

Free will. Man's Last Gasp to Justify any self-worth

What is meant by the phrase, the free will of man? Does man actually have a free will which speaks to an entirely autonomous will? Man certainly has a will, but as we'll soon discover that comes with the caveat that in Adam we are dead in our trespasses and sins. As we go through our text today this will become clear.

If we were to roughly outline this second chapter to the Ephesians it would probably go something like this: What you were, what you are, and what you can become as a child of the living God. What you were, outside of Christ, was spiritually dead as Paul clearly tells us in the first three verses of this chapter.

What you are, in Christ, is one who has experienced the magnificent grace of God which has resulted in eternal life in the resurrected life of our Savior Jesus Christ, which is what we see in verses 4 through 9 of this second chapter.

And what you can become, as believers in Jesus Christ, is very important to understand, and it finds its expression in EPH 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

This is who we are in Christ, God's workmanship, and together we have been called to walk in the newness of this life in the power of the Holy Spirit. But today we are going to back up to verse one of chapter two and look at what we were outside of Christ. This is not a bad place to start because it gives us a proper perspective of who we were in relationship to God when we did not know Him by faith in Christ. It's a humbling place to start because it peels back the veneer of man's perceived self-worth and exposes the real state of all people who are born into this world with the nature of Adam.

In my last study I devoted the entire time to verse one where Paul says to these Ephesian believers; and you were dead in your trespasses and sins, which has at its core an understanding of the death that Adam and Eve died the day in which they ate of the tree from which God commanded them not to eat.

Aside from the physical death that Adam introduced to the world that day, I also defined from Scripture what his spiritual death actually was as God pronounced judgment on him in Genesis 3. Since I took a deep dive into what it means to be dead, spiritually, in that study, I won't repeat it all here. I would encourage you to revisit that teaching as it will help you better understand the consequences of sin that results in the death of all mankind and what it takes for God to bring spiritually dead men back to life.

But in summary, to be dead in our trespasses and sins, is best explained in the description that God gave the prophet Ezekiel as it related to the spiritual deadness of Israel.

Ezekiel 37:1-3 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, *there were* very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, *they were* very dry. He said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, You know.

Good answer from Ezekiel, but the context is clear as this is a rhetorical question from God to the prophet with the obvious answer, of course dead dry bones cannot live. But God goes on to make the connection as to who these dead dry bones are and how God brings life where there was only death.

Ezekiel 37:11-14 Then He said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it, declares the LORD.

God makes it clear that unless he does a miracle to bring His people from spiritual death to spiritual life they remain dead dry bones, which is to say, they will not, and cannot seek for God in any truly spiritual capacity that is pleasing to God. And so, the idea that men have a free will that has the ability to please God by choosing to believe in His Son is to misunderstand the deadness we live in the flesh. Paul makes it clear why dead men will not seek for God.

Romans 8:6-8 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

The teaching of the free will of man is a misnomer. It assumes man is an autonomous creature who is capable of seeing his need to be delivered from the penalty of sin and then having an innate ability to exercise a faith that reaches out to God for the solution to his sin problem through faith in Christ.

The problem with the idea that man has the innate ability to choose God in his spiritually dead state discounts the fact that man's nature in Adam is what Paul describes in our text in verse 3 as being children of wrath. We are Adam's

rebellious offspring and we inherit the same death sentence that Adam received in the day that he ate of the tree from which God commanded him not to eat. In the day he ate of the tree Adam surely died as God promised. In that day Adam's nature changed from a God-pleaser to a God hater. In other words, he went from life to death. And being in Adam we too are born spiritually dead, which is what is declared in 1 Corinthians 15:22 As in Adam all die.

Let me try and illustrate this. Man's nature as a child of wrath is now restricted to make choices in conformity to that nature. It cannot and will not choose that which is contrary to that nature. Let's take the nature of a lamb for example. If you feed a lamb a rib eye steak and place next to that steak a fresh bed of hay that lamb will only choose the hay.

Why? Because the nature of a lamb falls under the category of herbivore. It has the free will, if you will, to choose the steak, but because its nature is what it is, it will turn up its nose to the steak, even if that lamb was starving. In that case the lamb's free will is not free to make any other choice than what its nature demands.

In a similar way, the nature of man is such that given the choice to choose self or God, it will always choose self. Why? Because being children of wrath our natural desires are to please self, or the flesh, that cannot see past its nature which is dead in its trespasses and sins. Paul explains it this way in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 7:5 For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

Of course, this begs the question, then how is it that some believe in Christ and some don't? If all men are born with the nature of Adam, which is spiritually dead, with no desire for the things of the one true God, what changed in the spiritually dead person to reach out to God? Again, I refer you back to my last study. But the short answer is actually found in the beginning of this letter to the Ephesians where Paul is addressing formerly spiritually dead people who are now born again in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3-6 Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

When I taught through this section in the first chapter of this letter, I made it clear as to why people believe in Jesus Christ for the redemption of their sin as they are

brought from the darkness of sin into the light of the Life found in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And it all began with the truly free will choice God made in eternity past as he chose a people for himself before the foundation of the world who would be brought into the kingdom of God as the Father sent the Son to redeem them.

John 6:37-39 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.

But simply because men do not have the spiritual capacity to seek for the one true God because of the deadness of their nature in Adam, does this mean people do not have the capacity to do any good?

I don't think anyone can argue against people having the capacity to make choices that are deemed good by man's definition where those choices can benefit the individual and others. St. Jude's Children's hospital comes to mind where a great deal of good results from people donating to a cause that impacts in a very positive way the health of children who suffer diseases of every kind, where the children and their families are given the best medical care at no expense to those families. Most people would call that a good thing. And there are countless other examples like this.

But when God defines the word good, as it applies to doing good that results in a right relationship with Him, He defines it quite differently, where even the best of our good works come up short of that which pleases him in a righteous way.

Isaiah 64:6-7 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on Your name,

And so, when we talk about that which is good and pleasing to God in a way that allows us to come into a right fellowship with God, we have to defer to what God deems good. And so, today's study will focus on where we were outside of Christ as we continue this teaching on man's will which desires to run from God not to him.

In light of this I want to refresh our memories as to what our spiritual deadness outside of Christ looked like and how God called us out from death to life as he metaphorically opened our graves and caused us to come up out of our graves as he put His Spirit in us causing us to come to life as we were graciously given the gift of faith allowing us to embrace this new life in Christ. And so, the opening line of chapter 2 sets the stage for the hope that Paul will soon declare in Christ.

Ephesians 2:1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

Paul is speaking in the past tense as he reminds these believers that they were once dead, but now they are no longer dead, what the song Amazing Grace characterizes; I once was lost, but now am found was blind, but now I see. But this deadness is characterized by Paul in verse two of our text in an activity where these Ephesian believers were previously walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

And so, essentially Paul says they used to actively walk, but their activity was defined by their deadness. This might seem to be a contradiction in terms and yet it shows us that death has a life of its own. It's not going anywhere towards the one true God, but it is active in its pursuit which will eventually lead it to a final death or separation from God forever, what the apostle John describes as the second death.

Revelation 21:8 But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

The second death follows the first death in Adam after his rebellion into which we were all born. These Ephesian believers were like every other pagan Ephesian as they once walked according to the course of this world. A more literal treatment of this section would be they walked in the age of this world. The word age is the same word that Paul utilizes to define this present world where Christ came to redeem his people from the evilness of this age.

Galatians 1:4 [Christ] gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

We who are in Christ have been delivered from this present evil age in the sense that we are no longer residents of this evil world with its curse that results in death.

Philippians 3:20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;

Though our legal status in Christ before a holy God declares that we are residents of heaven, we still have to walk in this present age as we eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will return on the last day to raise us up and literally fulfill our citizenship in the new heavens and new earth. The good news is we don't walk alone in this present age as we have been sealed and filled with the Holy Spirit who enables us to go forward in the grace and strength of God.

But as we come to the latter part of verse two Paul reminds these Ephesian believers of their past deadness in their trespasses and sins that desired only to **walk** according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

This is actually a reference back to the garden of Eden where man's spiritual deadness originated as Adam became a son of disobedience as he ate of the tree from which God commanded him not to eat, where both he and his wife desired to be like God. Satan, who is revealed as a serpent in the Genesis account is the prince of the power of the air as he labors to deceive the world. The spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience is not describing a demon spirit that causes men to sin and rebel. The spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience is in the immediate context of the human spirit that is dead in its transgressions and sins. In other words, this spirit is describing the nature of every human being outside of Christ that demonstrates a defiant posture against the things of God that leads to the death that Adam and Eve introduced into this world through their rebellion that Paul brings back up later in this letter.

Ephesians 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.

This is why Satan, or the prince of the power of the air, cannot be blamed for God's wrath coming upon the sons of disobedience. It is the disobedience of these sons that demands God's wrath. And then Paul once again reminds these Ephesian believers that this was their fate in the deadness of their trespasses and sins as he says in verse 3 of our text.

Ephesians 2:3 Among them [sons of disobedience] we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

These Ephesian believers are reminded by Paul that their former lives had only one thing in common with every other pagan; the lust of the flesh and of the mind that resulted in being identified as a child of wrath. Notice too, that Paul includes himself in this category of being a former child of wrath. Among them [sons of disobedience] we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh. Paul understood that it was by God's grace and grace alone that he was brought from the darkness of sin into the light of the Son of God, even as he was actively in the process of trying to destroy the church of Christ.

Acts 9:1-4 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?

Those were the words of the risen Jesus who took Paul's hatred for the church personally, and yet our Lord had chosen this accomplice to murder to be a part of his eternal kingdom as he gave life to Saul, (over-riding Saul's will that had zero

desire in seeking the Messiah Jesus at the time). God changed Saul's name to Paul, and gave him the task of being an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul knew what he deserved and now with God opening his eyes enabling him to be humbled in faith before the Lord, he gave his life to serve the living Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is why he later wrote to the Corinthian church, "For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (1 Corinthians 15:9-10)

By the way, Paul made no excuse that the devil made him persecute the church as one who used to walk according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air.

People will not be judged before a holy God because they were deceived by Satan. They will be judged because they actively rebel against God who revealed Himself in the creation of his world and in His Son. This is what the deadness of man's heart produces. It seeks its own way and it moves away from God not towards Him. It walks in self-deception which is really a fantasy world. It's not reality. The reality is that God will not be mocked and He must judge sin. To walk in the deadness of this fantasy produces death and destruction and yet men call it life and contentment. If that isn't deception, I don't know what is. Satan offers what he calls happiness and people are dying to get in line. And the line Satan uses hasn't changed all that much from what we saw in the Garden of Eden.

GEN 3:4-5 You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

By the way, don't think that Christians can't be deceived by the enemy. We are not exempt, but we certainly have a great advantage in that we have the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of Truth. Paul warned the Corinthian church, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." (2 Corinthians 11:3) We see a similar concern from Paul when he wrote to the Galatian church.

GAL 1:6-7 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

One thing we need to keep in mind is that these sons of disobedience in the second chapter of Ephesians are what we used to be outside of Christ. And so, there is a sense in which we should be able to identify with them because we too

used to be exactly like them. And the reason I bring this is up is because there's the temptation to look down on unbelieving people and think that we're better than them.

We have eternal life in Christ, but it wasn't because of anything we did to attain it. Like Paul, Christ came to us and opened our blind eyes as he brought us from death to life as he even gave us the faith to believe. We must never think that there was some inherent good in us that enabled us to see the light. We, just like the rest of the world, were moving away from God. And so, when we look at the world there should be a real compassion for them who are lost and a desire to love them with the truth. Praise God someone shared the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with us at some point in our lives.

Christians don't have room to be condescending or judgmental or take a "holier than thou" attitude when it comes to his or her relationship to the lost in this world. We were all part of the lost, which is why Jesus Christ commissions us to go out into all the world with the truth of the gospel. This is why verse three should be part of our daily reflection on God's mercy extended to we who deserved his wrath but were instead given his grace.

Ephesians 2:3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

This verse is overflowing with the idea that we were actively pursuing our sinful natures as this verse expands on verse two where outside of Christ we were walking according to the course of this world. In fact, the first three verses are identifying spiritual death outside of Christ where this death walks and lives in a way that leads to eternal separation from God. This is who we were outside of Christ. This should humble all of us who are in Christ because it takes us right back to the beginning of this letter that glories in the grace of God extended to us in Christ.

EPH 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Paul goes on to explain these blessings in the immediate context as he reveals how God loved us as He chose us before the foundations of the world, where He predestined us unto adoption. All of these blessings are found in the Son of God that Paul then shows to be our only hope and Savior.

When we meditate on this glorious truth, we begin to see how magnificent the grace of God really is. We begin to understand that we've been called out of this darkness of sin which has one consequence, God's wrath. We were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. Paul is using language which shows us that there is a personal connection to a head, to a father, to a family. In verse 2 he uses

the phrase, sons of disobedience. And now in verse 3 he uses the phrase, children of wrath.

To be a son or a child of someone denotes a personal family relationship with personal consequences. And there are really only one of two families anyone can belong to. People either belong to their father Satan or our Father God by faith in Christ alone. Jesus Christ made this clear when speaking to a group of Jews when he made the comment that though they could trace their biological roots back to Abraham, they were not walking in the righteous ways of Abraham, thus God the God of Abraham was not their Father. And the Jews responded:

John 8:41-44 The only Father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

Their father, Satan, is an abusive father whose plan is to ultimately murder these children. Why would anyone follow such a father? Because they don't have eyes to see through his lies and deception because they choose to believe a lie, because they are dead in their trespasses and sins. On the other hand, our heavenly Father has chosen a people for himself before the foundation of the world and adopts us into His eternal family. His love is pure and righteous and everlasting as Jesus makes clear.

JOH 14:23 If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

The unregenerate heart willingly continues as a child of wrath even as the light of Life reveals Himself as the only Savior. Many think that all people have God as their Father, that we're all God's children. No, all people have God as their creator, but to have God as our heavenly Father necessitates a change in status from being a child of wrath whose father is Satan, to a child of God, which only comes through faith in Christ.

This can only be a work of the Holy Spirit who takes dead men and raises them from the grave of wrath and destruction unto Christ so that they are now enabled to respond to Christ's command to come out of the grave.

Titus 3:5-7 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The question is how do we show our thanks to God for delivering us from His wrath to the hope of eternal life in the risen Christ? And do we appreciate this life in a way where we understand where we came from and then desire to go forward in this new life to do everything according to God's word and will to separate ourselves from the world in the power of the Holy Spirit?

The first three verses of Ephesians chapter 2 describe hopelessness for the sons of disobedience. They describe death, sins and trespasses, belonging to the prince of the power of the air, living in the lust of our flesh and being by nature children of wrath. It's when we come to verse 4 that we see a word that is probably one of the most comforting words in all the Bible. But...

Next time we'll see how this word transitions to the greatest hope this world could ever know. But in the mean-time, consider where you came from if you know Christ, and rejoice in this new life we have in Him with lives that demonstrate we belong to a Father who loved us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for us. That's a Father worth loving back with a life of gratitude and thankful trust and obedience.

I know this section of Scripture is not a popular place to visit, but my prayer for you is that if you know Christ, now you know why you know him. It's all God's grace all the time. If you don't know Christ as Lord and Savior, then my prayer is that you humble yourself before a holy God who desires to bring his people out from under the designation, child of wrath into his family by adoption through his Son, Jesus Christ.

In repentance and faith in Christ you will be able to rejoice in these words.

Romans 5:8-10 ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath *of God* through Him. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.