

Ephesians – One Body of Christ

The Gift That Changes Us

Ephesians 2:1-10

I would invite you to open up your Bibles to Ephesians chapter two, verses one through ten. We continue in Paul's letter to the Ephesians as he continues to explore this question that we began asking four weeks ago. What is the church? So, Ephesians chapter two, verse one begins like this...

And you were dead in 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, and 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. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he had loved us, 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 and the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable, riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing. It is a 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. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, we're entering the fourth week of the Redd family in Alabama. And, we're getting a sense of how things work here. And it's been really exciting to watch the new season, the fall season, get started both at school and around the church. And just to see how many incredible ministries that the Lord is doing through the work of this congregation. And I just want to say, this is this is my hope and my prayer for Briarwood in this season, as we begin the fall season of ministries, it's my hope that the Lord would just usher in now a time of incredible humility before the Lord, a time of spiritual renewal in which the congregation we seek to worship the Lord, to love the lost, and to care for our brothers and sisters within this church.

Over the past four weeks, Jennifer and I have heard just incredible stories, individual stories, group stories, people telling us about all the remarkable things that have happened at this church over the last 65 years. And I want to tell you, we are witnesses. My wife and my family are witnesses to the present witness, the present work that this church is doing now, today. And my prayer is that the Lord will continue this work in us, continue working out, as Paul says, his workmanship in us, that we will have bigger stories, greater stories to tell in the future than even the ones that we've seen in the past. And that's a mighty thing to pray for. So we lift that up to

the Lord now, during this season, I also want to point out something else. You will notice if you look at the little, insert that we have here with the outline and the quote there at the bottom, related to this sermon, if you flip it around, you'll see that I've just got about a handful of questions there related to the sermon. And this really comes out of some conversations I've had with many of you all over the course of the last few weeks where people have said, hey, you know, we talk about the sermon at our family's lunch afterwards or in our congregational community or in our small group or with our kids. And I thought, just as a help to you, I put these little questions in there that take some of the ideas, some of the things that we'll be talking about this morning and gives you an opportunity to just go a little bit deeper over the course of this week. It's our hope that you would be fed by the word. Of course, not just on Sunday morning, but that it would be feeding you over the course of the whole week. So this is not a mandatory thing. It's just an instrument to help you. And I pray that it will be of use to you.

Well, now, let us turn our attention to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul continues in this question that we ourselves are asking, what is the church now? We've seen how he started the letter. He again starts with a greeting in grace and peace. But then he goes on to lay out that map. Remember we talked about the map. He wants to locate the church in Ephesus, its members and its community. He wants to locate them in space and time. And you remember, he tells them, you have been, changed by God. You've been adopted by God. You've been, redeemed by God. You've been made heirs. You've been assured by the power of the Holy Spirit in this place and time to be witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But you were called (Remember what he said all the way back) before the foundations of the earth? You. So Paul starts with that big picture all the way before it, before the world was even created. You were set aside for these benefits of your salvation, and that just boggles our minds. But then he goes on and says, so let me unpack what that means for you. What that means is that you have not just been saved. You're not just a person who was saved because of what Jesus did. Rather, you have been saved. And that means you've been united with Christ so that as he sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, interceding on your behalf far above, and so that far above every authority and every power and every dominion, you are united in him through the power of the spirit, so that you can know that the immeasurable might and strength of God is directed wholly and totally towards you as you are united in Christ.

So you see how he's doing it? He starts with the big map, and he tells us what our current status is and what he's going to go to today. So he's going to remind us to say that now that I've encouraged you, I want to remind you what you once were. I want you to be able to appreciate who you are in the context of what you once were. And he is abrupt -- notice in the very previous line, he's talking about how we are seated with Jesus in heaven, and then notice where he goes in chapter ten, verse one. ***You who were dead in the 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. Notice what he says there you're seated with Christ in the heavenlies, but you were once dead in your trespasses. That's abrupt. That's a powerful rhetorical style that Paul is using there. He's going from the heavenlies to being dead in your trespasses. Now, we know that he's not saying that they were physically dead. The Ephesians know that they were alive.

They were breathing fresh air. They were eating food and living their lives. That's how they got to where they are today. So what is he talking about when he says, you were dead in your trespasses? Well, we know he's talking about a kind of spiritual death. And to understand spiritual death, we have to go all the way back to the early parts of Scripture, because this is a theme that's thread throughout all of Scripture. You can kind of pull it into all these different accounts, and stories in the Bible will pop up if we pull that theme. But I want to go back to the very beginning, where we find Adam and Eve living in the garden in perfect, loving communion with God, even involved in projects together, like naming the animals where God goes out and pushes the animals out in front of the man so that he can name each one of them. They're involved in this loving communion. And yet the Lord tells him, you can enjoy this abundant garden that I've made. You can eat of every tree in this garden except for this one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because if you eat of that tree, on that day. Genesis 2:17, you will surely die.

Now I just want to say, lest we think that this surely that is put in there by the King James, and kept in most translations ever since that surely is not just a kind of trick of Old English or something like that, but they're actually translating a Hebrew construction that, like many languages, have, worked was meant to enforce upon us the reality that the facticity it's actually called the factitive construction in Hebrew, you have two different forms of the verb, and it's how you say, I know sometimes we're talking and we're just saying things, but but I want you to hear me. I'm being serious now. I'm emphasizing the facticity of it in English today. We say, surely, or we say, indeed you will indeed die, or you will. You will in fact die. You will, as my daughters might say, you will literally die. You're going to literally die if you eat of this tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he's being serious about it. And yet what do we see as soon as they eat of the tree? God shows the mercy. He shows a mercy. He doesn't actually physically kill them, but he covers them with these animal skins. A thing that kind of hints at this work that he's going to be about later, isn't he? Especially when he tells the woman, you know, out of you will come a seed who will crush the head of that serpent. He's planting in them the hope of redemption. And we see him show them mercy and not physically killed them. They live to breathe and have relationships and have children, another day. We call that common grace. All humans living after the fall, that first breath of air. When you woke up this morning and you went and you were awake and you had a sip of coffee, guess what? That's common grace. You

don't deserve any of it. Because of the fall, we all deserve death. And he told us that -- he warned us of it.

Though, well, they do not physically die. Adam and Eve do now begin at the fall, as all humanity does. The long road to physical death. It's experienced by every human who has ever lived since. As you know, the mortality rates of humanity over the course of human history are what? they are dying...100%. That is a rate that you can count on. Bob Dylan told us he who ain't busy livin is busy dying. Okay, Genesis chapter three is telling us all of us are busy dying. We're all busy dying. We're all on that path to physical death. Because, you see, turning away from the God of life, the God of abundance, of thriving, the one who made this universe. But he made it to be a place where life would spring up out of it abundantly. The God who is the cause of life, both in himself and also in his relationship with us. He literally breathes into us, giving us life to turn away from that God is to embrace death, whether they fully understood it or not.

When Adam and Eve decided to follow their own wills and not the will of their creator, they put away not just him, but the life that he gives. To reject the God of life is to reject life itself. Now again, he was merciful. He let them live another day. But we should make no mistake that there is no truly significant or lasting sense of vitality in our lives apart from God.

Even this life that we live today is one just of his grace. That his mercy. If you turn away from him, it doesn't matter what you accomplish in life, what worldly successes you have, there is no lasting sense of vitality. It's just sandcastles in the sand being washed away by the ocean. Or to put it another way, to put it another way, the consequences of the fall do not begin when we die. If you were to go out there and talk to your run of the mill, person out on the street and say, what do Christians believe? They'd say, well, Christians believe that if you are not a Christian, you live your life. And when you die, you go to hell. And that's when the judgment begins, right? I think a matter of fact, many Christians believe that.

And yet Paul is saying here, your judgment began a long time ago. As a matter of fact, there's a sense that in this life, if you are not made alive in the spirit, if you are not justified by faith in Jesus Christ, you are all living already, living a little bit of hell right now as you begin your long journey to that absence, that alienation from God.

Paul means to be shocking when he says this. He means to be getting our attention because he wants to lay hold of something. Ephesians. You used to be spiritually dead. Notice what he says there. You didn't used to be spiritually infirm. You weren't spiritually handicapped. You weren't spiritually wounded. You can say you were those things, but that's not all that you were. You were spiritually dead. Just like the bones in that vision of Ezekiel, the prophet that we just read in our confession of truth, where Ezekiel the prophet goes out and he has this vision of being, of standing in a valley. And remember, the valley is filled with bones. And Ezekiel is a good artist.

He's a good poet. He wants, he wants us not just to hear the information. He wants us to feel the experience. And so do you remember how he describes the bones as he goes out there? He sees them all laid out. He says they weren't carcasses. They didn't have any sinew. There wasn't any ligaments left. What does he say? They were very dry because he knows that when bones are dry, there's no life in them at all. They don't have a little bit of a seed that needs to be cultivated and just nurtured and grown. They are dead and they have no life unless God gives them life.

It's important that we grasp this as Christians, that what happened in the fall, when sinned, enter in sin, entered the world was not a small fact of history. It wasn't just one point on the timeline of human things, but rather if we were to look at all of human history and we were to mark it all out and try to make an outline or a timeline, we would have two major headings, and one heading would be this **the fall. It's when everything changed, when sin broke the world.** As a result, those of us who are made in the image of God, the world just feels there's something that's wrong about it. There's something glorious, but there's something wrong about it too, because it's broken. There's a major event that happened, and that's when death entered into human existence. And of course, you know what the second major headline would be in our outline of human history, and that would be **the incarnation, the life, the death, the resurrection, and the Ascension and the Pentecost of Jesus Christ.** That comes to fix what happened in the fall. Those are your two main points in human history. And Paul is reminding us of this. Don't think of the fall as a small thing, because all of you had experienced the death that came as a result.

Well, if death is a dark ocean that overwhelms us and drowns us, against which we have no hope of ever overcoming, then it is made up of the waves and the droplets of our own sins and trespasses. Notice that Paul actually points out the three sources of evil. We in the reformed world often highlight the sin that's within us, right? We have our doctrines like total depravity, right? We talk about the fallenness, okay. We highlight the grace where focusing on the sin that is in within each one of us. And yet Paul points out which is true sin doesn't just merely come from us, it comes from the world.

The world is a source of sin, and it comes from Satan himself. He calls the prince of the power of the air. Of course, this is kind of a pejorative term. He's saying is Satan is a prince of sorts, but he's a prince of air. That's it slips through your fingers. He has nothing to offer. So Paul points out that sin can come from any of these sources, come from us personally, from the world, or from Satan himself. And so we are swimming, as it were. We are swimming in a dark ocean of sin and trespasses. And whether we realize it or not, because of sin, humanity is alienated from the God of life, alienated that from the world, that he made an alienated from one another as fellow image bearers, in such a way that can only be described as spiritual death.

So Paul says, you need to be aware of the reality of spiritual death. This has this has an existential effect on your life. But as you are aware of the reality of spiritual death, you now need to also be aware of the reception of transformative grace. Because of the reality of spiritual death you cannot talk about what God gives you in any other way than to call it a gift. It's a gift that you receive. You receive divine grace because you're dead. You're those dry bones. You're dry. There's no life in you at all. And so all you can do is just have something given to you from the outside. You have nothing to contribute. You have nothing to add. Grace is not something that we nurture and grow from within us, but rather it is given to us freely and we can do nothing other than just passively receive it. We deserved wrath, says Paul. We were indeed children of wrath, but he did not give us wrath. He showed us mercy.

Now God has always been a God of generosity and mercy and compassion. Yeah, I love that. Passage goes back in Exodus 34 Moses is on the mountains following the Exodus, and he's on the mount meeting with God. And he's wondering, Will the Lord continue to stay with us even though we've committed all of these sins in the Exodus? Because Israel had already done the calf, the golden calf, and has already whined and complained about the Lord. And so Moses is asking the question, I want to see you because he wants to know if God is going to stay with them. And the Lord says, if you see me, you'll die. But here's what I'll do. I'll put you in the cleft of the rock, and I'll pass before you, and you'll see my aura. You'll see my, my, my corona passing before you. And as God does this, he sings a song about his divine name. He says, the Lord, the Lord, Yahweh, Yahweh. And what merciful and compassionate. I love that passage because as God is reintroducing Himself to Moses, he knows what Moses is really asking. He's saying, Lord, will you have mercy? We don't deserve it. Well, will you have mercy? And the Lord says, that's what my name means --mercy, compassion, grace. See, our Lord loves to show grace. He loves to show mercy on those who do not deserve it. He loves to.

Well, you might say, well, you keep talking about how this is a reception and how this is something that the Lord does on our behalf. So why is it the Christians are always saying things like, choose this day who you will follow? Why are Christians saying things like believe, repent and have faith? Believe? Jesus Himself says this at the beginning of his ministry, John the Baptist said it repent and believe. Why are you telling me to do things? If this is something that God does to me? And that's a good question I want to point out. The Scripture is very clear about something here, and this is something I think even some Christians are confused about. The Scripture is very clear that our free will is very much actively involved in our salvation.

Throughout scriptures we see followers of God like Joshua saying, I and my family, we will choose to follow the Lord. We see believers who are standing up and responding to the call of Jesus and saying, yes, I will follow you. Jesus himself says, following me means picking up your cross and following me.

You see, when we talk about grace being irresistible as we do in the Canon of Dort, and some of you are familiar with that T U L I P, right?

You've probably heard about the acronym T U L I P

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited atonement

Irresistible grace

Perseverance of the saints, not preservation of the saints. Perseverance of the saints.

Notice it says irresistible grace. If you actually read the Council of Dort wrote, they say, this irresistible grace does not mean that there is any violence or hostility that is done to the will of the person. When we say irresistible, we don't mean that this is a compulsory faith. We actually believe that when you see -- when your heart's been made alive in Christ and you see his glory, his beauty, his goodness, it's the most beautiful thing you've seen and you are irresistibly drawn to it. But let me be clear. It's not that you don't want to go to it. You will want to go to it. You will want to naturally lay hold of it. That's how it's irresistible.

A good friend of mine, his name was Randy Newman. He was a stellar evangelist. He actually passed away just a little over a year ago. Some of you may know him or know his books. He's one of the most effective evangelists that I've ever known in my life. And one of the reasons why he was so effective is because he was a student of Christian conversions. He actually did a doctoral dissertation where he studied conversion experiences, and he just heard reports. You know, we all listened to people's testimonies. He listened to them studiously studying them, marking them off, showing how they're similar, how they're different. And he noticed a couple of things. One of them was this there are as many different conversion stories as there are people in the church. You can be converted over a long period of time where your heart and your mind is just slowly convinced by the teaching of Scripture. You can be converted in a second. You know exactly when it happened. You hit rock bottom. You said a prayer. Somebody said a thing to you and you heard it. And it was like, boom! The lights turned on and you had faith. It can be like me, where you don't remember what it was like before you were a Christian. But you do know what it feels like to grow in faith, to see a faith early in life, adjust to adulthood, and be conformed to adulthood.

But one thing else that Randy noticed was that while there's no cookie cutter conversion, while there's no cookie cutter Christian, you can tell whenever you're talking to people that there's a time when something happens. There was a change -- they maybe didn't even realize at the time that it happened. But later, in retrospect, you know, it was around the summer of 96. I was

different. Things were different then. You see that as the Lord awakening the heart so that you are irresistibly drawn to the goodness of God in Christ Jesus. See, as Paul writes, when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together. Notice, by the way, he's drawing them together as a church. You were made alive together in Christ with Christ. You see, Paul wants to highlight that heart change happens quite apart from our own ability. It's something that happens not because of what we do, but because of what God is doing with us. We then respond to what God has done and the only natural way that's appropriate through repentance and faith. And when we gain that faith, we must recognize that it was not because of anything we've achieved. It was not a reward for good behavior. It wasn't because I was just a little bit more spiritually aware than other people around me, but it was entirely and solely a gift given by God to me.

So the reality of spiritual death leads us to recognize and appreciate the reception of transformative, of life giving grace. And as a result, says Paul, in verses eight through ten, we get to enjoy the restoration of divine workmanship.

Look what he says in verse ten. ***We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.*** Remember what he said back in chapter one? All of this was prepared long ago before the foundations of the earth. Whatever Briar Wood Presbyterian Church does, that is good. Guess what? It was set aside long ago, from before the foundations of the earth. Why, that we might walk in them in the good works that he has accomplished through his workmanship.

You see, because we were dead in sin, because we were just a valley of dry bones, because life had to be given to us through the grace of God -- We can never say that is because of our own work, because we can never say it's because of our own status, because of because of something about us, our lineage, that we had a leg up on any one else in our salvation.

You see, Christianity is not a pull yourself up by your own bootstraps religion. And this can be hard. Okay, brothers and sisters, this can be hard because we live in a country that is very much a pull yourself up by your own bootstraps country. Now, don't get me wrong, I love personal responsibility. I love stories of people showing true grit in the face of adversity. I love stories of people through hard work and right reasoning and right thinking and persistence and consistency achieving great things. But as Christians living in America, brothers and sisters, we need to be absolutely clear on this point. **We are not saved because of one iota of true grit. We are not saved because of one iota of our own contributions, our own hard work, our own rags to riches story.** We are not saved because of any of those things. It is merely because God showed us favor.

Paul's warning is crucial here for the church. Okay, this is crucial for not just the church in Ephesus. It's crucial for us because there is a very fine but firm line between humbly recognizing what God has accomplished in you and beginning to have pride in yourself for what you have accomplished. There's a very fine but firm line between telling someone, look what the Lord has done through your hard work and faithfulness and telling them, look what you have done through your hard work and faithfulness.

Think about Nebuchadnezzar looking out over his dominion and saying, look what I have done. The Lord takes these things very seriously. That means it ought not be a false humility in which we say things like by God's graces, I've conquered the sin in my life. It should not be out of false humility that we say, By God's grace I have had success in my marriage, or in my parenting or in my business. It shouldn't be out of false humility that we say, by God's grace, Briarwood church has had a great effect in Birmingham and around the world. Don't say that in a false humility. Say that instead, because you have a crystal clear understanding of how the world really works. When Christians say things like that, look what the Lord is doing through your ministry. When they say things like that, they're not being pollyannaish. They're stuck at being some kind of sort of you know, falsely religious in their language. We ought to say that because we're realists, because we recognize how the world really works. And without God at work, we're just dry bones in a valley. But when God is at work, he can do amazing things through those dry bones who are given life. So don't say that out of false humility, but say that because you're a realist.

Paul reminds us of the reality of spiritual death. He points us toward the reception of transformative grace so that we might recognize that we are restored workmanship. We are restored acts of divine workmanship. I want to just draw out two points of relevance in this passage one for believers and one for nonbelievers.

The first one is what I think is Paul's immediate point, because he is speaking, after all, to the church in Ephesus, which is a church of believers, and he's reminding them of what they once were as they celebrate who they now are. As I said, scholars have long pointed out that Paul is using very vivid language here. This is very important to him. He wants them to recognize this. It's incredibly important for us as well. Let me just say, I think this is incredibly important for people of my age and younger, early to mid-adulthood. It's a time when you're trying to prove who you are. It's a time. It's a season of ambition. You want to you want people to know that you have what it takes, whether to be a parent or to be a spouse, or to be someone in your industry at work. And we're all striving and striving and striving, and it's easy for the faith to become just one other step. One other thing that we're doing in order to strive in our line of work.

A good friend of mine in Washington, D.C., who was a very wise man, who ministered up there for a long time, he had this saying, he said in Washington, D.C., believers in Washington, D.C., there's a tendency to see church as the religion department of the upwardly mobile life. I get a sense it's not just in D.C. where that's a temptation.

Paul wants us to realize that the gospel is not about getting things just a little bit better. It's not about smoothing over the hard edges of your life, but rather the gospel is a matter of life and death. Before you gain that new life in the spirit, before you have faith, you're not just spiritually sick, you're spiritually dead with nothing to offer God, the God of creation, but your own self-interested, self-centered passions.

But when you have saving faith in Christ, that faith becomes for you the most clear fruit, that you are no longer dead in your sin, but alive in Christ and reconciled to the God of the universe, the God of abundance. You realize now that your fellow Christians are not enemies or those to compete with, but rather they are fellow image bearers, your family and your redemption and your restoration and your hope for the whole world is that they too will have the same new life, the same reconciliation with God and with others, the same sanctification that you have experienced.

So I'm here to ask you this morning, believers in Jesus Christ, do you realize how much you've been given? Do you realize how much has been done on your behalf? Do not think of it as a small thing. Do you not brush off your faith as the last thing you do after you get all the important things done in life? Because it is really a matter of life and death.

Now nonbelievers, imagine there are some of you here. You hear these words and you're not entirely convinced by them. You hear these words about saving faith and you say, that's not me. I'm not there yet. Maybe you even grew up in the church. Maybe you've been hearing this for a long time, but you always thought, these are just the things they say.

It's a part of this cultural affinity group. It's just what we say to be in the group. Maybe you've been here and you say, I. I know people who deserve this kind of salvation, but I'm not one of those people. Maybe you've heard this before and you say, I'm not a I'm not a religious person. It's sociologically, socially embarrassing to kind of think about being a church person. That's not me. And I want to ask you what hides behind those thoughts? If it's that you think that you don't have what it takes to be a Christian person, I want to encourage you that there is no one in this room who has done anything to accomplish the gift of salvation that we've been talking about. There's no one in this room who is just a little bit better. And so they have earned the reward. That is the adoption, the inheritance, the redemption, and the assuredness of the gospel. There's no one in this room who deserves this more than you.

But what is hiding behind our embarrassment? What's hiding behind our fears? Is it perhaps a fear about giving up authority? Giving up self-rule, giving up what Paul calls the passions of the mind and the body. If that is, I want you to know I'm so glad you're here. Because I believe in a God who has been working these things out from before the foundations of the earth. My prayer would be that for you, this is maybe the first step. Maybe it's the second step. Maybe it's the thousandth step on your way to salvation in Christ Jesus. If you want to talk about that, if you have questions, I'd love to talk to you. Benny Parks would love to talk to you. Benny Youngblood would love to talk to you. Grab any one of us. We'd love to talk to you about these things.

But one thing that you can be assured of is that the good news is that there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves. It is a 100% free, completely free, absolutely free, utterly free. Liberatingly free offer of salvation. God loves to increase the scope of his divine workmanship by adding to the number who are in the body of Christ, and he invites you, come live, believe.

Let's pray.

Heavenly father, we do come before you humbly because we know that we have no power to win your favor for us. And yet, because we are in Christ, we have all of your favor. I pray, Lord, that you would give strength to fatigued hearts when they hear the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you would find the lost souls who struggle with belief. And yet, like the father of the man who confronted Jesus and said, I believe, help me in my unbelief, Lord, strengthen them through the power of your spirit. We pray we long to be your divine workmanship. Work your will out in the world around us. Through us we pray. In Christ Jesus name,

Amen.