "living" among "the sons of disobedience" (v.3). They are alive, and dead, at the same time.

We are dealing here with *spiritual* death, or a deadness of the soul. There is a difference between the death of the body and the death of the soul, as Jesus taught: "do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matt 10:28). Our soul is that spiritual part of us designed to draw life from God. Sometimes it is also pictured in the Bible as our heart.²

Just as our physical aspect draws life from water, food, sunlight, so too this spiritual aspect has a source of life. The soul is designed to draw life from God—God, who the psalmist describes as "the fountain of life" (Ps 36:9). From God the soul draws favor, grace, comfort, joy, friendship. The soul that is alive with God is marked by a sensitivity to the things of God, moved in love toward God, awake to the knowledge of God, humbled before the grandeur of God.

The soul that is dead is the opposite. It is cut off from God. This deadness may manifest in four ways:

First, Insensitivity: coldness and hardness towards the things of God. The soul that is spiritually dead has no love of God that warms it; it sheds no tears over sin that moisten it. "But because

² This is the case in Ezekiel, where "heart" speaks to the spiritual aspect of man: "And I will give you a new **heart**, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the **heart of stone** from your flesh and give you a **heart of flesh**" (Ezek 36:26).

of your hard and impenitent heart” Paul writes, “you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom 2:5).

Second, Ignorance: blindness to the reality of God; judging his ways and Word as foolish: says “the natural person [spiritually dead person],” Paul says “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him” (1 Cor 2:14).³

Third, Arrogance or pride: “In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, “There is no God” (Ps 10:4).

Fourth, Inability: We cannot please God or keep his commands. When we think of our own sinfulness, we typically focus on things we do. But the bigger issue is things we don’t do. We have not loved God with all our heart, mind, and strength, nor loved our neighbor as ourselves. Scripture teaches that God’s design for us is “to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48); “to be Holy, as God is holy” (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16).

Since the fall of humankind, we cannot please God in this way. “Those who are in the realm of the flesh” Paul says, “cannot please God” (Rom 8:8).⁴ Jesus teaches that it is in fact impossible for a sinful person to come to God by their own moral effort: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

Before the Ephesians were made alive in Christ, they had souls that were spiritual dead.

Notice Paul also says in verse 3 that “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

Children of wrath explains that this spiritual deadness is part of God’s judgement upon sin. We see God judges sin in Genesis 3—and that along with the eventual mortal death of the sinner, there is a death that touches our relational, vocational, and spiritual lives.

And notice that Paul says this diagnosis of death touches **everyone**, “by nature children of wrath, like **the rest of mankind**.”

We struggle with this sweeping diagnosis. Surely it applies to the worst actors in history. But what about the parent who is doing her best, generally kind and cheerful, working hard to put her kids through school. How can Paul say someone like this is “dead in her trespasses and sins”?

³ “Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the LORD?” (Ps 14:4).

⁴ The writer of Hebrews adds, “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6).

Just as a virus can dull our sense of smell, so the spiritual fallenness of our world and lives blunts our perception of sin. Because we cannot see God, and scarcely sense his value and greatness, we cannot fully grasp—intellectually or emotionally—the heinousness of sin. But the Bible is clear: from the days of the Flood, to the tower of Babel, to the failings of even the greatest heroes in the Bible (Noah, Abraham, Sampson, David, Peter): “None is righteous, no, not one.... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:10, 23).

Now, the Bible is not teaching that everyone is as sinful as possible, or that everyone sins in equal amounts. Some people do more wicked deeds than others.

What the Bible is saying, however, is that in this fallen world, we all turn, in our hearts, away from God. Just as Adam and Eve did. It is not so much the number of sins we commit, but the nature of what sin is, that causes this death. Sin, at its core, is understood in the Bible as **idolatry**—worshiping things above God—and **adultery**—loving somethings more than God.

In Putting created things over our creator, a trust is broken, an innocence lost, and a break created between our soul and the glory of God. This dislocation from God entails a death that is physical (we “return to dust”), legal (“under God’s wrath”), and spiritual (we are “hard, ignorant, proud” toward God, and “incapable” of pleasing him).

What happened to you—you who have been made alive in Christ? Paul starts his answer by reminding us that before Christ, “we were dead.”

Two words of application:

First, when it comes to your spiritual health, let the Word of God diagnose you. Your feelings, your culture, your friends and family, are *not* sufficient to give you a true sounding of your soul. The Holy Spirit, who speaks through the Word of God, is.

Second, if you have a subtle but growing taste for the things of God, if you find yourself hating your sin and fighting it, if you feel in your heart that Jesus has done for you what you could not, namely, reconciled you to God as your Father, then rejoice. You are seeing green shoots of life, growing out of a soul that has been brought from death to life.

[T] In the field of pathology—the study of disease—we read of “transmitters.” These are the agents that carry the disease. There are three things in this passage that Paul wants us to be aware, which function as transmitters of this disease of “soul-deadening-sin”: the world, the devil and the flesh.

II. The Transmitters: The World, Devil, and Flesh.

In our baptismal services, candidates and their sponsors are asked to “renounce the devil and all the spiritual forces of wickedness,” “the empty promises and deadly deceits of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God,” and “the sinful desires of the flesh.”

This triumvirate comes from Bible passages like Ephesians 2:1-3.

The World

Notice first that Paul says that our sinfulness is in part activated as we live under the influence of this world:

“You were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world” (2:1-2a).

The world, as originally created by God, is “very good” (Gen 1:31) After the fall of humankind, however, world-systems were developed that nurtured life apart from God. Recall that in constructing the Tower of Babel, humans were seeking “to make a name for themselves” (Gen 11:4). The “world,” as used here, speaks of the collective system of values and ideologies that a culture kneads into the soul of its people. And if, as the Puritans stated in The Westminster Shorter Catechism, that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever,” then the spiritual health of any culture must be weighed against that standard.

What does modern, western culture teach us to believe and value?

I was recently at a conference where a seasoned and well-respected pastor made the following point. In speaking about his local city’s major newspaper, he said that there is a section for local events, global events, business, even sports. But you won’t find a section on God, or missions, of the life of the church.

This made everyone chuckle, but it also made a point that has stuck with me: our surrounding culture does not draw our attention to what is most important. It trains us to have temporal vision, to miss the spiritual aspect of the problems around us, and to believe that solutions to our core problems lie within our power.

We need not flee the world, but we must be aware of the “course of this world,” asking how it is transmitting a sinful, God-neglecting, worldview to our psyches.

The Devil

Paul then adds that we are not only following the course of this world, but also

following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (2:2b)

This refers to the devil and his forces. The phrase “power of the air” seems to stress his influence in this present age. Recall that in Jesus’ wilderness temptation,

And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will (Luke 4:5-6).

“Why is the devil thought of as the ruler of this world?” asked the fourth century preacher, **John Chrysostom** (AD 347—407). He answers:

Because virtually the whole of humanity surrendered to him. All are his voluntary and willing slaves. Few pay any heed to Christ, who promises unnumbered blessings... He rules in this age, where he has...more subjects than God, more who obey him rather than God.

There are 2 billion Christians in the world. So with a population of 8 billion, this means that 75% of people are not members of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, but are living in world-systems more under the influence of Satan, than Christ. This, of course, does not mean they are all “possessed” by the devil—but Scripture is clear about his influence.

Satan’s chief tactic is not to get people to do bad things, but to get them to believe wrong things—he traffics in deception. And from our deception, we then act in error.

Often whole cultures fall under his deception, and things that in hindsight are so evil, seemed acceptable to a whole people: think of racism in early America, antisemitism in 1930s Germany, or the caste system in India.⁵ In time, with perspective, people can scarcely believe that whole cultures once believed some of these things. But Satan works carefully to deceive.

Let us never think that own age, or culture, is not susceptible to such demonic deception.

The Flesh

Thirdly, Paul turns to the self.

...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.... (v 3).

When the Bible refers to “our flesh” in context like this, it is a way of speaking of a person who is living, not according to the influence of God and the Holy Spirit, but entirely according to their own desires and opinions. Notice the language of “passions” and “desires.” These speak of strong inclinations and stubborn self-will to choose our own way. But to follow our flesh’s impulses unchecked, is to court corruption.

Sin, working through unbridled passions, enslaves (Jn 8:34; Rom 6:16).

The people that I know who read great huge swaths of history, paying close attention to how human’s act over time, do not come away as optimist. They are realist at best. They recognize that no matter what part of the world, no matter what ethnicity, no matter what shape of governance, there is an impulse in humanity that drives us not toward love, but evil.

⁵ Or the transgender ideology that’s so recently swept Western culture.

Sum: We are dead in our trespasses and sins, Paul says, and explains that the world-systems we inhabit, the devil and his deceit, and our own fallen nature, are transmitters through which this disease of soul-deadening sin spreads.

III. How Bad-news Can Be Goodnews.

We come to verses 4-5 next week, where continues to fill out the answer to “what happened to us” by looking into God’s grace. But in these first three verses, the apostle felt it necessary to paint with some color our state before God acted for us. He did not do this to discourage his readers, but to do them spiritual good. The Spirit of God, working through Scripture, never aims to leave us dead in our sins.

I’ll close, therefore, with a few ways that hearing this bad-news about our original condition, is good news for our present walk with Christ.

First, it produces alertness. We would love to put up our feet and coast. But Paul warns that the currents we swim in—whether our culture or our appetites or the spiritual influences around—are not, ultimately, heavenward. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” writes James (James 4:4). Let us consider well where we may be tempted to naively make friends with the systems of this present age.

Second, it is a spur for the church to become an alternative cultural and spiritual realm. Through our networks of Christian friends, our shared practices of joining on Sundays for worship, our commitment to live under the authority of God’s word, we (the church as a whole) must be an alternative realm within which we walk. The church must cultivate its own culture.

Third, our spiritual deadness must cultivate a deeper humility and thankfulness before God—for what He did for us in Christ. Paul will say in verse 8-9,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast (2:8-9).

The great saints are all marked by this: deep humility arising from an awareness of just how bad things would be for them, had not God intervened. Our spiritual deadness, the powerful influences of the world, the flesh, the devil, were not things we could overcome on our own. “But God,” Paul will begin in verse 4, “being rich in mercy,” intervened.

Turning a last time his Homily on our helpless condition, Thomas Cranmer closes:

Let us [a]cknowledge the exceeding mercy of God toward us, and confess, that as of our selves commeth all evil and damnation: so likewise of him commeth all goodness and salvation, as God himself saith by the Prophet Hosea, ‘I Israel, thy destruction commeth of thy self, but in me only is they help and comfort (Hosea 13:9). If we thus humbly submit our selves in the sight of God, we may be sure that in the time of his visitation,

he will lift us up unto the kingdom of his dearly beloved Son Christ Jesus our Lord: To whom, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory forever. Amen.⁶

Discussion Questions

1. Paul describes people living outside the grace and mercy of God as “dead in their trespasses and sins” (v.1). What do you make of this diagnosis? What does this death entail? Why do you think Paul starts his argument this way?
2. Paul further highlights three ways people walk in spiritual death—by following the course of this world (v.2), living under the sway of the prince of the air (v.2), and by indulging the passions of the flesh (v.3). What are two ways the systems of this world (culture) are orienting people away from God? How might the devil be at work in the culture you live in? How does the devil working through this present culture play on the passions of our flesh?
3. What hope does someone dead in their trespasses and entrapped in a godless culture under the sway of the devil have? Can they do anything to give themselves new spiritual life?
4. Even after salvation, Christians still face the powers of the world, the flesh and the devil. What are a few ways that the church (other believers) can help us fight these forces?

⁶ The Book of Homilies, “Of the misery of all mankind.”