

MADE ALIVE BY GRACE

Ephesians 2:1–10

Key Verses: 2:4–5

“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...”

What do you think about grace? Some might say, “Well, I don’t actually think about it much.” Others may think, “Grace? You mean, I get to cheat?” You know, like the robber who lived a life of many crimes, but while dying on cross next to Jesus and just saying a few words, gets to go to paradise with him? No fair, right? As Christians, though we’ve heard about grace and know it’s important, we may be thinking more about our duties and obligations, or maybe about all our sacrifices and hard work and what we deserve. In this important letter to the Ephesians, after his opening praise and prayer, Apostle Paul first writes about grace. Though we may have heard it a million times, it’s actually stunning. For Paul, it’s not just a theological concept; it’s a personal experience every Christian needs to have. Why does Paul begin with grace? What does it mean to us? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

An important word in Ephesians is “mystery.” It’s repeated seven times (1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; 5:32; 6:19). In Greek it simply means “secret.” So Ephesians can be called “the book of secrets” because in it Paul is sharing some spiritual secrets with us. What are they? First, we have every spiritual blessing in Christ. Second, we need to pray for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. And third, we all need to know God’s grace. In Ephesians Paul repeats the word “grace” 12 times. He calls it God’s “glorious” grace (1:6) or “the riches” of his grace (1:7; 2:7). Grace may seem weak. But Paul relates grace to God’s power at work (3:7). In today’s passage Paul says God makes us alive through this grace. What is this grace? It’s something we could never deserve, no matter how hard we try. Simply, it’s the grace of God’s forgiveness (1:7).

How do we come to know this grace? At the end of chapter 1, Paul prays for the Ephesians. In verse 17 he begins by describing how the Spirit enlightens us. But soon he starts talking about Jesus. Let’s read 1:19b–23. That’s a lot about Jesus. Basically, Paul is describing the power and glory of Jesus. God raised Jesus and seated him at his right hand. God put everything under Jesus’ feet. God made Jesus head over all things, including his church. And Jesus is the one who fills us. Then in chapter 2, verse 1 begins with the word “And.” It means this next part is connected with the end of chapter 1, the part about Jesus. It’s a huge contrast. Jesus is way, way, way up there. And where are we? Way, way, way down there. Read verses 1–3. It seems disconnected: Jesus in ultimate glory, and suddenly us, in sin and darkness. Paul writes this way to show us an important element of God’s grace. Later in chapter 4 he describes how Jesus ascended far above all the heavens, but how he also descended to the lower regions of this earth (4:9–10). Here, in this transition between chapters 1 and 2, Paul is saying the same

thing. This Jesus, exalted above all, humbled himself to come into this sinful, rebellious world to give us his grace.

In light of his glory, we were just a mess. In fact, we were dead. Like a dead fish floating downstream, we were just “going with the flow,” whether it was “the course of this world,” the devil’s influence to disobey God, or our own bodies and minds leading us to sin indiscriminately. Describing all mankind like this might offend some people. They might protest, “Are people really that bad? I’m not! I’m no follower. I’m not so weak! I’ve got my own mind!” Why is Paul writing like this? With the help of God’s Spirit, he’s trying to help us see ourselves as sinners.

It’s hard for us to accept. So Paul goes into detail. In verse 1 he begins with the expression “trespasses and sins.” To “trespass” means to go where we’re not supposed to go, in other words, to violate God’s laws. To “sin” means to miss the mark, meaning the main goal of life, which is God himself. If we haven’t committed any trespasses, we nonetheless live in a state of sins. In verse 3 Paul adds that “by nature” we were “children of wrath.” We all inherited a sinful nature from our ancestor Adam (Ro5:12). In our sinful nature we’re inherently disobedient and rebellious toward God. They may not always appear in our actions, but we all have these sinful tendencies in our hearts.

And Paul introduces another word here that’s important in Ephesians: the word “walk” (cf. 4:1,17; 5:2,8,15). We see it in verse 2, describing our old life, and later in verse 10, describing a new life in Christ. To “walk” in sin means to be totally soaked in it. In such a walk, our minds, our hearts and our desires, as well as our daily behavior, are all in violation of what God wants. God our Creator is good. He created us to do many good things for him. But in our sin, every intention of the thoughts of our hearts are “only evil continually” (Ge6:5). This is what provokes God’s wrath. Overall, verses 1–3 show how utterly helpless we were in our sin. We were in a doomed state, and we deserved it. And we notice something else here. Paul begins in verse 1 with the word “you,” but then switches in verse 3 to the word “we.” He doesn’t think he’s superior to even the most enslaved sinner; he’s saying he’s no different; he’s just the same.

What are we to make of this? Frankly, we all tend to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Ro12:3). We each have varying degrees of self-righteousness, and this is what creates all kinds of problems among us. During his earthly ministry our Lord Jesus had to deal with this. He told a parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Lk18:9). It happens especially when we’re trying to do many good things. Usually, we’re not even aware of how self-righteous we are. Paul knew this firsthand, better than anyone. In his former life, in his self-righteous zeal he was persecuting the church, and in his own mind, in terms of righteousness under the law, he was faultless (Php3:6). But later he saw himself from God’s point of view, that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent opponent (1Ti1:13a). Then he could write that “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me” (1Ti1:14a). He confessed that self-righteousness is “the foremost,” or “worst” sin (1Ti1:15–16).

In Ephesians Paul's main theme is unity in the body of Christ (2:14–16,18; 4:3–6,13). It's beautiful. But to get there, we've all got to start with growing in an awareness of God's grace in our personal lives. And this flows out of Paul's prayer for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (1:17). When our Lord Jesus told his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, he said, "And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (Jn16:8). In light of God's word we need to ask the Holy Spirit to show us how sinful we really are. And we need to depend on the Holy Spirit's work to help others see it as well.

Then, after describing our sinfulness, Paul makes a dramatic turn. Read verse 4. He begins, "But God..." Our sin is so ugly, so damaging, so enslaving, so hopeless. "But God." What beautiful words! Who is this God? Paul says he's "rich in mercy." He loves us with great love. He never stopped loving us, "even when we were dead in transgressions" (5a). This is another crucial word in Ephesians: "love." It's repeated 19 times. God loved us "before the foundation of the world" and predestined to adopt us his children through Jesus Christ (1:4–5). His goal in having Christ dwell in our hearts is that we be "rooted and grounded in love" (3:17).

How does God's love get rooted and grounded in us? Read verses 4–5 again. God's love is rooted and grounded in us when we taste his grace. It's God's one-sided grace that makes us alive together with Christ. This expression is the main point of today's passage: "made alive together with Christ." We were dead in sin. But God's grace makes us "alive together with Christ." In his grace our souls become spiritually alive. We become aware of God. We become aware of "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (7b). God's grace to us in Jesus becomes like a secret passageway into the greatness of his love. God is inviting anyone, today, even right now, no matter how great our sins may be, to turn to Jesus and receive his amazing grace. Basically there are two kinds of sinners in the world: obvious sinners, and self-righteous sinners. Both are sinning against God hideously. But God's grace opens the door into his love for us all.

When we taste his love that comes through his grace, something amazing happens. We change. We come alive. We cannot but love him back. Now, life is beautiful. Now we see this world filled with his glory and love, and we want to serve him. We want to sing and make melody to him with our heart (5:19). We begin to bear with one another in love (4:2), speak the truth in love (4:15), and build each other up in love (4:16). We learn to walk every day in Christ's unselfish love (5:2). When we're made alive in Christ, husbands love their wives just as Christ loved the church (5:25). When we're made alive in Christ, we grow to love him with love incorruptible (6:24). When we're spiritually alive, filled with his grace and love, we cannot but become a blessing in the church.

We notice something else here, too. Just as Christ was raised from the dead and is now seated in the heavenly places (1:20), when we're made alive together with him, we're also raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places (2:6). It sounds great, but what does it mean? It means we share in his victory, even now. In Jesus we have victory over the world, over the devil, and over the power of sin still lurking within us. Our lives are no longer dependent on our performance, but on the power of his grace at work within us. And ultimately, there's an even

greater goal. What is it? Read verse 7. Paul is saying that God is out to make each one of us like an eternal trophy of his grace. Our story, from our old life in sin to our new life in Christ, will forever reveal the immeasurable riches of God's grace in his kindness toward us. In sharing this secret about grace, Paul wants us to see this eternal perspective.

Paul emphasizes God's saving grace even more. Read verses 8–9. Why does he keep repeating "by grace you have been saved"? He says here that it's to keep anyone from boasting. He adds that even our faith is not our own doing: "it is the gift of God." How crucial it is to deeply digest this grace! As another way to prevent boasting, Paul describes grace as the source of our changed life. Read verse 10. When we're in Christ, we become his workmanship. It means any glory in our lives comes from him. Any good works we do are because he created us to do them. In fact, he prepared them for us in advance. All we do, by his grace, is walk in them.

Let's read verses 4–5 again. May God's grace make us alive together with Christ. May his grace fill us with new power to live against the trends of this world. May his grace root out any self-righteousness within us and fill us with his love, so that we can be a blessing to our church community and to the world.