

# Once

Ephesians 2:1-3 | Bryce Beale | October 8, 2017

Every age, like every man or woman, has its personality.

If in the 1400s, for example, you had uttered to a European peasant the word “sin,” he would have risen as the representative of the Medieval age and listed for you those seven sins considered mortal: pride, envy, anger, avarice, sloth, gluttony, and lust. His view of sin is serious—dead serious, to be literal—but he doesn’t sweat the small stuff, the venial sins.

But advance a few centuries and a new European personality appears. The Dark Ages have dawned into the Enlightenment; no longer is the Catholic Church considered the vault of knowledge, and men turn to themselves and their reason as the optimistic portals to an expanding world.

Say to this age, “sin,” and you will get the skeptical brow of a scholar. Sin is a religious term from the ignorant past, and like angels and miracles it disappears under a microscope. Man is not born evil, but neutral, and he is improving more and more.

Let that scholar sit down, and walk up to our own day. What is the personality of our age? Say “sin,” and what is the reply? It is not the serious view of the Medieval monk; the chains of the Roman Church are still open on the floor. It is a view much lighter, like that of our Enlightened forebears, and yet much heavier too.

The immeasurable corpses of two hot conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—World Wars One and Two—and one cold, nuclear stand-off, have turned us from happy skeptics into miserable ones. Science cannot save the world—but, as we have seen, it may destroy it.

The center cannot hold, and all meaning melts away into the chaos. But we cannot live without meaning, so we decide to make meaning ourselves—each of us, not God, not the Church, not science or the state, but each of us individually becomes the holder of all significance. Hence the appeals to be yourself and follow your heart.

Utter “sin” to our age, and you will find that each individual thinks lightly of his own “mistakes,” but very much of the evil in the world around him. If you have fudged on your taxes you have your reasons; yet you cannot deny the evil in the Las Vegas gunman last week. Man has always leaned this way, toward minimizing his own wrongs and maximizing those of others, but now we are laying down horizontal on the floor.

And over every age, unfurled and untainted by the opinion of each, is the banner of the gospel.

To the Medieval it says, “You have heard it said that only seven sins are mortal, but I say to you that the least of the venial sins is fuel enough to keep hell aflame forever.”

The wise men of the Enlightenment find on that banner nothing new, but what was from the beginning: “Professing to be wise, they became fools; their condemnation is just.”

And finally to us what does the gospel say? This:

“He who is forgiven much, loves much.”

Until you discover in yourself the same horrible, ugly, genocidal principle that you see in the gunman, the gospel will have no meaning to you. You see evil in all others; you must admit it in yourself with the same ferocity. “Before we can begin,” writes one, “to see the cross as something done *for* us..., we have to see it as something done *by* us...”<sup>1</sup>

The surgeon’s scalpel looks like a weapon to the healthy person; but to the man sick with a brain tumor, it looks like salvation. And the promise of forgiveness will only seem as sweet to you as your sin seems bitter.

For this reason Paul, before exulting in the grace of God in salvation, descends with the Ephesians down into the hellish pit of what their hearts had been—so that the ascent to daylight and the morning breeze afterward might make them, and us, weep for joy.

Despite our age we must take our sin seriously, that we might take the gospel seriously as well.

### **EPHESIANS 2:1-3**

Believer, although the apostle writes of the “rest of mankind,” it is your old heart, your former manner of life, that lies open on the operating table. Set forward in your imagination yourself, as you were at some point in time before your conversion.

Paul will come to conversion soon, in verses 4 and onward, but he takes three verses to get there—and he must, so that the Ephesians and you may know how great the power that revived you, and how great the grace that reached into the pit of your depravity and took hold of you.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 59-60.

Where sin abounds in our understanding, grace abounds all the more.

## Dead

The first description of your former self is found in the announcement of verse 1: “And you were dead.”

## Spiritually

It is hard to seize this fact when you consider how alive you felt. You were no follower of Christ, true, but you could breathe. Your heart was pumping blood for all those BC years—or you could not be here today. So what are we to make of the apostle’s pronouncement?

Well, we will know if we read it all: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” That is, you were not physically, but spiritually dead. In one dimension you lived and moved; in another you lay lifeless and cold. Every unbelieving woman is like the self-indulgent widow of 1 Timothy, “dead even while she lives.”<sup>2</sup>

See yourself back then, brushing your teeth before the bathroom mirror. Now, by the eyes of faith flick over to the lens that can perceive the spiritual scene. The doctor sets his doubtful stethoscope against your chest: silence.

Flick back and you are talking in an animated tone with friends; flick, and you are alone in a cold and narrow drawer, tag on your toe, rigor mortis stiffening your still joints.

Through the physical lens, you stand on a mountain trail, the wind blowing back your hair; but flick, and through the spiritual you are in a quiet coffin beneath six feet of compacted earth.

You lived, and all the while you were dead.

“Well,” you think, “all I saw and knew was in the physical, so why should I mind if I was dead in some other dimension?”

I will tell you: because God meets us in the spiritual. He is Spirit, and those who commune and converse with him must do so in spirit. He has sometimes shown himself in the physical, but even then the words of Jesus hold true: “the flesh is no help at all.”<sup>3</sup> No one can have a relationship with God, can truly know him, unless he does so in the spiritual.

And flick, in the spiritual the natural man is lifeless.

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<sup>2</sup> 5:6 (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> John 6:63.

Your experience will attest to the same. See your former self, in a creation and a culture covered in the footprints of God; the hand of God governed the circumstances of your life, and his voice echoed through every twinge of conscience and every marvel of the created order. But you never heard his voice; you never saw him in his work. Yes, you could accept the physical wood of the cross, but when Christ called you to come to him and be saved, you heard nothing, you saw nothing. This is spiritual death: a cold and willful insensitivity to the whole spiritual part of our existence, especially to God, who is Spirit.

## Grace

If this was you, then what must grace be?

Stand with Ezekiel and see yawning before you that valley littered with dry bones—yours among them! These bones cannot seek life; they will not seek God. They are not good, decent, somewhat living bones. These are not unconscious bodies that might awaken, but bones very dry, without sinew, muscle, or organ.

Blink, and see now before you every member of mankind standing spread across the valley of this world. In their eyes is evidence of their totally lifeless spirits; and among the many faces is one you recognize as your own. Heaven asks its question: “Can these bones live?”<sup>4</sup>

And we must reply, “Well, what is grace?”

“Will it seek us before we seek it? Will it descend into your valley to touch our unclean bones, though we have nothing to barter with? Will it love what does not, cannot, love it in return? Will grace purchase our revival and pay the price of it entirely itself?”

And one word answers our inquiries, one word on which the world rests, ready to fall into the permanent and second death of hell—one word, like Atlas, supports the world upon its shoulders.

See in our text again: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you *once* walked.” Once! “Can these bones live?” We reply, “They do!” Once I was dead, but now I live. Flick to the spiritual, and there you will see me walking with God, in his garden of Paradise, in the cool of the day.

If you are in Christ, then you know of what I speak. A world appeared to your heart’s view when you believed. It was as though you’d lived your life thus far in a crate, and the hand of grace, the hand of Christ, had taken hold of a board and pulled the board until it snapped. Sunlight entered for the first time, and as you crawled out of your confinement you realized that you had only half been living. The world was so much

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<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-14.

bigger than you thought. God is a real God, Christ a real Savior, his word unalterable truth, holiness the highest good.

Spiritually speaking, you began to live. Grace did all of this.

Here then is the grandeur of God's grace: "And you were dead...*once!*"

## Bound

But dead was not your only description—Paul adds to that another: "Bound."

See how you walked, in verse 2: "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. "

Theologians have long spoken of the three great enemies of the human soul, the unholy triumvirate: the flesh, the devil, and the world. In this verse and the next, the three are fused together into a metal chain no human effort could ever unlink, and this chain holds the Christless man in place; Christ himself said, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."<sup>5</sup>

Again you might object—you did not seem a slave. You did, outside of salvation, all you wished, and isn't that freedom?

Flick.

## The world

Look again into the spiritual facts, in verse 2: "following the course of this world." There is one metal which held the former you in captivity: the world.

In the halls of high schools, we call the world, and that force which it exerts over the soul, peer pressure. There are norms in place and if you deviate from them you are abnormal—or, more commonly, weird.

Parties with underage drinking, premarital sex, and a disdain for parents are the standards, subtle or loud, set for the student—but have you ever wondered who set these particular norms in place? What committee is responsible for drafting them. And why are they so widely adopted?

We answer, "These norms are what we call the world, and they are the product of collaboration. Our flesh, our natural, fallen impulses, reach up to shape the world from underneath; and from above the devil

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<sup>5</sup> John 8:34.

directs the work to his own ends, to maximize the godlessness of the result.”

Do not dare believe peer pressure is confined to school cafeterias. See your former self, like clay in the hands of society. We are all born Demases, in love with this present world, and blown about by the great winds of academia one day, and the next by winds from Hollywood. Some would charge Calvinism with making robots of us all—no, that is not the accomplishment of Calvinism, but of culture. We were slaves to the dictates of this world, and we walked in line with all the rest.

### The devil

Verse 2 continues to our next captor: “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” We are bound by the world, but also by the devil.

This created being is an evil dictator far worse than any man has ever been. He is prince of the power, or the domain, of the air—it seems his demons fill the atmosphere, and he himself, we know, marches to and fro over the earth, a spiritual malignancy active in his work of corruption, spreading his influence like a metastatic cancer.

You remember when Cain stewed over his brother’s success, how God had warned him, “sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if you do nothing you will lose, because your enemy is active. The cosmic powers over this present darkness do not take weekends or holidays.

And to this devil, this angelification of concentrated evil, you yourself once swore allegiance. We shudder to think of the occult and of Satanic worship—but you see, we were all devotees of the devil. We were held captive by him to do his will.

### The flesh

The world held us with a tight grip, and the devil with a grip even tighter—yet none of this would be possible without the final hand holding us.

See verse 3: “among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

The final hand grips us, yet it is our own hand, for we were bound by our own flesh.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4:7.

The devil is a tempter, but we provide the raw materials, for “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”<sup>7</sup> If the mouse did not have a taste for cheese, the mousetrap could not draw him. What there was in innocent Eve that the enemy could use we do not know, but when that snake sets himself to ensnare her offspring we know the abundance of opportunity he discovers: “the passions of our flesh.” He finds a total depravity—total because every part, body and mind, has the cancer in it.

And these are not vices picked up from the outside—we were, as Paul suggests, *by nature* all of this. The doctrine of Original Sin, that all of Adam’s descendants are born in depravity because of his initiating sin, is offensive to some, yet it is, to echo Chesterton, the only Christian doctrine that can really be proved. That men and women without exception fall short of their own moral law and inner ethic is evident everywhere. The daily news is often little more than a treatise on Original Sin and its demonstrations in the world.

### Grace

So let me ask again, with our former selves not only dead, but also enslaved to corruption and triple-bound: “Can these bones live?”

See the valley full of death, and watch the Israelites chained one to another, led in lines by an Egyptian whip. Do you see your face among the captives? “Can these be freed?”

And we find our reply: “among whom we all lived...*once!*”

Do you remember well the day that daylight first peaked over the crest of that valley’s rim? Do you remember the shock on the devil’s face, the surprise of your Egyptian overlords? Their dominance of your soul, this world and devil and flesh, was to that point uncontested and uncontestable.

Yet on the dawning of the third day, light broke over the horizon, and down swept the cavalry of God’s grace, following hard at the heels of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

Amid the tumult of the battlefield, Christ the King dismounted and took hold the chain that held your shackled wrist. That three-fold fusion of unbreakable adamantine, that chain he took into his hands, and pulled.

In one moment, the links were shattered. The lure of the world dissolved; the devil and his demons fled away; and your unruly flesh was crucified with Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> James 1:14.

What is grace? This is grace!

Who gives himself for bones? Christ does. Who can look upon a lifeless corpse, a body that cannot feel or love or repay, who can look upon that corpse and love it? Christ can.

Who sees the loathsome toil of one captive soul and cares? Christ! What king ever spent his armies on the rescue of another nation's slaves? Christ, Christ did.

It is no wonder that we with the rest were "children of wrath." We, once a sculpture shaped by the foul odors of the world, by the violence of depraved angels, by the unclean hands of our pulsing flesh, formed into a form abominable to heaven—we are not surprised to find wrath fuming in the clouds over our Sodomish souls, the response of a God who by nature is righteous.

But to look up and find grace? That is an element we never thought to find in the composition of the heavens. Not grace like this.

## Conclusion

You who have entered this place without Christ and without grace, I promise you that Scripture's assessment of your soul—that you are dead and bound by sin—is true.

But I can promise you more than that.

Just as true as your corruption, is Christ; and just as true as your enslavement is salvation. And just as great and greater still than every sin you have ever put your hand to, is the grace of God, poured out in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Are you dead to God? Then come to Christ, and live. Are you dead in trespasses and sins? Then come and be forgiven. Does the world own your soul? Christ has paid the ransom. Does the devil hold you as his captive? Christ has come to proclaim liberty to captives like you. Is your flesh strong? Christ is stronger, I promise you.

I cannot say your sin is a light thing—it is an evil deserving of a second death. But set in the scales, God's grace is still weightier.

This age will urge you to deny or minimize the sin that weighs upon your conscience, but I will show you a still more excellent way.

Confess it, and wrap your arms around the base of Christ's cross.

Then God may declare over you that utterance of grace: "You were dead...*once*."