

“BEFORE AND AFTER PICTURE” **(Ephesians 2:1-7)**

One of the main tactics advertisers use to sell customers on their product is before and after pictures – showing what something looks like before using their product, and what it looks like after using their product. For example, millions of middle-aged men take notice when they see this picture of a once balding man who now has a full head of hair, and say, “How did that happen and where can I buy whatever makes that happen?” As you can tell, I haven't called the 1-800 number and it's probably too late. This guy, Jared Fogle, became famous by losing 245 pounds eating Subway sandwiches, and looked like a completely different person. Dentists like to use pictures of crooked teeth before braces and perfectly aligned teeth after braces. Home renovation shows are popular on TV turning old, run-down houses into beautiful homes.

The purpose of these ads is to produce an “after” picture that is so mind-blowingly incredible that you look at it and say, “Who can produce results like that?” In our passage today in Ephesians 2:1-7 the Apostle Paul paints a masterful picture of believers, showing what we were before Christ and what we are after Christ. Every verse we’ve looked at so far in Ephesians has been profound, and in these seven verses Paul continues to delve into the deep truths of faith, and his goal in these verses is that we will see the hopeless, desperate condition of being lost without Christ, and the dramatic change that takes place once we receive God’s grace and are saved.

Verses 1-7 is very easy to outline. Verses 1-3 describes our dire condition before Christ, and verses 4-7 our exalted condition after Christ. Beginning in verse one, Paul writes... “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.”

The gospel means “good news” and in order to have good news there must first be bad news that makes the good news good. Paul says, *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”* Paul cuts right to the chase... without Christ we – and all of humanity – are spiritually dead and our relationship with God is severed beyond repair.

The opening chapters of the Bible describe how Adam and Eve enjoyed eternal life and fellowship with God in the garden of Eden. Then came the moment that changed history when they rebelled against God and sinned. The moment they sinned, both physical and spiritual death entered God’s perfect world. Paul puts it this way in Romans 5:12... “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” Adam and Eve continued to live physically – Adam lived to be 930 years old, but eventually he died – as we all will – because death, Romans 6:23 says, is the penalty of sin.

While Adam continued to live physically, he died spiritually the moment he sinned. Where once he was innocent to sin, his eyes were now opened to know the difference between good and evil – where he once lived in freedom, he now lived with guilt and shame – where he once walked with God in the garden, he now hid from God. Sin separated him from God, and as Romans 5:12 says, every person after Adam is born spiritually dead and separated from God.

Just as you can tell when a person is physically dead, the same signs are present when someone is spiritually dead – there are no spiritual vital signs, there is no spiritual pulse, there is no awareness of God or desire to know Him. A spiritually dead person is like a zombie – they have a body and appear very much alive, but their soul is dead to the things of God.

The worst part is that spiritually dead people don't even know that they're dead. They may sense something is wrong with the world and wrong with them, but they don't see that the source of the problem is their own sin. Paul says we are dead in our "trespasses and sins" – two words used to describe our sinful condition. The first word – *parabasis* – means to overstep or transgress against God's law. Every parent knows the word "transgression." Transgression means there's a line drawn and a person crosses that line. You tell you kid not to cross the line and what do they do? They cross the line. They say, "Bring it on." That's transgression and all of us do that. God has a line, a standard of holiness, and we put out toe over that line.

The second word for sin is *harmartia* which means "to miss the mark, to fall short." It was used of an archer who aims at a target and misses. This is what is described in Rom. 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." God has made a standard we must live up to – perfection – and anything short of that standard is sin. Because we are spiritually dead, we are incapable of living up to God's perfect standards.

Today the idea of sin has all but disappeared in our culture. Sin is a negative word – a condemning word – a non-affirming word. It is more positive and affirming to say that people are good – and if there's something wrong with your life, it's not your fault – it's the fault of those around you, it's your parent's fault, it's societies' fault, it's the founding father's fault – and all of societies' problems can be fixed with a new law, a new leader, or a new environment.

Yet the more we try to improve the world apart from God, our problems continue. A poll put out recently said that people – especially young people – are less happy and less hopeful than they've been in 50 years. Despair and suicide attempts have reached record levels. People are lost – they are spiritually dead and separated from God. They don't need self-help techniques to help them cope better, they need a spiritual resurrection.

The bad news gets worse in verses 2-3 as Paul goes on to describe how before Christ we were held captive to three enemies that waged war against our soul. The first enemy is the **world**. He says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world" (1-2a).

The "world" means the earthly, secular way of thinking that leaves God out of the picture. When you remove God from the equation, all of the emphasis is placed on the present world we see and experience. The "ways of the world" means the way spiritually dead people live and think – a way that is determined by elite people in secular culture who dominate public opinion – whether it is actors in Hollywood, professors in universities, or talk show hosts – what they say creates a kind of groupthink where everyone goes along with the popular thinking of the day, and puts pressure on everyone who steps out of line with that thinking.

This is why Christianity and belief in the Bible as the standard for life and morality is held in bitter scorn by the world because it is diametrically opposed to worldly thinking. The Bible says, “Here is the way you should live – here is God’s order and design for the world – here are the righteous standards He expects you to uphold.” The world says, “We’ll have none of it. We will choose the way we live and the way we think. Our authority is not God or the Bible, our authority is us.” Proverbs 14:12 says, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*” Paul says, “Before Christ you lived according to the ways of the world – you followed the way of death.”

The second enemy that held us captive before Christ was **Satan**. In verse 2b Paul writes that before Christ we not only followed the ways of this world, but... “and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” Whereas the “ways of the world” is something we can see and experience firsthand, Satan works invisibly behind the scenes to stoke rebellion against God. Paul calls him the “ruler of the kingdom of the air,” meaning that Satan rules over an unseen spiritual world that is active in the world. The “air” refers to the invisible realm above the earth where Satan and his demons move and exist – meaning that there is more going on in the world than meets the eye – there is an unseen, evil kingdom led by Satan and his demonic army that wages war on God’s creation. Satan’s number one goal is to keep lost people from being saved, and keep them blinded to the glorious gospel of Christ that will free them from sin and death.

The Bible says that this present world is Satan’s domain. When God created Adam, He gave him dominion over creation. “It’s yours... fill it and subdue it and rule over every living creature.” But Adam relinquished his authority over the earth when he sinned and control of the earth was given to Satan. 1 John 5:19 says “*the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*” This explains why the world is in such a mess – Satan controls and dominates every aspect of the fallen world system – influencing how people think and act and what they believe. His corrupting fingerprints are everywhere, from entertainment to education to politics and even churches. The earth is his domain. He prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. It’s his domain.

Paul says that the ruler of this world is “now at work in those who are disobedient.” There are many things that happen in the world that make you say, “This is demonic... this is generated and influenced by an other-worldly power”... when someone shoots innocent people at a Fourth of July parade... when people run loose on the streets... when society celebrates evil... you know that there is a power working beyond this world – it is the power of Satan working in those who are disobedient.

As if the world and the devil was not enough, Paul describes a third enemy that held us captive before Christ, and that is the **flesh**. In verse 3a he says, “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.” Along with the world and Satan, our own fleshly desires form a triple whammy of bondage.

When God created the world, He pronounced everything “good,” including our desires. God created us with certain desires – desires for food, for sex, for comfort, for meaning, and enjoyment of life. Once sin entered the world, instead of fulfilling our desires the way God designed, we were driven by our natural, fleshly impulses to gratify our desires in destructive ways. The desire for food turns to gluttony – the desire for sex turns to lust – the desire for comfort turns to indulgence. When desire is not controlled and restrained it leads to addiction, where it takes more and more to experience pleasure, creating a vicious cycle of bondage.

The world, the flesh, and the devil form a powerful force to keep people trapped in spiritual death. The world endorses and approves of just about every sinful desire – Satan pours gas on the fire by making sinful desires appealing – and then our flesh takes over and gives into those desires.

As if this were not enough, Paul spells out the ultimate consequence of our separation from God at the end of verse 3... “Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.” By “nature” Paul means that every one of us are sinners by nature – as Psalm 51:5 says, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Every person is born with a sin nature – we have a natural inclination to sin – given the choice to do God’s will or our own, we will naturally choose to do our own thing. My sin might look different than your sin, but we all share a sin nature and deserving of God’s wrath and judgment.

Many people bristle at the idea of a wrathful God. God is a God of love and forgiveness, they say, not someone who punishes people for getting out of line. As we will see in the next verse, God is absolutely a God of love and mercy and forgiveness, but He is also a holy God who is naturally opposed to anything that is unholy.

When the Bible speaks of God’s wrath, it’s not the angry, emotional outburst we have as humans, but a settled, measured opposition to all that is evil and unholy. Because God is holy and good, he’s naturally opposed to anything that’s unholy and not good. He cannot overlook it or pretend it’s not there – He must oppose and judge what is not in line with His character. Theologians say that God’s wrath is an expression of His love. People may say that they don’t want a wrathful God, but at the same time they want justice – no one wants to live in a world where people are not held accountable evil actions – a loving God cannot overlook sin, but rightly holds every person accountable. If God did not do this, He would not be loving.

John 3:36 says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t want God’s wrath to remain on me. The reality is that every person before Christ remains under God’s wrath and will face everlasting judgment.

Before Christ, this is the dire condition of every person – before Christ we are dead in our trespasses and sins – we go along with the ways of the world – we are under the control of Satan – we give into the desires of the flesh – and we deserve God’s wrath and punishment. The only way we will understand the gospel – the only way we will see the light and cry out to God for salvation – is to first understand our helpless condition.

This is the bleak “before” picture, and now in verse 4 we see the “after picture” – the good news of the gospel. Verse 4 begins in Greek with two of the greatest words in the Bible, “But God...” You were dead in your trespasses and sins, but God... you were enslaved to the world, the flesh, and the devil, but God... you were doomed to eternity in hell, but God.

In verses 4-7 Paul writes, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”

What comes out strongly in these verses is that God did not have to save us – being fully deserving of His wrath He could rightly have left us in our hopeless condition. But He didn't, and the reason is because of His **love** for us. Not just His love, Paul says, but His “great love.” God is love, and His motivation for saving us was His great love... For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Romans 5:8 says that God loved us while we were sinners – He loved us when we were unlovely and rebellious.

Not only is God great in His love for us, but He is rich in **mercy**. The dictionary defines mercy as “Compassion shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.” As the God of the universe, He has the power to punish us for our sin and rebellion. We have piled up a long list of offences against Him, and God could throw the book at us. But God is rich in mercy. He desires that no one perish in their sin, but that all would come to repentance.

Paul adds yet another word to describe God's attitude towards us, and that is **grace**... “*It is by grace you have been saved.*” When God saves us, He extends both mercy and grace. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve, and grace is getting what we don't deserve. In His mercy God withholds the punishment we rightly deserve, and in His grace He bestows on us spiritual blessings we have not earned or deserved.

All of these words – love, mercy, and grace – speak to the reason a holy God would reach down and save us from our plight. Our only response is to humble ourselves and like the tax collector in Luke 18 cry out to God and say, “Have mercy on me a sinner.” In order to be saved you must acknowledge your sin and your desperate plight, and cry out to a merciful God for forgiveness. There is nothing you or I can do to be saved, salvation is something done for us through the cross of Christ. We simply receive salvation as a gift from God.

The good news get even better... Paul says that when we were saved, God made us “**alive with Christ.**” Where once we were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins, we are made spiritual alive. It's another way of saying we're “born again.” Our soul, once dead, comes to life. We no longer just exist, we have a whole new purpose and calling. We have “spiritual vital signs.” The Holy Spirit within us gives us a peace we never had before, joy that is deep and abiding, and a love for people that wasn't there before. We have a new attitude and perspective about life. We are free from the ways of the world, free from the power of Satan, and free from addictions of the flesh. We have an appetite to know God and to be around those who have been saved by His grace. It's fun to watch the change that takes place in people's lives when God's grace makes them spiritually alive.

After evangelist D.L. Moody was saved he said, “I was in a new world. The next morning the sun shone brighter and the birds sang sweeter. The old elms waved their branches for joy, and all nature was at peace.” As the old hymn says, “Things are different now – something happened to me since I gave my heart to Jesus.”

But that's not all... Verse 6 says, “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” When Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers in chapter one, he prayed that they might know the power of God that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at the right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he says that once we have been saved by God's grace, we, like Christ, have been raised up and seated in the heavenly realms.

As believers we live in two worlds – we live physically on earth, while at the same time we live spiritually on a higher plane – as Paul says in Philippians... “Our citizenship is in heaven.” Even though we are not yet in heaven, our whole orientation is centered on things above. Where we once we controlled by the ways of the world and Satan and our flesh, we now sit in a position of power and authority over these forces. We are dead to sin and alive to Christ.

Where we once lived for the temporal pleasures and pursuits of the world, we are now governed by eternal values and priorities. Paul puts it like this in Colossians 3:1-2, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” After coming to faith in Christ we have a new zip code – we live physically in the world and we are faithful to fulfill our purpose in the world, but our hearts and minds are governed by heaven’s values and priorities.

In verse 7 Paul says that there is a grand reason for which God has saved us... “...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” What brings God the greatest glory? You could say that the nighttime display of the moon and stars display His glory, or the beautiful creation we see all around us – but God’s greatest glory is displayed in showing grace and kindness to rebellious sinners.

Each time someone is saved they become a trophy of God’s grace, showing a lost world how God can take a lost sinner, dead in their trespasses and sins – help captive to the world, the flesh, and the devil – and deserving of God’s wrath – and by His grace and mercy save them, bring them to life, and display for all eternity how great and marvelous God is.

As we reflect on these seven verses, it’s clear that everyone here in this room or listening to this message is a “before” picture or “after” picture. You are either separated from God, spiritually dead, and headed for eternal judgment – or you are saved by God’s grace. God freely extends His offer of grace to every sinner this morning, and to receive His grace you must acknowledge that you are a sinner who has trespassed against God and have failed to live up to righteous standards. To receive His grace, you simply cry out to Him for mercy and say, “I believe that you sent your Son to die in my place and save me. Lord, forgive my sins and make me a new creation.” Wouldn’t it be great to walk from here this morning with an “after” picture that says, “I was this before Christ, but God...” But now I am saved by grace.