

We are Alive

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[0:00] Well, morning everyone, and thank you Ash. I'm not sure if you're still in the room. Remind me how much alive I'm not. As it turns out, I just can't keep up with that sort of thing and his energy is just such a blessing to us as a church in moments like this.

So I really appreciate my brother. So as we have already been told, we're in the book of Ephesians in this term. If I've not met you, I'm Steve, senior pastor here at St. Paul's.

What we're doing in this term is we're discovering in the book of Ephesians who the church is. And we're doing that as we just heard from our news segment about we're doing that as we look forward to the next five to 10 years in what God is calling us to as a church in life and ministry together.

What we've already seen in Ephesians 1 is that in Jesus Christ, we have every spiritual blessing now in the present, present tense now. And we also have a guaranteed future glory in God's presence.

So what we have now and the future that we're looking forward to and the fulfillment of all things. So it is what we have and yet what we are still to receive.

[1:25] And what we have and what we are still to receive is every desire, every dream, every longing of the heart being gifted to us in Jesus Christ.

Now today's passage is one of the richest in the Bible of what it means in fact to be a Christian.

And what it means when Christians talk about being saved, being born again or becoming a Christian. And so if you are here in this room or online right now and you are not yet a Christian, then my hope is that these verses will give you clarity on what it is to be a Christian.

And also a desire welling up in you, in fact, to want to be one. If, however, you are a Christian and you're sitting in the room or online, you are a Christian, it is crucial for you to realize as you come to this text that this text is not primarily evangelistic.

That wasn't Paul's origin. That was not his purpose here. This text is actually written to Christians. It's written for Christians. You see, what he wants is for Christians to be captivated by the love and the grace of God that has in fact ripped us.

[3:07] And I mean ripped us from the grip of condemnation and death and raised us to the place of honor with Jesus Christ.

He wants us to be, our affections to be captivated by that truth. He wants us to know the glorious Father, have our hearts and our affections to be drawn to him in such a way that our lives are transformed.

That's his intention here. And so I've got three points, which on the St. Paul's app, you've got it there and you can take notes if you like as you go along. Now the first three verses are a comprehensive panoramic picture of the human condition outside of God.

It's the condition of everyone outside of God. It says quite bluntly, dead in your transgressions and sins. Now death here or dead is not a figure of speech.

He's referring to humanity as being absolutely dead. Not in danger of death, not dying, but absolutely dead. He refers to Gentiles in verse 1 and his fellow Jews in verse 3.

[4:33] So he's not making a distinction here between a particular depraved element of human society. He's saying all people are dead in transgressions and sins.

That is, spiritual death is universal. All of humanity from top to bottom, all people are spiritually dead apart from Christ. And the key to understanding what that means is the word followed in verse 2 and following in verse 3.

Those words there, which come from the same root word, basically mean to be mastered by. It's much stronger than the English language of following.

It means to be mastered by, to be controlled by. It, in fact, means to be enslaved. Spiritually, humanity is as helpless as a corpse.

Completely controlled, completely mastered by death in such a way that you have no capacity whatsoever to move, to act, to do anything on your own.

[5:50] And a corpse cannot bring itself back to life. And there are three things that we are told here that we are all enslaved to.

Firstly, it says verse 2, enslaved to the ways of the world. Verse 2 again. Secondly, we're enslaved to the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

And thirdly, in verse 3, enslaved to gratifying the cravings of our flesh following its desires and thoughts. Now, when Paul refers there to our flesh, we automatically think of the stuff that's over the top of our bones and stuff.

But he doesn't mean that. He's not referring to that. In both Hebrew and Greek language, the word flesh means the whole person.

Mind, soul, spirit, body. And it's a word that is particularly used in Hebrew and Greek language that refers to self-centered human nature.

[6:59] It refers to the nature of all people. And so notice the words craving, desires, thoughts. What he's referring to here is the bottom, the aspect here of self-centered human nature is the inner life of the person.

And according to the Bible, the reason why all of humanity is dead, spiritually dead in transgressions and sins, is because every single person is profoundly self-centered.

Profoundly centered on the self. As I've often referred to the 16th century church reformer and theologian Martin Luther, in his lectures on the Romans, the book of Romans, put the condition of the human heart very succinctly.

The Latin phrase he used was incurvatus in se, which is curved in on itself.

That is the condition of every human heart. Curvatus in se, curved in on itself. In such a way he said that every human heart is wickedly, curvedly, viciously seeking to use all things, even God, for its own glory.

[8:35] Profoundly self-centered is what it means to be human apart from God. It's like all of us have a computer that's not crashing right down at the center of our being, and this computer never, never, never, never stops.

And it's constantly in overdrive, analyzing, analyzing, analyzing everything, every person, every object, every interaction, every event, every setting, saying, how does this glorify me?

That is the natural default human heart. Everything is about analyzing its benefits to my happiness, my glory, my reputation, my comfort, my control.

Everything gets put through the grid of my heart, curved in on itself. That is the core issue of humanity is pride.

It is what the theologian John Calvin said, pride is the sin that exists below every sin. It's the very thing that caused the very first sin in the very first place.

[10:11] And pride is not so much thinking highly of yourself, it is constantly thinking about yourself. That's pride. Pride is making sure that everything is centered on me.

Now, it is obvious that self-centeredness can make you a cruel person. You know, history is full of those tyrants and dictators and, you know, who, you know, the egotistical, the proud person, the self-centered, the murderous, you know, we see them everywhere.

You know, they want to get their own way. They want to make sure that they're at the center and the top and, you know. But more often than not, self-centeredness creates moral people. Not as obvious to spot.

Someone that others look up to and want to be like. You see, if everything exists for my self-centered heart to make me look good and feel good, then there's no better way to make me feel good or look good than to be a good person that other people affirm, as opposed to the tyrant that other people despise.

Self-centeredness drives most people into serving the needy, into political causes, into being a good child to parents or a good parent to children, a good friend who assists whenever possible, a dutiful person who does what's expected of them.

[11:53] And what lies beneath that is a self-centeredness that drives us doing those things for our own affirmation.

We help for our sake. We do good things to be noticed by people. We do it all to receive the applause, to build up our sense of worth, wealth, which is always fragile and crumbling.

Now, I'm sure that most of you remember that one of the greatest Hollywood classics of the last century, the movie Rocky, starring Sylvester Stallone, it is beyond me that the guy, after all these years, has yet to win an Oscar.

Anyway, his love interest in the movie asked him, why? Why are you taking on the world champion in a boxing match?

He's going to pulverize you. Of course, he doesn't. If he did, we wouldn't have Rocky 6, 7, 8, 25, I don't know how many movies there are, but why?

[13:12] Why are you doing this? Because he wasn't expected to win. It was meant to be a spectacle. And his reply is remarkable.

He says, I want to go the distance. That's all he wanted, not to win, I just want to go the distance and then I will know that I'm not a bum. See what he's saying there?

I want to prove something to myself. Everything else in life can fall down. My marriage can fail. I can be a rotten kid. But as long as I've gone the distance with Apollo Creed, at least in that moment, I know that I'm not a bum.

You see, outside of God, every person is trying to prove themselves that they are worthy of affirmation. Because we need affirmation more than anything else.

And Luther's point here is that we evaluate everything in terms of whether it makes me look good or not. And yet the reality is none of it will ever be enough.

[14:24] None of it will ever be enough. And so we are enslaved to the treadmill of the pursuit of that affirmation.

So self-centeredness can make you cruel. It can make you moral. But we need to hear this one. Self-centeredness can make you a religious person too.

We can devote ourselves to God doing good works, turning up to church, reading the Bible, praying, giving, all good and right things to do, God's called us to, but for entirely the wrong reason. Where the motive of the heart is about even trying to get God to approve of us. How do we know? How can we tell the difference? Well, when things aren't going well in life, we do two things.

We start to pull back away from those things. Or and we start getting angry at God for not giving us what we think he should give us in that moment for things not going well.

[15:41] God, I've done all this stuff for you. How can this go wrong in my life? And both of those things are an indication we're expecting God to come through for us in that moment.

Of all I've done for you, God, it is mind-boggling that you could possibly get into Christianity and even stay in Christianity for decades to have God serve you, your ego, your affirmation, rather than for us to serve God.

that is always the issue if our obedience and our Christian life is conditional on the circumstances of life.

Verse 3 uses the word craving to describe our self-centeredness. It's a word that means an inordinate desire. In other words, it means that this self-centeredness is an over-desire.

It's in fact addictive. It means it's never enough. It's addictive in the same way that gambling is addictive. It's never enough. It's the same way that heroin's addictive. It's never enough. It might give you a high for just a moment but you just look at the next hit, the next hit, the next hit.

[16:59] It means that we are living for our own glory and it will never, ever be enough. No amount of glory, no amount of acclaim, no amount of recognition, no amount of comfort will ever be enough to settle the restless heart.

The computer that's in overdrive and it makes us miserable. It makes us miserable despite what our social media profiles attempt to portray about our life.

the default setting of every human heart without Jesus, without God is simply this as I read years ago and I can't remember where I got it.

It is simply this. I think it was C.S. Lewis. I'll give it to him anyway. It is your life for mine. Your ego, your self-centeredness, your life must be sacrificed for mine.

You exist to serve me, my interests first and that is how we even relate to our creator and our sustainer and our God. God, you exist for me. Now the Bible's view of sin is that every, it's not just that every person is tainted by it but that every aspect of a human person is tainted by it and the consequence is shocking.

[18:43] Verse 3, like the rest, we were by nature deserving of death. Not just by nature dead but by nature deserving of condemnation.

Not only spiritually dead but condemned by God. Our self-centeredness means we are deserving of God's wrath, his anger, his condemnation, his judgment.

Now the Bible reveals that God's anger is not like human anger. It's not spite. It's not malice.

It's not animosity. It's not revenge. It's not arbitrary. It is predictable and it's not governed by mood or whim.

It is God's personal, righteous, perfect, constant hostility to evil, injustice, and sin.

[19:49] It is his settled refusal to compromise with it in any way whatsoever and his resolve is to condemn it. This is the spiritual death that all people are enslaved to that leads to physical death and ultimately eternal death under the just condemnation of God.

That is the horror of verse 3 of being deserved of wrath. C.S. Lewis certainly did write nothing more, there is nothing more enslaving and miserable than self-centeredness.

It makes you miserable and it will increasingly make you miserable. He described it as hell begun in you that will eventually take you to hell.

That's self-centeredness. That's pride. And in this constant state of spiritual death and free fall into eternal death, unable to even know that we are in fact dead, let alone help ourselves to save ourselves, what humanity needs is intervention.

Not just a bit of help. Christianity is not self-help. We need someone to intervene. A corpse cannot push the emergency button and call for help and we can't do so spiritually either.

[21:44] and that's what makes verses 4 to 7 so remarkable. We're alive by grace.

I love it when Mel read this out. I don't know if you noticed, but she did. But, but, there's never a bigger but in the world than this one.

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.

Verse 6 says that God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.

That's verse 6. I don't know if you remember from last week. I mean, Nick's just read it out to us, in fact, reminding us from chapter 1 that God raised Christ up and seated him in the heavenly realms.

[22:54] Here we are told he's done that with us. That's where we are now.

What does that mean? You see, in the first century Roman world, the conquering general would return from the great victory and that general was given the greatest honour, the highest place in the capital as they returned, the capital city, and they were seated at the right hand of the emperor.

That was their honour. Jesus died, was raised up, given the place of greatest honour, the seat of the right hand of the throne in the heavenly realms.

It is the most honourable seat in all of heaven and the earth and under the earth. And so notice, God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him.

that's past tense. It's done. Because it can't mean that he's raised us up from dead physically because as of yet, I've not died.

It can't mean that I'm in heaven with him because I'm still here. It means that we are legally right now declared that that is my seat. You see, what it's saying is when a person trusts in Jesus Christ, all their sins, all of their self-centeredness are so hidden, so covered that they are treated as if they have done everything that Jesus, the conquering king, has done.

[24:49] God delights and honours and accepts and rejoices over us in the way that he does his own son. How can that be? Verse 7, he might show us the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

The word kindness there is not an emotion. It's actually action. It's a word that means costly action. The first three verses tell us that the essence of sin is putting ourselves where only God should be. That is the very centre of our lives, on the throne of our lives, in control of our lives. Sin is putting our self where only God deserves to be. Salvation in Christianity is God putting himself where we deserve to be.

It's the great reversal of positions. Jesus Christ took the just and righteous punishment. He took the wrath of God that we deserve for putting ourselves in the place where only God belongs, that is at the centre, the throne and the ruler of our lives.

[26:14] And the punishment that he took on the cross was much more than the cruel, the excruciating, physical punishment of a Roman crucifixion. He took the much more excruciating spiritual pain of the wrath of God being poured out on him, what verse three says that we deserve.

The one whose very essence was flawless selflessness was cut off from God, his father. He experienced the agony that we would experience if we were cut off from God for all of eternity. You see, the essence of sin is us substituting ourselves for God while the essence of salvation in Christianity is God substituting himself for us.

He sat in our seat so that we can now sit in his. ourselves where only God deserves to be and so God chooses to put himself where we deserve to be.

[27:36] And that, not just being intellectually assented to or agreed with but to be pushed down to the very centre of our heart, that and that alone is what blasts us out of our self-centredness it is to see Jesus saved through the most, sorry, Jesus save us through the most radically unselfish thing in the history of humanity for you, for me.

Though he was equal with God, he emptied himself of his glory and he came down and took the place of a servant. Verses four and five are absolutely startling but because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace, that you have been saved.

We were dead in our transgressions but God intervened, enslaved to sin, enslaved to our selfishness but God intervened, objects of wrath, deserving of condemnation but God intervened. Verses eight and nine emphasise, which is what we tried to keep up with a minute ago, emphasises that this salvation is all God's grace, it is all his gift, it is by grace you've been saved, through faith and it is not from yourself, it is a gift of God, not by work so that no one can boast.

God's gift, his salvation is a gift, new life is a gift, every spiritual blessing we saw in chapter one is a gift, the hope of the future is a gift and even faith to believe it and to live it is a gift.

[29:52] Now faith here, I just need to unpack this, faith here is not a mere intellectual ascent, faith means trust and the idea of trust here is it means resting, resting you see a Christian is a person who rests in, it's a person who trusts in the work of Christ, his grace to us and they are characterized verse 9 gives us the characterization of what a life of faith looks like verse 9 not boasting and we go, well, I'm a moral person, I'm not like that proud person who boasts about all their that's not what this word means because we think

I'm not a bragger let me say we all subtly do but despite that this boasting here is a difference between the self-centered and the selfless person you see boasting in the first century Roman world was what it was that you had your confidence in and boasting was particularly confidence in handling a what was it that your confidence was to handle a difficult scenario that's boasting where is your confidence it's not bragging about an achievement but where your confidence is placed and here we are told that one of the great things about the Christian life is it brings an end to the boasting it brings an end to that overdrive of the computer placing our confidence in our fickle personal hope and affirmations that we build for ourselves as I said earlier we're all looking for something to boast in something to put our confidence in something to trust in to rest in to pump up

our sense of worth and value anything it can be and this is what C.S. Lewis was saying here we are miserable because the life of boasting is a life of scrambling for identity it's exhausting it's enslaving because we are giving our all to something that was never designed to make us complete it was never designed to deliver us an identity and the new life that he gives us is a life of a gift of his grace the one worthy of all praise has denied himself and elevated us to the throne of honor his selflessness has overcome our selfishness and we have all the acclaim or the honor or the approval or the acceptance that we could possibly want and there is only one boast that liberates from the enslavement of scrambling through life searching for the confidence we need to face whatever life throws at us and

Galatians 6 Paul says it very succinctly may I never boast in anything else but the cross the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has now been crucified to me and I to the world in other words those three things are dead to me those three things that we are craving after are dead to me those three things that I'm enslaved to are dead to me because of the cross no longer searching for a boast to feel alive but made alive Jesus is his boast because he knows that in Jesus he the Christian the church is God's boast let me be honest with you I preach this passage many times over the last three decades but

I've never seen this bit before I've talked about this before but I've never seen this bit before I've never seen this bit particularly in light of the end of chapter one verse 10 gives us one of the most exalted images of the Christian not just seated up there in the throne room with God the most exalted images of the Christian the church in all the Bible we are God's handiwork it literally means his work of art his masterpiece I've been reflecting on this bit mostly in this last week Genesis 1 sorry Psalm 19 tells us that God made the galaxies he made the stars he made the solar systems he made the oceans the mountains he made billions of creatures he made it all everything Genesis 1 tells us that he made humanity in his very image as the pinnacle of all creation he made the angels he made the spiritual realm and none of it none of it is referred to as his masterpiece none of it

[36:13] God's masterpiece the thing that he sits back on puts down the brush and says that's that's it of everything I've been doing in history and humanity and time and space this is it this is this is the thing that sits at the entrance of humanity this is this is the thing I want to be on display his great masterpiece is his new humanity safe from condemnation people made alive set free from slavery blessed beyond comprehension with a promise of getting just more blessing more life beyond death and for all eternity that's his masterpiece that is if you like his gift and his masterpiece his gift it's a gift that none of us were looking for it's a gift that the human heart self said the human heart

I don't need it I'm my own masterpiece and it's a gift and I think this is Paul's point it's a gift that so many of us have in Christ and frankly we don't appreciate enough I think it's amazing that we are his masterpiece we are if you like put it another way humanity saved in Christ is God's boast we're his boast that's meant to break our hearts that's meant to grow our affections it's meant to change our lives order our priorities your social media life which is really an indication of your boast it's the things that you get angry about what other people are boasting about on social media it's the things that you put on social media yourself that'll give you an indication to your boast and it is nothing to this which gets me to the final point and

I'm going to be so fast here let me tell you going to be so fast verse 10 this is what it means to live by grace this is God's great purpose we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do prepared and advanced by God the good works even the good works are a gift even the good works are by his sovereign grace and empowered by his grace and what would be really nice is if Paul elaborated on what those good works were that would be really lovely because normally and I'm at fault here in the past what I would have done is I would have said therefore here's some stuff you should do these are the good works but he doesn't do that here he doesn't elaborate on it the tendency is to import here a bunch of activities that will really a list of things that

I'm happy to do that I can comfortably manage I am God's great masterpiece and here's the scraps that I'm prepared to do to show that well I agree with that masterpiece and I think what we should do instead is to step back and what I've been trying to do this week is to step back on here and look

at the big picture so we don't miss what Paul saying here about these good works what we should not miss is that he doesn't elaborate but he starts verse 11 with the word therefore therefore and the application of what we have been saved from and what we are saved for the good works we are saved for starts in verse 11 and it will take us basically right through to chapter 6 and what we will constantly see underneath it all what we will constantly see the good work that God has called us into in everything is a life of selflessness a life of other person centeredness God's great masterpiece begins in verse 11 as he unpacks Jew and Gentiles natural enemies coming together in God's new humanity and serving each other selflessly surrendering themselves so that their natural enemy becomes a masterpiece of God in the end in other words the good works is not first and foremost an activity it is a transformed heart it's about who we are not what we do and this will go right through this principle right through in every sphere of life you probably can't wait till I get to talk about marriage and parenting and work and the same principle of good work underlies all of it selflessness in every sphere of life that's what we're going to unpack in coming weeks and none of that life is possible unless we are broken unless we are broken by how sinful how undeserving how weak how evil we truly are in the depths of our hearts without [44:21] Christ and at the same time we are filled with joy by how forgiven and how loved and how loved and how honored we are Jesus Christ that is the growth trajectory that Paul calls us to at the end of chapter one a growth in both of those things a growth in understanding our sinfulness and a growth in understanding of who we are in Christ as God's masterpiece I want to ask you are you in your life pursuing that growth most of us are not with any intentionality and I saw this a quote from the late J.I.

Packer and it's connected to I think our seven rhythms of life which are meant to put this truth so that we be shaped into God's masterpiece in the center of our lives the reason why most of us are not doing it and not growing with intentionality is because the computer in our life is still there and it won't die it's still in overdrive happily in overdrive our lives are so busy and so here J.I. Packer live life slow enough to think deeply about God and his grace to you in Jesus Christ God