

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, August 22, 2010**

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Hymns: 541, 91:7-9, 444, 413, 53.

Lessons: Genesis 3:1-15, Romans 7:7-8:2, John 8:31-47.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:1-3.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

St. Paul has opened his letter to the Christians in Ephesus with blessings from God and the assurance that God has called them from eternity to be his children, the comforting doctrine of election. St. Paul has prayed for them that *“the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give [them] the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that [they] may know him better.”* Ephesians 1:17.

In these verses starting the second chapter, he reminds them of how they used to live before Jesus Christ came into their lives. In so doing, he gives a good although brief discussion of Satan, the leader of the world of darkness. We must remember that there is no life for anyone who is living under Satan—only death. The Ephesian Christians were dead in sin, as are all men. Today we are reminded that

**ALL OF US WERE DEAD IN TRANSGRESSIONS AND SINS**

- 1. The cause of sin in the world is two-fold: Satan and man himself.**
- 2. Sinners follow Satan, the ruler of darkness – and who is not a sinner?**
- 3. Under Satan’s power, mankind can only gratify the cravings of the sinful nature.**
- 4. But God has redeemed us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

St. Paul has praised the Christians in Ephesus but now reminds them of their natural state of unbelief. *“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.”*

Someone who is dead cannot do anything. He or she cannot breathe, cannot move, and above all cannot do anything to please God. All mankind is by nature, without the work of the Holy Ghost, dead in sins. As we learn from the catechism, Scripture uses three words for sin and two of them are piled up here. “Sin” is the word used for missing the mark, that is, ‘missing the bull’s eye’ of God’s law by breaking even one of God’s commandments. “Transgression” is the word used for ‘crossing the forbidden line’ of God’s law by breaking even one of God’s commandments. “Iniquity” is the word used for ‘failing to measure up perfectly’ to God’s law by breaking even one of his commandments. Everyone without God has no choice but to follow *“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.”* Even the believer is daily and repeatedly tempted and often gives in to these ways.

Who is this ruler, this spirit who is at work in those who disobey God? In two words, it is Satan, the devil. Today let’s look briefly at Satan. But first we must emphasize that although God created all things, in no sense is God the cause and author of sin. He did not create man to sin. At the end of creation we read *“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day.”* Genesis 1:31. Neither did God decree that man should become a sinner; nor did he approve of sin when it was

introduced into the world; nor does he in any way induce or lead man to sin. ***"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone."*** James 1:13.

According to Scripture the cause of sin in man is the devil and the sinning man himself. And of course every man is a sinner. Man wants to blame Satan or some other creature or even God for his sinfulness. He does not want to accept blame himself

Theologians sometimes speak of the devil as the "external" cause of sin. Created good and holy together with all other angels, the devil was not tempted and seduced by anyone else but the first thought of sin and rebellion against God originated with him. We read in 1 John 3:8: ***"He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."***

Now, how it was possible for a perfectly good and holy angel to conceive the thought of sin, we do not know, and it is futile to try to trace the origin and cause of sin beyond the devil. It is the devil, Satan, who tempted and seduced Eve, as you heard in our Old Testament lesson today. He became the external cause of sin in the human race, as we read in Revelation 12:9: ***"The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."***

To this day the devil is the driving force in the children of unbelief. The devil sinned first and then seduced men in the Garden of Eden. And he is still the power telling unbelievers to sin every day and tempting believers to sin every day. Jesus told the unbelieving Jews in our Gospel lesson ***"You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."*** John 8:44. In 1 John 3:8 we read ***"He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."*** Thus Peter warns us: ***"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."*** 1 Peter 5:8-9. Satan is not resting on his first success in the garden of Eden, but ever since then has been the prime mover of all evil.

But the cause of sin in man is secondly sinning man himself. Theologians have written about the heart of man as the "internal" cause of sin. Seduction by the devil does not do away with the fact that men actually do the sinning. It does not relieve man of the responsibility for sin. That is the clear teaching of Scripture. Although Adam and Eve were seduced by the devil, they are guilty and were punished by God, as you heard in our Old Testament lesson from Genesis chapter three.

Sin is not like dirt and dust, which settles on the body as a mere external pollution; but each sin we commit has its start in our own hearts. Temptations approach us from outside, touch and stir our hearts, and our heart is where our sins begin. The temptation which beset Eve from the devil was not the sin which Eve committed; her sin began as soon as she lost faith in God's word and, believing the word of the devil, desired to eat of the forbidden fruit.

Even without such external temptation from Satan the heart of natural man is inclined to all evil. After the flood when Noah sacrificed burnt offerings to the Lord, we read ***"The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.'"*** Genesis 8:21. The psalmist echoes this in Psalm 51:5 ***"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."***

To this day man sins when he is “drawn away of his own lust, and enticed”, as we read in James 1:14 ***“but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”*** (NIV) St. Paul confessed in our Epistle Lesson ***“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”*** Romans 7:18.

We dare not try to blame the devil for the evil we do. God did not accept that excuse in the case of Adam and Eve and neither will he now. The responsibility and guilt are all ours. The true seat of sin in man is man’s soul, man’s heart. In the soul the law of God originally had and should still have its seat. The body becomes the seat of sin only because it is the “container” of the soul. To this day evil thoughts and sinful works proceed out of man’s own heart. Jesus said ***“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”*** Matthew 15:19. The heart is the true seat of sin, the birthplace of all internal and external sinful acts. And so it is plain that Satan is ***“the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”***

But we look at those words and may think: ‘I am a pretty good person’, or ‘I have been a child of God almost all my life. I’m not like other men. Not me.’ But St. Paul tells us plainly: ***“All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.”*** Every one of us is a sinner, whether we want to admit it or not. We are by nature all really like the hypocritical Pharisee in the temple who compared himself to someone he thought was much more wicked than himself: the tax collector, the publican. ***“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.’”*** Luke 18:11. When we compare ourselves to others, we think we are better people than they are. We think that we aren’t nearly as wicked or evil as some people. But Jesus tells us that ***“the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”*** Luke 18:13. And then Jesus said ***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*** Luke 14:14.

But the ruling of Satan in our lives, as we were before the Holy Ghost called us to faith is not the end of it all. If it were, eternal damnation in hell would be the only road open to us. But St. Paul has told us in chapter one of Ephesians that we who believe have been chosen by God, elected to eternal life through Jesus Christ. Christ has set us free from sin, and he is about to tell us that it is God’s grace that saves us, not our attempt to do good works. So today you have just seen a brief look at Satan. And although our text points out the power of Satan, we must point to the very next words as our hope, both eternally, and today and tomorrow on earth. ***“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.”*** Ephesians 2:4-7.

We must also find hope and encouragement in the words of St. Paul to the Romans as we conclude our sermon: ***“Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”*** Romans 13:10-14.

Yes, we are by nature sinners. But God has rescued us and redeemed us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – Jesus conquering all the power of Satan – so that we may live as God’s dear children. So live as God’s children! Amen.