

Sermon 17, The Way of the World, Ephesians 2:1-3

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Proposition: Every human being is born into the deadness and bondage of the serpent's seed.

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, at the beginning of 2017 we spent some time looking together at the Bible's Big Picture. One of the things I tried to emphasize in that series was the theme that runs through the entire Bible of the seed of the woman vs. the seed of the serpent. We saw then that ultimately the progenitor of the woman's seed is Christ. He, and His elect in Him as His seed, are the recipients of all the Father's promises of salvation. But opposed to this realization of salvation is the archenemy Satan, 'The Adversary' as his name in Hebrew literally means. He has sought throughout history to stop, to overcome, to negate the saving promises and saving work of God. He too has a group of human beings to serve him, and they are called his "seed" in Genesis 3:15. God in fact has promised to put enmity between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed. Those human beings who believe the serpent's lies, who walk in the path he has marked out for them, and submit to his rule are his seed. Jesus and John the Baptist both used this brutal form of address. Jesus told the Pharisees that they were from their father the Devil, and John called them a "brood of vipers" (which is an obvious paraphrase of the term "seed of the serpent"!). It is this background on which Paul draws in his portrayal here of the pre-conversion condition of the Ephesians, himself, and thus really of all Christians throughout history. Conversion means being brought out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God. Conversion means being snatched out of Hell, such that its gates do not prevail to keep you imprisoned within its mighty fastnesses. Conversion means transitioning from being among the serpent's seed to being among Christ's seed. There are many facets to this lostness and deadness, of course, and they ultimately trace back to God's warning in Genesis 2 that the day humanity ate of the forbidden fruit would be the day on which they surely died. Paul is simply explaining to the Ephesians how this truth manifested itself in their lives. What he is highlighting here, having sketched the greatness of every spiritual blessing which we have in Christ, is how little we deserved those blessings and what rotten scumballs we were in and of

ourselves. We need to understand that all of us by nature are the serpent's seed, are children of wrath, unless and until the living God saves us.

I. You Were Dead In Sin, v. 1

So he begins by saying "You were dead in sin." Many English translations, including the King James Version, import the main verb from v. 5 and put it here. But Paul didn't write that verb here. He isn't going to share the good news right away. Besides, he already went through it all in the previous chapter! These three verses are simply going to hammer home the bad news until all of us see how totally inexcusable we are. You — the people I'm talking to, you here in front of me — were dead in trespasses and sins. The word for sin is doubled simply to indicate how total the influence of sin was. It wasn't just sin; it was sins and trespasses. You, brothers and sisters, were dead in trespasses and sins.

What does that mean? Having been around Reformed circles, you've probably heard the illustration that you weren't swimming with all your might, trying to save yourself, when Jesus sailed by on a Coast Guard cutter and threw you a flotation ring on a long rope. You grabbed that float and He hauled you onto the boat. No. That's not what happened. You weren't swimming. You weren't even floating facedown. You were dead and lying on the bottom of the ocean, and Jesus came swimming down to you, hauled you to the surface, and resurrected you. That is certainly a more accurate picture of what being "dead" means. This isn't mostly dead, to borrow the language of William Goldman. This is *all* dead. And of course, such an illustration is useful in Calvinist-Arminian polemics. But rather than thinking about what death means to us, it's more useful for our understanding of this passage to see what death means biblically. What is the background here?

It's what I already mentioned, Genesis 2:17: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." This promise was fulfilled to Adam and Eve, and on the day they ate they died. Their death is the same death that overtook the Ephesian believers and that has overtaken all human beings descending from Adam by ordinary generation.

Yet, of course, they didn't die that day! Adam lived over 900 years after the fall and had sons and daughters. So what's the idea? Was God's threat hollow? Not at all. We simply need to understand that death is not limited to the cessation of physical life, intellectual life, and emotional life. We can think of Aristotle's description of life: "In several ways a thing is said to live, and even if only one of these is present, the thing is said to live; as intellect and sense, local movement and rest, and lastly, movement of decrease and increase due to nourishment" (*De Anima* 2.2). Well, on the day after the fall, Adam and Eve still had intellect and sense, local movement and rest, and movement of decrease and increase due to nourishment! They still fit every way in which a thing can be said to live according to The Philosopher. But there is another form of life, and it is the life for which we were made: spiritual life, or more specifically, life in relationship to God. Adam and Eve died spiritually that day. Their friendship with God was cut off by the knife of sin.

Remember how Jesus defined life? He said that it was knowing God and knowing God's Son. That is true life, Life in its highest form and signification.

Think about it. A friend told me before I got engaged, "I hope you can be married soon so you can start really living!" But when a spouse or close friend dies, we might say, "My life is over." To maintain only the vegetative life, or the animal life that allows us to move around, is incomplete without the intellectual life — but even that is incomplete without the relational, spiritual life for which we were made.

Let me back up and put it another way. Scripture indicates that the spiritual and physical parts of the human being, though related, are not always in perfect sync with each other. Jesus says "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live" (John 5:25 NKJ). That refers to a spiritual resurrection, because Jesus says that the hour has already arrived. People heard His voice and came to (spiritual) life. The final, physical resurrection will follow in God's own good time. This is simply the reversal of the process begun on that worst day of human history in the Garden. There Adam and Eve fell into spiritual death while maintaining their physical life.

So that's what it means to say that you were dead in trespasses and sins. You have experienced the consequences of departing from God. You are living with the results of what happened when our first parents sinned.

What does that spiritual death entail? Well, just as physical death removes you from all physical goods, so spiritual death removes you from all spiritual goods. You are no longer capable of either receiving or creating a spiritual good. So long as the state of death remains, you are incapable of perceiving the goods and realities of a relationship with God. The point here is not that your human spirit is dead, but simply that it is severed from God and His goodness. Unless He changes that reality, you will remain dead. No amount of exposure to spiritual good can have the slightest effect on you. That's why you can preach to unbelievers and read the Bible to them until you're blue in the face, and why they will say "I don't get it. What do you see in that book? Why are you always preaching at me? This stuff makes no sense to me." As long as you are spiritually dead, no medicine short of a resurrection will help you in the slightest.

II. Your Erstwhile Standard of Conduct, vv. 2-3b

But again, you as a dead person were dead with respect to knowing God — not with respect to the vegetative, animal, and intellectual life! You and I, in our state of spiritual deadness, followed three guides.

A. The World, v. 2a

The first is the world. We walked, Paul says, according to the course of this world! Whatever way the world was going was the way we went. If the world was moving toward an emphasis on rights and equality, we moved that way. If the world was moving toward an emphasis on collectivism and brutality and class struggle, we moved toward collectivism and brutality and class struggle. Why in the world does everyone follow the fashions of the world? Because we

can't help it. When you're dead in sin, cut off from God, this ungodly world system is the best thing you've got.

Does the world always do what's right? Is it always a good influence? Ha! To ask those questions is to answer them. Everyone knows that society is wicked and that the world is going to Hell. Yet because it's all we had, we followed it when we were dead in sins.

B. The Devil, v. 2b-c

The Devil, too, had a huge influence over us. He rules over the demons who manifest their power in the regions surrounding Earth and its atmosphere. He works in his seed, who are characterized by their disobedience to God.

Sometimes Paul isn't very positive. Why does he bring up the Devil? Why does he call humanity "the sons of disobedience"? Ultimately, because that's simply the explanation of why humanity is the way that it is. Satan has power and is at work all around us. Our condition is not just maladjusted; at its root, it is *disobedient*. You can sum up everything about human beings by saying that God told us to do one thing and we choose to do another.

C. The Flesh, v. 3

But the triple threat includes our flesh — the sinful part of the human being. This "flesh" has two parts, the flesh and the mind. The flesh is basically all the evil desires of the animal part of our being — our wrong sexual desires, our desires for gluttony, our desires to be violent, etc. The mind includes every evil thing that pertains to our intellectual and spiritual nature, including sins like pride, envy, hatred, malice, and so on.

These three things, the world, the flesh, and the Devil, drove you. They were your standards of conduct. "How should I behave today? Oh, well, let me see what Satan thinks. Let me consult what everyone else is doing. And what do *I* want to do?" All of these work together to make up the life of unbelievers.

Brothers and sisters, the point of saying all this is not primarily so that we can fear or loathe or have pity on unbelievers. The point in saying it is so that we can *remember what this was like*. If you can't remember a time when you lived like this, praise God because you have been a believer ever since you can remember. But many or most of us in this room can remember what it was like to make decisions based on the advice of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. We remember how it felt to do what those three things suggested. It felt really good in a lot of ways — but it also hurt badly. We were constantly shushing our consciences. We had to avoid thinking. We had to lie to ourselves and the people around us. The psychological pressure was overwhelming.

Take a moment. Just remember what life used to be like when you followed the world, when you followed the flesh, when you followed the Devil. You may have felt very free for a lot of that time, but you were actually in bondage to corruption.

III. Your Former Group: The Sons of Disobedience, v. 2d

You were also part of a social group, the sons of disobedience. Paul mentions this group. That is where you lived. You moved in those circles. You were part of that set. If you were converted as

an adult, of course, you know exactly what he's talking about. You can remember the names and phone numbers of some of those old friends. You know who your favorite sons of disobedience were. And you might even still be friends with them on Facebook. If you were converted in childhood in a Christian family, your access to the sons of disobedience may have been limited. But for all that, you may have had friends or companions who joined with you in rebelling against the atmosphere of a Christian home. Take a second. Remember that. Dwell on that. How did it feel? What was it like to be part of that crowd?

IV. Your Former Nature: Born Under God's Wrath, v. 3d

Well, in addition to the psychological and social realities of sin, Paul adds one more thing. Sin permeates us to that point that we are born wicked. Just as Chinese children allegedly come out smelling like garlic because their parents eat so much of it, so all human children come out with sinful hearts. As Voddie Baucham says, they are vipers in diapers! That is the reality for every human child. Those of you who are parents know that as soon as your babies can manifest their personality, they manifest a disposition to disobey, to say "No," to hit and kick and resist perfectly reasonable requests and directives. That is not something they learned in the first three months of life. That is part of them, because it is part of you. We are all wicked, born as objects of God's wrath. That's right: when you were born, God was angry with you. Don't think that means He was out of control. He is always perfectly controlled. His wrath is a settled disposition to eliminate whatever attacks and spurns His love.

V. Every Human Is Born a Child of Wrath, v. 3e

How could this happen? How could God let continue a world like this continue? How can He allow every last human being to be born under His wrath? After all, it wasn't just you who were born an object of wrath. It was the rest of mankind, too. Somewhere around 4 people per second are born onto this planet, and all of them are objects of God's wrath unless something changes. When you see how perverted their hearts are, how many wicked things they do if you let them, you will agree with God that they deserve wrath.

If God is for you, who can be against you? And, of course, if God is against you, who can be for you? No one and nothing can help you stand up against God. If He is justly angry with you, there is absolutely nothing you can do to appease His face. Unless you can change yourself so that you're no longer a bad person, *and* eliminate all the things you did when you were a bad person, God's wrath will damn you.

Brothers and sisters, this point is where Paul presents the gospel. He tells about what God has done to save us from our problems. I know you think about your problems a lot. I think about my problems a lot too. But Paul wants to bring us all the way down to the problem at the root of all our problems. He wants us to think about what life was like as an unbeliever. He wants you to grapple with the full horror of your previous condition. Yes, there is hope and salvation in Jesus Christ. We'll get there next week. But for now, I want us to all to go home talking about how horrible it is to be an unbeliever. If you are an unbeliever and you don't like the way your life was just described, please come talk to me. But to the rest of you, think about how it was to

follow the world, the flesh, and devil. Think about your disobedient lifestyle — and then get ready to contrast it with the good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Amen.