

The Walking Dead

Ephesians 2:1-5 May 17, 2023

Ephesians 2:1-5 - And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ²in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. ³We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, ⁵made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!

Who doesn't love a good rags-to-riches story? It's especially enjoyable when it's not just about money, but there's a positive transformation for the character. Steve Rogers is a great example. His story starts with him being weak and sick and ineffectual, but then he is transformed. Steve is no longer the powerless kid getting beatdown by every passing bully. Now he's Captain America, empowered to fight the good fight *and win* with a strength and vitality that seems impossible.

In our text tonight Paul gives us a rags-to-riches story. But it's not really a superhero tale. It's more in the zombie/horror genre. He speaks of the walking dead and dark powers that control the world and infect the people in it. But a hero emerges - it's the God of the Bible - Who overcomes all this evil and turns back the fatal effects of sin, rescuing people and giving them new life.

Paul still wants us to think about the significance of salvation because he's convinced that will make a huge difference in our lives and our relationships with the Lord. In chapter 2, he has us think about how *bad* our prospects were before we were rescued by God's grace.

Ephesians 2:1 - And you were dead in your trespasses and sins

The problem couldn't be more direct or more dire. You were dead. Not "you were less than ideal." Not "you were sick." You were *dead!* There's no middle ground between life and death.¹ If you're dead, you don't go to a doctor to try to get better. There's nothing that can be done.

Death wasn't part of God's original purpose for His creation.² It came about through trespasses and sins. Adam and Eve were told very plainly, "If you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in that day you will surely die." They decided to go the death route instead of the obedience route, and so they brought sin and death into God's perfect creation. All of Adam's descendants inherit that death.³ And then we commit individual acts of rebellion and disobedience against God, because we are sinners and we are stuck in this state of death.

¹ *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

² Stephen Fowl *Ephesians*

³ 1 Corinthians 15:22

This spiritual death is a big problem. We need help beyond diet and exercise. We need help beyond doctors or philosophers or the spiritualists of this world. The *only* thing that could possibly help us is if there was Someone Who had power over sin and could raise the dead back to life. But no human religion can do it. No regime can do it. No philosophy can do it. Because all of those things come from dead sinners, therefore they are *also* dead in sin. No, we need outside help.

As we've seen before, these opening chapters in Ephesians are hotly contested battlegrounds when it comes to Calvinistic doctrine. This verse in particular is often seized upon as proof that human beings have absolutely no part in the process of their salvation. You'll hear quotes like, "Dead people can't do anything." "A dead man cannot exercise faith in Jesus Christ."⁴ "A dead man cannot cooperate with an offer of healing."⁵

This leads to a shocking statement of doctrine held by Reformed scholars like R.C. Sproul who say, "*Regeneration precedes faith.*"⁶ That phrase is called the "essence of reformed theology." And they will often point to Ephesians 2:1 and say, "There it is. You were dead. A dead man can do nothing, so God does *everything* with zero input or cooperation from the person."

The problem is that assessment of this analogy doesn't work in the context or in the rest of Scripture. Paul is going to say in verse 2, "you were dead...but here's all the things you were doing. You were walking and pursuing passions and being energized by the devil." The dead are very *active* in these verses. They *do* all sorts of things.

Second, when Adam and Eve committed the very first sin, they were told "in the day you eat of it you will die." God was right. They immediately died spiritually, they began to die physically, and they would've gone on to die eternally had God not intervened. *But*, even in their state of death, they were able to talk with God and answer Him and receive grace from Him.

Third, when Jesus told the parable of the lost son, the father uses the very same word for dead that Paul uses here. It's the word *nekros*. The father said, "This son of mine was *dead* and is alive again."⁷ When did that transformation happen? When he "came to his senses" and chose to fall on his father's mercy, asking for forgiveness.

Fourth, and this may be the most important. *If* this verse is saying, "You were dead, so you have absolutely no part in salvation, because a dead person can't do anything," then we run into a real problem when we get to Romans 6:11 which says that we Christians are *dead* to sin. Once again the same word. So, if the person in Ephesians 2 *cannot* act in faith toward God because they are dead *in* sin, how is it that we Christians are able to still disobey God if Romans tells us we are dead *to* sin? It's a problem. It would suggest that if we sin we are not actually Christians. After all, to be in Christ is to be *nekros* to sin.

⁴ Gordon Clark *The Biblical Doctrine Of Man*

⁵ John Gerstner *A Predestination Primer*

⁶ <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/regeneration-precedes-faith>

⁷ Luke 15:24

Yes, human beings are dead in trespasses and sins. They are separated from God and totally unable to save themselves. But God frees the will in order to give us ability to either accept His offer of salvation by faith or to reject it. The majority of us here tonight have accepted this free gift and so we *were* dead. Now we're alive. But if you are *not* a Christian, if you've never been born again, then you *are* dead in trespasses and sins. You may *feel* alive - You may feel like there is no problem, but the fact is this: *You are dead!* Sin is a fatal poison working its way through your life. You are like a zombie and there is no happy ending unless you are cured from your sin and death.

Ephesians 2:2 - ²in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient.

Zombies don't know they're zombies. They just stumble around doing whatever they do. That's exactly what life is for those who aren't Christians. But Paul goes deeper and reveals that, on top of being dead, the unsaved are enslaved to the ruler of this world. He's identified later in the book as the Devil himself. The Devil is real. He's called the god of this world because Adam and Eve were supposed to have dominion over the earth but instead they traded it to Satan. Now, he uses his sinister power to bring as much suffering and death and ruin to the people of earth because God loves people and Satan hates God. In 2 Timothy 2, we learn that human beings are trapped by the Devil and taken captive to do his will.

If you're not a Christian, the Bible is trying to help you. You may think you're living life just fine - sure you're not perfect, but you're doing the best you can - but the reality is that you are a dying slave being ground into this system of sin and death. The ways of the world lead only one place and that is the grave. If you don't repent and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, you're going to perish.⁸

This is why utopia is impossible, by the way. Because the world and its systems are ultimately ruled by the Devil whose whole goal is death and disobedience toward God. This is why the Lord Jesus is going to physically return one day and establish a literal Kingdom, reclaim this world and redeem it through and through, where *righteousness* will reign instead of sin.

Meanwhile, people on earth think that if we just have the right laws or the right balance of powers or the right distribution of goods everything will be perfect. But it's impossible because humanity is a bunch of corrupt, enslaved zombies living in ways that are in opposition to the goodness of God.

As Christians, this gives us an important perspective. We need to be thoughtful about how we interact and involve ourselves in the world's systems. Don't get me wrong - we're supposed to go throughout the world shining the light of the Gospel and demonstrating the love of God. But we are not going to make things better unless our primary goal is to rescue the dead as we have been rescued. In a zombie movie, the living cannot cooperate with the zombies. They can't work together to make a better tomorrow. What the zombies need is a cure. So, if you're a Christian, Paul would have us take a look at our political action, our social engagement, our interaction with culture and society, and run it through this perspective where we realize that this world is not our

⁸ Luke 13:5

home, it is ruled by the Devil who is working constant disobedience in all the ways he can. So, as we engage, our main goal is to rescue the dead, not gussy up the graves.

Ephesians 2:3 - ³We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also.

Previously Paul spoke to Gentiles, but he includes Jews here. This is a universal problem. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

When Paul talks about the “flesh,” he doesn’t just mean the tissue that makes up your body. He means “the whole [person] oriented away from God and toward its own selfish desires.”⁹

The flesh is a tyrant over the unsaved person and we’ve already seen that it is infected with Satan’s power. Paul is contrasting the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a Christian, leading to life and the work of the Devil, the “unholy spirit” in the heart of an unbeliever, leading to death.¹⁰

It’s important that we recognize that not every outworking of the flesh *looks* bad. Paul uses himself as an example. He says, “I was a dead man, doing sinful, zombie stuff, just carrying out the inclinations of my sinful flesh.” But what was Paul doing before he became a Christian? He was totally dedicated to religion. Everything he did he did because he thought it was honoring God. He was a scholar and an expert, willing to dedicate himself to his faith. But what was his life, *really*? It was war against Jesus Christ. It was selfish sin. It was devilish activity dressed up as piety. We too.

Again, someone who isn’t a Christian might say, “This is all a little too much. I’m not a depraved evildoer. I could be much worse than I am. I’m just a regular person.” But this is why you need to hear what God is saying in His Living Word. You are a slave to sin. Your flesh has taken over your life. Your legitimate human needs have been distorted and corrupted and now are leading you to eternal death.¹¹ Because when we live outside of God’s salvation, we are under wrath.

Wrath is not God throwing a tantrum. It is His response to injustice. He must avenge it. He must punish evil. He must put down rebellion. Ecclesiastes 12 says, “God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.”

So, the situation is dire. We were dead. Condemned. Powerless to climb out of our graves. And then Paul utters what has been called “The greatest short phrase in the history of human speech.”¹²

Ephesians 2:4a - ⁴But God...

⁹ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

¹² *ESV Study Bible Notes*

Despite the failure of man, despite the power of the Devil, despite the hopelessness of our situation, we read “But God.” The main point of Ephesians 2:1-10 is that God will not stay out of the picture.¹³ He will not write us off or start over with a fresh sheet of paper. Why?

Ephesians 2:4 - ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us,

This all-powerful God is a Being of love and mercy. How rich is His mercy? It is so great that even though we infected ourselves with sin and death, He is willing to come down and rescue us. Even though we were His *enemies*, He gave His own Son to die in our place so that we could have the chance to be saved. Even though we have nothing to offer Him and He has to do all the work to beautify us and remake us and restore us, He’s willing to do it because of His great love for us.

Imagine you’re on *Amazon* tomorrow, buying a product you’re interested in. I’ll use a guitar pedal as an example. There it is: it’s the ugliest guitar pedal imaginable. Also it doesn’t work. It’s completely busted and ruined and inoperable. The price? All the money you have. You’ll have to sell your house and your car and empty your accounts and cash out your retirement to get it. And, even if you buy it, and even if you fix it up, a lot of the time it’s *still* not going to work right. It’s going to give a bunch of static at random times. *Would you buy a product like that?*

The Lord did. Millions upon millions of times over. He bought you and me with His blood. That’s how rich His love and mercy are. Scholars tell us that the word Paul uses for mercy here is the same word the Septuagint uses for that Hebrew term we learned about in Genesis: *hesed*.¹⁴ That steadfast, loyal, active love that God has for us. It’s a merciful love, meaning God *didn’t have to do it*.¹⁵ With this great love and mercy, here’s what He did:

Ephesians 2:5 - [He] ⁵made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!

One of the main themes of zombie movies is that, once you’re infected, it’s over. But the Lord does the impossible: He brings us back to life. This is why Paul has been marveling about salvation for more than a chapter now. And it’s not just a future thing. You *were* dead, now you *are* alive, you *are* saved. It is a completed action with ongoing effects.¹⁶ It’s all a work of His grace. We do not save ourselves. But we have the opportunity to understand what God has done and respond in faith. As the letter continues, we learn more and more about how that response works out in our lives.

We could break this passage down and look at it from three angles. The first is for unbelievers. You need to be *advised* about your spiritual condition and the danger you’re in. You are dead and dying, headed for eternal death in the lake of fire. God doesn’t want you to go there, but you *have* to go there if you refuse to let Jesus be your substitute for sin because the wages of sin is death.

¹³ Snodgrass

¹⁴ Fowl

¹⁵ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁶ Fowl

But, you too can be made alive, saved from the guilt of your sin, saved from the eternal death you are headed for. The way out is very simple: You receive God's gift of salvation by faith. *"This is the message of faith that we proclaim: If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

The second angle is for us who are in Christ. We should be *amazed* at what was. We were dead. Hopeless. Helpless. Guilty. Trapped and enslaved. God cut through all of that to pull us out of the grave and lift us up to a place where death no longer has power over us, sin no longer has power over us, the Devil will no longer control us, he will *flee* from us if we resist him. This is the most amazing rags-to-riches story of all time and we should celebrate in our hearts what God has done.

But then there's the third angle of these verses. It's also for we who believe. We should be *aware* of what *could* be. The truth is, we *do* still sin. We *can* still fall into the Devil's traps when we make the same mistake Adam and Eve made and that's to disobey God. Paul was talking to Christians in Romans when he said, *"Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires. And do not offer any parts of it to sin as weapons for unrighteousness. But as those who are alive from the dead, offer yourselves to God."* It is possible for us to turn off the road of righteousness and take steps on the way of the world. The result is ruin and disaster. What did Jesus say to the church at Sardis? *"You have a reputation for being alive, but you're dead. Nekros. So, be alert and strengthen what remains and is about to die."* Christians must recognize that there is a war and struggle in our hearts and in this world and we have to cooperate with the sanctifying power of Christ so that we don't turn back to sin and death.

One way to keep our minds right on this is to evaluate whether we follow the standards of the world or if we instead see this world as dying and in need of saving through Jesus Christ. If we agree with culture, if we pass all the current standards of coolness or acceptability or open-mindedness, then we do not understand the situation properly. Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* We want to dedicate our lives to help save the dead out of their death and to walk with the Lord, not in the flesh which drags us into captivity. We have all the life and all the power and all the direction we need because God has given it to us. Be alive in Christ, fight the good fight, and walk worthy with Him until we finish our course and are ushered into glory.