

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 22, 1996 by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EPHESIANS 2:12, 8-9

“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.... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest anyone should boast.”

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SALVATION

The Bible teaches that man, as he came forth from the hand of his Creator, was a perfect being — perfect in body, mind, and spirit. He was made in the image of God and for fellowship with God. In order to be a moral being, man, of course, was endowed with free will; that is to say, he could choose to do good or evil. We know how man did, in fact, use his freedom. He chose evil; he deliberately disobeyed God’s will and purpose for his life; and the fellowship between the Creator and the creature was broken; and the first iron curtain was erected.

The Bible also tells us that every person, except Jesus Christ, born into this world ever since, is born with a nature that loves and does evil rather than good. The Bible assures us that you and I are sinful by nature and by practice; by what we are and by what we do; and who of us, upon looking into his own heart, would care to deny that this is true?

An apple tree is not an apple tree because it bears apples. It bears apples because it is by nature an apple tree! Similarly, I am not sinful primarily because I commit sins. I commit sins because I am by nature a sinner. This is what is meant by the thorny doctrine of Original Sin. It means that the first sin, committed by the first sinner, brought with it such consequences to the whole human family that no subsequent human being, except our Lord, has ever been able to get away from sinning. It is like the baby born to a mother who has contracted AIDS. That poor little child is born with the H.I.V. virus, and has received its death warrant already. St. Paul, in the first part of our text, actually says that every person who has not received Christ as Savior, is “dead in sins” — a strong and striking phrase indeed.

A little country church in Scotland was surrounded by the parish graveyard, as churches in the Old Country so often are. On one occasion, a stranger was inadvertently buried in this sacred plot of ground, and the Session of the church was considerably perturbed by this unwarranted intrusion. So, they passed a motion, and in due course the following information was posted on the churchyard gate — “Notice is hereby given that in future this churchyard is strictly reserved for the dead living in this parish”!

There are multitudes of “living dead” people in the world. Physically and mentally they may be active and alert, but spiritually they are without life. What does it mean to be “dead in sins”? It means that sin always has a killing power.

1. **Sin kills innocence.** No one is ever precisely the same after he has sinned. The psychologists assure us that quite literally we never forget anything. Everything we have ever done, or seen, or heard, has been stored away in our subconscious or unconscious memory. This means that sin leaves a permanent effect upon a person.

In Daphne Du Maurier's novel Trilby, there is a typical example of this. For the first time in his life, one of the characters took part in a drunken debauch. And when he had slept off his drunkenness, he found that a disconcerting thing had happened to him. It was as if a tarnishing breath had swept over his soul. "I have been drunk!", he kept thinking; "and so long as I live, I shall always remember, and know, and be ashamed of the fact that I have been drunk!" The experience of sin had left a kind of blemishing film on his mind and memory, and things could never be quite the same again. Sin does something to a person — it kills innocence.

You remember George MacDonald's lines:

"Alas! How easily things go wrong!
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long;
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain,
And life is never the same again!"

2. **Sin kills ideals.** Wrongdoing triggers off a kind of tragic process. At first a person regards some wrong thing like gossip or bad temper, or some more fleshly sin, with horror. The second stage comes when he is tempted into doing it, but even as he does it, he despises and hates himself. The third stage has arrived when he has done the thing so often that he does it without a qualm. The fatal power of sin is that each sin makes the next sin easier. Sin is a kind of suicide, for it kills the ideals which make life the splendid thing it can be. Sin produces this inevitable degeneration.

I suppose the most terrible example of that degeneration comes from Leonardo da Vinci's great painting, "The Last Supper." When Leonardo was painting the picture, he wanted Christ to be the center of the picture, and so he decided to paint the picture of Christ first. So he went out and he searched the places where art models lived, and he walked the streets and scrutinized the people he met, until at last he came upon a young man with a face of such fineness and purity that he was able to use him as a model for the picture of Christ. Well, the years passed, and Leonardo filled in disciple after disciple, and detail after detail, and he came to the last picture he had to paint, the portrait of Judas Iscariot who betrayed our Lord. So he went out to the streets again, and made his way to the places where the thieves and the prostitutes and the skid row derelicts made their abode. And at last he found a man with a face so vicious and so depraved that he decided that he would do for a model of Judas. And he took him back and painted him. And when the day came when he had finished painting him, he was paying him before he went away; and the man whom he had painted as Judas, said to him, "Sir, you have painted me before." And Leonardo said, "No, I have never in my life seen you before." "Ah yes you have, Sir," said the man, "and you painted me before, and the last time you painted me, you painted me as Christ!"

Sin kills innocence, and it kills ideals.

3. In the end, sin kills the will. Once a thing becomes a habit, it is not far from being a necessity. When a person has allowed some habit or indulgence to master him, he becomes its slave. His will is virtually helpless. He is “dead in sins.”

The old proverb puts it in this way:

“Sow a thought, reap an act;
Sow an act, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character;
Sow a character, reap a destiny.”

All this is at least part of what the Apostle Paul meant when he spoke of people being “dead in sins.” And now to “the Geography of Salvation.”

A short time before Alaska was admitted to statehood, the National Geographic Magazine featured an article on California. In the state of California at that time were to be found the highest and lowest points in the USA —

the highest, Mt. Whitney, the giant of the Sierra Nevadas, as it towers 14,495 feet into the sky;

the lowest, Death Valley, 282 feet below sea level — that strange, arid, ghostly, worthless tract, where few signs of life may be found; where, in summer, the earth sometimes reaches a heat of 190°F — the place where the first experimental atomic bombs were detonated — a few square miles of desolation where reigns the silence of death. It was given its name in the 1840s by prospectors who journeyed through it.

As I read that article I fell to musing. I pictured a man, one of those early prospectors of a century and a half ago, reaching Death Valley, being appalled by its bleakness, and by the uninviting nature of its surroundings, and saying to himself, “I must get out of here, and fast!” Travelling on, he climbs out of the Valley, and journeying westward, soon finds himself breathing the bracing air of the Pacific. He is at sea level now, standing on the shores of the mighty ocean, intrigued by the sight of the white foaming breakers pounding in upon the golden sands. But still our friend is dissatisfied. Within him there is the urge to climb. From Death Valley he had seen, in the distance, the snow-covered peak of Mount Whitney; and the next glimpse we get of him, he is toiling up the slopes of the great mountain, making for the summit.

Now that man, in his journey from Death Valley to the top of Mount Whitney, seems to me to point us to three kinds of people in the world today.

The “Death Valley” people are those who live away below the level of respectability — the down-and-outers who have made moral shipwreck of their lives — the residents of “Skid Row” — the people who in the words of St. Paul are “without God and without hope in the world.”

The “Sea Level” people are the ones who live a decent, ordinary life. They are no “saints”! They don’t profess to be above the average. They just mind their own business; do a good turn as opportunity presents itself; enjoy their work, their home and their family; and they attend church once in a while, especially at Christmas and Easter!

Mount Whitney represents the person of preeminent moral character. His word is his bond. There are no skeletons in his closet. He may be a regular church attender; he may even hold office in the church, maintaining the respect of all who know him. He is a leader in the matter of “good works.”

But now we remind ourselves of a very significant fact — our friend who journeys from Death Valley to the peak of Mount Whitney, even though he climbs from 282 feet below sea level to 14,495 feet above sea level, is still in the same state, the state of California!

And that fact illustrates for us one of the cardinal truths of the Gospel, namely this, that in the sight of God, if they have not received Jesus Christ as personal Savior from sin, the moral shipwreck on Skid Row, and the respected church member in Pleasant Town, USA, are both in the same state, what the Bible calls the state of condemnation.

The Bible continually affirms that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); that “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). Now this is something which the ordinary person finds it extremely difficult to understand. He rebels against it, because he thinks it isn’t fair. Most people have the deep-seated conviction that they deserve the favor of God; that, after all, they seldom do anyone any harm; they pay their bills, and provide for their family; and what more need they do to earn a passing grade from God?

But the point is — God has a standard of holiness, and that standard is Jesus Christ — and anyone who is not as good as Jesus Christ is a sinner and can never reach Heaven on the basis of his own goodness.

Perhaps the most famous of all British regiments is the Grenadier Guards. A man must be 6’2” in height before he can even be considered as a possible candidate for membership in the regiment. Imagine a man 5’6” tall presenting himself before the Recruiting Sergeant! He would quickly and pungently receive his verdict! But another man applies. He is of ample proportions, and looks like an ideal candidate. But when he stands to be measured, he is discovered to be 6’ 1 7/8” in height. One man is short by 8 inches, the other by 1/8 of an inch — but neither man can become a Grenadier Guard!

That is what Paul meant when he said, “All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.” You don’t need to be a scoundrel to be accounted a sinner in God’s sight. A sinner is anyone who is not up to God’s standard of holiness — he is anyone who is not as good as Jesus Christ — and that includes us all!

If we could earn the favor of God, and win or merit salvation by our own moral efforts, then there was no need for Jesus to die on Calvary; and His death would be reduced to a needless martyrdom. The person who imagines that his upright character can save him is really guilty of

the most serious sin of all -- the sin of trampling underfoot the blood of the Cross!

Sin, by its very nature, must be punished by a holy God. And the Cross of Christ means this — that God Himself bore the penalty of His own holy law. He Himself, in love and mercy, bore the shame and the agony of your sin and mine. In the truest sense, He paid our debt, took our place, and endured for us the righteous judgment upon sin.

Consequently God, in His wondrous grace, now offers salvation as a free gift to those who rely not upon their own goodness, but upon Christ's redeeming work on Calvary; and dedicate their lives to His service in grateful obedience.

To trust yourself to Christ means that God, though holy and righteous, is pleased nevertheless to forgive us, to blot out our sins, so that in His sight we are reckoned to be as good as Christ Himself. And that is what merits our salvation and our entrance into fellowship with God for time and eternity. It is our Savior's work accomplished on our behalf; it is not our good works, or even our faith that saves us; it is our Lord's work for us upon the Cross.

On that awful night when the angel of death passed through the land of Egypt, there was no question as to whether the people in the houses were good or wicked. What was of crucial importance was whether or not the blood of the slain lamb was sprinkled on the sides and tops of the door frames of the house. "When I see the blood, I will pass over you!" (Exodus 12:13)

You remember how John the Baptist, standing one evening by the banks of the River Jordan, saw a white-robed Stranger approaching, One Who looked young and bronzed and godlike; and John instinctively exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

And still it is the blood, the Life freely offered up, of Christ, the Lamb of God, applied to our sin-stained lives, that cleanses us, and makes us righteous in God's holy sight.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place, condemned, He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood;
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

When we receive Him by faith, then we will be given the Holy Spirit in all the fullness of His power, and that power will enable us to do the "good works," and live the transformed life that will commend our Lord to the world.

"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.... For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest anyone should boast."

"Upon a life I did not live;
Upon a death I did not die;

Another's life, Another's death
I stake my whole eternity."

AMEN.