

Ephesians 2.1-2a

Dead Man Walking: Total Depravity, Part 1

Edward had kissed his daughters, four year old Natalia and six year old Isabella, and told them good night and I love you hundreds of times. He worked hard to provide for his girls, including his wife Louise. He made small sacrifices along the way to give them a happy home, always putting their needs and desires before his own. Though his young daughters may have never understood the depths of their father's love for them, expressed in the rhythm of his life of work and play, there was no question in the minds of the family and friends that gathered at their memorial service last month, that he treasured them and was devoted to them, after Chief Warrant Officer 2 Edward Cantrell ran back into his burning house to rescue his two little girls. That one act spoke more of his love than a thousand kisses and a million words of endearment. "Greater love has no man than this," said Jesus, "that he lay down his life for his friends."

I do not doubt that you fathers here this morning have the same strong bonds of affection for your children, and would not think twice before laying down your life for their well-being. But let me ask you this. What if it weren't your children in the upper bedroom choking from smoke inhalation? What if it was the neighbor's house, where a child sex offender lived under probation after being released from prison? If I can push you a little further without pushing you away, what if this man had violated some children in your neighborhood, including your own precious little ones? Would you stand there, watching his house burn over him, comforted by the knowledge that he is getting his just deserts? Or, would you rush in after him? Is there anything in you that would motivate you to lay down your life for his? You and I would probably write the rescuer off as insane or terribly misguided to give his life in exchange for such a depraved individual. If we knew he was not insane and did what he did knowing truly and fully who he was rescuing, we would have to acknowledge that he has a kind of love unlike any we possess. Paul wrote in Romans 5.7-8, 10, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would even dare to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . . While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." John Bunyan wrote, "Sin is the dare of God's justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power, and the contempt of His love." And yet, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. This is the display of God's grace. For the next three weeks we are going to study Ephesians 2.1-3 and the doctrine of total depravity, so that we can see more clearly the immense love of God displayed in the cross. Today we look at what it means to be dead in sins. Next Sunday we will consider our former lives as "sons of disobedience." The third week we will examine what it means that we were "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

Our text helps you to behold the grace of God against the backdrop of your depravity. God's grace is clearly seen in your salvation when you realize that you were dead to God and quite alive to sin when He saved you. "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." What does it mean to be dead in trespasses and sins? The answer to this question will help us to see the grace of God in our salvation and praise Him accordingly. Jonathan Edwards said that he wanted to raise the affections of his congregation by teaching them the truth about God; and he wanted to raise their

affections to the level of their understanding of that truth. As we see the depths of our depravity apart from Christ and the height and depth and length and breadth of God's love in redeeming us from death in trespasses and sins, then we surely have fuel for our affections to render high praise to God our Savior. Understanding what it means to be saved from this condition should also help us to better understand the Christian life. Getting to the bottom of what it means to be dead should aid us in knowing what it means to be alive to God. So this doctrine, often called total depravity, impacts these two areas of our lives; first, it inspires us to give praise to God for His grace and, secondly, it instructs us as to living a new life with Him. On a slightly different note, I would mention a third area of our lives impacted by the doctrine of total depravity. As part of the Christian life is knowing how to relate to and bear witness to the world, understanding humanity's fallen condition will help us to better understand unbelievers as we relate to the world and especially as we evangelize.

What is death in trespasses and sins? John Calvin, in his commentary on Ephesians, cautions us about jumping to the conclusion that death, here, is metaphorical. Because we speak of death as a biological reality that has to do with the cessation of vital organ function, we tend to see its application to non-physiological realities as a figure of speech or a mere analogy. Calvin, however, says that Paul is speaking of "a real and present death" (220). In Scripture, death is not only the destruction of biological life. Death is a spiritual, enemy power that the devil uses to enslave humanity, and that God uses as the penalty for sin. The death and corruption of the body that we see with our eyes and feel in our flesh has already finished its work in the soul. This means that the immaterial "you" was dead. Your thoughts, your emotions, your desires, your will were all dead. Now you say, "Wait a minute, how can these aspects of me have been dead, when I still thought, I still felt emotion, I still had desires, and I still made choices? How, if I could do all of these things, could I be dead?" But, you see, death is not the cessation of being, it is the destruction of life.

Another way to get at this is to ask, what is that life that is destroyed in the fallen human condition? Paul answers this later in the letter. In Chapter 4 verse 18 Paul says that unbelievers are, "alienated from the life of God." "Alienation from life" is another way of saying "death." So, "alienated from the life of God" is describing the same condition as "dead in trespasses and sins" from another perspective. This alienation or estrangement from the life of God is the death that he speaks of here at 2.1. This helps us get at the heart of what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins because Paul describes some of the effects of this condition in 4.17-19. The effect of this alienation is that they walk in "the futility of their minds," "they are darkened in their understanding," living in "ignorance," and "hardness of heart." They are insensible to God and the things of God, because "they have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality." In other words, their souls are wired so that the things of God either bore them or pain them, but things relating to their temporal life very much excite them. Their desires or affections are described as "greedy to practice every kind of impurity." This "impurity" is not just the kind of gross immorality that we see as filthy. It is every motive mixed with selfishness, every thought about another person that does not uphold their dignity as a creature made in God's image, impurity is every action that is done for the glory of man instead of the glory of God. Again, Calvin nailed this in a sermon he preached on this text. He said, "For no matter how much we may flourish, no matter how splendid we may appear before men, and no matter how much we possess to invite the esteem of men,

yet we are only wretched putrefying flesh. There is nothing but rottenness and infection in us. God loathes us; we are damned and lost before him; the angels abhor us; all creatures curse and detest us, and all things demand vengeance on us, because we defile them. For there is such corruption in men that heaven and earth must be infected with it, until God has brought about a change (Romans 8.19)" (*Sermons on Ephesians*, 129). This last reference to heaven and earth being infected with man's curse reflects Paul's statement in Romans 8 that because of Adam's sin the whole creation is subjected to futility and in bondage to corruption, groaning together in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8.19-22).

This death is not *caused by our sins*. It was caused by our *sin* in Adam. The plural trespasses and sins, which focuses on the individual acts of rebellion that we commit in our lifetimes, is not the cause of our death, but is the sphere of our death. Adam's sin is the cause of death, for we all sinned in Adam. Another result of Adam's sin is that our existence, apart from Christ, is defined by sin. We might say that "trespasses and sins" is where we live out our death until made alive in Christ. Dead in sins, our minds are set on the flesh. Our thoughts are not of the glory of God in Christ. Our thoughts are of our glory. Like the builders of the tower of Babel, we build relationships, make our meditation, and spend our energy on making a name for ourselves. We have what Paul elsewhere calls lofty thoughts that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God. Romans 8.7-8 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Your thoughts were futile because you were not loving God with all of your mind. In Galatians, Paul describes the battle inside of believers between the flesh and the Spirit. The desires of the flesh war against the desires of the Spirit (Gal 5.17). Apart from Christ we did not have the Spirit. We had no desires of the Spirit. We had only the desires of the flesh. Desires that were at war with God. Desires that found Christ undesirable, even repugnant. Many of you will remember the show *The Adams Family*. You remember how they liked things that people typically dislike, and disliked things that people typically liked. When Mortitia saw roses that had bloomed, she clipped the flowers so that only the thorny stems remained, and then delighted in the thorns. Wednesday did not delight in cute little puppies, but loved on tarantulas and creepy crawlies. They were portrayed as being backwards in their desires, even monstrous at times. Even so, God describes the fallen human desires—dead to God, but very alive to things damning to the soul. We could go on. Our thoughts, our desires, our emotions were dead in trespasses and sins. The unregenerate get angry about the wrong things instead of being angry about things that are wrong. They rejoice and laugh at blasphemies and immoralities when they should be grieved. How fitting is James' rebuke today, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" (James 4.8-9).

When you were separated from Christ, you were hardly aware that anything was wrong. Calvin explains why. "For what is the reason that we do not perceive the state he speaks of, but because we are carnal? If there reigned a tyrant over us that would lay an impost upon us today and a tax tomorrow, and sacked men's houses, and the next day cut this man's and that man's throat, and ravished men's wives, and committed other enormities and outrages, we would perceive it well enough. And why? Because we are very much alive to things which touch our flesh, and so earthly that we cannot perceive anything unless it has to do with this present life. That is the reason why we do not perceive our own miseries,

for they are invisible. But St. Paul tells us that we must look higher than this world, that we must have other eyes than those which behold visible things (Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 136).

Yet, even now you may be thinking to yourself, "But I know many people who are not in Christ that do not seem to be dead. Their minds and hearts seem quite alive." John Stott helpfully addressed this in his commentary on Ephesians: "This biblical statement about the 'deadness' of non-Christian people raises problems for many because it does not seem to square with the facts of everyday experience. Lots of people who make no Christian profession whatever, who even openly repudiate Jesus Christ, appear to be very much alive. One has the vigorous body of an athlete, another the lively mind of a scholar, a third the vivacious personality of a filmstar. Are we to say that such people, if Christ has not saved them, are dead? Yes, indeed, we must and do say this very thing. For in the sphere which matters supremely (which is neither the body, nor the mind, nor the personality, but the soul) they have no life. And you can tell it. They are blind to the glory of Jesus Christ, and deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. They have no love for God, no sensitive awareness of his personal reality, no leaping of their spirit towards him in the cry 'Abba, Father', no longing for fellowship with his people. They are as unresponsive to him as a corpse. So we should not hesitate to affirm that a life without God (however physically fit and mentally alert the person may be) is a living death, and that those who live it are dead even while they are living. To affirm this paradox is to become aware of the basic tragedy of fallen human existence. It is that people who were created by God and for God should now be living without God. Indeed, that was our condition until the Good Shepherd found us." (*The Message of Ephesians*, 72)

Having asked what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins, we now turn briefly to this question:

What does it mean to walk in trespasses and sins? Or, what kind of conduct is bred from this death? I will mention only two manifestations for the sake of time, carnality and formal religion. First is carnality. This is the conduct that most obviously occurs to us when we think of "walking in trespasses and sins," as Paul says in Galatians 5.19-21, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these." A similar list of vices is found in Ephesians 5.3-5, "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place."

The second manifestation of this walk in trespasses and sins that I will treat of is formal religion. The clearest example of this in the New Testament is the Pharisees, whom Jesus said outwardly appeared righteous, but inwardly were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt 23.28). This is a religion that works hard for the acclaim of the community, but is still alienated from the life of God. It will not maintain the truth at all costs, because it prefers the praise of men over the praise of God. Paul describes those who are "having a form of religion, but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim 3.5). Formal religion does not take sin seriously. By formal religion, people deceive themselves into believing that they aren't so desperate. They can get by on their own merit. They don't need a savior to make atonement for their sins. God would have to be unreasonable not to accept their persons. They may go to church on Sundays. They may take part in charitable work. But they don't long for God. They don't see the relevance of the cross and the need for repentance and faith. When I was doing evangelistic work in New Hampshire to assist church planters, I was very politely given the same line from people that I talked to that I started to

wonder if they had adopted this phrase as their motto instead of “Live Free or Die!” As soon as I mentioned Christ they would say, “I’m all set. I’m Catholic.” It was like a creed. I heard it word for word from so many people, “I’m all set. I’m Catholic.” Paul said that “Israel who pursued the law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works” (Romans 9.31-32). Formal religion is just as damning as carnality, and perhaps more dangerous. I’ve heard many a carnal person say that they knew they needed to get right with God, but that it just wasn’t the right time. I’ve never heard a formalist say he needed to get right with God.

Whether it is carnality or formality or some other manifestation, walking in trespasses and sins is death, no matter how it is dressed up. Alienated from the life of God, unbelievers cannot do anything except sin. Even their civil righteousness and social goodness is sin. While their philanthropy may contribute to the public good and be justly rewarded by us, it is as filthy rags in the sight of God, for whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom 14.23).

How can we be brought from death to life? “He made us alive together with Christ!” (Eph 2.5). Death is the penalty for sin. Even the death of the soul, not just of the body, is the penalty of sin. When Christ died for the sins of His people, He paid the penalty for our sins. By faith, we are united with Christ in His death. Now its condemnation and power are broken. Raised with Him, we walk in a new way of life, not dead to God. Verse 10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Through the cross of Christ, the life of Christ comes to us and raises us from death in trespasses and sins, so that we can now consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. Now that we are brought near to God, no longer estranged from Him, we have a new walk. It is a walk with God. It is a walk in “good works, which God prepared beforehand.” Calvin says, “The fruit shows what the root is” (*Sermons on Ephesians*, 132).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones elaborated on this axiom of the fruit and root when he wrote, “The man who is not a Christian finds the Bible very boring, and expositions of the Bible very boring. He does not find films boring, he does not find the news-papers boring, he does not find the novels boring; but he finds these things boring. He does not enjoy conversations about the soul and about life and death and heaven and God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He cannot help it, but he just sees nothing in it and he is not interested. He is interested in men and their appearance, and in what they have done and in what they have said; the world and its affairs appeal to him tremendously. The position is perfectly simple; these other things are spiritual, they are God’s things, and that kind of man sees nothing in them. Why? Because he is ‘dead’ and has no spiritual life” (Phillips, 7). So, on the contrary, the Christian, who is alive to God, does have an interest in the Bible and its exposition, because in it he hears the voice of his Shepherd, Jesus. He does enjoy conversations about the soul and about life and death and heaven and God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He has great interest in these things, because these things are his life.

Now, the fact is that we do grow dull in spiritual desire. We do grow disinterested in the things of God because we have a war in us. We have the Spirit of God in us, who plants holy desires in us, but we also have the flesh present in us. The desires of the flesh war against the Spirit. So we must actively fight against sin and the flesh. One key in this fight is to stir your soul by fresh views of the grace of God in

your salvation. Fix the eyes of your heart upon these truths. Speak them to your heart. I was dead in sin. I totally misapprehended God. I disregarded Him and spurned His ways. Then, when I was a spiritual corpse, deaf to God, blind to God, unfeeling toward God, then, He made me alive in Christ Jesus. I was a stinking, rotting corpse, when the Holy Spirit of God touched me. He touch me! Though I defile everything that I touch, He touched me! Just as Jesus stretched out His hand to the leper, He laid hold of me, He touched me, and made me alive in Him! Oh! Let me search this mystery of my salvation, so rich in grace that even angels long to look into these things! Give me that Bible that I may know more of this marvelous grace! May this truth fuel your praise, to give glory to God for such grace. May it move you to walk in the way prepared for you from eternity by God.

Let me say just a few words about how this view of fallen human nature can inform our relationship and evangelization to the world. First, do not follow the perverse logic that says that if people are dead in sins, then there's no use in talking to them about God, Christ, and the gospel. They won't hear it. They can't hear it. Here is what is wrong with that logic. The means or instrument that God has ordained to bring men from death to life is the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Many will refuse to listen to the gospel. Oh, they'll politely hear you out, but they won't hear it and receive it as the Word of God. Many will simply dismiss it as your personal experience which has nothing to do with them. Don't let that discourage you. Some will hear and will believe. You may not see the fruit of the seed you sow. But God will save all of His elect, and He will do so by the instrument of His Word and Spirit.

Second, do not think that because people are dead in trespasses and sins that they are not responsible to observe God's law. God's standard of morality is made to conform to God's holy character, not man's fallen condition. Some have said that we shouldn't hold non-Christians to a biblical ethic, since they are dead in trespasses and sins. However, a king does not adjust his law to the practices of the rebels in his kingdom. He maintains his laws, and punishes lawbreakers. Should we have passed a law forbidding so-called "gay marriage?" Should we pass a constitutional amendment affirming marriage as union in holy matrimony between one man and one woman? Absolutely! Even though such legislation will not change people's hearts, God uses such means as human government to restrain the wickedness of man. The only way any society can exist is that God exercises what we call "common grace" toward mankind in general. Common grace includes human government such as law, law enforcement, and parents, as well as painful, physical and social consequences for sinful behaviors that curb the expression of evil desire. So do not be afraid to engage unbelievers, who are dead in trespasses and sins, with both the law and the gospel. Some may simply spurn it. Others may be externally influenced by it and avoid certain gross immoralities. Yet, some will be made alive in Christ. Jesus said in John 5:25, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."

Against the dark canvas of your former death in sin, behold the radiance of the glory of the grace of God. Glorify Him in worship. Glorify Him by walking in the good works He has prepared for you. Glorify Him by bearing witness of His grace and glory to unbelievers.

"Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (Eph 6:23-24).