

24th September 2023 – Good News #4 ‘How salvation works’ (Ephesians 2:1-10)

Ephesians 2:1-10 is one of great passages of Scripture – in fact, if I wasn't able to have a bible or even a whole chapter, but was only able to have just one passage to take with me for the rest of my life, it might very well be this one. Why? Because in 10 short verses, it has the whole gospel in it – it summarises the state of the world and of human history, describes human nature and the human predicament with devastating clarity, outlines the heart of God's character and God's plan of salvation and also illuminates the great truths of the new spiritual realities in which a Christian lives, both for our life now and the glorious eternity of our life to come. And all in 10 verses!

So I've got an impossible task today: in a few minutes what am I going to say which can possibly do this text justice? In short, this passage tells us what we **were**, what we **are** now, and what we **will be**. That's the headline, and my prayer is that there'll be a word for each of us today.

So: what we were. If you were to look back on your life, how would you describe it – especially if you can remember a time before you really knew God? I imagine you might use lots of words, some positive and maybe a few more negative: you might talk about feeling dissatisfied, restless, lonely, unhappy, missing something. I imagine very few of us use the startling word with which St Paul begins this chapter: (v1) ‘As for you, you were dead.’

Dead. That's a strong word, isn't it? And it might make us shudder, or raise feelings of silent protest. But it is the consistent theme of Scripture: **life without God is spiritual death.** It makes sense when you think about it: God is the author of life, so what happens to anything without the one who creates life? It dies. And yet it's much easier to admit that this applies to other things, or maybe other people, who aren't as nice as us! *They* might deserve that word – but us? That's a bit harsh, surely God?

Anyway, what causes this death? As Paul says in v1, it's our transgressions and sins – noticing here the use of two different words: both the idea of a deliberate crossing of boundaries and the witting or unwitting missing the target – what the old scholars used to call *sins of commission and omission* i.e. saying and doing what we shouldn't and *not* saying or doing what we should.

And we also notice three root causes of this thing we call sin: what in the old language we used to call the flesh, the world and the devil. Paul starts with the external pressures doesn't he – (v2) 'you followed the ways of this world'. We have a world around us which drags us down to its level, and if that isn't enough, there's a spiritual force working against us as well: 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air.'

There's a whole sermon here in itself but today I'll just make one observation. Don't over-dramatise the work of the devil – the devil doesn't come to us with horns and pitchfork, but in sheep's clothing. In my work as a pastor, I've lost count of the number of times I've seen a Christian really growing in faith who suddenly decides they need a new hobby which clashes with church or their home group or a ministry they're involved in – and hey presto a year later they've long since stopped growing spiritually and they're barely involved in church at all. And every time it silently breaks my heart – I see another spiritual life quietly strangled by what looks like a harmless choice.

So those are the external pressures; but we also have that internal voice telling us that God is a killjoy, that what's the harm in doing this or that or the other: think back a couple of weeks to the clever strategy of the serpent – here, it's what Paul calls 'the cravings of the flesh' (v3).

And, just as Adam and Eve start pointing the finger, it's easy to look at this verse and say: well, that's *other people*, especially *young* people, the hedonism of youth. But it's all of us. Our whole culture is built on consumerism, on gratifying our desires: the average Brit would need 3 worlds to sustain his or her lifestyle. So, Paul quite rightly says in v3: '*All of us* also lived among them at one time.'

You may think I'm labouring the point a bit, that I need to lighten up – but here's the thing. There's a reason why I'm doing that, and it's this: **we'll never truly grasp the great love and rich mercy of God unless we realise what a pickle we're in**, how utterly self-centred and corrupt we are. That might sound dramatic – but yes, I'm talking about you and I'm talking about me. Because if we ultimately hang onto the idea that basically deep down *we're* OK, we're pretty good people, the sort of respectable people that hold society together, and that Jesus only came for losers or *real* criminals – we've missed the point completely. As Jesus described so powerfully, it's not the Pharisee who gets put right with God, it's the guy who throws himself on the floor and says God' have mercy on me, a sinner!

The great preacher R.C. Sproul once observed that 'Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' And praise God, in verse 4 we get the bread – and not just Mother's Pride cardboard bread, we get the full-on focaccia with olive and walnut, the premium sourdough, the cinnamon and raisin bagel (insert your favourite bread here): '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.'

What a verse! Our spiritual death is not the final word. God's great love and mercy makes us alive. I am a great sinner – but I have a great Saviour. **Dead is what I was – what I am now is made alive.** And what's true for me is true for you as well: you are the one Jesus loves. If you had been the only person in the world, Jesus would have died for you. Your sin would have cost him his life, but he would have done it, gladly. Just for you. Because of his great love, and rich mercy.

And now we're not just alive here and now: we have a new citizenship: we're already seated in heaven – just take a look at that in v6 – it's *past tense*: God 'raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.' Spiritually, we are already in heaven – and one day it will be a physical reality as well. We'll enjoy what v7 calls the 'incomparable riches of God's grace' forever, worshipping the Saviour who has brought us life.

And if that wasn't enough, **we have, finally a new purpose for the future in this life: good works that God has prepared for us.** It would be tempting to say – well, spiritually I'm in heaven, so why don't I just go there? No, Paul says, God's got a purpose for you now on this earth: 'we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' Do you know what those works are at the moment? If you do – great! Get on with it. If you don't, then why not pray for God to reveal them.

I remember a moment like that in December 2000 – I'd just heard an inspiring talk and I said to the Lord on the tube platform while I was waiting for a train to get home: God, I'm ready for something, please show me what it is. The next day, a friend asked if I'd like to join the prison alpha team – and my life changed forever. Perhaps yours will, too? (A dangerous prayer – God might just answer it!)

As I close, this passage tells our whole life story. We *were* dead, separated from God. In Christ we *are* made alive – praise God! And now *we have a purpose* which God has prepared for us, and an eternal home. That is how salvation works. But it's not a theory – it's what God calls each of us to – to receive the great love and mercy of Christ. It is grace, amazing grace – the grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. Will you receive, again or for the first time, that grace today?