

Ephesians 2:1–3 | “Our Awful Past”  
*Preached on April 13, 2025 by Pastor Matt Brown*

You can turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2, verses 1–3 today. *[pause]*

We are working our way through Ephesians, and we just finished chapter 1 last week, and what a chapter it was!

Filled up and overflowing with deep doctrinal truth, it was encouraging and stretching. *[pause]*

Paul told of all of the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ, and ended chapter 1 with recounting what he prays for in regards to the Ephesians. *[pause]*

Now in chapter 2, Paul will talk about how God had powerfully intervened in their lives and did a miracle of grace. *[pauseeee]*

I want you to imagine meeting someone new at the park. *[pause]*

You begin talking to them, and it leads into a long conversation. *[pause]*

You talk about various things with this person, and you are enjoying the conversation and they are, too. *[pause]*

You both have time to spare, and are having a good ol’ time just chatting it up, so you ask them, “Tell me some more of your life story, I’d love to hear it.” *[pause]*

Now imagine they said, “Sure, I’d love to tell you my life story! Let me start near the beginning, I guess. I once was dead...” *[pause]*

Imagine your facial expression to that statement and some of your initial thoughts. *[pause]*

You’d be utterly shocked and confused. *[pause]*

Maybe you would think that they were joking, yet they continue on with the story, acting like it was true and real. *[pause]*

Perhaps then you’d wonder if there was something mentally wrong with them, for would a mentally stable person say such a thing? *[pauseee]*

If that wasn’t the case, you might consider that they just *thought* that they died, but were mistaken. *[pause]*

Could it be that they were just in such bad shape that they thought that they died, but they weren’t officially dead? *[pause]*

But as they go on, you realize that that’s not the case, either.

So you speculate that they were simply exaggerating, and they were merely highlighting had bad of a shape they were in. *[pause]*

But no, the more the person at the park talks, you realize that they are not joking, they are not mentally unwell, they are not mistaken, nor exaggerating...

*They really were dead in the past—now that would be shocking! [pauseeee]*

Well did you know that actually every single person who has trusted in Jesus Christ could begin their story that way? *[pause]*

*We could say, “I once was dead,” and it would be 100% true. [pause]*

Just listen to what our passage this morning says as I read it, for it will tell us about that truth. *[READ VERSES 1–5]*

*We see here none other than the truth that...*

**We were dead in our sins.**

There are a lot of different thoughts about the state of humanity. *[pauseee]*

*Some people think that we are all born into a neutral state, and we can either choose good or evil. [pause]*

Others think that we are all born inherently good, but it’s just the outside bad influences of others that causes us to do bad things. *[pause]*

*Yet why haven’t we progressed to some utopia? [pause]*

Look at the advances in medicine.

*Look at the so-called progress that they claim to have made in psychology. [pause]*

Look at the protections we can set in place now, yet isn’t it interesting that amidst all of those quote-on-quote advances, sin still rears its ugly head? *[pauseeee]*

*There’s also this idea of some people that we are all just kind of in a “sick” state, and we just need to find the “cure” to solve it.*

But is humanity’s problem that we are simply “sick”. *[pause]*

*Are our problems mere flaws or imperfections that need ironed out? [pause]*

Is it all just because of bad environments?

*Like if we were in just the perfect, right environment, would we all just turn out good? [pauseeee]*

Why, after thousands of years of humanity struggling through these things, is there still so much hate, racism, bullying, war, and crime? *[pause]*

Why are families still broken up, people hurt from others, people depressed, and peace seem absent? *[pauseeeee]*

The truth is that the world has no answer that comes close to understanding, nor resolving the problem of continual sin in the world...

Every theory falls short somewhere. *[pause]*

And if you don't understand the teachings of this passage, the world's condition will not make sense to you. *[pause]*

You will be continually confused by what's happening, and you will be perplexed about why nothing is working to solve the problems.

And so like a doctor, who declares the state of the health of a person, but so much better and perfectly, God declares the state of our *spiritual* health. *[pause]*

What does He declare?

He looks deep down, past our physical appearance, and can declare to everyone with precision, "We were dead in our sins." *[pauseeee]*

Knowing this truth makes a huge difference in how you approach life, and how you understand the sin you see in your heart, in the lives of others, and in the world. *[pauseeeee]*

Verse 2 clearly says, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins." *[pauseee]*

Think about that word, "dead," that's a pretty bleak picture, isn't it? *[pause]*

Our problems weren't simply outside of us in our environment, nor was it merely that we were flawed or sick—we *were dead!* *[pauseeee]*

Now this idea of being dead here can be confusing to some because they are thinking of *physical* death.

So they say, "How was I dead when I was most certainly alive? I mean, I was growing, active, full of physical life and vitality when I was younger." *[pause]*

Well it's because Paul is referring to *spiritual* death. *[pause]*

He's saying, "You were spiritually lifeless and dead."

Before Christ, we were physically alive, but spiritually dead. *[pauseeee]*

To be spiritually dead is to have no relationship with God, and to be spiritually powerless, unable to live a holy life, pleasing in God's sight. *[pause]*

Think about what death is—it's inherently a separation, so when you physically die, your spirit is separated from your body.

Well to be spiritually dead is to be separated from God and the life He gives. *[pauseeee]*

In John 11:25, Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."

Well this truth shows the opposite of that—though we were alive, yet we were dead. *[pause]*

We were like the walking dead, even though we didn't look like it, it was the truth. *[pauseeeee]*

You want to know what it looks like to be physically alive, but spiritually dead?...

It's the person who is indifferent to the things of God. *[pause]*

It's being unresponsive to God, not really caring to love or obey Him. *[pause]*

Commentator John Stott puts it well when he says of the spiritually dead person...

"In the sphere which matters supremely (which is neither the body, nor the mind, nor the personality, but the soul) they have no life. And you can tell it. *[pause]*

They are blind to the glory of Jesus Christ, and deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

They have no love for God, no sensitive awareness of his personal reality, no leaping of their spirit towards him in the cry, 'Abba, Father', no longing for fellowship with his people.

They are as unresponsive to him as a corpse."<sup>1</sup> *[pauseeee]*

This is why you can talk to an unbeliever about eternal, important, Scriptural things and they don't seem affected by it at all, and do not seem to care to be.

It's because they are spiritually lifeless, unable to respond to God. *[pauseeeee]*

A person is dead *in their trespasses and sins*. *[pause]*

So it's because of sins that we were dead, but it was also the fact that we were dead in the sphere of sin and separation from God. *[pauseeeee]*

You see, our biggest problem as humans isn't racism, injustice, corrupt politicians, lack of education, or even a lack of morals...

Our biggest problem is that we are dead in our sins without Christ. *[pauseeeee]*

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 72.

Paul says, “You were this,” so he’s describing their past condition.

They were once in that situation, but now it’s a different story—they have been made alive, which we will talk more about next week. *[pauseeee]*

We *were* dead in our sins. *[pause]*

Before faith in Christ, that was our state, and what a miserable state it was!

And Paul says, “*You* were in that state.” *[pause]*

He makes it personal for the Ephesians—it wasn’t just other people’s problem, *they* were in that awful state. *[pause]*

Likewise, *you* were dead in your trespasses and sins before being saved, and I was, too.

So we can’t direct our wagging fingers at others, for we were once there.

And that should give us compassion for the lost, knowing that we were in the exact same spiritual state before we were graciously saved by Christ. *[pauseeeee]*

*So we were dead in our sins, but what exactly did that look like in our lives? That’s what Paul expounds on next...*

## **I. We lived in sin.**

Let’s say that you saw a pig pen, and you looked in and saw pigs rolling around in the mud. *[pause]*

You might say, “Those pigs *live in filth*.” *[pause]*

When you say that, you don’t mean that the pigs accidentally fell into the mud once, and then quickly got out.

You say that because they love the mud and wallow in it regularly. *[pause]*

So also, that’s the idea here with saying that we *lived in sin*. *[pause]*

Before Christ, it’s not that we sometimes accidentally sinned once in a while, but didn’t really want to.

No, it’s more like the pig in the mud—we loved our sin, wallowed in it, and really lived in the realm of sin, and under its dominion. *[pause]*

We see that in the fact that Paul just said that we were dead in our trespasses and sins, and now he says in verse 2, “in which you once walked.” *[pause]*

That word ‘walked’ is used here to talk about someone’s way of life or lifestyle.

So before Christ, we lived in sin, deliberately rebelling against the Creator, and under sin's dominion—that's all we knew.

But thankfully, that's the way that we "once walked." *[pause]*

It is different now that we have been made alive in Christ, and that shows us that a true Christian's life *should* look different from the world around them.

We shouldn't just blend it, for that's a bad sign. *[pause]*

Your life now should look different from your pre-Christ lifestyle.

But realize that any change for good in you is not because of you, but because of Him—it's all of grace.

So we don't boast over those who are still in their sins, acting like we are so amazing in ourselves.

No, we boast in Christ, and His grace towards us—we were once there. *[pauseeee]*

As Paul continues, he describes further what this walking in sin looked like in our pre-Christ days, as he states that we were "following the course of this world." *[pauseeee]*

Our way of life was in conformity to the world.

It's like if someone had a big sign saying, "The world's ways are down this path," and we all would have been lined up in a straight line, following down that path. *[pauseeeee]*

But what does 'the world' mean here?

It certainly doesn't mean the world, as in the beautiful world that we see around us in nature.

Rather, as one Greek lexicon puts it, it's "the people constituting the world whose values, beliefs, and morals are in distinction and rebellion to God's."<sup>2</sup> *[pause]*

It refers to the world system that shows itself in opposition to God and His values.

So anytime that you see around you things that seek to deny or twist the truth of God or moral absolutes, that's a display of the world at work. *[pauseee]*

It's a set of values that push down God, and lift up humanity. *[pause]*

It pushes away what truly matters and what's eternal, and instead, focuses on the here-and-now of life, whether it be the promotion of materialism, sexual promiscuity, pleasure-above-all, or other similar things. *[pause]*

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

‘The world’ is a demonstration of humanity trying to live life apart from God, and it shows up everywhere, all around us. *[pause]*

I think we can all easily understand what the world is, for it’s on display all around us everyday—just turn on the TV, look at a billboard, or get on social media, and you’ll see it. *[pauseeee]*

Before Christ, we followed the world’s values, actions, and mindset—it’s the way that we lived. *[pause]*

We saw their ideals as most important, and tried to line up right behind them. *[pause]*

We had little thought of God and what He wants, and instead, we were enslaved to what the world said was good, right, and beautiful. *[pause]*

If the world said “Jump”, we jumped.

If it said, “This is what matters!” we thought the same way.

We were in slavery to the world’s way of life, and we didn’t even realize it. *[pause]*

We chased after it and loved it—we “followed the course of this world.” *[pauseeee]*

If you ever wonder why it is that so many people can believe and follow such anti-God values being pushed right now, *this* explains it...

It’s because they are dead in their sins, and following the course of this world, and that’s where we were at one point, too. *[pauseeee]*

Next, we find that we were also “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” *[pause]*

So our way of life was also in conformity with Satan. *[pauseeee]*

Now this one is a little harder to grasp about our pre-Christ days than the world one. *[pause]*

You may think, “I can see how I was following the ways of the world before I was saved, but following Satan? I’m not so sure about that one.” *[pause]*

Though you may not realize it, you were!

Your way of thinking and living was in accordance with Satan because Satan pushes anything that goes against God and His ways.

So since you were living in sin, then you were lined up and living according to Satan’s ways. *[pauseeee]*

He is called “the prince of the power of the air.”

So he has some power, and it's over the realm of the evil spirits, which tempt and influence this world.

And so Satan works to tempt and influence people in the world through various means. [pausee]

His influence is most often seen in ungodly values, attitudes, and actions.

And he may not be behind *everything* bad or evil in this life, but he is behind a lot more than we realize. [pauseeee]

In our day and age, many people seem to only believe in the existence of things that they can *see*, but the Bible is clear that there's a lot more going on than meets the eye.

There is an unseen realm that is at work in the world, influencing people to do what's wrong and against God.

So that's why Paul can say that we were once following Satan, for we lived lives in accordance with his anti-God values and desires. [pauseee]

To tempt and influence us back then before Christ was easy for him, for we went right along with his wishes.

We once walked in sin—just what he wanted. [pauseeeee]

Thirdly, Paul tells us that our way of life was in conformity to our sinful desires. [pause]

He says that “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.” [pauseeee]

There's this common idea in our day that says that if you feel something, then it must be right and good. [pause]

So people will say, “I can't help it if I desire these things, that's the way I was born,” and the implication is that those desires must be a good thing then that ought to be gratified. [pause]

As a result, they say that denying them or others the satisfaction of giving into those desires is wrong.

But there is something monumentally huge that they are missing—the reality that we are born with *sinful* desires. [pause]

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, humanity has been born with a sinful nature. [pause]

Often called “the flesh,” this is our natural, sinful bent towards sin and self, and Paul says that “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh.” [pause]

We had these sinful longings within us, but before Christ, we didn't consistently try to resist them.



Rather, we had these sinful longings that we regularly gratified. *[pause]*

We gave into our sinful desires—it was our way of life. *[pause]*

Maybe not every single time, but very regularly we would seek to gratify them as much as we possibly could. *[pauseeee]*

These passions of the flesh are really desires turned wrong—sin manifested in self-serving ways.

And we carried out those desires, for it was what we truly wanted, and those desires both came from our body *and* mind. *[pause]*

So our sinful nature affected every part of us...

It wasn't just that our body was affected, but our mind had a sinful bent, too. *[pauseeee]*

A big thing nowadays is to act like problems are only outside of the person.

So our world will say that it's because of someone's environment that they did something wrong. *[pause]*

They talk as if a child's *only* problem is his or her bad environment, or they will say that it's *only* because a child is feeling left out or something like that, that they act out. *[pause]*

Intentionally listen to what they say, and you will see that the problem is never really placed on the person's sinful desires, but the problem is always placed outside of self. *[pauseeee]*

Now, we already learned that the world environment can influence us and tempt us, but that's not the whole picture...

We also sin because we give into sinful desires. *[pause]*

Placing a person into a perfect environment won't magically cause them to never do anything wrong ever again.

And to think that way is to reject the truth of how every person is born with sinful desires, which is a clear teaching of Scripture. *[pauseeee]*

Paul says that we all once lived in these passions of the flesh, and we carried them out.

So our sinful desires rose up in us, lured us, and we gave in.<sup>3</sup> *[pause]*

We didn't seek to live for God and His desires, but for us and our's—that was our way of life before Christ. *[pauseeee]*

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<sup>3</sup> A reference to James 1:14–15.

The world, the flesh, and the devil—three powerful influences on us now, but especially before we turned to Christ...

*We were living in accordance with them all before Christ saved us. [pause]*

Instead of adhering to what God said, we lived with the world, the flesh, and the devil as our authorities, and we were in bondage to them. [pauseeee]

*All of this is not a pretty picture, but an awful one, and yet Paul isn't even done describing our past state, for he also adds that...*

## **II. We were children of wrath.**

Now what does that even mean to be children of wrath?

*Well the Bible can use “sons of” or “children of” something to describe “a class of people with a specific characteristic.”<sup>4</sup> [pause]*

Often a child's characteristics reflect their parents, so that's how this phrase came to be used about people who demonstrate a certain trait. [pause]

*It's like that characteristic could so well describe a person that it's like they could be called a child of it.*

So a “son of disobedience” is a person who is characterized so much with disobedience that it's like they are a son of it. [pause]

*Likewise, ‘children of wrath’ is a class of people alienated from God, and therefore under God's wrath, so they are called ‘children of wrath.’ [pauseeee]*

You see, it's not that people start out good or even neutral.

*And a big thing that many people say is that, “Oh, everyone is just a child of God,” but it's not true, for every person starts out as a child of wrath. [pause]*

“By nature” people start out as deserving of and under the wrath of God. [pauseeee]

*No one is ever born a Christian, but all people are born sinners. [pause]*

We were born apart from God, an enemy of God, and therefore under the wrath of God, and we were on our way to face it for our sin. [pause]

*This is not God being unkind, for we deserved it...*

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<sup>4</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995.

We were enemies of God, the good and holy Creator, who made us, for we all sinned against Him, and He can't let sin slide. *[pause]*

We were dead in our sins, unable to save ourselves or do what was pleasing to Him.

And we were living under the control and sway of the world, the flesh, and the devil. *[pause]*

What an awful, bleak picture, right?

*But thankfully, that's not the end of the story for us!...*

**We were dead in our sins, BUT GOD...**

Paul says to the Ephesians, and to us who have trusted in Christ...

*"You were this, you once walked that path, you once followed those things, we all once lived in these things and we were children of wrath...BUT GOD."* *[pauseeee]*

Oh do I love those two words, "BUT GOD".

They are just two words, but in the context of this passage, they are packed with the most powerful and precious meaning. *[pause]*

Our spiritual deadness and state of being under the wrath of God isn't the end of the story for us...

But there has been a turning point, and that turning point that changed everything is the work of God through Christ Jesus. *[pause]*

If you have believed in Jesus, the story of your life didn't end with spiritual deadness and wrath as the final words because God intervened...

**God initiated, God worked, God saved you—HE MADE YOU ALIVE!** *[pauseeeee]*

We didn't need a resuscitation, we needed a resurrection, and He did it!

Even amidst our rebellion against Him, even amidst our dead state, He made us alive with Christ, as we simply placed our faith in Him. *[pauseeeee]*

He made us alive by giving us new life in Christ, who came and died for us, and then rose again, and we simply believed in Him. *[pause]*

In the moment of salvation we were made alive, as we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, and now we are no longer dead in our sins, but made alive with Christ. *[pause]*

We are no longer children of wrath, but precious children of God. *[pause]*

We no longer follow the world or the devil, but we seek to follow Christ. *[pause]*

We no longer live in the passions of our flesh, carrying out those desires, but we go to battle against them through the power of the Spirit. *[pauseeee]*

Our lives don't look perfect, as we will still struggle with the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and sometimes even have some setbacks...

But there's a big difference now in our lives than from before Christ. *[pause]*

We are no longer *enslaved* to those things, but we fight those things, for we don't *want* to follow them, but we truly want to follow Christ from our hearts. *[pauseeee]*

You see, Christians are the only people in the world who can begin their story with, "I once was dead," and it be completely true. *[pauseeee]*

But death isn't the end of the story for us, and I want you to know that if you have never trusted in Jesus Christ, death doesn't have to be the end of the story for you, either...

God can do a miracle of grace in your life today. *[pause]*

Realize that you are dead in your sins, unable to save yourself, and a child of wrath, but know also that God sent Jesus Christ to be born as a human, live a perfect life, and then die on the cross for your sins. *[pause]*

He took your place, satisfying the wrath of God for your sins, so that you don't have to, and then He rose again victorious three days later.

But you must repent and believe in Christ to experience this new life, forgiveness, and hope. *[pause]*

The Bible says, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."<sup>5</sup> *[pause]*

So I "implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

Repent of your sins, turning away from them, and trust that Jesus Christ is the way to be saved. *[pauseeeeeee]*

The passage this morning reminded us of our awful state before Christ. *[pause]*

It wasn't a pleasant picture, but may we never forget what we once were (not to dwell on it in guilt), but to remember it in praise of what God has done in our lives. *[pause]*

We once were dead, but now we have been made alive—only God can do that, and He did it through Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 10:9.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.