

“By Grace You Have Been Saved” (Sermon on Ephesians 2:1-10)

Our Second Lesson for today is one of the outstanding passages in all of Scripture for putting together in one package several important realities. And they are: humanity’s natural condition; God’s great love and kindness in saving us; how that salvation comes to us as a gift; and then the result of what God has done for us in how we lead our lives. And there’s a key phrase that is repeated in this passage and that sums all this up, and it will serve as our theme this morning: “By Grace You Have Been Saved.”

By grace you have been saved. That becomes apparent when we see what our starting point was, that is, what humanity’s natural condition is—what we all started out as—before God intervened with his grace and salvation. Paul lays out what our natural state is, in these opening verses: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

Wow! This is a bleak picture, isn’t it? But it’s the truth, as much as we may not want to admit it. You and I, we were dead. Born dead. Dead in our trespasses and sins. That is our natural state—humanity’s natural state, after the fall. We are, by nature, the walking dead. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked,” our text says.

This deadness is reinforced several times over. It's the old story of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Paul includes all three of these factors in describing our deadness. He starts with the baleful influence of the world: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world." When Paul uses the term "this world" in this way, he's meaning the world around us as it is aligned against God and his will. If you need any proof of that, just turn on your TV set, and see what comes out. The world as a whole has gone its own way, away from God. And to "follow the course of this world," as our text says, means to be swept along in its current, heading for destruction. So that's the first of the three evil influences Paul mentions here.

Next is the devil. Paul says: You were dead in your trespasses and sins, following the course of this world, "following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." "The prince of the power of the air" is a biblical way to talk about the devil, Satan, the archenemy of our souls. This is the old serpent, the tempter from the garden, who misled our parents and would like to mislead us, to pull us away from Christ and faith in him. And there we would be, had not Christ intervened on our behalf. We would still be under the sway of Satan, captive in his realm. In other words, dead, spiritually.

So there's the devil, the world, and now Paul brings in the flesh. He says we all once lived among the sons of disobedience "in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind." Even if we didn't have the devil and the world influencing us against God, we would still have our own sinful flesh, our own natural

desires, rising up against God and going against his will. This is our “old Adam,” the sinful nature we are born with, those selfish desires that do not line up with God’s commands and what he knows is best for us.

So with the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh all exercising their dominance over us, even from birth, where does that leave us in our natural-born state? It leaves us dead, dead as a doornail, spiritually. That is humanity’s natural condition, apart from Christ. And that means we were, as Paul summarizes this section—we “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” “Children of wrath,” meaning that we have earned and deserved God’s justifiable wrath by our disobedience.

Dead in our trespasses and sins. By nature children of wrath. Paul could not make it any clearer how lost was our condition. Dead people cannot raise themselves up. Children of wrath cannot undo or appease that wrath by anything we do. So is there any hope for us?

There is. And it comes in the next verse. I love how it starts with “But.” “But God.” Everything in the first few verses of this chapter was bleak and grim and hopeless, and we were on our own apart from God. But that all now changes and shifts with this “But God.” Paul now moves from the Law to the Gospel. He writes: “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—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Wow! What good news this is! And it all starts with God. And ends with God, too. It's his job, from start to finish, this saving-us business. God is described as being "rich in mercy." Not stingy or begrudging, God is rich in how he has mercy on us poor sinners. And "the great love with which he loved us" ties in beautifully with that famous John 3:16 verse you heard in our Gospel reading today: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Yes, this is the love with which God loves us. He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. To a world of sinners, to us who had turned our backs on God, God sent his Son to rescue and save us. Christ Jesus is this one and only Son of God, who came down from heaven for us men and women, and for our salvation. He did this by taking up our sins and being lifted up on the cross, there to suffer and die in our place. God's beloved Son, with whom God was well pleased, took the wrath that we children of wrath deserved. Look to him and live, children! He is your Saviour! Your sins are forgiven because of this man on the cross!

And this is how God raises you up from death to life. Christ took the sting out of death, overcame it, as his own resurrection demonstrates. Yes, God is in the business of raising up the dead. And he did this for you when he made you alive in Christ, giving you faith, giving you the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, raising you from spiritual death to, now, new life together with Christ.

God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his

grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” See, that’s where all this is going. There is a goal in sight. It is life forever with our Lord, in the unending ages to come. Our being saved by grace is—the whole thing, from start to finish—God’s work, out of his great love and rich mercy, centered in and connected to, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And it is a gift, freely given, nothing we do to earn it or pay for it—as though we could! No, this is grace, pure grace, by which God has saved us. I like to use this little acronym to explain what grace is. You may have heard me use it before, but it’s worth repeating. It goes like this: Grace, G-R-A-C-E, “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” That says it, doesn’t it? “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” God is rich in his mercy toward us, and it all is ours as a free gift, because of the great price Christ paid for us on the cross. That’s what grace is.

Grace is a gift word. And this gift extends even to the faith by which we take hold of Christ. Paul says: “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.” “This is not your own doing”! And the “this” here includes the very faith by which you are saved. This too is a gift. It’s not because you “made your decision for Christ.” It’s not because you “accepted Jesus” and “let him into your heart.” No, rather, it’s because God made you alive in Christ, even when you were dead in your sins. It’s because God gave you the gift of faith to receive the gift of salvation. Like Luther writes in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the

Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” Yes, even your coming to faith in Christ is a gift. It’s grace all the way.

By grace you have been saved. Which is great, because then you can be sure of your salvation. If it depended on you at any stage along the way, then you could not be certain. You could not be sure that you had done enough to satisfy God. You could not be certain you had believed strongly enough or were sincere enough when you “made your decision for Christ.” But that whole monster of uncertainty is slain and swept away when everything depends on God and his mercy and his promise and his action. And that is what you have. Salvation by grace through faith, 100% God’s doing. This is a promise you can rely on and have confidence in, all the days of your life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: By grace you have been saved. By grace you will serve. By grace you will be saved when Christ comes again. Yes, from start to finish—and for eternity—it’s all God’s doing, and it’s all a gift.