

EXPOSITION OF EPHESIANS

Message #7

Ephesians 2:1-3

James Montgomery Boice told an interesting story that happened back around the year 1840, when revival was sweeping through Savannah, Georgia. There was a minister by the name of Palmer who taught that a sinner was totally unable to believe on Jesus Christ apart from the sovereign work of God, and then he would invite people to believe on Jesus Christ. A young man who heard Palmer preach came to Palmer and said you preachers are the most contradictory men in the world. You say that sinners are helpless to believe on Jesus Christ and yet you also say they will be damned if they do not believe on Jesus Christ. Pastor Palmer said to the young man, well there is no point in us quarreling about this- either you can believe in and of yourself or you cannot, and what I hope is that you will believe.

That message hit that young man hard. Palmer said he had no idea what those words had done to that young man, because the young man said “I have been trying my best for three whole days and cannot.” Pastor Palmer said, well let’s go to God and tell Him your difficulty and ask for His grace. Palmer said they knelt down and prayed admitting the total helplessness without divine intervention. When he got up from praying, he did not say a word and in a short time, the young man had believed on Jesus Christ. God’s grace had saved him (*The Doctrines of Grace*, pp. 88-89).

There is a term in the world of theology that many do not like; it is called “total depravity.” What this means is that sin has so affected every one of us at our core being to the extent that we will not seek any relationship with a Holy God. There is not one thing we can do, in and of ourselves, to get out of this depraved state. Of all of the passages in the Bible that show this point, here, in Ephesians, is perhaps the greatest text of all.

The point of these verses is not to prove that we are all sinners, although we all are. The point of these verses is not to prove that we sin because we are sinners, although we all do. **The point of these verses is to show that we are so corrupted and dominated by sin that we will not and cannot take one step to improve our status in our relationship with God, and we will not move toward God unless He graciously intervenes in our lives.**

To actually begin to realize the riches that we have in grace, we must see ourselves honestly before God saved us. When we do, we begin to realize that we could only be saved by God’s elective grace and once we figure that out, we begin to realize what God has actually given us.

Chapter 1 was so upbeat and so positive and God exalting because it shows every believer the work of the entire Godhead in our behalf. We saw the work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But when you come to chapter 2, it hits you right between the eyes because what we begin to realize is it is an amazing thing that God didn’t let us drop into hell.

GOD IS PRAISED AND THE GRACE OF GOD IS MAGNIFIED WHEN WE BEGIN TO SEE OUR DEPRAVITY FOR WHAT IT REALLY WAS AND WE REALIZE HOW MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS GOD ACTUALLY WAS TO SAVE US.

There are many churches that teach that the matter of your salvation is about your choice. There are many churches that like to stress “free will.” But the fact is there is not a person on this earth that has a complete free will. We do not have a free will to choose to become a world class Olympic athlete. There are genetics and other things involved. We do not have a free will to choose to become taller or shorter than what God has designed us to be. We do not have a free will to change an I.Q. of 120 into one that is 140.

When we properly understand this text, we begin to realize that grace salvation is all about God’s choice. When we look at these verses, we get to see ourselves as God saw us prior to Him granting us His grace. **You can use your will to turn away from God, but you will not, in and of yourself, use your will to turn to God.** You will not seek God and apart from God’s grace intervention you will not be saved. Ask yourself this question- if we take the will of man completely out of the process of salvation where does that leave us? It leaves us totally dependent upon and praising God for His grace.

In Ephesians 2:1-3, God describes of our real condition before He gave us His grace. There are five descriptive realities of our condition prior to God giving us His grace:

Descriptive Reality #1 - We were dead. 2:1

This past year some very famous people physically died: Elizabeth Taylor, Peter Falk, James Arness, Harry Morgan, Jane Russell, Joe Frazier just to name a few. The truth is they were spiritually dead long before last year and so were we.

Prior to God graciously saving us, we weren’t just a little confused about life, or confused about God, or confused about right and wrong; we were totally and completely spiritually dead. Before God took action to impart to us His grace, our condition was we were dead. Now we know this is talking about our spiritual condition, not our physical condition because the next couple of verses talk about how we actually lived our physical lives when we were dead. So a person who is spiritually dead has no life beyond the life of this world. We did not say he does not have existence beyond this world, but he has no life beyond this world, which means he is destined for burning hell.

The grace of God does more than just rescue us from a miserable existence; it actually gives life to those who are dead. We weren’t just a little lost in our relationship with God, we were dead in our relationship with God. Now don’t miss this. **When God’s saving grace is given to anyone it is given to one who is dead.**

We were not half-dead. We were not just barely alive, clinging to life. We were not almost dead, with family members on pins and needles as if we were in some ICU hospital room. We were dead. We were totally and completely dead with no chance of any life in and of ourselves.

We were dead in our relationship with God because of our transgressions and sins. The word “transgressions” mean we all walked away from the path of righteousness and from the Word and will of God. The word “sins” means we all missed the mark and fell short of God’s standards of righteousness. The Greek is very emphatic, very specific and very personal.

We all have our own transgressions and our own sins and that left us dead. In our relationship with God we were dead on a slab in the morgue of sin. That was our spiritual condition. In fact, Warren Wiersbe titled the first ten verses of Ephesians 2 as “Get Out of the Graveyard” (*Be Rich*, p. 39).

John Gerstner, who was a professor in a seminary out east, compared Paul’s description here to that of a zombie. He said a zombie in a horror story is a person who is dead but still walking around on his feet. He is nothing more than a moving, stinking corpse. As Gerstner says “this is a fair description of what Paul is saying about human nature in it lost condition. Apart from Jesus Christ, these sinning human corpses are “the living dead” (*The Doctrines of Grace*, p. 74).

Now the fact that we were dead is more than just an interesting analogy, this is a theological reality. **Ask yourself this question, what exactly does a dead person have the capability of doing? The answer is nothing .**

A dead person cannot move or breathe. A dead person cannot choose to do anything. A dead person cannot accomplish anything. A dead person is dead. Now I have seen, and so probably have you, people talk to a dead body in a funeral home, but I have never seen the dead person talk back. A dead person cannot communicate, cannot eat, cannot drink and cannot respond because he is dead.

Some die and perhaps seem to look a little better in their death state than someone else, but it doesn’t really make any difference because when you are dead, you are dead. It doesn’t matter if you looked like Marilyn Monroe or Madelyn Murray O’Hare. It doesn’t matter if you looked like Rock Hudson or Al Capone. It doesn’t matter what you looked like because when you are dead you are dead.

God wants every one of us to realize that this was our condition. People don’t like to see themselves in this condition. Oh they will admit they have a few flaws or as one person said to me, we all have made some mistakes. But they do not like to admit this theological reality- we all are dead in our relationship with God. **However, the more we understand this was our condition, the more we are able to begin to grasp grace and the more God will be praised for giving us salvation.**

A good illustration of how dead we are is in the case of Lazarus in John 11 who was completely dead until Jesus Christ gave Him life. Jesus did not walk to the tomb and look into it and say “yes I see that hand.” He did not get people to play harps and beg Lazarus to make a decision. Jesus Christ gave him life. Out of pure grace, He gave him life because he was dead.

Descriptive Reality #2 - We lived life with a world focus. **2:2a**

We were not only dead, but we have actually followed and actively practiced the wicked ways of the world. There have been many times when we have thought and acted no differently than the way a wicked world thinks and acts. We live in a world that does its best to get us to conform to it and not to God. This world has a focus that is designed to move people away from the truth of God. Music, education, business, entertainment, goals and objectives of this world are not designed to get you and me to glorify God.

In crawling through this text it has forced me to go back in time when I remember the world's goals and philosophies were mine. Prior to faith in Jesus Christ my whole life was lived with a world focus, not a God focus.

John Calvin said we were all infected with a depravity in this world. Sin did not just make an impact on a few people, but on the whole world (*Epistle To the Ephesians*, p. 220). Many people don't like this point, but the fact is there was a time in life when we did live and think just like everybody else in the world.

The world has a focus that leaves God out. The world does not see the need of reverencing or worshipping God. That is why people of the world think Sunday is their play day. It is just another day of the week for them to focus on anything other than God.

Descriptive Reality #3 - We lived life according to a satanic world. **2:2b**

Now Paul does not name Satan here specifically, but he does later in this very book. In Ephesians 4:27 and 6:11 he calls him the Devil. In Ephesians 6:16 he calls him "the evil one." Here he refers to him as being in charge as ruler over evil forces in the unseen world, the prince of the power of the air.

The words "the air" refers to the atmospheric space around the world in which humans live and breathe. **Humans are living in a world whose sphere is controlled at the present time by Satan.** Satan has tremendous power and influence in this world and prior to God extending to us his grace, we lived our lives right in accordance with him and his system. One biblical expositor said there are three simple observations that we may make about this world that shows it is satanic: It is a world given to humanism, it is a world given to materialism and it is a world given to illicit sex. Satan is controlling this world and we were part of it.

Well if we are living in a world dominated by Satan, how did we ever get into a relationship with God? The grace of God.

Not only does Paul say we were dead and worldly, but we actually were slaves of Satan and we were subject to his will. We were taken captive by him and his enticements (II Tim. 2:26). By the way, here is where real free will comes into play. Free will is a will that is worldly focused and satanic. A free will chooses its own course, which is away from God and consistent with Satan and this world. The human will is not about to choose God or His Word. We were children of disobedience, living our lives in the world and in the satanic system.

Descriptive Reality #4 - We lived life fulfilling our lusts . **2:3a**

Now some people would like all to think that they are really moral people, who have really never done anything to fulfill their evil lusts. Now just in case you think you are a little better than this description, notice **verse 3** “among them we too **all**.” Paul even includes himself. Remember Paul had been a Pharisee steeped in Jewish religion, but he came to see himself honestly prior to grace.

Now this is remarkable to think about Paul fulfilling the lusts of his flesh because he lived in a time when there wasn't a printing press to produce lustful things, there was no television or movies to watch, there was no internet or cable or satellite TV for him to vicariously fantasize and live out his lusts by watching others. He apparently knew what it was like to experience this first hand and he admitted it. Real godliness is always in the context of truthfulness.

Here is the truth; all people have enjoyed sinning. All people have enjoyed fulfilling their fleshly lusts. All people have enjoyed partaking of the satanic world. Prior to God's grace working in our lives, we all lived life, at times, with a focus fulfilling our lustful appetites no matter what they were.

If we could replay on a big screen the life of every person on this earth and see it as God sees it, we could easily prove the point. There is not a person here tonight who has not, at some point, enjoyed fulfilling their lusts. If we knew the truth as God knows it, we could probably take just about every known fleshly lustful sin known to humanity and show that we have all been guilty of some or most of them.

What we see here are the three main forces that have affected us all: the world, the devil and our own flesh. But there is one more point Paul drives home.

Descriptive Reality #5 - We all have a nature destined for the wrath of God. **2:3b**

Do you understand this point; we were “by nature” children of wrath. Don't you for one second think you smell a lot better to God in your depravity than someone else does. We all stink. We have a sin nature that deserves God's wrath. Unless God gives life to our dead, cursed nature, we are heading to wrath and we all deserve His wrath.

One ancient biblical scholar said God made this world for many, but the world to come for a few.

There are those like the Pelagians and Arminians who want to deny the idea of original sin. They like to say well sin spreads to someone when they choose to sin. That is not what this text says. This text says we were born with a sin nature and a depravity that destines us to receive the wrath of God. We are all degenerate sinners.

In fact, Augustine the great theologian came up with a theological phrase that described this perfectly: “non posse no peccare” which means “not able not to sin.” A person in and of himself cannot stop sinning because he has a nature enslaved to sin.

In fact, any honest believer will admit to you that there are times when the old nature flares up and is drawn right toward sinful things.

The worst thing about our sin nature and our sinful status, apart from God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, is that we are the objects of the wrath of God. It isn't that we will be judged, we are judged already (John 3:18). Jesus said "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe in Him has been judged already." John said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" but the one who doesn't "will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Paul said in Romans that the wrath of God is aimed straight at every unbeliever and they are storing wrath up for the time God will pour it out on them (Romans 1:18; 2:5,8).

Now why does Paul go to all the trouble to paint such a gloomy, dismal picture of man here in these verses? The answer is because Paul wanted believers to understand just how rich they are in experiencing God's grace. If you have believed on Jesus Christ, God has given you His entire grace package and it is that grace package that makes you rich.

God's grace package has delivered you from your dead depravity that deserves wrath and He has given you life.