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Raised For Love

Eph 2:1–10

Once again, Eph 2:1–7 presents for us one long, run-on sentence in the original Greek language, and Paul continues to use all-encompassing language to describe God’s love, grace, mercy, and kindness toward humanity. Today, we will discuss the first ten verses of chapter two—that we, the people of God, were once dead, but now we are made alive because of God’s rich mercy toward us. Tim Mackie calls this God’s “irresponsibly gracious gift.”¹ We respond to the gift by expressing faith (trust) in God and do the good works that we have been created to do as we live in gratitude as a new creation.

But this passage has a few other potentially confusing words for us. If we break down the verses word by word, we might stop and scratch our heads more than once. What does it mean that we were dead in transgressions and sins? What is the difference between transgressions and sins? Why were we by nature deserving of wrath? What does that mean? And how are we raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms? I’m not sure about you, but I haven’t had any near-death experiences lately, nor have I spent any time off this bit of dirt that we call Earth.

If you’ve grown up in church, you might feel like I’m asking no-brainers. You’ve heard the gospel all your life; you know that Jesus died for your sins so that you could have life with him. But have you ever paused to consider just how weird this passage is? Consider how it sounds to someone who has never attended Sunday school, to whom words like transgressions, sins, wrath, and resurrection are confusing at best and, more likely, completely bizarre. If this is you, you’re in a good place, because when I stop to consider the meaning of these words, I’m confused too. These are words that are heavy with centuries of theological meaning and cultural influence. We’ve attached a whole host of meanings to these words that may or may not have been what Paul meant in the first place.

So, I spent a good while researching all of the weird words in this passage. I looked at the Greek; I parsed out the meanings; I researched the cultural context. I won’t show you all of what I found, because that will interest some of you and bore most of you. If you’re interested, we can talk more later.

To start, let’s remind ourselves of what Paul has already said in this letter to the Ephesians. Troy taught us that Jesus came to earth as an extension of God’s welcome to all the nations. He showed us how predestination means being chosen to extend that welcome to all people—we are blessed to be a blessing. This was the job given to Abraham, David, the prophets, and finally, Jesus, and through him, the church. Then, last week, Mike

¹ Tim Mackie, Ephesians classroom.

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taught us that the church, the group of people who come together to worship Jesus as Lord, is the prize for which Jesus died and was resurrected. *This* is the salvation that Jesus brought to earth—that all of us, together, would know hope and power in him who has all authority over heaven and earth. He is Lord over all, and we connect together as an extension of his body.

Today, we consider who we once were and what Jesus calls us to as people who profess to believe in him. Let's walk through this passage and discover what Paul meant to the Ephesians, and how that applies to us today. First, remember that when Paul uses the word "you," he always means it in the plural sense. We're not talking about the individual, but the group—"you all were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you all used to live when you all followed the ways of this world...". Transgressions and sins. Why use both words? What do they mean?

Both words refer to the things that we do that harm God, others, or creation. *Transgressions* refer to our unintentional slip-ups or mistakes. We didn't mean to do it; we might not even realize that we've done it, like when I accidentally say or do something that hurts another person. *Sins*, on the other hand, refer to an ethical or moral failure, a harmful deed, or breaking the law.² This is a *deliberate* choice to walk away from the goodness of God and choose one's own self-empowered and self-originated way instead. So, the phrase "transgressions and sins" encompasses both the *unintentional* and *intentional* wrongs that we commit against God and others.

Since nearly the beginning of time, humans have been living in rebellion against God and his good purpose for his creation. We were created for goodness, let's not forget that. But rebellion is what they chose in that beautiful garden—they chose their own ambitions and goals instead of aligning with their Creator's command that they care for his creation and live in unity with others. Since that choice, humans have been stuck living apart from their Creator and spiritually from one another and continue to commit both intentional and unintentional wrongs against God, his creation, and others.

And so, Yahweh, the God who chose Israel out of the nations through which to show his glory to the world, broke into the world time and time again to pull his people out of their stuck state. In the Old Testament, he lived among his people in the tabernacle, and he gave them the Law to show them how to become unstuck in life together with him. When they didn't listen, he sent the prophets to guide them back to him. When they *still* didn't listen, he sent them into exile, and when they returned to Jerusalem, they came with renewed

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/266.htm>

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hearts that longed to worship Yahweh rightly, but they soon became stuck again in their desire to live righteously by their own means.

Stuck and stuck and stuck. Paul says that we were *all dead* in our transgressions and sins; outside the garden of Eden and outside a right relationship with our Creator, we are *dead*. We try and try to make things right on our own, but what happens? I'm not sure about you, but when I try to do this on my own, I get very frustrated. I don't get less stuck; I get more stuck. My efforts only get me so far, and then I hit a wall, even with all the best counselors, advisors, and support to help me. This is the "way of the world"—I try to do it all on my own, for my own interests, self-protection, and ambition. There is a point where I have to face the fact that I can't get myself unstuck on my own. I need help—more help than anything on this earth can offer.

This can look different from person to person. Some of us isolate ourselves and become afraid of venturing out to meet others; some of us build walls around our hearts and refuse to let anyone near; some of us follow the rules to a tee because they are what will protect us when everything goes wrong. This morning, I invite you to ask yourself: How are you stuck in patterns of thought or behaviour that serve your interests but may intentionally or unintentionally harm yourself, God, or others? How are you trying to get yourself unstuck? Is it working, or are you getting more frustrated?

By nature, Paul says, this pattern of stuckness is deserving of God's wrath. Now, this phrase can get some of us hung up on an idea that the God "before Jesus," the God of the Old Testament, was waiting around to smite us by lightning and then Jesus stepped in between to absorb that lightning of wrath on our behalf. And while this image is not entirely wrong, it is incomplete. This idea divides our idea of God into two Gods: the one "before Jesus" who is wrathful and vengeful, and the one "after Jesus" who is compassionate and loving. But that can't be possible, because we believe that there is only one God.

The prophet Malachi said, "'For I the LORD do not change,'"³ and the author of Hebrews wrote, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever".⁴ In Exodus, God says that he is "the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."⁵ While God is not static and is always on the move, his character does not and has not ever changed, not before Jesus and not after Jesus.

This means that when we read something that seems iffy about God's character, we need to put it up against this declaration of his character: that he is compassionate,

³ Mal 3:6

⁴ Heb 13:8

⁵ Ex 34:6

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gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness. This is the first lens through which we read all Scripture, and if something doesn't make sense, then perhaps we need to dig a little deeper.

So, when the Bible talks about us being children of wrath, we need to explore this further. Wrath, according to the Bible dictionaries that I consulted, is a controlled, slow anger, often described as a burning fire. It describes God's indignation at wrongdoing⁶ and his holy hatred. In the OT, we see God's wrath directed toward his rebellious people when they insist on patterns of being stuck, but here's the important part—his wrath is always a call to repentance.

In Zechariah, he says, "I am very jealous for Zion; I am **burning** with jealousy for her. . . I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain."⁷ God longs to have his people return to him. The image of the Holy Mountain is a return to the Garden, where there is right relationship between God and his creation once more. In other places, God's wrath is described as a consuming fire—not to destroy, but to purify and restore. God's wrath is the dramatic action taken to get the attention of his people and it is always an expression of his love, calling his people back to himself, back to life with him. I don't have time to go into the wrath of God more at this time, but if you are curious, I encourage you to do a word study on the wrath of God and notice how it is always connected to God's heart of love for his people.

In Ephesians, Paul says that all humans were deserving of this consuming fire because of our universal preference for self-rule and general mayhem. This underscores the seriousness of rebellion against God. But in Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God's final breaking into the world in human form, we are given grace. *Grace* simply means "gift." Jesus broke in to absorb that purifying fire into himself so that we could be free from our stuckness.

This passage is a study in contrasts: We were once spiritual zombies, but in Jesus's death and resurrection, we are made alive with him! Life with Jesus is one of love, mercy, life, grace, and kindness. What a different life this from the one that has us stuck in our "I can do it myself" culture! It is an open life, a free life, and it is one where we are *already* seated with Christ in heaven. This salvation is for *now*, not just for after our death.

What is required of us in return for this gift? Faith in him. That's it. In faith, we accept that Jesus is Lord—over everything, over creation, over our lives, over the death we died

⁶ Mounce, 22.

⁷ Zech 8:2–3, NIV

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when we finally give up everything into his hands, saying, “I can’t do it anymore.” We place our lives and everything in it into his hands and say, “I trust you to do with me as you see best.”

It’s easy to talk about faith, grace, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and even our brokenness in the abstract. But faith goes beyond words. It sinks into our hearts and wakes up our souls. It sees with eyes that are not physical the things that are behind the veil of this earth and experiences the love of God more deeply and immeasurably than can be described with words.

I grew up in church. I have known that God loves me all my life. Yeah, I “knew” it, and I’ve even experienced it from time to time—a feeling of God wrapping his arms around me, especially in particularly dark and lonely seasons. I’ve frequently felt God’s presence with me. But a few weeks ago, I had an encounter with God that first began as a little nagging inside of me. I felt that nagging (I’d probably felt it for some time but hadn’t taken the time to ask questions about it and pay attention to it) and I sat with it. As I sat with the Scriptures in the book of Isaiah, I heard God’s invitation to me:

“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
²Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
³Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you.⁸

Come. Come, I heard Jesus say. *Come.* And all I could say in response was, “Are you sure, God? Are you sure that you want me?” That response, from deep within my soul, surprised me. As I explored this uncomfortable uncertainty about Jesus’ invitation, I realized that it had been some time that I had felt sure of God’s love for me. I “knew” it, but I had not experienced it or felt it in a long time, and I realized that deep down inside, I didn’t *really* believe that God loved *me*. Oh sure, he loves everyone, but he didn’t really love *me*, at least, not as much as he loves other people. I’m too flawed, too particular, too intense, too weird. . . I spent two days at a silent retreat wrestling with this invitation to God’s love and

⁸ Is 55:1–4, NIV

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my internal resistance to it. Could I believe that Jesus loves me for me, no strings attached? That he simply desires to be with me, and if I did nothing else with my life that would be enough?

Could you believe it for yourself? All of us, I think, even ministry leaders, pastors, and longtime Christians, get stuck in our heads sometimes. You know the “right” things to believe and say, but when it really comes down to it, do you believe that God opens his arms to you and simply wants to be with you? That he wants to laugh with you, walk with you, work with you? That he is a Friend who sticks close to you because he wants to? That his grace is *for you* and he makes you *alive* out of your stuck ways?

For those of you who are new to the faith or are maybe hearing this for the first time, what does this picture of a loving God do to your heart? Is there a longing for this kind of love? Is there resistance? What might be stopping you from accepting God’s open arms of love?

This is the life that Paul paints for us. We no longer have to live with our faces to the dirt, struggling to make a living because this is all that is left for us. No, we are already seated in heavenly places with Jesus. We no longer have to try and try and try, only to feel that we are failing over and over on a loop. No, we are already saved by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. We no longer have to shore up our protections against every evil thing in this world and the hurt we have experienced. No, Jesus experienced it all and declared his victory over it. The life that Paul and the entire Bible paints is of a God who relentlessly pursues his people even to death, because he loves us.

Someone wise somewhere once said that we cannot love others until we have loved ourselves. I would amend this slightly. We cannot love others until we have experienced the depth of God’s love for us. This is the final word from Paul to us today: “We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”⁹ *You* are his masterpiece, his crowning work of art, and he has given you a single job to do—to be loved by him and let that love spill from you. To care for others, to tend his creation, and to work together with all of his church to bring his Garden kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. Our worth is not in what we *do*; it’s in *who we are* as the loved people of God. We are raised in Christ to love and for love.

We are going to pray, and I invite you to pray these words together with me.

God, I am overwhelmed by your love for me. I recognize where I have hurt others, myself, and your world unintentionally or intentionally. I choose to call Jesus my Lord in

⁹ Eph 2:10, NLT

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every area of my life. Help me to become unstuck and to accept with an open heart your love for me. I am your masterpiece. Thank you for your unending love for me. May this love fill me and overflow so that others will know how much you love them, too. Amen.