

# EPHESIANS 2:1-10

## GOSPEL SALVATION

### **Gospel Salvation for the Regeneration of His People**

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#### **Introduction**

Good morning, Union Church. My name is Kyle Rodriguez, it's my privilege to open up the book of Ephesians with you today. If you haven't already, I'd love to invite you to turn there now. Ephesians is in the New Testament of your Bibles, between Galatians and Philippians.

Last week, Pastor Ethan preached on the second half of Chapter 1, on how our praise for the glory of God should naturally spill over into care for one another—specifically through prayer. And brothers and sisters, I have felt your prayers this week. One way I felt them was at our first men's Bible Study on Wednesday, where we got to pray with one another in really genuine, honest, pleading ways.

And one of the things that I was struck by was that those prayers were profoundly gospel-driven. It was an instance where an understanding of the gospel and its implications for us drove us to pray for each other. These weren't rote prayers of cliches where each person tried to sound holier than the person before—I got to hear heartfelt, rich prayers of men who genuinely were grateful for the ways the other had pointed us to the gospel, we got to read and talk about how the Word of God is powerful to bring us to salvation and train us for righteousness, and then we prayed that God would drive each of us to be driven to the Word to experience that Holy Spirit power. It was the truth of the gospel spilling over into real, concrete action and prayers for each other. It was beautiful.

And that's what this particular series in Ephesians is all about. We've said a few times over the last few weeks that Ephesians is all about gospel foundations leading to gospel implications. Ephesians is one of the most well-known books in the New Testament, espousing some of the most repeated truths of Christianity, it is foundational. Yet, even if we have been following Jesus for decades, Ephesians still has much-needed things to say to us.

A friend of mine, who we worshiped and served alongside at our last church, wrote on social media this week "If the Gospel feels like 'old news', I probably haven't heard it enough yet."

It's so true, friends. For two reasons:

1. Because the gospel is so good. The goodness and beauty and awesomeness of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an infinite well for us to draw from. It is like a brilliant symphony that never ends, that is complex and rich and we never tire of listening to.
2. But the gospel also should never feel old to us because no matter how foundational the truths, we are constantly in need of new applications of those truths. Every season of life brings new opportunities for good, God-glorifying, kingdom work, new temptations toward sin, new sufferings to endure. And the gospel is the source from which we have to draw the direction, the application of how to be faithful in each of those things.

If the gospel feels like old news, we either overlook the depth of its beauty, or we miss the breadth of its applications.

Main Point

With all that being said, today we are going to reap the benefits of the gospel truth in Ephesians 2. And as we do so, I think this is the gospel foundation we are going to see:

Where death reigns, only a gracious God brings life.

Now, to double down on what we were just talking about, it's very possible that you hear that sentence, particularly in the shadow of the passage that we just read, and you're already starting to tune out. "Alright, good, gospel message, I'm good on that, I hope somebody here who doesn't know Jesus really gets this."

But brothers and sisters, resist that impulse this morning.

Because Paul wrote this passage not to unbelievers, but to Christians. He wrote it because Christians need to revisit again and again how their salvation works, to see the depth of its beauty and marvel at it.

And the implications it has for you today, right now, are different than they were five years ago, and different than they will be 30 years from now. And it is *good* news for you today just as much as it may have been in the past or will be in the future.

Now, before we dive into the text itself, let us pray to ask the Lord to help us.

Death – In this world death reigns, because in our inner selves sin reigns.

On April 26, 1986, just before 1:30 AM, explosions rocked the Number 4 reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the USSR, in what is now northern Ukraine. The nuclear meltdown and fallout that resulted are largely known today as the worst nuclear disaster ever, but one of the most fascinating things about Chernobyl is that in the moment, nobody seemed to understand how bad things were.

The men working at the plant didn't realize the variety of hidden factors that were combining to put the reactor in an extremely precarious position. The men in charge at the plant that night insisted that the reactor could not have exploded, because it didn't match their experience and perception of how nuclear reactors worked.

Perhaps the most chilling instance of this ignorance was the first firemen who were called to come put out the fires that night. With nobody aware of, or willing to accept, the fact that the reactor core was completely exposed after the explosion, the firemen drove into the compound and marched right up to the burning building, with nothing but their normal gear on, completely unaware that deadly amounts of radiation were raining down on them—radiation that would cause them to slowly, painfully decay over the next several weeks.

About 30 people died in the explosion and immediate aftermath, that night—and estimates of long-term deaths range from the hundreds to the thousands in the decades since—all because people were unaware of the extent of the disaster and the deadly effects that would result.

And here in the first three verses of Ephesians, Paul paints a very similar picture of the state of people without the intervening work of God.

“And you were dead,” Paul says. Though people may seem to be alive physically, they are the walking dead. They are spiritually comatose, flatlining, unresponsive. Whatever this state is that Paul is describing, it is dire, it is disastrous. It is not something to scoff at or ignore.

So, two diagnostic questions that have to be asked by any mechanic, disaster response team, or any kind of problem-solver: What is the source of the problem? And what are its current and future effects? Only then can we figure out what solutions may be effective both to fix the source and reverse the damage that has been done.

Where does this death come from?

Paul is clear right from the get-go: Why has this death occurred? Because of our sin. Our “trespasses and sins” he says, just to really drive home the point. Sin, the actions and attitudes that are contrary to the law of God, does something in us that kills us, that causes some kind of death.

On one hand sin immediately causes a kind of spiritual death—a spiritual death that might best be described as a separation from God. This is the literal language in Isaiah 59, where the prophet says to the people: “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you” (Isaiah 59:2).

But it’s also the figurative picture that is drawn in the very beginning of our Bibles. Do you remember when God put Adam and Eve in the garden, and gave them the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Do you remember what he warned them? He said: “On the day that you eat of it you shall surely *die*.” Note: He didn’t say that if they ate of the tree, eventually they would die. He said, on the *day* that you eat of it, you shall surely die.

And what happens, when Adam and Eve ate of the tree, disobeying the commands of God and placing their own desires and impulses and pride above him? They are literally, physically separated from God, ejected from the garden—on that day, immediately. And in being separated from God, we have cut ourselves off from the source of all goodness and joy and love and life. We are spiritually dead.

But sin also puts into motion the reality of physical death and decay. When Paul says in Romans 3:23 that the wages of sin are death, he means both spiritually and physically. Death is the natural consequence of sin, our moral failure toward the Creator is reflected in the brokenness of all Creation. So now, we are like the firefighters who rushed into Chernobyl, taking on deadly radiation with every breath. It may take minutes, hours, even weeks or years to show its effects—but even if we can’t see it, sin has already done its damage. We are already dead, we just don’t know it.

And it’s not only individual acts of sin that cause this death, but it is our very nature as humans. In verse 3, Paul says we were “by nature” children of wrath—just like all of mankind. That word could also be translated, “by birth.”

And this is a commonly misunderstood thing, even among Christians. Just this past week, a poll was released by Lifeway Christian Publishing, according to this poll, more than 60 percent of Evangelical Christians who go to church at least once a week, believe that everyone is born innocent in the eyes of God. More than 60 percent. And more than 50 percent believe that “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.” Meaning A. Most people don’t believe in this reality of a “sinful nature”

which then leads to B. That most people aren't really all that effected by sin! Sin is more a necessary nuisance, "to err is human." But it's not a significant problem for most people.

Paul says no, we are born as children of wrath, spiritually dead and guilty, separated from God. And this is woven all throughout the Bible.

David says in Psalm 51: "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

Proverbs 22:15 says that "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child."

Genesis 8:21 says that "the intent of a man's heart is evil from his youth."

Psalm 14 says that "there is no one who does good, not even one."

Job 15 indicates that it is impossible to be born as a human being and be righteous, that mankind is corrupt and drinks sin "like water."

Ecclesiastes 9:3 says that "the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts through their lives."

We are dead. We are dead because our individual sins have made us guilty and destined for wrath, and we are dead because our nature means our sins start from the first moment we breathe and we will never have the power to stop sinning.

What are the effects of death?

Paul goes on to elucidate the effects of this death.

This death impacts our own desires and tendencies: We are prone to follow the course of this world—and by world he doesn't merely mean the physical world, but the sinfully corrupt world. We long to be like the sinful world around us, we long to follow Satan, we long to follow the desires of our body and mind. In our natural state, in our state of spiritual death, we are trapped in a cycle of bad influences.

Have you ever gotten trapped in the YouTube algorithm rabbit hole? Started off looking for one video on how to change your oil and four hours later you're watching a documentary on the history of the Indy 500? There have been some fascinating studies done on the power of social media algorithms in recent years, and in particular on how social media is making us more and more extreme—because it sucks us into these things we like or agree with and then continues to feed us more and more of the same thing, often with longer and longer videos, more and more people who agree with us, with more and

more extreme views.<sup>1</sup> And it actually rewires our brains, making us seek out more and more of the more in-depth, more extreme content. We become addicted to going farther and farther down the rabbit hole.

And in the state of death that humanity is in causes something similar. We follow the course of the world, we follow the temptations of Satan, our own sinful desires, and we just get sucked further and further along. Soon enough, the old desires of our body and mind aren't enough—and the world and Satan himself eagerly provide us with new passions of the flesh. Our brains, our souls, become rewired each day to love sin more and more.

Because we are dead, we are blind to the paths of real righteousness and goodness, we have eyes only for following the world, Satan, and our own animal impulses.<sup>2</sup>

And the ultimate effect of this death is that we are destined to experience the wrath of God not only by our eventual physical death, but in spiritual death and punishment. We have rejected the purposes God has given humanity, disobeyed his commands for holiness and righteousness and love, been self-centered and destructive, and deserve his just response. The wages of sin is death.

In this world, death reigns. We are slaves in Death's dominion. There is no rebellion we can muster, no revolution we can ignite. We cannot fix ourselves, dig ourselves out of the rabbit hole, atone for the guilt that we have racked up. Left alone in this radiation-filled world, we are dead.

Life – Out of no motivation but his own pleasure, God intervenes to bring glorious life.

But, oh the beauty of these two words:

*“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved!”*

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to these ideas and how they could be studied, see:

<https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2019/10/24/youtube-algorithm-and-the-creation-of-rabbit-holes/>

<sup>2</sup> Now, some theologians and Christian traditions throughout time have argued that “no, people are basically free to choose good or evil—God doesn't force them to choose evil and he won't force them to do good. He has given us free will, we have to use that free will to choose to obey God.” This was essentially the contention of Erasmus, a Catholic theologian during the time of the Reformation, who sparred with Martin Luther. For a Reformed rebuttal to this idea, aside from the plainness of Ephesians 2:1-10, see Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* and Jonathan Edwards' *The Freedom of the Will*. In summary: While humanity has free will in the sense that God does not constrain our action and cause us to do anything against our will (he doesn't drag us kicking and screaming), our will itself is so tainted by sin that it will always choose sin, selfishness, and evil. We are free to follow our will, but our will itself is in bondage.

It is incredible, brothers and sisters, how often the Bible uses those two words to indicate that where death normally reigns, where death *should* reign, God makes a way for life.

In Genesis 7, there is a picture painted of the flood covering the earth, destroying and killing all life that existed, with the water raging and prevailing over all the earth. And then chapter 8 begins: “*But God* remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him on the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.”

In Genesis 50, Joseph says to his brothers, who hated him, plotted to kill him, and sold him into slavery: “You meant evil against me, *but God* meant it for good.”

Psalms 73:26 – “My flesh and my heart may fail, *but God* is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Acts 10:39 – “They put [Jesus] to death by hanging him on a tree, *but God* raised him on the third day.”

You were dead in your sins and addictions, following the shallow, misguided course of this world, shackled to the leading of the devil, a slave to your impulses and desires, by nature a child of wrath destined for destruction of your own making, *but God* made you alive!

The entire course of the history of the world hinges on those two little words: “But God.”

Why are you a Christian? God intervened!

And he intervened absolutely freely! That is to say, there is nothing in you that made, coerced, convinced, or caused God to give you that life. There’s no way it could! You were dead!

Why did God intervene? Because he’s rich in mercy—which enabled him to pour wrath out upon his Son, instead of you—and because he has a great love with which he loved you—even while you were yet dead in your sin. He is rich in mercy and overflowing in love—the reason that God has given you new life has nothing to do with who you are and everything to do with who he is.

And if that’s true, then your salvation is infinitely secure. Because while we change, our circumstances change, God does not change. His stash of mercy never runs dry, his love doesn’t distractedly jump from one object to another. If he gave you new life while you were completely dead, unable to please him or obey him, simply because

of his mercy and love for you, what stops him now, as a Christian who is alive, but struggling or suffering, from continuing to be merciful and loving to you?

In theological terms, the way we talk about this concept of new life is by the term “regeneration.” That the way God saves his people is by “regenerating” them, giving them new life, causing them to be “born again.”

And note, this regeneration that God grants to us is directly connected to the work of Jesus Christ—we are made alive together \*with\* Christ. And that’s important because it’s connected back to the source of the death that we talked about before: our sin makes us guilty and worthy of death and our nature makes us prone to sin and sin and continue to sin.

But in uniting us to Christ, God takes care of both of those issues. The guilt that we carry for our sin is wiped away, because Christ dies in our place upon the Cross, taking the wrath of God that we deserved and wiping us clean of our moral debt to him. And we are also united to Christ in his resurrection, so when we are given new life in Christ we are given a completely new nature! And even though our old self still drags its feet and tempts us and causes incredible frustration for us, victory over those sins is really possible! We can live like daughters and sons of God—made in his image—because he has given us that nature, in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

It's as if he's purged us of any trace of radiation, healed us of it's effects, and then equipped us with gas masks and radiation suits so that we actually can live and move and breath in this broken world without falling back into slavery to sin and death.

The kind of life that God breathes into his sons and daughters, by Christ, has the effect of reversing every single one of death's effects. But it only happens by God intervening. Watch, let me give you an example:

Instead of blindly following the world and the temptation of Satan, God grants his children with the ability to see \*him\* as the most joyful, satisfying thing. Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 4:4, when he says that the god of this world has “blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

So, unbelievers, anybody who does not call Jesus Lord and put their trust in his gospel, cannot see the light of the gospel. They can't. They're dead, and in their deadness, their eyes only see the world, only see the temptations of the god of this

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<sup>3</sup> Christians have often described the state of humanity, then, like this: Before the Fall, humanity was “able to not sin.” After the Fall, we were “not able not to sin.” In Christ, we are “able to not sin”. One day, when we meet Christ and dwell with him in glory, we will “not be able to sin.” For more on this, [see Puritan Thomas Boston's Human Nature in Its Fourfold State](#), which further develops Augustine's initial conception (see link for summary).



world, only see the tunnel vision of the desires of their mind and body. So, how does somebody come to believe the gospel if they can't see it?

Paul goes on to say in 2 Corinthians 4:6 – “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

God has to do the work! He has to remove the blinders from their eyes and shine the glorious light of the gospel upon them.

Paul is all about these metaphors: We are blind, we are in slavery, we are dead. And the entire point is to understand, you cannot save yourself! The blind man needs to be given new eyes to see the light, the slave needs to have his chains unlocked, the dead man needs to be resurrected.

Only the grace of an infinitely merciful, purposefully loving God can do that.

And look back at Ephesians 2, the reason why he does it, in verse 7:

“So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Again, the effect of death reversed. Once we were destined to experience the wrath of God, by the grace of regeneration he destines his children for an eternity of drawing from the immeasurable riches of his grace.

Oh, there is so much more we could delve into here, brothers and sisters. But what you have to see is this: Out of no motivation but his own pleasure in pouring out his kindness upon you, God intervenes to bring glorious life where death reigns.

Application: Because of the life-giving grace of God, we are equipped to be humble and purposeful.

Okay, so the Gospel Foundation is that “where death reigns, only a gracious God can give life.” If that’s true, then I have two Gospel Implications for you this morning, aside from some we’ve already talked about.

*First, because of the life-giving grace of God, we are equipped to be humble.*

The last three verses of this passage are basically a summary of what has already come before, along with some specific application. In other words, it is the implications to Paul’s gospel foundation he has laid.

And in verse 8 and 9, he specifically points to humility as a necessary byproduct of this gospel of grace:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

He repeats again and again—he’s already said this earlier in the passage too—by grace you have been saved. By a gift, a free gift, you’ve been saved, through faith. And if you’re tempted to think that putting your faith in Christ is something that you do in your own power, Paul is quick to remind you: none of this is your own doing, it’s a gift—why? So that no one may boast.

Understanding the radically free nature of the new life in Christ frees us to become radically humble. The reality that we can see the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ, the possibility that we might actually desire to kill sin in our lives and glorify God with our deeds, even if it is a struggle to actually do so consistently, is only because of the new life that God has supernaturally poured into you. You have nothing to boast about. **The only thing you contribute to your salvation is the weakness, the ignorance, the guilt that makes it necessary.**

Understanding this equips us to be humble.

And with humility comes a gentle spirit.

There is a young woman I know, who grew up in a very solid Christian home. In church all the time growing up, youth group, the whole nine yards. Went to a Christian school. And as she moved out of her parents' house, went off on her own, slowly stopped going to church, and slid her way out of faith. Just recently, I saw she had posted a picture on social media, it was a very provocative picture—and I just got mad. I care about this young woman, I know her well, I want to see her flourish, and I just thought: “What is she thinking? What is she trying to prove, who is she trying to please? She knows better than this!”

But the thing is, she doesn’t know better. Because she is dead.

If the life of Jesus Christ has not been freely given to her by God, if his Spirit doesn’t dwell within her, then it doesn’t matter where she went to school, church, youth group. If God doesn’t move, her soul remains captivated by the world, enslaved to loving her self above all things, entranced by the devil’s lies. She remains dead.

And it should frustrate us, it should anger us, it should break our hearts, when our children instinctively know to be selfish before they learn to share, when our friends fall prey to the vices of this world, our governments and universities are slaves to wicked worldviews and devilish half-truths. But our instinct when we encounter

those people cannot be anger that drives us to rage-filled tirades or arrogant dismissals. We have to get off of our high horse and down on our knees to pray that God would give them life!

There is a place for warning someone of the destructive path that their sin may be taking them. God often uses those warnings to bring about the life of Christ, prompting people toward repentance and faith. But do not let your first instincts be driven by exasperated dismissal of people or instinctual, angry frustration, but deep, mournful, pleading prayer that while they are still sinners, God would make them alive.

*Second, and finally, God's new life by grace equips us to be purposeful.*

I'm not going to speak a lot on this one, but I think it's worth taking home and meditating on more on your own.

Paul ends this passage with this verse:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Though you cannot do anything to make your salvation happen, God did save you so that you might do something. Though your salvation is freely given to you, it is not free so that you may be passive. It is meant to free you to active, purposeful good works.

And here's the thing that I want to leave you with: God saved you in Christ for good works that he has had prepared for centuries. What you do with this new life in Christ matters—God doesn't prepare things beforehand willy-nilly. So, do not waste the glorious new life in Christ that has been given to you, but use it! He has saved you, raised you from the dead to new life, for a purpose. Live this new life with purpose.