

3 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.

The opening phrase of our verse is a translation of the prepositional phrase “Among them,” (*ἐν οἷς, en hois*), differs from the assertions made in v. 2 that describe the worldly context in which Paul’s readers lived before coming to faith in Yeshua. There, in v. 2, two phrases denote this worldly context: “according to the course of this world” and “according to the prince of the power of the air.” Both of these utilize the Greek preposition *κατά* (*kata*), “according to,” which in this context indicates “in agreement with.”

In our verse, the opening preposition indicates that it is not merely the same worldly context described in the previous verse in which Paul identifies himself and his unbelieving Jewish brethren before coming to faith in Yeshua. Rather, by opening with this specific prepositional phrase (*en hois*), he is stating that before coming to faith in Yeshua, he and all unbelievers were part of the “sons of disobedience” and willingly were led by the “prince of the power of the air.”

Here, once again, Paul gives us a very clear and straight-forward teaching that all who have not confessed Yeshua to be the promised Messiah and have not placed their faith in Him for their eternal salvation are, in fact, identified by the Almighty as “sons of disobedience” who are ruled by “the prince of the power of the air” and who are therefore under the wrath of God. Paul will use the expression “sons of disobedience” again in the fifth chapter of our epistle. Note that in this text all who are identified as “sons of disobedience” are likewise under the wrath of God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph 5:6)

In the context of Eph 5 Paul is emphasizing the fact that true faith in the Messiah Yeshua will always be evidenced by a life characterized by holiness and not by the decadent lifestyle of unbelievers. While some of the Pharisees in Paul’s day may have appeared to be piously religious, as Yeshua Himself stated, the “inside of the cup” was full of refuse, that is, “wickedness” (Matt 23:25–26).

In our text Paul affirms this by moving from the second person “you” to the first person “we too.” By doing this, he is emphatically

stating that even a religious Jew like himself, before coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua, was reckoned by God as having no claim to eternal salvation any more than did the unbelieving Gentile. By starting v. 3 with the words “Among them we too all formerly lived...,” Paul makes it very clear that all, whether Jew or Gentile, who have refused to accept Yeshua by faith as the promised Messiah of God and the only Savior of sinners, comprise the “sons of disobedience” who are under the wrath of God. For ultimately their heritage is tied to Adam by whom sin and death entered the world and not to Abraham, through whose Seed redemption is accomplished and the eternal salvation of sinners is secured.

...we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh – Here it is clear that Paul is not putting Israel or the Jewish people as having a greater claim to eternal salvation than the nations. As Hoehner notes:

The contrast that Paul is making is thought by some to be between Paul as a Jew and the Ephesians as Gentiles, but more likely it is between him as a writer and the Ephesians as recipients.¹ The addition of “all” creates an insuperable objection against “we” as referring only to the Jews. All humans in the unregenerate state are in the same condition of rebellion against God.²

This is precisely what Paul teaches in his epistle to the Romans.

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Torah, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Torah are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Torah brings about wrath, but where there is no Torah, there also is no violation. For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Torah, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU” [Gen 17:5] in the

-
- 1 For the plural 1st person pronoun to be used by a writer to refer to himself, referred to as the “editorial singular,” see Blass-DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Univ of Chicago, 1961), p. 147, §280. Note also Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 398-99.
 - 2 Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p. 317.

presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (Rom 4:13–17)

Note also the emphasis Paul puts upon the inevitable change that comes into a person's life when they repent of their sin and exercise true saving faith in Messiah. He states that "we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh." When a person comes to faith in the Messiah, there begins a break with the former life characterized by sin, and a growing in righteousness evident in the overall aspects of one's life.

...*lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind*— The Greek term ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*), here translated by the English word "lusts," carries the general sense of "desire" and can refer to "good" or to "evil" desires. Most often, however, Paul uses the term in connection with the "flesh" in the sense of the "sinful nature of mankind"¹ and thus the translation "lusts" is correct, as the following words of the phrase make clear: "indulging the desires of the flesh."

In using "flesh" (σάρξ, *sarx*) to denote the sinful nature of mankind, Paul is not degrading the human physical body created by God. Much to the contrary. The believer is to glorify God in his or her body.

For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1Cor 6:20)

Likewise, when Paul speaks of the "desires of the mind," he is referring to the mind (διανοία, *dianoia*) as controlled by the sinful nature. Even those things that are considered "good" within the realm of human existence can evoke pride, selfishness, covetousness, etc. As Paul will go on to teach, only in Messiah can a person utilize the created wonder of the human body for righteousness in accordance with God's standard of holiness, for without faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:16).

and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. – Here again Paul is speaking of fallen mankind when he uses the phrase "by nature" (φύσις, *phusis*). This speaks to the fact that all who have descended from Adam are born with a fallen, sinful nature, or what in theological terms

1 ἐπιθυμία is found 19 times in the Pauline epistles, and only twice does Paul use it of righteous desires (Phil 1:23; 1Thess 2:17). The remaining 17 times (Rom 1:24; 6:12; 7:7–8; 13:14; Gal 5:16, 24; Eph 2:3; 4:22; Col 3:5; 1Thess 4:5; 1Tim 6:9; 2Tim 2:22; 3:6; 4:3; Titus 2:12; 3:3) are all used in connection with sinful desires.

is called “original sin.” Paul makes this clear in Rom 5:12.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Rom 5:12)

The final phrase of this verse has been much debated. What does it mean when our English translations have “...because all sinned”? The greater weight of evidence supports the view that “because all sinned” should be understood to mean “the proof of which is that all who lived after Adam have sinned.”¹

This is consistent with what Paul is teaching in our text. Apart from salvation in the person and work of Yeshua, all of mankind are characterized as living by the lusts of the flesh and of the mind, and are therefore *by nature* under the wrath of God. This likewise connects with what Paul has stated in the opening verse of chapter 2, that the unbeliever is “dead in trespasses and sins,” meaning that apart from direct, divine intervention, no one would nor could turn to God for salvation.

It is to this utter inability of fallen mankind to desire God or seek Him for forgiveness and salvation, that makes the following verses in our pericope so wonderful. For Paul will go on to speak of God’s abundant love and His sovereign and omnipotent power by which He brings to Himself an innumerable host of people whom He will save eternally. We are enabled to appreciate and extol to a greater extent the unspeakable gift of God’s grace and power in our salvation when we recognize the helpless state in which we would exist apart from His having drawn us to Himself, granting us repentance and faith to lay hold of eternal salvation in Yeshua our Savior and Messiah.

-----Excursus: The Biblical Teaching on Total Depravity of Mankind-----

The Nature of Man in the Tanach

There are a number of statements in the Tanach that address the basic sinful nature of man.

Then Adonai saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen 6:5)

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יֵצֵר מַחְשְׁבַת לְבוֹ רָק
רַע כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

1 For the technical aspects of this text, see my commentary, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (TorahResource, 2005), 1.117–119.

Having described the wickedness of mankind as great, note how the inclusive terms explain what this means: *every* intent...*only* evil *continually*. Notice also that the word translated “intent” is *yetzer*, the very word used by the Rabbis when describing the “evil” and “good” inclinations. Here, however, there is no “good inclination” to balance off the “evil.” Rather, mankind is characterized as having only evil intentions continually.

Similarly, in Gen 8:21 Adonai says: “... I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent (יֵצֵר, *yetzer*) of man’s heart is evil from his youth...” Here the point is emphasized that a person does not learn how to be evil, but this is something inherent within a person “from his youth,” a phrase that describes the general characteristic of a person and could be understood to mean “all of one’s life” (cf. 1Sam 17:33; 1Ki 18:12; Lk 18:21).

Jeremiah characterizes the heart of mankind as full of deceit:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick;
who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

עֶקֶב הַלֵּב מִכָּל וְאָנֹשׁ הוּא מִי יֵדְעֵנוּ:

Here we see the Prophet describing the heart (the seat of the intellect and volition) of mankind as most deceitful. He adds: “and is desperately sick,” but this English translation hardly does justice to the Hebrew. The word translated “desperately sick” is אָנֹשׁ, *’anush*, which usually carries the sense of “incurable” (cf. Is 17:11; Jer 17:16). The heart is most deceitful and incurable of this deceit. In the metaphoric language of the Prophets, the only possible cure is to obtain a new heart (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:19; 36:26).

This idea that a person is born with a sinful nature and a heart bent to deceit, is affirmed by the Psalmist in 51:7 – “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” The point that is being made is not that birth or conception is itself sinful, but that a child (and here it is the personal confession of David) begins life with a disposition that is bent toward evil. We may note a similar emphasis in Ps 58:3[4]: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth.” Job likewise reinforces the fact that people are born as sinners:

Who can make the clean out of the unclean? No one! (Job 14:4).

What is man, that he should be pure, or he who is born of a woman,
that he should be righteous? (Job 15:14)

How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who
is born of woman? (Job 25:4)

This bent to evil with which everyone is born is commonly referred to as

the “sinful nature.” But is the sinful nature something that can be overcome by one’s own efforts? Is it really a sickness that can be healed by the efforts of men? Jeremiah speaks to this issue:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil. (Jer 13:23)

Yeshua Himself teaches this same lesson when He is approached by Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3). The message of Yeshua to him centered on his need to be “born again.” But why is there a need for a new birth if one is able to correct what is wrong within him—if one is able to encourage the *yetzer tov* (good inclination) and diminish the *yetzer ra’* (evil inclination)? The point is clear—only a new beginning will do when it comes to obtaining righteousness before God. There is no way to reform or refurbish the wayward heart. Rather, the heart of stone must be removed and a heart of flesh put in its place.

Total Depravity/Inability

What the Prophets as well as Yeshua are teaching is that sinful mankind has neither the ability nor the desire to seek God and to please Him. The inward corruptions of the heart inherited from Adam have estranged mankind from his Creator and left him helpless apart from God’s intervention. This is Paul’s conclusion, based upon texts from the Tanach, after he has stated that both Gentiles and Jews are under God’s righteous judgment, being sinners:

...for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written,

THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.
THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,
THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS,
WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS;
THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.
THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.

(Rom 3:9–18 [Ps 14:1–3; 53:1–3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1])

We may note several important things from this listing of verses “chained” together by the Apostle.

In mankind’s fallen state, endowed as he is with a sinful nature,

1. No one has a righteous standing before God.
2. No one understands God’s righteous standards.
3. No one seeks for God. Even those who appear to be seeking for God turn aside to their own inventions and ideas, which are useless.
4. No one is able to do good deeds that garner rewards from God.
5. This is not something that affects a few or even just many, but everyone. There is not even one person who might be an exception.
6. Not only is mankind in its totality unwilling and unable to seek after God and please Him, the bent of fallen humanity is actively to pursue evil (deceit, gossip, cursing, bitterness, self-centered, destruction, misery, turmoil).
7. The general tenor of fallen mankind is summed up in this: they have no fear of God.

This, then, is the state of fallen humanity, to the last person. Apart from God’s intervention, mankind is hopeless and helpless. This is what is meant by the common theological phrase “total depravity,” which could perhaps be more correctly called “total inability.” The complete inability of mankind to find his way to God and to please Him does not mean that every human is as evil as he or she could be. Nor does it mean that mankind is entirely unable to do those things that society in general (regardless of time or culture) deem as “good.” The biblical doctrine of mankind’s total inability has to do with the fact that, left to themselves, fallen humanity cannot please God and further, is even unwilling to try. Thus, left to themselves, people are doomed to be objects of God’s righteous and just wrath against sinners.

Moreover, “total inability” means that there is nothing mankind can do, either individually or corporately, to change this hopeless situation. Mankind is lost without any hope of finding their way. This means, of course, that the only hope for mankind is that God Himself would intervene, and that, in a nutshell, is the primary message of the Good News, the Gospel.

It is interesting to note at least three metaphors that are used in the Scriptures to explain the total inability of mankind. These metaphors are 1) resurrection, 2) creation, and 3) birth.

We find the resurrection metaphor used by Paul in Eph 2:1–5:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ... But God ... made us alive together with Messiah.

This means that fallen mankind is viewed as dead in sin, which must surely describes their total inability to do anything in relationship to pleasing God. The only hope for a dead person is resurrection.

The metaphor of creation is also utilized by Paul:

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

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Gal 6:15)

How does this inform us of the biblical teaching of mankind's total inability? Obviously, that which is uncreated does not yet exist. To be recreated, or made a new creation, means that the old is not reformed, or somehow "fixed," but rather the way by which a sinner is made able to come to God is through being created anew.

Finally, the metaphor of birth, as we have already noted, is found in the teaching of Yeshua to Nicodemus (John 3). What Yeshua taught was necessary for a sinner to stand righteous before God was a new birth, a new beginning, not a reformation or retrofitting of the old. Peter also speaks in this same language of being "born again" or "being born from above" (cf. 1Pet 1:3, 23).

What is it that all of these metaphors have in common? The object of the action is entirely passive: a dead person cannot resurrect himself; an uncreated being cannot create himself; and an unborn person cannot birth himself. These metaphors of salvation, then, emphasize the total inability of mankind to save himself from his hopeless condition, and put the entire work of giving new life, bringing into being what has not yet existed, and birthing a new life in the hands of the Almighty alone. "Salvation is of the Lord."

This biblical doctrine of the total inability of mankind, while surely unpopular to the natural mind, is nonetheless one of the foundational truths in the study of the biblical doctrine of salvation. If we see the manner in which the Bible clearly lays this doctrine out, we will have a solid foundation upon which to understand the work of God in rescuing sinners.

----- *End of the Excursus* -----