

Living Dead

Ephesians 2:1-3

LITTLE ROCK, AR - The advertisement reads "Are you good without God? Millions are." The proposed bus ad that sparked a federal free speech lawsuit can now be seen on buses all over central Arkansas. Ad and billboards like this have been popping up all over the US in recent months. Greg Epstein is the Humanist chaplain at Harvard University who wrote the recent book, *Good Without God*. He teaches that we can lead good and moral lives without supernaturalism, without higher powers . . . without God. Now I would not argue the rights of the American Atheists or people from The Coalition for Reason to put up those signs. They have a right to free speech in this country as much as anyone. But as a Christian, thinking from a biblical point of view, I would have to disagree with their premise. Romans 3:10-12 says,

10 "There is none righteous, no, not one;
11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.
12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable;
There is none who does good, no, not one."

When people throw out God, they can define good by any standard they want, or by no standard at all. When I compare myself to Charles Manson or Osama Bin Laden, I might proclaim myself to good. But when the standard is Jesus Christ, and His righteousness, like everyone else, I fall short.

Paul is going to say that the real issue with people is not whether they are good or bad, but whether they are alive or dead. There are many who are alive physically, but dead spiritually.

The highest spot in the continental United States is Mt. Whitney in California. It stands a majestic 14,497 feet. From the summit, a beautiful panorama of landscape unfolds. You can see the Sierra Nevadas and the Mojave dessert. But just 84 miles southeast is Death Valley, the lowest spot in the United States at 282 feet below sea level. Death Valley is also the hottest with temperatures ranging to 134 degrees in the shade. It is a stark contrast to Mt. Whitney.

In chapter 1 of Ephesians we have been climbing the heights of God's blessings toward us in Christ. But as we get to chapter 2, Paul takes us into the depths of human sin and depravity before he causes us to rise again to the mountain top of God's deliverance and pardon.

Today we will study the first three verses of Ephesians 2. It deals with the way we were, who we were, and what we were like before we met Christ. We are going to see the mess that we were in. Then next week we will examine how God got us out of that mess. This look at the past is not one of nostalgia or pleasant memories. Rather it is intended to help us appreciate what God has done to rescue us.

With these thoughts in mind, let's plunge into the Scripture and discover what we were like before we were saved by Jesus Christ.

I. We Were Spiritually Dead (v.1).

Paul says that before we were "**made alive**" in Christ, that is before we were saved, we were "**dead in trespasses and sins.**" "**Trespasses**" comes from a word that means "to slip, stumble or go astray." "**Sin**" means "to miss the mark or fall short (cf. Rom.3:23).

Our problem is sin that separates us from God. We call it by other names, whitewash it, and then re-label it. But it doesn't work. You can take a bottle of rat poison and label it "Whole Milk" but that doesn't change its basic character. If you drink it, you will be wholly dead. Poison is still poison no matter what you call it.

People who don't know Jesus are absolutely and completely spiritually dead. They have no spiritual life. They are spiritual zombies, animated corpses. We were all born spiritually dead and until we met Christ we were hopelessly and helplessly trapped in spiritual death.

The word "dead" comes from a word that means "corpse." A corpse is one which has no life. A person who is not a believer is devoid of life. Now you say, "How can he be alive and yet you say he is devoid of life?" That gives you the first clue. We are not talking about physical life, we are talking about spiritual life. You've got to understand you can be physically alive but spiritually dead.

We see this fact in the Genesis story of Adam. Look with me in Genesis 2:16-17. This is the first man and the first woman ever put on this earth. God breathed into them the breath of life, not only physical life, but spiritual life. They were created with God's life in them. They could fellowship with Him, walk in harmony with Him, and walk in oneness with Him. Look at Genesis 2:16. They were in a garden, a lush place.

"And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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.'"

Remember that in chapter 3, Adam did eat of it. Did he die? Some people would argue and say, "No, he lived to be 800 or so years old. He didn't die the moment he ate of it." But yes, he did! Physically he didn't die that day, but physical death became a reality. Immediately he began to decay and corrupt. Not only that, his mind, his will, his emotions, and his soul were immediately disengaged from the wisdom he had once of God.

Then look at Adam's spirit. That's where he immediately died. He immediately spiritually died when he sinned in Genesis Chapter 3. That means the life of God's Spirit left him. Now Adam was physically alive (although dying); he was mentally competent (although his mind and heart were corrupted); but he is spiritually dead. He was alive in one sense, but God was not in him. He could no longer fellowship with God, he hid himself from God. Physically and mentally he was alive, but he was spiritually dead.

So in Ephesians 2:1, Paul says, "You Gentiles, that's the way you were, dead. I was, too, as a Jew. We all were dead." Why? Because of Adam. Romans 5:12 says, **"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned;"**

Lost people are not *in danger of* spiritual death. They *are* spiritually dead. This is not a figure of speech, but a real and present condition.

Every lost person is spiritually dead. In v.1, Paul speaks of "**you**," that is, Gentiles. In v.4 he says, "**we**," referring to himself and other Jews. It makes no difference whether they are young or old, rich or poor, Russian or American, we are all spiritually dead. The only exception was Jesus.

Someone who is spiritually dead is unable to understand and appreciate spiritual things. A physically dead person does not respond to physical stimuli. He can't see, hear, taste, smell or feel. A spiritually dead person does not respond to spiritual stimuli. He can't worship, pray, understand Scripture, have inner peace or know true joy and righteousness.

The only difference between one spiritually dead person and another is the state of decay. Though the drug-addicted derelict may seem deader than the man in the seat of governmental power, both may be spiritually dead. There are no degrees of death.

In the movie the Princess Bride, Wesley, the princess' true love has been killed on a torture machine by the evil sheriff. Wesley's friends take him to Miracle Max where after examining his dead body, tells them that they are lucky because he is only "mostly dead," not all dead. He proceeds to give Wesley a pill to make him alive again.

It makes for a very funny scene in a movie. But in reality, there is no state of being just "mostly dead." Dead is dead. There are no degrees of deadness, just different degrees of decay.

I know this sounds weird, but it is true. Even though so many lost people around us seem alive, they are alive only physically and emotionally. Spiritually, they are dead, Dead, DEAD!!! You cannot be *kind of* dead. You are either dead or alive!

Here's where we've got to be careful. Some people are not equal to others in their corruption. In other words, we are all equally sinful when we are born, but the outcome of that may not be equal. This is what confuses people. Some people's corruptness, their sins, may be much more vile than other people's. Inwardly their natures are equally as corrupt. That is what you've got to see.

You say, "Now how in the world can that happen?" Some people have learned how to restrain their sin. Some do it because of personal pride. Some people would never do certain things. It's not because it would be displeasing to God, but because it would be displeasing to the people they are trying to

impress. So, therefore, they restrain their sin. What appears to be goodness is nothing more than a mask over that corrupt nature that is within.

Some people can restrain sin by public opinion. If you are running for office, all of a sudden you will stop doing certain things. Not because you want to please God, but because you want somebody's vote. You'll do whatever it takes if you are a lost person. If you are a Christian, that's different. We are talking about lost people, now.

Some people try to be good because of selfish interests. If you want something bad enough, you will restrain your own depravity in order to convince others so you can get what it is you want, your own selfish interests.

Or perhaps they do it because of the fear of its consequences. Do you know there are some people today, especially in the day we are living in, who refuse to be immoral with someone because they are afraid of AIDS? That's good, but folks, it has nothing to do with righteousness. It has nothing to do with spiritual life. They are just scared to death of what might happen to them, so they restrain themselves.

Just because somebody is not corrupt outwardly, don't let that fool you. If there is no life inwardly, then he is just as depraved as the man that you can easily spot in a crowd. People without spiritual life are dead in their transgressions and sins, and every single thing they do misses the mark of what God requires. Day in and day out, there is no trace of spiritual life in them at all.

H. A. Ironside gives us a good explanation of this point:

We would not for a moment say everybody is just as corrupt, just as vile, just as wicked, just as despicable, as everybody else. That would not be true; and yet if people are dead, they are dead. The beautiful little maid, the daughter of Jairus, had been dead only a few minutes when the blessed Lord reached her father's house, but she was dead, she was lifeless. Fair to look upon, lovely and sweet, no doubt, in the eyes of her beloved parents, like a beautiful marble statue, but although there was not the corruption that there might have been, she was dead nevertheless. Turn over to Luke's Gospel and you will find that as the blessed Lord came to the village of Nain they were carrying a young man out to bury him. He was dead. Dead perhaps a day or two. . . . So this young man was dead longer than the little maid, but life was just as truly extinct in her case as in his. Then you have the blessed Lord at the grave of Lazarus. The sisters told Him not to roll the stone away, for their brother had been dead four days and would already be offensive. Corruption had set in, but the Lord Jesus brought new life to that man. In every instance it took exactly the same mighty, quickening power to restore the dead. Only the Son of God could speak life to the daughter of Jairus, to the young man of Nain, and to Lazarus. So we were dead, every one of us, we who are now saved. Some were deeply corrupted because of sin, others perhaps did not know so much of its vileness and corruption, BUT ALL ALIKE WERE

DEAD BEFORE GOD AND NEEDED NEW AND DIVINE LIFE (In the Heavens, 100-101, emphasis mine).

II. We Were Spiritually Disobedient (v.2).

We used to walk or live "**according to course of this world.**" The word "**walked**" carries the idea of meandering around aimlessly. "**Course**" comes from the Greek word for "weather vane." "**World**" does not refer to the physical world, but the value system of the world.

Gal.1:4 describes this world system as "**this present evil age.**" People who don't know Jesus are captives to the world system. They mindlessly follow the direction of the world wherever it blows them.

There are some who claim to be Christians who willingly enslave themselves to our pop culture and media icons. They worship whatever is on TV. James 4:4 calls them "**Adulterers and adulteresses**" and asks, "**Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.**"

Before we were saved we walked "**according to the prince of the power of the air.**" This refers to Satan who is alive and well on planet earth. 1 Pet.5:8 describes him as our "**adversary**" who "**walks about like a roaring lion...**" Mat.9:34 says he is "**the ruler of the demons.**" John 12:31 says he is "**the ruler of this world.**" 2 Cor.4:4 calls him "**the god of this age.**"

Satan will try to rule this world until Jesus dethrones him. He has leadership over hoards of demons, fallen evil angels who penetrate, dominate, pressure and control the life of every unbeliever. Eph.6:12 says, "**For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness.**" The devil is real.

Before we were saved, we submitted to "**the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.**" This refers to "the spirit of the times," the life of the typical unbeliever.

III. We Were Spiritually Depraved (v.3).

We used to be just like the unsaved people that we see every day. We were "**among**" them. We once "**conducted ourselves**" like them. Three things corrupt all men: the world, the devil and the flesh – A little girl pulled her brother's hair and kicked his shins. She said, "**The devil made me pull his hair, but I think kicking him was my idea.**"

Before we were saved we lived to fulfill "**the desires of the flesh and of the mind.**" The word "**desires**" refer to "seeking something with great diligence. The "**desires of the flesh**" refers to abandoning any reason or restraint and satisfying all our bodies' appetites. It represents the "if it feels good, do it" mentality. On the other hand, the "**desires... of the mind**" indicates deliberate, willful choices in rebelling against God. It means hearing God's truth but choosing to rebel against it.

We are not born neutral with the possibility of going either this way or that way. We are born sinners.

A person does not become a liar when he tells a lie; he tells a lie because he already is a liar. He does not become a thief when he steals; he steals because he already is a thief. And so with every other sin. Committing sinful acts does not make a person a sinner; we commit sinful acts because he IS a sinner.

Jesus confirmed this when He said, **"But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."** (Matthew 15:18-19).

We **"were by nature the children of wrath."** We were sinners **"by nature"** and by choice. Every part of us was tainted and infested by sin. We were not equally depraved, but we were universally depraved. We were made in the image of God yet **"by nature"** became totally corrupted by sin (Rom.3:10-11). The world likes to think that we are all the children of God, yet apart from Christ all men are **"the children of wrath."** Jn.3:36 says of unsaved man, **"the wrath of God abides on him."**

Believer, at one time, that was us. We were **"just as the others."** Praise God for the next word in verse 5, **"But."** God did not leave us dead. He made us alive with Christ. By His grace that we have been rescued from **"wrath!"**

C.H. Spurgeon once remarked, **"If Niagara could suddenly be made to leap upward instead of forever dashing downward from it's rocky height, it were not such a miracle as to change the perverse will and raging passions of men. To wash the Ethiopian white, or remove the leopard's spots, is proverbially a difficulty, yet these are but surface works; to renew the very core of manhood, and tear sin from it's hold upon man's heart, this is not alone the finger of God, but the baring of His arm. Conversion is a work comparable to the making of a world. He only who fashioned the heavens and the earth could create a new nature. It is a work that is not to be paralleled, it is unique and unrivaled, seeing that Father, Son, and Spirit must all cooperate in it; for to implant the new nature in the Christian, there must be the decree of the eternal Father, the death of the ever-blessed Son, and the fullness of the operation of the adorable Spirit. It is a work indeed. The labors of Hercules were but trifles compared to this: to slay lions and hydras, and cleanse Augean stables — all this is child's play compared with renewing a right spirit in the fallen nature of man."**