

## Remember Your Need for Grace: You Were a Spiritual Corpse, “But God...” (Eph 2:1-4a)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on March 6, 2011

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<sup>1</sup>And **you were dead** in your trespasses and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, <sup>5</sup> **even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)** [that’s what salvation by grace means, not the sick being made well, but the spiritually dead being made alive!]

... <sup>12</sup> remember that you were **at that time separate from Christ**, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, **having no hope and without God in the world.** <sup>13</sup> **But now in Christ Jesus** you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

You were hopeless (v. 12)... but now Christ has saved you (v. 13). You were dead spiritually (v. 1) ... but God (v. 4) made you alive (v. 5, that’s what it means to be saved by grace)

If you grasp the greatness of your need for grace you’ll grasp the greatness of the Savior who is all-sufficient for all our needs. Paul is reminding the believers in Ephesus *what they once were* without God, and *what they still would be* without God’s grace. He gives us here four reminders of man’s fourfold need of regenerating grace (we’ll just look at the first today)

### 1. You Were Spiritually Dead (v. 1)

“*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ...*”

This is a very unusual sentence in the Greek grammar that draws a lot of attention to this state of death, using unusual plural terms for sin and unusual word order to emphasize our deadness. The normal Greek word order is verb-subject-object, but in this sentence there is no subject until v. 4 (“God”), and the main verb is in v. 5 (“made alive”). It’s as if he was starting to write “*And you were dead but God made you alive...*” but as he writes the first few words, he is caught up by how hopeless and helpless we were in that state that he digresses for 3 verses on this deadness before, “oh, yeah, I need to come back and complete the sentence I started in v. 1 by adding the subject and verb!” That’s why NKJV adds the phrase “*he made alive*” in v. 1 but in italics to indicate it’s in context but not in the original text of v. 1; it’s added by the translators to make sense of it in English. In v. 1 the “*And you*” is not the grammatical subject of this long sentence, it’s the object of the verb in v. 5. We are the objects of God’s wrath (v. 3), but God (v. 4), the subject and Actor who acted on us, amazingly graciously made us objects of mercy.

v. 1 “And you” is plural (you all) =all believers in Ephesus and beyond reading the letter, plural universal language to emphasize all were included, and to make it even more explicit and emphatic, v. 3 begins “*Among whom we too all* [emphatic in Grk, and v. 3 ends with] “*as the rest*” [ESV “like the rest of mankind”; another version has “just like everyone else”]

v. 1 “*And you were ...*” That verb tense in relation to the main verb in v. 5 is continuous, i.e., showing a state or condition of deadness that’s continual and constant death. The text ‘shows their ongoing condition as dead before God’s gracious act of making them alive’<sup>1</sup>

The next phrase “*dead in*” refers to sphere or realm of death in the grammar,<sup>2</sup> in this case the spiritual realm, as the context of v. 2 makes clear, as it uses several spiritual terms for the spirit world and spirit of the age. Paul clearly isn’t talking about physical death in v. 1, because v. 2 says you were “walking” and then v. 3 uses the word “living” in relation to our flesh. Unsaved man is active in *fleshly* things, walking *in sin*, physically alive, but spiritually dead.

Paul speaks of this type of death in 1 Tim 5:6 (NIV) when he says a woman “*who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*” Jesus said to the Christian church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1: “... *You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.*”

The first time this word “dead” is used in the NT, it’s used by Jesus for the spiritually dead. He says in Matthew 8 “the *dead* bury their own dead.” Now a physically dead person can’t bury another physically dead person. Spiritually dead people can, and can do a lot of things physically, but they don’t follow Jesus and won’t follow Jesus because they have no spiritual life or longing to, they only live for things of this world. But the followers of Jesus have spiritual life and are contrasted in Matt. 8 with other living family members who are spiritually dead, not living for/following Jesus.

TRESPASSES – deliberate overstepping boundaries God’s given  
SINS – missing the mark, falling short of God’s glory and standard

In this spiritual realm, we all fall short. All fallen men are unable, incapable to do anything to please God or change this condition. “I’m fallen and I can’t get up” like that old TV commercial line. I spiritually can’t get up from this state: lifeless (v.1), hopeless (12). But I wasn’t just a mess spiritually, I was in the morgue spiritually. I didn’t need a medical doctor, I needed a miracle. Paul doesn’t say we’re disabled or diseased or *dying*, but *dead* spiritually and we’ve been that way a long time, unresponsive to God’s goodness, unmoved, unthankful to God. John MacArthur calls these “the *un-grateful dead.*”

Turn over to Mark chapter 9 for a moment to see how this same Greek word *dead* is used to give a physical picture of the spiritual image of a corpse. In Mark 9, a father comes before Jesus begging him to take mercy on his demon-possessed son, and the father pleads with Jesus in v. 24 and it says he cries out “I believe, help my unbelief!”

<sup>25</sup> *When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you [note: Jesus can command the deaf], come out of him and do not enter him again.”* <sup>26</sup> *After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, “He is dead!”* <sup>27</sup> *But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.*

The NKJV says the boy was “*as one dead*” – all the other major Bible translations have “*like a corpse*” – i.e., making no movements whatsoever, so the people around him said “*he is dead.*”

Why did they say that? There was no response, no movement, no life signs, but Christ raises him up. Paul says in Ephesians 2:1 “*and you were dead*” using the same Greek word (you were a corpse). Paul is saying we didn’t just *appear to be* dead; we *were dead* in sins, in other words, in the spiritual realm, spiritually speaking, no positive response to spiritual things, no spiritual movement to God, and no signs of spiritual life, as God’s Word defines them. Like a physical corpse, Paul says, that was all of us spiritually, and it’s still the spiritual state of all who aren’t yet regenerated by God.

This same word *dead* is used for Ananias and Sapphira who were struck dead by God for their sin in lying about how much they gave to the church, it says they found her “dead.” How did they know she was dead? No vital signs. No movement. No response. No life. Dead. This is the word Paul applies to all unregenerate people spiritually, and if you aren’t yet regenerated, this is your spiritual picture now.

So the title of today’s message is: Remember Your Need for Grace – You Were a Spiritual Corpse, “But God ...”

Now I know that title may not sound seeker-friendly or self-image boosting, but what Paul wants to lift up is the Savior and grace, by exalting God alone as the Seeker of us who were lost, and our God didn’t just *try* to find us and *try* to give us life ... He really did, and because we were really as bad as v. 1-3, grace is really amazing! Verse 1 begins “*and you were dead ...*” v. 4 begins “*But God...*”

If it weren’t for “*But God*” (in other words, God’s intervention and irresistible initiating grace) we would never have seen the light of spiritual day. But for the grace of God we’d all still be lost, lifeless, dead to spiritual things. See, Paul didn’t intend v. 1-3 to be a pretty picture or a pride-producing picture or a flattering picture. It’s a pride-shattering picture of the ugliness of our sin so that the Savior will look beautiful to us, and so we won’t boast in ourselves (v. 9).

Paul didn’t write this passage to make us look good or feel good about us, this passage is to make Christ look glorious on the black backdrop of our sin which was nothing to feel good about. Once we see ourselves as wretches, we can sing “amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” If we resist that this language of v. 1-3 could ever apply to us, it only proves Paul’s point about how deeply our sin affects us. The very fact that some of you won’t like this part of Ephesians (and some may not even like me at the end of this message) is further proof of what Paul is arguing about how sin affects our flesh and our mind. But will we let God’s Word rule us, or our thinking? If v. 1-3 doesn’t fit how we like to think, our pride must bow to it.

I don’t write the mail, I just deliver it. I’m just the delivery boy for God’s messages. I’m just teaching through the book of Ephesians verse-by-verse, and this is our next text. So my job is to deliver what is written, not change it or skip the bad news. But if you read *and believe the bad news*, then the good news will have a far greater impact. One of the reasons the good news of the gospel doesn’t affect us like it ought, is we don’t remember the bad news like Paul taught (v. 12): how hopeless and helpless we were, but for God. If you open the mail to a huge hospital bill you could never pay, and then you open another letter the mailman gives you that tells you of an inheritance you just got with billions of dollars, what a day of rejoicing that would be!

Paul has even greater news spiritually, as v. 7 describes far greater spiritual riches (“*exceeding / surpassing riches of His grace*”) for our far greater spiritual need. Unsaved man isn’t just in trouble spiritually, he’s in the tomb spiritually! We may look nice on the outside, do religious things on the outside, but be dead on the inside. Just as a dead person can’t see anything, the spiritually dead can’t see spiritually anymore than a blind man can see physically. Jesus repeatedly highlights this spiritual inability in Matthew 23:

v. 16: *Woe to you, **blind** guides ...”*

v. 17: *You **blind** men ...*

v. 24: *You **blind** guides ...*

v. 26-27: *You **blind** Pharisee, first clean **the inside** of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed **tombs** which on the outside appear beautiful, but **inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.***

Man needs a complete internal change the Bible calls regeneration. He needs life implanted, sight given, a new heart, a new nature. Even the most religious people who’ve ever lived from an external or outward standpoint, Jesus sees them like tombs, deadness inside. Does dead mean doing nothing? No, nothing of any spiritual value. Romans 3 says “*there is no one who does good, no not one. There is no one who seeks after God.*” I didn’t write it, I just deliver it.

How does a spiritually dead person make a good choice or seek after God? He doesn’t, if we believe the bad news of Romans 3. How does a blind person all of a sudden see the Lord as beautiful and desirable? Who opens his eyes? How can the deaf hear and respond? How does a person change his entire nature from the inside out? How does a dead person make himself come alive to spiritual truths? How can cadavers decide to respond positively? What does a corpse do to initiate the Lord raising him from death? Spiritually and Scripturally God alone can cause that, not man. *But God* is the only explanation for our salvation. How does He bring us from death to life? We’ll look at that next week, God’s regenerating resurrecting amazing grace.

If you have not yet experienced that grace, I pray today is the day you cry out to God to do for you what you are utterly unable to do for yourself, to save your soul.

If you have experienced this grace, you need to remember what you once were, and what you still would be apart from God’s grace, and continually say “but for the grace of God goes me” and say with Paul in another place, “By the grace of God I am what I am.”

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 154-55.