

From Death to Life

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Preacher: Taylor Hollingsworth

[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.

Ephesians 2, verses 4 through 7, says this, 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 and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. A cruel voice is lifted up.

If you will not be turned, you will be destroyed. These were the words spoken by the evil Emperor Palpatine just before he began shooting electrical bolts from his hands at his victim, Luke Skywalker, cowering on the ground in the legendary Star Wars movie, Return of the Jedi.

[1 : 55] As Luke, a representative of the good side of the force, was struck by the bolts, he hit the ground and he began to writhe in agony.

He was alone. Already worn from fighting Darth Vader, a sworn servant to the evil Emperor and an enemy of the light side of the force, Luke was captive.

Only the dark Emperor and Vader were present at this moment. Palpatine was prepared to execute Luke, and with him all the hope of light standing in his way to power.

A final burst of electricity surged from his hands, and just when death seemed inevitable, the hardened Darth Vader was overcome with mercy.

Shockingly, the right-hand man of the evil Empire picked up the Emperor over his head and threw him off a building into oblivion.

[3 : 06] Incredible. Nobody saw that coming. It was a surprising and a very great reversal. When I was telling Elizabeth, my wife, about using this story this morning, she looked at me dumbfounded and said, I had no clue that that happened in the movie.

I always fell asleep or got distracted, so I completely missed that part. And I looked at her, my son next to her, like, are you kidding? It's like the best part of the whole series.

Nine movies, and this is the best part. Oh no! So I pulled my phone out so that she could see that one scene, and she was so pleased, so relieved. She couldn't believe that she'd miss that part of the story, the best part of the story, all of these years.

Now it's okay to miss the mercy of Darth Vader, but this morning, I pray you do not miss the mercy of God.

Unlike Luke, we were not battling for good. We were not an oppressed victim of some evil outside forces.

[4 : 19] Walt showed us last week in verses 1 through 3 that we were spiritually dead to the things of God and actively following the prince of the power of the air. Emperor Palpatine warned Luke that if he did not turn, he would be destroyed.

God's warning to us was similar, but the terms were way different. Instead of an evil emperor who stood against us demanding that we trade our good for his evil, a good and holy God stood against us in our sin.

We were by nature children of wrath against the good God who made us. And for God to be just, how could he allow our rebellion to go unpunished?

How could dead sinners be reconnected to a good God? This was the impossible situation that we found ourselves in.

And it's into this situation two of the most glorious words fill us with astonishing hope. But God, but God, of all the surprising and great reversals, this is the most surprising and the greatest reversal. [5 : 42] John Stott wonderfully captured this. He says, We were the objects of his wrath, but God, out of the great love with which he loved us, had mercy on us.

When we were dead, dead men do not rise, but God made us alive with Christ. We were slaves in a situation of dishonor and powerlessness, but God has raised us with Christ and set us at his own right hand in a position of honor and power.

Thus God has taken action to reverse our condition of sin. It is essential to hold both parts of this contrast together.

Namely, that what we are by nature and what we are by grace, the human condition and the divine compassion, God's wrath and God's love.

Christians are sometimes criticized for being morbidly preoccupied with their sin and guilt. The criticism is not fair when we are facing the facts about ourselves, for it's never unhealthy to look reality in the face, but only when we fail to go on to glory and God's mercy and grace.

[6 : 58] That's the problem. So now this morning, my friends, we go on to glory in God's mercy and grace. We go on, we go on to meditate on the most surprising and the greatest reversal in the history of the world.

So our main point, very simply this morning, is this. Praise God alone for his mercy, love, and grace that saved us from death and made us alive with Christ.

This morning we're going to look at verses four through seven. The reason for God's great reversal, the work of God's great reversal, and the purpose of God's great reversal.

So let's take a look at verse four. The reason for God's great reversal. The first thing we must see in this text is the central figure of the text.

Verses one through three centers on mankind's plight. We were dead in sin. And then, in verse four, God breaks onto the scene.

[8 : 14] Notice that. He is the primary actor from front to back. It is God. Look with me. It is God who is rich in mercy.

It is God who loved us. It is God who made us alive together with Christ. It is God's grace that saved.

It is God who raised us up and God who seated us with him in the heavenly places. It is God who shows the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Benjamin Franklin popularized the phrase, God helps those who help themselves. But if this is true in light of what verses one through three teach us, where does that leave dead sinners in relation to salvation?

still dead. Because dead people cannot help themselves. And so we see God here taking the initiative, acting, moving toward dead sinners.

[9 : 28] This is wonderful news. H.B. Charles once said, in salvation, we do our part and God does his part. Exactly right. We do the sinning and God does the saving.

That's exactly right. God alone can save. God alone. But why? Why would God save those who have rebelled against him?

Well, there are two reasons given in verse four if you look at it. It's the mercy of God is rich and the love of God is great. The mercy of God is rich.

What comes to your mind when you think of mercy? mercy. Mercy in the Old Testament was associated with Yahweh's steadfast covenant loyalty and love especially when Israel was unfaithful. God's mercy was often shown to a recipient in a desperate and helpless situation. Mercy often connected with the ideas of compassion and pity.

[10 : 32] But this this is not just kind of like a oh bless your heart kind of compassion and pity. Not that kind. It's a it's a show up on the doorstep with chicken soup kind of compassion and pity.

It is not passive but active. Here God is described as being rich in mercy. Not just a fascinating combination of words rich in mercy.

In our world a rich person uses his wealth for his own comfort and his own good. You don't get ahead in the world by showing pity and compassion and giving and donating.

The way you climb the ladder is by obtaining and then holding on. But God's wealth is expressed in terms of mercy.

God does not need mercy. Think about that. God does not need it. He is not in debt. He is not miserable.

[11 : 39] He's not sad. He's not in trouble. He does not need mercy. He doesn't need it. Mercy is not intended for his benefit but for ours.

When the splash pad first opened at Regional Park I used to love watching the kids and adults huddling under that Tennessee water tower during those smoldering hot summer days and it would just kind of repeatedly fill up and then gush out all at once and all the people standing in there were feeling the relief from the searing heat again and again and just enjoying it.

God's mercy is like that. It's like that. He doesn't have a need to keep it to himself. He keeps pouring it out again and again onto the people.

He is rich in mercy and the supply is inexhaustible and he aims to pour it out on his people. On his people. God is rich in mercy but not only that, verse 4 alerts us that the love of God is great.

I mean the human heart is already drawn to love. love, even in all of its skewed and misshapen earthly forms. Often love in the world's eyes is a means to personal gratification and when we don't feel loved, we restrain love.

[13 : 07] It's typically how it goes. Think about those you've come across that are difficult to love. Why is it so hard? sometimes it's because they're ungrateful.

They don't recognize when you've tried to be kind or helpful. They don't recognize the sacrifices you've made for their benefit even. Or maybe rather than expressing thankfulness maybe they complain.

And this goes a step further than just being ungrateful because that could just be sheer silence but complaining takes the initiative to voice something that they believe you should have provided or you should have done and you failed to do it.

They have some criteria that was left unmet and they blame you for it. Or maybe they don't bring their complaints to you directly but they murmur behind your back to others about how you failed them or how you've missed the mark.

Or maybe another characteristic of being unlovable is pride. You know the people they only think about themselves and they always think about themselves in the best light without seeing any flaws.

[14 : 30] They think about themselves they talk about themselves and they act in such a way that the world revolves around themselves. So when you encounter ungrateful complaining murmuring prideful people which direction do you move?

So what makes God's love great? God's love is not conditioned on what he can gain.

He's not looking for someone to help him feel good about himself. It's been said that you can tell a lot about a man's character based on how he treats those who can do nothing for him.

So what then should we think about the God who extends his great love towards those who are dead to him? Dead.

Verses 4 and 5 say because of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses.

[15 : 45] Trespasses. Dead things rot. Dead things rot. They fill the tomb with the stench of death. In the same way when we were dead in our sins, our thoughts and our actions just must have been nauseating to a pure and holy and good God.

there was nothing in us attracting the love of God. In a sense we were unlovable.

What were we when we were dead in our sins friends? Did we express appropriate gratefulness to God for all that he has given?

Did we not complain and murmur about how we've been wronged in this life? Did we not blame shift and argue and gossip?

Did we not cast ourselves in the best light and live with our interests, our desires, our comforts as the dominant drivers in our thoughts and actions? Were we not ungrateful, complaining, murmuring,!

[16 : 57] Prideful people? Self-obsessed, indifferent toward our creator? and yet, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, this God loves the unlovable.

God alone has moved toward those who were dead. God has moved toward you. Oh, his mercy is rich.

Oh, his love is great towards you. This is what moved our God to action according to the Bible. This is the reason given to us for God's great reversal.

Secondly, the work of God's great reversal. The work. Verse 5 not only helps us to understand the greatness of God's love, it also helps us to more clearly understand his saving work.

It sheds light on when God worked on us. It says again, even when we were dead in our trespasses. This clearly links to verse 1, which Walt hit earlier, which also says that we were dead in trespasses and sins in which we once walked.

[18 : 32] This is not talking about a physical death. So what's it talking about? How is the sinner dead? Dead can mean two things. First, death means separation.

Sin separates us from God. This is death even before physically dying, separation from God. And second, death means incapability.

Incapability. Separation and incapability. As Pastor H.B. Charles put it, dead people can't try harder. Dead people can't do better.

Dead people can't change their ways. Dead people can't turn over a new leaf. Dead people can't help themselves. Therefore, there should be no place for pride, arrogance, or boasting for the Christian.

We weren't more qualified or deserving or smart. We were dead, condemned, and enslaved. God saved us. God saved us according to this text and he did it in three ways.

[19 : 36] He did it in three ways. He made us alive with Christ, he raised us up with Christ, and he seated us with Christ. These are all compound verbs, meaning two words put together, two verbs that Paul coined.

He actually made these up to capture the fact that when God was acting to raise and to exalt Jesus Christ, at the very same time, he was acting on his people, including every person that's a believer right here, right now.

We live in a culture that is constantly fighting death. I remember I read an article recently about several billionaires making massive investments to cure death.

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Google founders Larry Page, Sergey Brin, PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, Larry Ellison, Brian Johnson, all of these folks were involved at different points investing in different technologies like cell revitalization, supplements, vitamins, AI, to cure death.

When asked why they would invest in these various projects, one reporter said, death is the next problem waiting to be solved. These billionaires believed that unlocking this gift for humanity will provide glory to those who deliver it.

[21 : 10] Isn't that fascinating? To provide glory to those who deliver it. One of the major distinctions between us and God is that God can make something out of nothing.

As creatures, we can reflect him in some ways by rearranging the things he's already made, but we constantly come up against this boundary marker between us and God.

He alone can create life out of nothing. Nothing. The problem of death, spoiler alert, has already been solved.

It's already been solved, but many will reject it because of the implications. Our text shows that God alone makes the dead alive with Christ.

But if this is true, who gets the glory? God gets the glory and he has authority over us. The billionaires won't like this quest when so much of their desire is driven by getting glory for themselves and living forever without God.

[22 : 20] But God loves us too much to leave us where we are. The real problem is that sin has separated us from God and we are incapable of reviving ourselves.

God made us alive. God makes us alive. But he doesn't just resuscitate the old versions of us. He doesn't just make us better editions of ourselves.

We are made alive with Christ. With Christ. The old independent godless version of ourselves is still dead.

It's dead. When we put our trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins we come alive as something new. Something better. I read this riveting book a few years ago about missionaries in an area of Africa with a large extremist Muslim population.

And in the course of trying to proclaim the gospel in that context the husband was eventually killed. Martyred. So reflecting on the events that led to both life and death the wife titled the book in such a way to make a theological statement to all those who would later ask was it worth it?

[23 : 42] The book was entitled We Died Before We Came Here. Where were you when he called you out of your tomb?

Do you remember? Oh he stood at the entrance of our tomb filled with the stench of our self-love and our divine disregard and God being rich in mercy called us out.

He called us out. He made us alive together with Christ. He made us into a new creation never to be on our own again. Galatians 2.20 captures this reality wonderfully saying I have been crucified with Christ.

It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and he gave himself for me.

We died before we came here. He saved us. He saved us from death. He saved us from separation. He saved us from our inability to respond.

[24 : 59] He saved us from his just wrath. He saved us by nothing other than grace. Glorious grace. It says that by grace you have been saved.

Grace. Paul's understanding of grace may be best summarized as God's favor despite the demerits of its undeserving recipients.

God's favor God's favor. Despite the demerits of its undeserving recipients, I'm reminded of the story of Le Miserable. Jean Valjean is a hardened and bitter criminal.

In the opening scene, he seeks temporary refuge at the home of a bishop. Knowing the danger, the bishop still opens his home. He welcomes Valjean to the table with a hot meal.

And not only that, he allows him to stay overnight as his guest at his home. In spite of all the kindness and the trust that's shown, Valjean rises early in the morning and begins to stuff his sack full of the bishop's silverware.

[26 : 13] While hearing some noise, the bishop comes out to investigate what's going on and Valjean steps out of the shadows, locks eyes with the bishop, and then clubs him over the head with a candlestick before escaping into the night.

Though injured, the bishop does survive. The following morning, police bring the captured criminal back to the bishop's house to stand before the very one they presumed he robbed.

The police laugh. As they recount the story that Valjean told them when he was captured, he says, he did not steal it, but that you gave him the silverware.

That's his story. Valjean in this moment was totally at the mercy of the bishop. He was caught in all of his lies.

There was absolutely no escape. Justice was on the horizon for Jean Valjean. I'm very angry with you, Jean Valjean, the bishop began.

[27 : 21] But then to everyone's surprise, especially Valjean, the bishop tells the police that he's so glad that they brought him back because he did give him the silverware, but Valjean forgot the silver candlestick stands that he insisted he take as well.

and in a moment, the shocked Valjean was released from his chains as even more silver was stuffed into his sack.

The one who had every right to execute the guilty criminal was the very one who declared him innocent and blessed him at his own expense. The grace that saves is more than just a kind gesture.

It's more than just a gift. It is God's favor in spite of the demerits of its undeserving recipients. This is the grace that saves.

The very one we have sinned against has paid for our sins by his own blood. Out of his own pockets he pays the price.

[28 : 30] Being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses. he made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved. Praise the Lord. It's been said that mercy is God canceling your debt. Grace is God adopting you into his family, adding your name to his bank account, and giving you stock options in the family business.

This is mercy coupled with grace, extraordinary grace. And not only that, God raised us up with Christ.

Verse 6 says that God raised us up with Christ. We saw similar language in chapter 1 verses 20 to 21. If you look there, he raised him from the dead and he seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name

that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

The power and authority exerted by God to raise Christ from the dead is the same power and authority used to raise us from the dead.

[29 : 57] The same power. Even though we await an ultimate physical resurrection, our spiritual resurrection has already happened.

The power of God that raised Christ is the same power at work in our lives. This is good news. This is great news. I'm reminded of a story of some pirates who capture a man's children.

And the pirates can see the desperation of the father to reclaim his children. So they dangle the children in the net from the ship's mast and they tell him he can have his children if he can reach them.

The father climbs and he reaches desperately in hopes that he might possibly touch their hands and free them. But no matter how hard he tries, even with anguished tears in his eyes, his reach keeps coming up short.

Short. Short. Short. Perhaps some of you believe that God is like this in relation to you.

[31 : 11] Maybe you believe you're too far removed from his reach. You may think, I'm too far gone.

You don't know what I've done or where I've been. He can't save someone like me. He can't reach me. me. If that's you to you, I believe the Lord would say this.

My arm is not too short. I'll say it again. My arm is not too short. My arms have been outstretched. I went to the cross precisely for the ones who cannot save themselves. Those in over their heads.

Those who are seemingly out of reach.

I lay down my life and I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it up again.

[32 : 20] My arm is not too short to save you. This is resurrection power and it's available to all who call on the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

His arm is not too short. Furthermore, God seated us with Christ. He seated us with Christ. It holds true that when the work is over, the feet go up.

Maybe that's true in your home. So to sit down shows the finality of a task. Getting to God has always been based on works.

that is true. It's just not our work. To be seated with Christ means that we rest in the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

Praise the Lord. He has worked on our behalf. The feet go up and he sits down. He is seated at the right hand of God, the place of highest honor.

[33 : 21] In a royal courtroom, the place right next to the throne of the king is a place of relational proximity and trust. The one who holds this position has the king's ear.

We not only rest in the finality of Christ's work, we also enjoy the position of close relationship with the king himself. We've been invited near to the throne of grace to cry out to him, not just as a distant magistrate but as our father.

Father, hear our cries. He invites us to come near. This is what it means to be. Seated with Christ.

God made us alive with Christ. God raised us up with Christ.

God seated us with Christ. By grace we have been saved. This is the most surprising and greatest reversal. But why did God do it?

Why did God do it? We turn our attention now to point three, the purpose of God's great reversal.

The purpose of God's great reversal.

[34 : 25] verse seven turns our attention to the purpose revealed regarding God's great reversal.

Why did God save sinners? What was his goal in saving us? We read so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

The purpose stretches into the ages to come. The phrase coming ages refers to when this present world ends and eternity begins and continues on forever and ever and ever.

If his purpose endures that long then it's safe to say that his primary purpose is not your best life now. The purpose is infinitely more significant than wealth or health or earthly success.

what's going to happen in the ages to come? God will show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

[36 : 02] He's going to show. Show means to prove or to exhibit something. Every once in a while we'll go to the Tennessee Aquarium and each time we've been they've had different exhibits set up.

One of my favorite exhibits I ever saw there they had for a little while was this collection like giant sea creatures made out of recycled plastic debris pulled out of the water.

Super cool. The trash was basically strategically assembled into sculptures of jellyfish seahorses otters and my favorite the shark.

I mean they were really cool creations when you walk around them but what made them even more amazing was the fact that they were made from tons of random pieces of trash floating in the water. That's what made it truly astounding. in a much greater way God aims to exhibit his artistry not for a season but for all eternity.

[37 : 16] My friends we were like the debris in the water floating just kind of lifelessly along dead and without purpose but God being rich in mercy scooped us up.

He scooped us up. He drew us out of the water. All of us. You look around this room. Scooped up from death out of the water. He placed us together purposefully strategically dynamically vibrantly so that all who walk by might stop in amazement.

What? Can it be true? How could this be so beautiful? Look around. wasn't this the trash?

Wasn't this the trash floating along in the water dead and without hope? Is that the same person?

How can this be? It's incredible. How did this happen?

To witness these saved ones joined together provokes awe. It's awe inspiring. Not in the trash itself but in the artistry the creativity the thoughtfulness of the creator and the redeemer behind it all.

[38 : 34] That's what it provokes. Could you imagine if those pieces of plastic could speak to one another? What would they be saying? What would they say to one another as they lived out their new purpose rather than floating along in the ocean lost forever they've been gathered together and put into this majestic sculpture that just defies the boundaries of imagination?

What would they be saying to one another as they enjoy this light shining down on them in their new home together looking around at one another? Can you imagine? What would they be saying?

Can you believe this? That's what they'd be saying. They'd be looking around. Can you believe this? We were dead! You, me, we were just floating. Are you what did he find you?

Where did he find you? How did he bring you home? These are the conversations that begin now in the halls of the YMCA and echo throughout eternity for as long as we can possibly imagine and beyond that these are the conversations John Piper captured the beauty of this purpose when he said every day for all eternity without pause or end the riches of the glory of God's grace in Christ will become increasingly great and beautiful in our perception of them we are finite they are immeasurable!

That means they're infinite! Therefore we cannot ever take them in fully in this life! let that sink in there will always be more gloriously more forever only an infinite being can fully take in infinite riches but we can and we will spend eternity taking in more and more of these riches there is a necessary correlation between eternal existence and infinite blessing it takes the one to experience the other eternal life is essential for the enjoyment of immeasurable riches of grace that's what we'll be doing for all eternity marveling at the artistry of our good God brothers and sisters don't miss this part of the story don't miss this part of the story 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 trespasses he made us alive together with

[41 : 22] Christ by grace you have been saved praise the Lord this is the most surprising and the greatest reversal in the history of mankind what shall we do with this news what shall we do let's be a people who praise God alone for his mercy his love and grace that saved us from death and made us alive with Christ may God help us let's pray oh Lord we take this moment now to marvel to marvel afresh that you came to our tomb and you called our name come forth live oh Lord we give all praise all glory all honor to you thank you for your grace that treats us better than our sins deserve you've lavished your riches on us and we will praise you for this moment on into eternity

God help us we pray these things in Jesus name you you've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at [trinitygrace Athens dot com](http://trinitygraceathens.com)