

A Christmas Story: A Glimpse of our Past Condition
Ephesians 2:1-3

*“She will bear a son, and you will call His name **Jesus**, for **He will save His people from their sins.**”*
Matthew 1:21

Introduction: In his classic tale of redemption, Charles Dickens story “*A Christmas Carol*” illustrates the fact that even the worst of humanity could not only be reformed, but be transformed. We know about Ebenezer Scrooge is not only a miser, but sees people without compassion, the poor as a nuisance to get rid of, and family as an annoyance. Like his partner, Jacob Marley, who Dickens described as “having no bowels” (meaning no compassion), Scrooge was worthy of damnation and that time was fast approaching. It’s fascinating how Dickens framed the story in terms of “past, present, and future”, with each informing the other as to Scrooges condition, need, and possibility. Understanding our past is imperative in seeing ourselves clearly in the present to inform us of our future. This not only explains why this is such a beloved classic around Christmastime, but also that understanding OUR past helps us see God’s transformative work in OUR OWN LIVES.

As we read the passages concerning Christ’s birth, both Old and New Testament, we are struck with not only the timeline and events surrounding it, but also the **purpose statements** as to WHY He entered humanity at all. In **Matthew 1:18-25** we read about Jesus’ earthy father, Joseph, and his wrestling through the information that his betrothed wife (one that he was legally bound to and would require a divorce to dissolve the relationship) was pregnant. An angel intervened and, in a dream, told him “do not fear, take Mary as your wife, what that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” It was quite an unbelievable message, yet one that he faithfully heeded. Then the angel gave a purpose statement:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name **Jesus**, for he will save his people from their sins.”²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name **Immanuel**”
(which means, **God with us**).

Joseph was a man of faithfulness and integrity, so he did the hard thing, the courageous thing, and obeyed the Lord. But we also see why Jesus had to be born: *to save His people from their sin*. When the baby Jesus was later presented at the Temple, the righteous and wise servant named **Simeon** declared: “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; **for my eyes have seen YOUR SALVATION that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.***” (Luke 2:29:32). This was appropriate and true since when Jesus started His ministry decades later it was because “*the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.*” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying “**Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**” (Luke 4:16-17)

Christ came to save sinners! That is an undeniable, glorious reality of Christmas, the gospel, and our Lord Jesus Christ. This morning we are going to look at the **reality of our past condition**, to revel in what we were saved from, and to set us up for a look at our present and future NEXT WEEK (that’s a tease!)

Cause of our Past Condition: *Dead from Sin* (v. 1)

*And you were **dead** in the trespasses and sins*

Before looking at the text itself, let's make some observations as to *how* this was written. Remember, the end of chapter 1 spoke of God's power in raising Christ from the dead and seating Him at His right hand, which was the SAME power working IN US (19), and that was completely available to those who believe, since Christ is the head over all, especially the church, and gives us His fullness. In chapter 2:4 Paul talks about our **present** reality in terms of God's mercy and grace in redemption, and then points to our future security in Christ. In between, we see who **we were in the past, which includes all believers of all time**. The first observation and question is this: *why does Paul dwell on our past here?* He often spoke of his life before Christ saved him as part of his own testimony, but here he is talking about OTHERS condition. Is he simply digging up dirt from the past, since we all have areas of our lives we wish did not exist and that no one remembers, knows, or would talk about? Or was it something more? I believe remembering who WE WERE before Christ redeemed us has several benefits:

1. Remembering our past condition creates an opportunity for **humility and thankfulness**
2. Remembering our past condition allows us to be **gracious toward others in whatever condition they are currently in**
3. Remembering our past condition creates **startling contrasts of our present condition** – i.e., we were dead, now are alive; sons of disobedience now adopted sons; children of wrath now children of God; once serving our own passions and desires, now we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works)
4. Remembering our past condition fuels **worship, magnifying the wonder of God's mercy**

But WHAT is the condition we all were in at one point? The answer is in the first four words of verse 1: "And you were dead". This death is categorized as **complete and total**, not *mostly dead, which means we would be somewhat alive!* This did NOT mean physical death, but was in the realm of both *spiritual and eternal death*, the kind that was promised in Genesis 3 after Adam & Eve sinned, where animals had to die as a covering and substitute to cover their sin, and where separation from the Garden and intimacy with God was now normative. This is the essence of death: **separation**. It's why physical death is so abrasive and difficult: we are separated from this life, from our loved ones, and from vital relationships. In this condition of death, one cannot **respond to stimuli, have no ability to freely choose, and no power to make alive**. Linguistically there is no way around this word and the implications of it: every person begins life in a state of death, and unless something OUTSIDE of ourselves acts on us, we will stay there. We are utterly hopeless, in ourselves, to save ourselves.

What was the CAUSE of this death? There is some debate about whether **trespasses and sins** are the CAUSE or RESULT of death, but the overlap is obvious. We know that we are born into sin and death, since we are all born into the curse of our father Adam (Rom. 5:12). We are sinners from the start, and thus sin is a natural and inevitable consequence to our birth. The words for trespasses and sins are synonymous, but the basic nature of the word means "to miss the mark". It was a hunter's term or aiming at a target, much like I've done with the Avery men at Smoking Barrels. Weapons are set, sights calibrated, bulls-eyes targeted, and anything outside of the zone would miss the mark, or sin (and I sin greatly when it comes to shooting). **But what is the target that humanity aims at?** We often frame sin in terms of what we do, committing certain sins (lying, stealing, committing adultery or idolatry, complaining, taking God's name in vain, etc.). These are activities that violate the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18-22) and our own conscience (Rom. 2:15-16). But missing the mark is much greater and deeper than what we commit, it actually comes down to what we FAIL to do! *"For all have sinned and*

fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23). In whatever and whenever we fail to give God glory, or do anything by faith (Rom. 14:23), it is a sin. People are often like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31) people can argue that they are NOT THAT BAD, that they don't regularly lie, steal, cheat, etc., but if the issue is one of GLORY, FAITH, and BELIEF, everyone has fallen conclusively short, and not by a little bit. John 16:8-9 says that judgement comes because people did not believe in Him.

Now, to clarify another question that often comes up at this point: *are you saying all people are the same level of dead? Aren't some people worse than others? What about good people in our lives?* Let me try to answer that two ways: 1) All people are dead in their sin and unbelief, under judgement and without hope: 2) There are some people MORE GIVEN OVER TO THEIR SIN THAN OTHERS. **Luke 6:33** says *"And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."* In other words, even those who are sinners who do not know God will DO GOOD to others. **Luke 11:13**, *"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"* In other words, it is NOT that unbelievers are devoid of the ability to do anything good. God's common grace teaches us this, as He sends rain and sunshine on the wicked and righteous alike (Matt. 5:45). But what does this goodness earn us? The goodness that an unbeliever can generate is equivalent to standing on one side of the GRAND CANYON and trying to leap over it. Some may jump further than others, but everyone who tries will fall woefully short of the actual need. The 'goodness' shown by unbelievers is a gracious gift from God, but not a saving one. Only Christ can save, not our goodness.

Course of our Past Condition: *Walking Dead* (v. 2)

*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*

What does this condition of death look like? The answer to this question also informs us of our mission and challenge. For whatever reason, there has been a fascination with the idea of **zombies** lately, seen by the proliferation of literature and movies/shows concerning the topic. The undead who are somewhere between life and death, no longer able to have higher brain function yet enough left to chase, walk, eat, hear, and terrorize. The walking dead is an apt classification of those who are alive physically yet living in a dead spiritual condition. Just like zombies, some are in worse condition than others, but all are without ability to cease their zombie like state. Now the text informs us of three implications or outflows of this condition (and a fourth connected to the first in verse 3).

1. **Death and Sin Nature** – This is what verse 1 tells us, that we walk, live, or operate out of our sin nature, because we are actually SLAVES TO SIN (Romans 6:16 - ...you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which lead to righteousness.) Sin puts us in bondage, shackling us to our dead condition.
2. **Death and the System of the World** – But also do not live in a neutral setting. The system of this world is broken, and though God is ultimately in control of all things, the kingdom of this world is corrupt and hostile toward God. The systems and structures of this world are in **rebellion against God, suppressing the truth that is evident to them** (Romans 1:18 – *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who BY THEIR UNRIGHTEOUSNESS suppress the truth."*). That rebellion leads to a stubbornness to worship the creation rather than the Creator, exchanging the truth for a lie (Rom. 1:23-25), which culminates in such depravity that God gave them up to a *debased or insane mind* (Rom. 1:28-32; cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-7), that is characterized by inventing evil and giving approval to those who

practice evil. In other words, the system of thought, government, economics, morality, and what is or isn't acceptable in a society is shaped out of a system of rebellion and lies.

If you were to throw a dead fish into a river, that fish could not swim against the current but would simply go where the water took him. This is how the course of the world works. When people think they are progressive, critical thinkers, or intellectual, what they really are is simply following the course of the world set out for them. But **"claiming to be wise, they became fools" – Romans 1:22**. Our world can only mirror, parrot, mimic, or play out what the course of this world dictates, which again is a reversal of Biblical truth. What's behind the course of the world? Who shapes it? The father of lies (John 8:44)

3. **Death and Satanic Power** – Here, Satan's power and influence is described. He is the prince of the power of the air, with "air" meaning sphere of influence rather than mere oxygen to breath or atmosphere. He is the lord of the sons of disobedience, the ruler of this world for this time as God has given him delegated authority (but not absolute power). And how does Satan operate the course of this world:
 - **Chaos** – "When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44)". There is no truth in him, but that does not mean he does not PRESENT himself as a truth teller. When mankind exchanges the truth that God has set up, ANYTHING and EVERYTHING is open. We have seen a radical shift in morality this last decade, as the typical river of immorality has become a torrential flood. Remember, Satan himself knows and cares about the truth, but will do everything he can to keep people away from it, blinding their eyes to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). Chaos is his home court, his playground, and his goal. Our God is a God of order (1 Cor. 14:33)
 - **Confusion** – **"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice"** (James 3:16) – What does Satan encourage? If it feels good, do it! If it doesn't fit your lifestyle, kill it! If someone else has it, take it! If you don't like it, complain about it! If someone convicts you with truth, cancel it! If someone speaks the truth, silence it! Notice our culture cannot figure out its own rules, and certainly can't play by them. Reporters shilling for equality lose their jobs for inequitable actions. Those that lie about racist attacks are justified. What was acceptable in years past is now cancelled out in the present. Without a source of absolute truth, a standard, people have to walk on eggshells with steel toed boots. Our God calls us to **"deny self, take up our cross daily, and follow Him"** (Luke 9:23)
 - **Coercion** – What tool does Satan wield? Deception and lies. "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic." (James 3:14-15). Where do we see this? Earthly wisdom is framed as "science", and science is deemed as an absolute. We heard it once again in the Supreme Court as arguments were made for the beginning of life, whether at conception or birth. The Bible is clear that life is given by God in the womb (Ps. 139:13-16), and that life is precious and valuable since it was made in God's image. Our brand of modern science is often an extension of a worldview that disbelieves God, places man at the head where only Christ can be, and does things to suit our passions. We must see through this kind of "wisdom", since **"the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere"** (James 3:17). This is the test of true wisdom.

- **Children** – Who does Satan attack? Anyone he thinks he can deceive and manipulate (see Eve and Adam in Genesis 3). Who is on his target list right now? How about a battle for our kids? Students are being targeted and indoctrinated in an educational system bent on ridding us of God Himself. No one has to take responsibility for actions since there is always someone else to blame, parents should not weigh in on things like birth control or abortions, and boys and girls are taught to consider whether they were assigned the wrong gender in birth. We know that 1) God set up the family as the PRIMARY educator of children (Eph. 6:4) and 2) the home as the primary place of life, growth and worship. Think about this. Almost every immoral thing going on in our society today has at its foundation a tearing down of God’s institutions of marriage and family. This goes far beyond where you educate your child. It has everything to do with how we instruct our kids. *“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ”* (Col. 2:6-8)

Now, remember, there is nothing new under the sun. Was it “better” 50 years ago? I would argue it was not, but just different. In fact, the inroads in education and government had seeds planted decades ago that are just now beginning to bloom. Why is that important to remember? We do not have to live in fear or overreaction, but continue to trust, train, and hold fast to the truth, as we always have done.

Core of our Past Condition: *Dead and Loving it (v. 3)*

*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.*

Why is Satan so effective in keeping people in bondage to sin? Because we were (are) all dead and loving it! Sin appeals to our passions and desires. Our default setting is “SELF”, and we want to live for satisfaction, happiness, and gratification. If there is a system and message that encourages us to indulge our passions, then our unconverted self says “Giddy up!” It takes no work, no struggle, no thought to indulge our flesh, “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21). These are the “works of the flesh” and are contrary to the work of the Spirit and the glory of God. This is why the gospel is so counter-intuitive: deny self, embrace suffering, defer gratification, and find our satisfaction through trusting and obeying a Savior BY FAITH. This is why the gospel does not simply conform our external morality, but reshapes and restores our heart, changing and transforming our passions, desires, and mind (Rom. 12:1-2).

The stark reality is that in our condition of death we were also under condemnation or the wrath of God. God is love, grace, and peace, but also justice, wrath, and vindication. His kindness leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4), but we are also sorting up wrath for ourselves on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom. 2:5). It is on account of things like sexual immorality, impurity, passions, evil desires, and covetousness, which is idolatry that the wrath of God is coming (Col. 3:5-7). God is JUSTIFIED in His exercise of judgement, and every sinner gets what he deserves.

So, there are three things to walk away with this morning, since next week we’ll look at the overwhelming GOOD NEWS of our present and future. 1) This informs our mission as a church. We are not PRIMARILY called to make people feel comfortable or welcome, but we are called to wake the dead, to reach out to zombies, and communicate the power of the gospel. Only God can cure the walking

dead, and only the gospel can cure. 2) There are only 2 classifications of people today: **those who WERE or those who ARE**. Every day, but especially every Christmas, our world is confronted with which category we are in. If you WERE, you worship as a result of this text. If you ARE, our prayer is that you will HEAR, SEE, and Repent, today, now, and live. 3) We cling to Jesus Christ, who came to this earth as a baby, God incarnate, to save His own from their sin! He saved us, not because of our goodness but because He is consistent in His love and judgment, His grace and wrath, His mercy and justice. This Christmas is a time to WORSHIP, to yield, to thank, to entrust, and to say with the angels, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”** (Luke 2:14)