

Ephesians 2.2-3

Sons of Disobedience

What would you say to a young man struggling with habitual sin who says, “According to my psychologist my case is a sad one because of all the damage that was done to me by my parents in my childhood. According to my psychiatrist my case is a sad one because of the genes I inherited from my parents that dictate my desires and choices. Is there any hope? Can people really change? What counsel could you offer? What hope could you give?”

God’s grace is displayed toward us by transforming us from rebels into regents. We once were “sons of disobedience.” As God transforms us, He also delivers us from the powers that once dominated us and puts our enemies under our feet. We are turned from our disobedience and hostility toward God to enjoy the peaceable reign of God over us. And as God reigns over us we are given authority to reign over the enemies of our souls. What ruled our conduct as sons of disobedience? What has God saved us from and given us power over? This morning we are going to study the **three sources of evil** that once ruled us, from which God has saved us: **1) the God-defying antagonism of the world; 2) the God-defying ascendancy of Satan; 3) the God-defying autonomy of the flesh.**

God has saved us from the God-defying antagonism of the world (2.2b). Here I am trying to make explicit what is implied in verse 2, which the ESV renders “following the course of this world.” Another way, and, I would suggest, a better way to translate this phrase is “according to the standard of the age of this world.” The *age* that Paul is referring to is the age of the succession of human kingdoms that rise and fall in opposition to God’s kingdom, which succession Daniel foretold would end with the coming of the kingdom of God in fullness to exercise eternal dominion over the earth. “This present evil age,” as Paul calls it in Galatians 1.4, is in contrast to the age to come, which Daniel also foretold when he interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. “And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (Dan 2.44-45). This Kingdom was inaugurated with the first coming of Jesus, and will be consummated at His second coming. The world-system continues to operate under the conditions of the present evil age, while believers now experience something of the age to come, the Kingdom of God. Some have thought that “age” defines man’s opposition to God temporally, while “world” defines it spatially. However, *kosmos* does not refer to the earth as opposed to heaven as a place. *kosmos* means something that is well-ordered. In this case it refers to humanity’s cooperation and organization against God’s revealed will.

Now that we’ve defined the terms “age” and “world” you can see why I rephrased this as “the God-defying antagonism of the world.” What is antagonism? Merriam-Webster Unabridged online defines antagonism as “actively expressed opposition, hostility, or antipathy.” The third definition offered says, “the sum of the mutual interference between dissimilar organisms occupying or attempting to occupy the same ecological niche.” If I could tweak this definition to make it respect the nature of the conflict between humanity and God, we could say that the antagonism of the world is the interference between

humanity and God as humanity tries to occupy the same governmental niche that God does. Another way of saying this is that the antagonism of the world arises from humanity's desire to be God.

Of course, by speaking of the interference between humanity and God, I would not want to suggest that God's sovereignty is in any way impinged upon by humanity's rebellion. While the evil of our rebellion is a great crime, it is no more threatening to God's sovereignty than a child's temper-tantrum. Remember the words of Psalm 2. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'" And what does God do? Does He reel back in horror, frightened by the mighty rage of the nations? God is not threatened! "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." By no means does the God-defying antagonism of the world threaten God's sovereignty. However, even though this God-defying antagonism of the world is no great threat to God, it is most certainly a great crime against Him. I do not want, for one second, to minimize the seriousness of shaking our fists in the face of God; nor would Psalm 2. For, the Psalm goes on to say, "Then He will speak to them in His fury, and terrify them in His wrath!" God is not threatened by this rebellion, but He is outraged by the foolish pride of creatures who would seek to dethrone their Creator.

What Paul says here is frightening! If he were to say nothing else—nothing about the devil or about the flesh—this should be enough to make us cringe at the thought that we were once sons of disobedience and that unbelievers are still. This God-defying antagonism of the world is the standard by which men conduct their lives. If God did not restrain our wickedness, we would long ago have destroyed each other by our vices. John Owen said that every seedling of sin has the ambition to grow into the very worst of its kind. Every lust would be rape. Every angry thought would be murder. Every greedy impulse would be armed robbery or grand larceny. To the degree that God removes His restraining influence over humanity we see the detrimental effects of this hatred of God. Every person apart from Jesus Christ is a card carrying member of the God-haters' Union. We pay our dues in so many outrages, until God changes us from Sons of Disobedience into beloved children of God.

Even as Christians, James gives us this warning from his letter (4:4): "You adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." As believers, we've been redeemed from this power over our lives, but we are still in the world, and still susceptible to its influence. When the norms and laws of society contradict the commands of God we cannot go along, or we will find ourselves fighting against God. When the values of society run contrary to the values of God's kingdom we cannot go along. When the customs of society undermine the righteous requirements of God's Word, we must not take part. "Everyone's doing it!" should not be encouragement to us. That should be a red flag. If we know that "the age of this world" is a unified, God-defying antagonism, then we must be wary of cozying up to the enemies of God. The world is hostile to God. Jesus said that the world hated Him. You used to belong to the world. You were once seduced by its power and influence. But you have been called out of it. Now, in Christ, you stand against the world. Surely you don't think that you can befriend that system that is at enmity with Christ! Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word

that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15.18-20). Likewise, Jesus prays for us, "I have given them Your Word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth" (John 17.14-19). **We were sons of disobedience, but God has saved us from the God-defying antagonism of the world.**

God has saved us from the God-defying ascendancy of Satan (2.2c-d). The next power that God has saved us from is mentioned in the second half of verse 2: "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." I use the phrase "God-defying *ascendancy* of Satan" to bring out the several words that Paul uses denoting his rule and power-authority. First, he calls him "prince" or "ruler." Second, he refers to the realm of his authority "the power/authority of the air." Third, he says this spirit is "working" in people. That term "working" is the energy or power that expresses the authority and princely position just mentioned. Paul, of course, is not the first to speak of the devil as a ruler or prince. Jesus called the devil "the ruler of this world" (Jn 12.31; 14.30; 16.11). Jesus' opponents referred to the devil as "the prince of demons" (Mt 9.34). Earlier, in the book of Daniel, Daniel relates a vision in which a "man," whose description shows him to be more than a man, came to him from the LORD. He said that he was delayed in coming to Daniel because he had been resisted by the "prince of the kingdom of Persia," and could not get away until Michael, "one of the chief princes, came to help me." Later he refers to the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece. Most interpreters, ancient and modern, are agreed that this messenger and these "princes" are angelic or demonic beings who exercise powerful influence over nations. In fact, the nations seem to each have a chief "prince." What Daniel learns, and relates to us, is that there is personal spiritual wickedness at work in the affairs of men, including the affairs of state. When Jesus refers to the devil as the "ruler of this world" and Paul refers to the "prince of the power of the air," they seem to be pointing to a single demon who rules over the other demons and actively works in the affairs of men. In fact, he is the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, and the power that we once walked according to.

The Bible is not as interested in speculative questions about the devil's origin as we often are. But the Bible is careful to tell us about the devil's activity in the present. He is a destroyer, an enslaver, a deceiver, and a schemer. His schemes include lies about God, lies about humanity, and lies about the nature and effect of sin. "Has God really said . . . ?" "For God knows that when you eat of it . . ." Here Satan has questioned the truth of God's Word and the integrity of His motives. "You will not surely die!" "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." These were lies about human nature and about the consequences of sin. It is no wonder that Jesus said of him, "He has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8.44).

The father of lies is still sowing lies in these same areas of philosophy or worldview. He still tells lies about God. We live in a very religious culture. Most Americans claim to believe in God. But ask them some questions about the nature of their god and his works, and you will find that it is not the God of the Bible that they worship. Most people have reduced the attributes of God to love. Of course this is a man-centered love which says that God likes me just the way I am and would never want to change me.

If you want to change me, then you don't love me. This goes hand in hand with another lie of Satan that has been imbibed by our culture, namely, that I don't need to change. The country or the government or my parents or my spouse may need to change. I may need to change my job. I may need to change my neighborhood or my circle of friends. But how dare anyone suggest that I need to change! Just look at the sexuality of our culture. One argument for homosexuality is based on the lie that we don't need changing. If a man is effeminate, so the argument goes, then he is just a woman trapped in a man's body. There is nothing wrong with this situation. He just has to accept that, despite his anatomy, he is a woman. And you should accept it as well. How many times has a man justified fornication or pornography by insisting that he has these perfectly natural drives that must be satisfied, just like you have to eat when you get hungry? The lie here is "I don't need to change." My appetites are normal. My desires are natural. I just have to accept them, and so should you. Of course, these lies about God and about humanity go hand in hand with lies about the nature and consequences of sin. *You will not surely die, but God know that your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* Sexual promiscuity leads to fulfillment, we are told. Oh, I know that Solomon warns that "he does not know that it will cost him his life" (Prov 7.23). But who is Solomon to talk, what with all those wives and concubines. He just doesn't want you to enjoy what he has discovered. Solomon cries out to us from Ecclesiastes, saying, "this too is vanity!" But the serpent hisses and writhes frenetically: "Don't look over there! Pay no attention to that man! Nothing to see over there! He doesn't know what he's talking about. Why! just listen to him. 'All is vanity!' What a pessimist. He just doesn't want you to have any fun." So the lies run on about God, about humanity, and about sin and its consequences.

The "prince of the power of the air" makes sure that the air is full of lies about work (both for the lazy and for the workaholic), lies about parenting, and of course lies about the church. He tells lies about pain and suffering. Oh yes. And he finds many willing preachers to help him propagate these lies. How many poor souls have been destroyed because they were told that if you get right with God (whatever that means) then your marriage will be great, your children will be well-adjusted, and your life will become generally prosperous and happy? Then, when some tragedy befalls them they either have to accept that their faith wasn't strong enough (and they despair that it will never be strong enough to realize their full potential) or this "god-stuff" just doesn't work. I've seen it happen in my own family. Sadly, many never recover from the disillusionment that inevitably follows from this lie.

The lies are endless. Do you see the desperate condition of fallen man apart from Christ? We were sons of disobedience, being worked over by this deceitful spirit. We were under his authority. Make no mistake, the goal of his lies is nothing short of the eternal destruction of souls. Jesus said to His opponents, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because he has no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me" (Jn 8.44-45). The biggest lies the devil tells are about the person and work of Jesus Christ and of your need for Him. He would convince you that Jesus is a charlatan. He would convince you that Jesus is just a nice guy that you should emulate. But the last thing the devil wants you to believe is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who took on flesh and died on the cross for sinners and rose again from the dead. The last thing the devil wants you to believe is that Jesus saves

sinners. He will tell you that God doesn't care about sin, so you are fine like you are. He will tell you that you're really not a sinner after all. He will tell you that Jesus is fine for some people, but you don't need all that religious stuff. That's what satan does. He's the father of lies.

As a Christian, you are not immune to satan's lies. You have the means to resist and correct his lies, but you are not immune. You can be wounded by them. As we will see later in this series, Paul will call us to "stand against the schemes of the devil." The very first piece of armor that he mentions for our warfare is "the belt of truth." The belt is central to every other piece of armor, perhaps with the exception of the footgear. God's truth holds our armor together. Knowing that we were once, children of disobedience, following the God-defying ascendancy of satan, let us arm ourselves with God's truth to combat these lies. And knowing the fearful condition in which unbelievers live under his tyranny, let us proclaim God's truth to them in love. For, God has saved us from this God-defying ascendancy of satan. God has saved us from the God-defying antagonism of the world, the God-defying ascendancy of satan, and finally

God has saved us from the God-defying autonomy of the flesh (2.3a-b). Of course, by autonomy I mean self-rule—being a law unto oneself. This self-rule is really not independence, it is slavery. It is bondage to what Paul calls in verse 3 "the passions of the flesh." Living in the passions of the flesh, all that we could do was carry out "the desires of the flesh and of the mind." The word translated passions denotes the affections or deep seated desires that drive our thoughts, our emotions, and our choices. People like to speak of free-will as though we can make totally undetermined choices. Paul says that the sons of disobedience are not free, but live according to the passions of the flesh. Like the term "age of this world," "flesh" is a technical term that Paul uses to describe human nature seeking independence from God. Sometimes Scripture speaks of us as flesh in contrast to God, who is Spirit. But the contrast is not meant to merely distinguish the properties of spiritual versus physical. It is more a contrast between created and uncreated; temporal and eternal; antecedent or derived being versus absolute being; I exist because God gives me life versus "I Am that I Am"—Yahweh. When Paul takes up this term he uses it in the sense that this creature, who depends on another for its existence, suicidally seeks to be independent of the life-Giver. Or, sinful flesh wants life from God, but then wants to expend that life without God's help or guidance. The flesh is each human's nature to rebel against God's rule to rule himself.

Fallen human nature is not free. You were not born with the freedom to choose God. You lived according to the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires or the will of the flesh and of the mind. Flesh exalts the self as a god. It seeks to please itself. It trusts in its own wisdom. Like Narcissus, a sinner is beholden to his own reflection. Sin has wrought such a death in the soul that the supreme glory of the true and living God in the face of Jesus Christ is of no value to that soul. He esteems it as nothing or is irritated by it. He hates the light. But he fancies that the abyss of darkness in his own soul is a fountain of light. He is mesmerized by his own image. He cannot see that he is dead. He does not see his chains. He is darkness (Eph 5.8); and being darkness he cannot perceive truth. He can't see what he is. It is this "flesh" that determines his choices. Before God saved you and transformed you, every ounce of your being, every faculty, body and soul, was at war with God.

“But God.” Those words speak of the One who changed all of this. We all once lived under these powers as sons of disobedience. We were ruled by the God-defying antagonism of the world, the God-defying ascendancy of satan, and the God-defying autonomy of the flesh. “But God” made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. We are seated with Christ in heavenly places. What does that mean? Well back up to chapter 1 again. There we saw Christ raised up and seated at the right hand of God the Father in the heavenly places. What does that mean? It means that Christ is king. It means that Christ reigns over His enemies. He is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.” He is above the age of this world. He is above the prince of the power of the air. He is above sinful flesh. God put “all things under His feet.” God “gave Him as head over all things for the church.” Jesus reigns over all of His and our enemies. And here Paul says we reign over these enemies. As he says in Romans 5, we reign in life through Jesus Christ. In Christ we have been set free from these God-defying powers that once ruled us. Now we can defy these powers. James says “resist the devil and he will flee from you.” We couldn’t do that before. But in Christ we are seated in heavenly places above the prince of the power of the air. Paul tells us “by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the flesh.” We couldn’t do that before, but in Christ we are no longer slaves to the flesh. Christ has overcome the world. Christ has bound the strong man. He has destroyed the one who had the power of death and through the fear of death held men in lifelong slavery. God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. “By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8.3-4). In Christ, the world, the devil, and the flesh have lost their dominion over us. By grace you have been saved!

What does all this mean? First, it means that you have great cause to give praise to God. O give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever! Second, it means that you do not have to live your life defeated by sin. Sin is still present with us, but it does not have the authority to dominate us any longer. You mustn’t give up the fight against these enemies. Why would you give up a fight that you are guaranteed to win. Listen, that their power is broken does not mean that their battle is over with you. But it does mean that their war is lost. You will be the victor, because God has put all things under His feet. And guess whom you are seated with in heavenly places. That’s right. Jesus Christ, the King. You are no longer a son of disobedience. You are no longer defined by the world, the devil, and the flesh. You are no longer defined by sin. When you discover sin in your heart, attack it as a foreign invader. It is the insurgency, and left alone it will gain much strength and inflict much damage. But it cannot stand. A new administration has been established, a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Jesus will not allow the city to fall. So fight! Fight as victors in Christ!

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.” 1 Thessalonians 5.23