

September 3, 2023

BY GRACE WE HAVE BEEN SAVED  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
*(3 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)*

One of the blessings of pastoring somewhere for twenty-four years is that in your preaching you come back around to texts that you've preached before. So, oftentimes, I'll get to a point in my sermon preparation where I'll go back, pull up an old manuscript, and see what I said before. Sometimes it's helpful. Other times it's not. Well, sure enough, I've preached through the book of Ephesians before, and I had that in my mind as I studied my text this week. At times I thought to myself, "I wonder how I preached this the first time."

At the same time, though, I thought, "Do I really want to look?" I've been hesitant all week to go back and look at what I wrote then. And it's not because I was worried about robbing myself of the opportunity to look at this text with fresh eyes and not simply repeat what I said before. The reason is because when I last preached through this book, it was twenty-two years ago. I preached this specific text on December 30, 2001. None of my kids were even born yet, and I was twenty-three years old. If you're twenty-three or younger, you may not understand why I was hesitant to look back at what I said twenty-two years ago. If you're at least a couple of decades past that age, you absolutely know why I'm hesitant to read what I said publicly twenty-two years ago. How many of us would cringe to go back and hear all we were saying twenty plus years ago?

But I did ultimately read it. I opened that manuscript this week and read it. But I opened that document and looked at it like I do when I'm watching a television show and they're performing surgery. I want to know what happens, but I can hardly get myself to look at it. So, I turn my head away a bit, squint my eyes, and peek at it out of the corner of my eyes.

It wasn't as painful as I feared it could be—though still a little painful. I like to hope that a couple of decades have brought some maturity, humility, and wisdom that was sorely lacking in my twenties. And, I guess I could say, that is one benefit of looking back at your life a few decades ago. Ideally you'll be able to see what God has done to shape you, form you, and grow you in Christlikeness by his grace.

This is what Ephesians 2:1-10 is about. Paul writes to the Ephesian believers in order to show them the rich grace of God in this lives, but in order to show them this, he takes them back and reminds them of who they were and where they were before they came to Christ. And as painful as it is to think of, it helps shed light on the glorious work of what their God has done to save them and the grace that he has shown them in doing this.

But what's important for us is that Paul's writing here does not pertain to the Ephesian believers only. It is true that in verses 1-2 he uses the second person pronoun (you), but by the time he gets to verse 3, he is speaking of how "we all" once lived and refers to their state in this world as

being “like the rest of mankind.” In other words, this text is telling us—you and me—what we were like before we were saved and what God has done to save us.

Therefore, what I want to do this morning is help us bask in the amazing grace that God has shown us in saving us. And in order to do so, we will look at who we were before we were saved, what God has done to save us, and then consider the gracious nature of our salvation. Let’s start, then, with a consideration of who we were before our salvation.

### **Our condition before we were saved (vv. 1-3)**

Paul opens this section describing who we were before we were saved. Again, it’s only by having an accurate understanding of who and where we were that we can begin to get a clear picture of how powerfully God has worked in us and how gracious he has been to do so. Here’s what Paul writes in verses 1-3. “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” That’s a multi-faceted, dark, and gloomy picture of a terrible and complex state, so let’s take it a piece at a time. First, we were dead in our sins.

Now, obviously Paul is using “dead” here in a non-physical way. After all, we all could tell stories about our lives before we came to Christ when we were very much alive as best we could tell. But he means that we were dead in a spiritual sense. Later in this letter he will speak of these Ephesian believers as once having been “alienated from the life of God” (4:18). Paul will also speak in his letter to the Romans about unbelievers living under the “reign” or dominion of death (Rom 5-6). And specifically he here notes that we were dead *in our trespasses and sins*.

Here’s the picture: because of our sinful nature and guilt, we were ruled over by the evil tyrants of sin and death, unable to escape from their influence on our lives, and as such we were unable to pursue or please God. We were enslaved to sin and death, addicted to it and pursuing it. And had nothing changed, we one day would have died physically (as a penalty for our sins) and faced the second death, which is being thrown into an eternal lake of fire. That’s where we once were. But it gets worse. Next, Paul describes three other controlling realities in our lives.

He notes, first, that we were “following the course of this world” (v. 2). That is, we were following after the culture and society around us—which is filled with people who are also dead in their sins. You see, “world” here doesn’t mean simply the created order around us. “World” in the Bible represents “a whole value-system which is alien to God”<sup>1</sup> and opposed to him. This is why when Jesus prays for his followers in John 17, he says, “I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me. . . . I have given them your word, and the world has hated

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 73.

them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world' (vv. 9, 14). And so we were following the course of this world which is utterly in opposition to our Lord.

So, that's the first piece—the world around us was pulling us in. But Paul also adds that we were “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (v. 2). Now, this is a reference to the devil and his power, but it perhaps can take us back. Why would Satan be called the “prince” and why “of the power of the air”? Well, let's take these in turn. First, the Bible is not slow to speak of Satan as the ruler of this world or age. In fact, Jesus explicitly and repeatedly refers to the devil as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). So, it isn't out of place to speak of him as the prince of anything regarding this world. Okay then, but why say, “the power of the air”?

I think the answer is because in Judaism, it was widely considered that the air was thought of as the place where demons were active.<sup>2</sup> It was their realm. And this would have been well known to the Ephesians. Remember how Acts 19 tells us that many of them were converted from a pagan lifestyle where they were involved in sorcery and magic? The text even tells us that after they were converted, a number of them burned their books of magic. Well, interestingly, one of those well-known books of magic that they would have burned actually includes a petition that reads: “Protect me from every demon in the air.”<sup>3</sup> That's how all of Paul's readers would have thought of the air—the demonic realm.

Therefore, when Paul refers to Satan as the prince of the power of the air, we're being told that he is the prince or ruler of the demonic world. Have you ever wondered how the Bible can talk about Satan tempting us and seeking to devour us when there's just one of him, and he's not omnipresent? Well, it's because he is the ruler of a hoard of demons in this world that do his bidding. And this demonic world is what stands behind the spirit of this age that we see at work in unbelievers in the culture and society around us. Have you ever looked around and thought, “Why do people pursue such evil, even when it's foolish and illogical?” Why do people argue men can become women, or it is good for men to marry each other, or that pornography is something okay to view, or a number of other unhealthy practices? The answer is not because we're just, by nature, more logical than them. It's because the world isn't neutral. It has a ruler and demonic influences that hold sway over those who are not followers of Jesus. There are evil powers at work helping people in the world think and promote these foolish and destructive practices. And we were once enslaved to those same powers. We were under the rule of the devil himself. Yet there's more.

Paul also adds that we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. Now, “flesh” here doesn't simply mean our skin but our fallen, sinful, depraved human nature. We actually don't need help from any outside source to desire sin, to

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<sup>2</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 131).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

lust, covet, or want control. These things come quite naturally to us because of who we are in our very nature. And this is why Paul says that we “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” That phrase “by nature,” is speaking of how we were born into this world.

It’s not that we come into this world good and clean and uncorrupted. No, by our very nature in union with Adam and his sin, we are born into this world desiring evil. We are sinfully corrupt, addicted and enslaved to sin, and rightly headed toward the day when we would bear God’s wrath on the day of judgment.

This is a picture, believer, of who you once were. And, unbeliever, this is a picture of who and where you are now. We were under the enslaving power of death, spiritually dead in our sins, not pursuing or seeking to please God. We were following this evil and culture and society that is ruled over by the devil and his demons, and we were under his reign. And, if that’s not enough, we were born into this world, by nature, sinful so that our flesh craves sinful things that we once carried out, awaiting the day that the Lord Jesus Christ would righteously throw us into hell.

And it’s crucial that we get an accurate picture of this for a few reasons. One, every time believers have forgotten this dire position of unbelievers, we’ve grown weak in understanding our need to preach the gospel. You see, the gospel alone is the power of God to salvation. It alone can open blind eyes and bring dead men to life. But if man’s only problem is that we need an attitude adjustment or need a little convincing, then we’ll opt for what measures we think can best accomplish that and leave the gospel behind. However, we realize that salvation requires a miracle, then we’ll keep preaching the gospel—that alone which is the power of God to salvation.

Additionally, if we don’t think of ourselves as utterly corrupt by birth, then Jesus’ radical language of what we need will feel out of place. If we think we just need better instruction, then Jesus’ words won’t make sense. But if we realize that we are born into this world under the enslaving power of death, the devil, this evil age, and our own corrupt nature, then we will say, “If I’m born so utterly ruined, then I need nothing less than to be born all over again but this time with an entirely different nature.” And that’s exactly what Jesus tells us we need, saying in John 3:3, “You must be born again.”

Finally, if we lose sight of our former state, then we’ll simply fail to honor God for his grace as we should. I’ll flesh this out more as we go, so let’s press on to our next section where we see what God has done to save us.

### **What God has done to save us (vv. 4-6)**

Starting in verse 4 this text makes a great transition. Paul tells us that God made us alive, but as he does, he first notes why God does what he does. He says, “Being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses” (vv. 4-5). As we’ve seen in the previous two sections, God did not act toward us in a saving way because we

were deserving or impressive or merited anything. Rather, simply because he is merciful and loved us even when we were dead in our sins and following the devil, God “made us alive together with Christ” (v. 5).

God did the miracle that we couldn’t do for ourselves. He took people us when we were dead in our sins and made us alive in Christ. Actually Paul mentions three things that God did, and each of them is followed by the phrase “with Christ” or “with him.” Paul writes, “God . . . made us alive together with Christ . . . raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places” (vv. 4-6).

You may notice that this language of raising us up and seating us with Christ sounds very familiar. We saw the same thing spoken about Jesus in 1:20-22 as Paul wrote that God “raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion . . . and . . . put all things under his feet.” Now, Paul is saying these same things about us. What’s going on?

What Paul is telling us is that our God united us with his Son so that we experience in ourselves the blessings that come to Christ. When he was dead and in the tomb on that Easter Sunday morning the Father made him alive, raised him up, and gave him all authority to reign over all things. And so with us, our Father united us with his Son so that we were made alive in him, raised with him, and seated with him. That means that the very life of Christ is the life we have. We who believe already have a taste of resurrection life. But also we’re seated with Christ, which for him was a reference to ruling over all powers. What does it mean for us? It means that all of these realities that once reigned over us—the devil, his demons, sin, and death—are no longer reigning over us so that the devil doesn’t hold us captive, his demons cannot snatch us from God’s hand, sin doesn’t master us, and though we will die, it’s no longer a penalty for death holds no dominion over us. Satan no longer can stand and accuse us, and we can remind him that his doom is sure. And God has done all this for us by uniting us with Christ and blessing us in him. It’s a miracle, and it’s a miracle that reflects God’s grace toward us, which brings us to our last point.

### **The gracious nature of our salvation (vv. 7-10)**

After discussing what God has done to save us—delivering us from slavery to sin, death, the devil, and the wrath of God—Paul highlights the grace of God toward us in this in verses 7-10. Many of us have probably memorized verses 8-9, which tells us that we have been saved by grace through faith as a gift of God, but note that verse 8 begins with “for.” It connects with what has come before. And right before verse 8 we read in verse 7 that God has made us alive, raised us up, and seated us with Christ “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, when individuals look at you and me, they see evidence of the kindness and grace of God to a people who didn’t deserve it. That’s what we are. And that’s what we’ll be throughout eternity. We will perpetually be evidence of God’s kindness and trophies of his

grace.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely what he had said back in 1:6 when Paul told us that he'd chosen and predestined us to be his holy, blameless children "to the praise of his glorious grace." We can't help but look at ourselves and each other and marvel at God's rich kindness and grace.

Why do we show forth his grace? Paul answers, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (vv. 8-9). Our salvation is entirely a gift of God. We can't point to our works. If we could, we would boast in them. But with the believer, there is no boasting unless it is boasting in the kindness and grace of God to people who were once in a dire state and deserved God's wrath.

"But," one could say, "we do good works." Sure, Paul responds, but even that is a gift of his grace. Paul adds in verse 10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

It is true that you and I do good works, but we do them because when God predestined that we would be his holy and blameless children, he also predestined and prepared good works for us to perform and crafted us to perform them. So even our good works are mere exhibits of his grace. As Paul said to the Philippians, you and I will work out our salvation in a life of good works, but it is only because God is working in us "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). And as Paul said of himself, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). This is why Paul repeats in these verses "by grace you have been saved" (vv. 5, 8). He wants us to see that salvation is all of grace, and our lives are mere exhibits of the kindness and grace of our God.

Someone has described the gospel in terms of "do" versus "done." You and I have an inner desire to want to say that we deserve, that we've accomplished, that we've done what was demanded. But the reality of salvation is utterly differently. We didn't do, but it's been done for us as Jesus lived, died, and was raised for us. We've not accomplished, but God accomplished for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, even when we were dead, uniting us with his Son and making us alive in him, raised with him, and seated with him. We cannot boast of ourselves, for it's all of grace, but we can boast in the kindness and grace of our God, which we will do as we dwell with him for all eternity. So let's come give him thanks for these glorious realities now as we come to the table and praise him for his glorious grace. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, 82.