

April 22, 2012

Romans 6:19-23 / Colossians 2:9-14 / Ephesians 2:1-3
Our Pre-Conversion Condition: Struggling With Sin or Dead in Sin?

I know it's dangerous to say that some sections of Scripture are "more important" than others. After all, God saw fit to give us every single part of it as one cohesive whole – each part building upon and dependent up all the others.

Yet, at the same time, I do need to CONFESS there are certain verses of Scripture which have (at certain times in my life) opened up for me a whole new world of spiritual understanding and helped clarify for me or answer things for me which I had struggled for years and years to understand.

And this passage did that for me to an extraordinary degree. Because it was this passage that showed me why grace is not just nice, but absolutely crucial / not just helpful, but absolutely indispensable -- if any person is ever to experience the salvation of God in Christ.

You see, for years I had referred (time and again) to vv. 8-9 from this same chapter when doing evangelism. I had it memorized: ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith -- and this not of yourselves, it is the free gift of God and not of works lest anyone should boast."***

That's what I'd tell people: You are saved by grace. Yet although that's what I'd tell people, I didn't completely understand how it was grace that saved us -- other than to equate "grace" with the undeserved favor Christ purchased for us when He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross.

As sinners, we didn't deserve to have Christ die for our sins. Yet, out of love He did. And thus I took the "grace that saved us" to be the grace of His death for us. / In fact, that's what one of my first instructors in the faith taught me. We are "saved by grace" because Christ died for our sins and purchased for us a forgiveness we could never earn.

Yet when one looks at vv 1-7 they will quickly realize that's NOT at all the "grace" Paul is referring to in this passage of Scripture.

It's NOT the grace of Christ's SACRIFICE on the cross for our sins (as much as we also and obviously need that).

No. The grace Paul is speaking of in this passage is the grace of God's MERCY and POWER exercised on behalf of particular sinners by raising them from their spiritually dead condition in transgressions and sins and making them to be, "alive with Christ."

It's a truth so startling that when I came to understand that, my whole perspective on the Gospel and the Christian faith changed. It was like heaven opened up and my soul was filled with joy and grace became all the more precious to me. Because I realized that if I was a believer it was only because God, out of His great love for me, had moved upon my soul with that powerful and supernatural grace, which Paul speaks of in verse 5 -- a grace we call "the grace of regeneration." An act of grace apart from which I could never have been saved.

So what struggle did verses 1-7 help resolve for me? The struggle to understand how it was that "grace" had saved me, if that grace (as I was taught) was nothing more than the grace of what Christ did for me EXTERNALLY through His DEATH on the cross nearly 2000 years ago.

After all, even though He did that, isn't it us who must repent and believe in Him and trust in all that He did in order to be saved? And if it is us who have to do those things in order to be saved, don't we really save ourselves by all those internal efforts of the will to surrender to God and repent of our sins and believe on His name?

That's what I didn't understand -- that is, until I read verses 1-7. Because it was there that I came to realize that I couldn't have done any of those things -- neither repent / nor believe / nor surrender my life to God -- unless GOD had first done a supernatural work of saving grace within me by raising me from my spiritually dead condition in sin and making me to be alive with Christ.

THAT'S the "grace" Paul speaks about in vv. 5 and 8 when he says, ***"It is by GRACE you have been SAVED."*** Verse 5 couldn't make it any clearer where

Paul says: ***"God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ when we were DEAD in transgressions -- it is by grace you have been saved."***

THAT is the glorious and undeniable truth of this passage. And let me say right from the start: I have no other objective and no other agenda today than to seek to convince you of THAT God-honoring, gratitude nurturing and grace-exalting fact.

So, without any further delay let's dig into our passage and see what it has to say about the human condition prior to conversion, and why it is that that condition makes the exertion of God's merciful, powerful and supernatural grace on our behalf to be absolutely indispensable if anyone is EVER to be saved.

And let's begin **FIRST** with the most important truth of all – the one I wish every Christian person alive could come to grasp and affirm. The truth that you and I (and every unbeliever alive today) -- are DEAD in our trespasses and sins, before or until we experience the regenerating grace of God.

You see, contrary to the opinion of many, sin doesn't just interfere with our choice-making / or limit our ability to choose the good / or tempt us to do things we don't want to do. / It doesn't simply cause us to struggle with evil and temptation and immorality and ungodly urges or passions -- it quite literally kills us spiritually or makes our souls dead toward God.

As Paul makes very clear in verse 1: ***"As for you (that is all the believers there in the church at Ephesus), you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world..."***

And it's not just the former condition of all the believers at Ephesus. It's the universal condition of every person on earth before or until they experience regeneration or the new birth. / The end of verse 3 makes that un-deniably clear with the words, ***"Like the rest... (that is, Like the rest of humanity)... we were by nature objects of wrath."***

So what does Paul teach? He very clearly teaches us that until a person is "made alive with Christ" by the merciful exertion of God's supernatural grace on their behalf, their inner spiritual condition is one of being dead.

Not just infected by sin / or hindered by sin / but very much “dead in those transgressions and sins.”

And it will remain that way until God, by the grace we call regeneration / or being born again / or being born from above by the Holy Spirit (since they all mean the same thing / and refer to the same experience) / raises their dead spirits to life / and makes them alive with Christ.

Now, what does Paul mean when he tells us that apart from regeneration people are, "dead in their transgressions and sins"? He gives us a clue in Rom. 7:7-11 where he speaks of the sin that lives within us / and how it reacts to God's Law / or His commandments / and says:

"I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, **"Do not covet."** (That is, do not desire to have, or take, that which belongs to your neighbor.) **"Yet sin,"** he says, **"seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire."**

It's somewhat like the proverbial cookie jar. Because sin resides within all, we know that if we command a child NOT to go into the cookie jar / or even go near it / we'll actually stir up in them the desire to do it. Try it some time. Very firmly command them not to -- pointing to the cookie jar as you do. Then tell them you're going in your room to take a nap for an hour!

Before you commanded them not to, they may have had no thought whatsoever of getting into that cookie jar. It may have been the furthest thing from their mind. But the moment you commanded them not to / and attached a threat of a punishment if they did / sin made that jar the focus of their attention / and created in them a desire to have that forbidden thing!

That's what the indwelling principle of sin does -- especially when it comes to the commands of God. It makes us want to rebel against God's commands. / It spawns the urge to disobey or do what God forbids.

But that's not all it does. For in that same passage Paul goes on to say: **"Apart from the law sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the**

commandment came (and he must have been very young when it came, since being Jewish he would have been taught the law from before he could read or write)... when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I DIED. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought DEATH. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to DEATH."

So when Paul says: ***"The wages of sin is death,"*** he doesn't simply mean physical death. No! If we take Paul's words to heart he means that when we sin (and remember Paul's "sin" in that passage is not actually taking anything, but simply desiring to take something that belongs to another!) then something happens inside, and our soul, DIES. / It dies toward God.

As a result of the command, says Paul, ***"Sin sprang to life, and I DIED."*** / Not, "I will someday die." / Not, "I will gradually die." / But rather, "I died." / It's in the past tense. / It was a "death" that occurred at a particular time in the past -- the moment he first heard the command and sin sprang to life -- killing his soul.

At that moment Paul became a living, walking, breathing, dead man. Alive physically, but dead spiritually / very religious outwardly, but very dead to God inwardly, in his soul. / A man in need of being resurrected, "made alive" / or raised from his state of death in trespasses and sins.

And here I'd like to read a section from John Stott. It is lengthy, so please bear with me while I read it, since he explains this difficult concept so clearly.

"The death to which Paul refers is not a figure of speech... It is a factual statement of everybody's spiritual condition outside Christ, and it is traced to their trespasses and sins... A 'trespass' is a false step, involving either the crossing of a known boundary or deviation from the right path. A 'sin,' however, means missing the mark or falling short of a standard. Together the two words cover [every aspect] of human wrong-doing -- that is, our sins of commission and of omission [both the wrong things we do, and the right things we fail to do]. Before God we are both rebels and

failures. And as a result we are "dead" or "alienated from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18). True life, 'eternal life,' is fellowship with the living God, and spiritual death is the [relational] separation from Him which sin inevitably brings...

In the sphere which matters supremely (which is neither the body, nor the mind, nor the personality, but the soul) people (outside of Christ) have no life. And you can tell it. They are blind to the glory of Jesus Christ, and deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. They have no love for God, no sensitive awareness of His personal reality, no leaping of their spirit towards Him in the cry, 'Abba Father,' no longing for fellowship with His people. They are as unresponsive to Him as a corpse... To affirm this... is to become aware of the basic tragedy of fallen human existence... people who were created by God and for God are now living without God. Indeed, that was our condition until the Good Shepherd found us." And I would add with Paul, made us alive. / Sought us out / found us / and made us alive.

What, then, is the pre-conversion state of all humanity? We hopelessly and helplessly **"DEAD in our trespasses and sins."** / That's why Jesus can say: **"You must be born again"** (or given life by the Spirit of God). / Or as Paul puts it here, you must be, **"made alive with Christ"** / or experience the supernatural grace of regeneration.

If anyone is ever to be saved, God (in the mystery of His sovereign choosing) must come to you / and raise you from your sin-induced state of death in transgressions and sins / or you will remain forever dead, even while you are living.

Then **SECONDLY**, we discover that we were not only **"dead in our transgressions and sins,"** but we were also enslaved by sin. The phrase "transgressions and sins in which we used to live" (or literally in the Greek, "in which we once walked") is a Hebrew expression which points to a former ingrained pattern of behavior / or a path we once followed / or one's former habits and lifestyle.

According to the Bible one either walks in the ways of God or they don't. They either follow the way of holiness or they don't. The Bible would reject the

thought so common today, that one can "walk" with one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world. Because the path that leads to life and the path that leads to destruction head in completely different directions -- making it impossible for one to walk with one foot on one and the other foot on the other at the same time. The person who thinks they can is only fooling themselves.

So, what does the "walk" or "the path" or "the lifestyle of death" consist of according to Paul? Three things. 1st) It consists of "following the ways of the world." And, here, the term "world" refers to "society organized without reference to God, concern for God, or reverence for God." / What we might call, secularism" or "secular humanism." (Stott).

And it's the term, "world" used in that way, which explains why James can say: ***"Anyone who loves the world makes himself an enemy of God."*** Why? Because the world stands for everything that stands in opposition to God.

For instance: God calls us to a life of dependence upon Him and His grace while the world calls us to be strong and independent and stand alone on our own two feet. God calls us to focus supremely on "eternal things," or the "things that are unseen " and "store up our treasures in heaven" while the world tells us to accumulate our treasures on earth.

God tells us that wealth and riches are a danger to the soul / while the world tells us that wealth and riches are to be desired above all. God tells us that nothing in this life is more important than a life of love and faith and knowing him / while the world tells nothing in this life is more important than our own personal happiness, success and comfort.

God says the most important thing about you is your soul or your inner person and godly character / while the world says it's how you look / how much you know / how good you feel about yourself / how much you make / who you hang around with / how popular you are / how many friends you have on Facebook or twitter / what car you drive / what neighborhood you live in / how many trophies you have on your shelf / what brand of clothes you wear / what you weigh / where you shop / how good you are in bed / and how well-toned your abs, butt or biceps are when it comes time for the Speedo or the bikini.

Yes, my friends, the "world" is any collective mindset whose values, message, priorities and practices, encourage hedonism, materialism, greed, vice, immorality, lust, paganism, prejudice, hatred, revenge, violence, religion, secularism, and any other thing -- as an alternative to a life of love, and faith, and godliness, and holiness and communion with Christ.

Or in other words, any path other than God's -- which is what we all once "walked" at one time in our lives. ***"All of us," says verse 3, "lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of the sinful nature."***

Then **2nd**) We were not only ***"lived (or walked in) or followed the ways of the world"*** / we also followed, ***"the ruler of the kingdom of the air -- the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."***

It dovetails our text from last week, where I spoke of the biblical worldview and how it includes a belief in the satanic, demonic, or the powers of darkness in the heavenly realms. Although here, Paul uses two new descriptions for Satan -- ***"the ruler of the kingdom of the air"*** and ***"the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."***

And their entire purpose, says Paul is to create in every culture and society and country on earth an atmosphere or mood or general persuasion that encourages and affirms disobedience to God and a rejection of all His moral, ethical and spiritual mandates given in the Bible. A general societal mindset that says, "If the Bible is for it, I'm against it."

In fact, if THAT is Satan's aim (and Paul says it is), then it doesn't take very much discernment on our part to see that THAT SPIRIT now dominates our culture from top to bottom. All one need do is simply suggest in any public forum that people follow the moral decrees of the Bible or that society be structured according to its principles and there is such a strong backlash that you may as well duck in order to avoid the flack of the emotional explosion that will result.

And let me say this as a clarification: If it is that way, God has permitted it to be that way. Why? Because it confirms man's dead condition in sin, and shows, as Stott put it, that apart from the grace of regeneration, ***"People are as responsive to God as a corpse."***

But He allows it for another reason as well. To test the resolve of His people in the face of opposition. Will opposition drive us to simply fly under the radar and stop sharing the Gospel in word and deed (for fear of rejection and persecution or the desire for popularity) or will it train us to exercise self-control, stay the course, and boldly speak the truth in love.

It was the resistance of the authorities in Acts chapter 4, that drove the apostles and disciples to gather -- not to hide or consider stop sharing the Gospel publicly -- but to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to help them speak the Word of God even more boldly! What's your response to the unfavorable response of others?

The **3rd**) Paul says that our pre-conversion sinful deadness is revealed as we, ***"gratify the cravings of the sinful nature (literally, the flesh) and follow its desires and thoughts."***

And hear me well! What Paul is speaking against here is not the natural bodily desires for food, sleep and sex, but the perversion of those natural desires so that they are sought in excess, or in ways forbidden in Scripture.

He's referring to animal-like living where people simply respond to their bodily urges, their appetites, lusts and fantasies -- with little or no regard of what's good and right and just and loving and honorable and God-glorifying.

By the term "flesh" he means: Our self-centered nature that twists and perverts that which is good and turns it into all forms of selfish indulgence to the damage of our own character and the character of those around us.

When you see someone who lives as they want, with little regard for God or anyone else, you know you are looking at a person whose soul is dead -- a living, breathing, walking corpse.

Which brings us to the **LAST** thing Paul says about our pre-conversion condition -- ***"Like the rest (like the rest of humanity) we were by nature objects of wrath"*** (literally, "children of wrath"). That is, we are born into a state of condemnation, because of the sin that was in us from conception.

As David declared in Psalm 51:5: ***"Surely I was sinful from birth, from the moment my mother conceived me."***

We are born with the stain and guilt of the original sin woven into the very fabric of our being. And because it's in us all from birth, we stand under the just condemnation of a righteous God -- from birth.

And I know, as Stott points out: ***"There is no expression in Ephesians which has provoked more hostility than this."*** He's right. By simply affirming it I've taken heat and verbal slurs again and again -- in every church I've been in.

What is the "wrath" we are under by nature? It's God's personal, righteous, constant, uncompromising hostility toward sin / and His determined resolve to oppose it and condemn it.

So there you have it -- the biblical description of the spiritual condition of every person prior to conversion:

1.) They are spiritually DEAD in transgressions and sins.

2.) ENSLAVED by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And

3.) Because of it exist all their days UNDER THE JUST CONDEMNATION OF GOD -- even from birth.

All the more reason for us to proclaim the message God uses to raise dead sinners and make them alive with Christ.