

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE DEADLY POWER OF SIN

Ephesians 2:1-3

By

Steven J. Cole

October 7, 2007

© Steven J. Cole, 2007

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: [www.fcfonline.org/sermons](http://www.fcfonline.org/sermons)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, Updated Edition  
© The Lockman Foundation

October 7, 2007  
Ephesians Lesson 12

## The Deadly Power of Sin Ephesians 2:1-3

The late Anglican bishop, H. C. G. Moule, wrote (*Ephesian Studies* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 70), "Never was there a heresy, but it had something to do with an insufficient estimate of sin." He was right, because an insufficient estimate of sin means that we do not need the radical solution of the cross. And Satan does all that he can to undermine the necessity of the cross. He works overtime to get us to ignore what the Puritans called, "the exceeding sinfulness of sin."

Sadly, many modern churches that claim to be evangelical minimize sin. Some of them simply avoid the word, preferring to focus on more positive aspects of what they call "the gospel." But there is no need for the gospel if people are not desperately, hopelessly alienated from God because of sin. Some of these churches swap the label on sin, referring to it with all sorts of psychobabble. But the Father did not send Jesus Christ into this world to help us cope with our problems. He did not put His Son on the cross to make us feel better about ourselves or to boost our self-esteem. Christ came and offered Himself on the cross to deal with our most fundamental, pervasive, and eternally devastating problem, that our sins have made us objects of the wrath of the holy God.

Some say that they don't want to focus on the negatives, such as sin, but rather on the positives, such as God's love and grace. But if we don't understand the depths of sin from which God rescued us, we will not appreciate the riches of His grace and the magnitude of His love. As J. C. Ryle wrote (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], on Luke 20:9-19, p. 326), "Christ is never fully valued until sin is clearly seen."

And if we underestimate the deadly power of sin, we will surely fall prey to it. One of the greatest mistakes a general can make before going into battle is to underestimate the power of the enemy. If he thinks that the enemy is weak when they really are strong, his troops will not be prepared and will be routed. And so

we must have an accurate, biblical view of our own sinfulness if we would have victory over sin.

In chapter 1, the apostle Paul begins with an extended exclamation of praise to God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (1:3). He unfolds those blessings by showing that the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (1:4-6). The Son redeemed us through His blood and made known to us the mystery of His will for the ages, the summing up of all things in Christ (1:7-12). And God sealed us with the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13-14). God graciously lavished these blessings upon us, all to the praise of the glory of His grace (1:6, 12, 14).

Then (1:15-23) Paul shares his constant prayer for the Ephesians, that God might grant them a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. Especially, he prays that they might understand (1:18-19) “what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” This mighty power of God is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all authority and power. And He gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is His body.

But Paul knew that we will never praise and glorify God as we should if we lose sight of the depths of sin from which He saved us. We will not be filled with gratitude for our salvation if we forget where we were and still would be if God had not reached down to us with His abundant grace. So in chapter 2 Paul shows what God has done for us individually (2:1-10) and corporately (2:11-22) in saving us from our sins. He follows the same pattern in both sections: our past (2:1-3, 11-12); our present (2:4-9, 13-18); and, our future (2:10, 19-22). In 2:1-3, Paul wants us to remember our past before the Lord rescued us from judgment, so that we will appreciate the riches of His grace. He shows that . . .

All who are outside of Christ are spiritually dead, living under  
the power of the world, the devil, and the flesh,  
by nature under God’s wrath against sin.

Before we examine these verses, I want to say a word to those of you who like me grew up in the church. You may not have an outwardly sordid past. Perhaps like me, you've never been drunk. You've never used illegal drugs. You've not had multiple sex partners. You've lived an outwardly moral life. You may not have come to Christ because you saw that you were a wretch who needed saving, as John Newton put it ("Amazing Grace").

In my spiritual experience, the dawning awareness of the wretched sinfulness of my heart did not come before salvation, but rather afterwards. As the light of God's Word has shone more fully into the depths of my heart, I have grown to understand that it was only my outward circumstances of growing up in a Christian home that kept me from all manner of evil. If I had grown up in a pagan home with no moral training, I would have committed horrible sins, because my heart by nature is corrupt.

In our text, Paul begins by describing the past sinfulness of the Gentile believers ("you," 2:1). But lest the Jewish believers smugly think, "I'm glad that I'm a religious Jew who has never done those terrible sins," Paul includes himself and all Jews ("we too," 2:3). His argument is much the same as in Romans 1-3, where he first indicts the Gentiles, but then shows that the religious Jews are equally guilty before God, concluding (Rom. 3:23), "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So even if you have a relatively clean past, God wants you to see yourself in the mirror of Ephesians 2:1-3, so that you will be on guard against the deadly power of indwelling sin and so that you will thank God every day for saving you from the eternal consequences of sin.

1. All who are outside of Christ are spiritually dead, walking in their trespasses and sins.

For some reason, the translators of the King James Version added the words (in 2:1), "*He made alive.*" Paul will state that wonderful truth in 2:5, but his point in these opening verses is to emphasize our woeful spiritual condition before God made us alive. He wants us to feel the desperate situation that we were in (2:1-2a): "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked...."

The truth that we are spiritually dead before God saved us is a watershed in one's theology of salvation. Those who deny God's sovereignty in our salvation have to redefine what it means to be spiritually dead. Above all else, they want to avoid the conclusion that it implies inability, because if sinners are spiritually unable to believe the gospel, then salvation must be totally of God and not at all due to man's free choice to believe. So they argue that spiritual death only means being separated from God. It does not imply the inability to respond in faith and repentance to the gospel (Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* [Bethany House], second edition, p. 57-67, argues for this; for an excellent refutation of Geisler, see James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* [Calvary Press], especially pp. 91-120).

It is true that spiritual death includes being separated or alienated from God. But the very picture of being dead and the need for God to impart new life strongly implies a lack of ability on the part of the dead sinner to do anything to effect his own resurrection. When Jesus cried out (John 11:43), "Lazarus, come forth," Lazarus didn't exercise his free will to come back from the dead! He arose because Jesus imparted life to him. That miracle was a picture of what Jesus had said earlier of spiritual life (John 5:21), "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes." The only "free will" that Jesus mentions there is *His own will* to give life to whom *He* wishes.

Jesus also stated the inability of sinners to come to Him. In John 6:44, Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." In case we missed it, Jesus repeats (John 6:65), "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." The words, "*no one can*," in those two verses means that they are *unable* to come apart from God's powerful intervention. They are spiritually dead until God imparts new life.

In John 8:43, while contending with the obstinate Jews, Jesus said, "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word." Obviously, they could hear Jesus' voice. They weren't physically deaf. But their spiritual deafness meant that they were *incapable* of hearing Jesus' words in the sense of responding favorably to them.

Of course the apostle Paul lined up with the Lord Jesus on this same point. After stating that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18), he went on to explain (1 Cor. 2:14), "But 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." He did not say that the natural man chooses not to understand spiritual truth, but rather that he *cannot* do so. He lacks the capacity because his foolish heart is darkened by sin (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18).

Using the analogy of blindness rather than death, Paul states of those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:4), "in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Blind people do not have free will to see. Rather, they are incapable of seeing.

So spiritual death includes being separated from the holy God because of our sin, but it also includes being spiritually incapable of responding favorably to the truth of the gospel unless God raises us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

Paul adds that the sphere in which these Gentile believers were dead was "your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked." *Trespasses* and *sins* are essentially synonymous when used as plurals (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 280). Paul seems to use both words and to add that we *walked* in them to emphasize that our entire way of life before God saved us was one of repeated, perpetual disobedience to God.

This is further underscored by the description of unbelievers as "sons of disobedience" (2:2). "Sons of" is a Hebrew expression that means, "characterized by." To pick one word to describe those who are spiritually dead, they are *disobedient* toward God. They may be moral, law-abiding, decent people, humanly speaking. But in their hearts, they are not in submission to God. As Paul sums up the depravity of the human race (Rom. 3:18), "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Note also that Paul says that the Ephesians *formerly* walked in their trespasses and sins. While believers do sin, it cannot be said of

them that they walk in sin and are characterized by a life of sin. As 1 John 3:9 states, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." If you profess to be born again but continue to live in sin, you need to examine whether you are truly born of God. Walking in sin characterizes the person who is spiritually dead.

2. All who are outside of Christ live under the power of the world, the devil, and the flesh.

A. All who are outside of Christ live under the power of the world.

Paul says that these Gentiles "formerly walked according to the course [lit., "age"] of this world." This is a unique phrase that seems to call attention to the transitory nature of this present evil world, in contrast to the eternal, heavenly future of the believer. "The world" is the organized system under the control of Satan that is opposed to God. The main operating principle of the world system is self-seeking and independence from God. If we can use God to achieve our selfish goals, so be it. But man is on the throne.

The apostle John strongly warns (1 John 2:15-17), "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever."

Sometimes in the attempt to escape from the corrupting influence of the world, believers have withdrawn into monasteries or cloistered communities. But Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17:15-18), "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." So the Lord wants us to live in the world, but to be distinct from it because we live in light of His Word of truth.

Those outside of Christ live for this present evil world, because it is all they have. They may believe in heaven, but not enough to live in light of it. They may believe in hell, but they fig-

ure that only the worst of the worst will go there. But their focus is on how to get ahead in this world. They have no thought of laying up treasures in heaven nor of seeking first God's kingdom.

B. All who are outside of Christ live under the power of the devil.

Paul says that they formerly lived "according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." He is referring to Satan, who is over all of the fallen angels (demons) who followed him in his rebellion against God. Paul refers to him as the prince of the power *of the air* to show that these spiritual powers are both invisible and powerful. He later calls them (6:12) "the world forces of this darkness ..., the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." It's one thing to fight an enemy that you can see. But it's a whole different battle to fight a powerful, unseen enemy!

"Sophisticated" modern man scoffs at the notion that such unseen spiritual powers exist. Yet everyone accepts the existence of unseen radio waves, microwaves, and X-rays that travel through the air. We cannot see them, but we can see their effects. It is the same with demonic power. We cannot usually see demons, but we can see the results of their evil power.

Paul is not saying that all unbelievers are demon-possessed. But he is saying that Satan and his evil forces actively work in this world through unbelievers. In most cases they are oblivious to it. They go about their lives without much thought about it, except perhaps at Halloween. But worldly people are actually in Satan's domain of darkness (Col. 1:13). By living independently of God, with no fear of God in their hearts, they are inadvertently furthering Satan's evil plans to usurp God's sovereignty.

C. All who are outside of Christ live under the power of the flesh.

Lest religious people exclude themselves from this indictment of the sinfulness of the human race, Paul adds (2:3), "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, ..." *We too* refers to religious Jews, including Paul. "The flesh" refers to "human nature as conditioned by the fall" (Moule, p. 72). In Galatians 5, Paul sets the

desires and deeds of the flesh against power and fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-23). This shows that although believers have been delivered from the dominating power of the flesh, we still must do battle against it by walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But unbelievers are totally dominated by the desires of the flesh. In Romans 8:6-8, Paul states, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Note, again, the emphasis on inability. Unbelievers, who do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit, have only one option: they live to gratify the flesh.

This includes, of course, sensual desires and living according to what feels good at the moment. But it also includes what Paul here calls the desires of the mind. This includes such sins as pride and selfish ambition. His point is that before God saved us, even those of us who were religious lived to gratify selfish desires, whether physical or intellectual.

Thus, all who are outside of Christ are spiritually dead, walking in trespasses and sins. They also live under the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Finally,

3. All who are outside of Christ are by nature under God's wrath against sin.

Paul goes even deeper in analyzing the condition of man apart from God. The problem is not just behavior or even thoughts, but our basic nature. Of the religious Jews, Paul states that they were "by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." When Adam sinned, the entire human race was plunged into sin (Rom. 5:12-21). This means that we are not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because we are by nature sinners. We are born alienated from God, in rebellion against Him.

This is why unbelievers cannot exercise their "free will" to believe the gospel: they do not have a nature that is inclined toward God. They may dress up their old nature with good works, but it's like dressing a pig in a tuxedo. He may look nice for a short while,

but his nature will drive him back to wallowing in the mud. To change the pig, you've got to change his basic nature!

Paul says that those apart from Christ are "by nature children of wrath." This Hebrew expression means that they are characterized by being under God's holy wrath against sin. While modern man scoffs at the notion of God's wrath, it is a concept that occurs hundreds of times in both the Old and New Testaments, especially in the final book of the Bible, Revelation. It refers to God's holy, settled hatred against all sin that will result in His final, eternal judgment against all sinners, casting them into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). John 3:36 states, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

### Conclusion

I realize that this is a rather negative, depressing message, but I believe that Paul wants us to gather around the edge of the cesspool of what we once were so that we won't forget it. He wants us to remember our former condition so that we will appreciate what he goes on to proclaim (Eph. 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)..."

I leave you with this question: Is there a "*but God*" in your life? As you look at this gruesome portrait of the deadly power of sin, can you say, "Yes, that describes what I once was! But God by His grace broke into my life and made me alive together with Christ!" If so, let it flood you with thankfulness for His abundant grace!

## Application Questions

1. Why is it important to affirm that unbelievers are totally unable to believe in Christ unless God imparts new life to them?
2. What is the essence of “worldliness”? How do these three enemies, the world, the devil, and the flesh, assert themselves in the lives of believers?
3. Some argue that believers no longer possess “an old nature,” and thus should not view themselves as sinners. Do you agree?
4. Why must we hold firmly to the concept of God’s wrath? What do we lose if we minimize or deny it?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2007, All Rights Reserved.