

We need to prepare ourselves emotionally for what we are about to read. So, imagine yourself going for your annual physical exam. Everyone is nice. Voices are low. No one is in panic mode. You've done it many times before. The doctor pulls out the lab report and unemotionally tells you that your cholesterol looks great. Your HDLs have never been higher. Your LDLs have never been lower. And then he says to you in the same unemotional voice, "Do you feel okay?" And you say, "I think so." And he says, "Your white blood count suggests that you have a raging infection going on in your body, and you're going to start feeling awful soon." And before the day is over, you do.

Would you say your doctor is a pessimist, because he told you about a serious infection you were unaware of? I don't think so. The most optimistic doctors on earth tell you the truth about your body, or they wouldn't be good doctors. That's why some people don't go to any doctor. "I'm not going to see a doctor. He might find something wrong." And they don't go until illness forces them to go, and by then treatment has become more difficult and sometimes impossible.

Ephesians 2:1-3 is not pessimism. It is diagnosis. Without this diagnosis we don't understand Christianity. Without this diagnosis, despite the prodigious efforts of medicine, law, science, and education human problems actually get worse.

### A Necessary Sidebar

Ephesians 2:1-3 feels different from chapter one. I'll review briefly Paul's train of thought in chapter one, and you can see why it feels different. God made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people. He made that decision before the creation of the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating His followers from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as God's chosen people, the Church. As a result, God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing.

That's heavy stuff. It's heavy now; it was heavy then. Paul knew his teaching baffled the Ephesians. He also knew they needed help that only God could give. So, he prayed for them to know God better by knowing the hope God called them to, the riches of God's people, the Church, and the power of God at work on behalf of the Church.

On behalf of the Church and of all creation **God placed all things under his feet** (under Christ's feet). Christ is authorized to exercise God's power anywhere on earth in any way that His love and justice deem wise. And the Church is to embody the full meaning of Christ for human life.

If you have ears to hear, Ephesians 1 is a magnificent summary of the meaning of Christ. It is uplifting. By contrast Ephesians 2:1-3 lets you down – hard. Why did Paul do that? Why did your doctor tell you about the infection that raged in your body? It was the truth. The apostle's diagnostic unpleasantness tells the truth about the human necessity that lies behind the meaning of Christ. It's time to look at Ephesians 2:1-3.

### An Important Reminder

A close look requires an important reminder. This chapter opens by saying: **As for you.** Verse 3 begins: **All of us.** Throughout chapters 1-3 these two pronouns **we** and **you** alternate back and forth. Then, like a bolt from the blue Ephesians 2:11 clarifies what Paul had in mind: **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth.** Every time we read the pronoun **you** in Ephesians, it means recent Gentile converts.

Now look back at Ephesians 1:12. In the Jewish world Paul grew up in there were only two kinds of people, Jews and Gentiles. So, when he wrote in verse 12: **we who were the first to hope in Christ,** he meant **we Jews were the first to hope in Christ.** All the first Christians were Jews. Every time we read the pronoun **we** in Ephesians 2:1-3, it means Jews.

Keeping these pronouns in mind will help us grasp the central idea that unifies this entire letter. We'll get to that at the end of chapter 2. Keeping these pronouns in mind also gives us a glimpse into the radical changes that rocked Paul's world and rocked the Church. Who knew that the interpretation of a New Testament letter could turn on two pronouns? Well, it does, and we are ready for it.

### The Way of the World

Let's read the apostle's diagnostic unpleasantness in these three verses. **As for you** (new Gentile Christians), **you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us** (Jews) **also lived among them** (among the disobedient) **at one time gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest** (of the Gentile world), **we** (Jews) **were by nature objects of wrath.**

You don't want to read that when you are depressed. It's not for the depressed. It's for people, who are trying to make sense of this crazy world of ours. Making sense of it begins in verse 1 with something we'd rather ignore, like the man who refuses to see a doctor. **You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.** The most important word in verses 1-3 is the word **dead**, but I want to deal with it last. I want us to look first at the ways of this world.

**You followed the ways of this world.** We **followed the ways of this world**, and college graduates have more than a trillion dollars in tuition debt. We **followed the ways of this world**, and we put the world at risk of another Great Depression. We **followed the ways of this world**, and parents in metropolitan areas fear for the safety of their children. We **followed the ways of this world**, and nearly half of live births in Delaware are born to single moms, thus putting those children, according to the best secular wisdom, at greater risk of ignorance, disease, crime, and poverty. We **followed the ways of this world**, and people in government have violated the trust of the nation by targeting certain political groups, eavesdropping on Associated Press and Fox News reporters, and lying about the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

People didn't set out to make a world like that. They just wanted an education. They just wanted to own a home. They just wanted freedom to experiment with moral values. They just wanted to do government service. But they ignored the wisdom of our ancestors, and they

forgot God, and **their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.**

(Romans 1:21) That is why, despite the prodigious efforts of medicine, law, science, and education, life is becoming increasingly difficult and unsustainable. That is why the present generation of Americans is reliving the human tragedy on a national scale.

The apostle pointed to something else non-human and sinister in verse 2: **you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** Now there's a mouthful: **the ruler of the kingdom of the air.** The devil goes by several names in scripture: Satan, the accuser, that old serpent, the dragon, Beelzebub, etc. This is the only place in Scripture where he is called **the ruler of the kingdom of the air.**

More important than his name is the mischief he is up to: **he is now at work in those who are disobedient.** And I need to say something here. I would not serve you well, if I let it go by. Most of you are too young to remember comedian Flip Wilson and his hilarious character, Geraldine. Her favorite line was: "The devil made me do it."

The apostle did not say that. The devil imposes his ways on to the ways of the world, and he tempts us to follow those ways; but we choose to follow them. Paul indicated our responsibility with one word that is as unwelcome as your doctor's diagnosis of raging disease: **disobedient: those who are disobedient.** We know what is right, and we choose to do what is wrong, and that gives the devil a foot in the door.

Verse three is disturbing in another way. At the end of verse three the apostle used a phrase that explains why the ways of this world are a trap for well-meaning people. **Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. By nature:** That phrase turns upside down our silly ideas of doing what comes naturally. I'll tell you what the world is like when we let nature take its course: Don't wash your hair for a month. Don't mow your lawn this summer. Let your children go to bed any time they want and have everything they want in the checkout line at the grocery store.

We are always doing battle with doing what comes naturally. When nature wins, it is not pretty. As we have already seen from the ways of this world, the consequences of letting nature take its course can get ugly. A quick sidebar: Ephesians 4-6 gives the Church's alternative to the ugly consequences of sin. Stay tuned.

The very end of verse 3 is chilling. It says we're accountable to God for the evil in our world. **Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath,** targets of justice. Americans love to sue each other. We once had a neighbor, who sued another neighbor whose dog pooped on the first neighbor's lawn. It was litigiously loopy. But people will sue anyone at any time for anything. So, how is it that we, who turn so quickly to the courts for justice, dismiss the idea of divine justice? Why do we turn a blind eye to the possibility that God will judge us with justice? Why do we think He looks the other way, when we know what is right and choose what is wrong? Do we mistake patience for indifference?

## Dead

The most important word in these three verses now comes into play. Verse 1: **As for you, you were dead.** What in the world did Paul mean by that grim word? Ephesians 2:12 expresses Paul's meaning perfectly. He described the pre-Christian life of his readers in that

verse: **remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.** Every phrase matters. Two of them give clear meaning to the word **dead**. They are: **separate from Christ** and **without God in the world**. Being without Christ and without God is what it means to be **dead in your transgressions and sins**, and it leaves us at the mercy of the ways of the world and of the evil spirit that works in those who are disobedient.

That is why I grieve that people trivialize God in their thinking and living. They are only one generation away from the darkness. I grieve, but I am full of hope. I worry, but my labors will never cease. The language of verse four fuels hope in the darkest times: **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy.**

For all its lofty vision of reality Ephesians at its heart is a love letter. Like pulsations at the core of Being, love prompted God to create a community on earth He could call His people. The opening verses of Ephesians 2 remind us that creating that community on earth was a costly rescue operation. Jesus emancipated His followers by His blood from the ways of this world and from doing what comes naturally and from the guilt, lies, and alienation from God they bring.

Romans 5:8 sums it up: **God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** If God did that for us while we were **dead in transgressions and sins**, then, no evil and no suffering can separate us from His love, now that we are His friends. That's why hope will not disappoint us. That's why there can be joy in suffering. You can bet the farm on it.

### **Take-aways**

The deepening shadows on the borders of our national life give us further cause to take the next step I recommended last Sunday for making Ephesians more personal and for making Christ more personally significant in your life. Between now and June 16, Father's Day, let's take the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-20, put it in your own words or use it like it is, and then pray it several times a week. Pray for yourself, your family, for BVBC, and for the whole beautiful, maddening, Church that is spread throughout the wide world.

And let's take one more step. Ask yourself, "How would I treat BVBC, if I loved it the way Christ loves the Church? What could I do to help BVBC mirror Christ better?" That's how you can push back the deepening shadows on the borders of our national life.