

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

1: THE GOSPEL



Historical Context & Background

The letter to the Ephesians has been called the “quintessence of Paul” because, perhaps more than any other, this letter sums up Paul’s most important and repeated themes. In broad terms, Ephesians is trying to wrestle with the implications for the church of Jesus’ having become king of the cosmos. The passage for this week is, in many ways, the grounding—the foundation—of all that Paul thinks, preaches, and writes. It is the good news—the news that Paul wants the entire world to know. The message that Paul thinks worth sailing half-way around the world for. And the message that is still, today, here, now, the most important message in the world.



Related Passages

Romans 3:19-26 - Another passage where Paul summarizes the gospel in straightforward terms.

Romans 5:12-21 - In this passage, Paul lays out the salvific rescue plan for those in sin—by leaving the old humanity tied to Adam and becoming a part of the new humanity tied to Christ.

James 2:14-26 - This passage is often set in opposition to Ephesians 2:1-10, but in fact each share an important theme: the good works we do in response to God’s grace.



Key Terms

“Tresspasses”: The Greek word here is “peraptoma.” It doesn’t really mean, as you might see on a sign by a gate today, trespassing on someone else’s property. It instead suggests a violation of standards, or wrongdoing, against other people or against God, depending on the context.

Grace: If you grew up in Sunday school, you’ve probably heard this word so much that it’s gone stale. The Greek word just means “gift”: our salvation is literally a gift or favor from God. It is not something he is bound to, nor is it something we particularly deserve. It is freely given.

Mercy: If grace is being given something that you don’t deserve, mercy is not being given something (like a punishment) that you do deserve. I act in grace when I give you a chocolate chip cookie. I act in mercy when I don’t punch you in the nose after you steal my only cookie (surely a just punishment for such a heinous crime).



Key Themes

Dead in our Sin: The passage begins with the unequivocal affirmation that we were all dead in our sin. The universality of human sin cannot be denied. Elsewhere, Paul says “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This is an important theme in the Christian gospel that, despite being critical to the message, is too often ignored. In the modern world, we like to sweep sins under the rug—even the very word “sin” makes people uncomfortable. We don’t like to think that we, our friends and family and everyone we know, is sinful. This exposes the ugliness in our hearts, and reminds that even the saints among us are far from perfect. Instead, we’d rather imagine that sinful people are only psychologically messed up or just have been raised wrong. In reality, every person has a bent towards evil and will tend that way apart from God’s intervention.

John Calvin, for one, thought the message of sin was essential to the gospel. He said that the knowledge of man (that is, all of us) is parallel to the knowledge of God. Before we know God as savior, we have to know ourselves as sinners. If we don’t recognize our need for grace and for salvation, what use will we find for Jesus? Of course, some preachers and teachers have taken things too far—fire and brimstone sermons aren’t likely to win people to the kingdom and, even if they do, what kind of God are we talking about here? Nonetheless, in our want to avoid fire and brimstone, some preaches have gone too far the other way and skipped the message of sin altogether. But the gospel is null and void without the doctrine of sin, because what need have we for “good news” when all is well already?

“But God”: Although Paul is pretty heavy handed on the sinfulness and fallenness of man in the first few verses, he blessedly shifts the message in verse 4: “But God...” The glorious message of the gospel begins with “but God...” because God is on the move. God is at work. And, as Paul reminds us, our God is rich in mercy. In the key terms, I noted the difference between grace and mercy. Grace is being given something that you don’t deserve (like me giving you a cookie), while mercy is not being given something, like a punishment, that you do deserve (like me not punching you for stealing my cookie). So what does Paul mean when he says that God is rich in mercy?

It means that, thankfully, he does not give us what we deserve. Paul has already (in verses 1-3) said what kind of people we all are: sinful people who consistently offend other people and God. As such, we deserve death and hell. We have rebelled against God our creator. That’s why when people ask “is God fair?” we must answer: “absolutely not! And thank him for that!” God isn’t fair; he is merciful. And Paul reminds us that God has a great love for us “even when we were dead through our trespasses.” That mercy leads him to act. He has no interest in leaving us to our own devices, for then we would surely perish. We would continue to go wrong. “But God” intervenes, and he makes us alive with Christ. He offers us, in his grace, a new life so that we can avoid, in his mercy, the punishment we deserve.

“By grace you have been saved”: This is one of the most explosive passages in the Bible, and few passages have been as controversial or comforting as this one. First, the controversy, then

the comfort. The controversy revolves around this: what do we have to do to be saved? Well, Paul is rather clear: we don't do anything, God does it. Our saving is, unequivocally, a gift. The typical view of heaven is that all the nice people go there after they die, but that's not what Paul says. He says no amount of "good works" can get you there, it is only a gift from God. But the controversy comes when we go much beyond this and try to build theological systems off of one verse.

Controversial question #1: Does this mean we no longer need to do good things? Absolutely not. And Paul says as much. After Paul says that we are saved by Christ and not good works, he adds "we were created in Christ Jesus for good works." It is a part of God's plan that we help build his kingdom. A part of the gift is being able to participate in giving the gift to others, and building God's new world. Paul is not opposed to James, for instance, when James says "faith without works is dead"—Paul would wholeheartedly agree. Faith and works go hand in hand. But works on their own, as some of Paul's audience was tempted into thinking, can never do the trick. It's God's grace, given in Jesus, that saves us. That's Paul's point.

Controversial question #2: Does this mean we don't even accept God's gift, but he forces it upon us? It is true God gives us the gift of salvation but, as with any gift, we can choose to reject it. God, out of his love, doesn't force anyone to live in eternity in him, but the invitation is for all. As C. S. Lewis would say, "the doors of hell are locked from the inside." Its an old idea, but an important one. God doesn't arbitrarily choose who to save and who to damn—he wants to save all! And the gift of Christ, and with it his salvation, is given to all people. But, sadly, some have and will continue to reject this gift. God's grace is given for all, but only accepted by some.

Now the comfort. What Paul is saying is that, first, we cannot earn salvation and, second, God is in our corner. This is a liberating message. It frees us from stress about whether or not we are saved: we only need to put our faith in Jesus. We only need to recognize that the work is already done for us. We only need to look to him. And it's not some trick: God is rich in mercy and gives salvation as a gift. God wants us—you—living in eternal life with him, and for you to see the source of all life and salvation is his Son Jesus Christ. That is the good news.

The Gospel: It is strongly encouraged that you watch the video "N. T. Wright on the Gospel" (from the Going Deeper section below) in your group this week.



Three Main Points

1. Our sin is real, and it's more than just psychological. We are, apart from Christ, offenders against God.
2. Salvation is a gift. It is given to us by God.
3. Although salvation is a gift of God and is not due to our works, good works are still an important part of a person who is saved by God.

📖 Quotes & Stories

“AM I EVIL?”

*In the book *Silence of the Lambs*, there is a scene when Hannibal Lecter comes face to face with Officer Starling. Officer Starling can't help but wonder—what went wrong? How did this man do so many wicked things? We might wonder the same about the super villains of our society: Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, or even Hitler. How did they go wrong? What happened?*

Hannibal Lecter's response to this question is telling: “Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've give up good and evil behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants—nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand and say I'm evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling?”

We often try to explain away evil by appealing to some traumatic experience in the past or something that went wrong in a person's psyche, but this scene is a reminder that people are evil. Even though some commit more heinous and horrific crimes than others, our hearts are, apart from God, fundamentally wicked.

AN UNCLAIMED \$1.5 BILLION

In October 2018, someone walked into a gas station in rural South Carolina and decided to buy a lottery ticket. Days later, that very ticket won the Mega Millions prize of \$1.5 billion. The problem? The winner didn't come forward to collect the money. Nobody knows who the winner was. And, chances are, the winner doesn't even know they've won.

The offer of salvation—given by God—can be like this. Salvation is for everyone, and it's a gift valued a lot more than \$1.5 billion. The problem is? People don't know they've won. They've stuffed the winning ticket in a glove box or it got washed in the laundry and is lost forever. Like any gift, the gift has to be open and used to be of any worth. As people who can't earn our salvation, we don't do anything except accept the gift—but we must accept it.

“So that you may not be elated by the magnitude of these benefits, see how Paul puts you in your place. For ‘by grace you are saved,’ he says, ‘through faith.’ Then, so as to do no injury to free will, he allots a role to us, then takes it away again, saying ‘and this not of ourselves.’ Even faith, he says, is not from us. For if the Lord had not come, if he had not called us, how should we have been able to believe? ‘For how,’ he says, ‘shall they believe if they have not heard?’ So even the act of faith is not self-initiated. It is, he says, ‘the gift of God.’ ”

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

“Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”

G. K. CHESTERTON

“We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”

MARTIN LUTHER



Discussion Questions

- What examples of grace and mercy can you think of from your own life?
- What do you think Paul means by “following the ruler of the air” (v. 2)?
- What do you think Paul means by “following the course of the world” (v. 2)?
- What is the role of faith in salvation?
- What does it mean to be saved “through faith”?
- Do you see any similarities with your own story in this passage? Or any verses that remind you of different moments or times in your life?
- If you had to share the gospel while riding on an elevator with a friend, what would you say?
- Why is the message of universal sin important to the message of the gospel? How is it crucial?
- What do you think Paul means when he says that God “made us alive together with Christ”?
- How do we preach the gospel, and the message that everyone is a sinner, in a world that thinks that people are basically good?
- How does the message of the gospel shape Christian ethics? Or, in other words, what implications does God’s gift of grace have for the way we ought to live today?
- What does Paul mean by “created in Christ Jesus”?
- What is the role that Paul envisions for “good works”?
- How is the order of Paul’s argument here important or relevant?
- What does Paul mean when he says “we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else”?
- When Paul says “us” in this passage, who does he have in mind?
- This passage is clear that salvation is a gift, but what exactly is “salvation” and how can it be a gift?
- Is salvation an event or a process?
- Have you ever shared the gospel with someone else? What did you say? Is there anything you would do differently?
- Is the gospel message—that is, how you present it—the same for everyone? Should you always say the same thing (i.e. use something like the “Romans Road”) or should it be adapted depending on the context?

Application and Practice

Reflecting on the Gospel. The gospel is something that has become almost ethereal in Christian circles. We know its important, but we can't always say why or how. The Gospel isn't merely something were supposed to tell folks on the mountain about. It should be changing our lives and hearts, the way we live, and how we think about our world. This week, with Ephesians 2:1-10 open in front of you, reflect on the following questions:

- How have I sinned against God? What good things do I do apart from God?
- Why does God save me?
- What am I to do in response to God's grace towards me?
- Is it important that I tell other people about this? If so, how can I do so?

Try to do this for at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted time (i.e. put the phone on Do Not Disturb or, better yet, in the other room) or for 10 minutes two different days.

Going Deeper

Video. "What is the Gospel?" - N. T. Wright

Video. "On Predestination and Election" - N. T. Wright

Documentary. Martin Luther: The Idea that Changed the World (Netflix)

Catechism. "On Grace and Justification" - Catechism of the Catholic Church