

Dead or Alive? In or Out?

Ephesians 2:1-3

Starting in **chapter 1:3**, Paul's one long continuous sentence stretches into **chapter 2**, as he seems unable to contain his excitement about all that we have in **Christ**. But these three verses are different, as he reminds the believers in Ephesus (and us) of where they (we) have come from, how we used to be before.

The contrast with the whole of the rest of the letter could hardly be sharper. Paul makes a short list of opposites to the "*riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people*" which he has already mentioned and goes on to explain in greater detail.

1) "*You **were** dead in your transgressions and sins*". The Greek words mean 'slipping off the path' and 'missing the target'. It is not only deliberate rebellion against God which marks out a life that is dead, but also our 'ordinary' failings and non-achievement. To use non-religious language, we might say 'dead in mistakes and failure'. Please see the PAST TENSE! We **were** dead . . . "*But God . . .*" (**verse 4**)

2) "*You followed the ways of this world*" – with the inevitable spiritual results. Paul (and the Lord Jesus) had no illusions about who 'the prince of this world' is, and **1 John 5:19** puts it very graphically: "*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*" Again, please see the past tense!

3) "*All of us also . . . gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*" Paul is not pointing the finger at the folks in Ephesus; we were **all** like that, he says, just living for our own gratification. In his case, he used to get his gratification by being ultra-religious and self-righteous and persecuting others. Just because he had been religious did not mean that he had lived a selfless life!

All of these lead on to the glorious "*But God . . .*" in **verse 4**. Paul was confident that the Ephesian believers had moved on and away from these characteristics of a life dead towards God. His purpose in writing the letter is to see them move on further.

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The history of this church is sketchy but very informative.

We first meet them in **Acts 18:19-20 & 24-26**, as Paul drops off Priscilla and Aquila, briefly talks with the Jews in the synagogue and then moves off to get back to Antioch. Meanwhile, a very enthusiastic preacher called

Apollos comes through the area. Priscilla and Aquila hear Apollos speaking in the synagogue and quickly take him to one side to give him a more complete understanding of 'the way of God'.

When Paul comes back to Ephesus (**Acts 19:1-7**), he finds some 'disciples', but something strikes him as not quite right with them, so he asks a question that few would dare ask today: "*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*" Their answer reveals the same gap in their understanding as Priscilla and Aquila had discovered with Apollos. They, too, only knew about the sort of baptism that John the Baptist had proclaimed – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Apollos had good and accurate information about John's type of baptism. He was even able to show from the Old Testament scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. What he didn't know (until Priscilla and Aquila told him) was that the Holy Spirit was given to all those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

Because he didn't know it himself, he could not pass it on, so the 'disciples' in Ephesus remained as just learners and pupils until Paul came through, spotted the fact that they evidently had not received the Holy Spirit, and immediately acted to put it right.

It was not just a case of Paul laying his hands on them and them receiving the Holy Spirit. Look carefully and you will see some key teaching and response – brief, but it's there!

Paul takes them from where they are (knowing John's baptism of repentance for forgiveness) and leads them on. John did not just get people to repent and be baptised, he says, but told them to believe in Jesus. As soon as they heard that, they responded by asking for baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus.

What was so different? This baptism was not just a symbol of putting the past behind them and making a new start – as John's baptism had been. This was a statement of identification with Jesus. In **verses 4 & 5**, 'in' could be better translated 'into'. Both their believing and their baptism involved movement – believing **into** new life in Christ, being baptised **into** his name, publicly identified with him.

In the rest of **Acts 19**, we see that this was just the start. Paul stayed in Ephesus for another two years, and there is little doubt that this marked the real start of the church there. The message reaches out from there to the whole of the Roman province of Asia – western Turkey. See **verse 26**.

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And so we come back to his letter to the church in Ephesus. Paul knew their beginnings, the 'false start' of receiving an incomplete message, and

how they had stepped into newness of life by believing **into** Jesus and being baptised **into** his name. (***Ephesians 1:13***)

By believing into Jesus, they had taken hold of the forgiveness of God (***Ephesians 1:7***). Contrast with ***ch. 2:1***.

By being baptised into his name, they had very clearly stated their separation from the world system and Satan's control of it. Contrast with ***ch. 2:2***.

By going on to demonstrate their love for all the other believers (***Ephesians 1:15***), they showed that their lives of self-gratification were over. Contrast with ***ch. 2:3***.

End of story? Far from it!

Paul longs for them to go on growing, but how? His praying for them in ***Ephesians 1:15-23*** gives the clue . . .

He wants them to go on receiving the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, so that they will **know** Jesus and the riches of the inheritance which is theirs in him – and the ways in which that glorious inheritance will work out **in them!** (***1:18***) Just as the Lord Jesus promised in ***John 14:26*** and ***John 16:12-15***.

The lovely long sentence that takes up most of the first chapter and spills over into chapter 2 demonstrates how full Paul's heart is with all the things that God has done for him and them – and us – in Christ.

He wants them to have that same spiritual revelation as their base as they move on into all the aspects of personal and church growth which he is writing about.

Paul reminds us again and again in this letter that we are **in Christ**. If we read it in this light, we will discover a wonderful catalogue of what God has done for us in Jesus, and so can take hold of the things which are already made over to us. Just try reading through the whole letter and noting wherever the phrase 'in Christ' turns up – you are in for a feast!

Without this appreciation, most of the New Testament (but perhaps especially Ephesians) seems like wishful thinking and empty aspiration, a list of totally unattainable goals.

But, as Paul reminds us in ***1 Corinthians 1:30***, "*It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus.*" We do not have to try to 'get into' him. As soon as we believed in him, the Father joined our life with the life of Jesus and the inheritance became ours!

We need to go on and discover more of it . . .

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