

# “The Bad News of the Gospel”

(Ephesians 2:1-3)

## Introduction

- Unfortunately, much of “evangelism” today (in contemporary Christianity) is reduced to “Jesus loves you” messages – utterly void of anything regarding sin, repentance, or God’s wrath/judgment.
  - ✓ **Illust:** Joel Osteen – a heretical (false gospel, prosperity gospel) preacher – often states that he intentionally does not use words like sin, hell, judgment because people “already feel guilty enough” and such words only “make people feel bad.” He claims that he, instead, focuses “on the goodness of God.” This, of course, is a horrendous mischaracterization of the Gospel and a blasphemous mischaracterization of God (as if God’s holiness and wrath is eliminated by His “goodness”; as if God’s attributes need to be tempered by our fragile self-esteem; as if God’s sovereignty is controlled by our wishes and whims).
- Today it is fashionable to think of humans as basically good, and that most people are not deserving of God’s wrath or judgment – especially not the condemnation of eternal hell. Even when people do think about or discuss what is wrong with humanity, it is often described in terms of “being sick”, “well-intended”, “to error is human”, or “still needing to evolve” – and not in terms of sin, immorality, or depravity.

In the Bible, however, we find the unvarnished truth:

**Jer 17:9** ~ “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Jer 17:9 ~ “The human mind is more deceitful than anything else. It is incurably bad. Who can understand it?” (NET)

**Isa 64:6** ~ “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

Isa 64:6 ~ “We are all like one who is unclean, all our so-called righteous acts are like a menstrual rag in your sight. We all wither like a leaf; our sins carry us away like the wind.” (NET)

**Rom 3:10-18, 23** ~ “as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup>no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’ <sup>13</sup>‘Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.’ ‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’ <sup>14</sup>‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’ <sup>15</sup>‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known.’ <sup>18</sup>‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ ... <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (see Job 25)

**Rom 6:23** ~ “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- The truth is, we cannot truly understand the “good news” of the Gospel until we first understand the “bad news” of our sin. A person cannot appreciate being found if they do not realize that they were lost; they do not want to be rescued if they do not think they are in danger; they do not desire forgiveness if they do not think they have sinned. Likewise, a person does not desire the (gracious) salvation from God if they do not realize that they are under the (just) wrath of God. They will not understand the Good News (salvation) if they do not first understand the bad news (condemnation).
  - ✓ **Illust:** “Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed” (Charles Spurgeon; *Autobiography*, 1:54).
- It is with this understanding that Paul, as he describes the salvation of all Christians, declared the “bad news” of the Gospel.

**Eph 2:1-3** ~ “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, 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 – <sup>3</sup>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.”

➤ From this passage, Paul outlined the “bad news” of the Gospel in three specific ways.

### A. The unbeliever’s spiritual condition (vs.1)

➤ The first truth that we are confronted with is that the unbeliever is spiritually “*dead*” (*nekros*; vs.1). That is, apart from a saving faith in Jesus Christ, the sinner has no spiritual vitality. In and of themselves, unbelievers have no inclination toward God or godly things (Rom.3:10-18, 23). They do “*not accept the things of the Spirit of God*” (1Cor.2:14); they do not desire God or godliness; they are unable to live according to God’s commands. Just as a dead person cannot raise himself to life physically, so too a person who is dead spiritually cannot raise himself to spiritual life. The unbeliever is completely dependent upon God’s sovereign love and saving grace to be “*made ... alive ... with Christ*” (Eph.2:5).

**Rom 8:7-8** ~ “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup>Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (see Eph.4:17-19; Col.1:21)

➤ It is important to note at this point (as we will see again in verse three) that man does not become spiritually dead but is spiritually dead. Every person, with the only exception being Jesus Christ, is born into sin and therefore born spiritually dead (i.e., spiritual stillborn).

✓ Illust: “Man never starts on ground level, as it were. We do not start neutral, we do not start in a kind of indeterminate state, neither good nor bad. No, we start down in the depths of a pit. We are first raised up from that; and then we are raised right up into the very heavens themselves. So the apostle starts where we must start. Salvation comes to us where we are; not where we would like to be, not as we would like to think of ourselves idealistically. The gospel of Jesus Christ is thoroughly realistic and it starts with us exactly where we are, and that is, at the bottom of a pit of corruption” (D. Martyn

Lloyd-Jones; *An Exposition of Ephesians* [vol.2]; p.14).

➤ Those who are not “*in Christ*” remain “*dead in the trespasses and sins*” (vs.1). Notice the two near-synonymous words Paul used to describe the spiritual condition of the unbeliever.

#### 1. “*dead in ... trespasses*”

➤ The Greek word translated “*trespasses*” (*paraptōma*; vs.1; see 1:7; 2:5) means to slip, to stumble, or to fall. Whether intentional or unintentional, this describes the person who goes outside the bounds of God’s law. This is illustrated in our English word “trespass”, as the “trespasser” has violated the “no trespassing” order of our boundaries. All those who trespass the law of God will be prosecuted under God’s law.

#### 2. “*dead in ... sins*”

➤ A second way Paul described those who are spiritually dead is “*dead in ... sins*” (vs.1). This word (*hamartia*) is the general, most-common, word for sin [variations of the Greek word are used over 200 times in the New Testament]. This refers to any and every wrongdoing. The word literally means “to miss the mark”, as in hunting or target practice. Every sin misses the mark, or the standard, of God’s holiness (see Jms.2:10-11; Gal.3:10).

**Rom 3:23** ~ “for all have sinned [*hamartanō*] and fall short of the glory of God”

✓ Illust: “Sin is falling short of God’s glory, and falling short of God’s glory is sin” (John MacArthur; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians*; 2:1-3).

➤ This does not result in spiritual deadness, but is the result of spiritual deadness. The unbeliever is not “mostly dead”, or even terminally ill, but totally dead – with no spiritual life. Those who are “*dead in ... trespasses and sins*” (vs.1) have no love for God in their hearts. They are deaf to the voice of God, foolish concerning the will of God, and blind to their need for God. They are “*haters of God*” (Rom.1:30), “*enemies of the cross of Christ*” (Phil.3:18), and “*hostile to God*” (Rom.8:7).

**Rev 3:17** [Laodicea] ~ “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

➤ The unbeliever is as unresponsive to God spiritually as a corpse is unresponsive physically.

✓ Illust: Perhaps the 18th century revivalist George Whitefield (1714-1770) said it best:

“Come, ye dead, Christless, unconverted sinners, come and see the place where they laid the body of the deceased Lazarus; behold him laid out, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, locked up and stinking in a dark cave, with a great stone placed on the top of it. View him again and again; go nearer to him; be not afraid; smell him. Ah! How he stinketh. Stop there now, pause a while; and whilst thou art gazing upon the corpse of Lazarus, give me leave to tell thee with great plainness, but greater love, that this dead, bound entombed, stinking carcass, is but a faint representation of thy poor soul in its natural state: for, whether thou believest or not, thy spirit which thou bearest about with thee, sepulchred in flesh and blood, is as literally dead to God, and as truly dead in trespasses and sins, as the body of Lazarus was in the cave.

Was he bound hand and foot with grave-clothes? So art thou bound hand and foot with thy corruptions: and as a stone was laid on the sepulcher, so is there a stone of unbelief upon thy stupid heart. Perhaps thou hast lain in this state, not only four days, but many years, stinking in God’s nostrils. And, what is still more effecting thou art as unable to raise thyself out of this loathsome, dead state, to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave in which he lay so long. Thou mayest try the power of thy own boasted free-will, and the force and energy of moral persuasion and rational arguments (which, without all doubt, have their proper place in religion); but all thy efforts, exerted with never so much vigor, will prove quite fruitless and abortive, till that same Jesus, who said ‘Take away the stone’; and cried, ‘Lazarus, come forth’ also quicken you” (George Whitefield; sermon “The Resurrection of Lazarus”, John 11:43-44).

➤ This is the spiritual condition of every unbeliever.

## B. The unbeliever’s spiritual corruptions (vs.2-3a)

➤ The second way in which the apostle describes the “bad news” of the Gospel is the unbeliever’s spiritual corruptions. The unbeliever is a spiritual zombie walking in opposition to God and walking in the mire of sin. They are under demonic influence; governed by evil and godlessness; reveling in pride, immorality, and false worship. Having not the Spirit of God, they are enslaved to sin.

**John 8:34** ~ “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.’”

➤ The apostle Paul outlined these corruptions into three categories.

### 1. The world ~ “*following the course of this world*”

➤ First, unbelievers are “*following the course of this world*” (vs.2; *kata aiōn kosmos*). That is, they are living according to the system of this ungodly world – e.g. atheistic ideologies, secular psychologies, humanistic/satanic religions, unbiblical political paradigms, sexual immoralities, and idolatries. They are not walking on the narrow road that leads to God, but on the wide road that leads to destruction (Matt.7:13-14). Here “*this world*” (vs.2) refers to that which is opposed to God; not the earth, but the ungodly system and values that govern all unbelievers.

**John 15:19** ~ “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

**John 17:14** [Jesus prayed for His disciples/apostles] ~ “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”

**John 18:36** ~ “Jesus answered [Pilate], ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.’”

➤ As Christians, we are called to be in the world but not of the world. To live in this world without being corrupted by worldliness or worldly things – godlessness or ungodliness. Unbelievers are utterly helpless against the seductive and deceptive schemes of the devil. They are not only in the world, but they are also of the world – worldly and not godly.

**Rom 12:2** ~ “Do not be conformed [*syschēmatizō*] to this world [*aiōn*], but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

**James 4:4** ~ “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

**1 John 2:15-17** ~ “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup>For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup>And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever”

**1 John 5:19** ~ “We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”

1 John 5:19 ~ “And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.” (KJV)

## 2. The devil ~ *“following the prince of the power of the air”*

➤ The second way unbelievers live in spiritual corruption is by *“following the prince of the power of the air”* (vs.2). This refers to “Satan” (*Satanas*; adversary) or “the devil” (*diabolos*; accuser or slanderer). He is described in the Bible as *“the ruler of this world”* (Jn.12:31; 14:30; 16:11), *“the god of this world”* (2Cor.4:4), *“the prince of demons”* (Matt.12:24), and here as *“the prince of the power of the air”* (vs.2). While Satan is no threat to, and no match for God, he is a formidable (unbeatable) foe for humans (see 1Jn.4:4; 5:18).

Satan is a fallen arch-angel who opposes God and seeks to tempt (Matt.4:1; 1Thess.3:5) and deceive (Jn.8:44; 2Cor.4:4) people away from God, and even to destroy them (1Pet.5:8). God is allowing Satan *“the power”* (*exousia*; vs.2) to temporarily reign and have limited rule in this world (*“the air”*; i.e., his realm) – all under the sovereign authority of God, and only for as long as God will allow (Rev.20:10).

➤ Satan is further described in this passage as *“the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience”* (vs.2). Through his minions (demons), Satan oppresses and possesses unbelievers to do his bidding. They are regarded here as *“the sons of disobedience”* (vs.2) because their lives are consumed and characterized by disobedience to God. This is true of everyone who rejects Jesus Christ as God’s Son, and refuses to receive Him as their Lord and Savior – from the most militant atheist to the most moral false-worshiper.

**Eph 5:6** ~ “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

### 3. The flesh ~ “in the passions of our flesh”

➤ A third way in which unbelievers live out their spiritual corruption is “*in the passions of [their] flesh*” (vs.3). That is, they live not according to the word or will of God but giving in to their fleshly (sinful) “*passions*” (*epithymia*; vs.3). While this word can refer to positive or godly desires (Lk.22:15; Phil.1:23), here it is in reference to sinful lusts that come from the flesh and not from the Spirit of God.

**John 8:44** ~ “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires [*epithymia*]. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

**Gal 5:16-17** ~ “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires [*epithymia*] of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the desires [*epithymeō*] of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires [*epithymeō*] of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ... <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions [*pathēma*] and desires [*epithymia*].”

➤ Since they do not have the Spirit of God –unable to “*submit to God’s law*” and unable to “*please God*” (Rom.8:7-8) – they cannot help “*carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*” (vs.3). Whereas “*passions*” (*epithymia*) refers to “lusts”, “*desires*” (*thelēma*) refers to the “will” (Eph.1:1, 5, 9, 11). Enslaved to sin, the unbeliever is captive to fulfill the sinful desires of their “*body*” (*sarx*; flesh) and their “*mind*” (*dianoia*; thoughts).

While unbelievers are not as sinful as they could possibly be, they are totally corrupt as sin pervades their minds, bodies, desires, affections, and actions. They are, therefore, justly condemned by God as sinners.

### C. The unbeliever’s spiritual condemnation (vs.3b)

➤ The unbeliever is under the condemnation of God’s just “*wrath*” (*orgē*; vs.3). Because of their rejection of God, and His Son Jesus Christ, they are not children of God but remain “*children of [God’s] wrath*” (vs.3). The consequence of sin is physical and spiritual death (Rom.6:23), and separation from God (Is.59:2).

People will often ask, “Why would a loving God send people to hell?” This is a misnomer. People go to hell when they reject God’s saving grace (God’s salvation), which comes through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior.

**John 3:16-19, 36** ~ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ... <sup>36</sup>Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (see Col.3:6)

➤ This touches on two great biblical doctrines.

#### 1. Original sin ~ “by nature children of wrath”

➤ First, we find the doctrine known as “original sin.” Notice that the unbeliever is a child of God’s wrath “*by nature*” (*physis*; vs.3). Simply put, everyone (other than Jesus) is born into sin (Ps.51:5). This resulted as a consequence of Adam’s sin, which resulted in every human being having a sin nature. Every human, being “*in Adam*” (1Cor.15:22), inherited his sin and guilt. We sin because we are sinners.

**Rom 5:12** ~ “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (see Rom.5:12-21)

**John 3:5-6** ~ “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’”

- While this doctrine is controversial, it is plain to see in Scripture and in humanity (from a toddler’s “terrible-two’s” to the most hardened or depraved criminal). Even a cursory glance at our world should reveal that people are not “basically good.” More poignantly, if we honestly look into our own hearts (particularly for the unbeliever) we would realize that we are not inherently good.

## 2. Universal sin ~ *“like the rest of mankind”*

- Second, we find the doctrine of “universal sin.” This elaborates on the previous point. Original sin is universal in that it affects every person: *“like the rest of mankind”* (vs.3). With the only exception being Jesus Christ, every person is justly condemned by God as a sinner.

**Titus 3:3** ~ “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” (see Col.1:21; 3:5-7)

- Consequently, every person is in desperate need of God’s saving grace. No one is good enough – no one can do enough good – to warrant salvation (Rom.3:10-18, 23). Salvation comes through God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

## Conclusion

- To be sure, while some preachers/Christians forsake altogether the “bad news” of the Gospel (preaching only “Jesus loves you” or inviting you to “ask Jesus into your heart”), there are others who unfortunately focus exclusively on the “bad news” of the Gospel (preaching hellfire and brimstone sermons of God’s judgment and wrath). The apostle Paul did not make either of these mistakes. He clearly outlined both the “bad news” of the Gospel (as we have seen; Eph.2:1-3), and the “good news” of the Gospel (as we, Lord willing, will see next time; Eph.2:4-10). To be sure, the “bad news” is really bad, but the “good news” is really (really) good!
- Did you notice the “good news” of the Gospel even in the “bad news” of this passage? There are some great, glorious, words that we, as Christians, must not overlook.

**Eph 2:1-3** ~ “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, 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 – <sup>3</sup>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.”

- Again, we see that becoming a true Christian is not merely “asking Jesus into your heart” or “accepting Him as your Savior.” The true Christian receives, by faith, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This results in a radical transformation: 1] Their spiritual condition has changed as they were “dead in sin” but now are alive in Christ (Eph.2:5); 2] They are no longer a slave to unrighteousness/the devil but are now slaves of righteousness/God (see Rom.6:17-22); 3] They are no longer condemned under God’s just wrath (Rom.8:1) but are delivered *“from the wrath to come”* by Jesus Christ the Son of God (1Thess.1:10; Rom.5:9; Gal.3:13; 1Thess.5:9).