
The Bondage of Sin

by Edward T. Welch

The doctrine of sin is central to Scripture. If our understanding of sin is unclear, every other truth will be affected. In this brief study, I will consider the doctrine of sin as it appears in the book of Ephesians and as it connects with other truths, such as the doctrine of redemption. We will find that truths about sin always point us to the glories of Christ. As a result, in what follows don't expect an examination of sin alone. We can never talk long about sin without soon talking about Jesus Christ. As we proceed with our study, the bondage of sin should appear so miserable that we will hate sin all the more whenever and wherever we see it in ourselves.

When Paul talks about sin in Ephesians, he uses two different tenses: past and present. When referring to the past, Paul talks to those who have put their trust in Christ and reminds them of who they were in slavery to evil and what God did in Jesus. When referring to sin in the *present*, he knows that redemption has not eradicated sin from our lives. We are still in a raging battle. But we fight against sin not as dead men and women but as those who have experienced the power of the resurrection that enables us to fight and keep fighting in the Spirit.

Your Deepest Problem

Let's start off with the question, What is your deepest problem? Obviously, in the context of this discussion, you know the answer I'm looking for: *sin* is your deepest

problem. But outside of this context, you might give a different answer. The sullen teenager would not say that sin was her deepest problem. Pimples perhaps, or parents, or a lack of money, but not "sin." The aging athlete says that the ravages of time create his worst problem. The business person says, "The boss!" The husband says, "My wife," and the wife, "My husband." The single person says, "If only I had a spouse. My aloneness is my biggest problem." The cancer patient points to disease and the uncertainty of medicine. But what is your deepest problem? The book of Ephesians makes it clear that your deepest problem is sin. It was, is, and will be (until you die) your nemesis. If you miss that crucial fact, then the glories of Christ will not seem very glorious, and the love of God will not seem very loving. I remember speaking with a woman at our church who struggles with depression and despair. We talked about our redemption in Christ. We talked about how we have been forgiven and how we can forgive. Her response was, "Okay, I know these things. But what do they have to do with my depression? They don't work!" She did not yet see that she had a deeper and bigger problem.

In the nineteenth century the *London Times* once asked its readers, "What is the greatest problem in the world?" The novelist George MacDonald responded succinctly,

I am.

Sincerely yours,

George MacDonald

We need that kind of awareness: my deepest problem is that I remain a sinner who sins. I

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know your deepest problem...and you know mine! How does Ephesians tackle this?

Ephesians, like many of the Psalms, begins with praise. The supremacy of Christ attracts the apostle Paul. But Paul always keeps our sin problem in view. Beginning immediately in Ephesians 1:4, Paul says that God "chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless...." God's plan in our lives is to make unholy people holy, and blameworthy people blameless.

Paul sets a very practical example for us. He can't help but speak of the redemption through blood, the forgiveness of our sins through Christ's death (Eph. 1:7). As he continues to write about Jesus, he inevitably focuses on God's mighty power to redeem:

That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the age to come. (Eph. 1:19-21)

As you read this, you can almost feel yourself being carried to the heights. Just think: Jesus, the one we worship, has been given every royal title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the age to come. And this exalted King Jesus is the one who has revealed Himself to us, the one who has called us friends, and the one who has sworn that He will never leave us or forsake us. So Ephesians 1 ends.

With his prayer of praise concluded, at least for the moment, Paul then turns to address you and me. What is the first thing on his mind? He gets very direct. He zeros in on the fact that we were spiritually dead and under the wrath of the holy God.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. (Eph. 2:1, 2)

This certainly doesn't have the etiquette of a polite modern sermon! Paul could, at least, have prepared us a little more gradually, or chosen less extreme language. After all, other than his opening greeting, these are the first words Paul has directed to us! But Paul prefers that we live in reality: Christ is exalted and glorious while we, in ourselves, were stone-dead in sin. We were dead men walking; we were the living dead. His juxtaposition intensifies both the glories of Christ and our own spiritual inability. This is a central feature of Paul's thought. He goes back and forth between two

themes: our sin and Christ's redeeming love.

In Ephesians Paul discusses our sinful condition in many different ways. Sinners are enemies of God, slaves to sin, slaves to Satan, slaves to our own passions, lost and alienated from God, and living in darkness. Why, in his opening discussion of our problem, does he say that we were *dead* in our sins?

One reason, of course, is that we *were* dead in a double sense: both corrupt and cursed. We were completely unable to follow God, lacking the power to heal or change ourselves. And we were under the sentence of death: dead people condemned to die.

The other reason Paul describes us as having been dead is that he wants to maintain a close connection

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with what he has just said about Jesus. (Remember, Paul doesn't speak about us without also speaking about Jesus.) He has just told us that Jesus experienced physical death but was raised from the dead by the power of His Father. We too, Paul indicates, have been dead—spiritually dead. But now our lives are no longer devoted to the deeds of death because through faith we have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection. Do you see how Paul always directs us to the glories of Christ?

In Protestant theology we stress the centrality of justification by faith. This, certainly, is a good thing. We are justified by faith, not works. Dead people are not able to pay the penalty for sin with their own effort. It is only through faith in Jesus that we are no longer condemned before our heavenly judge. The emphasis on justification by faith, however, was intended to combat a particular crucial error in the Roman Catholic church, and not intended to carry as much theological freight as we often give it. Instead of centering on justification by faith, which is more limited in scope, Paul prefers to write about how we are united by faith into Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus died *for* our sins and was raised by the power of God. We, too, were dead *because* of our sins. But by faith we have been united with Christ: we are *in Christ*. So His death to sin is our own, His resurrection to life is our own, His being seated in the heavenly realms is our own, and His glorification is our own. Justification by faith is one fact of "union with Christ."

Can you see the richness of this theme? Justification by faith focuses on the atonement as a legal act that erases our condemnation. Being united with Christ—where all that is Christ’s is now our own—is even more encompassing. Dead sinners live, both judicially and dynamically, because of Christ. Christ deals with the past, present, and future of sin.

The biblical analogy that comes immediately to mind is that of Lazarus (John 11). Lazarus was unmistakably dead. Neither he nor anyone else had the power to bring him back to life. But Jesus spoke out, “I

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am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will not experience the death that accompanies the wrath of God.” Then He said in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” Death, like the rest of creation, responds to the command of Jesus, so Lazarus received life. From then on Lazarus’ testimony was very simple: “I was dead, and now I am alive.” This, indeed, if you have put your trust in Christ rather than yourself, is also your story. Every Christian’s testimony should start out, “I was dead, and now I am alive because of Jesus.”

What is it about sin that makes us dead? Paul offers three perspectives on sin that help to answer this question. He sees sin as related to cravings, to alienation, and to the concert of world, flesh, and devil.

1. The Cravings of Sin (2:1-3; 4:19, 22)

In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us that we were “dead” in our sins because we “lived” in them (2:1f). Being dead in sin, then, is similar to how cancer cells seethe with a perverse vitality. Paul says that as such dead people, we were busy “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts”(2:3). In Ephesians 4:19, Paul develops the same idea of lusts and cravings: “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more.”

These are frightening unveilings of the human heart. Our sinful hearts have an insatiable appetite, always ingesting, always consuming. But they never find satisfaction in what they consume! There is always this sense of “just a little more and then I will be full.”

How is this continual lust manifested in our present culture? The most obvious illustration would be drug addicts. Their lifestyle cries out, “I want more, I need

more, I crave more.” It is irrelevant that the object of their passion is killing them. All they know is that there seems to be a promise of life if they can just get a little more. It might start by their saying, “I feel a little lonely and need a boost. I’ll just try a few pills. Of course, I would never try snorting drugs through my nose. Those people are desperate. I certainly am not.” Then the addict finds himself snorting cocaine. He promises himself that he will never use a needle to inject drugs. But then, in a desire to get a little more high, a little longer high, he finds himself injecting drugs with a needle. “But I’ll never share a needle with anyone else. I am not really a drug addict,” he vows. Yet when he arrives at a party and has not brought his own drugs and needle, he quickly uses the needle that has been passed around to people he has never met. “But I will never steal to get drugs.” Then he finds himself in jail on breaking and entering charges. He doesn’t have a clue as to how this has happened to him. All he wanted was *just a little more*.

The addict, who is in all of us, is a worshiper: all human beings are worshipers. We either worship the true God or we worship our passions, our idolatrous, false gods. To put it another way, you either love God and follow *Him*, or you love your desires and follow *them*. And when you follow your own desires, God allows those desires to run amok to the point where they enslave you.

Whether our lusts take a more socially appropriate spin or spin out of control, the addict is in us all. One popular understanding of people, found in both secular and Christian literature, is that we are empty people looking to be filled. We want the admiration of others, possessions, the respect of spouse and children, appreciation from our employer, or sexual pleasure. In short, we want someone or something to fill our sense of emptiness by loving us desperately, telling us that we are great, and then either staying out of our way or helping us so we can get down to the serious pursuit of self-indulgence and sensuality.

A fascinating article appeared in the *American Psychologist*, the premier magazine for professional psychologists, entitled, “*Why is the Self Empty?*”¹ It accused secular therapy, and the individualism that undergirds it, of creating people who walk around unsatisfied and begging to be filled. The psychological establishment—or at least its pop version—has been perpetuating a doctrine that says the way to deal with problems is to get more: more esteem, more love, more happiness, more self-confidence. The article suggests that we have

¹Phillip Cushman, “Why is the Self Empty?”, *American Psychologist*, 45, (1990).

become a nation of psychic consumers who are never satisfied.

This indictment, no matter how admirable its willingness to look at the secular psychological profession, gives too much credit to modern psychologists and their psychological theories. The theories of self-indulgence that surround us have not turned us into lusting people. Rather, every human heart is capable of living out these theories with little or no outside help! The writer of this *American Psychologist* article is, for the most part, overhearing only the modern expression of the lusts of the heart.

Psychological emptiness and needs are usually just lust dressed up in a new garment. Isn't it true that no matter how much my wife loves me today I will want

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more tomorrow? I am insatiable. And when I am crushed because my wife doesn't love me the way I feel I need to be loved, isn't it true that I am worshiping my own desires rather than my God?

As another example, consider our tendency toward sinful anger. James 4:1,2 indicates that it is an expression of our desire to have just a little more.

What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but you don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want.

Desires without boundaries. Each man for himself. Both Paul and James describe the human heart as a heart that screams, "I want! I want! I want!" The true picture of our hearts is not that we are empty cups. Rather, we are, apart from Christ, out-of-control binge eaters, gluttons, always frantically looking for more. If we could see ourselves in the mirror as we really are apart from Christ, we look like a raging fire or a greedy leech. "I want! I want! I want!" Like a parasite that is never filled, we agonize and whine (Prov. 30:15f). Yet *this* hunger never makes us satisfied or obese. It starves us and kills us. We look like anorexics, holocaust victims, skeletons. By following our desires, we are dead in sins.

This is what you and I were. We loved our cravings, and we were completely oblivious to the smell of death all around us. Our cravings may have been "loud"—

perhaps we lived as immoral, drunk, violent or enraged people. Or they may have been "quiet"—maybe we lived fearing failure, rejection, poverty, or illness. But whether we were wolves or field mice, we walked in death.

Doesn't this make you marvel that God came close to you in Christ and gave you life? Isn't Ephesians' portrayal of sin and sensuality particularly repellent? With sin's ugliness etched in our minds, perhaps we will be more prone to nurture a hatred of sin rather than a love for it. Our inclination to love Jesus with an undying love will grow (6:23).

2. The Alienation of Sin (2:11-19)

The second way that Paul portrays sin is as alienation, isolation, separation or division. It brings to mind C. S. Lewis's view of hell as people moving farther and farther away from each other, putting up impenetrable walls to divide their adjoining lands.²

In Ephesians 2:11ff Paul states that sin excludes, isolates, estranges, and puts enmity between people, and between people and God. This separation is charged with hopelessness.

At one time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world...(2:12)

Life apart from Christ consists of one wall of enmity after another: walls that separate us from God and walls that separate us from other people.

As an apt picture of these partitions, Paul cites Herod's temple, a maze-like structure with myriad walls. The first wall within the temple separated the presence of God—the Holy of Holies—from the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy Place. The Holy Place was separated by walls and doors from the inner courts, into which only the priests could enter. The inner courts had a wall separating the priests' area from the court of Israel, which was exclusively for Hebrew men. Outside of this court was another wall that separated it from the court for Hebrew women. Finally, a large wall separated the temple and its courts from the Court of the Gentiles. If you were not a Jew, you could not proceed past this court. In fact, a plaque on the wall said, "No one from another nation is to enter within the fence around the temple enclosure. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death, which will ensue."

We were standing behind this last wall, totally separated from God and God's people. We were under God's wrath: "without hope and without God." And

²C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946).

because God's chosen people hated Gentiles, we could think of ourselves, without Christ, as estranged from God's people. But Ephesians 2:14 tells us that Jesus Himself "has broken down the middle wall of division between us" to reconcile us to God (2:16) as well as to each other. Christ Himself has eliminated all the separating walls!

If I were to poll the people I counsel, asking each one to describe his or her life experience in a picture, at least

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half would describe some analogy to Herod's temple. "I live behind walls that are ten feet thick. There's a small hole in the wall where I can see people walking about, but I can't reach them and they can't hear me. God seems far away: vague, threatening, or theoretical." Isn't the absence of community and connectedness with other people and God one of the most prominent experiences of this generation? Depression researcher Martin Seligman has seen it in the growing numbers of depressed adults. He asks, "Why are so many people depressed these days?"³ His explanation is that we have lost a sense of community. There is no such thing as the common good or common goals; nothing appears bigger than the self. Furthermore, Seligman indicates, the experience of depression is intensified in this culture because we have lost not only a sense of family and extended family, but our belief in God. What Seligman calls "the very small and frail unit called the self" is not able to stand alone. What an astute description of the pitiful human condition, not just from the perspective of this culture, but apart from Christ! How useless and miserable it is to be isolated and to put our hope in ourselves! Of course, many people attempt to break down some of the partitions between themselves and others. The fortunate ones might find a brief respite from their painful isolation. The desperation, however, will never completely disappear even with a close circle of friends with whom the walls are not as high. What Ephesians indicates is that interpersonal alienation is inextricably tied to Godward alienation. Until the walls fall in our relationship with our Creator, there will always be walls in our relationships with other creatures.

³James Buie, "Me' Decades Generate Depression", *APA Monitor*, (Feb. 1991) page 18.

True to form, the Apostle's deepest desire is to talk about Jesus. Here is God Himself, in the flesh, a Jew, no less. Jesus Himself would have every reason to erect higher walls! After all, to the Jews all Gentiles were unclean; and to God everything tainted by sin is unclean. Without Christ, we might see Mt. Sinai and the promised land in the distance, but we would never be allowed to touch or enter. God's plan, however, radically solves alienation and estrangement. His purpose was "to create one new man out of two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility" (2:14-16).

Do you still feel alienated because of your sin? Then you are looking at the outworking and the effects of your sin more than at the partition-shattering cross. Jesus is our peace. Do you want evidence for how Jesus comes close to you? Consider how Jesus took Mt. Sinai one step further. At Sinai God came close, but He could not be seen and His mountain could not be touched. With Jesus, God came close. Wherever He went, the crowds wanted to touch Him—and He invited it. He initiated. He Himself, touched with our infirmities and bearing our sin, touched us and called out to us. Again, a clearer understanding of our sin magnifies the glory and the closeness of Christ. It shows the despair and isolation of sin, allowing us to nourish a desire to put sin to death by grace.

3. The World and the Devil Work With the Flesh

We started by highlighting sin as lust. Our lusts affect others, but Paul's main goal is to reveal the workings of our own hearts before God. Next, we considered sin as interpersonal, involving enmity, hostility, and alienation between ourselves and God and between ourselves and other people. The interior broadened to the interpersonal. Now, to broaden the scope of sin even more, the Holy Spirit teaches that our personal sin works in concert with the world and the devil. This threesome opposes the true God: our own flesh, the world, and the devil. Each is an imposing evil in itself; together they overwhelm.

The apostle Paul, having been blessed with clear spiritual vision, always portrays things on a grand scale in Ephesians. The stage he reveals to us does not consist solely of sensuality junkies looking for their next pleasure fix. Much more than that, our lives are part of an unfolding drama. When it comes to sin, the scenery includes both the world and the devil. As a result, when God calls us to Himself through Christ, He calls us away from the bondage of sin, away from the false teaching and models of the world, and away from the rule of Satan himself. When we really understand the

nature of sin and of the forces that used to have hold of us, we are able to appreciate the excellencies of Jesus, who died and who loves, reigning over the cosmos.

Of this triad of flesh, world, and devil, I first want to put the spotlight on the world. Think of the world as the secular *church of the dead*: a church with its own traditions, liturgy, rules for living, and sermons. Its intent and message is to legitimize “the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does” (1 John 2:16). The Beatles once recorded a song whose only lyrics were these: “I want you. I want you so bad. I want you. I want you so bad, it’s driving me mad.” This is one of the choruses heard today in the secular church called the world. Turn on the radio, listen to almost any secular song, and you will hear the same fundamental message. It is the refrain of “I want,” beckoning us to sing along.

The world has been referred to as “corporate flesh.” Like all corporate structures, it is more than the sum of its parts. Distinctive patterns emerge when the secular church gathers for worship. Let me illustrate. Let’s assume that we are in the secular church, and the chorus selection is, “I want you so bad.” What would it be like if you had to sing this chorus alone? Chances are, unless you are unusually bold or have performed solos many times, you would be timid and sing quite softly. But if everyone joins in, you are going to sing more vigorously. Singing as part of a larger group legitimizes the lyrics. At the beginning you might think that the song is perhaps a little silly. Maybe your conscience is pricked for a moment. But when everyone else starts singing it, the guilt gets diluted and the beliefs behind the lyrics don’t seem so offensive. We think, “If everyone else is singing this, it must be okay.”

One of the world’s most popular “songs” during the 1980s was sung by so many people that even the Christian church picked it up. The lyrics were simple, “I must love myself more.” By God’s grace, the Christian church is now singing this song less and less. In fact, even the world is singing it less and less! But you still hear it, though the top ten songs these days say things like “your genes made you do it” and “this pill fixes what ails you”!

I recently spoke with a thirty-five-year-old woman who had spent over five years in mental hospitals. During one brief period when she was allowed to go home to her sister’s house, she met an old high school friend who had become a Christian. When her friend began to speak about Christ, this woman, who had been deemed hopeless by so many, felt like she was seeing reality for the first time. The cloud of her sin, the drugs, the indoctrination into the secular church began to lift, and she felt like she could see clearly. That weekend she pro-

fessed faith in Christ.

After she went back to the mental hospital, her friend began to visit her in order to pray with her and study Scripture. When they were reading Ephesians 2, this woman realized that two different churches were claiming authority in the diagnosis of her heart. Ephesians 2 introduced the selfish cravings of her heart, while her hospital therapy group emphasized the need to avoid unhealthy relationships and love herself more. Which was correct? For her, not only did she accept

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Scripture as God’s Word, but she found that Scripture fit the data of her heart more accurately. Her incessant craving to be understood had broken one relationship after another and had left her angry and empty: angry because her demands were not satisfied, and empty because she had the feeling that she was never full, always searching for something. Loving herself seemed like a hollow answer. With her new diagnosis, however, she began to see a way out. Christ!

The hospital argued with her new approach. They tried to demean her spiritual understanding by suggesting that her friend had no expertise in mental health problems. But she consistently chose to follow Scripture. Today she still struggles with a number of problems, but she is growing. She’s in a church where she is being reminded of the truth daily. The choruses of the secular church no longer have the appeal for her that they once did.

Now where is Satan in all this? He is the one leading the false worship! He is the preacher. He is the one working in those who disobey God by following their lusts and worshiping in the church of the dead. Here are a few of his sermon titles.

- “Your desires and cravings are good—they are given to you by God.”
- “Do your own thing.”
- “How can you really believe that God is good when you experience so many bad things?”
- “Real contentment is close at hand; just satisfy your desires a little bit more.”
- “Are you in unhealthy relationships? Move away from them and build better boundaries.”
- “God does not concern Himself with minutiae such as marriage contracts. His goal is love. So love

the one you are with. Sex is a good thing—a need.”

•“If you feel bad, a drug—legal or illegal—can make you feel better, more in control, calmer, and more focused.”

He preaches lies.

Satan leads a secular church made up of dead people walking. Their procession leads to the electric chair. As Paul indicates, “We were by nature objects of wrath” (2:3). Paul has been accused of being somewhat harsh at this point—some suggest that he is using fear to motivate. But in reality, Paul is only a distant second best as a threatener. Jesus Himself is the Divine Threatener who speaks most frequently about the wrath that is to come for those who follow their desires rather than Himself. An apostle is someone “sent” with someone else’s message. But Jesus was equally clear in person:

•“Every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire” (Matt. 7:19).

•“Whoever believes in Him [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already” (John 3:18).

•“Then he will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:41).

•“Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

This last passage should make the hairs on your neck stand on end.

But this Jesus then said that God is your *Father*, so don’t be afraid (Matt. 10:29-30). You were dead, under wrath. But because of His great love, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ (Eph. 2:4-5). You were once under wrath. You are now in grace.

Remember Who You Were

What do we do with these particular unpleasant remembrances of death, craving, estrangement, and deception? Keep remembering them! Don’t be like the professional athlete who is arrogant and condescending, who surrounds himself with people paid to tell him that he is great. As athletes are now beginning to realize, what they really need is someone to tell them where they came from. Whenever you find humility in a professional athlete, you will usually find that the athlete has maintained ties with his family and past friends—people who remember when he was cut from the team, or when he would cry with the least provocation, or when he was poor. These men are typically grateful and generous, knowing that they have received an unusual gift.

According to the book of Ephesians, we were not

good people who occasionally did a few bad things. We were dead, captivated by our desires, singing loudly in the chorus of the world, enemies of God, under His wrath. We did not one day choose to shape up or become spiritually alive. Dead people don’t have that kind of power. Rather, we were walking in darkness on the path to death. Yet in Christ we have been reborn, adopted, lavished with His grace freely given. It is no wonder that Paul repeats over and over that our lives are now lived to the praise of His glory.

This is Who You Are

When we view Ephesians 1:1-4:24 through the lens of the doctrine of sin, Paul’s comments not only amount to, “This is who you were.” He proceeds to exhort his hearers in the present tense: “This is who you

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are now.” In these passages he has laid out the general scope of sin in its various components. So it shouldn’t surprise us that when he writes to us in the present, he still believes that sin is our deepest problem.

From 4:25-6:9 Paul illustrates in detail where our sin struggles still take place. He indicates that we are still vulnerable to our sinful cravings (4:17-22; 5:3). When we are not vigilant, we can be temporarily waylaid by Satan (4:27; 6:10-18). We are vulnerable to being deceived by the world (5:6) and going back to singing old choruses (4:17-22). We can be alienated from people and divisive in relationships as noted in his comments about getting rid of “bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander” (4:31). Every positive commandment in Ephesians 4-6 mentions the negative alternative to which sin would take us! We are in a battle: within ourselves, in the world, and against the devil. When Paul says we must no longer live as the church of the dead lives, he knows we are vulnerable, that sin can still come easily, spontaneously, and habitually. The difference, however, between our past and our present condition is immense. Once we were dead; now we are alive. So in God’s power we can learn to live in new ways.

Notice Paul’s language.

•Live a life worthy of the calling you have received (4:1).

- Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (5:2).
- Live as children of light (5:8).
- Be very careful how you live (5:15).
- Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power (6:10).
- Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints (6:18).

Through the power of Christ, we can and must live this way. With all this in mind, we can be very optimistic when we approach Paul's exhortations to holiness. Perhaps at one time a holy life seemed like the impossible dream. For example, how can you live without "a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these things are improper for God's holy people"? Isn't this just part of humanness? From Paul's perspective, no. It is part of *dead* humanness, but not part of being alive in Christ. Paul makes radical exhortations to his hearers, *not* because he wants to burden us with guilt, but because he understood the profound transformation of being risen with Christ. It was his confidence in Christ's resurrection and the indwelling of the Spirit that caused him to plead for our holiness.

Sometimes I feel like I see these truths only dimly, but then I hear a story from a brother or sister that helps me to see clearly again. Recently I met a man who was a member of a fraternity at a major university. Like most fraternities, this one celebrated sexual immorality, impurity and greed. In fact, their corporate worship song was "More." Along with two Christian brothers, this man knew something about the power of God and that he was called to invade the secular community. So he committed to living in that very fraternity, with his two Christian brothers, for two years. Those were not the most enjoyable years he ever spent, but three times a day those three Christian men met for prayer. They prayed that they would be worshipers of the Most

High God and that the Spirit would make them alert to any compromises with the world. They were alert to the inclinations of sin in their own hearts, but they were especially alert to the resurrection power that allowed them to be light in darkness. They shone.

God has given us Ephesians so that we who are still

Paul's confidence in Christ's resurrection caused him to plead for our holiness.

so prone to darkness and fog might learn to live as children of light. We are light in the Lord, and we can continue to make progress in learning what pleases Him (5:8, 9).

A Closing Personal Comment

I love the book of Ephesians, especially when I can examine it slowly. It reminds me of where I came from and what I deserve. It reminds me of what my deepest problem still is. Too often I prefer to coast through life, avoiding those things that might be hard, such as really taking my soul to task. I identify with the sleeper who is told to wake up (5:14). More times than I care to admit, I had an opportunity to be light in darkness; but I chose the easy, more timid, self-gratifying road. Ephesians points me to the lavish love of God. It challenges me to live a more studied life.

"Pray for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mysteries of the gospel" (6:19). The former bondage of sin is broken in Christ, but now the battle with remaining sin is still going on in Christ. Finally, sin will be erased: God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight...to the praise of the glory of His grace.