

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

**(LESSON TWENTY-ONE)**

**“DEAD, DISOBEDIENT, DEPRAVED**  
**AND DOOMED, BUT GOD!”**

**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 **Lesson 19**, when we began to study the **second** chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the **Ephesians**, we stated that in verses **1-3**, he addresses the spiritual condition of the believers in Ephesus prior to their conversion. Paul describes four characteristics of unsaved persons in these verses, the first two of which we have considered. We have learned that unsaved persons are **dead** in trespasses and sins and that they are also **disobedient**. We observed that there are three forces that encourage human beings in their disobedience, namely, **the world**, **the devil**, and **the flesh**, and we briefly looked at these three forces.

In verse **3**, Paul informs us that unsaved persons are **depraved**. 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.”

**The Passion Translation** renders the clause as follows: “The corruption that was in us from birth was expressed through the deeds and desires of our self-life. **We lived by whatever natural cravings and thoughts our minds dictated.**”

Unsaved individuals live to satisfy the desires of the flesh and the wishes of the mind. And these desires and wishes are radically corrupt because that is the state of the unsaved person. The actions of the unsaved individual are sinful because his or her appetites are sinful. He or she is always fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind. The word “*Fulfilling*” is a translation of the Greek word **poieō**, **poy-eh'-o**, which means “to do, perform, accomplish.” The participle is present in tense. It speaks of the habitual performing of acts that satisfy the desires of the evil nature.

The Greek word translated “*desires*” is **thelēma**, **thel'-ay-mah**. It refers to “desires that come from the emotions.” Paul is informing us that the life of the unsaved person is influenced by the emotions rather than the reason.

When we apply the word **depraved** to unsaved persons, we are not saying that they **only** do evil, or that they are incapable of doing good. We are simply saying that they are incapable of doing anything to merit salvation or to meet the high standards of God’s holiness. In other words, they cannot do anything spiritually good to please God because they are “*in the flesh.*”

In this context, the “*flesh*” does not represent a person’s physical existence. It represents humanity in its sinfulness and rebellion against God. According to **Romans 8:6-8**, it is the sphere in which a person is unable to please him:

**5** *For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.*

**6** *For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.*

**7** *Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*

**8** *So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.*

The desires of the flesh include “*sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these*” (**Galatians 5:19-21, New Living Translation**). Paul says that the conduct of the unsaved individual is in keeping with the desires of this unregenerate outlook. It dominates their lives, and they carry out its dictates. Even their thoughts are corrupt, and their corrupt thoughts control their actions.

What is to be the end of such persons? Paul concludes **Galatians 5:21** by saying, “*Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*”

The fourth characteristic of unsaved persons described by Paul, is that they are **doomed**. “*By nature,*” unsaved persons are “*the children of wrath!*” In fact, the unsaved person is condemned already according to **John 3:18**: “*He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*” The sentence has already been passed, but God in His mercy is staying the execution of the sentence.

Every unsaved person is a child of wrath! This wrath is not to be compared to fire in straw, quickly blazing and quickly burnt out. On the contrary, it is a settled indignation. This reflects the attitude of God toward human beings viewed as fallen in Adam and refusing to accept the gospel of grace and salvation in Christ. **Psalm 7:11** informs us that “*God is angry with the wicked every day.*” It is with respect to them that it is written in **John 3:36**, “*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.*”

The wrath that Paul speaks of here is God’s holy anger against sin and the judgment that follows as a result of sin. The wrath of God does not describe God’s vindictive anger, nor His uncontrolled and unrighteous revenge, nor an outburst of passion on His part. Wrath and love are not mutually exclusive. God is a holy God, and therefore, He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. When people act wickedly, transgress His law, show disdain to Him as their creator, or despise His kindness and mercy, He acts in a righteous manner, punishing sin in the present and especially on the final day. Yet, this same God also acquits the guilty and justifies the ungodly! The truth is that only the person who understands something of the greatness of His wrath will fully appreciate the greatness of His mercy. The converse is also true: only the person who has experienced the greatness of God’s mercy can understand something of how great His wrath must be.

Paul says that the unsaved are the children of wrath “*by nature.*” The words “*by nature*” must mean, “*apart from saving grace.*” It refers to human beings as they are in their natural condition, as descendants of Adam. “*Children of wrath*” means objects of God’s settled indignation now and for all time to come unless God’s marvelous grace intervenes to crush sinful pride and stubborn disobedience, the disobedience of unbelief.

Brothers and sisters, it is critical for us to understand that all that we have said concerning the four characteristics of unsaved persons was true of us prior to our salvation! Once we too were dead; once we too were disobedient; once we too were depraved; once we too were doomed! Let us note carefully what the Apostle has written in verse **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.***” In the “*we all*”, Paul includes the Jews, and the Gentiles. Paul knew that he and his fellow Jews were deserving of and liable to wrath just as much as the Gentiles were.

Let us make it personal: “I was dead; I was disobedient; I was depraved; I was doomed; I ordered my behaviour in the sphere of the cravings of my evil nature, continually practicing the desires of my evil nature and of my thoughts, and I was continually a child of wrath by nature, as also the rest.”

In verses **11-12** of this same chapter Paul writes, “Wherefore remember, that **ye** being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called *Uncircumcision* by that which is called the *Circumcision in the flesh made by hands*; That at that time **ye** were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”

Wherefore remember! Brothers and sisters, we must remember. What must we remember? We must always remember the way we were. We must never forget who and what we were before the grace of God intervened in our lives. “*Don’t you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people — none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that.*” (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11a, New Living Translation**).

Brothers and sisters, some of **us** were once like that!

In **Titus 3:3** Paul says, “*Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other*” (**New Living Translation**).

**The Message** translates **Ephesians 2:1-3** as follows: “*It wasn’t so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn’t know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It’s a wonder God didn’t lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us.*”

Against the horrible backdrop of the hopelessness of the unsaved, Paul, in verses **4 -9**, introduces a life transforming, destiny changing message:

**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.*

**“BUT GOD!”** These words are, perhaps, the two most important words in the whole letter. They present the other side of the case. What is the other side of the case? The grace of God confronts our death by sin and our subjection by nature to the divine wrath. The same God who is angry with sin and with sinners, is a God of grace!

Man can do nothing to save himself, but God in His grace, intervenes to make salvation possible for His elect. **“But God!”** — what a difference those two words make! The focus of attention has shifted. In verses **1-3**, it was on sinful human beings. But now the attention is on God, for Paul is speaking of salvation and *“salvation is of the Lord”* (**Jonah 2:9**).

The magnificent change which God has effected, is triumphantly proclaimed by Paul. He explains that God’s gracious initiative and sovereign action stand in wonderful contrast with the hopeless condition of fallen humanity which we have described. We were outside of Christ and were the objects of divine wrath; **“But God”** has made us recipients of His mercy. We were dead; **“But God”** has made us alive with Christ. We were in bondage to evil powers; **“But God”** has seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms. A completely new situation has arisen because He has taken every necessary step to reverse our condition in sin.

In these verses, Paul highlights **four** activities that God performed on behalf of sinners in order to save them from the consequences of their sins.

The first activity that Paul highlights is that **God loved us**. **1 John 4:8** informs us that by nature, *“God is love.”* Love is one of His attributes. God has two kinds of attributes: There are attributes that He possesses in and of Himself, which are referred to as **essential** or **intrinsic** attributes such as life, light, love, truth and holiness. And, then, there are attributes by which He relates to His creation, and in particular human beings. These are referred to as **relative** attributes. For example, by nature, God is truth; but when He relates to man, His truth becomes faithfulness. God is, by nature, holy; when He relates that holiness to man, it becomes justice.

Love is one of God’s intrinsic attributes, but when this love is related to sinners, it becomes mercy and grace. **Ephesians 2:4**, informs us that God is *“rich in mercy.”* When we come to verse **7**, we will hear of **“the exceeding riches of his grace.”** The riches of His mercy and grace make it possible for sinners to be saved. In His mercy, God does not give us what we deserve; and in His grace He gives us what we do not deserve. And all of this is made possible because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. It was at Calvary that God displayed His great hatred for sin and His great love for sinners.

In verse **4**, Paul is explaining to us that God’s disposition towards those who are dead in trespasses and sins is one of mercy, and this is not a mercy that exists in small amounts. It is a mercy that is rich and exhaustless. The word *“rich”* is the translation of a Greek word which means, *“wealthy, abounding in material resources, abundantly supplied.”*

God is rich in mercy *“for His great love wherewith He loved us.”* He is rich in mercy because of, or on account of His great love. In other words, in order to satisfy the great love that He always had for us, He showered the richness of His mercy upon us. The richness of His mercy is an expression of the greatness of His love!

The Greek word translated *“love”* here is **agapē** which speaks of a love called out of the heart of the lover by the preciousness of the one loved. It is a love that impels the lover to sacrifice himself or herself for the benefit of the one who is loved. It is God’s mercy that restrains His wrath. He refrains from punishing us even though we are sinners. Why? Because of His great love for us. *“For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.”*

*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).*

The words “**But God**”, introduce the unexpected. Where we should have expected wrath and condemnation, we encounter the wealth of God’s mercy and great love. The words reveal a God who is rich in mercy beyond our wildest imagination. The sudden, startling interjection of “**But God**” into the scenario of our helplessness and hopelessness is a reminder that mercy is essentially and always a surprise. The “dead men walking,” toward whom God has shown mercy, had no grounds upon which to be confident of God’s intervention **for** them, only **against** them. They were dead and to be numbered with the enemies of God. In other words, the surprise of grace increases when we remember the way we were.

To say that mercy is a surprise is not to say that it is erratic and without any reason or basis. God’s mercy is rooted in God’s great love. Love is a disposition that has governed God’s actions from before creation. Paul has informed us of this in chapter **1** and verses **4** and **5**: *“Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure” (New Living Translation).*

Brothers and sisters, love lies at the basis of all of God’s purposes and plans, even those purposes and plans that include wrath and judgment. It is love that is at the heart of God’s wonderful plan to reconcile the entire creation to Himself, in Jesus Christ, and we are an integral part of His love plan.

In our next **Lesson**, we will look at the other activities that God performed on our behalf in order to save us from the consequences of our sin.