

## **God's Great Grace for Dead People--Ephesians 2:1-10 (ESV<sup>1</sup>)**

**This morning's text is the first of a December series from the letters of Paul, that can be thought of as reminding us of the great gifts that have been given to humanity through the incarnation of Christ. As we enter this joyous advent season, our hearts should overflow in thanksgiving for what the triune God of the Bible has done for us in Jesus, Son of God and Son of man, born of the virgin Mary in humble circumstances in Bethlehem.**

**Today we will focus on "God's Great Grace for Dead People," that is mediated through Christ Jesus. We have heard the wonderful text read, and there is a brief outline we'll use printed in your service guide. We will meditate on**

- **The Impossible Condition of all Humanity (verses 1-3)**
- **The Great Grace of God in Christ For Dead Humanity (verses 4-6)**
- **The Purpose of God's Grace (verse 7)**
- **Implications of this Grace for Christian Good Works (verses 8-10)**

**Please pray with me, and then we will work our way through the text a phrase or two at a time.**

**Father God, we thank You for Your Holy Word. We thank You for telling us who You are, who we are, and the basics of eternal reality. We confess that if You had not done so, we would be in utter darkness. We pray, that as we open Your Word this morning, You will act on our dull hearts by Your Holy Spirit. We believe, help us in our unbelief. Bring Yourself glory in and through us Your people we pray. Help me, I ask, to rightly represent You and Your Word. You know both my remaining sin and my frailty and how desperately I need Your help in this. I pray for grace to be clear-headed and true to the text. Graciously care for us all as we consider Ephesians 2, we ask in Jesus. Amen.**

**In the first 3 verses of Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul lays out the real condition of every son and daughter of Adam and Eve. What he says is completely true, and completely at odds with our default human beliefs about the way things are. This is the Word of God. Let us hear it and believe it.**

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**Eph 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins**

**Paul tells the Ephesian gentile Christians that prior to faith in Christ, they were "dead." Sure, they were walking around breathing and eating and drinking and talking, making plans, holding jobs, and having kids. But as regards all that ultimately matters, as regards knowledge of God, as regards anything enduring, they were "dead." They were not just sick, not just in need of some improvement or a little external help, but were wholly and completely "dead."**

**To state the obvious, dead people don't have the ability to act. The dead cannot change any circumstances. They cannot right any wrongs or do any good. They are completely dull to everything around them, unable to perceive, and even unable to enjoy or respond rightly to the most kind and gracious gifts of their Creator. They don't know their condition. Brothers and sisters, dead is really dead. Such was the former state of these Ephesian Christians.**

**Verse 1 says that the Ephesians were formerly dead "in ... trespasses and sins." This is not only the *cause* of their deadness, but also the *constant experience* of their dead-to-God mortal existence. Dead in trespasses and sins, they habitually, callously, and arrogantly stepped outside the will of God, they went where they should not have gone. And they always fell short of His glory and real goodness, always missing the mark. They were wrong in what they did, and they were wrong in what they failed to do and be. They were dead in the trespasses and sins**

**Eph 2:2 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—**

**The trespasses and sins were ones in which the Ephesians once "walked." That is, they were the normal stuff of their lives, they were the "way" of their lives. They were characteristic of everything that they did, thought, and valued. How was that? Surely the fact that humans are created in the image of God allows for something more hopeful??! But the truth is that marred by the Genesis 3 fall, all humans are born "following the course of the world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience."**

**The "course of the world" is what Paul in Galatians calls "the present evil age." It is more literally "the age of this world order." It is the rule and thinking and**

**activity of humanity set up in opposition to and ignoring the rule and reign of God. Real deadness is to "walk" or go through a mortal existence in rebellion against and disdain for the King and Creator of all. The origin of this kind of existence is the devil himself, "the prince of the power of air." He was behind the Genesis temptation, and he is behind the profane arrogance that is always at work in humans outside of Christ. It is no wonder that Paul uses the phrase "sons of disobedience" here. This is almost surely Hebrew idiom for people characterized by their disobedience to God. And it is not description of a few particularly evil people. The Ephesians and us all are by birth "sons of disobedience." It is a universal description of all humanity. This Paul makes clear in verse 3.**

**Eph 2:3 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.**

**Paul began speaking about and to the Ephesians. Now he includes himself and all people, gentiles and Jews alike (you and me included), in his description of the condition of humanity. All of us begin human life "in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind." We begin supposing we are in our own little worlds, in mortal lives centered on ourselves. We begin assuming that we are captains of our ships and masters of our own souls. In some cases that existence is filled with obvious gross immorality. In other cases it is filled with a more refined, more socially acceptable and cultured arrogance and self-sufficiency. Either way, it is always in rebellion toward and disdain for our Creator. That is how all humans are born and begin mortal existence. That condition is real deadness. It is the condition of a completely helpless death.**

**And verse 3 says that it is the condition of being "children of wrath." This is a phrase like "the sons of disobedience" in verse 2. It describes all people whose state is defined as being under the absolutely just, completely measured, absolutely consistent and predictable and moral hostility to evil, that is characteristic of the one true and living God. It is existence before the face of Him who is the very definition of good. Being "children of wrath" is, again, not a description of a few especially bad people, but rather a universal descriptor of every child of Adam and Eve.**

**So here we have in 3 verses a characterization much like the longer statement in the early chapters of Romans, a universal indictment of humans born into and practicing sin and rebellion against God, part of a devilish world system in**

**opposition to Him. What makes this most terrible is the clear inference that humans are absolutely trapped in this state, completely dead to God, completely without the capacity to extricate themselves. If there was a bit of real life in us at mortal birth, this wouldn't be so dark ... but there is none. If this was a state that a person could awaken himself or herself from or even be argued out of, this wouldn't be so desperate ... but it is not. Such is the utterly hopeless condition of every human ever born. This is what God says about our natural state. Let the weight of that sink in for a moment.**

**Thanks be to God, verses 1-3 of Ephesians 2 do not stand alone. They are followed by verses 4-6 and available deliverance from our horrible birth condition. In a moment, we will make our way through those verses and on to verse 10 a phrase at a time. But before doing that, I invite you to peek ahead and mark and be ready to savor the fact that all that is said in verses 4-10 *is in relation to Christ*. Look ahead. In verse 5 it is "together with Christ." In verse 6 it is "with him," "with him," and "in Christ Jesus." In verse 7 it is "in Christ Jesus." And again in verse 10 it is again "in Christ Jesus." The dire "dead" situation of humanity has its only remedy and only hope in Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, God come to earth in human flesh, born to a virgin in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, who for the sake of His people bore the just wrath of God on their behalf. Indeed, thanks be to God.**

**Back to text in linear fashion.**

**Eph 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins**

**Eph 2:2 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—**

**Eph 2:3 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.**

**Eph 2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,**

**"But God," says Paul ... two of the most lovely words of all Scripture. The first three verses of the chapter are without hope because they don't yet take account of the astonishing person of our Creator. As F.F. Bruce put it, "The wrath of God . . .**

provides the background against which his mercy and love stand out in all their radiance.”

This God of the Bible is rich in mercy. The wrath humans are naturally under is completely deserved and only right, but God has mercifully chosen to not unleash that wrath on all humanity. The take-your-breath-away truth is that God loves rotting dead-to-Him-and-all-that-is-good human beings. This is "great" love indeed! You and I have no use for those who don't properly respect us, who spit on what we hold precious, who ignore our wishes ... and we are only tiny specks in this vast universe. *This* verse concerns the Ancient of Days, the Alpha and Omega, the One who was and is and is to come, the One who is almighty, all-powerful, complete perfection. In our dead state, we humans spit in His face ... and He reacts in mercy, truly great mercy.

Why?---Paul says it is because of His great love---I don't know about you, but I find that truth nearly incomprehensible. Paul might as well have said that God acts in rich mercy "Because He does!" or "Because that's who He is!" And in a sense those answers *ARE* this answer to the question "Why?" "because of His great love." This amazing great love that acts to address our misery described in verses 1-3 is an expression of His very nature.

**Eph 2:4** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

**Eph 2:5** even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

The great loving nature of God acts even when and in spite of the fact that human beings are dead---stinking rotten dead---to Him and everything about Him. God acts in mercy in spite of the fact that humans are utterly locked into and enslaved by a hellish system and way of seeing and doing that is in opposition to Him and all good. God acts in spite of the fact that humans are justly under His wrath. And in place of death, enslavement, and wrath, God has made Christians "alive together with Christ." God has completely changed the circumstances of Christian believers. All of the natural misery of verses 1 through 3 is reversed, and Christians are genuinely alive in a state completely different from that into which they were born. They are alive with a Savior (Himself the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity) who was dead (suffering the wrath His people deserved in their places), and who now lives eternally. Christian people are "made alive" with Christ by the God of mercy.

Let's be clear that it's God who acts and "makes believers alive." In case we're not paying attention or are especially dense, Paul interjects (or really, says in other words) what should be painfully obvious at this point. This making alive, this saving work, is all God's doing, is all of grace. "—by grace you have been saved— " he says. There is not a bit of it that is deserved, earned, or merited. How could it be? Of course it is "by grace you have been saved." Our human deadness, enslavement to sin, and just position under wrath leave no other possibility. Such beings do not and cannot save themselves. They are unaware of their state, and in any case completely impotent to change it. Help must come from outside, from God Himself. Thanks be to God in Christ!

In verses 5 and 6 Paul seems to have coined a Greek usage unknown before this letter. This is what the ESV renders respectively as "with Christ," "with him," and "with him." This is apparently a unique compound form that takes a Greek prefix that means "together with" and combines it with verbs to get single words that mean respectively

"to make alive together with"

"to raise up together with"

"to sit down together with"

These are apparently quite striking Greek usages that underline the reality that the great mercy and benefits of life that are given to formerly dead people, are enjoyed *exactly in their union with Christ*. He was crucified, dead, and buried. The Father made *Him* alive again, and thereby gives *Christians* life with Him. That is, Christians are made "alive together with Christ."

Eph 2:6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

Further, *Christ* was raised from death to heaven, and Paul says that thereby so also are Christian people, *in union with Him*. Christians have been raised up together with Christ. We might be inclined to hear this as promise for the future, something for life after mortal death. But the tense doesn't allow that. The tenses in verses 5 and 6 require that these are finished realities. Christians have already been translated with Christ from death to life. They have been transported from a world system at odds with its Maker to life in the heavenly Kingdom of God. They are no longer slaves to sin and the spirit of the present age, but are free to worship and enjoy their gracious Savior and King. They have been already raised up

together with Him.

Further, after His raising and ascension, *Christ* sat down at the right hand of the Father in a place of authority and honor. And astonishingly the text says that *Christians* are seated with Him. This is dizzying, but *in union with Christ* in some ways believers share that place of authority and power. Instead of being dead and oblivious to God, they have direct access to God the great and powerful King in prayer. Instead of being ruled and hopelessly tormented by sin and the devil, Christians in increasing measure enjoy sanctification and freedom to not sin, having power over it. Their citizenship in God's Kingdom is an exalted wonderfully high thing, an honorable place that isn't shared by angels or any other created beings. Astonishingly, Christians have been seated together with Him in the heavenlies.

These things in verses 5 and 6 are the things that God, in great mercy and grace has done for Christian believers. He has made alive, has raised and has seated, all this in Christ. To what end?

Eph 2:7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

God has made us alive together with, has raised us up together with, and has seated us together with Christ, *so that forever He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. Make no mistake, God is properly out for His own glory, and the number one evidence of His gracious kindness is what He has done for Christian people in Christ Jesus. Formerly dead people, who were slaves to sin and objects of wrath, that are instead alive, raised and seated with Christ in heaven will be eternal testimony to the great mercy and goodness of God. All living beings will look on in wonder at this great work and give God praise, forever and forever. You and I will give praise, the angels will give praise, and even those beings who eternally hate God will look on this and say "Amen, this is immeasurable mercy and grace. This God is truly kind to His people."

Verse 7 is the center of this text. It's not the verse that comes in our Scripture memory programs and dull as we are, we typically blow by it and focus on other matters. But this is the true and glorious central matter. It is a staggering reality that Christians made alive, raised and seated with Christ will eternally be the prime exhibit in the cosmic display of God's grace and kindness.

The central truths of this passage have been stated. What remains in verses 8 through 10 are some correctives for Christian thinking. These verses surely contain good and important doctrine, but they are not the center of the text. And if we miss their relationship to what has preceded them, we have "missed the point."

**Eph 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

**Eph 2:9** not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It is common to take verses 8 and 9 alone as a memory text, detached from the rest of this section. But that largely ignores the question of what the "For" is about at the beginning of verse 8. In context, the "for" makes perfect sense. The immeasurable riches of God's grace will be on display throughout eternity, *because/for* the presence of Christians together with Christ in heaven *will be and could only be by grace!* There can be no other explanation for it, except God's saving of those Christians. Now this work of God is through faith---through humans made alive by God responding by taking Him at His word and casting themselves on the substitutionary atoning work of Christ. But all of it is ultimately the gift of God, and only God gets any credit for that. In context, it is clear that of course this is the way it is! Dead people, enslaved by the devil and the world system and under God's just wrath have no capacity or even inclination to do good, let alone be perfect and thus fit for God's presence. There can be no such beings in the presence of the Holy God. So indeed, salvation of Christians will be eternal testimony to the gracious kindness of God, not to any merit or work of those Christians.

Sure enough, these verses teach the insufficiency of human works to produce salvation. But in light of verses 1 through 7, to even frame a position of "works salvation" would be a complete absurdity. Dead, enslaved children of wrath don't act to make themselves right with God. The position of Christians in Christ cannot be of their own doing, and to claim human credit for it would negate verse 7, the eternal glory of God on display in His heaven in saved sinners. **OF COURSE** it is the gift of God.

It is probably worth saying before going on that we tend to hear the "this" in verse



**8 as a reference to "faith," making the sentence a sentence about the origin of faith. But that is not the main point being made. Rather, Paul intends us to hear the word "this" refer to the whole of the previous sentence ... including faith as a part, but surely not limited to it. That is, this entire amazing transaction that raises dead people and puts them eternally in heaven as the main exhibit in the case for God's immeasurably rich grace and kindness, *all of that* is the gift of God.**

**Having opened the issue of good works in verses 8 and 9, Paul then needs to not leave their nature in question. What of good things done by believing people?**

**Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

**There is another "for" here at the beginning of the verse. Verse 10 is lovely standing alone, but hear it in context. Regarding human good works, not only are they no possible basis for salvation, but they owe their very existence to God.--Let me say that again. Human good works not only are no possible basis for salvation, but they owe their very existence to God.--Saved humans are God's workmanship, His highest creation, an eternal testimony to His mercy. All good that they do they can only do because that's what they have been made to do. No human can claim merit for simply doing what he or she was created to do, any more than the angels before the throne of God can claim credit for constantly singing "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God almighty." Any glory or praise that is due for human good works belongs to God who made us alive in Christ and orders our lives. God displays His great grace in the fact that those who are His, rather than "walking" in the way of the world, now "walk" in good works. Their mortal existences are characterized by acts and thoughts that are consistent with heaven, not hell.**

**Verse 10 corrects any wrong reading of verse 9 that would suggest that somehow God's gracious saving of Christians makes good works irrelevant to them. Good works are in fact, what comes naturally out of genuine Christians. R.C. Sproul paraphrased James when he said "If the faith that we profess is a naked faith with no evidence of works, it is not saving faith."**

**Jas 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

**Good works are surely *not* the ground of salvation, but they surely *are* the fruit (the sure result of) real salvation. Make no mistake, if Christian people are**

**predestined to salvation by God (and indeed they are) they are equally predestined to good works to the glory of God. Saving faith necessarily changes the character of a Christian's life on earth, replacing sin and trespass with good works.**

**In light of this wonderful text ... how then should we live?**

**Believers: Take God at His Word and believe this wonderful text. Believing it**

- **Think rightly about yourself and act accordingly.**
  - **Constantly give thanks to God for His great mercy to you. Know what was your natural condition as a child of Adam and Eve, and shudder.**
  - **Meditate on the wonder of real life, freedom from bondage to sin and the wrath of God, and the miracle of your high place as eternal testimony to His grace, all of it given in mercy and kindness.**
- **Think rightly about good works. Joyously embrace them as your Savior puts them in your path as you run along behind Him. But reel in horror and repent if you find yourself stealing God's glory by taking credit for them.**
- **Think rightly about all other people, both those saved and those still dead—**
  - **Think well of Christians and treat them well always. God loves them. They, together with you, are His eternal objects of grace and sources of praise to Him. Love them and do good to them.**
  - **Think and act rightly regarding the spiritually dead all around you. Know that they too, even in their death, rebellion, and condemnation are loved by God. Plead constantly with the Father for their salvation. Only He saves. Humbly tell the dead the truth, knowing that you cannot argue them to life. They really are dead, and only God's Spirit can quicken them in Christ. Let that frame your grace-filled interactions with those outside the mercy of Christ.**
- **Think rightly and constantly about your only Savior, Christ Jesus. All we have that is eternal is in Christ Jesus. Read His Word and obey it gladly. Remind your heart that He is your only Hope of glory. Meditate always on His great person and grace.**

**Unbelievers: In all humility and sobriety, I also plead with you to hear this wonderful text. It is almost certainly an affront to your normal thought patterns, but if you can at all hear what it says, the Spirit of God is at work in you. Embrace the truth about how things are. Throw yourself on this great merciful God. He says He loves you, in spite of who you are. Don't try to come on the basis of**

**anything you are or have done. That's both futile and part of the darkened world system in which you have been trapped. Flee that enslavement while He is speaking to you. He is your only hope. He presently, right now, stands ready to make you alive. Run to Christ. Take Him at His word and throw yourself on His mercy. That is the very essence of real faith, and that is how He will save you if you will turn to Him as He calls you.**

**Let's pray and then we'll sing a closing song.**

**Father, we are in genuine awe of Your great mercy in Christ Jesus. We give You thanks for the truths we have just handled. We thank You for saving those of us who are in Christ. We plead for the quickening of souls of those presently dead in trespasses and sins. Bring Yourself much glory eternally in the saving of dead human souls we ask. In Christ Jesus, Amen.**