

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 2:1-10	DATE	09.15.19
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LESSON SUMMARY	Without Christ, humanity is utterly lost and condemned. Our gracious God has done what we could not by saving us through the work of Christ. This kindness flows from God's own good character rather than from human achievement.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

^{2:1} As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

At the end of Eph 1, Paul recounted the story of Jesus, who was raised from the dead and exalted to the place of highest authority by the mighty power of God the Father. Now Paul shifts gears to focus on the Ephesians' story. Speaking of their lives before Christ, he uses stark imagery – they were dead in their transgressions and sins. The death Paul references is a spiritual death that flows from the guilt incurred by active participation in sins and transgressions, which is the focus of v 2. Though the NIV captures the spirit of the original Greek in speaking of “living” in sin, a more accurate translation would be “in which you used to walk...” (The ESV and NASB follow this course). The idea here is that the Ephesians were walking a path of sin and transgression before they came to faith in Jesus. This imagery of walking will become important later in the passage.

Regarding the forces at play as a person walks the road of sin and transgression, two are mentioned in v 2. First, the pre-Christ Ephesians “followed the ways of this world.” The “world” here refers to creation in its rebellion against God. We can speak here particularly of the ways that different cultures move against the worship and will of the one true God. Having been born into such a culture, it is only natural that the pre-Christ Ephesians would live according to their cultural norms.

Second, the pre-Christ Ephesians followed “the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” which is a reference to Satan. Though the concept of “the kingdom of the air” is foreign to modern ears, it was familiar to Paul's original audience. Indeed, both Jews and Gentiles were acquainted with the idea of “the air” being the place of demonic activity.¹ To call Satan the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” is to speak of his pervasive authority in the present, before Christ's return. Beyond following the ways of the devil, Paul goes further to say that the devil was at work in or among those who are disobedient (literally, “the sons of disobedience”). So, before Christ, the Ephesians followed the anti-God ways of the world and the anti-God ways of the devil, who was also at work in their disobedience.

V 3 goes on to describe what life looks like when it is lived according to the ways of the world and Satan. This time, Paul includes his coworkers and himself in the description (“All of us also lived...”). In essence,

¹ See Arnold, 131-132.

this anti-God way of life is characterized by “gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.” The NASB gives a more literal translation: “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind...” Interestingly, to follow the ways of the world and the devil is ultimately to give ourselves over to our own base desires. Because of all of this, those without Christ are “by nature deserving of wrath” (literally “children of wrath”), meaning they are in line for judgment.

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

Were Paul to stop at v 3, the fate of humanity would be beyond bleak. With verse 4, however, he brings God into the picture, which changes everything. “But God” is a literal translation of the beginning of v 4, and many pastors and teachers have waxed eloquent on this phrase. “But God” introduces new possibilities that were beyond human achievement. Particularly, God “made us alive with Christ when we were dead in transgressions.” He did so because he is rich in mercy and loves us greatly.

As Paul continues in v 6, something remarkable takes place. Remember that the end of chapter 1 focused on the story of Jesus, who was raised and exalted by God the Father’s power. Then, in chapter 2:1-3, the focus shifted to the human story without Christ. Now, in v 6, we see a melding of stories. For us to be alive in Christ means that “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” The experience of Jesus (being raised and seated at God’s right hand) has now become the experience of his people! As NT Wright explains, “Paul sees the people who belong to Jesus as being somehow ‘in’ him, so that what is true of him is true of them.”² In this we see a great exchange. In taking on human flesh, Jesus shared in our story, even to death – its required end due to sin (Jesus, of course, was sinless, but he identified with humanity). By God’s power, though, Jesus saw the light of life beyond the story of fallen humanity. He was raised and exalted, and his people are now allowed to share in *his* story, which means they have been raised and exalted with him. For the time being, this raising and exaltation is a spiritual reality (we are raised from spiritual death). Upon Christ’s return, however, it will be all encompassing as Christ’s people are raised with new, imperishable bodies to live in God’s glorious new creation (see 1 Cor 15).

Why did God do all of this for Christians? Beyond having a character full of mercy and love, he also had a purpose: “in order that in the coming ages he might show you the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Arnold helpfully points to the New Living Translation as helpful in understanding these words.³ The NLT states that God did all of this “so [he] can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us.” We Christians will be living proof for all eternity of God’s extraordinary grace.

² Wright, T. (2004). [*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*](#) (p. 20). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

³ Arnold, 138.

If all the good outlined in vv 4-6 flows from and points toward God's rich grace, then human works must be understood correctly. When it comes to God's work in Christ, our works can do nothing but condemn us (as Paul explained in vv 1-3). The good that we receive comes as pure gift from a good God, and no recipient of God's grace may boast as if he or she somehow warranted or deserved it. All we can do is accept God's wonderful gift through faith.

¹⁰For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

This last verse of the section is really a continuation of what has come before. I separate it out because we sometimes overlook it as we gaze at the immensity of the rest of the passage. Christians are not saved by works. However, we are saved *for* works. As was the case in v 2, the NIV captures the spirit of the verse, but a more literal translation helps us see how v 10 relates to the passage as a whole. Remember that in v 2, Paul said that before Christ we "walked" in sin and trespass. This refers to a direction and way of life. In v 10, Paul uses the same language. Rather than God preparing good works in advance for us to "do" (as the NIV says) the original Greek reads that God prepared these works for us to "walk in." When Christians come to Christ, the direction of their life changes. Rather than walking in the sin that condemns them, they are called to walk in the good works that God prepared for them. Though some might see these good works as specific things God has planned for his people, I suspect that Paul is speaking here of a new way of life in general, though, of course, there are most certainly specific good works that God has planned in advance for specific people.

TEACH THE TEXT

Ephesians 2:1-10 is one of the more famous passages in the New Testament because of theological arguments over the role of works in salvation. Especially for us Protestants, it stands as a rock-solid proof text about the worthlessness of works when it comes to salvation. The thing to see here is that this is a true reading of the passage – Paul clearly says that we are not saved by works! At the same time, our focus on this one aspect of the passage can cause us to lose the magnificent forest as we gaze at this one beautiful tree. Rather than being a polemic about works in salvation, the passage is a glorious testimony to the vast riches of God's grace. Salvation flows from God's grace, and the saved will stand for all eternity as proof positive of God's grace. Yes, this means that works are useless for salvation. At the same time, it points to a much larger reality. To help your class capture the full scope of the passage, I would break things down into three themes: humanity without Christ, humanity in Christ, and grace.

HUMANITY WITHOUT CHRIST

Vv 1-3 detail the bleak predicament of humans without Jesus. We are spiritually dead as we walk the road of sin and trespass and are ultimately headed toward judgment. We are following the anti-God ways of the world and the anti-God ways of the devil himself. More than that, the devil is at work in our midst! On the ground this means that we live according to the lusts of our flesh and minds. According to Ephesians 2:1-3, humankind without Christ is self-obsessed and utterly lost.

As we look at this bleak picture of humanity, we can quickly affirm its truth. Just look at our culture today to see a society living according to the lusts of the flesh and mind. Money, sex, and power have been rightly named as great temptations in our culture, and they all have to do with self-promotion and self-gratification. We don't have to look far to see the truth of Paul's words.

At the same time, the picture in vv 1-3 may also seem unnecessarily dark. Reading these words, we wouldn't expect to find even an ounce of goodness in the human race. Yet goodness can most certainly be found outside of the church. The key here is to see that the God-given human capacity for good has not been annihilated with the fall. Instead, it stands partly intact. At the same time, it is thoroughly mixed with the many anti-God ways of the world and the devil. We might think here of organized crime. The entire system is depraved and moving in the wrong direction. At the same time, we'll probably find some glimmers of good if we look hard enough (people will sometimes be kind, generous, etc.). That good, however, does not outweigh personal or systemic guilt. The whole organization is headed toward judgment. In the same way, humanity goodness is wrapped up in and overshadowed by sin and trespass that demand judgment.

HUMANITY IN CHRIST

"But God" are two little words that transition us from vv 1-3 to vv 4-10. Though they are small, we can't overstate the weight of their significance! Because of God's mercy and love, because of his grace, a new way forward has been formed. Those who place their faith in Christ are now found "in Christ," which means that they share in his story. With Jesus, believers have been raised and seated in the heavenly realms. Because of this sharing in Christ's story, we will serve for all eternity as object lessons of the great grace of God. To be in Christ is to have our fates completely reversed. Whereas we once walked in sin and trespass, we are now empowered to walk in good works. While we were once deserving of wrath, we are now recipients of grace.

GRACE

This reversal of fortunes flows from God's grace, a concept that 1st century listeners would have readily understood. In ancient society, wealthy folks would sponsor public projects and people of lesser means. Thus, societal progress and personal advancement were largely dependent on the generosity of those with power and resources. The generosity of the well-to-do in society was known as "grace." To speak of grace in NT times, then, was to speak of God as the wealthiest of all patrons who generously sponsored humanity in Christ.⁴ In this case, grace made possible rescue from judgment, inclusion in God's family, and the reception of spiritual blessings. And all of this happened "in Christ." Grace is God's unwarranted use of God's own resources on behalf of the undeserving. At great cost to himself (the crucifixion of his only begotten son!), God showed us great kindness and made us alive with Christ. This is grace, and we who have received it should stand in awe!

⁴ For more on grace in the ancient world, see Desilva, ch 3.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 1-3

1. How would you characterize Paul's view of humanity without Christ?
2. What does it mean to be dead in sin and transgressions?
3. What does it mean to follow the ways of the world and of the "ruler of the kingdom of the air"?
4. According to v 3, what does all of this look like on the ground?
5. Is this a fair picture of people without Jesus?

Vv 4-10

1. If the story ended at the end of v 3, what would be humanity's fate?
2. What makes a change of fate possible for us?
3. What do you think it means to be made alive in Christ?
4. Why did God make us alive in Christ?
5. What is grace?
6. How do human works play out in this passage?
7. What should our response be to such great grace?

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