

Ephesians 2:1-10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ephesians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10 Even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

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

Paul began with his great blessing of God and prayer of thanksgiving in Ephesians chapter 1. Now in Ephesians chapter 2 he develops some of the themes of the prayer further, continuing one of the greatest surveys of the grand picture of salvation that we have in the New Testament.

Paul begins by examining the previous condition in which the recipients of the letter once existed. They were dead in trespasses and sins. The various shifts in the pronouns are significant here, although they have occasioned much debate.

Paul is probably especially focusing upon the condition of Gentile Christians prior to their conversion. They were spiritually dead, and also outside of any relationship with God, alienated from and dead to God, both in their spiritual condition and in their exclusion from the covenant.

[1 : 4 9] This was a condition that they formally walked in. This death was their manner of life, a course of existence set by the general course of the world, all led by the prince of the power of the air, Satan himself, and by the spirit still at work in those described as the sons of disobedience.

The spirit here is probably a reference not to Satan himself directly, but to the pervasive, insidious and insistent influence that he exerts. Paul describes the way that their former way of life was determined by the threefold forces of the world, the flesh and the devil.

They followed the general course of the society around them, under the rule of the devil, and subject to the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and the mind and the general spirit of the age.

In such suggestive passages we get a sense of Paul's subtle and multifaceted account of sin, one that recognises various aspects to its operations in the world.

Sin has structural, social and societal elements in the world. It is part of the spirit of the age, it is part of the zeitgeist. Sin has a personal power and agency to it, as it operates according to the overarching rule of the devil and his demonic forces.

[3 : 0 2] Sin is also a matter of our ungoverned passions and desires, and our fundamental mindsets, and the ways that these play out in everything that we do. Sin is those vices that have taken deep root in us, those habits that have become second nature for us, those desires that we never controlled and that now control us.

It's about the inappropriate and sinful loves that motivate us, and that drive us to pursue after certain things rather than the things that we ought to. When Paul talks about salvation, he draws his picture of it against such a background.

Salvation deals with sin at each of these levels of its operations. We are often in danger of exalting one or two of these dimensions to the neglect of others, and losing sight of the more rounded portrait of sin and our deliverance from it presented in Scripture.

The shift of pronouns from you to we, in verse 3, is properly designed to include Jews in the picture, showing that all, Jews and Gentiles alike, were under sin's sway.

Into this seemingly hopeless situation breaks the action of a merciful God. Out of his incredible love, a love not occasioned by anything in us, he made us alive.

[4 : 12] We were dead in our trespasses, unable to contribute anything or to manifest ourselves as being of any inherent worth. This all serves to underline the truth that we have been saved by grace.

There are many aspects of divine grace that can be highlighted. We might think about the lavishness or the liberality of grace, or of the pure benevolence of the giver. We might think of the efficacy of grace.

We might think of the way that grace precedes anything that we have given. Paul has things to say about all of these aspects of grace at different points in his epistles. However, for Paul, the one thing that most stands out about God's grace is the way that it is bestowed entirely without regard to the worth of its recipients.

We were dead when we received his grace. Indeed, as Paul argues elsewhere, we were not only dead, we were also God's enemies at the time. There was no reason whatsoever to show grace to us.

To our death, God responded with resurrection in Christ. Our deliverance from death is given through union with him. It is in being bound up with Christ and his destiny that we are delivered.

[5 : 20] Not only have we been raised, however, God has also made us participants in all that Christ enjoys as the ascended Lord of all. As he said earlier in chapter 1 verse 3, With Christ we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

His purpose for us isn't completed though. In the ages to come, he intends to demonstrate the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness. God wishes to manifest his character in his salvation of us.

People should be able to see the church and to learn something about God as his character is on display. This is a work in progress though, with various stages yet to be revealed. We are awaiting coming ages for the complete unveiling.

There is much yet to look forward to. The recipients of Paul's letter are in the state of salvation purely by virtue of God's grace, and they stand in that state through faith.

This isn't something that we have brought about ourselves. It's a gift that we have received. Faith responds to God's free gift, not as something that merits it, or some trait that is worthy of it, or as something that is exchanged for it.

[6 : 26] Faith isn't really some sort of work. It's not even a pseudo-work. It is a reception of a gift through a simple act of belief. As a result, boasting is nullified.

We brought nothing to our salvation. We contributed nothing to it. We didn't bring it about in any way. It was purely the gracious act of God bestowed to empty hands.

Our salvation wasn't and isn't a result of our works. However, it is for the sake of good works. When we think of good works, with our often narrow focus on the question of whether we go to heaven personally, we can often think in legalistic terms of what good works entail, regarding them as strict observance of the law.

Yet good works, as described in scripture, are generally described rather differently. Good works are far more expansive in their vision. They are works that heal and repair broken situations, works that bring light and hope, where there was once darkness and despair, works that fulfil the law by making peace, spreading the love of Christ, and manifesting the grace of God.

Good works are not so much strict colouring within the lines, as the painting of beautiful new portraits of Christ on blank canvases. They are creative acts. We are God's great masterpiece, being created in Christ for a transformed way of life.

[7 : 43] It was always God's intention to realise his transforming purpose in us, that we might be a living testament to the greatness of his work. We, the very people who once were dead.

A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching here change the way that we relate to and perceive the Christian life?