

Dead towards God

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Date: 25 April 2021

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[0 : 0 0] So this morning's reading is from Ephesians 2, verses 1 to 10. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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, 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.

But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By Christ you have been saved, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in the kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, for good works, and for good works.

[1 : 4 7] But I was struck this week again that my nine-year-old grandchild, who was doing a speech at his school up in Gandawindi, can speak with some knowledge about Anzac Day.

Why is that? Well, it's because, very simply, what I might call this morning the doctrine of Anzac Day is well and truly taught every year in the schools.

The doctrine is just a set of beliefs and values. An Anzac has a set of beliefs and values. And they shaped us as a nation, and they're taught without embarrassment or without apology in our schools every year.

Why? To use the cliché, lest we forget. Today we also begin a nine-week doctrinal series focusing on how we experience God's grace and salvation.

And yet an interesting thing might just have happened. That sentence alone would be enough to make lots and lots of Christians, perhaps even some here this morning, switch off, because it mentioned that dreaded word doctrine.

[3 : 1 3] The modern evangelical spirit says, look, I just want to praise and worship God, so don't offend me by trying to teach me doctrine.

I just want to praise and worship God, so don't bore me with the notion of doctrine. I don't need it.

I don't want it. Now that sort of statement sounds humble. I just want to praise the Lord. It sounds appealing. It sounds virtuous. But in actual fact, as it's stated, it's quite contrary to Scripture, particularly verses like Romans 12, 1-3, where it actually urges us as Christians to pursue radically transformed minds.

And practically, it's nonsense. I mean, at the end of the day, how can we respond appropriately? How can we praise in thankfulness thankfulness?

Unless we understand God's character. Unless we understand God's dealings with the world. Unless we understand what his mercy and compassion is meant to us in salvation. Unless we're aware of how we've experienced the salvation, quite contrary to anything we deserve.

[4 : 35] So my friends, as we start this series, it sounds as if I have to start negative, and that may be my character, but I just long that we might be excited about doctrine.

That we might actually think that it's valuable to put the effort in to learn it. Why? Lest we forget.

Lest we forget the beauty of the Lord. Lest we forget his compassion and mercy to us who deserve only his condemnation.

Lest we forget the firm foundation we have to stand upon. The foundation from which we speak to others in our world from. Lest we forget.

Well, let's jump into the series then with a question. Very general question. What is the Bible about? And you won't get any prizes for saying it's about God.

[5 : 46] Dig down into that a little bit more. And we say, well, it's about God and his relationship with mankind. And then we have to dig a little bit more and say, well, okay, that's a relationship that collapsed and has become hostile because of the rebellion of the image bearer against their creator.

And then we dig a little bit more and say, well, that's not the full story of the Bible because the Bible tells us about God's action to undo that rebellion. To fix the mess.

To restore the relationship. To fix the mess. So, in a simple statement, what is the Bible about? Well, the Bible is actually, it's of itself, a systematic or doctrinal statement of God's answer to the problem of human sin.

And so we can say then that the interrelated, the key interrelated themes in the Bible are human sin and how we experience God's grace in salvation in response to our sin.

And here's the rub. Unless we actually understand the problem of sin, we will not appreciate or desire God's solution.

[7 : 15] God's solution. Call me canon is a song along these lines that says, well, it's only when you know you're seriously and totally lost that you can fully appreciate being found.

Unless we understand the problem of sin, we will not appreciate or desire God's solution. We won't even think we need a solution. And certainly not God's solution. So this morning I want to start the series by doing just a brief examination of what I'm going to call Paul's case study in Ephesians.

The passage you just read to us. And Paul's writing to Christians in Ephesus and he's describing to them how they experienced and why they needed to experience God's grace and salvation.

It's typical, this passage, I've just chosen one, but it's typical of dozens of passages across the Bible I could reference today but don't have time. And in this passage Paul makes two very, very simple points but they're profound points.

Sets out the case beautifully as he speaks to these Christians at Ephesus. The first thing he says to them is, verse 1 there, at one time you were dead towards God spiritually.

[8 : 33] Just read the passage again. Very clear. And you were dead. And as we read this, just see in your mind that which is dead. So you can think, oh, if you've seen a person that's dead, think of that.

If it's just roadkill, then think of that. But, and you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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, 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.

It's graphic language, isn't it? And Paul uses graphic language to make absolutely clear the problem of human sinfulness.

What's the problem? Well, at one time, every single person, says Paul, is like a corpse in terms of their relationship with God.

[9 : 55] What does that mean? Well, it means every part of the heart and the mind and the will is dead or deadened towards God.

your attitudes, your emotions, your affections effectively deadened. the result leaves people totally unaware of their true spiritual situation.

That's by nature what it is to be dead. You can see a body there and you can poke it or you can see a dead animal on the side of the road and you can kick it and poke it and drag it but it's unaware of its situation.

It gets run over multiple times by vehicles but it's just there. It doesn't know what's happening. That's the picture language here. Totally unaware of their true spiritual situation and we're still totally unable to do a thing about it.

To do anything to change. How did such a desperate situation develop? Well, verse 2 is the direct consequence of our sin or rebellion.

[11 : 10] the expression of which is, in verse 2, following Satan's rejection of God and his determined opposition to be doing things God's way.

Not God's way, but my way. Now, in classic theological terms, we call this total depravity.

Now, that word depravity have to work on because it's not a common word these days, so I've sort of gone for total inability, which isn't quite the same, but it's close enough, I think, for our purposes. Total inability.

Total inability to even recognize your predicament. Total inability to change your predicament. Just like a corpse is defined by total inability.

God's will. And it's called that because when a person is born, they have no awareness of God's will, no inclination to serve God, no inclination even to pursue God.

[12 : 28] God's will. What we're talking about here is a state of total disconnect between God's intentions for his image bearers and the reality of life for his image bearers.

When God created his image bearers, he created them with a mind to know his will. He created them with a heart to do his will. He created them with affections to love and delight in him. But in a spiritual coup d'etat of sin, that's all gone.

Instead, people now claim, image bearers now claim the world to be their own and dismiss God, the creator. They live actively as though they are autonomous, as if they don't have to answer to anyone else, especially not God.

They live as though they are God. the image bearer has now become the image setter. It's a total disconnect.

But more than that, it's a relational problem. The natural inclination of any person in their natural state when they're born in this world is hostility to God.

[13 : 54] sometimes that's expressed in a really aggressive rejection of God. But if you read Romans 1, sometimes it can be expressed in a religious veneer, where it appears as if people are seeking God and searching for God, but actually they're not.

They're actually, according to Romans 1, reshaping or rejigging God and bringing them down to something that's manageable and something that's acceptable to them. And so in a sense, it's another form of rebellion.

You say, well God, I'll acknowledge you, but not like that. I'll acknowledge you whenever I can shape you in a way that's convenient to me or in a way that you're no threat to me.

Either way, it's a deep, deep relational problem. And it becomes then a legal problem. Children of wrath. Verse 3. We're told God speaks.

He takes himself very seriously. He responds to such rebellion by justly condemning the rebel. So the outworking of all that is that when we're born, we are guilty before God.

[15 : 18] We are objects of his wrath. verse 3. That's pretty strong language, isn't it? It's picture language we don't like today.

Because it's not flattering to us. it speaks of our helplessness, our inability. But friends, we have to say it's a very common problem.

The way of the world, the course of this world. It is what every person is born into. we're wrong. We often think, well, the majority of people can't be wrong when they think life is like this.

But the Bible's telling us quite the opposite. The majority of people are wrong. together, blissfully unaware of that predicament that they're in, and the judgment that's looming and impending on them.

People neither realize their predicament nor realize they're unable to please God in any way, or make themselves acceptable to God when they die. That's what it is to be spiritually dead towards God.

[16 : 44] Now, at this point I want to address two common questions. It might be a question that's in your mind. You might be saying, well, come on, are people really that sinful? Well, total depravity or total inability does not mean, does not mean that any given person is as bad as they possibly could be.

That's not what the Bible's teaching at all. It's not teaching that a person is not capable of doing good things in our community, in our society.

It's not teaching that people don't have a sense of right and wrong. The Bible affirms all those things. People do good things in our world. People do have a sense of right and wrong.

That's not what we're meaning, talking about when we talk about total inability, total depravity. But it does mean this, that sin has mutilated every faculty of us image bearers.

Sin has disabled every good thing that the Lord created in us. See, people are not born morally neutral.

[18 : 01] It's hard to believe that when you pick up my grandchildren. It's hard to believe, well, for a little while, it's hard to believe they're not born morally neutral. By the time they get to six months, you get no doubts about that.

But when they look sweet and innocent and newborn, you think, wow. people are not born morally neutral.

People are born hardwired to reject God, to oppose God, to be hostile to God. We might say it's in their DNA.

And the Bible's constantly, if you can read the Bible from comfort to comfort, and constantly it's describing this condition overflowing. It overflows from our hearts, and it messes up everything we do in our natural state.

And it's especially true of how people treat God. And you can see it. It's sort of intuitive. We don't need to, in a sense, have the Bible stand alone in this.

[19 : 17] We can see it as we engage with people. People in our world generally couldn't care less about God. But even where they do have some sense of God, they cannot think or choose or do anything that would be acceptable to God.

So, are people really that sinful? Well, in terms of the Bible, yes. Total inability. second question that's often thrown up then is don't people have a free will whereby they can choose to serve the Lord?

Don't people have a free will? Well, the problem here, it's a real problem, but not as difficult as what people sometimes think. The problem here is that people can choose real choice, which we all have, with what the Bible calls free will.

I like to use an illustration here, I don't know where it come from, I've plagiarized it from somebody or somewhere else, but I can't remember where now. The illustration goes like this, a vulture circling over the top, and on the ground here, under the vulture, there is, over here, a rotten sheep carcass, stinks, and beside the rotten sheep carcass, a couple of meters away, there's a beautiful baked dinner with veggies, gravy, mint sauce.

Which one's the bulk you're going to go for? It will go for the carcass. Why? Because that's its nature. It looks at the two, it has a choice, but it goes for the carcass because its choice is bounded by its nature.

[21 : 20] It makes a choice based on how it is hard wired. And it's the same way, I think, that people are hard wired to reject God in their hearts and minds and attitudes.

it's a real choice that people make, but that choice is shaped and limited by their nature they're born with.

So in practical terms that means then that people are not sinners because they choose to sin. People are not sinners because they choose to sin. People choose to sin because they're born sinners.

sinners. Born hostile to God. Born with the hard wire to reject God, to go against what he represents, what he calls them to.

So where do we go from here then? Well, we used this illustration before. When you seek treatment from a doctor, the doctor's assessment of your illness determines the treatment.

[22 : 37] Headache, or if you go and have a Panadol. A tumour in your brain, much more radical approach. Life threatening disease, major surgery.

His starting point determines what follows. That's precisely Paul's point here. People are not just spiritually off colour.

People are not just spiritually distracted and just need a little bit of urging to get back onto the right track again. Paul says people are spiritually dead.

They need something major to happen. person's predicament before God is much more serious than just something that requires a little pick-me-up, spiritual pick-me-up, or a spiritual injection.

Before God, they're spiritually dead, spiritually helpless. Verse 12 of Ephesians 2, Paul puts it in slightly different words. He says, people are without hope and without God in the world.

[23 : 56] Now, whatever way you look at it, that's a pretty bleak prognosis, isn't it? Or it would be without more graphic language that Paul uses here in verses 4 through 10.

And just feel the way this sits neatly in opposition to the first part. And you were dead. Verse 4, but God made you alive.

Just feel the balancing and the removing of that terrible predicament. God made you alive. Friends, just let that statement sink in.

And then keep reading to see that everything mentioned in these verses is something that God does for us and does in us. Now, why would we expect that to follow?

Because we've already established there's total helplessness, total inability, total blindness, total unawareness. So if anything significant is going to happen, if we're going to be rescued, if we're going to be turned around, if we're going to be made alive, then God will need to do it for us.

[25 : 17] God will need to do it in us. The two parts go together. Salvation is God's work from start to finish.

God's love and mercy combine to give new life to the sinner. God knew because God had the proper diagnosis.

God knew that it would never be enough just to say, well, look, hang on a sec, now, I'm going to make salvation available and I'll put it on the table over here. And so when you're ready, you just go and make use of it as it pleases you.

God knows that that wouldn't work because we're dead spiritually. We're unaware that we even need what he's provided for us if he did it like that. people need to be renewed, not just told that renewal is possible.

They need to be resurrected. They need to be brought back to life. And only God's power working in us can do that. It's not enough to bring the gospel message to people who have no desire, no ability to respond.

[26 : 35] God needed to bring the sinner to his solution, the Lord Jesus Christ. He needed to actually not just bring them but actually make them alive.

Do radical surgery in the inside out. Change their DNA if you like. And we'll see more of that over the coming weeks. It is not that we come alive by our own choice, by our own efforts.

it is by God's grace. We're chatting about this as elders past Monday night. And one of the comments was that one of the elders said that for years they'd never really understood why these things are called the doctrines of grace.

Don't all Christians believe in grace? We'll see more of this over the next few weeks as well. But the idea of doctrines of grace is that grace every step of the way because we're left to ourselves we're unable, unwilling.

It's not just some grace to get us up and running and then we're on our own or some grace to then help us get over the death line into heaven. It's God's grace every moment of the way.

[27 : 51] Because apart from his actions in us and for us we just would not be able to do it. But more of that as I say over the coming weeks. verses 6 and 7 quite instant when you see exactly what God has done for us.

We've been raised up with Christ. In other words all the privileges all the power of God that brought Jesus back to life and took him back to heaven as it were all of that has been invested in us Christians you and me.

verse 8 for by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your undoing it as the gift of God. Even our faith and we'll see more of this over the next few weeks.

Even our faith has been given to us as a gift of God. That's been something God's enabled us to do. And he had to do that because previously we were unwilling and unaware of our predicament.

God needs to actually give us the willingness and the ability. And God does that through his spirit.

[29 : 14] He actually opens our eyes to our predicament. He changes our desires and attitudes so that we actually reach out and take the gracious gift of salvation.

And finally verses 9 and 10. Even the changed lifestyle of new obedience and service of Jesus that results from being saved, from having new attitudes, from having desires, even that is something God has intended to give us and plan for us all along.

It's grace from start to finish. Now just let me sort of wind up now with a couple of so what.

Given this, why do people find this truth so hard to accept? And people do. People stumble at this very starting point. This notion of our total inability before God.

Now why? Why do we stumble on it? Why is it so hard to accept? Well I think it's because the starting point for thinking about God and people and salvation has changed massively.

[30 : 25] And throughout history the pattern is always the same. When people move away from God's description of sin, when people move away from God's description of the sinner, then people start to believe they can save themselves.

Albeit they'll recognize they need some help from God, but generally people will think, well, yeah, I need God to help me do this, but generally I can do this and this and this. So it's a sort of cooperative effort.

And that can only happen when people have moved away from God's view of sin and the sinner. In our day the pattern's the same. So many so-called evangelical Protestant churches have as their starting point the humanist philosophy of our society rather than the Bible.

And our humanist philosophy of society says that we're basically good people. Yes, we need some help, we're not as good as we could be, and we need some help at particular points, but essentially I work with Jesus as a good person.

That's not what the Bible says. The belief of our world is that man is at the center of things. Given the right circumstances, given our own reason, given our own logic, we'll be able to work things out and get it right.

[31 : 45] And history and experience tells us that's nonsense. And so with this starting point, churches have lost a real sense of what it means for God to have a holy character, what it means for God's demands in response to the rebellion of his image bearers.

And so churches actually teach that by and by God is happy to respond to what essentially we think and decide is right. And God is like a grandfather figure who's just grateful for some attention, who's just grateful for people to treat him nicely.

And people have lost a real sense of sin, I think. So if you look at the word sin, I mentioned this a few weeks ago, the word sin mostly today has been secularized in its usage.

It's no longer a theological word, I don't think, in our society. If people use it at all, it's usually in the context of a failure to accept reasonable standards of decency, decent conduct.

And that's generally defined by our culture, by our community. Or, as I said a couple of weeks ago, sin is just an indulgence in some food that's really not good for you but so intensely desirable and pleasurable, like the lollies here this morning.

[33 : 17] And so the problem is that when we start, when people start to define sin, then we just start to slide over the definition and make it more palatable, make it more comfortable for us.

And that's under pressure to do so from our so-called progressive society, intolerant society. Don't dare speak to me as if I'm in this sort of condition.

I'm a good person. Yes, I've got flaws, but essentially I'm a good person. Give me a chance and I'll get it right. But in the Bible you see sin is defined always as an offense against God.

It may have implications in our behavior before and towards others, but primarily sin is about rejecting God and his authority. And once we lose that sense of sin and that sense of God's holiness, then, and we see it in churches, everything just slides and becomes flexible.

And gospel can become about people. And the gospel is so then it's about my needs, my desires. The gospel will make me happy. The gospel will build my self-esteem.

[34 : 46] That Jesus will help me be fulfilled. Or it can be the gospel of works, performance.

You know, it says, well, okay, yes, you need help from Jesus, but alongside that help, he expects you to read your Bible and get to church and pray and help people and do all these other things.

And a combination of these two things will get you over the line. The Bible is totally opposed to any such thinking.

The word of the Bible is that God saves sinners. Now, when you think about it, we actually pray that, don't we? Now, why do we pray that? God, because intuitively, we have a sense of God when we come to him, especially in this context, we have a sense of God that is so far removed from us, and a sense of our own unworthiness.

We intuitively know that we need to be saved. Contrary to what we deserve, we need God to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

[36 : 06] Friends, this truth is hard to accept because it is a blow to human arrogance. It's a blow to human self-confidence. And it's such a blow that people, even professing Christian churches, would prefer to replace this truth with a lie, or a sort of a cheap substitute of this truth.

And we can understand why, because naturally, you'll understand this, I see it in myself, naturally, we quickly and easily reject any assessment of self which is not complimentary.

our instinct is to excuse self and blame others for our behavior as required. And that is an evidence of the very point I'm trying to make.

Well, second, so what? Given this, what sort of people ought Christians to be? And I finish fairly briefly on this. What sort of people ought we to be as Christians?

If we get a hold of this truth of being spiritually dead to God, totally unable, totally inability, but God making us alive.

[37 : 29] Well, if we understand what God has done for us and in us in making us alive, then surely, of all people, we ought to be totally fanatic, total fanatics in responding to God.

Surely we'd be people who'd love to sing his praises as I started, but now with the full depth of theology driving those praises. If you and I really believe we're dead in sin and under God's wrath before God's grace burst into our lives, then, my friends, we will be humble and compassionate in our dealings with others, especially as we engage in the community.

How bizarre is it that Christians sort of want to step back from contact with unbelievers who are just doing what unbelievers do?

How can that be if we understand that we also were dead to God at one stage but were made alive by God's grace? Why would we recoil from that sort of behavior, that sort of person?

Surely, my friends, we'd be wanting to reach over to that person and say, hey, yeah, that's just exactly what I was like and let me tell you, let me point you to the solution to your problem.

[39 : 16] Humble and compassionate. We ought never, my friends, I think, look down our noses at those who perhaps come among us who are struggling or whom we engage with at work or elsewhere in the community.

and if we really believe that sin is so offensive to God that nothing less than the death of a son can deal with, then, my friends, I think we'll be careful about our own sin, will we not?

If the very purpose of Jesus coming into this world was to rescue us in our deadness where sin didn't even rate on our radars, if he gave us new life so we might be true image bearers, then surely we'll want to be careful about our own sin.

Lest that make a mockery of the very thing that Jesus came to do. Let me close in prayer. Lord, even this morning, some maybe find it hard to hear this description, this biblical description of what we are before you in our natural state.

Lord, help us not to trip over that, for Lord, even as we try and protect ourselves in some semblance of goodness, we are immediately and radically cutting back and paring back your goodness and your mercy and your grace.

[40 : 55] Lord, help us to make you really, really big in our lives. Your wisdom in the path of salvation you've set, your kindness and love to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, your commitment to us in following through and making sure we get home to heaven to be with you, not giving us the rains at any point Lord, because you know we'll mess it up.

Lord, help us to make you so big and ourselves so small that we just put out our hands, empty hands and say, thank you Lord, help me to live for you this day, in Jesus' name, Amen.