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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Grace That Really Is Amazing

Ephesians 2:1–10

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series: Sit, Walk, Stand: A Journey Through Ephesians

For several decades adventurous souls have sought the challenge of traveling on foot from the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere to the highest place in the United States. They start at Badwater in Death Valley, California, at an elevation of 279 feet below sea level. They travel across a scorching ribbon of asphalt highway, over mountain passes and across dry basins, and on into the shadow of Mt. Whitney, 14,495-foot king of the mighty Sierra Nevada range. Many come in summer, when valley air temperatures exceed 125 degrees, and try to run the 130+ mile distance. The approach differs with the individual, but the route is always the same. When they finally get to the top the contrast is stunning. From the bottom of the world to the top; from relentless heat to perpetual coolness; from looking up at the rest of the world to looking down on all of life.

It's hard to imagine a more extreme contrast. But there is one—not in the physical world but in the spiritual world. In Ephesians 2 Paul describes the spiritual "Death Valley" all of us were born into, but he also describes the glorious change of location God has provided through Jesus. He rescued us from the dry and barren desert and exalted us to the rarified crystal clear air of God's grace! What that looks like in each of our lives might differ, but the route is always the same.

We've been looking at the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians for several weeks now. In chapter 1 he started with praise and then he moved into prayer. He started by praising God for all spiritual blessings he's given us through his Son, Jesus. He then prayed that the eyes of our hearts would be opened so we'd know him better and see more of what those blessings are. In the last part of that prayer he asked that we'd come to understand how great his power is towards us who believe. He said this is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at God's right hand far above all rule, authority, dominion and power. Now, starting in chapter 2, he spells out how this power has been at work in our lives. He showcases God's power by spelling out the extreme difference between where we were and where we are.

The Fallen Nature of Humanity.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 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. 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 (Ephesians 2:1–3).

He starts out and describes our former condition. Brace yourself! It's bleak! Talk about a desolate wasteland! Notice he says three rather appalling things about us.

We were dead

First, we were dead. This is a factual statement of our spiritual condition apart from Christ. He's talking about spiritual death. Spiritual death means you're alienated from the life of God. Life is found in relationship with the living God and so when we're separated from him we're separated from life. You can be incredibly healthy and strong; you can have the lively mind of a scholar; you can have a vivacious personality, but you can still be spiritually dead. When you're dead you're blind to the glory of Jesus Christ and deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. There's no crying out to your Father-God, no awareness of his personal reality, no desire to please him. You're as unresponsive to him as a corpse.

Paul traces this condition to our trespasses and sins. These two words give a complete account of human evil. A "trespass" is a crossing of a known boundary or a deviation from the right path. But a sin is a missing of the mark, a falling short of a standard. Together, these two words cover the bases, giving both the active and passive aspects of our wrongdoing. He says we used to "live" or literally "walk" in these.

We were enslaved

Not only were we dead, we were also enslaved. We may have thought we were footloose and free to do whatever we wanted, but in fact we were in bondage to three forces. We ***followed the ways of this world.*** When he talks about "this world" he means a collective way of thinking and living that's antithetical to God. It's a whole social value system in which God isn't part of the equation. It takes all kinds of different forms, but it always comes down to lowering the moral standards set forth in God's word and exalting the things of this world, whether they be money, fame or power.

But that's not all, he also mentions ***the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the sons of disobedience.*** That's talking about a malevolent spiritual enemy the Bible calls the devil or Satan, as well as his demonic host. Yes, he's real. He's behind the worldly mindset I just described. Jesus

called him a liar and a murderer. He loves to twist the truth of God in our minds and distort the image of God in our hearts.

Finally he says we *“gratified the cravings of our flesh and followed its desires and thoughts.”* The flesh is our fallen self-centered nature, not our human physical bodies. The “desires and thoughts” aren’t normal normal bodily desires, but rather the twisting of these desires and fulfilling them in ways God never intended. By the way, the desires and thoughts of the flesh include things that appear respectable like pride, selfish ambition and even self-confidence. So, these three forces—the world, the devil, and the flesh—held us in bondage.

We were condemned

As a result, we were condemned. He says *“we were by nature deserving of wrath.”* This is talking about God’s wrath. His wrath isn’t like our wrath. It’s not a bad temper; he doesn’t fly off the handle. It’s not spite or malice or animosity or revenge. It’s not arbitrary or subject to mood or whim. God’s wrath is his “personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil, his refusal to compromise with it, and his resolve instead to condemn it” (Stott). Notice he says we were **by nature** deserving of this wrath. He’s pointing to the fact that we’re part of a fallen race and by birth we have an inclination towards sin and that sin brings us under his judgment.

As I said, this is pretty bleak. Now you might think, “Well, I know a lot of people who fit that description, but that’s not me. I’ve always tried to be a good person. I’ve always believed in God. I may not be perfect but I’ve always tried to do the right thing and I’ve helped a lot of people.” Or you might think, “This can’t describe everyone out there. There are a lot of really nice people in this world. People who really do a lot of good. They may not be followers of Christ but they have their own sincerely held beliefs that are right for them.”

But notice something about this. Paul himself was born a Jewish man. He describes himself elsewhere as zealous for God and blameless in regards to God’s law. But note how he includes himself in this with a subtle shift in pronouns. He starts out and says *“you were dead...you followed the ways of the world...”* But then in v. 3a he includes himself in this: *“all of us also lived...”* Then he even includes “the rest” of us. So he wants us to know you can be a very religious, moral, do-good kind of person and still fit this description. It’s not that all humans are equally depraved, or even as depraved as we could be; and he’s not saying no one is capable of any good, but rather that no part of any of us is untainted by sin.

Rick Warren’s wife discovered this truth about herself on a trip to Rwanda. She writes:

“The first time I visited Rwanda, I went looking for monsters, albeit a different category of monster—the kind that isn’t relegated to B movies. I’d heard about the 1994 genocide that had left one million

people dead—tortured, raped, viciously murdered—and somehow I thought it would be easy to spot the perpetrators. I naïvely assumed I’d be able to look men and women in the eyes and tell if they’d been involved. I was full of self-righteous judgment. What I found left me puzzled, confused, and ultimately frightened. Instead of finding leering, menacing creatures, I met men and women who looked and behaved a lot like me. They took care of their families, went to work, chatted with their neighbors, laughed, cried, prayed, and worshiped. Where were the monsters? Where were the evildoers capable of heinous acts? Slowly, with a deepening sense of dread, I understood the truth: There were no monsters in Rwanda, just people like you and me. ...

“Before that trip, I can’t tell you the number of times I reacted to evil I read about or witnessed by saying, ‘I’d never do that!’ But thousands of years of bloody human history prove differently. Fifty-four years of my own history prove differently. We’re all proficient in our ability to conceive, plan, and execute evil. Of course, we don’t call it evil when we’re the ones involved. But it is. As one French writer observed, ‘There is hardly a man clever enough to recognize the full extent of the evil he does.’ You might as well face the shameful truth: You and I, put in the right situation, will do absolutely anything. Given the right circumstances, I’m capable of any sin. I’ve grown more afraid of the monster lurking in the dark corners of my soul than of any monster lurking in the dark corners of my house.”

It’s very important to get this, because when people fail to understand how bleak their situation is, they’re easy prey to superficial remedies. Maybe education will fix us, or better government. But if Paul is right, we need much more than that. A disease as pervasive as this requires a radical remedy. This is what Paul gives us next.

The Gracious Work of God.

The first two words of v. 4 are perhaps the most important words in the whole paragraph. In the Greek text the first two words are *de Theos*, meaning “But God...” These may be the two most wonderful words in the Bible. “But God...” Despite the fact that we were spiritually 279 feet below sea level and completely helpless to do anything to change our situation, God acted. Look what Paul says in verses 4–6:

But because of his great love for us God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

There’s not doubt these are some of the most significant words in the entire Bible. They get to the heart of our evangelical faith. They answer four simple questions about God.

What did God do?

The first question: what did God do? The answer is very simple—He saved us. It’s like he swooped in and plucked us from the

desert and flew us on his back up to the highest peak. Look how he describes this salvation. We were dead but God *“made us alive with Christ.”* Dead people can’t make themselves alive. Only God can do that. He gave us spiritual life. Jesus said, *“He who has the Son has the life...”* Then it says he *“raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.”* Remember in chapter 1 that God showed off his power by raising Jesus from the dead and seating him in the heavenlies? Well, here he does the same thing to us who are “in Christ.” Being seated with him refers to the place of authority and power and privilege. Because we’re united with Christ, that’s where God has placed us. The whole point is that something has happened to us; something we couldn’t do ourselves.

It’s important we ask the question, what does this look like when it happens to you? What are the signs in our actual experience that this has actually happened to us? I’m not talking about what we experienced at conversion. Conversion experiences come in all shapes and sizes. For some it was a very quiet thing; perhaps you felt a sense of peace or joy or relief, but there wasn’t any thunder and lightning. For others, it was very dramatic and emotional. It doesn’t matter how you experienced it; the fact is you were made alive! And people who are alive will show the signs of spiritual life. What are they?

The first thing is there’s a sense of no longer being alienated and afraid of God. We come to sense he’s our Father and we want to be in his presence. God is no longer seen as my enemy or a terrible judge; he’s seen as a friend, as a father, with a father’s love. It’s Mother’s Day today and it’s appropriate and also accurate to say we’re also drawn to him like a mother. I think of how Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing”* (Lk 13:34). Jesus sees himself as a mother hen longing to gather her chicks up in her protective arms, but they’re unwilling. But when God makes you alive that changes. Now you **are** willing; you come to him. And the reality of being near to him allows you to be able to endure anything. I’ve seen believers here at CPC endure the unendurable and bear up with joy under the most difficult circumstances.

Another thing that happens is you desire to please him. You have a new sensitivity to the things in your life that are offensive to him. This isn’t about fear; it’s about a desire to please that’s natural in any loving relationship. It’s not about perfection either. In fact, the more you grow in him the more aware you become of your own sin. But the difference is now you’re willing to confess it and rely on him to help you change. I remember this so well in my own life. Within days of becoming a Christian I knew there were things in my life that needed to change. I knew I was

forgiven, but I wanted to please him. Things that before I felt fine about, I now knew had to be dealt with.

And with that comes a hunger and a desire for God’s word. This book that had been dry as dust to you if you ever bothered to pick it up, all of a sudden comes alive. You can’t get enough of it. You instinctively know he speaks through this book. As a new Christian, someone handed me a New Testament before I went off to college and I devoured it before the first semester was over. Babies long for their mother’s milk and new believers long for the milk of God’s word.

Finally, there’s a new love for God’s people. You find you’re hanging out with people you never would have hung out with before. There’s an invisible union you have with other believers. It’s not that you never have problems or conflicts, but it’s like the problems and conflicts that take place within a family. There’s a new ability and willingness to forgive. You know how much you’ve needed forgiveness, and how much he’s forgiven you for, and you know how wrong it would be to refuse to extend forgiveness to someone else.

Why did God do it?

The second question is, why did God do it? Paul tells us in v. 4, *“because of his great love for us.”* He didn’t do it because we were so wonderful or lovable. He didn’t do it because he had to; his hand wasn’t forced. He didn’t even do it because he needed to, as if he’d lack something if he didn’t get this done. No! He did because of his great love. Scripture says “God is love.” What greater picture of love do we have of God taking on flesh and blood, living with us and teaching us, and then stretching out his arms on a cross to be condemned to death in our place? That’s the greatest demonstration of love ever made.

Then he describes him as *“rich in mercy.”* The Lord abounds in tender compassion. His heart goes out to us. He longs to give us what we need rather than what we deserve. And finally it says he did it because *“in the coming ages”* he wanted to show off *“the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”* I think of a great work of art like the Mona Lisa. People see that and they don’t ask, “Who is that lady?” They ask, “Who painted that portrait?” Somehow, in the coming ages, the host of heaven will look at us and they won’t say, “Who is that?” Instead they’ll say, “Who did that? What a display that is of God’s amazing grace!” All creation will praise him!

How did God do it?

The third question is, how did God do it? Paul answers that question on verses 8–9:

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

How did he do it? He did it by grace thru faith. Grace wasn’t only one of the things that motivated him to save us, it’s also the

means by which he saved us. Above all, he wants us to know our salvation isn't based on our good works but on God's grace. He calls it God's gift. You don't earn a gift; all you can do is receive it. You can't boast about a gift; all you can do is thank God for it. Imagine giving someone you love very much a wonderful gift for their birthday. You thought it through and you saved for it and you bought it and then gave it them. But the first thing they did after opening it was offer to pay you for it. That wouldn't only be ridiculous, it would be offensive. All we can really do is receive the gift. That's what faith is. Faith is receiving the gift, embracing it, saying, "Yes, I need this and I want this and I believe you're giving this to me out of your love."

Some people view faith as a kind of work. That would mean the one thing we could boast about is our faith, but that's not right. Boasting in your faith would be like boasting in the fact you reached out to take a check from somebody. Imagine you have a huge debt but someone offers to pay it for you and writes out a check for you for a million dollars. You reach out and take it from him. How absurd it would be if you then went around saying, "Isn't it wonderful I had what it takes to reach out and grab that check?" They'd probably say to you, "Wasn't it marvelous he paid that debt for you?" If you said, "Oh, he didn't do much; I took the check. I mean, if I hadn't taken it, what good would it have done for him to give it in the first place?"—how silly that would be! It's the grace of God which make our salvation possible.

What purpose did God have?

Finally, the fourth and last question, what purpose did God have? The answer is in v. 10:

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

Not only did he save us, but he re-created us. He uses a word here—we're his "handiwork." Another translation says "craftsmanship." The word actually means a work of art. As his own creation, we're his "work of art." Some people claim all this grace business actually encourages us to sin more. If it's all grace and we don't have to do anything, what's left to motivate me to do good? But look what he says: good works may not be the means of salvation but they certainly are the result of salvation. He created us for good works! So maybe there's finally something we can boast about. We're doing the good works, right? We can take a little credit for that, right? No! He even created these beforehand so that you just walk in them. Notice how he's gone full circle here. He's started out by saying we used to "walk" according to the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of

the air. But now he says we "walk" in the good works he prepared beforehand.

Who is doing the work here? I remember years ago being in the snow with my kids when they were little. We'd be walking through the fresh snow and I'd tell them to follow in my footsteps. And the older kids would be able to do that, but the younger one couldn't because his stride was too short. So I said, "Matt, come here." I picked him up and put his left foot on my left foot and his right foot on my right. I said, "Okay, let's go." I began one big stride at a time with my hands under his armpits and his feet lightly on mine. Who was doing the work? In a sense, he was doing it, but only because I was doing it. As long as he stayed attached to me, he'd be able to walk in my footsteps. That's the way it is with us and God. We can't take credit even for our good works, but we can thank him for the grace by which he works through us.

Do you see the extreme difference between what we are by nature and what we can be by grace? Do you see how this reveals the amazing power of God? Where does this find you? I think there are three groups of people listening to this.

First, there are those of you who know this but need a reminder. You're on Mt. Whitney but somehow you've forgotten that. The circumstances of life have overwhelmed you. But God can take you on his back from Death Valley to Mt. Whitney, he can deal with anything you're facing. Have no fear—nothing is impossible with God!

Second, there are those of you who are still trying to save yourselves. You're still trying to make it from Death Valley to Mt. Whitney on your own. You're trying really hard to jump through hoops, do good deeds. Maybe you believe you can get there at the end of your life when God weighs the good vs. the bad and you hope the good will outweigh the bad. But no matter how good you are, you're not good enough. Scripture says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Third, maybe you're a person here today who feels so torn up and bad and lost, you feel you're a hopeless case, and if there is a God he wouldn't want to have anything to do with you. I want you to know that Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost. Jesus is all about repairing broken lives. If you're broken and feel hopeless, you can put your faith in him and he'll put the pieces back together.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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