

Total Inability, Part I

by Jim Ellis

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

Introduction

This is the first of two messages dealing with the subject of natural man's ability (or lack of ability) regarding spiritual things. When I say the natural man, I am referring to mankind in his fallen, unregenerate condition; and when I speak of his ability regarding spiritual things, I am referring to his ability in that fallen condition to respond to God or, for that matter, to do anything to please God. However, we'll get into the discussion momentarily.

The Scripture reading for this message is Ephesians 2:1-10 but the focus will be on verse 1. While this message will seem somewhat topical in nature, I hope you will see that it is in fact an exposition and analysis of Ephesians 2:1 and an assessment of the biblical ramifications of this verse.

Let me begin by saying that the grace of God is an unfathomable wonder. I don't think we shall ever, in this life at least, plumb the depths of His grace to us in Christ Jesus.

This second chapter of Ephesians seems to be designed to magnify the riches of divine grace in the salvation of sinners. To that end the apostle Paul presents us with a striking contrast here in these first few verses of chapter 2. He takes us, as it were, down to the Death Valley of the soul in verses 1-3, and then he raises us to the heavenly places in Christ Jesus in verses 4-7.

Paul knows that for us to better understand grace we must better understand the condition in which grace finds man. You cannot appreciate verses 4-7 until you really understand verses 1-3. In these three verses, he describes the corrupt state we are in by nature, before conversion, in order to provide the necessary backdrop for properly revealing the matchless grace of God in the salvation of sinners.

I think this is something we need to be reminded of. Not just we here at the Chapel, but the evangelical church at large. Specifically, in today's Christianity, the desperate condition of the natural man is at least underestimated if not practically denied. Oh, we admit he is a fallen creature. Adam's sin has had an effect. Man has indeed lost his way and is in need of help. But do we really understand how fallen we are? Do we really understand how sinful and corrupt we are? Do we really understand how helpless we are if left to ourselves?

The sinfulness of sin and the corruptness of man are not favorite topics in the church today. But they are necessary topics if we are to preach the whole counsel of God. Ignoring them has had its obvious effects as we look around the professing church today.

The Problem with the Flesh

All would agree that man has a problem and is in need of the grace of God. But how bad off is he?? Paul has answered that question very succinctly in verse 1 -- you were dead in your trespasses and sins. We are going to take the next two sessions to hopefully grasp, at least to a fuller extent, the meaning of what Paul is saying here. So we begin:

When Paul says you were dead in your trespasses and sins, he is not denying that we were physically alive, then as now. Rather, he is talking about the spiritual condition of the unbeliever; and he is making an absolute statement. When he says you were dead in your trespasses and sins, he doesn't mean we were merely in danger of death but that we were in a state of real and present death.

Although Paul is speaking of our spiritual condition, death is not to be viewed here as merely a figure of speech. Paul means that we are absolutely dead to the things of God. And this state of spiritual death is universal to mankind. He is not describing some decadent, drugged out segment of society, but all humanity, from top to bottom. All people are dead apart from Christ.

This is a rather severe statement, and a rather sweeping statement. So what does it mean to be "dead in our trespasses and sins"? Well, Paul tells us here in verses 2 and 3 something of what it looks like. He gives us some rather specific characteristics of this spiritual death. To be dead in our trespasses and sins is: to walk according to the course of this world, to be dominated by Satan, to be self-indulgent, to cater to our lusts, and to manifest in untold ways our corrupt nature, proving that we deserve God's wrath.

As you see, one can be a fairly active character and still be dead. We are very much alive to sin but dead to God. Paul is painting a rather grim picture of the unsaved man. But, let me just say again -- If we don't see how fallen and destitute we are, we don't see the grace of God as we ought.

To say, as the Scriptures do, that we were dead in trespasses and sins certainly has implications that go beyond the manifestations in verses 2 and 3. If man is spiritually dead, what does that mean on the inside? What is man's real condition? As I asked before, How bad off are we in our natural state?

A Spiritual Examination

Scripture has some things to say to help us assess the condition in which we find the natural man. So, let's just call in Dr. Bible and give man a "spiritual" examination.¹ Dr. Bible's examination reveals the following:

(1) Well, for one thing, **he's blind**. He can't see anything spiritual -- In John 3:3, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." If he cannot see the Kingdom of God, he is blind to the Kingdom of

God. To see means to perceive or appreciate. Christ is saying that man does not have the spiritual ability to perceive or even desire the Kingdom of God until he is born again.

We must understand the difference between sight and seeing. Once we see that, we will understand the right relationship between the new birth and faith. Do you get sight by seeing, or do you see because you have sight? Which is the cause and which is the effect? Does it help a blind man if we shine a brighter light in his face? Of course not. We know the problem is not the amount of light, the problem is the man's eyes. The blind need sight not light.

The unregenerate man has the same problem. He needs far more than light, because he is spiritually blind. He is not near-sighted. He does not have defective vision that can be corrected by an act of his will. He needs new eyes. Jesus said that man cannot even see the Kingdom of God unless he is first born again, that is, regenerated. Every regenerate believer can say a hearty amen to the words of Christ from Matthew 13.16 - Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. In fact that leads me to the next observation of Dr. Bible.

(2) The natural man is **completely deaf**. -- Jn. 8:43 "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word." Again we have the same cause and effect relationship. Why did the Jews not understand our Lord's words? He said it was because they cannot hear. We need not only new eyes but new ears. Just as the ability to see is a gift of God in the new birth, so is the ability to hear.

I am sure we all have seen a dog responding to a dog whistle. Human ears cannot hear the sound because our ears do not have the ability to hear that sound frequency. The dog hears it easily. In the same way, the natural man does not have ears to hear the gospel. He considers it nonsense, for the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). Those born of God hear, understand and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

(3) Also according to Dr. Bible, the unregenerate man is **mentally deranged**. -- In 1 Corinthians 2:14 we read, "a natural 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." Again we must notice the cause and effect. The natural man cannot understand . . . **because** they are spiritually discerned. You need the Spirit to understand spiritual things, and lost man does not have the Spirit until he is born of the Spirit.

According to Ephesians 4:17-18, natural men walk in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God.

(4) In fact, fallen man is **unable to even move a spiritual muscle**. -- He cannot make a move toward Christ until he is given spiritual life.

John 6:44-45 "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."

This verse states what no man can do unless God does something first, namely, come to Christ. That is human inability. This inability to make a move toward God is emphasized in Romans 3:11-12:

There is no one who understands,

There is no one who seeks for God;

All have turned aside, together they have become useless;

There is no one who does good, There is not even one."

The natural man not only does not understand, but there are none who seek after God. There are no seekers! And apart from Christ, ALL are spiritually useless, absolutely useless! There are none who do good. Like I said, the unbeliever can't move a spiritual muscle.

(5) In fact, Dr. Bible's medical report shows that the natural man is totally infected by SIN. It has penetrated every part of his being and left him in a state of total inability. This is especially seen in his heart. The heart is black with sin.

Jeremiah 17:9 the heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick.

Genesis 6:5 every intent of the thoughts of the heart was only evil continually.

Ecclesiastes 9:3 Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.

(6) Spiritually speaking, man is not in very good shape: He can't see, he can't hear, he can't understand, he can't move himself toward God, he can do nothing good, and his heart is completely infected by sin. The patient is totally unable to respond to any spiritual stimulus in any of his faculties. We have no choice here but to send for the coroner.

When the coroner examines the body, he finds that man is without a single evidence of spiritual life . . . and pronounces him **DEAD!** Which brings us right back to Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1.

There is an old saying, "Where there is life there is hope." When it is discovered that someone is desperately sick, we rush them to the hospital in hopes of keeping them alive. When they are dead, all hope is gone, and we take them to the graveyard. A lost sinner is not sick, he is really dead. He is not a hospital case who might respond to the right treatment. He is dead to righteousness and alive to sin. He loves his death in sin and hates the Doctor and the medicine. He is a graveyard case that needs a life giving miracle.

A Graveyard Case

Speaking of graveyard cases, I have a story to share with you. Kent Hughes, pastor at College Church in Wheaton, has in his file a photograph of the corpse of nineteenth century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The photo shows his body sitting in a chair, dressed and hatted in early nineteenth century gentlemen's wear. The whole thing is a result of his dark humor, for when he died he gave orders that his entire estate be given to the University College Hospital in London on the condition that his body be preserved and placed in attendance at all hospital board meetings. It was a fairly sizable estate, so this was duly carried out, and every year to this day Bentham is wheeled up to the board table and the chairman says, "Jeremy Bentham, present but not voting." Jeremy Bentham will never raise his hand in response, he will never submit a motion – because he has been dead for nearly a hundred and sixty years. ^2

Dead people can't do anything, and that is the spiritual state of those apart from Christ. How foolish do you think Ezekiel felt when God asked him to preach to a valley full of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-7)? How foolish would you feel standing in a graveyard witnessing to the dead? That, friends, is how foolish it is to preach to the unregenerate man?? He is spiritually dead – **he is present but not voting!!**

Now I'm not saying we shouldn't evangelize and witness to the lost. Don't misunderstand me here. My point is that when we evangelize and witness we must recognize what we are doing and who we are relying on! For you see, the Scriptures tell us that God is pleased to save men through the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor. 1:21 KJV). Listen to the words from Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 37:1-4a The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 And He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. 3 And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, Thou knowest." 4 Again He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones."

The Case of Lazarus

I sometimes try and picture the scene in John 11. I see the stone rolled away from the grave of Lazarus and some men are there. One is looking into the dark tomb and passionately pleading with dead Lazarus inside. "Lazarus, if you will only give God a chance, He will give you life. If you just take the first step, then the Holy Spirit will make you come alive. God honestly wants to make you come alive, but it's up to you Lazarus. You must decide to take advantage of God's offer of life. You must get up and take that first step in faith." (That may be just a bit of a caricature of what we hear today, but not much.)

Charles Spurgeon has an interesting comment: "This preposterous idea of the sinner taking the first step reminds me of the Catholic claim that one of her saints had his head

cut off in battle. The man (supposedly) picked up his head and walked 3,000 miles back to Rome." Spurgeon continues, "I would have no problem believing such a story, if the man could have taken that first step!"

If a depraved sinner can take the first step, namely to become willing, then he can just as well make it the rest of the way. That first step, however, happens to be the big one. That first step is out of the grave of spiritual death. If the sinner has the spiritual power to will his way out of the grave, he should have no problem walking out of the grave yard to wherever he chose to go. It's that first step that is the real problem.^3

Now let's suppose a second man walks up to the tomb while the first is catching his breath. This one, however, cries out, "Sinner, believe! Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus walks out of the tomb. If we interviewed this man, the questions might go as follows:

"Were you not fully aware that Lazarus was totally dead in that tomb?"

"Of course I was. Is not that what Scripture says?"

"Did you think that Lazarus had the ability to hear and respond to your message?"

"Not for a moment. How can a dead man respond to my voice?"

"Why did you command him to believe when you new he was unable to comply because he was dead?"

The man would smile and say, "Friend, my confidence was neither in my ability to preach nor was it in the supposed power of Lazarus free will. My whole confidence was in the power of God. I spoke the Words of Christ knowing that Christ himself has the power to wake the dead and give them faith."

God said to Ezekiel, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' 5 'Thus says the Lord God to these bones, "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life," (37:4-5).

When we preach Christ, we are preaching, as it were, to dry bones . . . we are preaching to the dead, spiritually dead. But praise be to His name for the gospel is the power of God that can "wake the dead." Our Lord said,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live," John 5:25.

Now is the time. When we see men and women coming to Christ in response to the preaching of the gospel, we are seeing a resurrection from the dead, a spiritual resurrection from a spiritual death.

A Comment on Evangelism

Does not the truth of Ephesians 2:1 speak volumes about evangelism and the way we go about it?? Does this have anything to say regarding the importance of prayer in evangelism? Does this have anything to say about our message and our methods? I think so.

This doctrine is not merely academic. It is immensely practical, and greatly needed in the church today. Understanding the inability and corruptness of man forces us to see that our only confidence in evangelism is the sovereignty of God's grace. Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:7) quit the synagogue because of stiff opposition and retreated to the house of a Gentile. Paul was disillusioned and somewhat fearful. Was this going to be another Thessalonica or Berea where he is beaten and run out of town on a rail? But God said, Do not be afraid, do not be silent, I am with you and I have many people in this city. There were many of God's elect in that city. And he was going to use Paul's preaching and the power of His Spirit to call them to Himself. "Do not be afraid Paul! Just preach the word!" What confidence we can have when we realize that it is God who is at work. It is not our responsibility to convert sinners! That is God's work. Our responsibility is to preach the Word, faithfully and clearly. And we may have confidence that those whom God has chosen will respond in God's timing. Cf. Acts 13:48.

This confidence should have three effects on our attitude toward evangelism and personal witnessing. It should make us bold, patient, and prayerful. Bold, because God is with us and is working out His purposes. Patient, because God is the one who must open the heart to respond. And He does this in His own timing by His own sovereign grace. Prayerful, because it is only God who can save a sinner. We must pray for God to work in the hearts of the lost and prayerfully submit to His sovereign will.

How did man get in this sad condition?

The unregenerate man is indeed in a desperate condition. So, how did he get this way? Was he born innocent and then somehow corrupted himself by falling into sin as Adam did? Do we each recommit the Fall? No. According to Eph. 2:3b we were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. We were born suffering the consequences of Adam's sin. When Scripture refers to the natural man or our natural condition, as here in Ephesians 2:3, we must understand it to refer to that sinful, guilty condition in which we were born. We were not born innocent and guilt free! On the contrary, we were born children of wrath, in need of redemption. For example, we read:

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me," Psa. 51:5. Or as the NIV puts it - "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

"The wicked are estranged from the womb; These who speak lies go astray from birth," Psa. 58:3. Or again, as the NIV renders it - "Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies."

This is confirmed in Romans 5:12 where we are told that sin entered the human race through one man and death entered through sin, and so death spread to all mankind because all sinned. In other words, all sinned in Adam.

We were born sinners and that's why we sin. The old saying is true, "We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners."

This is no novel teaching.

This is not new truth, this is old truth, . . . fundamental truth, in agreement not only with the overall teaching of Scripture, but with historic Reformation theology. As our Statement of Faith here at the Chapel puts it -- "We believe that, being fallen in Adam, our first father, we are by nature children of wrath, under the condemnation of God and corrupted in body and soul, prone to evil and liable to eternal death; and being dead in our trespasses and sins, we are unable to help ourselves and cannot be delivered from this dreadful state except through the unmerited grace of God our Savior."

Summary

I began by asking, How bad off is the natural man? Well, I think we can say, He's as bad off as he can be. He may not be as bad as he can be. As John Gerstner used to say, "There's always room for deprovement." However, man is as bad off as he can be with respect to God. We've seen that he is not sick but spiritually dead in sin. Every aspect of his being has been affected by sin. He is unable to help himself and he is unable to please God.

On the basis of the texts we have looked at today, we see that unregenerate man is utterly sinful, devoid of the Spirit, completely helpless, corrupt, guilty, justly under God's condemnation and unable to make a move toward God. And that is how you were! Take it personally, because it is personal. And that is how I was . . . until God, by His sovereign redeeming grace, brought me to life, brought me to faith and saved me. As we read in Ephesians 2:4-5,

But God being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

While we were yet dead, he made us alive together with Christ. That is resurrection power. Man is radically dead, and can be saved only by the radicalness of resurrection. If you are a Christian, you have experienced resurrection power.⁴ Paul in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 18-20 speaks of God's power in the life of a believer:

18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in

Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places. (NASB)

The power of God manifested in the resurrection of Christ is the same power which quickens us and brings us to faith in Christ. We were spiritually dead and needed a spiritual resurrection.

When the text says He made us alive, or as the KJV puts it -- quickens us, it is speaking of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration, which I take as synonymous with the new birth. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, You must be born again. He was saying you must be made alive to the things of God, you must be regenerated. In the Old Testament this is described in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes.

This is regeneration. And when God thus quickens us, we invariably respond to the gospel with faith and trust in Jesus Christ. It is through regeneration, the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, that we are brought to faith and experience union with Christ.

If the new birth is a quickening from the dead, and it is according to Ephesians 2:5, then faith must be a gift of God issuing forth from the new birth and not the cause of it. The late John Murray, former professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, says it this way:

Regeneration is inseparable from its effects and one of its effects is faith. Without regeneration it is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to believe in Christ, but when a person is regenerated it is morally and spiritually impossible for that person not to believe. ^5

This is a key truth that is often denied today. We must understand that it is God who works in the hearts of people to individually and effectively call them to Himself. And He does this through the preaching of the Word and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

Considerations for the Reader

As we come to the end of today's message, I humbly ask the reader the following questions: Have you believed? If so, it is only by the grace of God. Have you come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ? If you have, it is because you have been born of God.

Have you not trusted in Christ? Then you are indeed in dire straits. Because of your sin and your sinful nature you are both unwilling and unable to believe; and yet if you don't, you will die in your sins and be doomed forever.

Apart from God's saving grace, we are all without hope. May the Holy Spirit open your eyes and your heart so that you might see your need and behold the Savior. As we are told in Scripture, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved (Acts 16:31). Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

Stay tuned for Part II.

In the next message (part 2 of 2), we will conclude this study of Ephesians 2:1 with a look at some implications from what we've said here. We'll look at answering some questions that may have been raised in your mind, such as:

What happened to free will?

Hasn't God given all men sufficient grace to believe if they will?

How can man be responsible for his sin if he is unable to do anything but sin?

Or, How can man be responsible to believe in Christ if he can't do it of himself?

Until then, may you grow in the knowledge of His sovereign grace.

Endnotes:

¹ This illustrative device is borrowed from John Reisinger, Sound of Grace, Vol. 4, No. 4.

² R. Kent Hughes, Ephesians, Crossway Books, 1990, p. 66.

³ John Reisinger, Sound of Grace, Vol. 4, No. 3, pg. 6.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, Op. Cit., p. 69.

⁵ John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied, Eerdmans, 1955, reprint 1984, p. 106.

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