

“IN TIMES PAST”

Ephesians 2:1-3

Intro: The Bible gives us the most accurate description of man that is to be found anywhere. It tells us as Christians not only what we are now since we have been saved, but it also tells us what we will be when God has completed the work of salvation in us. But the Bible also tells us what we were before we were saved. And it is in contrasting what we were by nature with what we are now and what we will be by the grace of God, that we are made to marvel at the contrast.

That evidently is at least one reason why the Apostle Paul gave the believers at Ephesus the truth that we have in the first three verses of chapter two after all of the amazing truth that he gave them in chapter one. But let us remember that the message of Ephesians is just as much for us today as it was for the Ephesians or any of the other churches to whom this letter was originally sent. We can turn to other books of the Bible and find passages like the first fourteen verses of Ephesians 1, and prayers just as powerful as Paul’s prayer in the latter part of chapter 1, but it would be hard to find anything that surpasses what we have here.

Paul took us back before creation itself to tell us how the members of the Godhead planned our salvation. He spoke of us as people upon whom the Lord set His love before there was any world at all. Of course Paul would not have known any of that truth if the God had not revealed it to him. But anyone who reads chapter one with any understanding at all, would be forced to ask himself, or herself, as he read verse 3 and was ready to go on to verse 4, how can the next verse possibly lead me any higher and into any more glorious territory than the verse that I am looking at right now. And Paul’s prayer from verse 15 on to the end of the chapter was Paul calling upon God to make sure that that these glorious truths of the Gospel, these truths of salvation, were really getting into the hearts of his readers.

So, spiritually, all of us who know the Lord have a past, and we have a present, and we have a future. And it moves from a shameful past, to a wonderful present, and a most glorious future. Now in Ephesians 2, where we are today, we are looking at our past. And as we place these verses beside what we have seen in any verse in chapter 1, we all should find that our hearts are filled with amazement. If verses 1, 2, and 3 of chapter 2 include all of us, how could we ever find our way into the truth

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of chapter one? Well, the truth is, we didn't find our way. By nature we were all headed in the opposite direction. But God has changed the course of our lives. But you say, if verses 1, 2, and 3 apply to me, then I don't deserve the blessings mentioned in chapter one. And you are right again. You don't deserve them, and neither do I! That is why we can rejoice at that little word "grace" which is found, for example, in verse 6. Grace means two things: It means that our holy God has not given us what we deserve, but He has given us what we do not deserve. We can't buy this wonderful salvation. We can't earn it. It is our by the free grace of God because of what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us when He died for us on Calvary's Cross. We are going to learn a lot more about the grace of God before we finish our study of Ephesians. God hasn't closed His eyes to what we were in giving us salvation. In fact, it is exactly because of what we were that He determined to save us from the penalty of our sins, which was eternal separation from God, but He has also saved us from the power of our sins. And all of the blessings of our salvation, which Paul has mentioned in chapter one, come to us through Christ! There is no other way to get them.

Now let me read Ephesians 2:1-3 so we can all have this fresh in our minds. This is one passage where we have God's portrait of what all people are by nature. It doesn't make any difference where we were born, or when we were born. These verses describe every person who has ever been born into this world with one exception. And that exception is Christ. Follow in your Bible as I read. (Read Eph. 2:1-3.)

Now let me ask you a question. I don't expect an audible answer, but I want you to answer this question in your own heart. Here is the question: Have you noticed from your reading of Ephesians that there are other verses where Paul comes back to this same subject, our sinfulness? I hope you can say, Yes.

For example, let your eye run down to verses 11 and 12 in this same second chapter. (Read Eph. 2:11-12.)

Now look at the words "far off" in verse 13 of this same chapter, and then you will find these same words in verse 17. Paul was making an appeal to Gentiles in this epistle. He was commissioned by God as the apostle to the Gentiles. The Gentiles had not been given the Scriptures in OT times. Occasionally a prophet was sent to a Gentile nation, but that didn't happen very often. And so Paul spoke of them as being "far off."

Now turn to Ephesians 4, and follow in your Bible as I read verses 17-19, and then verse 22.

And then notice in chapter 5 what Paul wrote in verses 3 through 8. You see, even though we have been saved and brought into the family of God, it is still possible for us to sin. That is why we have to be very careful about the way we live. Some day it will not be possible for us to sin anymore. But that will not be until we die, or until the Lord comes and takes us all to heaven. Until then we must stay very close to our Bibles, reading them every day, learning the truth of Scripture, and seeking with the Holy Spirit's help to obey God's Word – which means not doing what God tells us not to do, but doing what He tells us in His Word that He wants us to do.

So we still have our old sinful nature, but we have a new life in Christ. And the books of the Bible gives us all of the help we will ever need to live lives that are holy. Don't forget that Paul told us in Ephesians 1, verse 4, that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him." We are never going to be perfect in this life, but we can be, and should be, growing to be more like our Lord Jesus Christ from day to day.

But now, let us go back to the first three verses of Ephesians, chapter 2.

If you have a Bible that uses italics, remember that that is not for the sake of emphasis, as it often is in other books that we read, but words in italics are words that have been added by the translators to make the meaning of Scripture clearer.

One of the doctors at the Gresham Internal Medicine Clinic, who works with Dr. Lockwood and Dr. Custis, is Dr. Wei Lin. As his name tells you, he is Chinese. And what is even more important, he is a Christian. He really loves the Lord. He is Lucille's doctor, and probably some of you are his patients too. The last time he saw Lucille for a brief checkup, I was with her, and he told us that he is translating one of Arthur Pink's books into Chinese. And he spoke of how difficult it is at times to find just the right Chinese word, or words, to convey what Arthur Pink has written in English.

I mention this just to help you understand why here and there you will find word in italics to make the Greek or the Hebrew more understand-

able when it is translated into English. So the words in italics do not change the meaning, but just make it clearer.

Here in Ephesians 1, Paul was speaking to believers. But while he was writing to them as Christians, what he said in the Greek was, “And you were dead in trespasses and sins.” When we get down to verse 5 we have the word “quicken.” So it was perfectly true for the translators of the KJV to say, “And you *hath he quickened* . . .” But it may have even been more powerful to say, “And you were dead in trespasses and sins.”

The point is that all of us were born into this world physically alive, but spiritually dead. You never have to teach a child to sin. No one had to teach us to sin. We are sinners by nature. A baby is a precious gift from God, but he is a sinner by nature and if that baby is not saved, he, or she, will break your heart. We all had the same start, and the only remedy for our sinfulness is Christ, is the Gospel. And this salvation comes to us by the new birth, where we receive divine life, God’s life, eternal life. Our problem is our trespasses and sins.

If you consult various commentaries, you will find various ways in which different writers try to distinguish between “trespasses and sins.” John Eadie, a Scotch Presbyterian, who lived back in the 1800's, has written commentaries on several NT epistles, and he wrote on Ephesians. After reviewing quite a few different ideas about these two words which were recommended by different Christian writers, I think he wisely came to this conclusion:

The two words in close connection must denote sin of every species, form, and manifestation, of intent as well as act, of resolve as well as execution, of inner meditation as well as outer results (p. 119).

And then pointing out that the Greek actually says “the trespasses” and “the sins, Eadie went on to say, quoting another writer by the name of Stier, that these word then have “this force – Sins, ‘which you are conscious having committed’ . . . “Sins, which are well known to have characterized your unconverted state” (*Ibid.*)

So Paul very likely was using these words to include all sins, even sins which we never actually committed, but sins which we committed in our hearts, like the Lord said about adultery, that it is sin for a man to lust against a woman in his heart. We can hate a person in our hearts, but act like we like that person very much. We not only sin outwardly, but

inwardly in our hearts.

I have used the words, “in time past,” as it is in verse 2, or “in times past” as it is in verse 3, for my subject. It is translated “once” in the NKJV. In the NASB it is translated “formerly.” The NIV translates it differently in verses 2 and 3 – in verse 2, “used to live,” and in verse 3, “at one time.”

The point is that although we have not all sinned the same sins, yet we have all sinned! Our past life was a sinful life. And this is presently true of every person who has not trust in Christ for salvation. And we know what those sins are. We are not to talk about them, and certainly now to boast about them. We need to be ashamed of them.

We lived “according to the course of this world.” The word in the original Greek which is translated “course,” is the Greek word for *age*, or a period of time. The world is in a constant state of change. If my parents were living today, they would be startled, amazed, to see how the moral standards in our generation, have fallen. And they continue to fall. We live in an adulterous generation. Hollywood has made it appear OK for an unmarried couple to have a child, or children. Godlessness prevails. We have outlawed the Bible in our schools, and the ACLU would outlaw the Bible in our churches. The homosexual problem is out of control. So the people of the world adjust to “the course of this world.” Whatever evil is acceptable, people adjust to the change. And as a result we move farther and farther away from God, and farther and farther away from the Word of God.

And all of this is under “the prince of the power of the air,” which is a title of Satan. Hendriksen says in his commentary on Ephesians that this has to do with his power which is exercised by demons who are not earth-bound like we are, but who do the bidding of Satan in his plan to bring the whole universe under his control.

The “children of disobedience” are people who live in disobedience to God, and Satan makes sure that they have every encouragement and every opportunity to exercise their disobedience to God. What better term could we find that would better describe the generation in which we live. There could hardly be a better description of the world in which we live. Paul called Satan “the god of this world” who “hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4). And in this verse the word for

“world” is the word for age, looking at the world from the standpoint of time. He is the mastermind behind all of the ungodliness that is so powerful and prominent in the world today.

Everything that we read in the Bible is important, but I want you to notice how Paul approached this question of sin in verse 3. Remember that Paul had been talking about the fact that this world is a world of sinners. People don't like to be called sinners because it exposes what they really are. But look at what Paul said here: “Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past.” “Had our conversation” is the translation of a Greek word which means that “in times past” we all lived like the people of the world live, “the children of disobedience.” “Conversation” is an old English word for *the way we live*. *Paul was not saying that we all have committed all of the sins that it is possible for us to commit. Thank God, He has prevented such a tragedy from taking place. But the potential is there in each one of us.*

But it does mean that we naturally live to satisfy the lusts of our own hearts. Do you wonder why adultery has become a way of life in our nation today? The answer is right here. Do you wonder why executives of big companies are often caught turning millions of dollars in their direction? Do we wonder why athletes will use steroids in order to get a greater advantage in the sport they are involved in, and then lie about it? Do we wonder why there are politicians who use their position to load their own pockets? Do we wonder why there is so much unfaithfulness in marriages? And what about the way pornography has enslaved so many and has become so available on the internet?

Why have these and so many other sins gotten to the place where they threaten the very existence of our generation. It is because people live in the lusts of the flesh, and are living to fulfill the base desires of our flesh and our minds. We are all sinners by nature. And as sinners we are children of wrath, children under the judgment of God. And the writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

This is what led to that now famous statement, I believe made first by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that great English preacher of the nineteenth century, who saw a drunk staggering down the street. And Mr. Spurgeon said, “There go I, but for the grace of God.”

Concl: I can't leave you there. Next week, the Lord willing, we will see the remedy which the Apostle Paul went on to explain in Ephesians. But let me close by reading a passage from Paul's letter to Titus where he took his place with other sinners, and then went on to speak about where he had found the answer to his own sin. I am reading from Titus, chapter 3, the first seven verses:

- 1 Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work,
- 2 To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.
- 3 For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.
- 4 But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared,
- 5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;
- 6 Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;
- 7 That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

I know that there are those in our city who would like to make what I am about to say, illegal. But I am going to say it anyway, and I say it because it is true. There is only one solution for sin. It is a Person. His Name is the Lord Jesus Christ. I think that it was John the Baptist who said. It was true then, and it is true today. These words are recorded in John 3:36:

- 36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

If Christ is not your Savior, you are under the wrath of God because of your sins. If He is your Savior, your sins are forgiven, and you are a new creature with a new life and a new heart that loves God and desires to please Him.