

Sermon – 13/04/2008 am

Dead Men Walking

Study Text: Ephesians 2:1–2

You may be familiar with the title ‘dead men walking’. It is the title given to a book and film about men on death row in US prisons. Scores of lawbreakers have been condemned to death. As they walk around the prison others call out to them ‘dead man’.

The title is most appropriate for our exposition of this passage before us. The passage begins *and you were dead in your trespasses and sins*. Who is the ‘you’ referred to by Paul? Was he writing to men in Ephesian prisons, men facing the death penalty? No! He was writing to the church at Ephesus. He was writing to people who were alive. How could he say they were dead?

You will read the words ‘he made alive’ in the NKJ Bible but it is in italics meaning it is not part of the original. It is put there because in this very long sentence the verb ‘made alive’ does not come until verse 5. Inserting the verb here however detracts somewhat from the force of Paul’s teaching. He begins here, as he does in Romans, by painting a very bleak picture of our human condition. He does not tell about the grace of God in redemption until he has made perfectly clear our desperate need and the universal sinfulness of mankind. *For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

It is pointless preaching the gospel without first preaching about sin. To say ‘Jesus saves’ begs the question ‘saves from what?’ Does Jesus save from a life without meaning and purpose? One of the most popular evangelistic books of our day is called ‘the purpose driven life’. Is it only those who realise that their life is in a mess who need Jesus? Christians are often ridiculed as being weak for needing the crutch of religion. What do we mean when we say ‘are you saved?’ Do we understand what sin is and do we make it clear to others.

Dead

You were dead. Do you remember your doctor ever telling you that you were dead? From the physical perspective you have been alive since birth – and you will proceed from life to death one day in the future. Paul however says you were dead and will go on to say you have been made alive, you who are in Christ. He is of course talking about spiritual death, but do not forget that physical death is vitally linked with spiritual death.

God said to Adam that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge good and evil he would surely die. He disobeyed God, he sinned against God, he ate the fruit and he died. He was cut off from fellowship with God, the giver of life. He was cast out of the garden and out the presence of God. Adam became a dead man walking.

Sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12). Consequently death reigned from Adam to Moses and indeed onwards until Christ. The heathen, and even some Christians, reject the story of Adam as myth or just symbolic. Oh that death were just a myth or just symbolic. Men can reject the

word of God but they cannot escape the consequences of Adam's sin. As human beings we all inherit his genes and we inherit a sinful heart.

Contrary to the assertion of Darwinian-based science and psychology we were not born perfect. We might have looked perfect and beautiful to our parents. We might have won beauty contests, but our hearts were sinful and hostile towards God. Appearances can very deceptive. We were without God, without hope, and without life.

'What have I ever done to offend God' you say. You were born a human being, a descendant of Adam. 'What has this child ever done to offend God?' The answer is the same. This is a bitter pill to swallow. But you must swallow this pill if you want to live. If you say you have no sin you deceive yourself. You must acknowledge your sin; you must confess your sin before God, if you want to live.

What is sin? 'Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God' (Shorter Catechism 14). Paul uses two words in this passage – 'trespass' and 'sin'. You may be familiar with the word trespass from hoardings on construction sites or farm gates – 'trespassers will be prosecuted'. Trespass literally means to 'stray from the path'. It means to deviate from the truth that God has given to us.

Sin means to 'miss the mark', or as we read in Romans 3:23 it means to 'fall short'. We have all failed to please God. Actually only Adam and Eve were able to please God for they were not born with sinful hearts like us. *Without faith it is impossible to please God* (Hebrews 11:6).

Why is Paul telling Christians that they were dead in their sins? They were no longer dead but alive! He knew how easy it is for Christians to forget their past and how they were saved. Over the years they might start to focus on all they have done for Christ. They might even start to boast and demand a place of honour. Note the word boast in verse 9.

Darkness

The second way in which your life before grace is described is that of following the way of this world or walking in darkness. The word translated 'course' or 'way' actually means 'age' as in 'the age of this world'. We might paraphrase as 'following the spirit of this age'. Cut off from God because of sin we have become blind to the Spirit of God. Men are ruled by the spirit of this age. In the book of Revelation John speaks of this spirit in symbolic terms as the great prostitute. This prostitute seduces earth dwellers into living for the treasures and pleasures of this world.

Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. This was what people were saying in the days of Noah and are still saying today. God said of those people that their every thought was evil and that he was sorry he made them (Genesis 6:5, 6). Apart from grace, the heart of man is desperately wicked and deceitful. The evil heart even deceives itself. *Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil* (John 3:19).

Sin corrupts the very core of our being. Our moral compass goes haywire. We cannot discern right from wrong. Even when God tells us what is right and wrong we cannot do what is right because of our corrupt heart. *The good I want to do I do not do, but the evil I will not to do, that I practice* (Romans 7:19).

To live according to the philosophy of the world is to live in opposition to God. If your heart is set on the things of this world it is not set on God. Since God is light, to live without him is to live in darkness. The Ephesians once walked with their understanding darkened, they once walked in the blindness of their own hearts (4:18). You also walked in this darkness, in this futility of mind, seeking fame and fortune in this fallen world.

Devil

In the previous chapter Paul wrote of praying for the believers in Ephesus. He gave thanks for their faith in Jesus and their love for one another. He prayed that would have the spirit of wisdom and the knowledge of God. He asked that God open their eyes to know the great power of God at work in them, the power of the resurrection.

Divine wisdom, knowledge and power were completely foreign to these believers before the coming of God's grace. They were dead in sin, they were walking in darkness, and now he tells them they were under the rule of the devil. I wonder how the Ephesians received this letter, especially being told they were once ruled by the devil. Do you accept that you once belonged to the devil? How do your unsaved friends react when you tell them they are children of the devil?

The *prince/ruler of the power/authority of the air* (2:2) refers to the devil (*cf.* 6:12). He is the spirit at work in the heart of the disobedient. The devil is a spirit – hence the reference to the air. Modern man thinks that the devil does not exist, and that talk of such power is nonsense. That is of course the way the devil likes things to be. The truth, however, is that the devil or Satan is alive, and is powerful as the ruler of the air, of the darkness of this age.

Jews claimed to be children of Abraham and indeed to have God as their Father. But if this was the case they would have believed in Jesus. In rejecting Jesus the Son of God, they were showing that God was not their Father. Jesus told them *you are of your father the devil* (John 8:44). They were deeply offended and railed against him. They took up stones to stone him but Jesus did not retract what he said. 'You who reject me reject God, and so are children of the devil.

These Jews got upset initially when Jesus told them they were slaves to sin. He went on to show them they were slaves to sin and the devil. A slave has no power – he does what he is told. The devil rules in the heart and lives of all who are outside of Christ. It is only by the grace and power of God that you are transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. You were dead men walking, walking in the darkness and marching to the drumbeat of the devil.

Before you knew the grace of God you knew only death, darkness and the devil. The Reformers summarised your status as that of total depravity. Furthermore you were under the wrath of God. As you rejoice in the heavenly blessings you enjoy in Christ do not forget the depths from which you have been lifted up.

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