

**But God . . .**  
 Ephesians 2:1-7  
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*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of 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— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. – Ephesians 2:1-7, ESV*

If you know me at all, you know I'm a big-time history nerd. It was George Santayana who famously wrote, "Those who fail to learn from the past are condemned to repeat it." And this is true, but I like a cartoon I saw a couple of years ago that said, "Those who do learn from the past are condemned to watch everyone else repeat it." As Solomon famously said, there truly is nothing new under the sun!

But history has another, more positive, advantage: I love studying history because, in part, it helps us understand how we got where we are. Those who understand the past better understand the privileges and blessings we have in the present and how we got them. I'm reading David McCullough's biography of John Adams again, and I'm still amazed by the collection of geniuses and the orchestration of events that brought about our independence from Great Britain, our Constitutional form of government and our American liberties.

Here in Ephesians, Paul has praised God for "every spiritual blessing" we have received in Christ. He has praised God and he has prayed for us to better know and understand our blessings and the God who has given them to us. Now, as we turn to chapter two of this wonderful letter, Paul turns his focus from praise and prayer to telling the Ephesians how it is they have come to receive these blessings.

Paul turns from praise and prayer to history, a very personal and powerful history, so that the Ephesians will better understand where they have come from and how they have gotten to the blessed state of fellowship with God and every spiritual blessing that they now enjoy.

### **I. Our Natural State**

In telling this history, Paul alternates back-and-forth between "you" and "we." In this use of pronouns, Paul is identifying himself with the Ephesians, and we, too, can place ourselves in this story. These verses tell the history of every true Christian. Verses 1-3, which tell our natural state, is the

story of all humanity, as Paul makes clear at the end of verse 3 with the phrase, “like the rest of mankind.”

Paul says three things about our natural state in these first three verses:

1. We were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked.
2. We were trapped, or enslaved, in three ways:
  - a. by the patterns of this fallen world
  - b. the leadership of the chief fallen angel and
  - c. the pull of our fallen desires.
3. We were condemned by God’s just law and awaiting His judgment against us.

### **A. The Walking Dead**

So, the first thing Paul says is that we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked. How could we be dead and yet walking? Paul’s use of the word “walking” refers to the way in which we lived our lives, so how could we be dead and yet living?

The walking dead. The living dead. Paul is saying that we were spiritual zombies. There was a sense in which we were alive – physically and mentally and emotionally alive, to a degree - but the larger reality of our spiritual condition is that we were dead. We were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we walked.

What do zombies live for? What is the one thought, the one desire, the one motivation they have? Brains! They live to feast on human brains, and they’re not even sure why.

In the same way, Paul says we were dead to God and living for trespasses and sins, unaware even of why we were living for these things. What are trespasses and sins?

Trespasses are willful and deliberate violations of God’s Law – like when someone sees a “No Trespassing” sign and decides to cross into the forbidden territory anyway. The fancy name for these actions are “sins of commission,” things we do that violate God’s law – lying, stealing, cheating, blaspheming, committing adultery, lusting, coveting, gossiping. We’re all guilty and we know it.

Sins refers to the ways in which we fall short of God’s holy standard, which is perfection. (How could a perfect God set a standard that was less than perfect?) These are termed “sins of omission” – things we fail to do that we know we should be doing. The best way to summarize this is to consider what

Jesus said were the greatest commandments – to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Whenever we fail to love God with all that we are and whenever we fail to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, we are falling short of God’s holy standard and we are sinning.

Paul says that in our natural condition, we live for trespasses and sins, we walk in trespasses and sins and we cannot do anything other than trespasses and sins. If we’re dead to God- cut off from the life of God- this is most certainly true.

## **B. Triply Enslaved**

So, if we’re dead to God and thus cut off from Him, who, then, do we follow? As Bob Dylan famously sang, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

In our natural state, we serve three masters, following the only three voices available to us when we’re cut off from God: the world, the devil and our own flesh.

First, the world: “*you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world.*” The world around us sets a pattern for life, a pattern characterized, above all else, by selfishness – self-preservation, self-advancement, self-seeking, self-affirming. And this pattern of selfishness may vary in the exact object being pursued – pleasure, power, material possessions, fame, security – but it is a self-centered and self-serving pattern nonetheless.

Then, the devil: “*following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.*” The prince of the power of the air- or the ruler over the realm of the air- is Satan, not because he controls the atmosphere, but because he commands a host of demonic spirits who inhabit this world – in the air all around us, as it were.

Now some people dismiss the idea of the devil as a ridiculous idea – a silly devil in red tights with a pitchfork and horns. But just because we may have a mental idea of the devil which is ridiculous does not mean that the real devil is ridiculous or non-existent. The Bible repeatedly affirms the existence of a real, powerful, evil spirit who rules and controls other lesser evil spirits. He is called the devil, Satan, the thief, the accuser of the brethren, the enemy of our souls. And for those who are dead to God, he is their master, as he was once our master, too.

Finally, our own fallen nature: “*among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*” Without God’s influence, all we have are our own desires, the feelings and thoughts that arise from our own self.

Do you see the connection between these three? Both the world and our own flesh are naturally telling us to live for ourselves. Satan doesn't care if we believe in him or not; as long as we're cut off from God, he can feed our own natural selfishness to our own destruction.

Non-Christians will often accuse Christians of being narrow-minded, and too often we give them good cause for such accusations by our language and our conduct. But the truth is that it is those who are cut off from the life of God, who are dead in trespasses and sins, who are truly narrow-minded. They may travel a thousand different paths, but they're all really the same, motivated by some variety of selfish desire and under the influence of the worldly patterns of living and the same devil, the thief whom Jesus said comes only to steal, kill and destroy.

To be locked up inside yourself is the real narrow-mindedness. It's the real slavery and oppression.

### **C. Condemned Like the Rest**

But not only were we by nature the walking dead triply enslaved in narrow-minded futility by the world, the devil and our flesh, we were also under a sentence of condemnation and awaiting judgment like the rest of mankind.

We "*were, by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*"

You see, you can live this life cut off from God, living for yourself, manipulated by Satan, but you can't make God not exist by your unbelief. As C.S. Lewis said in *The Problem of Pain*, "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell."

And so, in the end, everyone who dies cut off from God faces Him whom they have denied and suppressed and rejected all their lives. They will discover, too late, that God does exist and is, in fact, their judge, and that the charging documents against them are filled with trespasses and sins, which they have lived for all of their lives.

And this was us. This was me. This was the Apostle Paul. This is the natural condition and the deserved destiny of all mankind. It is our nature, ever since the fall. We are dead. We are guilty. We are enslaved. We are narrow-minded and blind. We are cut off from God. We are condemned in our rebellion.

But before you feel too sorry for us all, consider this: Though we inherit our sinful nature and are surrounded by a fallen world, it is also true that we love our sin and we choose our rebellion again and again. We are slaves who love our masters, prisoners who love our chains and who keep them locked, even when God offers freedom and redemption.

As the Great Lion Aslan said in response to Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*, also by C.S. Lewis, "Oh, Adam's sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!"

Our story could end there. The God who created us and who is willing to redeem us could leave us in our rebellion and in the hopeless enslavement we love so dearly and He would be perfectly justified and right to do so. It is exactly what we deserve. No, in fact - as long as we draw breath in His world and experience the pleasures He has created and yet stubbornly refuse to glorify Him – it is much more than we deserve.

If you are here this morning and you do not know the Lord, this is the end of your story. Your story right now ends with the period at the end of verse 3. All of these first three verses, which for the believer in Jesus are in the past tense, are still present tense for you. But it doesn't have to end that way.

## II. **God's Amazing Grace**

Thankfully, in God's amazing grace, the story continues with two words that change everything.

*"But God . . ."*

*"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"*

At the heart of this wonderful statement are five words: But God made us alive. We were dead, but God made us alive. So we see that this salvation story is a kind of creation story. God creates spiritual life.

Just as in the original creation story, we begin with darkness and chaos. Gen 1 says, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep." That's an apt description of our spiritual state, too: formless, void and dark – a lifeless chaos.

And just as "the Spirit of God was brooding over the face of the waters" in Genesis 1 to bring life, so we have here God working to bring us life.

### **A. Motive: Love**

Just as no one but God was powerful enough to create an orderly, life-filled and life-giving world by the word of His power, so no one but God is powerful enough to create life in us when we are dead, enslaved and condemned. Yet why should God – the God we have denied, rejected and rebelled against again and again – why should God make us alive?

What was God's motive in choosing to bring us life, to create spiritual life in us by His Holy Spirit? It was love, a love so strong that Paul places a double emphasis on it – it is not just because of love, but because of the great love. And it is not just because of the great love, but it is because of the great love with which He loved us.

Do you believe that God loves you? “Oh sure,” you might respond, “God loves the whole world because God is love. God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, right?”

Yes, but do you know that God loves you, that he loves you personally with a great love? It is this great love with which He loves you that motivates Him to bring you to life. If you have any experience of spiritual life, it is because of God's personal, great, saving love for you. If you are dead and you are to have any hope of spiritual life, it must be because of God's great love for you. His love is our only hope?

## **B. Action: Life**

And this is exactly what His love motivates Him to do: He makes us alive. So often, people will talk about “being saved” as “going to heaven when you die.” And while that is certainly one of the benefits, that is by no means the chief characteristic of salvation. When Paul says “by grace you have been saved” here, he's talking about being made alive together with Christ! He's talking about a real spiritual life given to us here and now, in this world and in this life.

Here's what Paul would have you know: If you don't have eternal life here and now, then you don't have eternal life.

Going to heaven when you die is just the extension of the eternal life God gives you now with Him. If you expect to get into heaven, it will only be because God has given you life, and so when you see Him, you will see the Father who has loved you and given you life, and when you see Jesus, you will see the Savior whose life is now your own.

## **I. Resurrected with Christ**

And the other thing Paul would want you to know is that the only way to be raised to new life is with Christ. Here's the simplest way I know how to put it, and while it is simple, that doesn't make it any less profound or mysterious: Christ entered into our sin and death in His body on the cross so that we can enter into His resurrection and share in His eternal life.

And when I say “our sin and death” and “we can enter,” I mean that personally. Christ entered into our specific, personal sin and death, so that we personally may enter into His resurrection life.

## **2. Exalted with Christ**

And here’s something else that’s simple and yet profound and mysterious: Not only does God make us alive together with Christ, but he also exalts us with Christ to the heavenly places, where He makes us sit with Christ at His right hand. He “*raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*”

Thus, while we continue to live our earthly lives here in this world, and even while we still struggle against sin and the world and the devil, our true life is in heaven with Christ.

In Colossians 3:1-4, Paul tells us:

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

### **III. God’s Eternal Glory**

And so the story continues into eternity future, when we appear with Him in glory. The future is, in fact, the goal of our story: “*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*”

#### **A. Immeasurable Riches of His Grace**

When we appear with Christ in glory, we will display the immeasurable riches of His grace. Everyone will see for all of eternity, when they see you and me with Christ in glory, how amazingly and abundantly gracious God is.

#### **B. In Kindness Toward Us in Christ Jesus**

The immeasurable riches of His grace will be displayed in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Dr. Blaikie in *The Pulpit Commentary* highlights four aspects of God’s kindness which will be on display:

- God's kindness in the **matter** of His blessing us: forgiving us freely and accepting and adopting us in Christ
- God's kindness in the **manner** of His blessing: dealing with us tenderly and patiently as He forgives
- God's kindness in the **extent** of His blessing: giving us every spiritual blessing, to the fullest
- God's kindness in the **duration** of His blessing: forevermore, throughout all of the ages to come

### **Application:**

How do we respond to such amazing grace, such saving love?

1. **Worship and adore Him!** He has so loved and blessed us, thus we should bless His Holy name and love Him in response!
2. **Spread the good news of His amazing grace and great love!** We should tell others of the great salvation of our gracious God.
3. **Don't settle for living for the things of this world anymore.** We should turn our backs on the course of this world, on the ways of the ruler of the power of the air, on the fleeting pleasures and lasting sorrows of sin and on the slavery of living for self. We must not seek to go backward in our spiritual history, like the Israelites in the desert who longed to return to their bondage in Egypt. No, we must look up and press on to our future in the Promised Land, leaving behind the fleeting pleasures and lasting consequences of sin for the fleeting pressures and lasting glory of Jesus Christ!