

## Ephesians 2:1-10 God's Grace Alone

### Introduction

On Thursday afternoon I had an embarrassing experience at the checkout of a local supermarket. All had gone to plan until I was asked to insert my debit card in the card reader at the checkout. I had confidence that all would go well, but it was on this thankfully rare occasion misplaced. The card was declined. After a few moments the process was repeated but the same rejection took place. Thankfully, I had other means to settle the bill or it would have been really embarrassing. Later when I phoned the bank I found out that they had posted out a new card for that account as my current card was due to expire in a few weeks' time, but it had got lost in the mail. So for security reasons they had put a block on the account. It only took a few minutes to clear the blockage, but a further twenty-four hours for due process to take effect. To be assured that all was in order was a relief.

In the pre-Reformation Church in Europe the standard view of salvation was – in very simple terms a conviction that your good deeds needed to outweigh your bad deeds to get into heaven. But what kind of good deeds had such merit to help us on our way? Regular Sunday communion attendance was essential, together with other good works that should balance out the bad thoughts, words and actions we have committed. As a 'plan B' if we failed to live up to this standard we could spend some time in purgatory to suffer for our sins and then be admitted into heaven. However, unlike your bank account where there is usually no difficulty in discerning whether you are in credit or overdrawn, there is a real problem with the above system as the sincere Christian believer could not be certain where they were currently standing with respect to this system of merit. There was, therefore, no assurance of going to heaven and for many believers like Martin Luther himself it became ever more frustrating. The harder they worked to do good deeds the more they became aware of other sins and shortcomings which led in Luther's case to despair and took up hours of his monastic superior's time in the Confessional Box.

There was an added problem in that the Latin translation in use at the time mistranslated the Bible term *repent* [Greek *metanoia*] with 'penance' [Latin *paenitentia*] so completely misleading the Christian who could read the Biblical text only that translation. However, in the early years of the Reformation scholarly priests like Luther were able to read the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek and see that a more accurate Bible translation could be 'a change of mind' or even 'a change of character', that is a 'conversion', a turning from living one way to going in a different lifestyle direction. The problem at the heart of this matter as Luther knew all too well was that we cannot be as good as Jesus in His perfect life choices. The Bible teaches clearly that we are born with a sin bias – theologians in the past spoke of 'the total depravity of man' – this did not mean humanity was as bad as it could be, but that every aspect of our personality or humanity was affected, even damaged by sin, so that the potential for every kind of evil thoughts, words and actions was present within all of us. We have the capacity by our moral choices to feed the good desires within us and live wholesome lives or vice versa and commit acts that damage ourselves and other people. A person may ask you: What do I need to do to become a Christian? I'm basically a good person, do a fair days work for my employer and am a good neighbour, in addition to taking care of my family. Such a person is often offended by the sin issue being raised. The same problem arose for Jesus in Matthew 19:16-17 in which a rich young ruler asked Him the following question: *Teacher what*

*good thing must I do to have eternal life? Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied. There is only One who is good. If you want to enter [eternal] life keep the commandments. It is quite simple if you want to get to heaven and earn your way – simply keep all of God’s commandments every day of your life! The problem is that none of us ever comes remotely close to doing that. At the heart of the issues raised in Ephesians 2:1-9 there are two questions which may arise in our hearts:*

Question from unbeliever: How can a God of love send people to hell?

Question from believer: How can a God of justice be true to Himself and allow a sinner like me into heaven?

Which is your question?

We can dispute the wording of the first question and say more accurately that God allows us to receive the consequences of our own choices regarding the good news of the Gospel. But at its heart is a mindset of law or grace. What is my problem and what is the solution to it? Ephesians 2:1-10 explains clearly what we need to grasp on this subject.

### 1. **The Extent of My Problem** (Ephesians 2:1-3)

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). If you accidentally cut a major artery would a plaster stem the flow of blood? Would a few sandbags be sufficient to halt the progress of a river in flood? Could King Canute stop the tide coming in by decree? Can a person be good enough to save themselves and get into heaven? [it is the same answer to all four questions!!] Paul declares three things in these three verses:*

(a) **You were dead** (Ephesians 2:1) *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...* Not a figure of speech like the Father of his wayward son in Luke 15:32 *Lets have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found* in the parable of the prodigal son. Paul intends to declare a spiritual fact! What vocabulary does he use to make his point: (i) *Trespases* straying from the path /crossing boundaries –a wilful decision such as seeing a No Entry sign and going in; (ii) *Sins* missing the mark /falling short of the target (archery image) Romans 3:23 *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...* It is a comprehensive claim of wrongdoing. John Stott, a great Anglican theologian and Bible commentator said on this verse: the sins of commission and omission... In the light of this perfect standard, by nature we are rebels and failures. It culminates in Ephesians 4:18 *they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.* Paul does not intend these statements as a compliment! A person can be in excellent health, vigorous mind, have a charismatic personality yet be blind to God, deaf to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit and as responsive as a corpse to the claims of Jesus on their life.

(b) **You were enslaved** (Ephesians 2:2-3a) <sup>2</sup> *in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.* There are three ways in which this term can be used. Physical slavery which is still in operation in parts of the world today; bonded labour more common and encompasses the lives of millions of people in Asia and parts of Africa; or here Paul is speaking of spiritual slavery. What does he

mean? Spiritual death is caused by sin, but what causes us to get into this predicament. The Bible speaks of the world, the sinful nature and the devil as the causes. (i) *you followed the ways of this world* (v2) yielding to the pressures from people holding values around us that are contrary to those taught in God's Word. For many of us in school and other workplaces we are a tiny minority and the worldview and presuppositions many hold come from diametrically opposed sets of values to those of Jesus Christ. We will disagree with them over issues that arise, but that is inevitable because we have a totally different starting point. What is remarkable is how often we may agree with them –vestiges of Christian influences on our culture. When those influences are totally absent it is a real problem inserting them into a culture. In the February 2006 issue of the medical journal *The Lancet* there was a discussion of the problem of the high suicide rate in Japan, double that of the USA which has twice the population of Japan. Why is it almost impossible to counter the samurai warrior approach to suicide? It is seen as an honourable way to leave life on earth because: “no strong religious taboos against suicide exist in this strongly secular society”, whereas in America the familiarity of the Good Samaritan story and subsequent Samaritans organisation's work is a powerful restraining influence. (ii) *You followed...the ruler of the kingdom of the air* (Ephesians 2:2) Ephesians 6:12 speaks of *the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*; The secular world has a domesticated picture of a red devil with horns –mythology!, however the devil is real and powerful but limited in what he can do. Christians often go to one of two extremes either ignoring altogether the battle in the spiritual realms with the occult in its various forms or become obsessed with finding demons everywhere. Satan values both forms of extremism that over or underestimates his powers. (iii) *the cravings of our sinful nature* (Ephesians 2:3a) legitimate desires taken to excess, for example, food=gluttony; sex=lust; sleep=slothfulness; self respect= inflated pride; illegitimate desires: malice; violence. inappropriate ambitions; Paul in Philippians 3:3-6 describes his fiercely nationalistic and orthodox Jewish pride but although done in God's name he came to state: *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...I consider them [past achievements] rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ* (Philippians 3:8-9). The world around looks on with sadness or disgust at the excesses in UK lifestyles, the idea that young (ish) people cannot have ‘a good time’ without getting totally inebriated on drink or drugs; a sex-mad public culture which glories the performance of certain physical activities but expresses no serious interest in the lifelong committed relationships in which it is supposed to take place and thereby rendering single people as somehow abnormal or inadequate. As Christians we have to speak out with humility for a balanced biblical view of lifestyle choices that is both wholesome and inclusive in all aspects of our lives.

(c) **You were condemned** (Ephesians 2:3b) *by nature children of wrath* (NKJV) *by our very nature subject to God's anger* (NLV) bias to sin Romans 7:15: *I want to do what is right but I don't do it. Instead I do what I hate.* Romans 5:12-14: *When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died- from the time of Adam to the time of Moses- even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come.* We can only accept how good the good news of the gospel is when we have recognised how serious is the bad news regarding human sinfulness. The hypocrisy of our

contemporary culture is seen so clearly in the outrage generated in the media when a public figure or someone else of interest violates their boundaries, yet when Christians raise the violations of God's boundaries it is seen as judgemental. In human relationships it is so insightful if we can catch a glimpse of how other people see us. With respect to God we need to grasp how He views us if we are going to be in a position to do anything about it.

## 2. The Depth of His Grace (Ephesians 2:4-7)

<sup>4</sup>*But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,* <sup>5</sup>*made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.* <sup>6</sup>*And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,* <sup>7</sup>*in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus* (Ephesians 2:4-7). **But God:** divine intervention to rescue us from our plight. Great wrath requires great love to overcome it. God's wrath and His love are like two sides of the same coin;

(a) **The action of God** *you have been saved* is a past action with ongoing consequences; Horace Walpole invented the word 'serendipity' in 1754 to mean: 'the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident'. Paul invents three new words used elsewhere to refer to what God did with Jesus after the crucifixion to explain the significance of the transformation God has worked in our lives when we profess faith in Him. Paul added the Greek prefix **syn** *together with* to three words associated with Jesus after the crucifixion. (i) *made us alive with Christ* (Ephesians 2:5a) a reference to the resurrection of Jesus; (ii) *raised us up with Christ* (Ephesians 2:6a) a reference to the ascension of Jesus; (iii) *seated us with Him in heavenly realms in Christ* (Ephesians 2:6b), a reference to Jesus sitting at right hand of the Father in heaven. Romans 8:17 *Now if we are children, then we are heirs, co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory;* In the heavenly places or realms Paul is speaking of our future here which is amazing. This is the world of spiritual reality in which principalities and powers operate (Ephesians 3:10; 6:20); in which Christ reigns supreme (Ephesians 1:20); where God has blessed us as His people in Christ (Ephesians 1:3) and there seated them (and us) with Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). In summary, in Christ, we have passed from death to life and from slavery to enthronement; what an amazing transformation!

(b) **The purpose of God** Why would He do this for us? What could possibly motivate a holy God to do this for you and me? Here there are four key words (i) God -rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4) unmerited favour to the undeserving; (ii) His great love (Ephesians 2:4) Paul will pray (Ephesians 3:18) that these Christians *may have the power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ;* A human parent will go to incredible lengths to show love to their child even when there is no reciprocity –we love our children because they are our children –how much more God loves His children. (iii) His grace (Ephesians 2:5, 7) God's riches at Christ's expense; it is never cheap grace as God has to be righteous. He cannot forgive unconditionally without the satisfaction of His justice. Perfect love cannot overlook wrongdoing, instead God in the person of Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross *so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness* (I Peter 2:24); (iv) His kindness (Ephesians 2:7) Would a parent donate bone marrow or a kidney to save the life of their child? Do we need even ask the question? Of course they would. Don Richardson in his book *The Peace Child* spoke of an extraordinary event that took place in Irian Jaya in which two tribes formally at war for a very long time resolved

their differences in an incredibly moving way. Representatives of one tribe as a statement of their good intentions for peace and reconciliation offered the gift of a young child which was accepted by the other tribe. The life of that child growing up was visible proof of the promises made that day. However, God went a step further. Romans 5:10 tells us: *Our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies.*

### 3. **The Nature of My Calling** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

<sup>8</sup> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –* <sup>9</sup> *not by works, so that no one can boast.* <sup>10</sup> *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:8-10)

(a) **By grace** (Ephesians 2:8-9) It is for God's glory alone not something that is shared. This emphasis is found also in other passages too. For example, Acts 18:27 where *Apollos was a great help to those in Ephesus who by grace had believed.* In case we still don't get it Ephesians 2:9 declares that there are no ground for self-righteousness. I Corinthians 1:31 states: *Therefore as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.* What does this mean in practice: (i) In daily Christian life this means that we should have a balanced perspective on our work for the Lord. Although we are called to be 100% for the Lord it is only He who can save people. Too many Christians are so afraid of saying the wrong thing that they say nothing about their faith to people who are not yet Christians, instead of leaving that with the Lord. God provided all I needed for salvation so He will also equip me to speak for Him. (ii) Too many people think I'm not good enough to be a Christian –true but you fit perfectly into the category of people Jesus came to save! (iii) Knowledge of God's grace will enable us to refrain from boasting too much about our successes but also from being emotionally crippled from future service by past failures.

(b) **For good works** (Ephesians 2:10) True believers show evidence of grace in their lives and persevere in the faith. Remember John 15:16 Jesus said: *You did not choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit.* (i) A fruit tree takes time to produce its apples or pears, for example. Christian character should also develop progressively. Philippians 2:12-13 *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.* Works and grace are here together in harmony! One visit to the gymnasium will never give you that extraordinary physique that some people dream of; it takes months and years –regular exercise is required so it is in living for Jesus. (ii) Why am I here? This is a question many people ask. The answer is simple: to live a life pleasing to God. It is no accident that on average people with a living faith (not just Christians) on average give three or four times more of their disposable income to charity and likewise of their time. Our faith in the Lord gives us the direction we need for living. J.O.Y. Jesus first, others second and yourself last; to grasp this fact will help us have a healthy approach to time management with respect to the balance between work /family/ church /own time. Approaching life from God's perspective He modelled a work time off balance in creation –assuming you hold the days of Genesis 1 being 24 hours each! When we grasp that we are seeking to glorify God in each area of our lives it gives a dignity and respect that may be overlooked by the world. He values the long-term carer serving at home just as highly as the professional high-flyer who attains awards from colleagues for innovative practices and the person you are in relation to other people at school as much as the grades you get at exam time.

Grasping the truth about grace may help us as motorists be more considerate drivers on the roads when we observe the shortcomings of other drivers! Grace enables us to grasp the importance of serving others ahead of being served first ourselves. Grace equips us to understand we are no better than anyone else and so our judgements about other people and their accomplishments will be modified when we see things God's way. If we are thrilled with God's amazing grace to us we will want to find appropriate ways of passing it on. But first and foremost we will prioritise time personally and collectively as a congregation to gather to praise and worship the God who has blessed us with His amazing grace.

By nature we are sinners, but by grace we are saints. On this journey of faith we will pledge afresh to seek to honour God individually, but also do everything in our power to encourage one another to become more like Jesus for His name's sake Amen.