

“Temptation and [Jes]us (Part 5)”– Ephesians 2:1-10

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and let’s meet in Ephesians 2...

So in recent weeks we have been exploring what James teaches us about the way temptation works. Last week we saw how our temptations derive from inner desires that drag us off course and entice us to sin. We reflected on how God created mankind with desires to serve His good purposes, but ever since the Fall described in Genesis 3, our desires have been corrupted by sin. This led us into a discussion on human depravity—the way sin has infected every part of the human person. We considered the Bible’s description of sinners and how we are sinners by nature and by choice. I ended by quoting from the book of Ephesians and it is to those verses that I want to return this morning.

These verses are not about temptation directly, but they help us to see why our desires are so corrupted that they lead us to temptation. So this is kind of a sidebar, but it gives us an opportunity to look at some historical errors that still shape certain segments of Christianity today. So if you like history and theological debate, then you will probably enjoy this sermon. On second thought, you probably won’t because we will have to be so general and big picture today that you’ll probably be frustrated that I didn’t elaborate more on something or feel that I didn’t do justice to some doctrine you are quite fond of. Sorry about that. But I’ll try to be as fair as possible, even though we will be forced to generalize a bit.

Let’s begin by reading these verses in Ephesians 2 again. I’ll start at the beginning. Follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

There is so much here and our time is limited, so we will have to settle on some broad observations this morning and hopefully the Lord will give us an opportunity to dive deeper into the verses one day in the future. For today I want us to see four things that Paul says is true of the Christians at Ephesus, namely: what they were, what they did, what they deserved, and what God did.¹ Each of these is true for the Ephesian Christians because each of these is true for all believers. With that in mind, let’s begin by noting what Paul says about...

What They Were

The key verse here is the first verse, where Paul writes,

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...” (Ephesians 2:1)

That’s pretty strong language there—Dead. This has been a challenging verse for many interpreters of our day and age because it smacks in the face of the prevailing culture of self-esteem we find ourselves surrounded by. And, make no mistake about it, Evangelical churches have not been immune this kind of thinking. Last week, I gave you some recent examples of preachers who suggest that we are born more or less neutral in terms of our inclinations toward good and evil. Unless things have changed in recent years that has been the thinking of most Americans and most Evangelicals in this country for some time.² But it represents a break from biblical teaching. As we considered last week, the Scriptures paint a more cynical picture of human nature in the wake of the Fall. But alas there is probably not much of a market for “Viper in a Diaper” onesies, so if you show up to the baby shower with one in tow, don’t expect a warm reception.

Of course, we are not the first generation to recoil at this notion of depravity and original sin. Not at all. Historically, there have been other takes that have a different ring to them than Paul’s words here in Ephesians 2:1. For example, in the fourth and fifth-centuries, there was a man by the name of Pelagius who believe, more or less, “that human beings are born spiritually healthy and that people simply need to try harder to do what is right.”³ This way of seeing things is known as “Pelagianism.”

For Pelagius and Pelagians today (even if they don’t go by that name), people are not born broken. They are born with the capacity to make good and evil decisions and they can, in themselves, take the first step toward God. Pelagius wrote a number of things, most of which has not survived and we know only by reputation, but one of his more influential works was his treatise on *Free Will*, which exists only in fragments today. From what we can tell, however, he clearly taught that humanity is “morally neutral with an equal capacity for either good or evil” and he rejected the notion that “we are driven to sin by the corruption of our flesh”.⁴ So how then do we become sinners, according to Pelagius? It is nature or nurture? Pelagius says nurture. “In other words, we are ‘socialized’ to sin or ‘conditioned’ to sin because of continual exposure to a family and society that are themselves sinful for the same reasons.”⁵ In the end, according to Pelagius, Adam’s sin doesn’t exert any effect on our nature. He was a bad example for us. But the notion of being “fallen” in Adam and having built in biases that incline us to sin, he rejected.

Because this is where he landed, he had a great deal of difficulty trying to articulate the need for grace. He was very inconsistent on this matter, sometimes speaking of grace as though it were a necessity and at other times speaking as though grace were superfluous. “For Pelagius, grace wasn’t a gift that transforms sinners; grace is strength that God gives in response to human efforts to do what is right.”⁶ Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones liken this exchange to an arcade video game.

“In Pelagianism, the more good works you do, the more grace God gives—sort of like a video game where, the better you play, the more powers and abilities you unlock. Eventually, if people keep putting their quarters in the grace arcade, they can gain enough points to live a perfect life. For Pelagius, grace was a stairway to heaven—it supports you with each step you take, but the first step and the initial effort are yours to make. Grace comes in from time to time to give you a pat on the back and a nudge when you’ve done something good... And even though ‘Stairway to Heaven’ happens to be a great fingerpicking exercise for aspiring rock stars, it’s a miserable way to live your life.”⁷

The church father Augustine of Hippo agreed. Not with Pelagius, but with this being terrible. He dedicated a lot of time disputing these things with Pelagius. He labored to show that if our reception of grace is the result of human effort then it ceases to be grace. Grace by definition isn’t earned. It’s unmerited. It must be freely given.

And it must be freely given to sinners if there is any hope for salvation because we, despite the claims of Pelagius, are fallen sinners. We are born broken and in need of grace.

Eventually, and not surprisingly, Pelagius was condemned as a heretic and his teaching branded heresy. Yet his influence remains even to this day. Lots of people, including some who call themselves Christians, share his perspective. And if not exactly his, something close to it. For example, maybe they are willing to concede that we aren't born healthy, spiritually speaking, but just weak. This spin on things was made famous by a fifth-century monk by the name of John Cassian.

Cassian wasn't all-in with Pelagius, but he definitely wasn't a fan of Augustine either. He strived for some mediating position, which today is usually referred to as "semi-Pelagianism." Unlike Pelagius, Cassian was much clearer (and consistent) on the need for grace in our salvation. But while God's grace is needed for our salvation, he argued, people still have to take the first step toward God. The sin of Adam weakened us, but it didn't prevent us from taking that step toward God. So what we are left with is not a total depravity, but a partial depravity. If in the Pelagian view grace was like a stairway we climb up, in Cassian's view (and the semi-Pelagians that come after him) grace is more like an escalator. "Sometimes sinners step on the escalator of grace in their own power, and sometimes God helps them—but either way, a human choice is the gateway to getting God's grace."⁸ This is not what Paul is saying in Ephesians 2:1. When he says "dead" he doesn't mean healthy (Pelagianism) or weakened (semi-Pelagianism). He means dead. And not surprisingly the Semi-Pelagianism was also rejected by the church at the Synod of Orange. Both views are considered unorthodox.

Now let me address the elephant in the room for some of you—the Calvinism vs Arminianism debate. If you don't know what that is, then don't worry about it at the moment. But for those of you who get really passionate about such things, let me clarify a few things. First, both ways of thinking fall under the umbrella of orthodoxy. You wouldn't necessarily know that based the way a lot of people speak about such things, but that may be more symptomatic of our age—the age of outrage. But in truth, there are godly men and women today and historically who land on different sides of that divide. They can't both be right of course. But if they are wrong, it's not on a core issue. This is an insider conversation between true Christians in most cases. It's significant, but not core. It's important, but not what the Bible elevates to "*first importance*" (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3ff).

Nevertheless, this debate is frustrating for people like me because terms carry baggage and often that baggage is not appropriate. There are a lot of mischaracterizations and straw men constructed when these matters are discussed. For instance, let me address those of you with a more Calvinistic persuasion. It is wrong to say, in my view, that all Arminians are really just semi-Pelagians. That would be like an Arminian acting like all Calvinists are hyper-Calvinists. They are not. When we mischaracterize the other side, in either direction, in one of these ways, it may be ignorant or disingenuous, but it's not fair.

Having said this, I *do* think that those of you who consider yourselves more Arminian in orientation need to be aware that there is a risk, if you're not careful, that you drift into Semi-Pelagianism (or Open Theism). Arminians are more prone to that error. Calvinists have their own errors that they are prone to, including that equally unfortunate error of hyper-Calvinism. Both sides need to be careful and mindful of these vulnerabilities. And both sides need to remember that these are legitimate discussions and debates, not the test of orthodoxy. We forget that to our detriment and to the detriment of the body of Christ and her witness.

Maybe you're thinking, "Well then, how is the Arminian perspective not semi-Pelagian?" I'm going to generalize here because there is more diversity of thought and expression in these camps than you might expect, but generally speaking most Arminians, historically, recognize the truth that God must initiate our salvation. They will sometimes speak of something called "prevenient grace," which simply means "grace that comes before." The idea is that humans are so sinful—by nature and by choice—that if left to themselves they would never choose God. Therefore, what is needed for a person to profess saving faith in Jesus is a "grace that comes before" and makes a person able to make a free decision for or against embracing the truth of the Gospel. Who

does God extend this grace to? Everyone. Therefore, everyone, when presented with the Gospel, can choose freely to believe or reject the invitation. That choice is the result of God's grace.

Ironically, this prevenient grace is a kind of irresistible grace, at least at first, because it affects everyone equally. But once it is ours, we can resist it. "Like unplugging your phone before its fully charged, humanity [because of prevenient grace] has the capacity to disconnect from the current of grace that God initiates." If the sinners resist, then God leaves them to die in their sin.

So if Pelagianism saw grace as a stairway and semi-Pelagians saw grace as an escalator, Arminians (by virtue of this prevenient grace) perhaps see it more like an elevator. "God finds people and—as long as they don't resist his efforts to save them—places them in the elevator where he lifts them to a place of healing and life."⁹ Everyone is on the elevator. When the Gospel comes, we have to decide if we are going to take ourselves off the elevator or allow the elevator to start ascending and take us up. You don't work to get yourself up. The elevator does all the work. But you do decide. And you can decide because God has extended His prevenient grace to enable that decision.¹⁰ If you find yourself off the elevator, it's your fault. You rejected and refused the Gospel's offer. But you could have done otherwise because of God's prevenient grace.

Calvinists, on the other hand, agree that grace must precede belief. They disagree on whether or not this notion of prevenient grace for all can find biblical support and whether or not such grace is at work in the life of everyone who hears the Gospel. It's a matter of the scope and effectiveness of grace. And we'll have to leave it there today.

My point though is that both positions—Calvinism and Arminianism—are within the bounds of orthodoxy when rightly understood. But in the end, we ought to take our lead more from what the Bible says than from what some theologian or theological system teaches. So let's look again at Ephesians 2:1...

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins..." (Ephesians 2:1)

This is what they were. Dead. Clearly Paul doesn't mean they were physically dead. But they were spiritually dead. They had no spiritual life. And if that is true of us, it seems to me, then our salvation must be all of God. People who are spiritually dead don't seek life. They can't seek life. They are dead. If you throw a floatation device to dead person drowning in the ocean, they aren't going to take it. Why? Because they are dead. They're not treading water. They are not looking for someone to come around and toss them a rope. They're not floating there "agonizing over whether to vote for Jesus in a cosmic popularity contest."¹¹ They're just dead. And if you're dead you don't need a little help or an opportunity. You need a resurrection. You need to be born again.

That's who they were. Because of who they were, notice what Paul says about...

What They Did

Look at verse 2 and the first part of verse 3...

"...in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind..." (Ephesians 2:2-3a)

If the tree is dead, it's not going to produce good fruit. "Death in our roots led to death in our fruits."¹² So Paul says that these Ephesians, before they knew Christ, were characterized by spiritually dead activities. That doesn't mean that none of those activities ever look good. It just means that they are not truly good. As one author explains,

“In this dead condition it is impossible for us to do anything that pleases God, because no matter what it is, and no matter how much it may look like a good deed to us and to other humans, God will not be pleased with it. Why? Because we will do our alleged good deeds for some reason other than love of God.”¹³

This was true of these Ephesians before they knew Christ. They went the way of the prevailing culture—*“following the course of this world”*. Their desires were so corrupted by sin that *“carrying out the desires of the body and the mind”* meant sinfully living out *“the passions of [the] flesh”*. Their fallen nature shaped what they desired. That’s what James is wrestling with when he speaks about our desires being enlisted in our temptations. Both Paul and James are describing what is true of every fallen human. Paul says in verse 3 that this is how *“we all once lived”*. Here is how Charles Spurgeon, the Baptist preacher sometimes called the “Prince of Preachers,” put it,

“As the salt flavors every drop in the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature. It is so sadly there, so abundantly there, that if you cannot detect it, you are deceived.”¹⁴

And therefore, as Montgomery and Jones explain,

“Left to ourselves, the death that we inherited from Adam mortifies all that we are, and sin infects all that we do. We cannot cleanse ourselves from this stain, and—as long as we remain dead in our sins—we will never desire the remedy that God has provided.”¹⁵

In light of that, notice what Paul says about...

What They Deserved

Look at the tail end of verse 3...

“[We] were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:3b)

Wow. By nature—like all of mankind—we were children of wrath, which is to say deserving of God’s wrath. That is the appropriate response to sin—wrath. Divine anger. And since, as Paul says elsewhere, we all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23), we must all be under God’s wrath. We all stood condemned, dead in our trespasses and sins. Without hope of making things right. As Paul puts in later in the chapter, *“you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”* (Eph. 2:12). And if you want to see these ideas fleshed out more, then go read the first three chapters of Romans (especially the third).

That’s all really bad news, right? But that’s what makes what Paul says next so amazing. Because in verse 4, Paul begins to show us...

What God Did

Look at verses 4 and following...

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

So what did God do for believers? He did what He must do for spiritually dead people. He “*made us alive together with Christ*” (2:5). He caused them to be “*born again*” (John 3:3-7). “What none of them could do or would do, God did, for the purpose of revealing ‘the incomparable riches of his grace’ (Ephesians 2:7).”¹⁶

And why, according to Paul, did God show them grace? It wasn’t because they earned it. You can’t earn salvation when you deserve judgment. You can’t earn deliverance when you are a child of wrath. The wages of sin, what you earn for sin, is death. So why did God save them? Why did He bring them to life? If it wasn’t something they did that prompted it, then why? Verse 4 tells us. It was because God is “*rich in mercy*” and “*loved us*”. Sinners are saved because of who God is and what God has done. Not because of who we are by nature and what we do by nature. And that is really good news! Our salvation is not about our merit. “If you’ve trusted Jesus Christ, all that you contributed to your own salvation was a sin-bloated spiritual cadaver—blind to God’s glory and dead to his grace—that God inexplicably chose to enliven and to love.”¹⁷ What good news! And Paul summarizes this good news simply, by stating—“*by grace you have been saved*” (2:5). And then he repeats that with greater specificity in verses 8 and following...

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Salvation is God’s work. Not ours. He gets the glory. Not us. Must we repent and believe? Yes. We are saved through faith. But that repentance and belief itself is evidence of God’s grace—“*it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*” If total depravity is true, then salvation must be all of grace. I think the Lord Himself summarized the implications of this doctrine best when He stated, “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out*” and “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (John 6:37, 44). He must take the initiative. And if we are responding rightly to His saving invitation by drawing to Christ in faith, then it is not because spiritually dead people finally learned how to come back to life, it can only be because God grace has impacted us and given us life. It’s truly by grace that we are saved.

This past week I read a wonderful book by Glenna Marshall, called *Everyday Faithfulness: The Beauty of Ordinary Perseverance in a Demanding World*. At one point, reflecting on Ephesians 2:8-9, she writes,

“Bottom line: You must believe in Christ and repent from your sins to be saved, but it is *God* who first makes you alive in Christ so that you can do so. God is the one who makes your dead heart beat for him. He gives you both the faith to believe and the obedience to repent (see Rom. 2:4; Acts 11:18). He makes you a new creation. He transfers you from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of Jesus (see Col. 1:13). God first does the work of regeneration—of making us alive in Christ—so that we may have faith to believe that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. We respond in obedience to the transforming work of the gospel with repentance and belief, but we do not do it apart from God’s power and plan.”¹⁸

And the beauty of the Gospel is that God will save all kinds of people. There is no one more or less worthy of grace. None is worthy. And His grace is going to save every kind of person you can imagine without distinction, to the glory of His name.

Let me close with a story about someone who came to grasp this reality. I’m not sure of the original source, but this is how Kent Hughes tells it:

“A large prestigious church had three mission churches under its care. On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches came to the big city church for a combined Communion

service. In those mission churches, which were located in the slums of the city, were some outstanding cases of conversions — thieves, burglars, and so on — but all knelt side by side at the Communion rail.

On one such occasion the pastor saw a former burglar kneeling beside a judge of the Supreme Court of England — the very judge who had sent him to jail where he had served seven years. After his release this burglar had been converted and become a Christian worker. Yet, as they knelt there, the judge and the former convict, neither one seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, the judge was walking out with the pastor and said to him, ‘Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?’ The pastor replied, ‘Yes, but I didn’t know that you noticed.’ The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, ‘What a miracle of grace.’ The pastor nodded in agreement. ‘Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace.’ Then the judge said, ‘But to whom do you refer?’ And the pastor said, ‘Why, to the conversion of that convict.’ The judge said, ‘But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself.’¹⁹

Never forget, brothers and sisters, that there are not degrees of dead. None of you were kind of dead in your transgressions and sins. All of us were dead. It takes the same miracle of new life to raise each of us—whether we are notorious sinners in the eyes of the world or regarded on a pedestal. The miracle of regeneration is just as gracious for each, just as undeserved, and just as amazing! Blaise Pascal was right when he said that “Grace is indeed required to turn a man into a saint; and he who doubts this does not know what either a man or a saint is.”²⁰

So if you are a Christian today, be awestruck by your God who made it so! Marvel at His grace! Boast in His cross! Because He is the giver of life! Amen! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Let’s leave it there for today. Next time I preach to you, we will look at that last verse in James 1 concerning temptation and make some practical applications. And then my hope is the following week to look summarize all that we have seen so far by seeing it play out in the life of King David and his famous story of temptation and sin. That’s the plan, if God wills.

Let’s pray...

¹ I owe a debt to Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones for this fourfold breakdown. Much of what I will say today related to Ephesians 2 has been influenced by their book *PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

² According to one Barna survey, 74 percent of Americans and 52 percent of Americans who identify as Evangelical agree with the statement “when people are born, they are neither good nor evil”. The study is now a bit dated, but there doesn’t seem to be much evidence that thinking has changed on this matter in favor of the biblical perspective, which runs counter to this majority. See <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-draw-theological-beliefs-from-diverse-points-of-view/>.

³ Montgomery and Jones, 64.

⁴ See “10 Things You Should Know about Pelagius and Pelagianism” by Sam Storms, which could be accessed as of the date of preaching at the following website: <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-pelagius-and-pelagianism/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Montgomery and Jones, 64.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ As Roger Olson explains: “The moral ability to respond to the gospel freely—by the graciously freed will—is a free gift of God through Christ to all people in some measure. It does not mean that anyone can now seek and find God using natural ability alone! It is a supernatural endowment that can and usually is rejected or neglected. According to Arminian theology, because of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit all people are being influenced toward the good; the deadly wound of Adam is being healed....no person is left by God entirely in that state of nature without some measure of grace to rise above it if he or she cooperates with grace not resisting it.” Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 155.

¹¹ Montgomery and Jones, 54.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jim Scott Orrick, *Mere Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019), 35.

¹⁴ Also cited in Montgomery and Jones, 56. Original source: C. H. Spurgeon, “Honest Dealing with God” (June 20, 1875).

¹⁵ Montgomery and Jones, 56.

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸ Glenna Marshall, *Everyday Faithfulness: The Beauty of Ordinary Perseverance in a Demanding World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 83.

¹⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 76.

²⁰ W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, *The Viking Book of Aphorisms* (New York: Dorset Press, 1966), 89.