

Ephesians 2:1-7¹

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.*

This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed above and the notes given below.

D. New Position Individually ([2:1-10](#))**1. The old condition: dead to God ([2:1-3](#))**

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

Notes**[2:1-7](#)**

This portion forms a part of the third of the eight long sentences in this epistle ([1:3-14](#), [15-23](#); [2:1-7](#); [3:2-13](#), [14-19](#); [4:1-6](#), [11-16](#); [6:14-20](#)) with 124 words. In the Greek, the subject and the main verbs do not occur until [2:4-6](#).

[2:1](#)

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.—This verse indicates the Ephesian believers had been dead in their sins; verse [2:5](#) will explain their new life. The Greek is literally “transgressions and sins,” which are synonyms denoting conscious and deliberate false steps.

[2:2](#)

You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world.—This clause may refer to the lifestyle of the world, but more likely it alludes to the temporal values of the world.

obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world.—The Greek text speaks of the prince of the authority of the air but does not identify him as the devil. According to the ancients, “air” is not a reference to an impersonal ideology or *Zeitgeist*; instead it was the personal abode of living evil spirits (*1 Enoch* 15:10-11; *2 Enoch* 29:4-5; *Ascension of Isaiah* 7:9-12; 10:29; *Philo Dreams* 1.22.134-135; *Giants* 1.2.6-11; *Plutarch Morals* 274b).

those who refuse to obey.—This is a good rendering of the literal “sons of disobedience.”

1. Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 16: Ephesians-2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 46-48.

[2:3](#)

following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature.—A more literal rendering is “living in the desires of our flesh, doing the wishes of the flesh and the reasoning processes.” This rendering attests that sinners live according to their flesh, gratifying the cravings and pleasures of the flesh, which are distorted by sin. The flesh dictates their lives. Furthermore, they not only satisfy the wants of the flesh but also rationalize this self-centeredness.

All of us used to live that way... By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.—Whereas Paul used the second person plural pronouns (“you”) in the first two verses of [chapter 2](#), in this verse he uses the first person plural pronouns (“we/us”). Some scholars (Abbott 1897:43; O’Brien 1999:280) think Paul was making a contrast between Ephesians as Gentiles (“you”) and Paul as a Jew (“we/us”), but more likely the contrast is between him as a writer and them as recipients (so Lincoln 1990:88; Best 1998:208). If the first alternative were the case, not only would the “all” in [2:3](#) refer only to Jews, then also in [2:4-7](#), [10](#) the first person plural would imply that only the Jews were the objects of God’s love and workmanship, and in [2:5](#) and [8](#) the second person plural would imply that only Gentiles need to be saved by grace. In either case, such a concept does not agree with NT teaching. Therefore, it is best not to make the distinction between Jews and Gentiles until [2:11](#).

Commentary

In [chapter 1](#), Paul spoke of God’s eternal plan in choosing those who were predestined to adoption in his family and who were brought together under Christ, the head of the church. [Chapters 2-3](#) explain the execution of this eternal plan by showing how God makes sinners into saints and then creates a new humanity, the church, Christ’s body. Paul begins by contrasting the past unregenerate condition of believers and their present regeneration.

In a sense, the first three verses of [chapter 2](#) is a parenthetical section, describing the believers’ condition before they experienced God’s transforming power. Before expounding on this extraordinary power, Paul described the awful condition of sinners who deserved nothing but God’s wrath ([2:1](#)). He explained to the believers that they had once been dead. This, of course, does not refer to physical death; it refers to spiritual death. As one who is physically dead cannot communicate with the living, so also those who are spiritually dead cannot communicate with the eternal living God and thus are separated from God. In this context, their spiritual death was a result of their sins. As mentioned above (see note on [2:1](#)), the Greek text includes “trespasses” along with “sins.” These are synonyms, depicting humanity’s deliberate acts against God and his righteousness—with resultant failure to live holy lives. When people are dead, they have no capability to generate life. Therefore, only the power of God can transform sinners into saints.

Having stated the sinners’ shared condition, Paul then gives more details to substantiate his claim. Their spiritual condition is described in three ways. First, he states that they had lived according to the temporal values of the world ([2:2a](#)). Literally, “they had been walking previously according to the age of this world.” The word “walking” has reference to their conduct of life. The Greek preposition *kata* [^{TG} <G2596>, ^{ZG} 2848] (according to) indicates a standard. Here that standard is conformity with the age of this world. The expression “age of this world” appears to be vague, but it probably indicates a way of life or a lifestyle. This stresses the temporal aspect, which is consistent with Paul’s usage elsewhere in Ephesians ([1:21](#); [2:7](#); [3:9](#), [11](#), [21](#)). Hence, it has the nuance of age or a span of time within this world.

To better understand this concept, it is necessary to consider the word “world.” Although it can have reference to the created material world (cf. [1:4](#)), here it likely refers to the ethical order of the world, which is a satanically organized system that hates and opposes all that is godly (cf. [John 15:18, 23; 18:36; 1 Cor 3:19](#)). Accordingly, “to live like the rest of the world” is to be in step with the world by embracing its temporal values. Those thus described are so involved with the activities and values of the present age that they have no time to be concerned with God, eternal values, or with the judgment to come.

Second, unbelievers follow the prince of the power of the air, who is known as Satan ([2:2b](#)). The Bible declares that the whole world is “under the control of the evil one” ([1 John 5:19](#)), also called “the god of this world” ([2 Cor 4:4](#)). Therefore, not only do unbelievers conform to the temporal values of this world, they also conform to the ruler of this realm. As mentioned in the notes above, people of the first century viewed “air” not as an impersonal ideology, “the spirit of the age,” but as the personal abode of evil spirits. Thus, not only do Satan and his emissaries reside in the air and heaven ([6:12](#)) but also work in the hearts of those who disobey God. These verses make it clear that unbelievers do not inadvertently sin but actually defy God by deliberate disobedience. In short, unbelievers conform both to the values of the world and to the dictates of Satan and his emissaries.

Third, unbelievers not only conform to the pressures of the world and to Satan but also to sin because they enjoy doing so ([2:3](#)). “Sinful nature” is a rendering of the term “flesh” (*sarx* [^{TG}[<G4561>](#), ^{ZG}4922]). This term may have reference to the material part of human beings, but it can also refer, as here, to the moral dynamics of fallen humanity. It is that which opposes God ([Rom 8:5-8; Gal 3:3; 5:16-17](#)). Unbelievers are inclined toward the things of the flesh ([Rom 8:5](#)), which produce works that are contrary to the character of God ([Gal 5:19-21](#)). Hence, one who lives in the flesh is depicted as one whose existence is apart from God and thus opposed to God and his ways. This is the result of a fallen reasoning process, which corrupts the will. It suggests that sinners consider their actions through a self-centered lens. They also use their minds to rationalize their sinful activity ([Rom 2:15](#)). Therefore, sinners are by nature ones who deserve God’s wrath. This wrath is depicted as both a present wrath ([John 3:36; Rom 1:18](#)) and a future wrath ([5:6; Rom 2:5; 5:9](#)). This may not be a very pleasant picture of humanity; nevertheless, it is true. Only God can change the scene, as is depicted next.

The Complete Biblical Commentary

Ephesians 2:1-7²

2:1. The first 10 verses in this chapter are among the most evangelistic in the Scriptures, explaining beautifully the actual steps which occur in salvation. Paul began by reminding believers of their wretched condition before God performed the miracle of redemption. "Were dead" comes from a combination of a participle and an adjective (*ontas nekrous*), so it literally means "being dead" and refers to spiritual death which is the state of separation from God. While some Bible scholars say it is impossible to make a distinction between the words "trespasses" and "sins," others claim "trespasses" refers to outward manifestations of sin and "sins" relates to the sinful nature of a fallen human being.

2:2. This verse further depicts the lost condition of mankind by specifying the forces working against them. First, unbelievers walk "according to the course of this world." This is a way of saying that fallen creatures manifest their state of spiritual death by living lives of enslavement to the world's standard of values, values that are human-centered, not God-centered.

Secondly, the rest of the verse informs us of the power that works behind this "spirit" of the age, or the ways of this world. Satan takes advantage of man's lost condition. He is at work "in the children of disobedience" or he is "operating in the sons of disobedience."

Here the writer of this epistle depicts the forces which war against believers as they seek to live godly lives: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is an external foe, its evil influences surrounding the believer. The flesh (the self-life) is an internal enemy, its weaknesses making it susceptible to temptation. Satan is an infernal foe, going about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He uses the influences of the world to seduce believers, and he takes advantage of believers by attacking them at their weakest points. But God has not left believers at the mercy of these enemies of the soul. He is the eternal Friend and Deliverer who will bring victory.

2:3. Here Paul uses the pronoun "we" (*hēmeis*) to show that the sinful condition he had just described applied to Jews as well as to Gentiles. In [verse 1](#) he refers to "you," the Gentile believers to whom he was writing. Next, Paul specified the third force that works against unbelievers—their fallen sinful nature. The word for "lusts" (*epithumiais*) may be used in a good sense ([Luke 22:15](#)) or in an evil sense, depending on its use in the specific context. Paul's use here obviously refers to evil desires. Unbelievers habitually yield to the cravings of the sinful nature with which they were born ([Romans 5:12](#)). As a result, they "were by nature the children of wrath." The word "wrath" speaks of God's abiding opposition to evil ([Matthew 3:7](#); [Romans 1:18](#)), and it is a reminder that those individuals who continue to practice sin are facing the wrath of God.

2:4. After describing what believers were in the past, the apostle began his picture of the present condition of Christians with "but God" (*de theos*). Man does not have to continue to live on the lower plain described in the first three verses of this chapter; God made a higher level of life possible for those who would accept it. God intervened because of His great love (*tēn pollēn agapēn autou*), the motivating force behind all that He does. In [1 Corinthians 13](#), the great classic in which he described this marvelous love, Paul detailed very specifically many of the important aspects of love. At the same time, he reminded believers that this same love must be the motivating force behind all their deeds as Christians.

This love caused God to act in mercy (*eleeō*), which can be defined as love in action. Because He loves so much, God performs specific acts of mercy.

2. Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library – Galatians-Philemon*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 110-113.

[2:5](#). God's greatest act of mercy is explained in this verse. Even though we were dead spiritually, He "quickenened us together with Christ" (*sunezōpoiēsen tō Christō*). This verb is the first of three in the context that has the prefix *sun-* ("with"). The second (*sunēgeiren*) was translated by the NIV "raised us *with* Christ," and the third (*sunekathisen*), "seated us *with* him." These verbs beautifully summarize what God does for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. First, He implants spiritual life within; then He elevates them to a new level of life; and thirdly, He permits them to enjoy a continuous relationship with Christ in this present earthly life. He accomplishes all this "by grace," *chariti*, an instrumental case construction in the Greek language which expresses the means by which something is accomplished.

"Grace" explains how God operates. It refers to "undeserved favor" and is a constant reminder that God does not manifest acts of mercy toward people because they deserve them. "Ye are saved" in this verse actually comes from a perfect tense participle ("having been saved," *sesōsmenoi*), showing a completed action with continuous results. Salvation is probably expressed this way because of the necessity of an initial act of conversion. However, God does not cease working in believers' lives after conversion.

[2:6](#). The last verse in this section shows the marked contrast between the believers' former lost condition and their present situation in Christ. While believers still live in mortal bodies on earth, they also participate in the resurrection life of Christ. The emphasis in this context is the believer's identification with Christ in His death ([verse 5](#)), His resurrection ([verse 6](#)), and His ascension ([verse 6](#)).

[2:7](#). However, the story is not yet complete. [Verse 7](#) shows why God has done all that [verses 4-6](#) describe. This verse begins with a strong statement of purpose, "that" or "in order that" (*hina*). Throughout all eternity the Church will be a demonstration to all creation of God's grace. Believers will truly be "trophies" of God's grace forever. "He might show" (*endeixētai*) is a middle voice verb meaning "to show for one's self" or for His own glory. So, for eternity believers will be glorifying God.