

Chapter Two

commentary

Having expounded in the first chapter the wonders of God’s grace in Messiah and the “mystery of His will” that all things in the entire universe should be summed up in Yeshua (1:9–10), Paul goes on to extol the inheritance which all believers in Yeshua have received, namely that we have been redeemed to be God’s own possession and thereby have an eternal inheritance in Yeshua, even eternal life with Him.

Then Paul continues in the first chapter to describe his prayers for the community of believers (1:15ff), praying that they would be enlightened

to know 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. (1:18b–19)

It is thought that Paul, in praying that those believers to whom he is writing would know more and more the mystery of God’s eternal and abundant love in Yeshua, would likewise encourage himself. For though he was imprisoned when writing this epistle, he knows that in Messiah he is free indeed—free from the penalty and power of sin, and free to serve His Lord and Savior even while in prison for his faith.

In seeking to make known the glories of the eternal salvation obtained by Yeshua for all who are His, Paul now in this second chapter emphasizes the stark contrast between the unbeliever who is dead in his sin, and the believer who is alive in Messiah. Thus, in this chapter Paul explains and illustrates what he has taught in the opening chapter. He does this by contrasting the unbeliever who is in bondage to sin with the believer who is enabled by the Ruach to live unto righteousness. As such, the glories and greatness of God’s grace in Yeshua, applied through the work of the Spirit, are more fully understood and thus appreciated in even greater ways, yielding a life of joyous service to the One Who has redeemed us.

It is true that the world and the enemy of our souls would seek to diminish sin as not sin at all, or simply to define it as “normal” and therefore without consequences. But in the opening of our chapter, Paul makes a clear and stark contrast between the life of the unbeliever which is dominated by sin and its corruptions, and the life of a believer

who, having been made new in Messiah, is growing more and more in righteousness and victory over the sinful flesh. He teaches us to live our lives from God's truth and not from mankind's fallen perspective. As Moule notes:

“Never was there a heresy, but it had something to do with an insufficient estimate of sin.” And an insufficient estimate of the “thing which God hateth” is not only the parent of speculative error; it is the secret death of true spiritual joy.

So the Apostle is bent upon reminding the Ephesians of their past, and of the absolute mercy which had lifted them out of it into such a present, and for such a future.

“He teaches all the mercy, for he shows them all the sin.”¹

And such an insufficient estimate of sin is partner with a woeful insufficient recognition of God's utter holiness. Indeed, the love of God made known in His mercy and grace to sinners through the gift of His Son, reveals in clear terms the infinite nature of His holiness. Therefore, we more fully recognize sin for what it truly is, i.e., rebellion against God, only when we consider the utter and infinite holiness of God.

1–2 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 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.

The opening verse of our chapter begins with “And” (*καί, kai*). This raises the question of how our verse connects with the context. Does the “And” connect it to the previous paragraph (1:15–23) or does it anticipate vv. 4–7 and the core sentence “God...made us alive” so that Paul's point would be to contrast “you were dead in sin” with “you are now alive in Messiah”?

What is hidden in the English translation above is that the phrase “you were dead” is actually a participle, “and you, being dead...” (*Καί ὑμᾶς ὄντας νεκρούς*), so the Greek does not have the subject and verb of the sentence until vv. 4–6. This, it would seem, casts the opening three verses of this chapter as anticipatory and dependent upon vv. 4–7.² Taken in this way, the participle “being dead,” (*ὄντας νεκρούς*) should be understood as concessive, meaning “*although* you were dead in your

1 H. C. G. Moule, *Ephesians Studies*, p. 70.

2 See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, pp. 306–07

trespasses and sins..."¹

Some have interpreted Paul's use of "you" (ὁμοῖς, *humas*) in this opening verse of chapter two as indicating a contrast between Gentile and Jewish believers. They point to the fact that in v. 3 Paul speaks of "also we" (καὶ ἡμεῖς, *kai hēmeis*) and consider this to indicate a contrast. But this interpretation would undermine the very emphasis that Paul has given in the opening chapter, a point he emphasizes throughout this epistle, namely, that Jew and Gentile have, by the same means, been united together in the body of Messiah and share equally in their status as God's own children having both been adopted into His family.

What is more, in unfolding the wonder of God's sovereign election and calling in chapter one, Paul has made it clear that eternal salvation of every believer begins with God's having chosen him or her before the foundations of the world. Further, God's election issues in a divinely initiated calling which is effectual and therefore results in drawing the one called to true faith in Yeshua and thus granting eternal life. And this is equally true for all who are saved, Jew and Gentile alike.

Further, to think that Paul is here suggesting that the unregenerate life of Gentiles is marked by greater sinfulness than that of Jewish unbelievers is to misunderstand the gravity of sin in general and the fact that God, Who is infinitely holy, views all sin as entirely contrary to His own being. One likewise is reminded that Paul considered himself to have been among the worst of sinners, as he wrote in his epistle to Timothy.

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Messiah Yeshua came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. (1Tim 1:15)

It is therefore wrong to think that Paul, here in Ephesians, would present the Gentile believers as having a former life in unbelief that was marked by greater sinfulness than Jewish unbelievers. Rejecting God's Son, the Messiah, is the height of sinful rebellion.

In fact, one of the primary points Paul is emphasizing in this epistle is that in Messiah, Jew and Gentile have been equally blessed and have been united together in the one body of Messiah.

So the point Paul is making by opening this chapter with "And you" (where "you" is plural in the Greek), is to emphasize that God's grace

1 See Benjamin Merkle, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Guide to the New Testament* (B&H Pub., 2016), p. 52.

has been given to each individual within the community of believers and that this gift of God’s salvation flows entirely from His own sovereign will, not something “won” or “earned” or even “attracted” by a person’s people-group identification. Thus, what seems to be an awkward sentence structure in the Greek actually emphasizes this point, for Paul emphasizes that all believers were, before coming to faith, dead in trespasses and sins, and all were made alive by God’s gift of salvation. What has been true of all who are God’s children is likewise true of those believers to whom He writes this epistle. We see this emphasis clearly if we link together the primary aspects of this opening paragraph and note the dual use of pronouns: second person plural (“you”) and first person plural (“we”) and how the readers (“you”) are grouped together in the concluding “we” and “us.”

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world... Among them we [all] too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh... by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God ...made us alive together with Messiah... and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Messiah Yeshua so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Messiah Yeshua. (2:1–7)

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins – Paul characterizes unbelievers as “dead” on account of “trespasses” and “sins.” Paul does not mean by this that unbelievers are incapable of doing anything that is generally reckoned as “good.”

...even the unregenerate can perform *natural* good: eating, drinking, taking exercise, etc., and *civic* or *moral* good. Some worldly men have “uniformly conducted themselves in a most virtuous manner through the whole course of their lives.”¹

But Paul’s point in marking the unregenerate as being “dead” is that they have no means by which they, on their own, can acquire right standing before God their creator nor can they expect that even their “good deeds” as reckoned by mankind in general are accepted by God as attracting His favor, for “without faith it is impossible to please Him”

1 Hendricksen, *Ephesians*, p. 111.

(Rom 11:6). Isaiah, describing wayward Israel, puts it this way:

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Is 64:6)

What is more, when the Scriptures refer to the unbeliever as “dead,” it is a clear picture that the unbeliever, like a person who has died, is unable on his own and by his own power to effect spiritual life. For Paul is speaking here of spiritual death when he writes that before faith, we all are “dead in trespasses and sins.” Therefore, what is required for an unbeliever to come to faith in Yeshua is a resurrecting miracle which only God can perform. For God must awaken the heart in order for the Gospel to be heard and received by faith. Calvin comments:

He does not mean simply that they were in danger of death; but he declares that it was a real and present death under which they labored. As spiritual death is nothing else than the alienation of the soul from God, we are all born as dead men, and we live as dead men, until we are made partakers of the life of Christ, — agreeably to the words of our Lord, “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live.” (John 5:25).¹

In noting that spiritual death is marked by “trespasses and sins” (τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις), Paul may be using a common pair of words to express in general a life marked by that which is contrary to God and which He hates. Some have wanted to emphasize a distinction between the two words: “trespasses” being “deviations from the straight and narrow path” and “sins” being “deeds that miss the mark.”² But it appears that Paul may use these two words as near synonyms and thus when coupled together to simply describe “all manner of sin.”³

1 Calvin, *Ephesians*, p. 219.

2 Cf. Henricksen, *Ephesians*, p. 111.

3 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Ephesians*, p. 280.

(2) *in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world* – Here we see the Apostle making a clear distinction between the life of an unbeliever and that of a true believer in Yeshua. The life of the unbeliever is radically changed when being regenerated and saved by faith in Yeshua, for the redemption He accomplished when applied to the one who comes to Him by faith, causes old things to pass away and new things to come.

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Cor 5:17)

Before salvation, the course of one's life, one's "walk," is in accordance with "the world." Here the word "world" (*κόσμος, kosmos*) carries the meaning of that which is contrary to the Spirit of God and therefore outside of the realm of God's righteousness. James emphasizes this same truth when he writes "friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:4). Likewise John admonishes us with similar words:

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. (1Jn 2:15)

...according to the prince of the power of the air – Paul here pairs the "course of the world" with "the prince of the power of the air," for it is the evil one, Satan himself, who seeks to rule over fallen mankind and to establish his kingdom as overpowering the kingdom of God. When Paul couples these two concepts together, i.e., living in accordance with the world and being under the domain of Satan, he makes it clear that there is no middle ground. Either a person is a servant of God, seeking to walk in the footsteps of the Messiah and ordering his or her life in accordance with God's revealed will, or that person is a slave to sin and pleasing the enemy of the soul.

What does Paul mean when he describes Satan as the "prince of the power of the air"? In this translation, "prince" translates *ἄρχων (archōn)* which carries the basic sense of "ruler" or "someone who has authority." The English word "power" translates *ἐξουσία (exousia)* which can have the sense of "authority" or "power." But why does Paul consider the realm of the evil one to be the "air" (*ἀήρ, aēr*). The Greek word can describe the atmosphere immediately above the surface of the earth or even the sky and the expanse of the sky.

It is clear that by the phrase “ruler/prince of the power/authority of the air” Paul is describing the devil as well as those spirits which serve him. He also references the devil and demonic forces two other times in Ephesians.

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. (4:25–27)

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:11–12)

Why does Paul picture the devil, the enemy of God and of mankind created in God’s image, as ruling in the realm of the “air”? If we consider that these evil forces are described as “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places,” it seems most likely that Paul is using “air” to describe these forces of evil as spirit beings who are not constrained by physical boundaries.

...of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. – Even as Paul, in this opening paragraph of chapter 2, extols the glory of believers being children of God, seated with Yeshua in the heavenlies, so here he describes unbelievers as “sons of disobedience,” that is, those who willingly submit to the rule of the enemy and whose lives are characterized by disobedience to God Who created them in His image.

Once again Paul is emphasizing that there is no “middle ground.” All who have rejected God’s gift of salvation by rejecting the Promised One Who alone has effected eternal redemption are those whom Paul denotes as “sons of disobedience.” Only those who are “in Messiah” are granted true life in Him and eternal life in the world to come.

Surely Paul is painting a very dark picture of fallen mankind, but one that is true nonetheless. He is doing this because it is only when we realize what we would be apart from God that we are enabled all the more to glory in the unspeakable gift of God’s grace in Yeshua. Surely the mystery of His abundant love, that He would give Himself to save us and bring us into His family, granting us eternal life with Him, is the foundation for a life of constant praise and thanksgiving to Him.