



Self-Discovery

Ephesians 1:15-23

Grace Church | 10.17.21

If the central question of last week was “do you know God?”, that of this weeks text is “do you know yourself”? Every year, men and women who have the ability spend thousands of dollars trying to answer that question: they go to counseling to dive deep into their inner emotions, they travel to remote cultures or off the grid to discover themselves, they take personality tests, they do meditative exercises, search out their family lineage. There are whole enterprises and business models devoted to self-discovery. Neither is this practice new: ancient people committed themselves also to pilgrimages to holy sites or to distant places in search of meaning. We are all endowed with a desire for self-knowledge. According to the Greek writer Pausanias, the great temple of Apollo at Delphi had that very same maxim inscribed on it’s outer portico: “know thyself.”

Why do you think we are so fascinated with the enneagram? We live in a culture of self. What if I told you today that you could walk out of these doors with an understanding of self that was radically different than any other self-prognosis, and yet radically better? That a journey of self-discovery could start here, in the presence of God and his people? That is exactly what we find in Ephesians 2:1-7. Paul gives first the great backdrop of the human condition in order to allow us to reorient our self-discovery and our identity not in ourselves, but in the very grace of God. So we will start there: by looking with striking clarity to our natural, pre-God selves, before turning towards a picture of our new identity in Christ. We will start with the “and you” and end with the “but God.”

The “and” in verse 1 tips us off to the fact that although our translators give us a helpful chapter break here, this is still part of Paul’s opening thoughts. The themes he is praying for in 1:15-23, that we would have a knowledge of the power of God, are continued here. That knowledge of God, in fact, is what allows us to see ourselves rightly. There is no knowledge of self without a right knowledge of God, because we will always be tricked to thinking reality is the world that revolves around us and for us, instead of the world that is oriented towards the revelation of God’s glory. So now that we have ached in our hearts for a knowledge of God, we turn with the “and” to ourselves. Here we find one overarching reality concerning the human condition, followed by 3 explanations of that reality. We start with the operative word here, that jumps off the page. And you were **dead**.

What might it mean to be “dead” in trespasses and sins? Trespasses are acts of rebellion, a rebellion and action, and sin denotes a missing of the mark, a failure to do what is commanded or



right. Think of it this way: trespass is a stepping over the line of Godliness, sin is failing to reach the line. So it's because of or "in" this state of failure that we can be rightly understood to be "dead". It's not a physical death, because obviously there are plenty stuck in sin against God who breathe his air. And it's not an emotional death, in verse 3 describes this state as having "desires", so it's not a deadness to the world, like a sort of vegetable state. The death that is being described is a spiritual deadness, a deadness to the things of God. To trespass into the places God has created us not to go, and to fail to step into the roles that God has called us creates a deadness of heart before him. In the garden, Adam and Eve trespassed against God by eating of the tree he commanded them not to, and they sinned by failing to fulfill the great mandate to subdue the earth. What resulted was a spiritual deadness. No longer did the earth convey to them intimacy with God: it fought against them. No longer did they walk with God in the garden, instead they were cast out. The fact that their bodies became destined for physical death was only a symptom of the spiritual death that entered the world because of sin.

In one of his sermons, the Great Awakening preacher George Whitfield compared the state of spiritual death apart from God to the rotting corpse of Lazarus:

"Bound hand and foot in grave clothes, locked up in a stinking dark cave, with a great stone rolled on top of it."

Nothing in this world feels so final and so irreversible than death. It is the great equalizer. No one in their right mind expects to circumvent death apart from God. To be dead is to be helpless. This is no joking matter. It's striking, it's severe. All those in sin are walking around slowly rotting away, cold and dead towards God because of their rebellion. Deadness to God is not a stage of life, it is our life before God. We don't slowly age out of spiritual things into death—sin doesn't slowly eat at us, like a scale weighing on us, as if our works were not enough and we slowly drown in our sin. No—the idea here is that apart from the grace of God we are already dead. There are two spiritual states: dead and alive. There are no partially dead. The purpose of such a statement is to wake us up—we prayed for a knowledge of the power of God? Here it comes: what power can make dead men come alive? What power can make those who want nothing to do with God, whose hearts are hard as stone, suddenly cry out to God as Father and Lord? Deadness is the superlative—no other description could bring us to a state of hopelessness than that. And this is not those *out there*, no **verse 3** reminds us we are dead "like the rest of mankind". Dead people don't act, they don't do, they don't earn. Lest a sliver of self-importance or pride remains, Ephesians 2:1 kills it. You were dead. Because we are created to live only in relation to God, a break in that relation cannot mean anything else but death.

Now the text gives us a better explanation of this deadness. Verse 2 says that before Christ we were "following" three things: 1) the course of this world; 2) the prince of the air; and 3) the desires of our flesh.

To "follow" is not quite strong enough in eEnglish to convey the meaning here in the original language. But we get close when we consider the call of Christ. What does he call his disciples to?



He says: “follow me.” To follow is not a free and voluntary jaunt, it is a whole-life discipleship. It is to make the thing you are following your teacher, your master. Paul calls himself a bondservant, a slave of Christ. But before Christ, he was a slave, a follower, a disciple of the course of this world, the prince of the air, and the desires of the flesh.

Following the course of this world is literally translated as “the course of this age”. The idea is very simple: sin has caused death, and so we are living in a spiritually dead age. A great cloud, a barrier between man and God, has been erected. All around us, governments are formed, businesses run, laws created, decisions made, academic degrees handed out, culture shaped—and the majority of it is done with a cold disregard for God. This is a *cultural* deadness. Instead of being alive to the spiritual world—the place where God is—instead of living as kingdom citizens of the age of God that has come in Christ, we lived only for this world. All we could do was seek pleasure or power or peace in this life. This age, this world, was our captive, and we followed the societal norms of the age. This is more than politics: you were not less dead because you used to vote one way and not another. This is not about conservative or progressive agendas. Left or right culture: both are fallen apart from God, and apart from God we are doomed to be enslaved by the whims of the fallen world. And you know what the primary discipleship we fall into in the world? It’s this lie: you have life in yourself. You are good, you are bright, you are entirely self sufficient. And all you have to do is discover that goodness, that “youness”. It impacts our education, our parenting, our understanding of sexuality. There is no greater counter discipleship to the world than to believe without doubt that everything good and true must come from God and is not found in your without him.

There is something else though, competing for this discipleship of death. That is “the prince of the power of the air” in **verse 2**. It is probably not lost on you that this is a reference to Satan. We don’t think enough in our Western enlightenment driven society about the spiritual powers around us, but Scripture is not silent. Our deadness is demonic. Satan here is called “prince” implying a kind of authority. We already know from our text last week that it is not a final authority, since Christ has put all things under his feet—but it’s a real authority. His power is “the air”. No, this is not a defense of the satanic power of electromagnetic waves or television. The reference here is to the physical world. Paul is showing us how far the influence of Satan reaches. It’s everywhere: it’s in the air. Sin has tainted this world, and Satan is the master of sin. There is no where we can go, no air we can breathe this side of redemption that he is not influencing. This doesn’t have to sacre us as Christians, what it should do is give us a stark reminder of our spiritual state before Christ. We were servants, disciples, slaves, of Satan. There is no neutrality here: he is our master or Christ is our master.

How does he work in the world? It is through his spirit—which is not a marker of the Holy Spirit, but rather just a spirit of power, the spiritual force of the demonic—Satan works his power through the sons of disobedience. This is not some special, possessed subset of sinners. No, Paul is making the connection here. There are two kinds of sons in this world, two kinds of heirs. There are those adopted by Satan, the sons of disobedience, which we lived with and partnered with, and there are sons of God. There are those who look forward ot an inheritance from their Father Satan, an



inheritance that is already now fading away, and there are those who will be heirs of the eternal inheritance of God in Christ. I have no other way to explain it except to say again: there is no neutrality. All around us, men and women are given themselves over to be sons of disobedience, heirs of rebellion. And their reward will be the same as Satans: eternal punishment. This is our state apart from God, **verse 3 again**, we all once lived here.

As if our state of bondage and death could not get worse, here in **verse 3** Paul ups the ante. The real problem, the real thing contributing to death, is not what is outside of you. The real problem is what is *inside* of you. We all once lived in the passion of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. Now, the text is not teaching us that the body and the mind and the physical flesh are evil. The word “flesh” here is not speaking about our physical self, but rather that human nature inside of us that is fallen from God. We are not born desiring God—this is the sin of Adam in us. We are not by nature children of holy desires. We are by nature children who sin, and incur the just wrath of God as a right response to that sin. Look around you at the world: the desires of the mind and the body rage uncontrolled. Every day we are tempted to throw away joy with God, faithfulness that lasts forever, for simple pleasures: for lust that lasts a moment, for a few more numbers in our bank account. We are twisted and bent. You were not a slave of sin because sin forced its way in against your will: you loved it, and you freely followed your desires which were continually evil.

This carrying out of passions and desires does not always have to have an immoral face. The ultimate expression of the deadness of sin is not actually gross immorality, it is actually pride. Before Christ, you may have been an upright, religious well-respected, completely washed servant of the lowly. But your heart being dead to God means that you did it all for yourself. There are two desires that control us: either we desire the glory of God, or we desire our own glory. This is not about our outward actions, it’s about the desires of our heart—that is what makes us dead. It’s not our actions, it’s our nature. We don’t need new hands, we need a new heart.

And all of this adds up to the inherent hopelessness of a life without God and dead to him. The scariest reality of our state without God is not described until **verse 3** ends. By nature “children of wrath.” Without God, we don’t simply miss out on the extra-curriculars. It’s not just a lack of what is good. God’s justice is actually retributive, meaning he pays according to the crime. The triune God is infinitely holy. Because he created all things, all sin is against him, which means he cannot and will not ignore it. He is too pure to look on evil, too good to tolerate that which is not, and too glorious to share his glory with another. Our sins separate us from God, which is enough for spiritual death, but they also incur the wrath of God. God’s wrath is not an unchecked anger, it’s not reactionary or arbitrary, like a bubbling over of a kettle. It’s not determined by his mood. God’s wrath is a result of his entire self being set against anything and anyone that is unrighteous. He will make all things right in the end, he will fill all in all. And so there are two ways to experience the wrath of God. First, as a sweet balm, put on Christ, that is painful to understand but ultimately full of hope, because God’s glory is our highest good and he protects his glory at all costs. And secondly, we can experience God’s wrath, when all of our life and sin is revealed, as the most terrifying purity in existence, set against us. Both of these visions of God’s wrath in the end will



understand it as just. No enemy of God will call him unjust for condemning them. And no saint will call God unjust for condemning Christ. But the only way to see God's wrath as full of hope is if we no longer are children of wrath. The only way to see the justice of God as true and right is by coming out of death, being transferred from the discipleship of this world into the one to come, being freed from slavery to the prince of darkness and into service of the Father of lights. The only way we can escape the cycle of constantly falling to our own evil and prideful and self-serving desires is to get new ones. The only way to escape death is by rising again, and the only way dead men rise is if there is a power greater than death.

So friends, I do not know what burdens you carry. But nothing could be worse than spiritual deadness. Your body cannot last forever, but your spirit will. Better to be physically decaying than spiritually rotten. Better to cut off your hands than be cast into hell. I don't know what kind of burden you carry, and it may be a heavy one. God did not promise our life would be easy—but he did promise his burden is light. How can he promise that? Because there is only one load, one burden, one yoke, that will crush us forever. It's not cancer, it's not depression, it's not your boring job, it's not divorce. The one burden that will never be lifted by our own strength is spiritual, eternal death. If that burden were to be lifted, even physical death loses its sting and it's power. Your struggles are real, but if the burden of eternal death is gone, what real burdens are there? What is life by a momentary, light affliction leading to eternal rest and happiness? No other words lift us up from the troubles of life and cause us to fly into the world with joy than those found in **Ephesians 2: 4**. You were dead, *but God*.

You were dead, but you are not alone. You were dead, but God is not silent. You were dead, and nothing about you screamed "deserving of mercy", but God is rich in it. He can't help it: it flows out of him like water, it's the currency of his relations. This richly merical God is exactly what you needed. He looked at you: his rotting, vanquished, corpse of an enemy. And what did he see? An object of love. Not just any love, not just a love that puts up with us, not just a love that liked parts about us. A great love, a love that loved us while we were dead, **verse 5**. Dead things, dead people, are not lovely! In fact, in God's law for his people Israel he commands them: don't go near anything dead! Don't get close to what is unclean. But God *does*. He is not made unholy by the dead, his holiness raises the dead. Look at it: what is the single greatest evidence for the bodily resurrection of Christ, contrary to all the pseudo-scientific doubters? That there are real, living men and women walking around in this life who used to hate God and now are alive to him. Spiritual regeneration—alive with Christ. The resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of a new age: where graves were opened, where tombs can become hopeful and not haunted.

You followed Satan and his world. You had no thought of heaven and the throne of God. But God raised you to seat you with Christ in the heavenly places, to put you up in that place of honor reserved for the conquering hero. Your earthly desires are now replaced by heavenly ones, all because Christ is in you. Jesus died to make you alive: his death for your life. There is a power greater than death, there is a power that makes all our burdens light. That power is the gospel of Jesus Christ.



So what's left? All that is left for us now is to rejoice. We *were* dead. Past tense. So what is our life now? What is life now? **Verse 7** shows us. Life now is immeasurable riches of the kindness of God. That's your story, that's your self-discovery. You are not dead any longer, God is showing his immeasurable kindness and grace in you. Is that a testimony that is on your lips? Do you openly and consistently share the depths of your deadness to show the kindness of God? Is that a testimony that is part of our church? Next time someone asks your enneagram, you can tell them if you want. But also say this: my identity is rooted here: I was dead in sin, and God made me alive in Christ. We have a great story, a great gospel. We have been taken from the depths and risen to the heights. We can't over-hype or over-sell this. So let's hype and sell it. We were dead, now we are alive. We are great sinners, we have a great savior. Let's honor him now in prayer.

