

Ephesians 2:1 – 10. Made Alive in Christ

What do you give the person who has everything? You pray that they may understand and know and grasp and experience every spiritual blessing that is already theirs in Christ. Of course, Paul isn't writing to multimillionaires, he is writing to Ephesian Christians. These Gentile followers of Christ were living in a city where the worship of the goddess Diana dominated everything. In coming to Christ, they left that life behind and some were facing hardship and exclusion because of their new faith. So Paul begins by telling them that they are far richer than they could possibly imagine. In Christ they have a new family, new status, a new future, a new power and a new name. They have every spiritual blessing in Christ and his prayer is that they might understand that more.

But the problem with big gifts is that we begin to think we are entitled to them. If we've been given a gift, then somehow we must have deserved it. That's what our culture tells us. That's how our world works. Adverts tell us that we are worth it, that we've earned it. In business we earn a pay rise or promotion. Our hard work gets us that new personal best. Our good looks or our charm secures that glorious spouse. We get what we deserve. It's karma! That is the culture of our day.

Even fairy tales or films back that up don't they. When Superman or big-screen heroes rescue people they save the good girls or the good guys and the villains get squashed. And think about the story of Cinderella. It's no wonder she gets chosen is it. After all she's as gorgeous on the inside as she is on the outside. Beautiful, kind-hearted and oppressed by her evil half-sisters, no wonder Prince Charming falls for her. She deserves it!

So perhaps it works the same with God. Does God love us, bless us, forgive us, accept us because we have in some way deserved it? Has he chosen us because we like Cinderella and he notices our beauty and talents underneath all the dirt?

Paul's answer is a resounding 'no!' If he was using this analogy he would tell us that we weren't like Cinderella, we were like the ugly sisters. Except, ugly sisters can be comically ugly can't they. So how about these

two as examples of what we were like: Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. The Moors murderers and possibly 2 of the most hated people in British history.

Now I suspect some of you may be shocked or offended by that. But that's only because in our moral universes we compare ourselves to people like this and feel good in the comparison because compared to them we do look like Cinderella. But we need to see ourselves not compared to our annoying neighbours or the villains on the front of the local newspapers or the Moors murderers, we need to see ourselves compared to the holiness and righteousness of Almighty God. Compared to him mother Theresa and Martin Luther King are just like Hindley and Brady. And so, outside of Christ, are we.

In some ways the language Paul uses is even more extreme because he says that the Ephesians were spiritually dead. Even evil people do good things from time to time, but dead people don't. Paul says that there was no spiritual life in them at all because their sins and transgressions, their ungodly lives, have left them spiritually dead to God.

What caused that deadness? They had followed the ways of the world rather than the ways of God. Their morals, their worldview were corrupt. What's more they were under the influence of the devil. He is the ruler of the kingdom of the air referred to in verse 2. That's why they were living lives of transgression and sin because everything about them was standing against God.

But Paul isn't pointing the finger and saying you lot were like that. You see what he does in verse 3. He says "me too!" The #metoo campaign encourages people to be open about how they have suffered abuse, but Paul's me too campaign is about saying I'm guilty as well. You were dead, so was I. You Gentiles were spiritually dead, worldly, under the influence of evil, and so were we Jews.

And he goes on in verse 3. *"All of us lived gratifying the cravings of the flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath."* Yes we have been led and influenced by the

world and by evil, but we like it. We close down the voice of our conscience so we can follow our evil desires. We set our own moral standards so our own passions can be fully indulged. We go looking for teaching that makes us feel good about ourselves and we flock to it instead of seeking for God's truth. So what do we deserve? Wrath! Judgement! The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. If we are expecting a payment from God for our lives, then this is what we've earned. Of ourselves, for our sin and disobedience we deserve God's wrath.

We have lived in God's world, breathing his air, enjoying his gifts, using his talents and resources, thinking only of ourselves and ignoring him and his claim on our lives. Friends, none of us are neutral. We have been living like squatters in God's world, all of us, from Mother Theresa to Myra Hindley, from Martin Luther King to Ian Brady, all of us, before we come to Jesus, were rebels and traitors against God. All of us deserving of God's wrath.

And that is only right. John Stott describes God's wrath this way: *"It is his personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil. It is his settled refusal to compromise with it, and his resolve instead to condemn it."* This isn't God getting angry and losing control, this is about a holy God condemning and judging evil.

Can you see how that is a good thing? Who would want to worship a God who turns a blind eye to evil, who says that cruelty doesn't matter, who doesn't care about abuse or rape or murder or injustice? I hope none of us would say those things are ok because the God of the Bible certainly doesn't. God is good and righteous and holy and he stands opposed to all kinds of evil, and that means that on our own we all stand under his rightful condemnation.

All except one. Because Jesus lived a sinless life, so sinless that even his enemies could not find anything that he had done wrong. His life was led entirely by the Holy Spirit and not by the spirit of the age. And when he faced Satan's temptations, Satan fled before him. We can't say that. We want God's love, we want his acceptance, his name, his blessing, his eternal life, but only Jesus deserves those things. We deserve God's wrath.

BUT. Look down at the first word of verse 4. BUT. What a glorious word! BUT. We deserve wrath BUT! We deserve death BUT! We deserve exclusion from God BUT! Despite what we were, despite our former animosity towards God, despite the total depravity of our sinful, selfish hearts, despite the fact that our lives and words and thoughts were deserving of his wrath, BUT! Despite being dead in our sins with no health in us, BUT! Let me read you those wonderful verses again. Verses 4-9: *"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, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 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."*

Mercy and grace appear in this passage. They are beautiful but different. Mercy is when God does not give us what we truly deserve. It's what the traffic warden shows you when they don't put a ticket on your car even though you've stayed in the space 10 minutes more than you should have done. It's what your spouse shows you when they're willing to go with you to counselling after you have been the one who cheated. It's what God shows you when he doesn't make you face the wrath your sinful life deserves. That's mercy.

But there is grace here too. Grace is when God gives us something which we don't deserve. Grace is God showering us with unearned gifts. Our righteousness is like filthy rags, we have taken God's holiness exam and got an F, and yet he gives us a new status, a new name, a new family, a new future, he gives us his full and free forgiveness, his unending love, his Spirit within us. That's grace.

And what grace we find here! We were dead in transgressions, but verse 5 tells us that we have been made alive. We were under the influence of evil, but now we have been lifted up to the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. We were objects of wrath, but God showered his love and mercy upon us.

You see, the gospel is the ultimate rags to riches story. The Royal wedding a few weeks ago wasn't really that, was it. Megan Markle may have had a difficult upbringing and have come from a broken family, but when she met Prince Harry she was already a rich and famous TV star. No, what we have here in Ephesians chapter 2 is entirely different. Prince Charming loving and saving a beautiful Disney Cinderella is completely understandable. She may be a servant girl but she's beautiful inside and out. But in the Bible's version, Cinderella isn't simply a beautiful but poor, servant girl; she's the ugliest of ugly sisters! She's filthy and unkempt; wicked, selfish, violent, untrustworthy and even actively rebelling against the rule of the Prince who has come to rescue her.

So can you see that the depth and breadth and height of God's love and mercy and kindness for wretched sinners like us is of an entirely different order to that of Prince Charming? God didn't love and save us and shower us with gifts because we deserved it. He loved us and rescued us even though we did not, in any way, deserve it.

So how was that possible? How can God both be just in punishing sin, and be so gracious to wretched sinners? The answer is there in verses 4 to 9. Look down, see the number of times that Paul speaks about us being with Christ, or in Christ. That is how God can deal with our sin because Jesus Christ, the only righteous one, became sin for us.

2 weeks ago we saw all the glorious blessings that God has for us but we saw they are only ours in Christ. To receive these blessings, we must be united with Jesus by faith, and that starts at the cross. You see at the cross Jesus took our sin upon himself. He took the punishment that our sin and disobedience and selfishness rightly deserve. He stood in our place. The wrath we deserve was poured out on him. And when we come to Jesus in repentance and faith we are joined to him as he suffers on the cross. So that when he rises from the dead and ascends to the right hand of God on high and comes again with glory, we can share those things with him too.

Imagine for a moment you are holding a little child when you find yourself caught in a terrible hailstorm. What you do? You hunker down, and you

shield the child from the hail, taking the blows on your back yourself. That's what Jesus did for us, only it wasn't a hail storm, it was Roman nails driven through his hands and feet and the full force of God's wrath against our sin that came beating down on him. He was bruised for our iniquities and pierced for our transgressions, and by his stripes, by his suffering, we are healed.

And did you notice that little phrase in the middle of verse 5 – that all these things happened *“when we were dead in (our) transgressions.”* God doesn't insist that we have to reach a certain level of moral goodness before he will save us. No, it was while we were dead in sin that Christ died for us. What's more, even the fact that we were able to respond to God in faith is itself a gift of God. Verse 8 tells us that. *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God.”* Of ourselves we would not have chosen God, but by the work of God's Holy Spirit He softened our hearts so we could respond to his gracious call. Friends, we are saved by God's grace alone.

I hope the words Paul has for us here in Ephesians chapter 2 have made your heart sing this morning. They should. If we have been in church for many years, we can start to lose sight of our wretchedness before a holy God, and that is the death knell for our joy. Friends, you'll only appreciate what God has done for you in Jesus, when you fully understand the depth of your sin, the wrath you deserve, and all that Jesus suffered for you although you were utterly undeserving. You weren't almost at heaven's gates when he rescued you, you were lost. You weren't living a good life when Jesus died for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. You weren't cheering him on from the side lines when Jesus came to find you, you were fighting for the enemy. Have you seen afresh this morning the depth of God's love for you? I hope so! Meditate on it daily, constantly. Friends, we should never walk away from across.

But if you are not a Christian, if you've been trying to live a good life in order to somehow impress God and get to heaven, can you see now how futile that is? It's like trying to swim the Atlantic on your own when someone has given all they had to pay for an airline ticket. You can never

live up to God's standard. Outside of Jesus you, like all of us, like me, deserving of God's judgement. We cannot earn his love, we cannot ever deserve his grace or his mercy. But it is there for us. It is there for you today. Are you willing to put your hand up and say "me too!" and acknowledge your sin and need of a Saviour? Are you willing to put your trust in the God who saves sinners and breathes new life into the spiritually dead and brings them into his family and blesses them in Christ with every spiritual gift?

God's grace is there for you too today. Whatever you have done, however much guilt you carry, however spiritually dead you feel, God's forgiveness and grace and mercy are big enough to cover over every single one of your sins and the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is able to raise you and change you too. Wouldn't it be amazing today if you were able to walk out of here saying I once was dead, but now I have new life in Jesus! I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see. If God is prompting you this morning, please don't leave here until you have spoken to somebody and prayed with them. God's grace and mercy are there for you today. You don't deserve it. You cannot earn it, but Jesus has suffered and died the death you deserve so that you can be forgiven and have eternal life. Will you accept God's offer?

This passage has the gospel front and centre and it is a glorious message. But it ends with a description for what comes next.

God doesn't forgive us and save us and give us new life so we can carry on living the same way as before. Since we have died in Christ, and had been raised with Christ, so now we need to live for Christ. Verse 10 tells us that *"we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

You see coming to Christ marks a massive change in our identity. We were dead, we are now alive. We were once slaves to sin, shaped by the ways of this world and influenced by evil forces, now we are in Christ, a child of God, counted righteous in God's sight, part of the worldwide family of believers from every nation, destined for heaven and God calls us to live

like it. God has good works for us to do. Those good works don't save us, remember, we have been saved by grace, by God's work in Christ for us. Our good works neither save us nor contribute in any way to our salvation. But the way we live should demonstrate that we are now citizens of different kingdom under a different king.

Chapters 4 to 6 deal with this in much more detail, so all I want to do today is to make you aware that becoming a Christian should and must change how you live. If you are 'in Christ' you have a new Lord, a new outlook on life, a new purpose in life and a new future after this life. You have been brought out from the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light and so you need to live like it. And so God has prepared good works for you to do.

Many of those good works will be at home or amongst your friends and co-workers as you live out a Spirit-filled and empowered life of gentleness and everyday kindnesses, practising forgiveness, patience, love and mercy, serving others before yourself. If you were untrustworthy before, you should be trustworthy now. If you were dishonest, you now need to live honestly. Christians should be the most reliable, gracious employees. We should be a pleasure to work with. That's part of the good work that God has prepared for you to do.

Being a Christian will also mean different priorities for your time, your talents and your resources. Spending time with God in prayer, reading the Scriptures, coming to church, serving in church, giving to the work of the church, will all form vital parts of your new life. If you are a Christian. That's also part of the good work God has prepared for you to do.

And in each and every situation, in church, at work, at the gym, at the school gates, amongst your family and friends, as a Christian you are there to point people to Jesus. The fact that you belong to Jesus should be evidenced through your life, but lifestyle won't do by itself. All of us who are Christians need to speak about Jesus and to be ready to give a reason for the hope we have when opportunities arise. God has prepared good works for you to do.

But none of these things will happen unless we grasp the true wonder of the work that God has done for us in Christ. Our service for Christ and our obedience to Christ flows from a thankful heart. So are you ready this morning to raise your hand with Paul and say, "Me too. Me too! Before I came to Christ I was wretched, blind, helpless, hopeless, lost in sin. But out of his grace, and not by my works at all, God rescued me in Christ death on the cross, adopted me and blessed me in Christ with every spiritual blessing and now I want to live for Christ who loved me and gave himself for me."

Can you say that this morning? Are you blown away by the grace and mercy of God to save a wretch like you and like me? I hope so! And if so, are you willing to let Jesus shape your life and willing ask him to show you the works that he has prepared for you to do.

That can be your song this morning. And whether you are a new Christian or you've been a Christian for a long time, it's the song you need to sing every single day. Because we were dead, poor wretched and blind but we have been saved, chosen, washed, blessed, filled, adopted and equipped for service in Christ by God's amazing mercy and grace.