

"It Takes A Miracle" (Part I)
Ephesians 2:1-3 [section: 2:1-10]
Series: Ephesians [#5]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
April 29, 2007

Introduction

Last week we completed chapter 1 in our look at Ephesians. That is a great, grand section of praise to God and the expression of the wonderful things God wants for us. Throughout the entire chapter we are on the mountain top of the blessings people have in Jesus Christ.

And so the first four words of chapter 2 can be quite a shock: "And you were dead..." Paul still has many more heights to climb, but here he reminds us that things were not always so wonderful for those who now believe.

Kent Hughes writes about taking a trip with some young people to the top of Mt. Whitney, in California. This mountain is the highest point in the lower 48 U.S. states at 14,494 feet or 4,418 meters above sea level. As you can imagine the wind was blowing and it was chilly, but the panoramic view was spectacular. It seemed as if they were on the top of the world. As they talked, one of the young people noted that only 80 miles southeast of the mountain was Death Valley, the lowest spot in the U.S. at 280 feet below sea level. It is also the hottest with a record of 134° F., or over 56° C. From the top of Mt. Whitney down to Death Valley—that is *quite a contrast!*

The opening verses of chapter 2 are quite a contrast to chapter 1 as Paul takes us down into "Death Valley." Here Paul informs or reminds us of what it is really like for people who are not believers—people who have not placed their faith in Jesus Christ. The picture is not a pretty one because the condition is not a pretty one.

These three verses are concise and pointed. It is a condensed version of the first three chapters of Romans. This truth is not popular among many today, even some in the church. It is deemed to not be "*politically correct*," or outdated. But God speaks through Paul to tell us the truth as it is to tell us that on our own our situation is utterly hopeless; that "*It Takes A Miracle*" to rescue us. These verses show us we cannot reach the mountain top with God until we see ourselves down in "*Death Valley*."

Why Do We Need A Miracle?

We need a miracle because we are dead in sin. Look at the first verse, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." Unless and until we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are *dead*.

This is not a figure of speech, but a straight forward statement of fact. It is *not* that we are weak or impaired, not that we need a bit of direction or help, but, that we are *Dead*. Paul, of course, is not speaking about physical death because verse 2 goes on to talk about

how we live, or were living when we were *dead*. He is speaking about spiritual life and death — of either having or not having life with God.

God designed people to have both physical life and everlasting life with Him, or *spiritual life*. But when Adam sinned it changed not only his situation and nature, but also that of all his descendants. God is perfect and holy. Only those who are perfect and holy can have His everlasting life and a relationship with Him. All of us inherit Adam's sinful nature and, more than that, as Romans 5 tells us, we all were united with Adam; we all sinned in Adam.

Because of God's perfect and holy nature He must and does judge sin with **death**. Death is separation— physical death separates a person from his body; spiritual death separates a person from God.

Everyone without faith in Jesus Christ as Savior is dead in their "*trespasses and sins*." Think about these two words. *Trespass*. To make an error; to slip or fall; to go in the wrong direction. *Sin*. To miss the mark or target. It was used in those days of archers. Today, when Jordan enters an archery competition his purpose, his target is the bullseye. If he doesn't hit the bullseye, he misses the mark. Sin is failing to hit the bullseye—which is God's standard of perfect holiness. Anything outside of that is sin.

By using these two common terms, Paul is covering every type or kind of sin—and also excluding any and all excuses we might have for some of our *sins*.

But Paul's emphasis here is not on our acts of sin, but on our sinful nature. Notice his words carefully, verse 1, "being dead *in* your trespasses and sins." "*In*" speaks of being in the realm, in the sphere of sin. Couple this with verse 2 which tells us that by nature we are "sons of disobedience," and verse 3 which tells us that we "were by nature children of wrath," and his emphasis becomes clear.

What God is telling us here is that by birth, in our nature, we were sinners—even before our first act of sin. And so, we were born spiritually dead. Our sins flow from this sinful, spiritually dead nature. Disobedience and sin are in our spiritual genetic code.

There are, of course some implications from this. What can a physically dead person do physically? The answer, of course, is *nothing*. *Absolutely nothing!* What can a spiritually dead person do spiritually? The answer is the same, *nothing*. *Absolutely nothing!* We cannot change our spiritual genetic code. We cannot atone for our sins, nor can we make ourselves holy and acceptable to God. While we can do many good things for ourselves and others, we cannot do any spiritual good.

While we may not be as bad as some, or even many others, on our own *we all* are dead. As one person remarked, "the only difference between one sinner and another is the state of decay." [Wiersbe.] And, we cannot raise ourselves from death to life. "*Why do we need a miracle?*" "*Because we are dead in sin.*"

Secondly, we need a miracle because we are dominated by Satan and his forces. Look at verse 2.

“in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”

In our sinfulness and sin we “walked according to the course of this world.” The “course” or, literally, “age” of this world is not speaking about the planet, but the system of values and conduct that dominates our world, that is not from God, not in harmony with Him, and actually is in opposition to God.

Galatians 1:4 tells us that Christ “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this *present evil age*...” In our societies, just as in individuals, there are many good things. But not good spiritual things. Everyone who is dead in sin walks according to the course of this world, according to “this present evil age.”

Paul goes on, “according to the prince of the power of the air.” The “prince” or “ruler” is Satan. Satan is the leader, the ruler over the fallen angels, the demonic forces. Jesus called him “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31, etc). In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul called him “the god of this world.” Jesus’ death and resurrection defeated Satan, but until God sums all things up in Christ, Satan and his forces have a stay of judgment—and they are diligently, powerfully at work to energize this evil age and dominate people.

“The prince of *the power of the air*.” In Paul’s day “the air” normally referred to the lower atmosphere around people, much as we think of it today. It is where we live and breathe, all around us, that Satan and his forces operate to direct and energize this evil age.

“The power of the air” might refer to Satan himself, but I think it more likely refers to his vast host of fallen angels. Later in this letter, 6:12, we read,

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

These are the ones who are the “power” or the “authorities” of the air. Now, Satan is a created being. He cannot be in more than one place at a time. But there are vast hosts of fallen angels or demons that are active everywhere to

- blind and lead,
- to entice and entrap,
- to make darkness look like light,
- to deceive and destroy.

We need a miracle “because we are dominated by Satan and his forces,” and we can’t break that domination ourselves.

Another reason we need a miracle is because we are slaves to our sinfulness and sins. Let's go back to verse 2.

“in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”

The last phrase of verse 2 tells us spiritually dead people walk or live according to “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” Again notice our nature—disobedience, not obedience. Some take the phrase “the spirit” here to refer to Satan and his forces—not that they “possess” everyone, but that they are actively working in and at everyone. Others, like myself, see it referring to our own sinful, disobedient nature which always leads us away from God, rather than to Him.

Verse three gets more specific and direct, “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind...” We “live(d) in the lusts of our flesh.” Consider the terms:

- “lusts” = strong desires of all sorts—good and bad.
- “flesh” = our fallen, sinful, disobedient nature.

Because we were spiritually dead, we lived and were *bound* in this realm—self-centered, separated from God, seeking our own desires.

We also were “indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind.” We *lived* in this atmosphere and more than that, we “*indulged*,” we fed those desires. As Paul wrote “the desires of the flesh and mind,” he was making sure we don't think these sinful desires are limited to the sensual part of our being. Tut include all of who we are, including our mind.

Paul uses himself as an example in Philippians 3. False teachers came to that church making much of how good and great they were, how much they knew and had accomplished. Paul responded by saying he gloried “in Christ Jesus and put no confidence *in the flesh*,” even though he could have—even more than those false teachers. After all, he was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.” *But ...* he went on to say, he wrote off all these things *of the flesh* “as loss for the sake of Christ.” So, the “desires of the flesh” include those of “the mind” such as pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency and accomplishment.

But you may say, “Wait a minute! Isn't all this a bit too strong? After all, don't we have a *free will* to choose?” That is a good question. And we could camp around it for a long time. We do have freedom to make responsible choices. But, being spiritually dead, on our own we do not make choices that align with God, that seek God, that please Him.

Very briefly, some thoughts from Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century can help us here. He said that my will is not the problem, in that my will is simply my mind choosing what it thinks is best. My problem is my *moral nature* which is opposed to God and produces sinful motives. As dead sinners we evaluate and judge—but in spiritual areas on our own we always make wrong judgments. So, we *are* free to choose whatever we desire the most. *But*, because we are dead in our trespasses and sins, our natural inclination is toward sin not righteousness.

We cannot do what pleases God because we will not do what pleases God. And the reason we will not is because we don't want to. "We *are* slaves to our sinfulness and sins." Because we are "dead in our sins" and slaves to our sinfulness, "*It Takes A Miracle*" to bring us to life and break the chains.

There is one last reason for us needing a miracle. It is because we are condemned in our sin. The end of verse 3 tells us "we were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." The "wrath" here is the rightful or righteous anger of God.

God's anger is not impulsive; nor is it arbitrary or spiteful. God's anger is his holiness in action in response to evil, in response to sin. He will not, indeed He cannot be the holy, loving God He is without opposing and condemning evil.

Those who say that God's wrath and judgment are simply Old Testament and mistaken concepts are wrong on several points:

- First, God's righteous anger and judgment are prominent in the New Testament as well as the Old. Look at two examples"

2 Thessalonians. 1:7-9, "...the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,"

Then, later in this letter, 5:6, Paul tells us, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things [sin] the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

Yes, these *are* very somber words. God gave them to make us aware of what is at stake.

- Then, as well, if God were not righteous in judgment on evil, He would not be pure, true and truly loving. If God says, and he does, that the one who sins dies, and yet in the end He to some will say, "Well, you were sincere, you were struggling with your questions and problems...you meant well. It's okay, even though you did not come to put your faith in Christ" — if He were to say that, then He was not telling the truth; He could not be righteous and pure as He would be tolerating evil; and in not bringing justice for believers, He would not be truly loving.

We need a miracle “because we are condemned in our sin.”

Conclusion.

Yes, “It Takes A Miracle” ...

- because we are dead in our sin;
- because we are dominated by Satan and his forces;
- because we are slaves to our sinfulness and sins; and,
- because we are condemned in our sin.

The next verse, which we look at next Sunday, begins with the all-important word ... “*But.*” It takes us to God’s miracle for us.

If you are a believer, if you know that Jesus Christ is your Savior, and all the wonderful blessings of God in chapter 1 are yours, make sure you truly understand that you really were in “*Death Valley*” until you accepted Christ.

As we come to some quiet time with God, thank God again that He has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, that He desires you to have a rich, personal and certain knowledge of Him. And then, *remember, remember*, that

- no matter how good or religious you were before you came to Christ, you *were* dead in your sin;
- that even though you may have had the privilege of growing up in a Christian home and seeing the love and truth of God clearly, up until the moment you believed you *were* dead in your sin;
- yes, remember that only a miracle of God’s grace has saved you.

Thank Him today ... and every day for His great grace.

If you have not yet come to put your faith in Christ, make no mistake about it, you are still in “*Death Valley.*” A history professor regularly tells his students in the first class of a term, “You can take this class one of two ways: Seriously, or ... Over.” That is true in school, but it is not true of life and the question of “what will you do with Christ.” As Hebrews 9:27 tells us, “...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” There is no second chance.

God is offering you the miracle of doing for you what you can never do—to pay the penalty for your sin, to redeem you from the present evil age, to raise you out of “*Death Valley*” to life and His glorious kingdom forever. If there is any stirring in your heart at all today, know that it is not from yourself, not from me, not from the situation, but from God Himself. Come to Him in these next quiet moments and tell Him,

“God, I know that I am dead in my sins, that I am separated from You and that I am rightfully condemned in my sin. Thank you that Jesus, Your Son, came and died for me, for my sin. Forgive me of all my sin and give me life in Jesus. I want to know You today and forever.”

If that is your decision and prayer, make sure you talk with me or someone about it here today before you leave.

© 2007, Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.