

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

What Does the Phrase “Dead in Sin” Mean?

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“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” — Ephesians 2:1

“Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)” — Ephesians 2:5

“And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” — Colossians 2:13

What does the phrase “dead in sin” mean? What does it mean to be spiritual dead? And how did these simple concepts become so convoluted?

Arminian or synergistic arguments against the Calvinist interpretation “dead in sin” usually go something like this: There is no Scriptural evidence for the mistaken calvinistic notion that spiritual death means to be like a physically dead corpse and so nonresponsive and unable to believe the gospel. The Reformed view of “spiritually dead” or “dead in sin”, they claim, refers to dead spirit of man, that (the inner spirit) is what is dead. Therefore, the Calvinist comparison of a dead body’s inability to respond with a dead spirit’s ability to respond is fundamentally flawed...and that if the Bible says unsaved humans are “dead in our sin” this alone is insufficient for making deductions about the dead spirit’s inability to choose Christ. If that is the case, they reason, then spiritually dead people should not be able to do anything more than corpses can do, which what they want to show is plainly absurd. An often used example:

To prove the Calvinist view of “dead in sin” is wrong, notice the Bible plainly teaches that those who are dead in sin can resist the Holy Spirit. Now have you ever seen a corpse resist something? Of course not. So if we adopt the implications of the Calvinistic definition of “dead in sin” then we must deny that anyone who is dead in sin can resist the Holy Spirit or reject the gospel (Acts 7:51; 2 Thess. 2:10; 1 John 4:10; Rom. 10:21). Corpses can’t resist or reject anything any more than they can see or hear anything. This, they reason, shows that Calvinists have misinterpreted the meaning of dead in sin.

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Dead is dead, right?, they say. “How do men “dead to sin” choose pornography, marital infidelity, etc.? In other words, they reason that Calvinists take the phrase “dead in sin” too far. Arminians will propose that “dead in sin” means something less than living “as a walking cadaver in a spiritual graveyard” whose “ear is deaf to any word from heaven” (Sproul). They will say they have read Calvinistic articles that argue things like man is no more capable of responding to God’s offer of salvation than a corpse is of responding to an offer of a fine meal. But man can respond, they say.

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So what do Arminians claim that “dead in sin” really means?

In the context of a series of verses that like Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul says that the Gentiles are “excluded from the life of God” (Ephesians 4:18). “Excluded” could also be translated “alienated.” Arminians usually propose that “dead to sin” means that man is alienated, hostile, separated from God, and void of eternal life. To be dead in sin means to be separated from God (and, thus, His life). But it does not mean he is incapable of responding to the gospel.. Death is separation, Arminians argue, not simply a termination or cessation of life. Physical death is the separation of spirit from body. The body ceases to live and decay begins, but the spirit continues to exist.

When Paul says, “The wages of sin is death,” he is not simply referring to the cessation of corporeal existence, the Arminian argues. Therefore, to the Arminian, spiritual death for the natural man is better understood as separation from God and not in terms like, “spiritual cadaver” or “spiritual corpse.” If you use terms like that, then you have to refer to a “walking cadaver.” In other words, you’ve got to have a cadaver who still functions somehow. It’s better to just go with “separation from God.” Again Arminians will argue that if unregenerate man is cadaver-like and incapable of hearing from God and believing in Him, then, they reason, why aren’t regenerate men cadaver-like with respect to sin, Satan, and this world?

Response:

All of these arguments actually reveal a fundamental misconception of what is meant by Calvinists when they use the biblical phrase “dead in sin” to refer to man’s spiritual inability to respond to the gospel. Furthermore, I believe I can fully demonstrate that classic Arminians believe almost exactly the same thing as Calvinists with regard to man’s natural condition apart from the Holy Spirit.

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Stay with me here because I believe a lot of unnecessary ink has been spilled over this issue. Scripturally speaking, “Spiritually dead” refers to the idea that the unregenerate man (that is, the person without the Holy Spirit) is dead to spiritual things. His utter inability to respond the spiritual truth is due to the fact that he is unspiritual, of the flesh. Jesus said, “that which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit... The Spirit gives life but the flesh counts for nothing...that is why I told you that no one can come to me unless God grants it” (John 3:3, 6; 6:63,65) The person who is flesh is unregenerate and therefore dead in sin or spiritually dead. He is dead to spiritual things BUT IS ALIVE TO THE FLESH. That is why he can love sin and resist the Holy Spirit. Notice in the three quotes from Ephesians and Colossians at the top of this article... in each instance, quickening or regeneration is the solution to the problem of being dead in sin. What is that? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. That is, apart from regeneration, the sinner remains dead in sin or in his natural condition of original sin. To drive home the point, lets ask, can a person come to Christ apart from any help from the Spirit?

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The Scripture says that “no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:3) So “spiritually dead” does not mean man has a dead spirit, but rather is void of the Holy Spirit and therefore is dead to spiritual things. Paul said, “For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness” (Rom 6:20).

Again, in another critical passage on the subject, Paul said,

“But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God... these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For ...no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, THAT WE MIGHT UNDERSTAND the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The NATURAL PERSON does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is NOT ABLE to understand them because they are SPIRITUALLY DISCERNED.” (1 Cor 2:7; 10-14) (emphasis mine)

Spiritual truth spoken to an unregenerate man is not discerned, foolish and unacceptable unless God reveals it to us by his Spirit, and he gave His Spirit that we might understand, as the text says. What is ironic about this whole thing is that the very Arminians who spill so much ink refuting this actually believe this very same thing. I would like to issue the following challenge to any Arminian or synergist: **Can a natural person, left to themselves, even lift a finger toward their own salvation? or have any response whatsoever to the gospel APART FROM the work of the Holy Spirit?** No, in fact traditional Arminianism teaches that unless the Holy Spirit grants “prevenient grace” then there is not even the possibility of any response. So frankly I am baffled as to why

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Arminians would spend time writing countless articles in an attempt to refute something which they themselves already affirm. The very necessity of prevenient grace to the Arminian excludes the possibility of a response by those dead in sin, and demonstrates beyond any further question, that they fully embrace the term “spiritually dead” in the exact same way as the traditional Calvinist. This is not where these two camps differ. The difference is whether this working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the unbeliever prior to salvation is monergistic or synergistic. ... whether it effectually accomplishes God’s intended design or whether such grace can be resisted by man. That is really where we differ, not over the meaning of the phrase “dead in sin”. At least the concept of total inability to respond is precisely the same apart from grace.

To review, man’s natural condition is that we have no spiritual life in us and are therefore dead to the things of God. By nature we have a moral inability and thus no inclination to believe the Christ of the Gospel. Prior to being born from above we are in bondage to our sinful impulses, unless and until the Spirit first opens our blind eyes, deaf ears and stony hearts to the gospel.

But lest there be any misunderstanding, let’s be clear, the Apostle Paul wrote that even though the natural man is ‘dead in sin’, that ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of God.’ (Rom 10:17). No one is saved apart from believing the gospel. But Paul also teaches that the word must be accompanied by the Holy Spirit or it will fall on deaf ears. In 1 Thess 1: 4,5 he says,

“For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”

He knows they are chosen by God because the gospel he preached was impressed upon their renewed hearts by the Spirit, without which, he could preach till he is blue in the face and they would never respond. In a like manner, a farmer can do all the things necessary to plant crops, but unless God blesses his work with rain from above, the farmer’s work will not be productive. Our job, the scripture teaches, is to preach the gospel, declaring to the world the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 5:24). We plant and water, but God alone causes the growth and opens the heart.

Paul said that we are to ‘persuade’ unbelievers, and to ‘reason’ with them, and this was his own practice. Now why would Paul write and practice this if he knew people are as dead as Lazarus and incapable of believing or hearing the truth? Because it is only through the proclaimed gospel accompanied by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit to change a heart of stone to a heart of flesh that one believes in Jesus. So yes, Jesus is asking us to do what is impossible. He asks us to preach to those dead in sin... to people

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who cannot and will not respond. But being impossible should never stop us from obeying and being used as a means to accomplish Jesus' end, because "what is impossible with man [faith and repentance] is possible with God." So we do not let the fact that we can't cause the new birth stop us from heralding the gospel to all creatures. That is, in fact, how people are born again, through the good news of Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit opens their ears to it.

So I believe this clearly demonstrates that this whole argument against the Calvinist understanding of "spiritually dead" does not make sense because, apart from Arminian prevenient grace, they believe the same thing about the natural state man. Where we differ is over the nature of saving grace ... not over our inability believe or respond apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

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