

# The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

*<sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup>which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.  
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

## Message 10

### Children Of Wrath

July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Ephesians 2:1-3

Rev. Paul Carter

### Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Ephesians 2:1-3. This morning we enter the body of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 1 contained an extended eulogy where Paul set out his understanding of redemption as the basis for praising God and a thanksgiving prayer where Paul thanked God for their faith and asked God that he help them grow deeper in it. At chapter 2 we begin to enter the heart of Paul's theological presentation. He begins in a place we no longer go; he begins with the total depravity of all people everywhere apart from Jesus Christ. Let me read to you from God's holy, inspired and inerrant word.

<sup>1</sup>And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>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—<sup>3</sup>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. (Ephesians 2:1-3. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

My intention this morning is to briefly walk you through the text so that you can be struck by the full weight of its meaning and implication and then to anticipate and respond to some predictable reactions to this teaching. Let's begin then with a brief analysis of the text.

### Understanding The Text:

The word “and” at the start of verse 1 indicates that Paul views this doctrine as flowing logically out of what he has just finished saying. He has just said that God has redeemed us and that God has a plan to bring all things in the universe under the sole, benevolent headship of Jesus Christ and this plan will be not only for God’s glory but also and surprisingly, for our good.

<sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23. NRSV)

That’s where Paul ended chapter 1 so we are very excited, this is very good news, we are heading in a glorious direction. But. Before we get there Paul needs to be sure we understand and remember where we came from. This is a glorious journey, Paul says, but it begins not in the clouds, not in the heavens and not in the light – it begins in the pit, in the mud and in the dark.

<sup>1</sup>And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2:1. ESV)

That is where Paul’s Gospel begins – indeed, that is where THE GOSPEL begins. It begins with truth about our fallen and desperate condition. According to Paul:

### **1. Apart from Christ we are dead and we are deceived**

Paul talks about three forms of corrupting and enslaving influence. He talks about the world, the devil and the flesh. These three are our masters and they hold us bound in chains of darkness and death. He says concerning the world, that before Christ we were:

following the course of this world, (2:2. ESV)

That phrase does not translate into English. The Greek word translated in most literal English Bibles as “the course” is the word *aion* (pronounced *ahee-ohn*) from which we get our English “eon”. If you wanted to translate it literally it would be “following the age of the world” which makes no sense in English. What it means is that before we came to Christ we were bound by the spirit of the age. We thought like everyone else in contemporary culture. We were with it, we were going with the flow. But that flow was leading us over the cliff and into the pit of hell.

What this text is saying is that people apart from Christ are not independent thinkers. We are subject to group think. We think we are thinking but in fact we are deceived by the spirit of the age. Let me give this to you in contemporary terms. When we read about the Nazis we tend to think they must have been from another planet. How could it make sense to them to murder 6 million people just because they were Jewish? How could it make sense for them to euthanize handicapped people? That is insane – except that they didn't think it was. It seemed to make sense AT THE TIME, according to the spirit of that age. They were in bondage to a spirit. In Greek culture there is actually a god named Aion – some scholars think that Paul is making a play on that and suggesting that behind the “spirit of the age” there is literally a strong demonic influence – whether we find that in this word or not we are going to find it later in the verse so we can be confident that Paul believes that whether he's saying it here or not. The point is apart from Christ we are deceived into thinking like the spirit of the age. We look at the Nazis from a previous age and we see that but let me hold up the mirror to us. We abort over 1 million babies a year in North America. Over 90% of Down Syndrome foetuses are aborted according to this month's MacLean's magazine. Why does that make sense to us? Why does killing babies because they have a handicap make sense to us but we think the Nazi's with their eugenics program were insane? We're doing exactly the same thing. We have aborted approximately 12 million babies in North America in the last 10 years – that is two holocausts. But we're not insane – they were insane. Really? Or are we captive to the spirit of the age? The Bible says apart from Christ you were a slave to the spirit of the age. You were a captive to the tyranny of group think. There is very little in recent or ancient history that challenges that suggestion.

Paul says concerning our bondage to the devil, that prior to our coming to Christ we were

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

Ephesians has more to say about the devil and the demonic than any other letter we have from the Apostle Paul. That he is here “the prince of the power of the air” is simply a Jewish way of saying that he rules the intermediate dimension between the realm of God and the realm of humanity; what the Bible often calls “the heavens”. The throne of God is in what Jews would think of as “the third heaven” or “the highest heaven” and the birds and the clouds are in the first heaven which we would just call “the sky” and then the realm of spirits was thought of as “the

second heaven” – we would just say “the spiritual world”. The devil has been kicked out of heaven but woe unto the earth for he has come down to you; Revelation says. He has less influence than before, and the end of his influence has been secured by the cross, but he continues to harass, deceive and manipulate the sons of disobedience. Paul is saying that the devil is in your head if you have not put faith in Jesus Christ. Unbelief is, at least in part – demonic in origin. We need to keep that in mind as we pray for lost loved ones.

Thirdly Paul mentions that we are in bondage to our flesh and to “fleshly ways of thinking”. He says in verse 3 that prior to Christ we:

lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind (2:3. ESV)

Modern Christian readers tend to think of the passions of the flesh as being exclusively sexual in nature but that is not the case. Paul defines them more fully in Galatians 5 where he says:

<sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21. ESV)

Obviously sexual sin is a big part of that list but so also are things like enmity, jealousy, rage, divisiveness and drunkenness – all of these things are the fruit of the flesh and that’s why Paul adds this parallel phrase “and the mind”. Some of these are bodily passions and some are more mental passions. The point is that these are what drive and deceive the person apart from Jesus Christ.

Now, from a Christian world view, when we are evaluating human behaviour this text is telling us that we need to consider three factors: environment, spiritual influence and appetite. People apart from Christ think and behave the way they do because of what they are exposed to, because of who is whispering to them and because of their particular lusts and desires. It is rarely if ever one or the other – it is generally some combination of all three. It isn’t as simple as saying: “That lady is an alcoholic because she has a demon”. Well, we shouldn’t discount the likelihood of demonic influence but we also need to consider environment – who is she hanging around with? What were her parents like as people? Environment matters and then we need to consider the

spirit of the age. What cultural biases and blindspots are contributing to this problem? That is a Christian way of thinking about behaviour.

So far then, Paul has analyzed the present state of the man or woman apart from Christ. They are dead and they are deceived. By the way – that is the worst kind of dead. The worst kind of lost is when you think you are going in the right way – because then you never stop to ask for directions. The worst kind of wrong is when you think you’re right because then you never think to receive correction. The worst kind of dead is when you think you are wide awake. Then you never know you need to be born again. That’s where you were, Paul says, before God in Christ took pity on you. He goes on to say that:

## **2. Apart from Christ we were by nature children of wrath**

That phrase in English is alarming and hard to take and it is actually far worse in the original Greek. In English “Children of Wrath” seems to provide some wiggle room – maybe it means “of” in the sense of “possessed” as in “children belonging to wrath”. That’s horrible but not as horrible as what it actually says. In Greek the phrase is literally: “children in the lineage of wrath”. The Greek word is *phusis* in the dative which implies location and causality. Meaning that we are in a line of people under wrath. We were BORN into a situation of warranting the wrath of God. This is what theologians call “original sin”. You were born a sinner who sins. Hear that carefully. You were born a sinner who sins. Not you are a sinner because you sinned. The Bible says you were a sinner before you sinned. You were born pointed in the direction of rebellion against God and because your mind was captive to the world, the flesh and the devil you never even thought of submitting to God and walking in his way. You were born running head long into hell and you didn’t even know it. That’s Paul’s diagnosis of the human condition apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Now before we deal with some frequent reactions to this teaching we need to spell out the major implication of this teaching and it is simply this:

**Implication: After Adam and before Christ people do not have “free will”**

That is what Paul is saying. He is saying that you were born into a long line of sinners – you were born pointed in the direction of sin and stupid and you have been drawn further and further down that road to hell by the three chords of bondage: the world, the flesh and the devil. You are in no wise free. Do you make decisions? Of course you do but you are choosing only from a menu of very bad options and you are making your choices under very bad influences. That is not freedom. Only in Christ, when your eyes are opened, when the chains of sin and death are cut and you are filled with the Holy Spirit are you free again. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom and nowhere else. Adam and Eve had free will and every born again person has free will but sinners apart from Christ do not. That is an absolutely massive truth. It means when you were a sinner you were dead, you didn't know it and you were not able to want or to achieve anything different. That is absolutely horrifying and that was us – all of us, Paul says, until God in Christ had mercy upon us. Thanks be to God!

That's the text and that's what it means but we can't end there can we? That truth is so new and so alarming and so freighted with issues that we need to spend some time wrestling with our own natural reaction to that even as saved people. As saved people we also instinctively recoil from this. We can't believe that we were ever that lost; we can't believe that our situation was ever that hopeless; we can't believe that we did so little in reality to contribute to our salvation. It strikes at our pride and our sense of worth. And of course, it is meant to do just that.

With the time we have left let me hit upon two of the most common questions that are asked, whether silently or verbally when this doctrine is publicly taught in the church.

### **Common Reactions and Questions:**

The first question that is often asked is some version of:

#### **1. Is this doctrine necessary?**

Many more Christians believe this doctrine than speak this doctrine. Many churches would say: "Well of course we believe that, after all it is in the Bible, but do we really need to speak about it? Do we need to hit people with their depravity and their sinfulness or are we rather in the grace business? Shouldn't we lead with the good news and keep the bad news to ourselves?" I suspect

that there are many people in this church who believe this doctrine but who secretly wish that we were not preaching on it this morning. Perhaps you brought a friend and you are horrified by the fact that we have just told your friend that she is DEAD in her sins, she is totally deceived, she is not a free thinker and she is running headlong into hell. Perhaps you are worried that she is quite unlikely to visit Guest Central after the service for a gift bag.

Let me say first that I totally empathize with that sentiment. This is hard to hear. This is totally at odds with what we are used to hearing about ourselves in this narcissistic self esteem obsessed culture. We are used to being told that we're ok and that we're basically good and smart and so to come in here and hear that you are not ok and that you are not basically good and that you are a mental, emotional and spiritual slave is rather hard to deal with. I appreciate that. But. Let me also suggest that this truth is necessary existentially and experientially.

When I say that this doctrine is necessary in an existential way I mean that it is essential to the reality of how things really are. You need to know how things are and this is how you are. You need the truth about your own condition or you will never understand your need for salvation. If you do not know that you are a sinner then you do not know that you need a Savior. If you do not know that you are helpless and desperate then you cannot know that you need mercy. If we don't teach this doctrine we will change how people understand the reality of the cross. The death of Jesus on the cross will become nothing more than a moral example. Jesus will become Ghandi; the cross will become Selma Bridge. Jesus becomes a hero of non-violent resistance instead of a Saviour who pays the price for our sins in his body on the cross. This doctrine is necessary to our understanding of reality. We have to know who God is – he is HOLY and he will not abide with sin – and we have to know who we are – WE ARE DEAD IN OUR TRESPASSES AND SINS and we are by nature CHILDREN OF WRATH. That's the truth and the truth will set us free.

When I say that this doctrine is necessary experientially I mean that we all need to confront the reality of our own depravity if we are ever going to hold to the Savior as we ought. There is safety in knowing the truth of who we are apart from the grace of God. For the first 9 years of our marriage Shauna Lee and I were engaged in foster care. We worked generally with hard to place children and we had over 14 children through our home over that time for various lengths of stay. Practically what that means is that I have taught an awful lot of kids how to ride a bike

and how to swim. I remember one boy we had with us for three years that we'll call Tommy – that's not his real name but it will do. Tommy was a fun kid, he was a great athlete and he was naturally good at just about everything. I taught him to ride a bike and I remember teaching him to swim. Tommy was absolutely convinced that he could swim. He had only swum with waterwings or with me holding him but he was convinced that he could do it on his own. I kept telling him that he wasn't quite ready but he was absolutely sure that I was holding him back so finally one time as he was kicking at me and getting angry I agreed to let him go and he sank like a stone. It was like he was wearing cement underwear, I've never seen a kid sink so fast. He hit the bottom of the pool and he started "climbing the ladder" but he wasn't going anywhere until I reached down and pulled him up. That was an important moment in Tommy's swimming career and all of us need such a moment if we are to cling to the Father as we ought.

Many of us have that moment before we come to Christ. For many of us, it is that moment which leads us to Christ. We find ourselves at the bottom of the pool sucking poison into our soul and nothing we are doing is doing any good. We are stuck and for one brief moment we know it. We call out to God and he rescues us. He lifts us out of the pit and he sets our feet upon the rock and we are saved. But what about those of us who were raised in Christian homes? I came to Christ at 6 – I was never a drug dealer, I was never a gang member, I was never a gambler or a prostitute or anything interesting at all. At worst I was a selfish brat and an occasional cookie thief. That didn't feel like total depravity to me so as I grew older I grew prouder and prouder and prouder. It didn't help that I kept winning prizes at Sunday School or getting sent to the Christian Keener Camp. By the time I was a young adult I was convinced that God was lucky to have me on the team. I was convinced I could swim above the stink and swamp of human depravity. I was different. And God in his mercy and wisdom let me go. He didn't abandon me but he let me swim a little while on my own and I sank like a stone. I faced temptations and currents I had never known even existed and they pulled me into the pit and I was doing the ladder dance like nobody's business and it wasn't doing me a lick of good. I was sucking in poison and I felt like I was fading into the dark. And I remember clear as day that night when I knelt on my bed and pounded the sheets with my fist and wept before God for deliverance. And my father reached down and pulled me up and I have clung to him in holy terror ever since. I can't even imagine what deep waters I have since passed because he now holds me close at hand.



Listen to me church, it is not only pagans who need some time at the bottom of the swimming pool in order to learn saving humility. Children of faith need it to and our grandfathers knew it. In the Old Baptist Confession there is a line that reads like it was written for me:

Paragraph 5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does often times leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy ends.<sup>15</sup> So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good. (The Baptist Confession of Faith. Section 5 Paragraph 5)

I still find it hard to read those words without getting a lump in my throat. I wasn't saved out of the pit – I was saved in a Christian home at the age of 6! But I needed to spend a season in the pit to discover the hidden strength of the corruption and deceitfulness of my own heart that I would be humbled – and boy was I. Now I hold close in holy terror. I am not ashamed of my waterwings and I am not ever far from my Father's side. This lesson, for me on the other side of my conversion, was for His glory and for my good. This doctrine is necessary, existentially and experientially.

Secondly and lastly, people often ask when this doctrine is taught publicly in the church:

## **2. Is this doctrine loving?**

Is it loving of God to remind Christians of their natural depravity and is it loving for Christians to remind non-Christians of their natural depravity? Well, as one who has been reminded, let me say that I do believe it was loving. I believe that while God is not to blame for my season at the bottom of the pool of sin and depravity, it was his kindness none the less. It was short, it was awful and it was educational and it has spared me much hardship ever since. I pray that my kids are smarter than I was and that they take God at his Word in a way I didn't, but I trust that if they are stubborn and hard of heart he will do what it takes to break the crust and bend their knees. I take comfort in that. I'm glad my God loves me and my kids that much.

Is it loving for us to share this doctrine with unbelievers? Well, is it loving for a doctor to tell a patient he has a malignant tumour? Is it loving to tell an alcoholic that if they don't stop drinking they will die? I think it is. I think it would be the most unloving thing imaginable to know the

saving truth of the Gospel and to not share it for fear of offending someone drunk on the deceptions of a lost and dying world.

Its not unloving if its true. If its true than telling people is the most loving thing imaginable. There is no salvation without repentance. The first word in the first sermon of Jesus ever recorded was REPENT.

<sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17. ESV)

The end of all things is at hand. There is nothing left but the patience of Almighty God. The love of God cries: REPENT! Turn from your evil ways and be saved! While will you die?

<sup>32</sup>For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:31. ESV)

Turn and live. That is how love speaks – Old Testament and New. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.