



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Ephesians 2: 1-7

Fall 2023

"From Death to Life"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of Ephesians and beginning chapter 2 this morning, we're going to look at verses one through seven. And in that Christmas Carol hymn that we just sang, there's that last statement,

Christ was born to save,

Christ was born to save.

That's really Christmas—and that's the reason we have this passage that we're going to look at this morning: Here's the reason why Christ needed to come and save.

Now I've taken seven verses, and that doesn't seem like a great deal, but there's a great deal of information and doctrine in these verses. I could have probably cut it into two or three lessons very easily, but what I want to show, and the reason I take this as a whole, is I want you to see 'the before' and 'after'. *The before* is pretty grim, but *the after* is glorious; so, we need to read this all in context and all together.

Ephesians chapter 2, beginning with verse 1, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins..." (*What is it...?Angels fear to tread where'?...whatever!...This is one of those texts, I think, that most preachers don't want to tread into. [Laughter]*)

2 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ²in 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.

(That word, "spirit", in that last part of the verse, "the spirit that is now working," is not an evil spirit, it's not a demon—it's, 'the spirit of the age.' And I think we need to understand this, and I'll mention this again. But..)

...the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³ 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. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2: 1-7

We've been saved to be a great picture and example of His grace and mercy; we've been saved for His glory. We will forever enjoy that great blessing, and forever reflect it to *His glory*—which is 'the chief end of man', the purpose of everything. Let's bow in a word of prayer and thank the LORD for this time together, and our time of study together. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this great text of Scripture, a text full of great doctrine—but basic Christian doctrine that we need to know, we need to understand, and we need to believe. And so LORD, teach us; we always look to You for that. A man can stand at a pulpit or a lectern and deliver the lecture, the notes, or the sermon that he has prepared for; but it's nothing if You're not in it. It's nothing if the Spirit of God doesn't open our hearts and guide our thinking and illuminate our minds. And so we pray for that, we pray

for His ministry chiefly that we would be built up in the faith, that we would have understanding, and we would rejoice in the things that the apostle Paul wrote.

This text is from the apostle Paul who was inspired by the Holy Spirit. And so this text may be difficult truth for some—but it is glorious truth and necessary truth; so bless us. All truth is necessary, and so bless us as we study this spiritually.

Bless us materially, LORD. We have needs: There are sicknesses going around now, for this is that season of the year. I pray for those that are dealing with that, that You'd give them strength and healing and health, and bring them through their difficulty very quickly.

Some are in protracted illnesses that are the way to the end for some. I pray for them, and pray for those that are taking care of them, that You'd encourage and strengthen and bless and be glorified in all of it. And so LORD, we pray for that. We pray for You to be glorified in everything, and we pray for that specifically for this hour. Bless us, and build us up in the faith, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) Humorist, James Thurber, wrote an article for the New Yorker in 1960 titled, *The Trouble with Man is Man*. Paul would have said, "Amen", to that. The reason is given in the first verses of Ephesians chapter 2, where the apostle wrote, "And you," and by application that means *you* and *me* and *all of us*, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." (vs1). Dead! —That's bad news.

The good news is, 'That's not a problem that God cannot fix'. In fact, He has fixed it because Paul then wrote, in verse 4 and verse 5, "But God, being rich in mercy...made us alive." That's the best news. It's all about grace. —It's about sovereign grace.

But we can't understand grace unless we see it against the dark background of sin, and death, and helplessness. And I underscore that last word, helplessness. *Utter helplessness!* That's what Paul states here in chapter 2 in order to give the Ephesian saints, (and to give us), clarity on God's goodness and grace—to demonstrate that our salvation was altogether of the LORD.

In chapter 1, Paul revealed God's eternal plan of salvation in 'choosing a people for Himself.' (vs4). And then, in verses 18 and 19 he expressed the desire that the Ephesians would understand that. He prayed that they would, "...know...the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe..."—that we would *know* the *greatness* of God's saving grace.

So here, in the first verses of chapter 2, Paul shows the greatness of God's power to save by stating the greatness of the trouble from which He saved us, He rescued us from *utter helplessness*. That's our condition, and it's important that we know that.

But 'there's the rub', so to speak; even believers have trouble with this very thing. Man does not want to consider how bleak his condition is: His lost-ness, his inability, his guilt. That's always been the problem. The ancient Greeks said, "Know thyself." —Wise advice. But Calvin commented in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "The philosophers taught men to consider only what would boost their self-confidence." With the result, people are persuaded that there's nothing really wrong with them, that there's nothing in them worthy of blame.—They are 'Okay...and, in fact, man is competent in himself to lead a good and happy life.' Consequently, 'Knowing thyself' in the wrong way is not good. People trust in their own ability. And as Calvin wrote, "We stubbornly insist on going our own way until we come to utter ruin."

In fact, only our Creator is capable of making ourselves known to us. He did that in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 1. There is nothing here to persuade us that we are well, that we are competent in and of ourselves for anything good. Here Paul states the problem in the darkest, starkest terms; "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." That's the description of the human condition universally in a fallen world.

We can only understand this from a knowledge of the catastrophe that occurred at the beginning of human history—when Adam failed to obey God, fell, and brought all of us down with him. He died and we died, just as God warned him he would if he ate the forbidden fruit; "...in the day you eat from it, you will surely die." Genesis 2, verse 17b. And what Paul says here is based on that. Without an understanding of that,

man can see imperfection in humanity, but also nobility—and conclude, wrongly, that humans are flawed but improving, and will rise from the dust to glory. That's man's hope.

But Paul destroys that notion with one word, "*dead*". It's an absolute statement. It's not, 'sick unto death', not, 'half-dead but capable of improving'; no!—"Dead"! Lifeless! Now obviously people have physical life: They move about, they enjoy good health, they engage in business, in romance, and intellectual pursuits—but they're *dead*, spiritually.

This word, *dead*, was used of the prodigal son by his father: "This son of mine was dead...", he said, "...and has come to life again." (Luk 15: 24). He was cut off from all communion in life with the family—and that's the condition of the natural man. The soul is alienated, cut off from God and His life, spiritually—without any communication, without any understanding, without any desire for understanding. That's Paul's meaning—"dead".

People are unresponsive to God and the things of God, (that is, without *positive* response—they do react, negatively). Paul stated that in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 14. "A natural man...", (that is, a man who's not been reborn, has not been regenerate, the natural unbelieving man), "...does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them...". "**Cannot**" — he's dead.

And Paul gives the reason for that. It's sin; "You were dead in your trespasses and sins." (vs1). And we can no more cure ourselves than a dead man can raise himself. We're *hopelessly helpless*.

Again, all of that is due to Adam's failure. Paul wrote in Romans 5, verse 12, "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." When the original man sinned, he fell—and as a result, all his descendants fell with him. We inherited the consequences: His guilt and sin nature, then physical death due to that spiritual death.

Modern man dismisses that as a myth—it's 'not history', 'not revelation'. But the consequence: Man cannot understand his/her condition and need, they cannot understand themselves as a result of dismissing those first three chapters of the Bible. I think I've made this point more than once. I make it again: The first three chapters of the Bible are essential for understanding reality. That's why they've been given—and that's why they have been attacked so fiercely over the past, what, 150-200 years.

They reveal that, 'God is': That He is 'the Creator' and that we are 'His creatures', (we are not our own). But men don't like that. Men never have. That's why Adam rebelled and fell. But if we don't understand that, we won't understand why the world is in the condition that it is in. Mankind will never understand history, never understand nature and why it is 'red in tooth and claw', (*reference to the violent natural world*), they never understand themselves and their need—and will, as Calvin said, "go on stubbornly until they come to utter ruin."

But Paul here, is not talking to 'mankind'. He's not trying to convert mankind. He is not trying to convince the world of anything. He's writing to the church, to the saints to explain to them the greatness of grace, and the greatness of God's love. That is what produces gratitude, which galvanizes obedience from a willing heart. So Paul amplifies their former condition. He explains it further in verses 2 and 3; and what life was like before grace intervened, with a description of the pattern of their behavior, what he calls 'their walk.'

Because of Adam's fall, and their sins, (that is the Ephesians sins and ours), because of our sins, we were held captive under three malign influences: The *world*, the *flesh*, and the *devil*. We were directed by them. In the past we fell short of the instruction of Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked...", (Ps 1:1),—that's how we did walk. That's how all of us walked. We followed "the course of this world"; (vs2), literally, "that is the age of this world", (this has the idea of 'what is fashionable in this age'.)

Every age has its fashion, which is always changing. What is constant about it is it is always against God. In each age, its thinking, its ideas, are inspired by the world—which is a society organized to enhance man's glory, not God's. It's what directed the men of Genesis chapter 11, who built the tower of Babel: "Come," they said, "let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *will reach* into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name..." (vs4). 'Let's do something that will make ourselves great!' It's the opposite of what God told them to do. Previously we all walked like that; living for the moment, living for self, and to promote self.

But there's also a spiritual influence in this secular, materialistic system—and it's satanic because Paul adds, 'we walked under the influence and according', "...to the prince of the power of the air." "Old Nick" was our captain. (*satan*).

The New American Standard Bible translates it "*prince*", but the Greek word, *archón*, means 'ruler', 'commander', 'chief', 'lord'—all of these ideas. Christ called him "the ruler of this world" in John chapter 12, verse 31. Later in Ephesians, Paul identifies him as "the devil", (*Eph 4:27 ; 6:11*),—he has great "power", (*Eph 1:21*), (or *authority*), and influence. Paul puts his domain in "the air", (vs2b); in the atmosphere above us where his minions and lieutenants, (his demons), are. Paul speaks of them later in chapter 6, (*verse 12*), as, "the spiritual forces of wickedness."

But he also is active on earth. And he's active in our lives in various ways—a fact that was accepted universally in times past, but today it's out of fashion in our materialistic age. Nevertheless, the Bible is clear about his existence and his activity. Job describes Satan, "going to and fro on the earth". (Job 1:7). John calls him "the evil one" (1Jn 5:18), 'in whose power the whole world lies'. 1 John chapter 5, verse 19, "...the whole world lies...in the evil one."

He is in Genesis chapter 3 in the garden—and throughout the Book of Revelation where he is called "...the great dragon...the serpent of old...who deceives the whole world..." (Rev 12:9). Paul gives a lot of attention to that subject later in chapter 6, where he explains the spiritual warfare—all that's going on behind the scenes, the invisible war.

So the unregenerate, the unbelieving, follows the course, the values, or ways of this world, but they are also under the influence and the direction of the ruler of this world, "the evil one", Satan.

Paul describes how it happens next in his statement, "...the spirit that is now working among the sons of disobedience." (vs2c); or literally, as I indicated in our reading of the text, that's "of the spirit". So, "the spirit" is 'the spirit of the age' that Satan governs. He is, '...the prince of the power of the air and the prince of the spirit of this age, which is now working in the sons of disobedience.' Meaning, 'He governs the thinking of this age.'

In 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 4, Paul wrote that he, "...has blinded the minds of the unbelieving..." And one way he has done that is to blind the minds of the unbelieving to his existence. He works best in secret. He works best in the dark. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11, that he, "...disguises himself as an angel of light" ..., (vs14)—as one who 'brings truth', as one who 'brings enlightenment', while he actually blinds people to the truth.

His agents do the same thing. Paul goes on to speak of them as, 'disguising themselves as servants of righteousness.' (vs15). They are in pulpits, they are in university classrooms, fabricating the *zeitgeist*, 'the spirit of the age'. It is godless, but it's convincing; Satan is the master of counterfeit and deception. And he's always at work in the thinking and beliefs of men through false ideas of reality, or false ideas of giving happiness. He holds people in his power through what seems to be 'noble' or 'scientific'—or romantic ideas that are really just cleverly devised deceptions. He builds 'the broad way' that is very appealing, 'the wide way' that's very accepting.

So it's captivating, and it's more than that, it's convincing and enslaving. And Paul reminds the Ephesians in verse 3 that they were once a part of that. 'We all were', he said, "Among them we too 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." (vs3).

It's all of us in our pre-Christian days. We were no different from the rest, that is, from the rest of the unbelieving world. We were in 'bondage to the *flesh*', which is the third malign influence. The world and the devil influence us from outside; this is the influence from the inside: Our *desires*, our *lusts*. Here is where the trouble of man...is man. We are ruled by our desires.

In Galatians chapter 5, verses 19-21, Paul named the deeds of the flesh: A list of 15 vices, from immorality, to idolatry, to jealousy and drunkenness. I'm sure all 15 fall within this description of the lusts of the flesh. But the word, "*lusts*", gives a clear indication of the nature of the condition. In the majority of cases in which that word is used, it means, 'the strong desire for something evil.' So in times past, we all lived among the sons of disobedience, under the control of our lusts, our desires; yielding to all kinds of temptations and indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.

Well, what are the 'lusts of the mind'? Any number of things, I think, from intellectual ambition and pride, to avarice, to greed, the desire for wealth, all that drives the natural man without exception. I don't think it's wrong to have ambition, to have a desire to improve. We should. We should be striving for that, have a desire to have a position in a company, or in an academic institution. But what's the motive behind it? If it's selfish ambition, that's a problem. And that's so much of what is described in this 'lusts of the mind', all that drives the natural man without exception.

And it falls under the biblical doctrine of *total depravity*—an off putting term, I know. The idea of '*depravity*' conjures up images of degenerate, moral monsters. —And people know they are not that; 'I'm not Nazi.' 'I'm not Hamas.' So it's offensive.

But the term does not mean that, 'we are *totally* bad'. It doesn't mean that all human beings are equally bad, and that nobody is capable of doing anything good at all, that we are on the very bottom rung. People are capable of great kindness and generosity to the poor and those in need. Unbelievers have displayed great bravery and self-sacrifice on the battle field.

The doctrine doesn't deny that. *Total depravity* simply means that we are all fallen, and that no part of a person, from the body, to the mind, to the will or affections, no part of us has been left *untainted* by sin. It's touched every aspect of us. Sin has affected every part of our being. It has caused death. And spiritual death has caused corruption. All people are equally dead, but not equally corrupt. We're not all alike in our behavior.

Let me illustrate what I'm saying: *The Battle of the Somme* was one of the deadliest battles in history. On the morning of July 1, 1916, British troops left their trenches; and went over the top and marched towards the German lines. They thought the Germans had been obliterated, (they had just waited a month as the British bombed their position). A solid month, day and night. People could hear the cannons in London from what they were pounding them from that whole month. And so they walked out onto that battlefield thinking they were going to find an obliterated German army.

Fact is...they had not touched them. And as they got near, the German machine guns opened fire. And within the first minute of battle, thousands were cut down. On the first day, there were over 57,000 casualties, with almost 20,000 killed. Well, days passed before the rescuers could go out into no man's land and search for survivors. And when they did, they came across bodies in various conditions, various stages of decay. Those who died immediately were in the advanced stages and obviously dead. But others had died only recently. Waiting for their rescuers to come, they perhaps, died only minutes before and still appeared in a more hopeful condition. They might have even seemed to be sleeping. But one was really, no better than the other—no 'less dead' than the other regardless of how the appearance would have seemed.

And so it is with all the spiritually dead. Some show less corruption; they do humanly good things—but they are all equally dead. And that means, everyone by nature is so profoundly separated from God, that they can be described in that way—'equally dead'. Many may compare favorably with other people: They're honest in

business, kind to others, good citizens, they're patriots. They have good values in comparison to others who are pure hedonists. And the distance between those two groups may be wide—but the distance between both of them, and God, is infinite and unbridgeable. They are dead, unable to bridge the gap—and *unwilling* to bridge the gap—dead!

Now that's a stinging indictment on the human race. All are spiritually corrupt, guilty of sin, and utterly incapable of changing their condition or being reconciled to God. All are, *helpless*.

But again, Paul's purpose here is not to accuse the human race; rather it's to show the saints the greatness of grace in God's power toward us who believe—and what He has gained for us.

Paul shows that next in verses four through seven, and introduces it with two of the greatest words in the Bible: "But God." We were dead, sons of disobedience, willfully going our own way, and guilty, children of wrath, doomed; "But God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ." (vs4-5).

This little word, "*but*", has been called, "*A might adversative*". It moves us from death to life, and gives the answer to the human condition, the remedy for the human condition—which is God and His mercy. One of the greatest statements in the Bible is Micah chapter 7, verse 18; 'God delights in mercy.' That's why we receive it, only because, "He delights" in it.

That's what Paul develops here, "But God, being rich in mercy...". 'Giving help to the helpless'—that's what *mercy* is. It's been defined in different ways, but that's what God did for us. His motive for doing this is His love, "His great love". He is "...rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us." (vs4).

Now that's humbling. It should be humbling. The reason for God's mercy is not traced to something in us, not some redeeming virtue in us or some great thing we've done. We were dead in our sins; and when He looks upon us, in our natural condition,

that's what He sees—people dead in their sins. The reason for His mercy is found only in Him and His infinite, inscrutable love.

To that, Paul added in verses 5 and 7, *grace* and *kindness*. Leon Morris made a keen observation; he wrote, "We are mistaken if we think of Him as a rather stern judge, so that we must be on our guard at all times, lest we offend Him. He is a judge, of course, but the New Testament writers came to see that the qualities that mark out our God are qualities like *mercy* and *love* and *grace* and *kindness*. It's important to recognize this as we seek to serve our God."

I think Morris is right about that. The LORD is always for us; that should cause us to draw close to Him. He's a loving, gracious, merciful God. Verse 5 gives the reason to do that, to draw close to Him, where Paul repeats verse 1, "even when we were dead in our transgressions...", even then God showed mercy toward us and, "...made us alive together with Christ...". But then Paul adds, 'it's all of grace', "...*(by grace you have been saved)...*" (vs5).

And what a picture of grace this gives: Grace *and* mercy. When we were *dead* in sin, He still loved us and changed us. We were *dead* when He gave us life. In the imagery of Ezekiel, 'He did spiritual heart surgery on us.' He took out the 'heart of stone', and replaced it with "a heart of flesh", a living heart, a heart that's able to respond and able to do and please Him—that's Ezekiel 36, verse 26.

When we were separated from God and hostile toward God without understanding, without ability to understand or desire to understand or love Him—He loved us and He gave us life—gave us life now, presently. It's what John called "eternal life." We have a glorious future and have nothing to fear after death.

But as Leon Morris put it, "We have nothing to fear before death either." We have life *now*. Every child of God, everyone born of God, everyone *born again* has life—eternal life, now. Paul wrote, 'He gave us life together with Christ.' (vs5). Our new life is

lived with the Savior. He is with us, and His life is in us. He guides us; He enlightens us through the Holy Spirit. He enables us daily, moment by moment.

That's what Christ won for us through His death and resurrection; and did not only that, but also, "...raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (vs6). We are there now, in our representative. Just as we were on the cross with Christ as our substitute, as our representative; we are now seated in heaven with Him, at the Father's right hand. It's as though we really live there.

And so, while we are here on this earth, where Satan is the prince, the ruler, nevertheless, we have all of heaven on our side and working for us. We're citizens of that heavenly realm. Our souls are as secure here on earth as Christ is secure now in heaven at the Father's right hand. If Christ can be pulled down from His throne in heaven, then we can lose our eternal place with Him; in other words, we are *forever* safe and secure. So, we can sing with confidence;

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

That's the assurance John Newton had, and it's the assurance Paul gives us in verse 7, where he says, 'In the ages to come', God will show, "...the surpassing riches of His grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." So we will be there, for ages to come, "Bright shining as the sun", as Newton also said. For all eternity, we will display the glory of God's grace through our resurrected, glorified bodies and character. And we will enjoy that glory.

What an undeserved blessing; since the trouble with man is man. And that trouble being, we were dead—stone cold dead spiritually and unable to fix the trouble, unable to remedy the problem, and God fixed it by His great grace. We are rich beyond measure; our future is certain and secure. How then, in light of this great grace, should

we live in this present day? Well obviously, we should live with gratitude, and we should live to the LORD's glory.

Thomas Erskine, as I have repeated in the past, was right: "In the New Testament, religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude." What we do in the purest sense, the purest way, the best kind of obedience, is obedience from a grateful heart. It's obedience that is lived in the power of God but with gratitude for what He's done for us. And He's done these great things in our life in the most subtle of ways—almost imperceptibly how He changes a heart, and brings one who is in rebellion, to peace with the LORD and faith with Him.

Presbyterian minister, Clarence McCartney, gave an illustration from James Gardner, a colonel in the British army. He was a brave, daring soldier, but a hedonist—'a rake', (*libertine*), who boasted in it. Frequently he narrowly escaped death, but that had no effect upon him. He never considered abandoning his sins and adulteries. He was 'dead'; in fact, he defied God to change him.

Then, on a Sunday evening in 1719, while waiting to meet a woman, he happened to pick up a book that his mother gave him when he left home to take up a soldier's life. The book was titled, *The Christian Soldier, or Heaven Taken by Storm*. (*by Thomas Watson*). He picked it up, (just in a moment of boredom, I guess), waiting for his companion and he began to read it. —And he saw Christ on the cross with glory, and heard a voice in his mind saying, "O sinner, did I suffer all this for thee, and these are the returns?" And he was convicted and converted. He was made alive from the dead and became a true 'Christian soldier'. And when he died on the battlefield, years later, he gave a great confession of his hope. He knew where he was going because of what Christ had done.

Now that's the surpassing greatness of His power. It works through a book, or the spoken word, to soften a heart, to bring life into that dead heart, unexpectedly, and then bring a person to understanding faith, and eternal joy.

If you've never experienced the power of God's grace, you can't earn it. Grace is a gift, the free gift of God and it is found only in Jesus Christ, God's Son, and our Savior. If you want life, if you want real joy, come to Christ. If you want forgiveness, look to Him who died in the place of sinners so that all who trust in Him would be changed from death to life—and changed in order to give glory to God in the way we live and what we experience. May God help you to do that.

(Closing Prayer) Father, that is so true, “Left to ourselves, we would mock the cross with those that did.” But because of Your infinite, unconditional, eternal love for Your people, You sent Your Son to ransom us, redeem us, buy us out of the slavery and slave house of sin and judgment by paying our ransom. And His wounds paid that; His death was a sacrificial death for us—which we could not have made, only He could do it. We thank You that You sent Him into the world—and thank our Savior for coming, “for the joy set before Him”, to save His people. *(Heb 12:2)*.

Thank You for Your grace. This season of the year, we pray that You would help us to focus on that, and rejoice in what You've done through Your Son.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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