

Sermon File # 867

Scripture Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

Sermon Title: *Made Alive with Christ*

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Made Alive with Christ

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 2:1-10, as we continue looking into this letter of the Apostle Paul that describes our new life in Christ and in relationship with one another. In chapter one, Paul explained our significance in Christ (1-14) and prayed for our insight into a glorious life through the growth of our understanding of the life of faith and hope, our spiritual riches, and the power of the Holy Spirit (15-23). Paul has explained that God has revealed his eternal plan for his chosen people in chapter one, and next, in chapters two and three he will explain how God carries out his plan by making sinners into saints and building them into his church (Hoehner, 305).

Our text contains well-known verses that are often used to share the message of salvation through Christ. This passage, however, is not just for purposes of evangelism, but is important for our understanding as followers of Jesus of the significance and meaning of our being made alive with Christ. So, in these verses for today (a typically long Pauline sentence), the apostle reminds us of what we used to be, and that what we are and are becoming today is solely by the working of a gracious God.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 2:1-10**.

This fallen world is vainly and frantically searching for some kind of salvation, often by scientific and technological advances or by New Age religion and meditation. As Ecclesiastes says, God has set eternity in the hearts of men (3:11). Mankind inherently seeks for meaning and continuation of life, by any and every means possible. People in this post-Christian culture are seeking some form of salvation, either in this life or in the next, and are inclined to follow any theory other than a biblical one. And human pride and the proclivity to reject what is perceived as outdated tradition and ecclesiastical authority lead many to reject the teachings of the church and embrace other theories, such as those espoused in *The Da Vinci Code*, a best-selling book and popular movie of several years ago.

Ben Witherington III is an evangelical New Testament scholar of some renown, whose recent book is a formidable reply to the specious claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*. Witherington explains that our culture is enamored by alternative theories to biblical truth. Anyone who can propose ideas about Jesus that can be shown to have been suppressed by the church and other religious institutions, especially if those views of Jesus are scandalous and anti-tradition, has “an instant audience.” We live in a culture, he says, “where the latest is the greatest and the old is suspect.” And Witherington notes somberly that “we are facing a serious revolution regarding some of the long-held truths about Jesus, early Christianity and the Bible,” and Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is just one manifestation. Many voices are “proclaiming a new Christianity for a new age,” serving up “a new syncretism of New Age religion—part pagan, part gnostic and part Christian.” (Witherington, 11-12). And these voices claim an alternative way to some kind of salvation other than that proclaimed in Scripture.

The definition of salvation in our Western society needs clarification, even with church members. As George Barna says (I assume his research was conducted in the US), one-third of all adults (34%) classify themselves as born-again, yet of these only 65% believe they have eternal life because they have confessed their sins and have trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior and are following him as Lord. Our world today, and especially the secular media, borrow biblical language and erode and cheapen its meaning by using it to describe secular experiences. For example, a sportscaster will speak of one of the World Cup football (soccer) teams, which has emerged from the doldrums to be a finalist team, as being a “born-again” football club.

Our Scripture text is perhaps the highest “mountain peak” expression in the Bible on the meaning of salvation, and Paul describes salvation as being made alive with Christ. We first need to understand...

Our spiritual death

In verse one Paul reminds the church that every one of us, before we met Christ Jesus, was spiritually dead, regardless of how alive we might have appeared. This claim of our text may seem to be countered by the lively appearance of those outside of faith in Christ. Who, in fact, seems to be more

alive than unbelievers who are intellectual university professors, championship athletes, and famous and winsome movie stars? Indeed, they are alive physically, mentally and socially, yet at the deepest level of their humanity and being, the spiritual, they are dead. Note...

- *The condition of our death*

Paul reminds us so poignantly of the fact that all of us share a common condition—we were dead in our transgressions and sins (verse 1). To understand and appreciate salvation we must realize that prior to salvation is the universal condition of spiritual death. The good news of salvation presupposes the bad news of our lost-ness, the condition from which we must be saved. Paul describes this lost-ness in these first three verses as spiritual death. Before Christ came into our lives we were spiritually dead.

When I was younger there was a statement on my US, State of Kansas driver's license that said that, in the event of my death, my organs could be donated for purposes of transplant to save the life of someone else. Years later, for some reason (old age, I can safely assume), my organs were no longer wanted. But even in my youth, before my organs could be used, the requirement was that I would be medically and officially declared to be dead.

Here Paul gives a definition of spiritual death just as medical schools and societies have their definitions of death. When we were dead in our transgressions and sins, Paul implies, there was no ability to respond or any inclination toward God. Like a corpse, there was no response to even the voice of or light of God's truth until his Spirit awakened us. There was continuing decay of our spiritual and moral faculties with which we were created. This image of God, with which we were created, was being continually marred.

- *The cause of our death*

Paul says we were dead in our trespasses and sins. The sins we have committed have alienated us from holy God. We are sinners by our very nature. As we note in the passages in Genesis 3 about the fall of Adam and Eve, we are not sinners because we sin but rather sin because we are sinners in our very fallen nature. Adam and Eve sinned in paradise, so we cannot blame our sin on our environment. All have transgressed, and we all have the spirit of rebellion in our hearts.

In verse 2 Paul reminds us of our former, unconverted life, "in which (we) used to live when we followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Note...

- *The course of death*

The course of spiritual death is a forced direction our lives are taking, farther and farther from God. These verses in our text describe the "living death" that

takes place when a life succumbs to the world, the flesh and the devil (Lincoln, 117). Paul describes this direction as carrying the sinner helplessly along the road to total destruction. The lost person follows the course of this world, what the Germans call “zeitgeist,” the spirit of this age. Persons apart from God, who proudly assert their individuality, are forming values and opinions based on opinions fed into their minds by the secular and academic elite (CS Lewis speaks to this matter in *The Abolition of Man*. David Wells in his series *No Place for Truth, God in the Wasteland, Losing Our Virtue and Above All Earthly Powers*, says the most influential voices in our society are advertisers and psychotherapists. We might add to that the voices of celebrities and other entertainers). Scripture teaches us that this spirit of the age runs counter to Christ, and is shaped by evil, with Satan as the architect. This “world-age” always runs counter to the will and purposes of God, who created us to know and obey him.

The spiritually dead are mere dupes of Satan, who influences the course of our lives apart from God. You are either under God’s control and protection or under Satan’s control and destruction. His destiny chosen for his dupes is eternal spiritual death. He seeks to drag us down with him to eternal death and destruction in hell. This is what The Book of Revelation calls the second death. And, in verse three, Paul says the lost are captive to the lower sinful nature. It is the flesh captive to lust, for sensual pleasure or personal power and esteem. And close to this is the concept of the fallen self, taken under the power of the devil, the world, and the self-centered flesh.

Somewhere Chuck Colson told about a young woman who was drawn to follow Christ, who could set her free from a life of total self-gratification through non-stop partying. Incredulously, she asked the one who shared with her the good news of Jesus Christ, “You mean I don’t have to do what I want to do?” She found freedom and deliverance from her own relentless pursuit of self-indulgence in the gospel that freed her from her own appetites and the downward, self-destructive course of this world.

I walked by the Dorcas Room (a ministry to the needy) several years ago when two of our ladies were arranging the clothing and other items for distribution to those in need. I was captivated by an interesting item left for donation—a creative version of a stroller for a small child. This stroller has a steering wheel for the child, yet the “ultimate” control is with the adult, who holds the long handle that overrides the child’s steering. I think of that as a picture of those outside of Christ, who think they are in full control of their lives. Yet it is Satan himself who overrides, and who delights in the blindness and pride of the hearts of those who say that they are in control.

- *The condemnation of death*

In verse 3 Paul says we were objects of the wrath of God, under the sentence of death and everlasting punishment. The wrath of God is not a capricious, volcanic eruption of vengeance. It is his just punishment for sin. God’s love and holiness demand his wrath against whoever spurns his love and violates the holiness he requires of his creation. Holy God hates sin, and our sin

alienates us from him. Our sin condemns us before God. Apart from his grace we are already, at this very moment under the sentence of his condemnation (John 3:18). Unbelievers are already on death row, as it were. Only God's mercy has stayed the execution until we repent and receive his provision of mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. To have died unconverted would have spelled our eternal spiritual death and everlasting torment in hell, which is being reserved for the devil and his demons. These first three verses tell the sordid tale of spiritual death that is unavoidable apart from Christ and the good news, to which Paul moves beginning with verse four.

Paul says, secondly, that salvation is an experience of...

God's amazing grace

In verse four Paul gives a tremendous mood swing, and with the adversative conjunction, translated "but...God!" brings us from death to glorious life in Christ. (The NIV translation loses the force of "de theos" by inserting the adverbial phrase). Here is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Verse four introduces us to the amazing grace that intervened on our behalf, rescuing us from the predicament described in verses one through three.

Grace means unmerited favor, that which we so desperately need but could never deserve, nor do for ourselves. We Christians need the spirit of John Newton (1725-1807), that reprobate slave trader who certainly had known spiritual death and depravity apart from Christ. Grace became the theme of Newton's life, and *Amazing Grace* his theme song.

- *Behind grace is God's love*

Even if we were not objects of God's love, he is love within himself. In John 17:24, Jesus prayed the High Priestly Prayer and referred to the love that he and the Father, the triune God, had among their three persons. Grace is God's love in action toward us sinners. Sin made us objects of God's wrath, but God, even in his wrath, remembered mercy. Verse four says the God is rich in mercy. So, being a merciful God, and also a holy God of wrath against sin, what could he do to bring grace to mankind?

- *Bringing grace is Jesus*

God brought grace to us in Jesus Christ. Through what God did for us in Jesus Christ we have the means of salvation. Through his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus paid our sin penalty. All of our sinfulness and sins described in the first three verses of our text were atoned for in the cross. And his resurrection on the third day meant that his death had accomplished the will of the Father in paying our penalty for sin, which we all deserved to pay. Jesus continues to live to save all who will come to God through him (Hebrews 7:25).

Daniel Vestal told a legendary story about a young Russian in the days of the czars who lived a totally self-destructive and self-indulgent life. Because he could not pay his enormous debts, he was imprisoned. One lonely night in his prison cell, he added his debts and realized there was no way he could ever get himself out of debt. He scribbled across the bottom of the ledger, "Who will pay these debts?"

He fell asleep, exhausted and depressed, and hopeless. Unknown to this young prisoner, Czar Nicholas I was walking through the prison, and noticed the young prisoner asleep, with the ledger by the cell door. The Czar picked up the ledger with the prisoner's question, "Who will pay these debts?" and wrote at the bottom "I, Czar Nicholas, will pay your debts" (Vestal, *"These Things We Believe: Salvation,"* 4).

Without doubt, I am a hopeless debtor to God. I could never pay for my own ransom from sin or redemption from spiritual slavery. To pay my way out of sin and into heaven would require more than I could ever earn, borrow, beg or steal from now through eternity, even if every person of means I had ever known tried to help me buy my way from deserved hell to heaven.

I was expressing my concern with a lovely, highly educated lady who frequently visited our worship services, that she might trust Christ as the Savior who died that she might have eternal life. Her difficulty, she confessed, was in accepting the fact that Christ would have to suffer and die in her place. Salvation, she insisted, was something she could earn by not just one, but by several lifetimes (She believes in reincarnation). The truth is, we could never, even if we had a cat's nine lives, earn our salvation. In fact, we would only drive ourselves deeper into debt.

Jesus Christ, the King of kings, has written in his blood over the account of our sins, "I *have* paid your debts."

- *Needing grace is everyone*

Paul reminds the believers throughout Asia Minor that they were desperately in need of God's grace. Paul was addressing the religiously devout Jews as well as the pagan Greeks. He was addressing the cultured and educated and also the barbarian underclass, the rich and the poor. Paul is saying that everyone is either spiritually dead or alive. Everyone apart from the rebirth is dead. There is no such condition as spiritually half-alive or half-dead.

Jairus' daughter whom Jesus raised to life had been dead only a few moments. Lazarus, whom Jesus also raised, had been dead for four days. Both were equally dead.

The immoral criminal with demented mind and seared conscience is spiritually dead, but so is the good, moral, civic-minded, church-going man or woman apart from faith in Christ. Like the legalistic and scrupulous Jews in Ephesus, so the religious person who works to earn favor with God is as lost as the agnostic, secular humanist who cares nothing for spiritual or biblical truth.

Perhaps the worst sin barrier for grace to overcome is the barrier of pride that causes anyone to say, "I don't need to cast myself on the mercy of God. Christ didn't need to die for my sins." That pride is more resistant to grace than the person in the grips of immorality who realizes his/her lost-ness.

- *Receiving grace by faith*

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (verse 8).

Grace is God's movement toward us, and faith is our openness and movement toward him. Faith is the openness to our realization of our sin and need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Faith sees that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to pay for our sin penalty, and rose from the grave to give us the free gift of eternal life. Faith is the openness and willingness to turn from the way we have been thinking and living, and turn toward Christ and follow him as the Lord and Master of our lives and our future.

This is part of the scandal and offense of the cross. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn or deserve our salvation and deliverance from death.

"It is the gift of God." That pronoun "it" refers not just to grace but to the entire process of salvation (Robertson, 525). The grace of God and even our faith to believe are his gifts to us. We would not have faith to see and understand the good news. We could not realize our need apart from the Spirit of God's bringing us to that awareness. Faith involves the total abandonment of any attempt to justify oneself and openness to what God alone could do for us in Christ (Lincoln, 111).

Jerry Bridges says God's grace does not just make up the difference in what certain of us cannot do to attain salvation. We are all in absolute need of grace alone. To compare the efforts of the good, religious person to the reprobate pagan is like comparing two people's attempts to jump across the Grand Canyon (in Arizona, USA). The canyon averages nine miles from rim to rim. Suppose one person, like Carl Lewis, could leap from the edge about 30 feet, while the other, like me, could jump only about six feet. What difference would it make relative to 47,520 feet (nine miles from rim to rim)? And Bridges says that when God built the "bridge across our sin to himself and to heaven, he didn't stop 100, or 30 or even 6 feet short. He built the bridge all the way" (27). "It is the gift of God!"

We who are saved experienced grace. Verses five and eight say that God "made us alive" and "by grace you have been saved." This Greek perfect tense says that salvation by grace has happened in the past, but its effects continue in the present (Hoehner, 332f). Here is the dynamic of salvation, which continues to be a matter of change from death to life, giving us...

Our heavenly life

Finally, salvation is an experience of heavenly life.

John Henry Jowett called this passage of Scripture, beginning with verse 4, “the transformation of the graveyard.” He said we could imagine a graveyard’s being transformed into a sweet meadow with children playing (193ff). Greater than this scene is the transformation of a lost soul into one alive in Christ.

- *Alive with Christ*

Paul uses dramatic language to show the radical transformation from our spiritual death to life, language which Jesus also used (5). The father in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son declared that his wayward and hopelessly lost and now repentant and returned “was dead and is alive again” (Luke 15:24, 32, cited in Hoehner, 307).

The believer is “in Christ,” which is a key concept in Paul’s letters. Those of us in Christ are resurrected with him, and also are exalted with him. Even as he is bodily in heaven, so we now experience communion with him in “the heavenly places.” Though we are temporarily sojourners on the earth, our true citizenship is in heaven. We know God as our Father, Jesus as our elder Brother, and one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul is saying that salvation brings about the birth of the church.

There can be no private salvation apart from the church. We are seated together in the heavenlies, and there are no “box” seats for the elite, or for those who wish to be excluded and segregated from other believers. We are all like the late Rosa Parks (African American heroine, whose refusal to sit in the back of a bus inspired the civil rights movement in 1955), leading the way to open seating on God’s heavenly bus! We are...

- *Seated with Christ*

Because we are seated with him in the heavenly places, we can know something now of heaven on earth. Even if our circumstances are more hellish than heavenly, when we receive the free gift of eternal life we become God’s kingdom people, with a new standing with God and as participants in his heavenly rule. As John RW Stott says, seated with Christ draws the obvious conclusion that we are seated on a throne (81). As followers of Christ we reign with him, sharing in his rule over all things, including the circumstances of our lives. That’s why a child of God is never “under the circumstances.” Verse seven reminds us that we will be with Christ in the ages to come. Our present hope keeps our perspective upon eternity and upon God’s sovereign control and the inevitable outcome of total victory for all of us who are in Christ.

And we are...

- *Created in Christ*

This heavenly life means we are being created in Christ and prepared for eternity with him. Through this great salvation we are new creatures, with new minds, hearts, wills, desires, powers, and relationships. We are able to overcome past; sinful forces because of what Thomas Chalmers called “The expulsive power of a new affection” (300). In verse ten, Paul says although we are saved entirely by grace, we are saved for the purpose of living a heavenly life, here and now and for eternity. If Christ is not that expulsive power, and if there is no moral difference in our lives from what we used to be then it’s obvious we haven’t received saving grace.

Paul says we are saved to be God’s workmanship, and the word is the Greek work, *poema*, from which we get the English word, *poems*. God is at work in us as his new creation, making us into his poems, in the classical sense of works of truth, balance, delight and beauty. He is making us to be like his own Son, full of poetic “rhyme and reason,” his works of art (Hoehner, 347).

Several years ago, Nancy and I were in Florence, Italy, viewing the 5.17 meter (17 foot) statue of David, regarded as one of Michelangelo’s two greatest masterpieces (along with the Pietà), what has been called the greatest depiction of the human form. In the year 1500, the city officials of Florence were disturbed that a valuable but useless piece of marble lay neglected and exposed to the elements in the yard of the cathedral workshop. They looked for an artist to use it, but even Leonardo Da Vinci declined the challenge. Eventually the 26-year-old Michelangelo saw this piece of marble not just for what it was but for what it could become under his patient and masterful workmanship over a period of 3 years.

God is at work in us, bringing us to perfection which will never be fully complete until he sees us face to face (1 John 3:2). He superintends all the circumstances of our lives, and he calls us to respond to them in faith and faithfulness and trust.

Our text (verse 10) tells us that God has prepared in advance even the good works we are called to do. Our life work, and even the little, unnoticed acts of kindness are a prepared course God has designed for us. We are simply joining God in his eternal plan for us.

In our text, Paul has eliminated all grounds for boasting. Grace and faith necessary for salvation are his free gifts to us. Now that we belong to him, and our names are written in the Book of Life, we still can take absolutely no credit for our lives! We continue to depend on grace to do good works in the kingdom. Apart from the continuing work of grace in us, even our “good works” would be hollow and futile and meaningless. We never get to the place when we no longer depend on the grace of God

Chuck Swindoll says he is looking forward to heaven when no braggadocio Christians will be dropping names (mainly their own!) and telling all the great

things they are doing for God. Everyone, he says, will have “grace” written across her and his life (30ff). As John Stott says, no one in heaven will be walking around like a proud peacock (83).

It’s hard to study this text without thinking of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son and the contrasting figure of the elder brother, who was such a stranger to grace (Luke 15:11-32). The elder brother could not rejoice in the return of his sinful brother, and revealed the truth that he thought he deserved his father’s blessings. He was spiritually in a far country and rebellious because he was self-righteous and unable to understand grace, mercy and forgiveness.

It’s grace from start to finish, and grace is for all and needed by all. It is grace that delivers us from death, and transfers us to the heavenly realms, and enables us to become God’s poems and to join him in good works that glorify him.

Conclusion:

Salvation is a matter of death and life. To reject it is to die, and to receive it is to live. The difference between life and death is grace.

Grace is also an acrostic that says “**G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense” (Vestal, “*God’s Greatest Gift*, 4).

Have you come to that conjunction in your life, and met that adversative in verse four, “But...God”? God has made provision for you, and you can receive the same grace others of us have received.

Most of us here today have already been made alive in Christ, yet many of us have forgotten the reason for our salvation. Our text has made it clear that we are saved to become God’s choice creation, his works of art, his masterpieces of grace. Like me, you may need to reaffirm that calling and that worth in the eyes of God. Like me also, you might need to get your focus off your circumstances and put your eyes on Jesus and allow him to life you, lift *us*, to a new plane, a new plateau of thinking and living.

Maybe also like mine, your conversion story is not as dramatic as that of the Apostle Paul and you cannot even remember when you first began to trust in Christ and receive the gift of his new life. Maybe it was the dawning of a gradual awareness because of your being nurtured in a home and church environment of faith and trust in Christ. But, also as for me, it took as much of God’s grace to save you as to save a notorious sinner, saved out of a life of flagrant immorality or crime. We all desperately need God’s grace and we need it now and every day of our lives. And those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, his disciples, need to seek and to fulfill his purpose for us who is calling us to be his *poems*, his masterpieces. We are saved for the purposes of his glory and to seek to honor and please him with our lives, which have infinite value in his sight.

Whatever your life situation, Jesus can and will bring you from death to life. It's time today for you to "get out of the graveyard" (Wiersbe, 39) of spiritual death and come into the life everlasting offered us by grace through faith.

The truth is, those who call upon the Lord at the final minute of opportunity and who truly repent of sin and trust in and commit themselves to Jesus Christ are as saved as anybody can be. You and I are saved by the same grace that saved them, and however long we have served Jesus, we are no more deserving of heaven than there are (See Matthew 20:1-16). And God in his grace has kept you alive so that you can respond to his offer of salvation, just as did those who repented in times of disasters, such as the recent earthquake.

Our advantage over those "eleventh-hour" converts is the opportunity we have to serve and glorify Jesus Christ as God's "poems." In verse 7 Paul gives a great purpose clause, "in order that." We are saved in order that God's grace might forever be displayed. I think of that statue of David, on display for art aficionados and tourists and everyone might appreciate the workmanship. Our lives thus are to add to the fame of God for all eternity. The question for us is: 'Are we becoming what Jesus Christ in grace saved us to become?' Are you and am I becoming his poems? Let's commit ourselves to becoming what he has saved us to be in Christ, and do the works he has prepared in advance for us to do, for the glory of his grace.

Today we will gladly celebrate with you if God is calling you from death to life. We have pastor/elders who will pray with you to trust Christ as Savior and begin following him as Lord.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What is your reaction to the statement that all people are seeking some form of salvation? What are some other forms of salvation that you know about that people are seeking outside of Christ?
2. How does Paul describe the condition of people who are outside of salvation in Christ?
3. In what ways are unbelievers dead, even though physically alive?
4. What is your definition of grace?
5. How do we receive and experience God's saving grace?
6. In what way is faith (verse 8) also part of the gift of God?

7. What does it mean to you to be “seated with Christ in the heavenly realms”?
8. How is your life becoming God’s “poem,” that is, his workmanship to display his glory and grace?

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