

INTRODUCTION

How can it be? Many if not most of us are what the Apostle Paul called saved. But how can it be that we are? That's the question Charles Wesley asks in the great hymn of his that we sang. Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2:1-10 and let's answer it.

VERSE 1

Paul starts off in verse 1 by revealing the condition of all non-Christians. They are dead in their trespasses and sins. Trespasses and sins are the same thing and we need to define them. So let's do that.

People often hand me money and ask me to give it anonymously to someone who needs it. They trust that I'll do so but suppose I don't. Suppose that you hand me \$100 to give to so and so. But I only give so and so \$50 and keep the rest for myself. I have two questions. First, is that a sin? Yes, it is. Second, why is it? What is the objective reality that makes it a sin? That reality is that it offends or disgusts God.

Grasp what few people today do. The primary reference point of sin isn't people. It's God. God, the Maker, Sustainer, and Master of the universe, has certain objective qualities. One of those is that He is holy, meaning morally pure and I mean utterly so. Well, because He is, some things that people think, feel, and do offend or disgust Him.

Our own holiness, as imperfect as it is, helps explain that. Suppose that you see me kick a sleeping baby. How many of you would be offended or disgusted by that? All of you would be because you have a certain degree of holiness. You have a certain moral sense.

It's the same way with God. Because He's holy, some things that people think, feel, and do offend or disgust Him. That and that alone is what makes them sins. God alone is the primary reference point of sin.

Now, verse 1 reveals the result of committing sins. It makes people spiritually dead. To be spiritually dead means to be unable to act upon and respond to God and the realities of His kingdom. Dogs and music are

a good analogy of this. Dogs are dead to music. They cannot act upon and respond to it. They cannot enjoy the beautiful music that Elaine, June, and Bassha play for instance. Well, people in their sins are to the spiritual realm what dogs are to music – dead. They cannot act upon and respond to God and the realities of His kingdom. They cannot, as one example of this, hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. They are dead to the spiritual realm both now and forever.

VERSE 2

That brings us to verse 2. Paul reveals the two authorities that drive or run the lives of non-Christians. The first is “the world,” the culture around us that is set against God. The second is “the prince of the power of the air,” Satan.

Paul teaches that those two authorities dominate the persons and lives of non-Christians. He explains the main way they do that in 2 Corinthians 4:4. He says that *“the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.”* The ancient Greeks had a saying, *“whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.”* That is a penetrating insight. That’s exactly what the world and Satan do. They make non-Christians mad or mentally ill in a particular sense.

Dallas Willard explains it well. The natural role of the human mind is to find the right way to act. It is to discover the way that is just and right and that leads to what is good. But non-Christians habitually sin in many ways. So, their minds turn from reason to rationalization, to justifying what they do. Their minds no longer establish what is right and good in order to do it. They turn instead to establishing that whatever they do is right and good, or necessary – no matter how evil it is. That is madness and in that sense every non-Christian is mad.

Statistics show, for instance, that 74% of high school students cheat in their classes in one way or another. And almost all of them justify doing so. As one self-confident young man put it: *“Everyone else is cheating and so to be competitive, I have to. Besides, I learn what*

I need to know. So what's the big deal?" The world and Satan have made that young student mad. His mind establishes the evil he does as right and good and necessary. He is, from a Biblical view, mentally ill.

VERSE 3

We now come to verse 3. This verse reveals the source of the sins that non-Christians commit. Notice the terminology that Paul uses here, *"the lusts (or desires) of the flesh."* That refers to the human body and its desires formed for evil and against God.

What happens is this. As children, we begin imitating the sinful behaviors of those around us. Those sinful behaviors that we imitate soon become habits, which then become choices, which eventually become character. That is the cycle of sin and it forms our bodies and desires so that they constitute a pervasive structure of evil. We are poised to sin, in other words, only awaiting the occasion.

Most people, for instance, are poised to sin when they're cheated. I was in an automobile repair shop one time when a man at the counter got angry and began yelling at the clerk for being overcharged. He berated her and told her that they were all crooks including her.

That illustrates what Paul talks about in verse 3. The lusts of the flesh are the source of the sins that people commit. The hard fact is that most people are slaves to those lusts.

Verse 3 reveals the ultimate consequence of that. Non-Christians are children of wrath. The wrath it's talking about of course is God's. At the Second Coming of Jesus, God's wrath will come against non-Christians. He will judge and punish them for their sins, the punishment being eternal loss. That is their ultimate destiny.

VERSES 4-7

But the good news is that it doesn't have to be. We see that in verses 4-7. Notice what God does when people are converted, when they come to Jesus. He makes them alive, verse 5, or as verse 6 says it, He

raises them up and seats them with Jesus in the heavenly places. That figurative language means that the Holy Spirit gives them a new kind of supernatural life and power. That life and power then enable them to overcome the lusts of the flesh that dominate them. We call that "regeneration."

Sadly, most American churches preach and teach very little about regeneration. Instead, they identify conversion almost completely with forgiveness of sins. Listen carefully to what preachers and teachers say about those who come to Jesus. They talk all the time about them being forgiven for their sins but almost never about them being regenerated.

But regeneration is just as central to conversion as forgiveness is. Forgiveness in fact is even subordinate to it. The Holy Spirit gives us the new life and power and in light of that our sins are forgiven as well. At that point, regenerated and forgiven, we are what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "new creatures in Christ." We're then able to learn and do what Jesus says and become like Him in the process.

I met an Akron policeman who was recently converted at the Akron Baptist Temple. He told me about the exciting changes that had made, one of which was this. He's no longer bi-lingual, as he jokingly said it. Before being converted, he had a second language, dirty words, which he used all the time. But now, he doesn't use them at all. That is a profound psychological and social change. He was regenerated.

Verse 7 reveals the ultimate consequence of that. It's the riches of Jesus in the life to come. There is a "pie in the sky" for Christians. That pie is a full life of unspeakable love, peace, and joy that never ends.

VERSES 8-10

But how can it be? That's the question that Charles Wesley asked and that I ask you today. How can it be that we are regenerated, forgiven, and given eternal life? Paul tells us in verses 8-10.

First, it's by grace, the grace of God. On their own, non-Christians aren't able to respond to Jesus. Something has to happen before they

can. That something is the conviction of sin. By grace refers to several things one of which is this conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit acts in and upon non-Christians and convicts them of their sin.

Conviction of sin is a fundamental tenet of the church's faith, ministry, and life. Consider John Wesley's celebrated dictum, "*I must preach law before I preach grace.*" That is the church's standard. He meant that people must hear the law and thus be convinced that they're sinners before preaching grace would do any good. If they aren't convinced that they're sinners, then they think they don't need grace.

I think of Mordecai Ham, the renowned evangelist under whose influence Billy Graham was converted. Ham would preach for weeks in a given location before allowing people an opportunity to receive Jesus. That was a common practice at the time. Its purpose was to create great mental suffering in the hearers. Evangelists did that because of what they believed - that people need to thoroughly understand that they're sinners doomed to temporal and eternal loss. Only then can they be convicted of sin and come legitimately to Jesus.

Those evangelists were right. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say. Non-Christians having needs isn't a sufficient basis of response to Jesus. But conviction of sin is. Without conviction of sin, there is no spiritual or eternal problem for the gospel to solve. And without that, the Christian religion makes no sense at all. It may appeal to people but it has no more substance than any other religion or group does. That means that we need to make sure that the non-Christians we're trying to reach grasp that they're sinners. If they don't, we need to explain it to them clearly as I did today so that they will.

We now know part of what "by grace" means. The Holy Spirit initiates our salvation by convicting us of our sin and enabling us to respond. We must then respond. We do that by confessing that we're what the Holy Spirit has shown us we are - sinners under God's wrath.

But confessing that is only the first step. Verses 8-10 reveal the second. Salvation isn't just "by grace" but "through faith" and "for good

works" as well. Faith and good works have to do with Jesus. Let me ask a question in that regard. What is Jesus to you? There are three possibilities.

To some people, He is nothing. I once asked an attorney who claimed to believe in Him three questions. First, how many minutes a day do you think about Him? His answer - most days none. Second, how often to you talk about Him with others? His answer - never. And third, how often do you take Him into account when making decisions. His answer - never. Jesus is nothing to Him.

There's a second possibility. To some people He is something. As Oswald Chambers points out, that's what He is to *"the half-converted, the average Christian."* He's something - a part of their life where they do need Him but not part where they don't. Years ago, I counseled a troubled married couple to surrender to Jesus. They replied that they wanted Him to fix their marriage - not run it.

There's a third possibility. To some people, Jesus is everything. Chambers defines that this way: *"You must yield yourself totally to Christ, remain in Him, and obey His commands."* I'd say it this way. We arrange all of our affairs around Him and learning and doing what He says. We allow Him to run literally every part of our lives.

A Christian I knew had a legal dispute with his brother over their father's estate. I told him he needed to arrange the prosecution of his case around Jesus. He needed to prosecute it according to His word and will and in a way that glorified Him. He did just that because no part of his life is off limits to Jesus. Jesus is everything to Him.

CONCLUSION

That brings me back to my original question. How can it be that we're saved. We now know. We must recognize and confess that we're sinners who are under the wrath of God. We must then make Jesus everything because we are. If you haven't done that, do it today. After all, as Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 6:2, *"Now is the day of salvation."*