

Authentic Christianity

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding that man is spiritually dead and in need of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to be made alive.

Duration: 24:02

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 11:25, Romans 6:4, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:1-10

Topics: "Authenticity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the common belief that the problems of mankind can be solved through external means such as direction, explanation, encouragement, and self-discipline. He criticizes pastors who focus solely on addressing these issues in their churches. The speaker argues that the root problem of mankind is spiritual death, and therefore, what is needed is not reformation or indoctrination, but resurrection. He emphasizes the inescapable reality of physical death and the need for spiritual revival.

Transcript

One of the things that most militates against personal faith is ignorance and confusion. And despite the fact that the United States of America is built upon the foundations as we know them, nevertheless, many, many people, even well-educated people, would be hard-pressed to pass the most simple test on the nature of Christian faith. But far more significant than that, they would be hard-pressed to articulate any sense of personal awareness of the truth from Scripture.

And so, I'm very concerned that what would happen on these afternoons is that we would provide a forum for considering the implications of faith, but more than that, that each of us would understand together that there is precious little significance in breaking into the middle of our day to come and listen to a man speak, no matter who the man or how articulate or otherwise he may prove to be. And for that reason, since most of you do not come to the office armed with your Bibles every day--although that day may be in the future for some--I've provided for you the Bible there on that sheet, which I'd like for you to take away, put it in your inside pocket, and at least you have ten verses of Holy Scripture close to your heart, depending on which pocket you put it in. And because it is going to be the source of our consideration, I'd like to read it, and you can follow along if you choose to, and check whether what is written there is actually what is the text of Ephesians 2. Paul writes, 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.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves.

It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. So these ten verses, then, I suggest to you, contain a vivid description, or a multifaceted description, of what it means to be a real Christian.

And what I'd like to do is to begin this afternoon by tackling one facet of the truth contained in these ten verses, and to look at them in light of the instruction that is provided regarding this matter of, as Paul refers to it, death and life. He introduces it immediately in the first verse, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. And he returns to it a wee bit down the page, in about the middle of the paragraph, where he says that God has made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

Now, what is being said here is something fundamental concerning the natural state of man. And what is being said here in Ephesians 2 is in a direct collision course with the most commonly held notions of the natural state of man. There, of course, are many of them, but we might summarize the top two throughout history, and frankly, the top two that remain today, as being these.

First of all, one view of man is that man is okay, or that man is well. It is epitomized in the current literature that goes under the kind of heading, I'm okay, you're okay. And people take that into their exercise club and ride exercise bikes and read that as they're going, and they know jolly well that they're not okay.

The size of their tummy is an indication that they are not physically okay. The things that pass through their minds as they watch people jogging around the track is an indication that they are not morally okay. And yet, still, they try to press themselves to the conclusion that really all is well.

And since man is well, all he needs is a good diet, exercise, and the right dose of vitamins. It's the same mentality which pervaded the mind of Chamberlain in the immediacy of the Second World War when he arrived back from his meetings with Hitler and announced at the airport in Britain that there was now, on the strength of this piece of paper, going to be peace in our time. And of course, within a matter of days, Hitler's forces had already invaded other countries in Western Europe.

What lay behind that was the fact that Chamberlain's view of man was that man is well. There is nothing wrong with him, really, and that we may assume the best about all men, all times. The second view of man, into which this view laid down here in Ephesians 2 comes into direct collision with, is that man is sick, and that he is pretty sick.

Indeed, some would go so far as to say that he is mortally sick. However, his sickness is not a sickness unto death in the traditional view, but with the right kind of environment and the right kind of treatment, this

sick man can become a well man. And this notion of the natural state of man pervades our culture and is integral in many decisions which are rendered in the judicial system of the Western world.

So, by and large, as you walk the streets, you will be rubbing shoulders with people whose view of man is that man is really okay, or that man is kind of sick. Now, either view may lead us to conclude that, therefore, if man has a problem at all, it can be summarized in terms of all kinds of external things. For example, he's a little bit lost, and he's in need of direction.

He is slightly confused, and he needs an explanation. He is rather unhappy and in need of encouragement. He is kind of weak-willed and needs to exercise some self-discipline.

And consequently, many of our churches are filled with pastors who spend all of their time trying to address those issues. "Come on now," they say to their congregation, "the problem with you is just that you're a wee bit unhappy, and you need some encouragement. So let me try and encourage you as best I can." And often, as pastors, we're some of the most doleful-looking characters that you ever saw in your life.

And the average man is dragged there by his wife, and he goes away saying, Well, hopefully I won't have to go through that again for another four or five months, because whoever that character is, he missed the point completely. I am not unhappy, and he couldn't encourage me if he tried. Well, then he says, Perhaps it is that you're a little confused.

No! I'm not confused. And so we go through the litany of external needs, and by and large, man, middle-class man, is able to say, No, I don't score on this chart at all. So therefore, you've got nothing to say to me.

And that's exactly the situation. The church has nothing to say, and it says nothing. And people say, This is an esoteric interest for the weak-willed and the stupid.

Therefore, when I grow stupid or weak-willed, I will turn my attention to it. But until such times, I will continue on my journey. Now, Paul, who was, you will remember, a lawyer, who was a theologian, who was the Shegevar of his day, was radically changed.

His life was turned upside down. And as a result of this, having been turned the right way up, if we might put it that way, he began to write these letters. And it is clear that he would have no truck with the individual who, either then or today, would want to explain man in terms of being really well or really sick.

And that's why he says, If we're going to understand man at all, we need to understand that it isn't that he's really well or really sick. It is that he's really dead. Dead.

The statement is absolute. It is not a figure of speech. And the statement is comprehensive.

There are no degrees of dead. The statistics are the same throughout humanity. One out of one dies.

Whether you die a prince or a pauper, you die. The fact of physical life is an inescapable reality. Fine, says Paul, there is an underlying truth, namely the fact of spiritual death, which is equally a reality.

Now, if you're able to follow this line of reasoning--that presupposes there is some line of reasoning in this, which is perhaps pride on my part--but you will realize that once you lay this down as the premise, that man is dead spiritually, then men and women are not in need of a call to reformation. They are not in need

of indoctrination. They are in need of resurrection.

And once again, the church fails, because the church puts on its face to humanity and says, Come to us, and we'll indoctrinate you. That's what you need. And the man says, No, it's not.

Come to us, and we'll reform you, because that's what you need. And the man says, or the lady says, I've turned over so many new leaves, I have reformed myself so many times in the last forty years of life, that I know that the answer to my condition does not lie in reformation. And so the Bible says, we understand that perfectly.

The answer lies in resurrection. Now, a life without God, says Paul here in Ephesians 2, no matter how mentally alert we may be, no matter how physically fit we may be, such a life is a living death. And those who live in it are dead while they're living.

That is what is being said here. He's writing to a group of people, and he says, Now, when you think about your natural state before this transformation took place in your life, it wasn't that you were just a little off. It was, frankly, guys, that you were dead--spiritually dead.

And he describes it by identifying the fact that they were dead in these two areas. They were dead in transgressions. The word is a great old-fashioned word, and describes man as we really are--that we transgress God's laws.

Which of us is unprepared to admit that? Frankly, we transgress our own laws, don't we? We establish a little code of ethics for ourselves, and we cannot even attain to that. We break our own rules. If we break our own, then which of us would be so proud as to say that we would have never broken one of God's? And we are deviating from his path.

We are parking on his yellow lines, we are driving forty in the twenty-five-mile-an-hour zone, and it is an indication of what we're really like. We're dead in transgressions, he says, and in sin--explaining what this death is. Our inclinations, our thoughts, our words, our deeds miss the target of God's appointing for us.

And the thing about this which is so uncomfortable is that, as I said to you, there are no degrees of spiritual deadness. This is very, very hard, you see, for the happy, integrated, suburban pagan who contributes to charity, who cuts out of work early, once every month, to do his obligation to his children's basketball league or whatever else it is, who never turns the lady away when she comes from the Hart Foundation at his door when he's watching TV and wants just to send her up the street. And when he finally sits back down and takes the remote into his hands, he strokes himself on the back and says, You know, I don't know what that guy Beg is on about down there in that dungeon.

I don't mean to be unkind to the place. Down there in that subterranean level. I don't know what he's on about, because after all, I came home, and I looked after my kids.

I kissed my wife. I just helped that lady from the Hart Foundation. And, you know, all my charitable contributions are over the average national levels.

Well, I got news for you guys. The Bible says, So what? You're still dead. That the best of things we do are touched with death.

There is dust on it all. Dust! And this is the explanation that Paul is giving of the condition. He says, you want to have a graphic indication of what it means to be a real Christian, then he says, you need to understand the nature of the condition, which is that things are not the way they're meant to be.

Jesus, in John 17, where he prays what we refer to as his high priestly prayer, he says in John 17, 3, he says, Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. What is eternal life? It starts now, and Jesus says, Eternal life is knowing God. A little later on, in verse 25, he's praying, and he says, Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you.

Spiritual death is this. We do not know God. Eternal life is this.

We come to know God. How does that transaction take place? Well, what does Paul say? You were dead in your transgressions and in your sins. But, he says, you were made alive.

Made alive. You see, even if we could bring ourselves to the place where we were prepared in all honesty to accept this biblical verdict on our lives--namely, okay, fine, I'm dead, right? In your heart, you say, Okay, that's okay. I'm prepared to admit that I'm dead.

The next thing that happens inside of your mind is this. You're going to say, So what am I going to do about it? Because after all, I didn't grow up in America believing that there wasn't something you could do to change things. This is the land of change.

We can change our plans. We can change our dreams. We can change our Congress, maybe.

We can change so many things. We can change. Therefore, what am I going to do about it? Well, that's ridiculous, isn't it? What can a dead person ever do about their condition? I've done funerals now for the last seventeen years.

I've got more stories to tell that are humorous and macabre than I've had sandwiches in downtown Cleveland. But there's one thing I know for sure, that every time I go in to that room where that body lies, I can talk to that person till I'm blue in the face. I can give them instructions.

I could offer them food. I could tell them I had tickets for the Cavs versus the Bulls. There isn't a thing I could say to them that could make them animate in their dead condition.

You see, this is the issue this morning. If the biblical verdict is true, and we're dead, therefore there is nothing that we can do to get alive. Therefore, we need somebody else to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And that is the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, says Paul, here is the amazing thing. You were dead in your transgressions and sins, and he has made you alive.

Maybe when you're sitting at home a little later on in the week, you can take a New Testament, and you can turn up to the fantastic story of the death and subsequent resurrection of the fellow called Lazarus. And you have this amazing description of Jesus arriving at the tomb of Lazarus in John chapter 11, and him giving instructions that the stone would be taken away from the entrance, and the protestations of his sister Martha saying, Hey, I don't think you want to do that, you know. I mean, this isn't exactly what you'd call Alaska here, you know.

I mean, it's kind of warm, and you haul that stone away, and the whole town's gonna know that you did. And so they took away the stone, and Jesus looked up, and he said a brief prayer to his father, and then he called out in a loud voice, How ridiculous for a mere man to stand at the grave of a man dead four days, and to call his name with the expectation that he might come out. And out he came.

Why? Because the voice of Christ not only calls to life, but the voice of Christ instills life. And that is how anyone is ever made alive. First, the acknowledgment that this biblical verdict is true, I'm dead.

Second, the awareness that I can do nothing to remedy my condition. Thirdly, the hearing of the voice of the risen Christ instilling within me the heart cry for this kind of resurrection, which I've now recognized I so dreadfully need. The hardest thing about speaking in this way today is that this is rather offensive.

After all, you're a very nice group of people, and we send you an invitation and gave you a sandwich, and it's been a fairly okay time. What a shame to end it on such a whole thing by suggesting such an idea to people. Only an idiot or somebody who believed implicitly that this book is true would ever take such a risk.

And the fact is that America, of all the countries in the world, is expert at dressing up death and making it appear that it isn't really happening to us. Your funerals are full of that hypocrisy--and I don't mean that in unkindness. They are geared to steal ourselves against the reality.

And coming from that environment in the physical realm, we attach the same approach to the spiritual realm. And so we want to walk from here saying, It can't possibly be true. I'm not dead.

Therefore I don't need life. Well, here's the deal. We're either dead or we're alive physically.

We're either dead or we're alive spiritually. And there's no middle ground. Therefore I think that the sheet that I gave you is worthy of your careful and prayerful consideration, and that the claims demand our humble response.

Let us pray together. We pray, O God, that you will take the truth of your Word and open it to our hearts. Take our hearts and open them to the truth of your Word, so that we may encounter you, the living God, in the pages of your living Word, and that we may be able to set aside the opinions of men, but grant us no release from the insistent voice of your risen Son until we find our rest in him.

Hear our prayer as we commit one another to your care in the hours of the afternoon and in the days of this week, that in the community here in Cleveland our lives may count. For we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH.

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