

## Chapter 2

### *Our Desperate Need For Sovereign Grace*

When God began to overwhelm me with His grace, one of the first things He did was help me to understand the Biblical teaching on the condition of unsaved men. The only way we can rightly appreciate God's grace is to realize how desperately we needed it. Ephesians 2:1-3 furnishes us with a thorough and graphic description of mankind in a state of sin:

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*

If you were to come over to my house and go into the family room, you would see several family portraits hanging on the wall. We have had our family picture taken almost every year since our eldest son was born, and my wife has arranged the pictures very nicely on the wall. However, there is one portrait in particular that I am not fond of. For some reason, the year this picture was taken I combed my hair straight back so that it stands up tall and puffed out. I don't know what possessed me. It is a horrible photo! What's more, it is embarrassing. Some night when everybody else is sleeping, I would like to sneak into the family room, take down the picture, and burn it!

In the same way, the Apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter two is showing us an old portrait of ourselves that we would just as soon forget. It is our spiritual portrait taken before we became Christians. It is a ghastly and embarrassing sight. A friend of mine carries around in his Bible an old picture of himself which was taken a couple of weeks before he was saved. He is wearing long, scraggly hair, donning a T-shirt advertising an acid rock band, and looks like he is high on drugs. He carries this old photograph around with him so that he will never forget the hellish life that God saved him from. Likewise, in Ephesians 2 the apostle Paul is showing us the hellish life that God saved us from.

### *We Were Dead In Our Sins*

Ephesians 2:1 says, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." What does that mean? It can't possibly mean that we were dead *to* trespasses and sins. No, we were very much alive to them. Our text tells us that we formerly walked in them. It also cannot mean that we were dead to the world, because verse two tells us that we walked according to the course of this world. Furthermore, it cannot mean that we were dead to the flesh, because verse three tells us that we formerly lived in the lusts of the flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind. Finally, it cannot mean that we were dead to the devil, because verse two tells us that we walked

according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. When the apostle Paul says that we were dead in trespasses and sins, he does not mean that we were dead on those levels. No, the sad truth is that we were vibrantly alive to our sins, the world, the flesh, and the devil. We were biologically, socially, intellectually, and perhaps even morally alive; but we were spiritually dead. We were alive in every way except for one; we were dead to God. We were completely cut off from the life of God.

What does it mean to be dead in sins? A dead man has absolutely no power. He is helpless to do anything. If you were to go down to a mortuary, you could yell at a corpse for hours, but the man could never hear you. You could command him to open his eyes, speak to you, or stand up. You could do this hour after hour, but you would never elicit a response from him. He cannot even flicker his eyelashes. He cannot respond because he lacks the one thing needful - life. You can kick him or put a gun to his head and command that he speak to you, but the response will always be the same - nothing. He cannot see you, hear you, understand you, receive you, please you, or come to you. That is exactly the same situation we were in before God saved us.

### ***The Man Dead In Sins Cannot See<sup>1</sup>***

Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus goes on in verse five to tell Nicodemus that unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Thus, all who have been born again have entered God’s kingdom and, having entered, are able to see it. If someone lived all their life in Europe, they would never be able to see the United States. In order to view the United States, an individual must first enter it. Likewise, in order for an individual to see the kingdom of God, he must first enter it. But entering the kingdom takes place only when God regenerates an individual. Thus, the unregenerate man cannot perceive the kingdom, for he is wholly outside of it.

But what is meant by seeing the “kingdom of God?” It cannot refer to heaven, for a man enters the kingdom when he is born again, not when he dies. It must refer, then, to that spiritual kingdom in which God rules and reigns by His Spirit in the lives of His people. In Romans 14:17 Paul identifies the characteristics of the kingdom as righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Seen in this light, Jesus was instructing Nicodemus that unless a person is born again he can never see, understand, or experience the things of the Spirit which are discerned and enjoyed by the regenerate here upon the earth when they enter God’s kingdom. Paul expressed this same truth in 1 Corinthians 2:14 in this manner, “But a natural [unsaved] man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

### ***The Man Dead In Sins Cannot Hear***

Jesus, in speaking to the religious leaders of His day, declared in John 8:43, “Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.” Now, these religious leaders could hear the audible sounds that Jesus uttered. But they could not hear them with the internal ears of their heart. They could not embrace and receive Christ’s word for they had no heart for it. Radio signals are all around us right now. If we were “tuned in,” we might hear rock, jazz, classical, or country music. But we could never hear any of it without a stereo receiver. In

the same way, a man remains stone deaf to the voice of Jesus Christ until he is born again. He lacks the “receiver” necessary to hear His voice. That “receiver” is a brand new heart that God gives to all those He causes to be born again.

### ***The Man Dead In Sins Cannot Receive***

Jesus told His disciples in John 14:16, “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.” Just as a dead man cannot embrace you, so too a lost man cannot receive the Holy Spirit. He is spiritually helpless to do so, for he is not aware of Him and does not know Him.

### ***The Man Dead In Sins Cannot Please***

Paul tells us in Romans 8:7, “the mind set on the flesh [the mind of the unregenerate man] is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” We know that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Before we became Christians we were without faith, and thus, spiritually powerless to please God.

### ***The Man Dead In Sins Cannot Come***

Jesus told us as much in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” He said again in John 6:65, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.” Until the Father draws a man, he cannot come to Jesus Christ, being spiritually unable to make a move towards Him.

In spite of this clear teaching from God’s Word, there are a number of different opinions today about the lost man’s condition. For example, some believe that man is spiritually well. A British monk by the name of Pelagius in the early fifth century espoused this view, openly debating the teachings of Augustine on this issue. Pelagius taught that all men have the absolute equal ability at every moment to do good or evil. He believed that a man could live sinlessly. In his view, it is absolutely essential that we are able to keep all of God’s commands, for if we cannot, then God was unfair in giving them to us. His slogan was, “Whatever I ought to do, I can do.” Furthermore, Pelagius believed and taught that Adam’s fall hurt only himself. Thus, according to his understanding, children are born neutral into the world, without a sinful nature.<sup>2</sup> This same basic view has been embraced today by some theological liberals who believe that all men are basically good. Given the proper environment and education, they say, men will live righteous lives.

There are others who believe that the unsaved man is spiritually sick. These individuals do not agree with Pelagius that man is spiritually well, because they realize that much of what he taught is contradictory to the Word of God. However, they do not believe that the unsaved person is as helpless as Augustine taught. Therefore, they have reached what is, for them, a happy medium. They believe that Adam’s fall did deal a radical blow to the human race, but it did not leave him in a condition of total spiritual helplessness. In this system of thought, God

graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does so in such a manner as not to interfere with man's freedom. According to them, every sinner possesses a free will and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. These individuals believe that man has the power to cooperate with God in obtaining salvation. They understand the condition of the sinner to be like a man who is drowning in a river. God throws the life rope to him. All he must do is reach out and hold onto the rope and let God pull him in to safety. Nevertheless, the decision to grasp the rope or let it slip through his fingers lies with him alone; God will not interfere with his decision.

Finally, there are others, myself included, who believe that man is not spiritually healthy or spiritually sick, but rather, spiritually dead. They believe that man cannot cooperate with God in obtaining salvation, because every part of man's being was affected by the fall, including his will. Thus, man is powerless to save himself or even cooperate with God in his own salvation. This was the position of Augustine as well as the reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Salvation in this scheme is not determined by whether or not a man will choose of his free will to grasp the life rope that God throws to him. The reason is obvious; man is not just in trouble, needing a life rope tossed to him. He is dead at the bottom of the river. He needs God to dive down, bring him to shore, and then breathe His very life into him. Now, this may be very humbling to our natural pride, but it seems to me to be exactly what the apostle Paul is teaching here in Ephesians chapter two.

### ***We Were Controlled By The World***

Ephesians 2:2 tells us that we formerly walked "according to the course of this world." In referring to the "world," Paul is not speaking here of planet earth or all the people in the world. Rather, he is referring to the world of men alienated from God. He is declaring that formerly we ordered our behavior according to the course or path that the ungodly of this world walk in. We adopted their opinions, values, and attitudes. The world squeezed us into its mold. The phrase "according to" is from the Greek preposition "kata." Its root meaning is "down." It came to have the meaning of "to be dominated by."<sup>3</sup> Formerly, we were dominated by this evil world system. We were brainwashed by its propaganda. We had imbibed its philosophy of living for self and pleasure. Taking our cue from the world, we believed we could solve our problems. Thus, we did not need God and would not seek Him. Before God saved us we were unknowingly ruled by this present evil world.

### ***We Were Controlled By The Devil***

Additionally, Ephesians 2:2 tells us that we formerly walked "according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." The word "prince" comes from the Greek word which means "ruler." Jesus referred to the devil as the ruler of this world (John 12:13; 14:30; 16:11), and the Pharisees called him the ruler of the demons (Matthew 12:24). Paul referred to him as the "god" of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4). The devil is a ruler.

Who does he rule over? Our text says that he is the prince "of the power of the air." In Ephesians 6:12, Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the *rulers*, against the *powers*, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces

of wickedness in the heavenly places.” In Ephesians 2:2 we again find the words “prince” (ruler) and “power.” Therefore, since “rulers” and “powers” refer to evil spirits in Ephesians chapter six, it is extremely likely that they also refer to evil spirits in Ephesians 2:2. Thus, when we are told that Satan is the prince of the power of the air, it must mean that he is the ruler of all demon spirits. He rules over the kingdom of darkness. In other words, Satan is the five-star general commanding his army of hellish hosts.

Furthermore, we are told that “we formerly walked according to the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” This does not mean that all lost men are indwelt by demons, but it does mean that they are subject to demonic influence. Unsaved men respond naturally to Satan’s leading. Again the Greek preposition “kata” is used, meaning we were dominated not only by the world, but also by Satan and his wicked hosts. Imperceptibly to us, he was ruling over us, influencing us, tempting us, and holding us captive to do his will. We were absolutely controlled by him. This sobering truth is echoed elsewhere as well. Paul in writing to Timothy says, “the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses, and escape from the snare of the devil, *having been held captive by him to do his will*” (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Again the Apostle John wrote, “We know that we are of God, and *the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*” (1 John 5:19).

### ***We Were Controlled By Our Flesh***

What’s more, we were also controlled by our flesh. Ephesians 2:2 informs us that we formerly walked in trespasses and sins. Just as a fish swims in water and a bird flies in the air, so we walked in sins. They were the natural element in which we lived. Everything we did in the sight of God was sin. Our deeds may have looked good to other people, but they were sinful in the sight of God, because they were not done out of faith in God, love to God, or for the glory of God. To illustrate, imagine that a doctor signs on with the United States Navy. While on board ship, he decides to mutiny and lead a crew of men in seizing the vessel. Eventually, a United States destroyer comes after them and a great gun battle ensues. When men on the doctor’s ship are wounded, the doctor goes three days and nights without sleep in order to treat their injuries. Finally, the ship is captured. What will the United States government do to that man who gave so unstintingly of his time and energy? Will they give him a medal of honor for his sacrifice? Of course not. They will hang him! Why? Because all the good he did, was done in rebellion. His very goodness was evil.<sup>4</sup> So too, all our human goodness is evil in the sight of God, because it is all done in rebellion to Him. Until we surrender our lives to Christ in repentance and faith, “every intent of the thoughts of our heart is only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Not only did we walk according to our sins, but Ephesians 2:3 tells us that we lived in the lusts of our flesh. Flesh, here, refers to man’s fallen corrupt nature. We gave ourselves over to the lusts of our fallen nature. The lusts of our flesh were expressed in two different ways. Externally, our fleshly lusts expressed themselves in “indulging the desires of the flesh.” We indulged in alcohol, drugs, sex, and anything else that arose from our bodily appetites. Internally, our fleshly lusts expressed themselves in “the desires of the mind” such as pride, envy, unbelief, strife, and selfishness. We “lived” in them. We gave ourselves over to fulfilling

them. We were concerned with gratifying our fleshly desires in ways both external and internal. These lusts dominated and controlled us.

### ***We Were Under The Wrath Of God***

In Ephesians 2:3 Paul declares, “and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” When he says we were children of wrath “by nature,” he means by physical birth. If that is true, then the ideas that babies are born into the world innocent and that children are under an “age of accountability” are myths. The Bible declares that they are born under the wrath of God and apart from a miracle of regeneration will be lost forever. This text in Ephesians is not the only passage that teaches this truth. We are taught elsewhere that we sinned in Adam (Romans 5:12), were brought forth in iniquity (Psalm 51:5), and are estranged from the womb (Psalm 58:3). All men are born under condemnation with three strikes against them. They are born DOA -- dead on arrival!

Our text tells us that we were “children of wrath, even as the rest.” We were no different than the rest of the world. In fact, we were in exactly the same condition as they are. Thus, if we are Christians and others are not, the reason does not lie in the fact that we are innately any better than they.

The sobering truth of this passage is that all men are born objects of the wrath of God. God’s wrath is His holy response to sin. All sin is offensive and loathsome to His awesome purity and holiness. As long as we remain the sons of disobedience we must remain children of wrath. The only way, therefore, to escape the wrath of God is to cease being a son of disobedience. A son of disobedience is a person whose life is characterized by disobedience; a sinner by nature. The only way, therefore, for a man to cease living as a son of disobedience is for God to change his nature so that he becomes a child of light producing the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth (Ephesians 5:8-9).

### ***Conclusion***

I trust that we can see more clearly now the sinner’s desperate need for God’s sovereign grace. We have seen from the Scriptures that if we are Christians, a miracle has taken place! We were dead in our sins, controlled by the world, the devil, and our flesh, and under the wrath of God. “We were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another” (Titus 3:3). We were in the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26). Furthermore, “while we were still *helpless*, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). Do these texts seem to agree with the popular teaching that God wants to save everyone, but must wait until someone of his own free will lets Him? The texts describe us as dead, enslaved, captive, controlled, blind, deaf, helpless, hopeless, and powerless.

The popular understanding of free will is that all men possess the ability to repent of their sin and believe savingly on the Lord Jesus Christ at any time. However, if I am a slave, am I free? If I am held captive, do I have the freedom to leave? If I am blind, am I free to see? If I am deaf, am I free to hear? If I am dead, am I free to live? Of course not! Clearly then, the popular

notion that the sinner's "free will" enables him to come to Christ in saving faith at any time, is at odds with the clear testimony of Scripture.

Rather, free will points to the liberty God has given man to make his own choices. When I go into a restaurant, I have the freedom to order anything on the menu (assuming I have the money to pay for it!). However, I will never voluntarily choose to spend my hard-earned money on cooked spinach. I detest spinach. My inclinations rise up against the very thought of ordering spinach in a restaurant. Likewise, the unsaved man will never choose to repent of his sins and commit his life to Christ on his own. God invites him to repent and trust Christ. More than that, God commands him to repent and trust in Christ. Nevertheless, the sinner will never accept God's invitation or obey His command to repent and believe for the simple reason that He does not want to. He will always choose sin over Christ. His mind is blinded (2 Corinthians 4:4); thus he thinks wrong thoughts about God. His heart is hard (Ephesians 4:18); thus he feels wrong emotions toward God. His will is corrupt (John 5:40); thus he chooses wrong actions in relation to God. His mind, emotions, and will are all in rebellion to God. Thus, he will never make the right choice in relationship to God unless God, of His own free grace, sovereignly grants him a new nature. Therefore, if we are Christians today, it had nothing to do with us and everything to do with our gracious heavenly Father. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory!" (Psalm 115:1).

The dark backdrop of man's sin and inability provides a wondrous setting to display the glory of God's grace. When you once understand and embrace the Biblical description of man as lost, helpless, and hopeless in his sin, you are now ready to glory in the magnificence of God's sovereign grace.

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#### NOTES:

1. I am indebted to John Reisinger for his teaching at a men's retreat on March 3-5, 1995 in which he outlined what the unregenerate man cannot do.
2. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996) 3:802-812.
3. Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, Volume 1, Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973) 61.
4. This illustration was taken from a tape by John Reisinger in which he was expounding the doctrine of total depravity.