

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON TWENTY)

“DISOBEDIENCE THROUGH THE WORLD,
THE DEVIL AND THE FLESH”

EPHESIANS 2:1-10 (KING JAMES VERSION)

1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;

2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)

6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:

7 That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

In our previous **Lesson**, we started to consider **Ephesians 2:1-3**. In these verses, Paul addresses the spiritual condition of the believers in Ephesus prior to their conversion. He writes, “*And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.*”

We stated that there were **4** characteristics of unsaved persons, as described by Paul in these verses which we desired to highlight. We considered the **first** of these, which was that unsaved persons are **dead** in trespasses and sins. We noted that unsaved persons are not merely sick, or even terminally ill. They are dead! Because they are dead, it is impossible for them to do anything to help themselves. They require resurrection, not resuscitation.

We said that when we speak about unsaved persons as being dead, we mean that they are unable to understand and appreciate spiritual things. They possess no spiritual life, and can therefore, do nothing of themselves to please God. Just as a person who is physically dead cannot respond to any physical stimuli, so a person who is spiritually dead, cannot respond to spiritual things. The corpses in a funeral parlor do not hear the conversations going on around them. They have no appetite for food or drink; they feel no pain; they are dead. In the same way, the spiritual faculties of unsaved persons are not functioning, and they cannot function unless and until God gives them life. They are, to all intents and purposes, spiritual corpses. Our world is one vast spiritual graveyard, filled with people who are dead while they live.

The state of death spoken of here, is *“in trespasses and sins.”* Unsaved persons are dead with reference to trespasses and sins. The death spoken of here is not a physical one. It has to do rather, with the moral and ethical part of these individuals, their reason, will, and emotions. They are living in a state of separation from God and God’s life, in the sense that God’s life does not energize and control their reason, will, and emotions. The reason, will and emotions of these persons are very active, but they are energized by the totally depraved nature.

The Scriptural evidence is conclusive. Human beings are *“dead in trespasses and sins,”* and they may only be delivered from that state of deadness by a spiritual resurrection. Unsaved persons are physically alive, but in the spiritual sense, they are a corpse in a morgue. They are, in reality, “dead men walking.”

The **second** characteristic of unsaved persons described by Paul in **Ephesians 2:1-3**, is that they are **disobedient**. He writes in verse **2**, *“Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of **disobedience**.”*

This disobedience was actually the cause of man’s spiritual death. We read of this in **Genesis 2:16-17**: *“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: **for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.**”* In **Genesis 3:4**, the devil, in the form of the serpent, said, *“Ye shall not surely die,”* and because this satanic lie was believed, the first man and woman disobeyed God and ate of the fruit of the tree. In doing so, they sinned and as a result of their sin, they experienced immediate spiritual death and ultimate physical death. Since that time, the human race has lived in disobedience to God.

Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus that they once were characterized by this same disobedience. He writes *“Wherein in time past **ye walked.**”* The word *“wherein”* goes back to the phrase *“trespasses and sins”* in verse **1**. The idea is, “You also, at one time walked in trespasses and sins.” The word *“walked”*, is the translation of a Greek word which means “to walk around or about.” In time, the word came to mean, “to live, to regulate one’s life, to conduct one’s self, to order one’s behaviour.”

Paul is informing us that one of the characteristics of unsaved persons is that they conduct their lives and order their behaviour in the area of trespasses and sins. All their thoughts, words, and deeds are enveloped by sin. Not one of their acts ever gets outside this circle of sin. That is what is meant by the term **radical corruption** which we spoke of in our previous **Lesson**.

The word “*walked*”, is in a construction in the Greek which looks at the action as a complete unit. This means that, as far as God is concerned, the whole life of the unsaved person, from beginning to end, is nothing but sin!

This sobering reality will help us to better appreciate what is the prophet Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 64:6**: “*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.*”

The **Complete Jewish Bible** translates this verse as follows: “*All of us are like someone unclean, all our righteous deeds like menstrual rags; we wither, all of us, like leaves; and our misdeeds blow us away like the wind.*”

Brothers and sisters, we are incapable of any good whatsoever unless God works effectively in our lives. Again, we quote from Isaiah: “*LORD, thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us*” (**Isaiah 26:12**).

The **Complete Jewish Bible** renders the verse in the following way: “*ADONAI, you will grant us peace; because all we have done, you have done for us.*”

In **Ephesians 2:2-3**, Paul speaks of the three forces that encourage human beings in their disobedience. These forces are **the world**, **the devil**, and **the flesh**. We will briefly consider these three forces.

Paul speaks of the force of the **world** using the phrase, “*according to the course of this world.*” The Greek word translated “*world*” is **kosmos**. As it is used here, the word refers to the ordered world system of which Satan is the head, the fallen angels are his servants, and all unsaved persons are his subjects. There are aspects of this ordered world system which may be cultured, educated, refined, powerful, and outwardly moral, but it is completely alienated from God and entirely hostile to Him. It includes those people, pursuits, pleasures, purposes, and places where God is not wanted.

All unsaved persons order their behaviour “*according to the course of this world.*” The words “*according to*” are the translation of the Greek word **kata**, which in its root meaning speaks of domination and control. The unsaved person’s act of ordering his or her behaviour in the sphere of trespasses and sins, is dominated or controlled by “*the course of this world.*”

The word “*course*” is the translation of the Greek word **aiōn**, which may be defined as “All the mass of thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims, aspirations, which may be current in the world at any time.” It constitutes a real and effective power, being the worldly, spiritual atmosphere which at every moment of our lives we inhale, again inevitably, to exhale. Every system has a spirit that gives birth to it and that informs and directs it. It is the **aion**, or the “*course*” that is the spirit that gave birth to the **kosmos**, the ordered world system, and that informs and directs it.

The **aion**, the “course” or spirit of the ordered world system or **kosmos**, puts pressure on every individual, saved or unsaved to conform to the system. The difference between unsaved and saved persons is that while the saved person is pressured to conform to the world, the unsaved individual is completely dominated and controlled by it. Jesus Christ was not “of this world” (**John 8:23**), and neither are His people (**John 17:14**). But unsaved persons, either consciously or unconsciously, are dominated and controlled by the values and attitudes of this world. Unsaved individuals move about freely in the environment of the ordered world system and feel perfectly at home, conducting themselves in complete harmony with the course or spirit of the age.

Brothers and sisters, let us consider the passages of Scripture outlined hereunder in order to make an assessment of our own relationship with “the world:”

ROMANS 12:1-2

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

J.B. Phillips New Testament renders the verse as follows: *“With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.”*

The Message furnishes this translation: *“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life — your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life — and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”*

JAMES 4:4

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

1 JOHN 2:15-17

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

We, now, come to the second of the three forces that encourage human beings in their disobedience. This is the **devil**. Paul speaks of the devil in the phrase, *“according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.”*

The ordered world system was created by Satan and is energized by him. He is source of the **aion** or “course.” All unsaved persons are dominated or controlled by the “*prince of the power of the air.*” The word “*prince*” is the translation of a Greek word which refers to the first in an order of persons or things. It speaks, here, of Satan who is the first one in power and authority in his kingdom. He is the first or pre-eminent one. The word “*Power*” is probably a reference to the fallen angels or demons that are associated with him in his nefarious activities.

In **Ephesians 6:10-12**, Paul speaks in greater detail about these forces. He writes, “*A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places*” (**New Living Translation**).

The word “*air*” is a reference to the lower, denser atmosphere. The kingdom of Satan is in this lower atmosphere where we human beings are, in order that, in his bitter hatred of God and human beings, he along with his demons may prey upon humanity. Satan is the leader of the authority (demons) of the lower atmosphere. Paul is advising us that all unsaved persons order their behaviour according to Satan’s dictates and those of his demons.

Satan’s kingdom encourages us to have ungodly values, attitudes, and actions, in much the same way that a spirit of enthusiasm at a sporting event might stir us up to cheer, shout, jump up and down, and otherwise, act in ways that we would not if we were not under the influence of the spirit of enthusiasm. Under the spirit of Satan’s kingdom, we tend to act in ways we would not normally act.

It is significant that in **1 Timothy 4:1-3**, Paul credits the origin of the false religions to the demons. “*Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.*”

So effective is the devil’s evil working that Paul refers to his victims as “*children of disobedience,*” that is, men and women whose lives are characterized by disobedience. They rebel against the authority of God, preferring to obey the promptings of the enemy. Such men and women reject the gospel and disregard God’s will. All who are outside of Christ live in a kingdom called “*the power of darkness*” (**Colossians 1:13**), in which the devil holds sway.

The word “*disobedient*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “non-persuadable, non-compliant.” In **Acts 7:51**, Stephen referred to Israel as “*stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.*” This gives us a graphic picture of a person who is not saved.

Although the ruler of this world has been defeated by Christ at the cross, he continues to make his powerful influence felt. He is effectively at work in those who have not personally benefitted from God’s deliverance in Christ. He, also, still poses a threat to the saints who must steadfastly resist him by God’s power, as outlined in **1 Peter 5:8–9**: “*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.*”

The third force that encourages human beings to disobey God is the **flesh**. Paul refers to this in **Ephesians 2:3**. He writes *“Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our **flesh**, fulfilling the desires of the **flesh** and of the mind.”* By *“the flesh,”* Paul does not mean the body, because the body is not sinful of itself. The word *“flesh”* is the translation of the Greek word **sarx**, which here, refers to the totally depraved nature as dominating the unsaved individual.

Every human being was born with a fallen, human nature that desires to control the body and the mind and make us disobey God. An evangelist once announced as his topic, *“Why Your Dog Does What It Does.”* Many dog lovers came out to hear him. What he had to say was obvious, but too often overlooked: *“A dog behaves like a dog because he has a dog’s nature.”* If, somehow, you could transplant into the dog, the nature of a cat, the dog’s behaviour would change radically. Why does a sinner behave like a sinner? Because he has the nature of a sinner.

Is it any wonder that unsaved persons are disobedient to God? They are controlled by three great forces - the world, the flesh, and the devil - and they cannot change their own natures or overcome the world and the devil, of themselves. They need outside help, and that help can come only from God. What the unsaved individual needs is a new heart or a new nature and the only surgeon who can perform such a surgery is Almighty God. Have we all been operated on by The Great Physician?