Opening Words

A giant python slowly wraps itself around you. You are mesmerized by its beauty and the touch of its skin but it slowly and surely squeezes the life out of you. And that is the way of the world for it slowly and imperceptibly squeezes us into its system so that we will obediently line up with it, do what it says, and forsake God.

23 Eph We Walked According to the World

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins."

What a contrast between the heights of worship and prayer in chapter 1 and the depth of our depravity in the opening words of chapter 2 – you were dead in your trespasses and sins. It is not that we got better, evolved from polytheism to the worship of the one true God and then discovered all these rich treasures that God has for us in Christ. Quite the opposite! Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that the world through its wisdom did not come to know God. Not only did we not come to know God, but, we were dead.

Then, as if that were not enough, Paul goes into a further description of our desperate plight in verses 2 and 3. Listen to these words. Let's listen to Paul speak to us in Ephesians 2:1-3.

> And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, [2] in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. [3] Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Paul identifies the three great enemies of God and mankind in this passage. Did you catch them? He talked about the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the way he presents them shows how complicated and enslaving life can be without God. It is not just that we were dead because of our rebellion and falling short and that we just kind of sat is some corner of the room in our death. Paul says in verse 2 that we were **walking** in these sins and in verse 3 he says that we were **living** in them. We were quite active in our sin, and in this death, we were compromised and influenced not only by our choices but also by the culture in which we lived and by spiritual forces in heavenly places that are against us, namely, the devil.

Let's examine these three forces – the world, the devil, and the flesh. I want us to camp for a while in these verses and in these concepts – to remember what life is like without Christ so that the riches of his mercy and grace will be that much greater for us.

Paul says in verse 2 that we walked according to the course of this world. In his time and in his language, he wrote that we walked according to the age of this world. What does he mean? Paul is

describing what we normally refer to as "the world" and when we refer to the "world" we are referring to the attitudes prevalent in our society that bend people away from the true God rather than toward God. It is those attitudes and values in our society that do not glorify God and that reinforce our sinful desires.

This can take so many forms. Some of them are blatant and full frontal assaults like reading the news on the internet and having an obscene picture appear before us. Another example is aggressive, evangelistic atheism. Some atheists are pooling their money and talent and buying advertising to try to influence people not to believe in God. But the influence of the world can deceptive, like an attitude that slowly shapes our thinking, step by step not to trust in Christ. Let me give you some examples.

The world tells us that it is OK for people to live together if they love each other and are faithful to each other. Who can argue with that? That's just the way life is these days, right?

The world tells us that everyone's beliefs are valid and every religion is just as good as another. Who can argue with that? That's just the way life is these days, right?

If we beg to differ, even if we do so politely, and with humility, we are branded as narrow minded bigots who are full of hatred. It makes it tough to stand for what is right.

Paul says that before we came to Christ we walked according to the course of this world, i.e., according to the way the world thinks and influences and shapes people, families, and nations.

Let me share some characteristics of the world. Probably the classic passage on this is 1 John 2:15-17. Listen to these words from John.

> 15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

Notice that it is easy to love the world for John must warn believers not to love the world. This shows that the world is full of attractive things that are not good for us but which lure us into their path. Notice that the world appeals to our bodies for John talks about the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes. It's hard enough that we have sinful desires that arise from within us, but the world system reinforces those sinful things by presenting beautiful things and it tells us to indulge our flesh and eyes and that it is OK to do so. We have seen in our day the scourge of pornography. But it is not just that pornography is everywhere, it is that it is mainstreamed into our society and is subtly becoming more acceptable and just another form of recreation.

Then, John talks about another form of worldliness. He speaks of the boastful pride of life. He speaks of people who are arrogant and people who think they are better than others because of … what? … they make more money than others? They live in nicer homes? They have powerful jobs? They make movies and are adored by millions? Does that make them better than others? Is that why they are so proud?

Paul tells us in Ephesians that in these things we formerly walked. Maybe we did not walk in all of them. But this description of the world applied to all of us in some way. Some of us have been more susceptible to pride, others to the flesh, others to beautiful possessions. This was part of the death that we walked in.

The world relentlessly seeks to press us into its mold. This is the JB Phillips paraphrase of Romans 12:2. Let me read it first in the NASB, the Bible I use and one of our best translations. Romans 12:2 says, "And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Phillips famously paraphrased it this way, "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." Isn't that a beautiful way to paraphrase that? Or maybe we should say that it is a scary way to paraphrase it.

Think of a giant python that slowly wraps itself around you. You are mesmerized by its beauty and the touch of its skin but it slowly and surely squeezes the life out of you. The world is that way. It will slowly and almost imperceptibly squeeze us into conformity with its system so that we will obediently line up with it and do what it says. Paul says this is how we formerly lived – according to the course of this age.

What happens if we try to stand against it? We will find resistance from the world. We will find ridicule. We will find shunning. We will find indifference and sometimes we will find hatred. 1 John 3:13 says "don't be surprised if the world hates you."

The world wants everything to conform and any deviation from it causes a reaction and a stir. Remember our studies in the early part of this series when we talked about Paul's ministry in Asia? He was having such an impact that the worshippers of the false god Artemis rioted. It's not that they said, "Oh that's OK – Paul is preaching another religion and if his religion gains more followers than ours, that is just the way it is." No, on the contrary, they rioted and wanted to kill Paul. Throughout the Roman empire, the government would not tolerate people who would not sacrifice to Caesar and multitudes of Christians lost their lives because they would not conform to the spirit of the age.

Let's remind ourselves again what the world is. The world is that set of ideas, attitudes, and values that bend us away from the true God. Living in the world but not being of the world is like swimming against the current. We must develop strong muscles or we will find ourselves floating downstream away from the destination we need to go for life.

We can know the difference between a worldly perspective on life and a godly perspective on life by answering these four sets of questions:

1. What am I doing with my life? Is my life to glorify myself or God?
2. Why am I doing what I am doing? Am I trying to advance the purposes of God or something less?
3. How am I doing what I am doing? I may even be doing something noble, but if I am not doing it in the right way, I may be worldly.

4. Where am I going? What is my goal? What is my destination? What do I really want to achieve?

What, why, how, and where – these four simple questions will help us know the difference between what is of God and what is of the world system.

And we must remember one other sobering truth, the world system, though created by fallen humans, is super-energized by the evil one and we will, in our next study, examine Paul's words about him.

But as we do close – let's remember – that Paul wants us to remember where we have come from. We ***formerly*** walked on this path but no more. Through Jesus Christ we have found the strength to overcome the world as John says in 1 John 5:4 – "And whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith."