

Ephesians 2:1-10

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[0:00] Pray with me, friends. Our gracious God, we thank you that you have saved us from death, that you have brought us into life.

Would you awaken our hearts to the wonder of this again tonight?! In your name I pray. Amen.

Once upon a time, you were dead.

Yeah, welcome to the evening service, everyone. But I'm not coming up with this. This is where today's passage begins. You and I and all of us were dead. And if you read other passages in the New Testament, you will see that the Bible uses a bunch of different pictures to describe salvation, what Jesus did for us.

Sometimes the picture is of a courtroom, and our sins are convicting us, and Jesus is the judge who forgives us. Sometimes the picture is like a bank account, and we're in debt, and Jesus pays what we owe.

And tonight, the picture is more like a graveyard. Or maybe it's like a graveyard in a zombie apocalypse. Because that's how Paul starts talking about salvation today.

[1:11] There are a bunch of dead people walking around, and it looks like they're going to be trapped that way forever. But, spoilers, that's not where the story ends. Because the picture starts in a graveyard, but it ends in this glorious community of life.

So tonight, I want to look at each of these things. Death, life, and living. What does it mean to be dead? How are we made alive?

And then, how do we live after that? Death, life, and living. So like any good adventure story, we have to start with the problem. We have to start with the conflict. For the Ephesians, the people that Paul wrote this letter to 2,000 years ago, there's a presenting problem.

This is a community made up of Jews and Gentiles, who are two people groups who have deep religious and cultural differences. And they're trying to live together in this new community following Jesus, and it's really hard.

And next week, we're going to get into the details of all that a lot more. But in today's passage, Paul wants us to see that the biggest difference is not really between Jews and the Gentiles, but between those who are dead and those who are alive.

[2:24] The Jews and the Gentiles, the conflict of that is just the surface problem. The bigger problem is that all of humanity starts out dead. So let's see how Paul describes this in the first two verses.

He says, When you think about being dead, what do you picture?

What posture is in your mind? It's probably lying down somewhere still, right? Not moving. But what's strange about Paul's description of dead people here is that they're walking.

You were dead, he says, in the sins in which you once walked. And twice he describes these dead people as following something. They're moving. We were dead, but we were walking. It's that zombie apocalypse.

Because for Paul, being dead is not that you can't do things. It's that you do a certain type of things. Things that lead to death.

[3:26] Here's how he describes this life of death in verse 3. He says, We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

So part one of what it means to be dead. We are children of wrath. This phrase might make us uncomfortable, and it's supposed to. Paul is saying that because of our actions, we deserve wrath. We have hurt ourselves. We have hurt others. We have hurt this world. And justice demands wrath against that. And the thing I want to note here is that the same wrath that can condemn us is also

the wrath that defends us when we are the ones hurt and when we want justice from God against evil and exploitation.

And as we're going to see, even when we do deserve wrath, it is not God's wrath that ultimately falls on us. The movement God makes toward us is love. God's wrath and his love always go together, and they feel like opposites to us.

But in God, they're able to meet. And we'll get to more of this good news in a minute, but for now, we have to sit with the pain and brokenness of what it means to be human, which is that we deserve wrath. Now, part two of what it means to be dead.

[4:48] We carry out the passions of the flesh. Now, flesh in this verse doesn't just mean physical desires, and we notice this because in the same verse, Paul's going to expand on it, and he says, we carry out the passions of the flesh and the mind.

So he's saying anything that we do in our minds, our bodies, our words, our desires that are opposed to God lead to death. And maybe you're thinking, okay, okay, we keep throwing this word around, but what does being dead look like?

Paul's got you. If you flip over to the next few chapters, he's going to list out some things about this way of death, and you don't have to look there now. You can fact check me later, but here are a couple things I found that are more specific about what this life of death looks like.

It looks like speaking falsehood, theft, destructive anger, hurtful speech, bitterness, sexual immorality, greed, and this is not an exhaustive list.

It just gives you a picture of what the way of death looks like. Remember that Jesus says God's law is summed up in these two commands. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

[5:56] And love your neighbor as yourself. And I think as we start to evaluate our own motivations and behavior, we can't honestly say that we love God and others with all that we are.

So the diagnosis is looking pretty bleak. So stick with me. We're not out of the land of the dead yet. There's one more thing I want to talk about when we talk about this world of death. We're talking about three things here.

The first is that we're dead because of individual choices that we make. Paul says we're carrying things out. We choose to do these things. But the second is that we're dead because we're born into a world of death.

We are by nature children of wrath. We're sons of disobedience. We inherit brokenness that we don't choose. And third, we're dead because there are spiritual forces at work against us.

Did you wonder about that phrase, the prince of the power of the air? It might sound a little weird to us. But Paul is saying that the air is referring to this invisible spiritual realm where there are real spiritual forces at work against us that contribute to this way of death.

[7:01] And all three of these things play a role in any brokenness you see, whether that's racial injustice or addiction or generational trauma or anything else wrong in the world and in your own heart.

They overlap to create this web of death that keeps us trapped. This is the kingdom of death. No human can escape it. We're born dead.

But notice, in our passage of 10 verses, only three talk about death. Paul is a lot more interested in something else.

He's interested in the rescue story. He's interested in life. I think sometimes we're a lot more comfortable thinking about death or understanding brokenness than we are imagining what could be really good and true and beautiful.

So this is a good moment to just pause and ask God to awaken in yourself a longing for his goodness, to appreciate the beauty of his life. Paul is really good at this.

[8:01] In these next verses, he cannot get enough of what God has done. Scholar Scott McKnight titles his chapter on this section, Love Comes in a Bundle of Graces.

I love that. Love comes in a bundle of graces. And the first and primary grace we notice comes in verse 4. So Paul has just described us as dead and controlled by the spirit of evil.

And then he says, in one of the most beautiful hinge moments of scripture, by 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.

This is the moment in the classic adventure story when everything seems to go wrong and you think there's no hope for the protagonist. And then the tide turns. And the hero shows up. But God, everything changes. In this passage, God's initiative is the dominant force. He makes us alive.

[9:07] He raises us up with Christ. He seats us with him. He gives the gift of salvation. He shows the immeasurable riches of his grace. Do you ever feel like you can't reach God?

Like you can't be good enough for him? Or maybe you can't find him? Friends, he is always the first to reach out to us. Let the battering ram of these statements break down any pain or fear or shame you may be carrying.

Because God is coming for you. He loves you. And he will not let you go. And it just gets better.

Grammatically, the main verb in this whole section is made us alive together with.

In Greek, that is one word. And it's likely that Paul actually made it up. It's just a combination of the words for with, life, and make. And Paul swooshes them all together because there's no other word that can contain what God has done for us.

The main point Paul wants us to grasp is that we who were dead have been made alive. And not only that, we've been made alive together with Christ.

[10:17] Look with me at verses five to six and see if you can tally up the number of times he says that we're either in or with Christ. He says, God 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 and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

And the language Paul uses shows us how closely we are now mapped on to Jesus. We have become so identified with him that we can't disentangle ourselves from him.

Back in chapter one, Paul described God as raising up Jesus and seating him in the heavenly places. And those are the same words he uses to describe what God has done for us in this chapter.

Paul actually can't talk about Jesus' resurrection without talking about ours. There are a lot of nitty gritty details in this passage. Grace and faith and how do they all work together.

But for a moment, I just want you to pause and zoom out a bit and feel the overabundance that Paul is describing. It's like ocean waves that keep coming. God is rich in mercy.

[11:34] He loves us with a great love. He shares immeasurable riches with us. He is kind toward us. And when you need to be reminded of who God is, come to this passage.

Just write down everything it says he's done, every way it describes him. And then, and only then, look at yourself. If God has done this, what then do we do?

Well, I'm glad you asked. Let's look at verses eight to nine. 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 work so that no one may boast.

For by grace, you have been saved through faith. God initiates in love. He saves in love. And we respond in faith. And maybe you've heard this word faith so many times that it feels a bit worn or faded.

Or maybe it's a new concept to you and you don't really know what to do with it. The thing about faith is that it's actually really simple. Faith means yes.

[12:42] It means saying yes to the life God offers and what he has done. And the greatest example of faith throughout Christian history has always been a teenaged girl 2,000 years ago.

Mary, the mother of God. An angel tells her that she's going to become pregnant miraculously with a son who's going to save the world. It's the craziest thing that you could ever hear.

And her response to this has reverberated through the ages. Behold, I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.

That's what faith says. Let it be to me according to your word. It means you cup your palms and you hold your life up to God and you say yes. I accept the life you're offering.

Rescue me. And I want to say here, I know this can sound abstract or scary or a number of things because faith is both very simple but it is very hard.

[13:47] And what may help to remember is what this passage tells us is that faith is always first and foremost a gift. So if you want faith or if you're skeptical of it, you can talk to God about it.

You can ask God for faith. You can tell him what confuses you about it. As we see in this passage, he will meet you there. So we were dead and now we have been made alive.

And this brings us to our last point, living. How do we live now when we wake up tomorrow, Monday morning? What does all of this mean for us? And that's why I love that we have verse 10 as a part of this passage because it helps us understand what all of this actually looks like, what it's for.

Look at verse 10 with me. Paul says, For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Now this verse might surprise you because Paul literally just said in the verse before that our salvation is not by works. And now he's saying we are created for good works. But the resolution is right there at the beginning of the verse.

[14 : 53] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. Workmanship is not a fancy word in the Greek. It just means stuff that's been made. We are God's good work.

And do you see in this language, it's new creation language. He has made all of us new. I think this is the power of the death to life picture in this passage. The death to life picture helps us see that all of us, every part of us has been made new when we are made alive.

One of my favorite verses is 2 Corinthians 5, 17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away.

Behold, the new has come. And because we are new, our behavior will naturally be new as well.

Think of the classic example of caterpillars becoming butterflies.

When the butterflies emerge from their chrysalis and their wings dry, what do they do? They fly.

And they don't have to wonder whether they're going to or angst about it. They just do it because they are now creatures with the capacity for flight.

[15 : 59] And we are now creatures with the capacity for good works. And this is both life-changing and it's also super practical. The second half of Ephesians, which we're going to get to, is going to describe what this actually looks like in our relationships and in our work, in our jobs, our studies.

And there was a quote in a commentary I read that made me laugh this week. It's talking about these chapters. It says, Paul gives in chapters four to six of Ephesians, a description of this new life, which is surprising for its almost pedestrian character.

Basically, this new life is surprisingly boring. Or maybe it's surprisingly simple. It looks like telling the truth and controlling your temper and speaking encouragement.

Not crazy things. But if you were actually to live like this in every area of life, it would change everything. And there's a movie that came out earlier this year that I think that helps me picture what this looks like.

And it actually, the title of it fits our passage today very well. It's called Wake Up, Dead Man. And it's part of the Knives Out series of mystery movies. And in this one, the protagonist is this Catholic priest, Father Judd.

[17 : 10] And Father Judd has had a violent past. He was a boxer. And he killed a man in anger and he goes to prison. In prison, he converts and decides to become a priest. And he has these motions that picture how his life has changed.

And the first one is this like boxing stance like this, fists up. He's like, that's who I used to be. But now he extends his arms like the cross in love and surrender.

And there are times throughout the movie when he's tempted to return to his former way of living, when he wants to use power and manipulation to help clear his name from this charge of a murder he didn't commit. And at one key point, he stops and he realizes what he's doing.

And it's not too much of a spoiler to say that he literally makes this movement with his arms to remind himself who he is now. And from there, he chooses an act of mercy that changes the course of the plot.

And that's what Paul's talking about. There are two postures that we can live by, the posture of death and the posture of life. And it's so easy to fall back into the old way, to live in the way of death.

[18 : 15] But the thing is, you know, Father Judd may slip back to the way he used to live, but that's not actually who he is anymore. He is made for life to be a priest who speaks grace and peace to his congregation.

And so too are we. A quick note before I wrap up. I can't talk about this without talking about the Holy Spirit. When we are made into a new creation, we are given new breath.

And that breath is the Spirit of God who lives within us always to help us continue to choose and to do these good works. Walking in the way of life is never something you have to do alone. You can't do it alone. And thanks be to God, we don't have to. So this week, read aloud verses 4 to 10 from this passage and list what God has done for you.

And then ask him, what good work have you prepared for me today? What would someone who has been rescued from death do? Friends, once upon a time, we were dead.

[19:22] We were living in a zombie apocalypse. But God, our bad choices, our inheritance of brokenness, evil spiritual forces around us, they don't control us anymore.

God has rescued us. He has made us alive. And all we have to do is say yes in faith and receive his spirit to live out these good works that he's prepared for us.

What did baby Ruth do today to be baptized? Nothing, right? She was born into a family. She didn't choose. She was carried here. She was held by Aaron.

She didn't do anything in order to be invited into this family to be claimed and cared for by us. We did it for her and Jesus ultimately did it for her because we love her.

And baptism is the perfect picture of this death-to-life story. This is what God has done for all of us. We too were submerged in the waters of death and we too have been raised to life.

[20:28] So friends, let us live. Amen.