

Christian Life Sermon Where the Journey Begins

Introduction:

Every journey has a starting point, and that starting point plays a significant part in defining the nature of the journey we are on. In regard to living the Christian life, where we begin our journey helps define the nature of our journey and gives us ways to measure whether or not we are making progress in that journey. The Scriptures teach us how to precisely understand where our journey began to help us successfully navigate the path that is before us.

I. God's Assessment of Our Pre-Conversion Lives: (Eph.2:1b-3)

This passage comes in the midst of a portion of Ephesians where Paul was writing to his readers about the grandeur of the salvation that they had received by the grace of God. The purpose Paul had for including this passage was to highlight just how magnificent the salvation that they had received was by reminding them just how desperate their situation had been prior to receiving that salvation.

The first thing Paul wrote in reviewing what his readers had been saved from was that they “*were dead in trespasses and sins*” (vs.1b). The Greek verb translated as “*were*” is a present active participle referring to the former state of the Ephesian believers. This makes it clear that Paul was not referring to the future destiny of people who were still lost but was referring to their situation prior to conversion. But what did Paul mean that in the past these believers had been “*dead*”. Obviously since Paul was writing to living saints, he couldn't have been saying that they had previously been physically dead. So, in what sense had they been dead? He was saying that these saints had previously existed in a state of spiritual death. Spiritual death is to be understood as basically being identical to the idea of physical death. The difference between the two is the sphere to which one is dead. In both cases it refers to no longer being alive. Paul wrote that this death was “*in trespasses and sins*”. Grammatically, this phrase is a dative of sphere, indicating the context in which this death took place. The distinction between these two terms is that “*trespasses*” refers to transgressions, while “*sins*” refers to shortcomings. These words conveyed that their death took place in the midst of both active violations of God's will and possessing a morally corrupt nature. In order to better understand how the idea of death is to be understood here, it is helpful to look at what it means when other things are described as “*dead*”:

- (Rom.7:8) when sin is described as “*dead*” it means it is unable to express itself in a person's life.
- (Rom.6:11) when a person is considered “*dead*” to sin, it means that sin no longer controls or dominates them.
- (Jas.2:17) faith is dead when it fails to produce works.
- (Heb.6:1) works are dead when they are destitute of that Divine element which alone gives them reality.

In each of these examples, being “*dead*” means not interacting with whatever thing it is to which one is dead. Therefore, to be spiritually dead means to be unresponsive to, and unable to interact with spiritual things.

Next, Paul wrote, “*in which you once walked*” (Eph.2:2a). The plural relative pronoun “*which*” refers back to the words “*trespasses and sins*”. The idea this conveys is that these believers had formerly “*walked*” in trespasses and sins. The idea of “*walking*” is frequently used metaphorically in Scripture to refer to one’s daily conduct or manner of life. Therefore, the statement means that sinfulness characterized their lives. The Greek word translated as “*once*” means formerly, and thus it refers to what characterized their lives prior to conversion.

Then to further explain the nature of their pre-conversion lives, Paul wrote, “*according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience*” (vs.2b-d). The Greek preposition translated as “*according to*” designates what things set the pattern for their lives prior to conversion. The first thing that set the pattern for their lives was “*the course of this world*”. The Greek word translated as “*course*” refers to an age or period of time that has an indefinite length. The word was used to express the idea of what pervasively characterized a particular period of time (similar to what is meant by the German term “*zeitgeist*”). Both terms, “*age*” and “*world*”, were regularly used in the New Testament to refer to the social value-system of fallen humanity, a system which is by nature hostile to the things of God. The second thing that set the pattern of their lives was “*the prince of the power of the air*”. The title translated as “*prince*”, would be better rendered as “*ruler*” since it refers to one who has chief authority in a given sphere. The “*ruler*” that Paul was referring to was Satan. This is consistent with how the devil is described elsewhere in the New Testament (II Cor.4:4; I Jn.5:19). The Greek word translated as “*power*”, refers to the possession of authority, and in this context, it indicates the domain or realm of the devil’s authority (we see this same usage in Luke 23:7 where it refers to the jurisdiction over which Herod ruled). The reference to that sphere as “*the air*”, is equivalent to the idea in Hebrew thinking of the first heavens (the atmosphere), and it was used here to emphasize that the devil’s influence is all around those who live in this world. Next Paul wrote, “*the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience*”. The Greek word translated as “*works*” refers to being engaged in some activity or function, with a focus upon the energy or force involved in what is being done. Here it was used to express the idea of working within something so as to energize it. The expression “*sons of disobedience*” is a Hebraic idiom referring to someone who is characterized by disobedience. The Greek word translated as “*disobedience*” refers to an obstinate refusal to obey someone or something. The charge in this verse is that prior to conversion, these believers lived in conscious disobedience to God and that their thinking and behavior was patterned after what was popular in the world as it was shaped by the influence of Satan.

Paul closed this passage by writing, “*among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind,*

and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (vs.3). The words “*among whom*” refers back to the sons of disobedient, saying that these believers were formerly living as a part of that group. The Greek word translated as “*conducted*” was used figuratively in the first century to refer to behavior lived in harmony with a particular code or orientation. The way the next clause was translated in the NKJV obscures the actual meaning of what Paul originally wrote. First, the translation “*lusts*” has an exclusively negative meaning in modern English. The Greek word Paul used simply means “*desires*” and could refer to either positive or negative desires. The actual idea Paul was conveying was that prior to their conversion these saints lived only to satisfy their appetites, and to do so the way that the world and the devil encouraged them to do it. Another problem is the translation “*desires*”, because the Greek word Paul used actually refers to what one wants, wills or determines to do. Considering this, the phrase “*conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind*”, means that in the past these believers had lived their lives doing whatever they wanted to do, instead of living their lives according to the will of God. The phrase “*of the flesh and of the mind*” identifies the source of the desires. The desires of the “*flesh*” refer not only to the appetites that arise from the body but also includes those that arise from the entirety of one’s fallen orientation to life. The Greek word translated as “*mind*” refers to one’s thoughts, intentions, purposes, notions, or opinions. The point is that though these believers had been profoundly influenced by the world and the devil, they were also influenced by their own sinful impulses and ambitions.

The last thing Paul wrote in this verse was “*and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others*”. The Greek word translated as “*nature*” refers to what something is by virtue of birth or creation; the essential qualities that define that thing. Human beings are born into this world as objects of God’s wrath as our inheritance of Adam’s sin and guilt. The idea is that both the nature and inclination of fallen people are the reasons why they are offensive to God and deserving of punishment. The “*others*” Paul refers to are the rest of mankind, meaning that in themselves these saints had been no different than any other sinner, and so their salvation had nothing to do with their personal virtue.

II. Characteristics of Our Fallen Nature: (Rom.3:10-18)

In his letter to the saints at Rome, Paul gave a thorough explanation of the Gospel and its implication for the lives of those who embrace it. Here, Paul used numerous OT quotations to make the point that apart from God, human beings are lost and profoundly sinful. Thus, all people need what the Gospel provides, which is the righteousness that enables one to find acceptance with God. These verses reveal God’s assessment of humanity, that they:

- 1). Are not righteous (not even one is) (vs.10). To be righteous, is live in harmony with who God is, and to be obedient to His commandments. Righteousness is what earns a favorable verdict before God’s justice. No one has met this standard.

2). Do not understand (vs.11). The word “*understands*” means to comprehend. Therefore, Paul’s point was that no one genuinely comprehends spiritual truth apart from the illuminating grace of God.

3). Do not seek after God (vs.11). The word for “*seeks*” means to search out for someone or something. The idea is that no one seeks out God. However, in both Acts 15:17, and Hebrews 11:6 this same word is used to describe those who do seek God. On the surface then, this would appear to be a contradiction within Scripture, because both cannot be true in the same sense. The resolution to this is that this passage is talking about human nature. The other passages speak about observable phenomena. In addition, it is helpful to recognize that the seeking that is in mind here is a determined search not for “*a*” god, but for “*the*” God.

4). Have turned aside (vs.12). This means to purposely turn away from something, in order to shun or to avoid it. The idea is that every person has chosen to turn their back on both the truth of the Gospel and on God Himself.

5). Have together become useless (vs.12). The Greek word translated as “*useless*” means worthless or of no profitability. Because it was used in the passive voice it indicates that something or someone has made human beings useless, and that something is sin. The charge against humanity here is that everyone has lost their value and usefulness in terms of serving God and bringing Him glory.

6). Are not good (not even one) (vs.12). The word for “*good*” refers to goodness of heart or kindness. It means to soften what would otherwise be harsh. It is good in the sense of being benevolent or helpful. Therefore, it is not within the fallen human heart to be compelled to genuinely reach out to meet the needs of others. The added phrase, “*not even one*” is an idiom that means when we try to count all those who do good, we do not even get to one, emphasizing the universal nature of this charge against mankind.

7). Have throats like an open tomb (vs.13). This is a word picture (one that is frequent within O.T. literature), of an open grave from which foul things flow, symbolizing the evil things people say that comes from deep within them. The idea is that what one says is as foul as the stench emanating from an open grave.

8). Have deceiving tongues (vs.13). Here Paul borrows another image from the Psalms which indicates that human beings are by nature deceitful and liars. The imperfect tense of the verb here stresses that human beings do not simply deceive occasionally but rather persist in their hypocritical professions as a characteristic of who they really are. The charge against humanity is that everyone is a liar.

9). Have the poison of asps under their lips (vs.13). This is another metaphor that relates to speech. Paul quoted the Psalm which states that the lips of man are full of the poison of venomous snakes. The charge against humanity here is that everyone inflicts injury and harm by the words we speak to one another.

10). Have mouths full of cursing and bitterness (vs.14). This verse continues the condemnation of human speech. The Greek words found in Paul's quotation carries the idea of defaming and harsh criticism. The idea is attacking others with our words as if they were weapons.

11). Have feet, which are swift to shed blood (vs.15). The picture in this phrase is that people rush to take advantage of the opportunity to harm one another. The indictment is that mankind is eager for and even driven toward violence. That in their hearts, everyone is murderous (Matt.5:21-22).

12). Destruction and misery are in their ways (vs.16). The word for "*destruction*" means to break into pieces, to crush, to bring to complete ruin. The word for "*misery*" means to afflict or bring distress upon someone. Together these words paint a picture of human beings bringing ruin and heartache wherever they go as a natural outflow of their way of life. The charge against mankind is that we are all destructive and leave shattered lives in our wake.

13). Do not know the path of peace (vs.17). This accusation again speaks of a way of life, but in negative terms for a life that fallen man does not know. This simply means that a lifestyle without strife and hostility is foreign to fallen human nature.

14). Do not have the fear of God before their eyes (vs.18). In Proverbs 9:10 we are told that "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*" The idea is that to really know God is to be overwhelmed by His majesty and genuinely afraid to rebel against His ways. In contrast fallen human nature is oblivious to and unconcerned about the ultimate danger that comes from rebellion to God.

III. How These Truths are Relevant to Our Christian Lives:

It is fair to ask if it is truly helpful to our spiritual well-being to know what the passages above teach us about our former lives, after all, those things are by definition, in the past. Wouldn't our mental energies be better spent on learning how God wants us to live now?

The question above assumes that we as believers are a good source of information regarding how to properly live the Christian life. Theology, history, and personal experience indicate that this is a flawed assumption. What is clear, and it has been alluded to in previous lessons, is that the Scriptures are intended as our only reliable resource by which we can gain an understanding about how to live the abundant life that Christ came to give us.

Some might assume that the only reason to know what is taught in the passages above is so that we can give this information to unbelievers when we seek to evangelize them. Though this information is certainly critical for a person to grasp in order to gain salvation in Christ, that cannot be the only reason for knowing this information. This can be proven by the fact that neither of these two passages represent messages to unbelievers. Instead, both passages were specifically written to congregations of professing Christians, indicating that it was specifically

important for Christians to keep these truths in mind. What emphasizes this point is that these two passages are not isolated examples of teachings to Christians about their former sinful lives. The epistles in the New Testament have many references to the past spiritual condition of the recipients of those letters. In fact, it is from those passages that we learn several reasons why it is important to remember how our spiritual journey began.

First, the instruction about our previous sinful lives reminds us that we will always be entirely dependent on God to save us:

*“Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit,
are you now made perfect by the flesh?”*

Galatians 3:3

What Paul wrote in this verse was part of His argument against the influence of Judaizer’s who were teaching that obedience to the Mosaic Law was necessary in order to gain eternal salvation. Paul explained in the verse cited above that the Galatian Christians should have known better based on their own salvation experience. They had not received the indwelling of the Spirit of God by keeping the Law, they had received that indwelling because they had put their faith in the Gospel (Gal.3:2). Therefore, since they had been unable to gain salvation at the beginning by the works of the flesh, what made them think they could complete that salvation by those same inadequate works of the flesh. Paul’s point was that salvation is something God gives to us as a gift, it is not something we earn. Paul’s entire argument is rooted in the idea that those believers were unable to live genuinely righteous lives on their own, and the reference to their own past was used to prove his point. The application to us is that one reason it is important for us to remember our previous sinful state is so we will not forget that we must be continually dependent on God if we are to succeed in the pursuit of genuine godliness.

Second, the instruction about our previous sinful lives encourages us to be humble before God:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who exalts himself will be exalted.”

Luke 18:10-14

Jesus’ story here was meant to illustrate the appropriate posture that a person must adopt if they are to find acceptance with God. Though Jesus originally told this story to “*some who trusted in themselves*” (vs.9), it was included in Luke’s

Gospel because it conveyed an important truth for followers of Christ. Jesus used the story to teach His listeners that it is only those who recognize that they are moral failures who will gain acceptance with God. In the story, the tax collector was under no illusions, he knew he was a wicked sinner, and all he could do was to ask God for mercy and grace. By contrast, the Pharisee was confident that he was a paragon of virtue, and the implication from the story is that this very confidence would ensure that he would be rejected by God. The Pharisee represents pride in one's own goodness, while the tax collector represents humility in light of the reality of what all human beings are; sinners. The point of the story is to warn that confidence in our one's own goodness is offensive to God, because it is a lie. Instead, God demands that we humble ourselves before Him in recognition of the truth about ourselves, and when we do that, He gives us the grace we need to be saved and to be made righteous (Jas.4:7). So, again, the teaching about our past sinful state is necessary to cultivate an ongoing humble stance before God that makes it possible for God to transform us by His grace.

Third, the instruction about our previous sinful lives provides the rationale for living lives in the present that are different than how we lived in the past:

“But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Ephesians 4:20-24

In a previous study we focused on how the Christian has been born again and made a new creation, that each one has been given a new nature. However, this does not mean that absolutely everything we were in the past has been completely removed. Throughout the New Testament we are exhorted to resist the impulses of our flesh. The idea of the “*flesh*” is not simply that we continue to have physical appetites, rather, the “*flesh*” represents that part of us that is still at home in this sinful world. The full dynamics of this will be explored in a future study, but at this point it is sufficient to understand that while we now have a righteous nature, we also are influenced by our dark past. What this means is that despite our best intentions, it is easy for a Christian to lapse back into old sinful habits. In the passage above, Paul was exhorting his readers to focus on living in harmony with what God had made them to be, and to consciously resist the tendency to yield to the lusts of the flesh. Paul wrote that this would be accomplished by consciously living in harmony with their new righteous identity, while recognizing that their former sinful lives were at odds with the life that God wanted them to live. The application for us is that references to our sinful past help us to understand what things we are to avoid and why. Our sinful past is meant to be seen as a drastic contrast to who we are now.

Fourth, the instruction about our previous sinful lives clarifies for us specifically what it is that God wants us to remove from our lives as Christians:

“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.”

Colossians 3:5-7

In the first portion of Colossians chapter three, Paul reminded his readers that as Christians, they had died to who they were prior to their conversion and were now living an entirely new life oriented around God and His will. He wrote that in a very real sense; their true life was hidden with Christ in heaven (Col.3:3). Because of that new life that they had been given, they were to “*put to death*” things that reflected their old life that was now dead. Paul then listed several specific sinful practices and attitudes that he had in mind (the implication being that these things were still manifesting themselves in the lives of these Christians). Paul then added that the motivation for removing those things from their lives was that those things arouse God’s wrath upon the condemned. The application to modern Christians is that we are to remember that our prior sinful acts were leading to inevitable eternal judgment. Since we have come to Christ to be delivered from that judgment, we should also actively seek to cease doing those things that had caused us to be objects of God’s wrath. And so, references to our past sinful lives give us specific things to remove from our present lives, making it clearer how we are to change.

Fifth, the instruction about our previous sinful lives informs us about the nature of our growth, by revealing what it is we are being transformed from:

“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ”

Philippians 3:7-8

In the verses just prior to those cited above, Paul was listing his accomplishments as a Pharisee. He did this because once again he was writing to a church that was being influenced by the teachings of Judaizers. These false teachers were exhorting the Philippian believers to be obedient to the Pharisaic interpretation of the Mosaic Law. They were asserting that to do so would enable those believers to gain eternal life. Paul listed his accomplishments to show that they were far beyond those that the heretics had achieved. But in the verses cited, Paul made the point that those things that he thought in the past would secure God’s favor, were in fact meaningless. When He encountered the risen Christ, he learned that self-righteousness ends in ruin, and that salvation comes only through the righteousness one gains from Christ through faith (Phil.3:9). In this passage Paul was not citing wicked things he had done in the past. Instead, his previous sinful life was his arrogant posture before God that manifested itself in good works meant to merit God’s favor. The application for modern readers is that it is not simply wicked behaviors and attitudes that we must abandon, but also any false notions we

had about worshipping God and gaining His favor. We must divorce from our lives all false religious and philosophical ideas, because they are contrary to the truth that God has given to us, around which we are to build our lives. Therefore, among the sinful patterns of the past that the Scriptures tell us and that we are to put away, is false piety.

Conclusion:

The question that is always before us is whether or not we are genuinely committed to the journey of following Christ. If we are, it will involve being willing to leave our past lives behind. This requires that we understand what we are to leave behind.

Jesus specifically addressed this requirement during His earthly ministry:

“And another also said, ‘Lord, I will follow you, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house’. But Jesus said to him, ‘no one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

Luke 9:61-62

There is historical evidence that this basic proverbial idea was not original to Jesus. It was originally a proverb about literal plowing. It related to a truism about the human body, that our bodies follow our eyes. Therefore, if one is plowing, and one looks backward or even to the sides, one will tend to swerve while plowing which will result in curving furrows. The practical problem with that is that it will reduce the amount of sowing one can do in one's fields. Jesus took this idea and applied it to spiritual realities, teaching that distracted plowing makes one unfit for the kingdom of God. To be “*fit*” means to be suited, appropriate to, or useful for something. Jesus' point was that the individual was not really ready for a life focused on God's kingdom, because of his backward glances. People look toward the things that attract them, or that they are attached to. Therefore, when Jesus speaks of the man “*looking back*” and used a tense that indicates that this was a pattern rather than a quick single look, He was saying that the man's heart was actually focused on the things he was leaving behind, and not on the kingdom of God. Jesus was saying that this man had a divided heart. Though he did want to follow Christ, his household was more important to him than following Jesus. Therefore, he would never give himself completely to following Jesus. The application to us is clear, that our journey of following Christ must be the defining priority of our lives. Part of making this commitment is staying mindful of what we were, and making sure we no longer return to what we were. The threat is not always the temptation of abandoning the faith, often it means settling for partial obedience, living a life that is a mix of godliness and worldliness. This is something Jesus would later say is offensive to Him (Rev.3:15-16).