

The Walking Dead

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Ephesians chapter 2, beginning in verse 1, 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. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Each year, the Hall of Fame basketball coach, John Wooden, began his first practice in the same way.

In the fall of 1966, the future great Lou Alcindor, who later changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, began his freshman year at UCLA to play basketball under Coach Wooden. He had high hopes for the year. They had just won the national championship. But the first practice wasn't what he imagined. Coach Wooden arrived in practice in the same way he always dressed, in his suit, with his iconic thin-rimmed glasses.

[1 : 48] He began, gentlemen, to which all of the players tensed in anticipation of the first drill. He continues, we will begin by learning to tie our shoes.

Each of the blue-chip recruits were surprised, but Wooden continued and asked them all to sit down. He began teaching. First, put your socks slowly with care over your toes.

Now move your socks on either side, here and there. Smooth out all of the wrinkles, nice and tight. Take your time.

Next, lace up your shoes from the bottom, carefully, slowly, getting each pass nice and tight. Snug, snug, snug is what we're after, he said.

Wooden went on to explain, if you get a blister in a big game, because you didn't tie your shoes right, you're going to suffer. And if they're not done properly, your shoes could come untied during a close game.

[3 : 04] Presumably, if those things happened, you'd be unable to play. When your team needed you to play, and you'd have to sit. If you do not take care of your shoes and your feet, you will not be able to play the game of basketball.

That year, after learning to tie their shoes, that class went on to win another national championship for UCLA, and they would go on to win 10 championships in the next 12 years, seven of them consecutively.

The warning is, if you don't get the first things right, you'll get the whole thing, everything wrong. Perhaps Coach Heupel should start with some tie in the shoes this next week.

Well, this morning, we come to Paul's careful description of what is wrong with us and the world around us. There's a sense in which the Apostle Paul is urging us to heed Coach Wooden's advice. If we do not get the first things of our sin right, we'll get the message of the gospel wrong. If we do not understand our problem rightly, we will misunderstand the solution God has provided.

[4 : 28] D.A. Carson helpfully says, there can be no agreement as to what salvation is unless there's agreement as to from which salvation rescues us.

The problem and the solution hang together. The one explicates, explains the other. It's impossible to gain a deep grasp of what the cross achieves without plunging into a deep grasp of what sin is. Now, if you open up your paper this afternoon, what is wrong with the world is not going to align with Ephesians 2. Some people say our problem is material. Our problem is that we need wealth and health and prosperity.

And the good news to that problem is that Jesus comes to give you all that. You'll just believe in Him. And that gospel is raking in millions of dollars every year throughout the world. Probably billions of dollars. But our problem is not material mainly. Others say our problem is structural. Our problem is that we've been taken advantage of and oppressed by the people in power because of our background, our race, or our sex.

[5 : 45] We're victims. That's the problem. That's the problem. We're victims. We're on the losing side. And the good news is Jesus came to overturn all that. So believe in Him.

But no, our problem is not mainly structural. Still others say our problem is psychological. Our problem is that we're lonely and anxious, broken and depressed.

We fail. We're ashamed. We can't forgive ourselves. Would you pray for us so we can forgive ourselves? And so they say the good news is that Jesus came to heal you and make you a better you.

Would you believe in Him? But the Scripture is very clear. This is what we must hear. Our problem is not mainly material, structural, psychological, or any other. Our problem is moral.

Our problem is moral. Our deepest problem is that God is holy. We are His creatures and we have rejected Him. So many of the false gospels of this age center on our needs, our wants, our desires, our health, or whatever it is.

[6 : 53] But God is not focused primarily on those things. He's focused primarily on His glory and how we've rejected Him and our many sins against Him.

And so we must not lose sight of our moral problem in this chaotic and confusing age. In a day when we talk so much about weakness, victimhood, shame, the left-leaning world, and more, we must not be deceived.

If we do not get the first thing of our problem right, we'll get the message of the gospel all wrong. If we lose a grip on our moral problem, we'll lose the gospel.

We'll assume we're okay. We'll assume we need a few touch-ups. Even though people out there may need to be rescued. We'll assume we just need a little help, a little healing.

Lend me a hand, Lord. We'll assume we do not need a Savior. Cornelius. Cornelius Plantinga says it like this, to ignore or euphemize, to deaden, or otherwise mute the lethal reality of sin, is to cut the nerve of the gospel.

[8 : 02] It could not be more serious is what he's saying. For the sober truth is that without a full disclosure of sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, irrelevant. Irrelevant.

Unnecessary. Unnecessary. And finally, uninteresting. You know, why the gospel is being rejected so massively by so many is because it's viewed just as irrelevant.

Unnecessary. Uninteresting. The Apostle Paul calls us to remember who we are. Wonderfully, this is a letter written to people that are Christians.

And he's calling, remember who you were. Remember what happened. In a way, where we're going, it's apart from the mercy of God. We're completely corrupted by sin, utterly unable to free ourselves from its grasp.

Apart from the mercy of God, we're completely corrupted by sin, and utterly unable to free ourselves from its grasp. In three points, we're going to begin, you were dead.

[9 : 09] You were dead. The Apostle Paul has been, as we saw last week, celebrating the immeasurable greatness of God's power towards us who believe. What he showed in raising Christ from the dead, and now he's going to begin explaining the power displayed in our salvation.

It's far greater than we can imagine. And he begins first by focusing on the desperate situation into which our sin left us.

Look at verse 1, And you were dead in trespasses and sins. Paul is speaking very directly to the Ephesians. You were dead.

Preaching the gospel to them. Telling them who they were. Reminding them how desperate their situation was. But he's not just speaking to the Ephesians.

Look, he begins, And you were dead. But look at verse 3, Among whom we all once lived. The problem the Apostle is talking about here is a problem shared by all humankind.

[10 : 23] John Stott says, Paul is not giving us a portrait of some particularly decadent tribe. Or degraded segment of society.

Or even the extremely corrupt paganism of his own day. We know how pagan, it just means ungodly. This worldly focus, Ephesians was.

The temple to Artemis, and all that was going on in that city, and the many Roman gods, and the gods of the day.

No, this is the biblical diagnosis. A fallen man, and fallen society everywhere.

You were dead in trespasses and sins. Both of those words are used to talk about the problem about us, the problem with us, and yet they're combined here to show the full nature of this problem.

[11 : 22] And trespass is just a false step, a crossing of the boundary, a breaking of a rule, going outside where God has told us to go.

Sin is a missing of the mark, a falling short of the standard. Together they capture the positive and negative aspects of our wrongdoing. We were rebels.

We trespassed. We'd gone astray. We'd broken God's rule, and decided to begin ruling ourselves, but we were also failures. We missed the mark.

We did the things we should not have done, but we also failed to do the things we should have done. Sins of omission and commission are captured there.

The result is we were dead. If you remember in the garden, the Lord said, you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if you eat of it, surely you will die.

[12 : 32] We all know what happens next. They ate the tree kind of like wet paint, you know, the one thing you're not supposed to do, you got to touch it, you know, and see how wet it is. And did they die?

Not immediately, right? So what does it mean that we're dead in trespasses and sins? It means we're so corrupted by sin that we were completely separated from God with no ability to do anything to make it right.

So corrupted by... This is what deadness means. So corrupted by sin that we're completely separated from God and no ability to do anything to make it right.

We're corrupted by this sin. Sin separates us from God. Remember, they're cast out of the garden. The angel guards them from coming back into the garden. And God promised to bring judgment on sin.

Throughout the years, theologians have argued, how dead is dead? Like, are we mostly dead or all the way dead?

[13 : 43] You know, it's hard not to think of the princess bride when you hear that. In that great movie that we watched together at the church a couple years ago, Wesley is fatally wounded.

And nigga takes him to Miracle Max to bring him back to life. So they can get back to rescuing the princess. So he brings him in. He says, he's dead.

He can't talk. Because Miracle Max was talking to him. And he says, ooh, look who knows so much. It just so happens that your friend is only mostly dead.

There's a big difference between mostly dead and all the way dead dead. Max says, what's that? Max continues, mostly dead.

He's slightly dead. All dead. Well, when they're all dead, there's usually only one thing you can do. And nigga says, what's that? Max says, go through his clothes and look for loose change.

[14 : 45] Some have argued that we're essentially mostly dead. We just need a little water to revive us. We just need a little help. Maybe a little stomach pump or something like that.

We just needed to hear the gospel. And we would have the ability to respond to it and trust in Christ. But others argue, we would argue, that we were all the way dead dead. Corrupted by sin. Separated from God with no ability to make it right. No ability to do anything about it. The great R.C. or the late R.C. Sproul and great, honestly, R.C. Sproul encouraged us to imagine a man drowning. Imagine a man who cannot swim being cast into the seas, drifting in the ocean. As you do when you begin to lose your breath, he goes down once and twice and manages to kick back up a third time. But he's about to go under one final time unless someone throws him a life preserver. is that the way we were?

[15 : 50] Reaching out our arm for a life preserver? No. That's not what this text says. We were not merely nearly dead or on the verge of death or sick unto death.

We were all the way dead. We were buried in the bottom of the ocean. And if you don't believe my arguments thus far, the text makes it clear because there's a contrast between death and life that carries through these verses.

If you look back in verse 20, he talks about Jesus when he raised him from the dead. And Jesus was not mostly dead or slightly dead, but all the way dead. Our theology hangs on him being completely dead, but God raised him up.

Well, the same thing is happening to us. If you look down there in verse 5, even when we were dead, God made us alive together with Christ.

So if Christ was all the way dead, then we were all the way dead so that the radical gospel might be displayed in raising dead men and women to life.

[16:58] Now you may be thinking, how could we become dead dead? You know, how could we become that dead with no ability to do anything about it? This is where Paul turns next.

Second point, you were bound. You were dead and you were bound. Paul continues and describes the slavery that resulted from rejecting God's rule.

We are in bondage to an enemy around us, an enemy above us, and an enemy within us. He begins with this enemy around us. Look at verse 2, in which you once walked.

So this deadness is a living deadness. In which you once walked. That's just a metaphor for living life. In which you once lived is what he says in verse 3, but they mean essentially the same thing. In which you once walked, following the course of this world. Literally, walking according to the age of this world. Last week we saw that Christ came and he's the name that's going to be above every name, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

[18:08] And so it tells us that while we await for him to return, we're dwelling in what Paul calls in other places this present evil age. Just as in chapter 5 of Ephesians, he says, these days are evil.

What are evil about these days? Well, it's the age that we're living in. And so what does it mean to walk according to the age of this world? It means to live like everyone else.

It means, for some, for many, trying to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak. Trying to keep up with everyone else. Wanting the things that give you the cred that you want.

Wanting the shoes or the clothes or the car or the house or the social media likes that let everyone know you belong. There's a world filled with voices trying to entice you to build your life around them.

I remember as a kid, we'd always listen to radio. No one listens to radio anymore, I don't think, but we always listened to radio, this teenage rock station, and they regularly ran ads on pimple cream.

[19:22] I never thought about that. Like, why did they run ads on pimple cream? Well, because many of our teenage faces looked like a mountain range of pimples and acne.

But one ad that I remember me and my brothers kind of play-acting it out in silly ways, it was a girl, she said, talking about going to a conference, the girl said, great seats, row C.

Her friend says, oh no, maybe they'll put a huge spotlight on my zits. The ad pops in, there won't be any zits.

We're going to execute them. Pimples! And then it just explosions go off. Even on that teenage rock, what is it enticing you to?

A clear face. But the world's enticing never stops. It may be pimples when you're a teenager, but the enticing keeps coming.

[20:25] Always saying, this is what you need to be hip. This is what you need to be good. This is what you need to be cool. All of these things, but that's not the only way the world entices us.

Walking according to this age also means, if you walk according to this age, it means you reject biblical teaching for the lies of mainstream feminism, transgenderism, critical race theories, unquestioned individualism, statism, the idea is the world is not merely voices that entice us, but voices that get institutionalized.

It's very serious, but the point that the apostle is making is before Christ, we were enslaved. We were sold out. We were a part of the world that was passing away along with its desires.

We had an enemy around us. We also have and had an enemy above us. Paul reminds us of the devil himself. Look in verse 2 as he continues following, again, repeating that, following, walking, following, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

The air is likely a reference to the things unseen as we've talked about, the heavenly things, the unseen world, the powers that rule, the darkness that we don't see.

[21:58] Well, there's a prince over the unseen spiritual forces. Ephesians 4.27 says, don't get angry. Give no opportunity.

Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Give no opportunity for the devil. 6.11 tells us to watch out for the schemes of the devil. Our enemy is not merely impersonal evil forces, but a personal evil one.

The devil has fiery darts. He accuses, as we know from Revelation. He prowls around 1 John 5 devouring believers. He blinds the minds of unbelievers.

2 Corinthians 4. He snatches truth out of the heart. The parable of the sower. Mark 4. All of these things. But He is also a prince. He's the God of this world.

Our Lord said He's the ruler of this world. He's a ringleader of darkness. He does not work alone. Throughout His personal evil influence, He rallies the rulers and authorities.

[23 : 12] Ephesians 6. The cosmic powers of this present darkness. Spiritual forces of the evil in the heavenly places to define and direct this age.

So much so that there's a spirit that permeates from the evil one. Now, we don't talk a lot about the devil.

We're too sophisticated for all that in Western society. As the usual suspects said, the greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world he didn't exist.

But the Bible is clear. We're in enemy-occupied territories, what C.S. Lewis said. We have an enemy around us. We have an enemy above us.

The point that the apostles make is that before Christ, we were in bondage to Him. These verses are not mainly about fighting the ongoing temptations of the evil one, but recognizing the bondage we once had to Him.

[24 : 22] Look at 2 Timothy 2. Paul talking about opponents to the gospel and what he hopes God might do. He says, God may perhaps grant the opponents of the gospel repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth, that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.

How dead is dead. Before Christ, were we free enough to do whatever we willed? Not according to that passage.

We were captured by him to only do his will, the devil's will. Couldn't be more serious.

Paul continues and talks about the enemy within us, the flesh. We were in bondage to the sinful flesh within us.

Look at verse 3. Among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. We lived in the passions of our flesh.

[25 : 35] flesh. This word, flesh, and the way Paul uses it, is unique to him. It's a way of referring, obviously there have been places where he refers to flesh, it's just referring to human beings.

but he uses it in certain places to refer to the fallen human condition in which the experience of all people everywhere is that of being a sinner.

So he's using this idea of flesh to refer to the fallen human condition which is the experience of all flesh, all people, this fallen condition, this corruption that comes from within.

What Paul is alerting us to is that sin is not a dirt we need to wash off or a personality quirk we need to manage. It's an ingrained corruption that traces through every human heart.

You remember our Lord when he was talking to the Pharisees who were condemning his disciples for not washing his hand, the Lord said, it's not from without that you are corrupted, it's from within.

[26 : 43] Look at Mark 7 for from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, keep going, it all comes from there, out of the heart of man, the apostle is alerting us, is the never-ceasing desire to be first, to be central, to be celebrated and admired, the willingness to do whatever you have to do to get what you think is best for you.

It's the reason you always look for yourself in every picture. and check your hair. It's the reason you never lose an argument in your own head.

It's the reason you cannot not think about yourself, what you want right now. What, are you hungry, you need something? You know, it's the reason you have a hard time actually thinking about someone else for more than a few seconds.

And Paul alerts us that it begins in the mind. We lived in the passions of our flesh. We lived in them, entrenched in them, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.

So it begins in the mind, but it also is in our hearts, overflows from our passion. And it flows out in the desires of the body and the mind that we carry out this idea that is in our mind, in our hearts,

and carried forward in our actions.

[28 : 11] What Paul is saying is that we're radically depraved, corrupt in our minds, hearts, and actions. We're not as bad as we could be, but we're bad in every way.

Remember years ago, I was telling somebody the other day, you know, R.C. Sproul was in many ways a theologian for a different generation than me. John Piper was the theologian in so many ways.

It caught a hole in my heart. And one time we found this website, it's probably still up, I think it's www.johnpiperisbad.com and somebody, Piper was just going off, talking about this idea of radical depravity and saying, John Piper is bad, and somebody put it in the music of Michael Jackson. And it's totally great, so that's free, you can go check that out. But this idea that we're completely bad, we're corrupted, but sin does not just leave us corrupt to do for ourselves.

Sin, as the apostle goes on in other places, sin is a master that makes you its slave. It's an evil king that takes you as its servant. It's a wicked employer that demands you give your wage.

[29 : 28] It's an all powerful ruler that dominates you and takes you under control. We talk so much about power and oppression and injustices in our culture. Well, there's no more powerful and dehumanizing ruler than our own sinful cravings.

It may be a sinful craving to be liked or to be in control. It may be a sinful craving to be first in your class or president of your company.

Nothing will demand more sacrifices, more hours. You want to know why you work late? Or why you may work late? It may be this, the passions from within you.

Nothing will demand more tears than your own cravings. No wonder, Romans 8 says, the mind that's set on the flesh and hostile to God does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot.

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. It's a sold out condition in which we are sold out for the things of the flesh. alerting us to this reality that those who are outside of Christ are dead in trespasses and sins, in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[30 : 46] We have no will left in the matter. Completely unable to do anything to change.

Completely corrupt. utterly unable to free ourselves. What theologians used to call total inability. Point three, you were condemned.

You were condemned. Paul continues and describes the sentence from God that rested upon us in this condition.

Remember, he's preaching the gospel to the Ephesians. He spends so much time on the good news. He spends these verses alerting them to the seriousness of the bad news.

He continues, and you were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. We were deserving of condemnation under the wrath of God.

[31 : 56] Jesus said, all who sin are slaves to sin. How could he say that? How could he say that?

Because the great problem is not that we commit this or that sin, but that we cannot not commit sin. Whereas in the garden, Adam was able not to sin, we are not able to not sin.

Our sin and our corruption is by nature. It's an inherited and ingrained corruption from birth.

All you have to do is start having kids. And you get some first hand proof. The best material provision, the most nurturing environment, the most caring parental engagement, the most secure political situation cannot prevent this internal corruption from coming out.

Our problem is not nurture, it's nature biblically. And so, because of this, all humankind outside of Christ is under the wrath of God.

[33 : 22] under His just wrath. All humankind is under a curse.

God is under God who is infinitely capable of blessing people, but utterly incapable of cursing them. We sing God bless America because we cannot imagine God doing anything but blessing people.

But we're warped in our understanding because our minds have been conformed to this world.

Our God is not like this world. God is holy. There is no darkness in Him at all. No corruption, no deceit, no missteps, no failure, no shadow due to chain, no turning.

His eyes are too pure to look upon evil. He is light. He dwells in unapproachable light. No one can see His face and live because no one but sinners live in this world.

[34 : 43] As Jesus said, blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. The reason we cannot see God, the reason we're separated from God is not because there's something wrong with our eyes.

The reason is there's something dreadfully wrong with our hearts. the corruption in our hearts, the rebellion in our ways, the deceit in our mind.

We fail to obey Him and outside of Christ, all humankind is under a curse and Adam all die. The Scriptures are explicitly clear.

We are dead, we're enslaved, we're condemned, we're arraigned and waiting on the charges from the holy throne of God. What do we do?

What do we do? There's nothing you can do. That's what this passage is getting at. The dead people do not start making resolution.

[35 : 45] They don't change, they don't make things right, they don't respond, they don't break free. The only thing we can do is Lord save or I perish. The great Charles Spurgeon says, we hold that man is never so near grace as when he begins to feel he can do nothing at all.

When do you feel you're near grace? A little something fuzzy in your heart? Well, when you can do nothing at all. Beloved, this is your situation.

This is who you were. Sold. given over, imprisoned, condemned, and awaiting the arraignment. Apart from the mercy of God, we're completely corrupted by sin, utterly unable to free ourselves from its grasp. Since the beginning of our study of Ephesians, we've learned that we've been chosen.

We've been redeemed. We've been adopted. These verses remind us that we've been delivered from the wrath of God.

[37 : 07] Now, some people throw this out and say this is primitive and obscene cosmic child abuse. Well, the wonderful truth of the gospel is that the reality of our situation being children under wrath by nature that's exactly what Christ came to redeem us from.

In Galatians 3 it says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. The idea is that cursed is everyone who does not obey all the things written on the law.

And so God put forward Jesus Christ as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners to receive the curse that should have rested on them. The judgment and wrath of God is poured out on Jesus in our place for three hours.

He is judged for our sin for every look at porn, every drunken stupor, every harboring of bitterness, every careless word, every lash of anger, every seemingly slight irritation, every ungrateful grumble, every morsel of gossip savored, every story of slander shared, every arrogant boast, every look down of contempt, every crude joke, every perverse pleasure, every act of half-hearted obedience, every failure to love our neighbor, every click form to keep those who aren't cool out, every consuming desire to fit in, every lie propagated, every failure to stand for the truth, every failure to trust God and all the wrath of God that reserved for all of those failures was rested on Jesus Christ. All of the wrath that would have taken an eternity to pour out on you was poured out on him. Why? Because he took the curse. He did not merely take it upon himself.

[39 : 00] He became the cursed one. He became the curse who received God's furious wrath. What does it mean that the judgment and wrath of God has fallen on Jesus Christ?

Well, the great Scottish preacher John Duncan said with tears streaming down his face, do you know what Calvary was? Do you know what it was? It was damnation!

And he took it lovingly. After three hours on the cross, Jesus Christ cried out enduring the wrath that was deserved for your sins, saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

R.C. said, this cry represents the most agonizing protest ever uttered on this planet. It burst forth in a moment of unparalleled pain.

It is the scream of the damned. For us, it's the scream of the damned. It's as if the Lord said to his son on that tree, may the Lord curse you and abandon you.

[40 : 18] May the Lord keep his darkness upon you, give you only judgment without grace. May the Lord turn his back from you and remove his peace from you forever.

Why? So that you might be redeemed by the curse, redeemed from the curse. So that you might never be repaid according to what you owe.

You might never be condemned for your many sins and your continual rebelling. That you might be delivered from death, from bondage, and most wonderfully from condemnation.

May God fill our hearts with joy. Father in heaven, we thank you.

The joy of thinking on these things. God, most sobering truths as we're alerted to the reality of what is wrong with us.

[41 : 45] we know, Lord, until sin be bitter. Christ will not be sweet. And so we savor the reality that Jesus Christ came to save sinners such as we are.

We thank you, praise you, and rest in you. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.