

Total Inability, Part II

by Jim Ellis

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

Recap of the First Session

Our Scripture reading this second message is Ephesians 2:1-10, as it was for the last. I want to more or less continue from where we ended in the last session because there are some important things that I think still need to be said.

Let me quickly summarize what we said last week and then we can move on. First we noted that the very arrangement and flow of Paul's argument here in verses 1-10 suggested that for us to better understand God's saving grace we must first understand the condition in which that grace finds man. We cannot understand the grace described in verses 4-7 until we understand the pit from which we came in verses 1-3. So, to that end, we focused on verse 1 where we are told that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. You will remember we determined that Paul was referring to our spiritual condition not our physical condition. He tells us we were spiritually dead. We looked at the meaning of this truth here in the context of Ephesians as well as derived from other places in Scripture.

We saw that this passage speaks of our moral inability due to our corrupt nature. If you'll recall, we had Dr. Bible conduct a "spiritual" examination of the natural man and found him to be spiritually blind, deaf, mentally deranged, and totally unable to respond to any spiritual stimulus in any of his faculties. We found that man was completely infected by sin, that sin penetrates every part of his being and has left him in a state of total inability regarding spiritual things. This inability is such that the natural man is dead to the things of God, cannot help but sin, and cannot respond to the gospel if left to himself. We also saw that this corruption is something we are born with. Man is born corrupt, sinful, and guilty.

We saw that man must be born again (i.e. regenerated) in order to spiritually respond to God. And we saw in Ephesians 2:4-5 that indeed it was when we were yet dead that God made us alive and raised us up with Christ. Praise be unto His name. The real bottom line of last session was that unregenerate man is as bad off as he can be with respect to God; not as bad as he can be, but as bad off as he can be. And he is morally incapable of believing in Christ. This certainly seems to be what Scripture teaches. However, this teaching does raise some issues and questions. And I want to deal with some of those issues in this second session.

Has God not given all the ability to believe?

Now, Some might argue that even though there is truth in what I've said, the situation is not quite as I have portrayed it. They might suggest, for example, that God, based on Christ's atonement, has given all men sufficient grace to believe if they will. In fact, they would say that if God has not given all men the ability to believe, then (1) He is not fair to judge and (2) man cannot be held responsible for his unbelief. So, although it is maintained that salvation is indeed all by grace, this grace has supposedly provided all men with a free will and the ability to exercise saving faith in Jesus Christ. We will deal with the concepts of free will and responsibility in a moment, but let me just say here that if this view is true, then you must admit the following:

1. There is no such thing as the natural man as described in Scripture. When Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:14 that the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit, we must say, No Paul, this natural man doesn't exist, for God has given all the ability to understand if they will. When John says it is not by the will of the flesh, or by the will of man, we must say, No John! It is specifically up to the will of man to believe and to be born again, for man's will is free. When the Scripture says that those who are in the flesh cannot please God, we must say Not true! There are none in the flesh in this sense, for all men have the ability to believe in Christ which certainly is pleasing to God!

2. This effectively makes the determining factor in salvation man's will, not God's, for according to this view, God wills all to be saved and has made equal provision for all. It is thus up to man to exercise his free will.

3. Finally, if this view is true, how is it that some believe and others do not? It can only be because there is something inherently superior about those who believe. They are either smarter or more spiritual or something! Whatever it is, it is something in them. . . it must be something apart from God's grace, for according to this view, God has given the same grace to all. But Scripture just doesn't allow that to be the case. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 we read, For who regards you as superior? (or as the NIV puts it, who makes you different from anyone else?) And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? The point here is that all men are equally lost and equally unable to respond. There's your equality! But what makes the difference? It is nothing in man. It is the grace of God that makes the difference. It is the grace of God that makes one to differ from another!

So, we might ask, How is it that one believes and another does not?? It is because God has sovereignly chosen to open the heart of the one and not the other, at least not yet. It is God who works!

The clear teaching from Scripture, that man is born corrupt and dead in sin, is under attack from our seminaries and our pulpits today. One of the first things to happen in the departure from a biblical theology of redemption is that man begins to view himself as not completely corrupt and certainly not completely unable to respond to God. Then, before you know it, the idea that God is truly sovereign in the salvation of men, effectively saving whom He chooses, is lost, as it seems to be in the evangelical church today.

Martin Luther once said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

Well, in my opinion, the theology-of-the-day constitutes a subtle yet insidious attack on the gospel of God's grace in Christ right here at this point. And so right here at this point we should make a stand.

Quotes from Today's Predominate Theological Perspective

Let me illustrate what I am referring to with quotes from a couple of noted evangelical theologians of the day.

William MacDonald, speaking about the grace of God in salvation, says, "God cannot and will not regenerate a heart that will not admit him. God respects the sovereignty-within-limitations with which he endowed man at creation . . . Jesus will deliver men everywhere from the demonic spirits that bind them, but never will he cast out unbelief from anyone's heart. He will speak truly [for instance] to the Pharisee Nicodemus, but he will wait for him indefinitely to make his (own) decision about a new birth. It must also be remembered that the dramatic conversion of the "chief of sinners" on the road to Damascus was not the overpowering of a God-hater, but the enlightenment of a badly mistaken man who up to that time had thought he was serving God and was doing so in all good conscience!" ^1

Clark Pinnock, a well known evangelical theologian, in discussing the sinfulness of man, says the following, "We are touching here upon the traditional doctrine of original sin. Sin is indeed inherited, not in a biological sense, as Augustine argued, and certainly not because of a legal imputation of Adam's guilt, as in the federal theory, but historically. Man is shaped by the warped social situation into which he is born and in which he grows up to maturity." He goes on to say, "The Fall has not deprived man of his ability to choose. It rather initiated a process in which man uses his freedom in morally perverted ways. It did not nullify man's freedom; it only altered the moral direction of it. For this reason God continues to confront fallen man with the option of his grace." ^2

This is far too typical of what is being taught in our seminaries and far too typical of what is being preached from our pulpits. Today's Christianity is a shallow man-centered perversion of biblical Christianity. These men apparently have the very view to which I was just referring. Namely, that man has the ability in and of himself to savingly turn to Christ. And therefore, salvation is ultimately determined by man himself.

The Nature of the Will

Let's look for a minute at the nature of man's will. How are we to understand free will and the fact that man does have the ability to freely make choices? Let me make some observations that have been helpful to me:

1. The will is the faculty of choice, the immediate cause of action.
2. In every act of the will there is a preference – the desiring of one thing over another. To will is to choose and to choose is to decide between two or more alternatives. Where there is complete indifference, there is no volition, and no will to choose.
3. But when we do will to make a choice, there is something which influences the choice, something which determines the decision of the will. Therefore, the will is not free or sovereign but is subject to that something.
4. What is it that determines the will and causes it to make a choice? It varies in different cases. It may be logic of reason, voice of conscience, or impulse of emotion. But all of these, considered individually or as interacting together, are direct reflections of the heart and mind. The action of the will is determined by the condition of the heart and mind. According to Scripture, sinful acts and sinful choices are traceable to a corrupt heart, and by nature our mind is futile, darkened and ignorant of the things of God (Eph. 4:17, 18).

Mark 7:21-23 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

5. Human philosophy may insist that it is the will that governs man, but the Word of God teaches that it is the heart.

6. Our will is not free but subject to our sinful heart (Jer. 17:9). Man is only as free as his sinful nature permits. Man cannot rise above his nature or change his nature by an act of his will. As we read in Jeremiah 13:23,

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil.

What's the point here? The leopard can't change his spots. And sinful man cannot, by an act of his will, do good.

7. When God gives us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:26-27), then and only then are we able to choose those things that are pleasing to Him and serve Him in the power of His Spirit.

8. But even then our will is not free. Then it is no longer in bondage to sin but enslaved to God (Romans 6:22).

9. By nature we are children of wrath, dead in our trespasses and sins, and we cannot please God (Eph. 2:1-4, Rom. 8:8). We are unable to come to Christ on our own or by our own choosing (Jn. 6:44). Man's will is not free towards God but free only to sin.

Now, if by free will it is meant that when I do something, I do it freely without compulsion or constraint, then that is freedom of action and it is agreed that man is a free moral agent and freely makes choices. That is precisely why he is responsible – because he is not forced to act against his volition. But free will is a misnomer because the will is not truly free but subject to the nature of the individual -- and that nature is corrupt.

When men argue theologically for man's free will, they are not simply saying that man is a free moral agent and that he freely makes choices. They are arguing that man has the moral ability (and is free) in his unregenerate state to savingly trust in Christ. We must understand the issue here.

If you will grant that the will is subject to the nature of man, and if you agree that our unregenerate nature is corrupt then you must agree that man does not have a free will. He freely makes choices, but these choices are limited by his nature. He does not have a free will toward God!

It is not by the will of the flesh, or by the will of man, (Jn. 1:13).

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God, (John 1:12-13).

It is not of him who wills or him who runs, (Rom. 9:16). Receiving God's mercy, which is ultimately given in Christ, is not attributable to the will or efforts of man, but to the will of God.

In the exercise of His will he brought us forth, (James 1:18, NASB). It is God, in the exercise of His will, who brings us forth! Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, (NKJV).

Charles Spurgeon said, "I will go as far as Martin Luther, where he says, 'If any man ascribes anything of salvation, even the very least thing, to the free will of man, he knows nothing of grace, and he has not learned Jesus Christ rightly.'" ^3

Free Will and Human Responsibility

Now let's look briefly at this issue of man's responsibility for his sin and unbelief. A common argument follows: ^4

Major premise - God holds man responsible for his sin and unbelief.

Minor premise - Man cannot be held responsible for something he can't refrain from doing.

Conclusion - Man must have a free will and the ability, in and of himself, to choose between sinning and not sinning and between believing in Christ and rejecting Him.

The conclusion is false because the minor premise is false, namely that man can be held responsible only for what he is able to do. But, you see, that's what we think. We assume that man's responsibility implies his ability. And that's exactly where our thinking is wrong.

The Scriptures do teach that man is responsible,⁵ but they also teach that he is unable to turn from sin and trust in Christ if left to himself. That was the thrust of my first message -- man does not have the ability. Both are true. Yet we think this is inconsistent because we think man can't be responsible and yet unable. There may appear to be an inconsistency here, but I assure you that it is only an appearance of one, for there are no inconsistencies with God.

This idea that responsibility implies ability is not a scriptural idea. It's not even the primary idea in Webster's Dictionary. It is fallen man's idea. (That ought to be a warning in itself, remember in the last session, fallen man was found mentally incompetent). According to Webster we note the following:

Responsibility (the noun) - Something for which one is responsible; a duty, an obligation, or a burden. There is nothing in this definition which implies ability.

Responsible (the adjective) - Webster gives several definitions in order of usage:

1. Liable to be required to give an account (no indication of ability here)
2. Involving personal accountability (accountability does not imply ability)
3. Being a source or cause (e.g. if you cause something to happen you are said to be responsible. Again no necessary ability is implied)
4. Able to make moral and rational decisions on one's own (finally, we see the idea of ability!)

Why is it that in discussing man's responsibility before God, we only think in terms of the last definition? What you must see is that the biblical commands to repent and believe (just like the commands to obey) do not imply ability. The command is based on man's responsibility (i.e. his duty or obligation) and what he ought to do; and ought does not imply can. Ability is not prerequisite to responsibility!

Let me give you an example: The Scriptures say, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great

commandment," (Matt. 22:37-38). Let me ask you something. Can you obey that command? No! Should you obey? Yes! Is God wrong to give us that command knowing that we are unable, in our fallen state, to comply? Do we owe God that obedience? Are we responsible? Yes! Are we able? No!

Scripture tells us that we cannot help but sin because of our fallen nature; yet that does not excuse us, on the contrary it aggravates the guilt. Arthur Pink commented on the inability of man in this way,

When we speak of the sinners inability, we do not mean that if he desired to come to Christ he lacks the necessary power (or capacity) to do so. No; the fact is that the sinner's inability or absence of power is itself due to a lack of willingness to come to Christ, and this lack of willingness is the fruit of a depraved heart. ^6

In John 5:40 we are told, "You will not come that you may have life," In John 6:44 we are told, "no one can come unless the Father draws him." Are these verses contradictory? No. From a theological perspective, man cannot come; from a manward perspective, he most certainly will not come, if left to himself. There is no contradiction or inconsistency. I don't think the real issue is that we can't understand what we're told in Scripture; the problem is we just don't like it.

Implications Regarding the Doctrine of Salvation

Before we end this session, we need to look for a moment at how all this relates to the doctrine of salvation.

At the risk of oversimplification, I will say that the real issue today in the doctrine of salvation boils down to one question. Is salvation synergistic or monergistic?

Synergistic may be defined as -- two or more agents working together to produce a result, a result not obtainable by any of the agents independently. The word synergy or synergistic comes from two Greek words, erg meaning to work and syn meaning together, hence synergism is a working together.

Regarding the doctrine of salvation, this essentially means that God and man work together, each contributing their part to accomplish salvation in and for the individual. This is the predominant view in evangelical Christianity today. This synergistic theology basically says that although God has done a great and wondrous thing by sending Christ to die for the sins of men, it is up to man to respond by turning to Christ in faith. If he does, he will receive forgiveness of sins and be rewarded with eternal life. In other words, God has done His part, now it's up to man to do his. This is the synergistic gospel that we hear from the pulpit today, but it is a false gospel with an erroneous view of salvation.

On the other hand, Scripture presents to us a monergistic salvation. Mono means one, hence monergistic means the work of one. The Bible teaches that salvation is the work of God alone, from first to last. He has chosen in eternity past whom He will save out of lost

humanity (which I unashamedly refer to as the elect), and in His timing He will bring the elect to faith through the work of the Spirit for the sake of the Son, and save them forever to the praise of His glorious grace (Romans 8:29f).

In reflecting on Ephesians 2:1, the late Dr. John Gill said the following,

Man in an unregenerate state, being represented in these passages as dead in sin, shows, that whilst they are in such a state, they are as incapable of spiritual motion or action, or of quickening themselves, as a dead man is of natural motion, or action, or of raising himself from the dead. Whence it must needs follow, that the work of conversion is a work of God, and not man, and to be ascribed to the exceeding greatness of his power, in which man is passive as a dead body is in its resurrection from the dead. ^7

Salvation is Monergistic!

According to Scripture, believers are those who were appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48), and predestined according to Him who works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11) to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). It is by His doing that anyone is in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:30).

In the process of salvation, the Scriptures do not represent God as being dependent on man for a single instant or for a single thing.

I'm reminded of the story in Mark 10:26-27 where Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. The disciples were astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" Looking upon them, Jesus says, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." Did you get the message? With man it is impossible! Jesus did not say, "Oh it's easy to be saved, you just need to understand you can't buy your way into heaven." No, he said it is impossible for man to effect his own salvation.

Charles Spurgeon said, "When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul - when they were as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron; and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown all of a sudden from a babe into a man - that I had made progress in scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God ... I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, I ascribe my change wholly to God." ^8

We proclaim the gospel of God's grace in Christ to all men.

Some might think that what I have said in these two messages is inconsistent with our biblical mandate to preach Christ to all people indiscriminately. But I don't believe that

to be the case. God indeed promises that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. You may ask, How can God be sincere in His promise if He has chosen to save only some?

Let me put it this way: The promises of God are sincere, but they are for those who come and take them. There are no gracious promises for those who will not believe. Christ offers himself as Savior to those who turn to Him, not to those who don't. That is why we must beseech men to believe in Christ, so they may take to themselves the promises of God. And we know that they are enabled to do so as the Lord quickens their dead hearts and removes their unwillingness and stubbornness. ^9

The sincerity of a promise is proven by its fulfillment. And the glorious fact is that the promises of God have in every single instance been found true. Everyone who has called on the name of the Lord has been saved. Not one who has trusted Christ has perished. There has never been a person who has wanted to come to Christ, who has found God's sovereign election to be a barrier in the way.

Oh brothers and sisters, the wonder of the matchless grace of our God. Do you see it! His glorious grace and mercy in Jesus Christ sovereignly brings about the salvation of wretched sinners like me and like you. We were dead in our trespasses and sins!

When Jesus called to Lazarus as he lay dead in the tomb, **he called him by name, "Lazarus, come forth!"** His power is such that had he not called him by name but simply said "Come forth!" the whole earth would have opened and given up all its dead! But he called him by name.

In Isaiah 43:1 The Lord God says to Israel, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine!" And so the Lord says to you who are in Christ Jesus, the true seed of Abraham,

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine!

If you are reading this today apart from Jesus Christ, I say with all confidence and on the authority of the Word of God, that your only hope is to place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and Him alone. Today may be the day of your salvation!

May God open your heart to respond to the Word of His grace in Jesus Christ. May He open your eyes to see your desperate need and behold the Savior.

As you are enabled by the Holy Spirit to do so, may you cast yourself at the foot of the cross and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

Endnotes:

¹ William G. MacDonald, *The Spirit of Grace* (essay) in *Grace Unlimited*, Bethany, 1975, p. 86. At the time he was professor of biblical studies at Gordon College.

² Clark H. Pinnock, *Responsible Freedom* (essay) in *Grace Unlimited*, Bethany, 1975, p. 104-5. At the time he was associate professor of theology at Regent College in Vancouver.

³ Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons Vol. 1*, p. 395.

⁴ Adapted from John Cheeseman, et. al., *The Grace of God in the Gospel*, Banner of Truth, 1972, pp. 35-36.

⁵ John 8:24 - Unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.

⁶ A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, Baker, p. 187.

⁷ John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, Part II, Chapter IV, Section IV, on Eph. 2:1.

⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography: 1, The Early Years*, Banner of Truth, p. 164 - 165.

⁹ John Cheeseman, *Op.Cit.*, p. 63.

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