

Rescued Out of a Deep Pit

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you met the Apostle Paul and taught him how to think this way, and then you enabled him, even in a jail cell, to write down these words.

We believe also that you've preserved them for us. And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would help us understand these words and that we would live in the reality of them.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. But God. That little phrase takes us into the heart of the gospel.

But God. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.

But God. It is the gospel in its simplest form. I would think, actually, that this could be the title of the whole Bible, stamped on the cover and on the jacket, But God.

[1 : 08] From the very beginning of the story, through the middle of the story, and to the end of the story, But God. Especially in the middle of the great story, Jesus of Nazareth, friend of sinners, healer of broken minds and bodies, is crucified on a Roman cross.

But God thundered the early preachers of the church. But God raised him from the dead. So, too, in the middle of our stories.

We were dead. We were dead in our sins. We had fallen into a very deep pit from which we could not free ourselves. But God.

The little phrase takes us to the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, I can understand why some translators of this text want to move the good news forward from where it's located up to the very beginning.

The good news comes at verse 4. But. But God, being rich in mercy. But some translators, in their eagerness to get this good news front and center, actually move it forward into the opening verse.

[2 : 24] Into verse 1. The way Paul begins is on an awful note. You were dead in your transgressions and sins. But translators, some translators, eager to get to the gospel, have Paul say, God made us alive when we were dead in our sins and transgressions.

Amen. That's the good news. But Paul does not announce it until he first speaks the bad news. The good news is so good because the bad news is so bad.

Yes, the good news is enough on its own. The good news can stand on its own. Without any reference to the bad news. But God has made us alive with Christ, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ.

But all the more so in face of the really bad news. So, before he announces the really good, good news, Paul takes us through the really bad, bad news.

So, I invite you today to focus on the bad news. Chapter 2, verses 1 to 3. It is not a politically correct text.

[3 : 41] I realize that, keenly so. I've wrestled all week with whether I really should do this. I'm aware that most people in our part of the world, in this world-class city, would find this text very offensive.

But as politically incorrect as it is, and as offensive as it may feel, the text helps us make sense of our lives in 2011.

And it makes the really good, good news of Jesus Christ really, really good. Now, a couple of observations about the text before we dig in.

In the English translation of Ephesians 2, 1 to 3, we have two sentences. There is a period at the end of verse 2, and there's a period at the end of verse 3.

See them in the text? There's a period at the end of each of those. But in the original text, in the Greek, they are commas. And they are commas because verses 1 to 3 is part of a long sentence

that goes all the way to verse 7.

[4 : 59] It's another example of the long sentences Paul puts in his letters. He begins the letter to the Ephesians with a 202-word sentence.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, and then goes on to tell about all those blessings. He then shares his prayer for the Ephesians and us in a 164-word sentence that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you, that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.

And then, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 7, we have a 124-word sentence announcing the good news in face of the bad news. I'll say more about the structure of this long sentence next week.

One other observation. In this long sentence, Paul uses a cluster of words. A cluster of words that he uses in just about every one of his letters.

The words are justice, mercy, and grace. Justice, mercy, and grace. And they're interrelated in this way.

[6 : 08] Justice is God giving us what we deserve. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve. And grace is God giving us what we do not deserve.

Justice, God giving us what we deserve, which is why you do not want to pray for justice for yourself. Mercy, God not giving us what we deserve. And grace, God giving us what we do not deserve.

Apart from God's actions in Jesus Christ, we were in a pit. A very deep pit. Justly so. Humanity made, and continues to make, the decision to go it alone.

To go without the living God. And we end up in this pit. And it would be perfectly just of God to leave us in the pit. It is what we deserve. But, being rich in mercy, blessed be his name, God does not let us stay in the pit.

In his mercy, he does not give us what we deserve. So he rescues us out of the pit. And then, wanting to show the surpassing greatness of his grace, says Paul, God not only does not give us what we deserve, God gives us what we do not deserve.

[7 : 22] God makes us alive together with Christ. God raises us up with Christ. God seats us with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ. Which we'll focus on next Sunday. Now, let us make our way through Paul's description of life apart from mercy and grace.

It's not the whole story. For even as Paul develops what he does in this text, he will say to us that we were created in the image of God. Which has huge implications for human goodness.

It's just that something's gone wrong. Something terrible has gone wrong. Ephesians 2, 1 to 3.

Politically incorrect. I know. Offensive to modern and post-modern readings of reality.

I know. Yet, explaining why for all of our lofty visions of a truly of a truly human world, we simply do not get there.

Listen again. And you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

[8 : 41] Among them, we too all formerly lived in the lust of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest.

Sobering. In 1960, J.B. Phillips paraphrased Paul's words this way, And you were spiritually dead all the time that you drifted along on the stream of this world's ideas of living and obeyed its unseen ruler who is still operating in those who do not respond to the truth of God.

We all lived like that in the past. We all followed the impulses and imaginations of our evil nature being, in fact, under the wrath of God like everyone else. In 1993, Eugene Peterson in his *The Message* also paraphrased Paul, It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in the old stagnant life of sin.

You let the world which doesn't know the first thing about living tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it.

All of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't let loose his temper and do away with a whole lot of us.

[9 : 55] Again, I realize that outside of the church hardly anyone takes Paul seriously on this text. Indeed, I realize that even within the church very few people take Paul seriously in this text.

Yet, when I listen to people struggle with why they're not able to be what they want to be, I hear hints in their soul that they actually do believe Paul.

Paul is describing the pit from which we cannot free ourselves. Really bad, bad news. This is really going to be bad.

Dead. Paul uses it twice. In verse 1, you were dead in your trespasses and sins. In verse 5, when we were dead in our transgressions, sin.

It means miss the mark and we all do it. Transgression or trespassing, it means to cross the line, to go across a clear boundary and we all do it, says Paul, and it all resulted in death.

[11 : 11] Our physical bodies are still alive for a while anyway, but even sin has affected our bodies because one day they return to dust. Dead.

It is no figure of speech. For because of sin, we were dead in the sphere of life that finally counts. We were dead in this relationship with the source of life, with the living God.

We were the walking dead as some people describe us apart from mercy and grace. We were as interested in the things of God and His kingdom as a corpse is interested in the things that are above the ground.

And we could not make ourselves come alive. Try as we might, nothing would make us experience the life for which we were created.

You were dead. We were all dead. All of us dead, says Paul. Doing our jobs, relating to people, buying and selling, but at the core, we were dead.

[12 : 12] And we could see it in our eyes, it was on our faces, you could hear it in our voices. The walking dead. The pit is deeper still.

We were simply going along with the flow of the walking dead, says Paul. We were walking according to the course of this world. World.

The word here is the word cosmos. And as I pointed out in other sermons, in the New Testament, cosmos does not refer to the physical universe. Cosmos refers to the world rejecting the presence and lordship of God.

Cosmos refers to human society organizing itself without God. We used to go with the flow of human society organizing itself without God, says Paul.

We used to take our cues on how to live from the world organizing itself without God. We let our sense of identity and worth be shaped by human society organizing itself without God.

[13 : 19] We let our careers and our livelihoods be shaped by human society organizing itself without God. We let our understanding of how communities and cities and nations work be shaped by human society organizing itself without God.

We let our understanding of sexuality and marriage and family be formed by human society organizing itself without God. Our values were set by a God-less way of life which had been shaped by a God-less vision.

So, Peterson paraphrases Paul. We let the world which doesn't know the first thing about living tell us how to live. The pit is deeper still.

We were not only going along with the God-less humanity, says Paul. We were going with the flow of spiritual powers. Spiritual powers that do not like the living God who despise the name of Jesus. Paul in the text refers to the prince of the power of the air and to that spirit now working in the sons of disobedience. Paul will later in his letter to the Ephesians identify that as the devil, as the Satan, as the arch enemy of God.

[14 : 35] In our sin, says Paul, we were unwittingly cooperating with powers opposed to the living God. God. Again, I know this sounds crazy to our contemporary world.

Believe me, I know. But according to the authors of Scripture, we will never understand life on this planet unless we take this dimension of reality into consideration.

The prince of the air, air, atmosphere, literally and metaphorically. It's occupied space. I quoted Walter Wink last Sunday who encourages us, who exhorts us.

Spiritual powers are everywhere around us. Their presence is real and inescapable. The issue is not whether we believe in them. The issue is whether we can learn to identify our actual everyday encounters with them, what Paul calls discerning the spirits.

The bad news Paul is telling us is that we did not recognize these powers. We inadvertently fell into their trap, into their web and we inadvertently ended up living in ways inspired by the spirit that nurtures disobedience in the world.

[15 : 55] Do you think, do you think that human trafficking is just the work of humans? Are we that bad? Do you think that the stronghold pornography has on our culture is just the work of humans?

Do you think that the grip gangs have on the young people of our city is just the work of humans?
Do you think that the power wielded by dictators is just the work of humans?
Do you think that this chokehold of consumerism in our time is just the work of humans? humans?
We used to walk says Paul according to the prince of the power of the air who messes with human sin to bring us down into this pit.

In the early days of the church people began to sell their property and then give the proceeds of the property to the work of the gospel. When people would come they would lay that money at the feet of the apostles.

No one was expected to give the total profit. No one. But for whatever reason Ananias and Sapphira sold some of their property and then they brought the proceeds to the apostles and said that it was the total proceeds.

[17:13] That is they lied. They sinned. They transgressed. And unknowingly began to cooperate with the prince of lies. The apostle Peter says Ananias why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.

Anytime we enter into lying we start cooperating with the prince of lies. Judas Iscariot did not like the way Jesus was dealing with the opposition that was coming against him from the religious establishment.

That is he didn't like the way Jesus was being Messiah. So he decides to force Jesus' hand and to turn him over to the powers that be. Luke in his gospel says Satan entered into Judas and he went away and conferred with the chief priests and captains on how they might betray him.

You went along with the prince of the air says Paul every one of us in one way or another working in the sons of disobedience says Paul.

This word disobedience in the text is made up of two words. It's the word belief and then the little letter alpha which is attached to a word to negate it.

[18:27] So the word is belief and not. Not belief. Non-believing. So sons of disobedience could actually be translated sons of not believing. Paul is telling us that at the root of disobedience is disbelief.

At the root of non-believing is non-obeying is non-believing. And that is the goal of the prince of the power of the air in the world. Non-believing.

Everything he does in this air in this atmosphere where we live our human lives is on to the one end of unbelief. Which is why what he was trying to do with Jesus of Nazareth at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the desert.

The spirit of disobedience was working on Jesus' mind to get him to disbelieve his father so that he would disobey his father's plan.

It's what he's doing with every human being on the face of the planet. He is working in us so that we do not trust the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:31] For once we do not trust then we are going to be prone to disobey and fall deeper into the pit. The pit goes deeper still.

Lust of our flesh. We all live in the lust of the flesh. Paul knows no exceptions. We too all formerly lived in the lust of our flesh indulging the desire of the flesh and of the mind.

I told you that the bad news was really bad. Flesh. Sometimes in the Bible it does mean physical flesh as in flesh and blood. But most of the time it refers to human nature as it is apart from the living God.

Cosmos, world, human society organizing itself without God, flesh, human nature trying to live without God. Flesh is human nature turned away from the living God and then turned in on itself. Flesh is humanity with self at the center and we all know what Paul is talking about. Self-oriented, self-powered, self-driven, self-governed.

[20:47] Which, as Paul told the Galatians, issues in the so-called deeds of the flesh. Immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, outburst of anger.

I'm not going to read the rest of the list. It's ghastly. The inherent consequence of self turned in on itself and we have all done it, says Paul.

Affecting the mind, says Paul. The self turned in on itself can no longer think clearly about reality. Oh, we are able to think great thoughts.

We are able to do medicine and art and philosophy and music. We are able to do all of that. But since the core of the self has turned away from the source of all truth, the mind is not able to see

reality as it really is.

I know that's deeply offensive. Believe me, I know. Flesh is an awful reality. The flesh rejects God. It finds the things of the kingdom of God.

[21 : 48] Odious. The flesh fights God and does everything to keep Jesus out of the picture. The flesh rejects God. I will be the captain of my life. Ending up in alienation from others and in profound loneliness.

The pit is deeper still. We were by nature children of wrath, says Paul, even as the rest. Politically incorrect, off the charts.

For most people, the word wrath conjures up the picture of someone in a fit of rage and out of control. Right? That's what wrath means. Some people have spoken of this earthquake in Japan as the wrath of God.

It is not. A thousand times no. Even if the insurance company labels it acts of God. In many readings of reality, such calamities are thought to be the work of angry gods.

And so people then move into this mode of finding ways to placate the gods so this won't happen again. Not so in a biblical reading of reality. This earthquake simply says that something is off in the created order, but it is not the work of an angry God.

[23 : 08] Then what does Paul and what do the authors of scripture mean by the wrath of God? The wrath of God is God's controlled, relentless, just opposition to all that is unjust.

That's good news. The wrath of God is God's controlled, relentless, righteous reaction to all that is unrighteous. Bless his name.

Leon Morris of Australia I think has done the best work in understanding the wrath of God. In his book, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, he writes this, the wrath of God is often confused with that irrational passion we so frequently find in humans and which was commonly ascribed to heathen deities.

But thank God, that's not what the Bible means. The wrath of God, says Morris, denotes not so much a sudden flare-up of passion which is soon over. The wrath of God denotes a strong, settled opposition to all that is evil and opposition arising out of God's very nature.

and the worst expression of God's opposition to all that is evil emerging from his very nature is not thunderbolts from heaven but God letting us have our way.

[24 : 40] Handing us over, as Paul says to the Romans, handing us over to the sin we keep choosing, to the cosmos we prefer, to the powers with which we are enamored, to the flesh we seek to indulge.

You want to keep crossing boundaries? You want to keep going with the flow of godlessness? You want to cooperate with forces that oppose my way? You want to live with self at the center?

Then you may have your wish. That is wrath. C.S. Lewis says that fundamentally there are two kinds of people in the world.

Those who say to God, your will be done, and those to whom God says, your will be done. By nature, children of wrath, even as the rest, justice, God giving us what our sin deserves.

But God, God, God, God, God, God, God, God does not leave us in, your will be done.

[25 : 53] His will will be done. His will for his creatures and his creation will be done. And so, in Jesus, God comes down, all the way down.

God becomes one of us. He becomes a full, flesh and blood human being. And God enters into the pit. He comes into the pit, all the way down, down, down, down, down, all the way down, and grabs hold of us and rescues us.

Rescue is the essential meaning of the biblical word salvation. Rescue. In Hebrew, it's the word Yeshua, from which we get the name for Jesus.

Yeshua. And if you've ever traveled in modern day Israel, you know that this word Yeshua is written on the front of every ambulance. Yeshua, the rescuer, racing to a scene of an accident where someone is dying.

The living God, Yeshua, races to the problem and rescues us out of the pit. That's mercy. And grace, he then makes us alive with Christ, he raises us up with Christ, and for goodness sakes, seats us on the throne with Christ in the heavenly places.

[27 : 16] Really, really good, good news. I invite you now to be still and to take some time to personally respond to God out of his word today.

in the quiet, I encourage you to confess any way we still live in this pit, any way we cooperate.

I encourage you to be honest, to be bold, to be brutal, and confess any way it's still true.
And then I would encourage you to simply ask the Savior to lift you out. Name the places of your soul where you want to be freed.

thank you doesn't seem adequate enough.

[29 : 06] we could say thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you the rest of our lives and it just doesn't seem adequate enough. But thank you. And dear God, you know we long for that day when all of humanity is finally lifted up and when your creation is finally freed and made holy.

And this we pray in the name of Yeshua the rescuer. Amen. Amen.