

Immerse: From Dead in Sin to Saved by Grace
Ephesians 2:1-10

Next weekend we will celebrate Reformation Sunday. And we will have the Kirkin of the Tartan service online. And it will be a great celebration, please invite your friends. But it just so happens that this Sunday we are looking at the two books of the Bible that changed the great reformer Martin Luther's understanding of salvation more than any other part of the Bible. Romans and Ephesians are two of Paul's masterpieces where he really spells out how we are saved. Pastor Steve already read from Romans chapter 10. Now let's look at this wonderful passage from Ephesians.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

“ Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

⁸God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰For 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.”

So, Ephesians has a very different tone than 1st and 2nd Corinthians did as we looked at those last week. Those letters to the church in Corinth were very specific to them. Paul was answering very important questions that they had obviously written to him and Paul was attempting to correct what had become a hot mess in that church. Corinth had sexual immorality, and divisions, and disrespecting of the Lord's supper, and they were suing each other and the list goes on. The letter here titled Ephesians is quite different. This is written to a group of people (probably gentiles) that Paul does not know personally. He has heard about them and now writes a general letter of encouragement and instruction.

And this passage I just read basically has three sections. Martin Luther, in his commentary of this passage, breaks this passage into three parts also and indeed your Immerse Bible does the same thing if you look at page 218. Luther writes: “There are three principal topics treated of in this Section. First, the spiritual state of the Ephesians before their conversion. Second, the change which God had wrought in them. Third, the design for which that change had been effected.”

So let's look at these three sections. The first is verses one through three and it is about what they used to be like; dead in their sin. The passage before this one has a lot about being raised with Christ in it. So this is the contrast. Living in sin which means no relation to God and distorted relations with one another. If God is life, then life without God is the equivalent of death. And the word used for living here is actually the word for walking. So walking in sin. Paul says "you used to live in sin (or walk in sin) just like the rest of the world." Just like the rest of the world. So in other words humans being good is not the default. Being sinful is the default for us. Without God we all walk in sin. Sin defines the boundaries of our lives.

And then Paul writes "obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God." Now I do not want to go down a rabbit hole talking about the devil. Is there a real evil force? Yes. Are we really tempted? Yes. Jesus was even tempted. But let's not take this opportunity to blame the devil for our sin. The majority of the Bible is about the problem of human sin. Not the devil. And the Bible says very little about the devil and a lot about human sin. And in fact the whole Bible is about God trying to rescue us from our human sin. The last part of Paul's statement there is key. "He (the devil) is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God." Those who refuse to obey God. That is human sin. The blame is on us. We can choose to obey our own desires or obey God's desires.

We are constantly tempted to follow our own desires and we live in a culture that encourages us to do so. That is the danger of the world that Paul is talking about here. It wants to give you your desires. If you want to eat, there will be lots of food commercials during the football game to encourage you to eat too much. And in fact when you go out to eat, most of the time the portions are much bigger than they should be for one meal. Our culture encourages gluttony. Have a rough day and want a break? The world encourages you to have a drink. Or find a substance that will make you feel better. "You deserve it" the world will tell you. Like buying stuff? The world will always try to sell you as much stuff as you can buy. Not getting along in your marriage? There are actual websites out there to help you find an affair. Looking for pornography? The internet will give you an endless amount of it. Don't like the truth, someone out there will tell you what you want to hear instead of the truth. The world is dying to give you what you want. And following all of your own desires, that is human sin and that is death compared to living into what God has planned for you.

So Paul says that is where we all were at one point. It is where we all start spiritually. Then we have the second section of this passage which is verses 4-7. Now one of the things I like about the Immerse Bible is it take out the chapters and verses. And although there are times those are helpful references, it tends to break up the reading and neither the Old Testament or New Testament books were written with them. They were added later. And so Immerse let's you read it more like it originally was. But, it still adds punctuation that was not there. In the original Greek verses 1 through 7 are all one sentence. So in your Immerse Bibles these two sections would really be all one sentence. Now, Paul is notorious for writing long sentences like this. When I was in seminary and Pastor Steve was in seminary we had to learn how to read first century Greek (it's typically called Koine Greek) in order to read passages from the New Testament in their original language and setting. And in my seminary we started out with the Gospel of Mark, which is pretty concise. And I thought I was doing pretty well after a few weeks of Mark. But then we got to Paul's letters. And for me all success went out the window because of these long sentences. We called him Paul the participle man. Because he combines verbs and just keeps going. And these verses 1 through 7 are a great example. But it also means that this is one big sentence with a contrast from the first half to the second half.

Paul paints this picture of walking in sin and death that applies to all of us and then he says “⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.” And the way the grammar is used here the emphasis is on God, which makes sense. Paul says *we* were like this (that was the first half of the sentence), but *God* is like this (second half of the sentence). God is so merciful and so loving. Notice, it is all God here. We haven’t done anything to earn God’s favor which Paul will make even more clear in a little bit. Our only value is that we are created by God and in God’s image. Again, all God. We have not done anything to earn salvation from our human sin.

And then one of the most famous lines from this letter “(It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)” Grace. To define it commentator Gorman puts it this way: “grace means the completely undeserved, loving commitment of God to us.” More about grace in a moment, because here this is just an aside by Paul. Here Paul continues “For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.” This passage can seem a little confusing. Is he talking about us being risen again and going to heaven with Jesus? I don’t think this passage is that literal. I think this is about our spiritual lives. We live under the influence of sin which I talked about earlier, or we live under the influence of Christ. And salvation is not something just done for us, but we participate in it. We are raised from our dead in sin state and actively live in Christ.

The last of the three sections of this passage is verses 8-10. So let’s read those again. “⁸God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰For 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.” There is probably no clearer statement about grace and faith leading to salvation rather than works in the Bible aside from this one. Luther wrote in his commentary about this passage: “This is plain, *for* salvation is entirely of grace. Ye are saved by grace; ye are saved by faith and not by works; and even faith is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” In other words, God does it all.

Even though we can understand this in our minds, it is hard to accept in daily life. We are works based as human beings. Everything else we do in life we do with an anticipated outcome. Right? If I do my job, I get paid. I do the grocery shopping so that my husband and I have food and to be a good wife. I call my mother because I love her and it makes her happy. If I take a class I do the homework with the expected outcome of a good grade. If people are coming over to my house, I clean it so that they will think I am at least a decent house keeper. We do things with anticipated outcomes. This is how we operate in life. So it is so hard to wrap our brains around grace. Around the fact that we are not rewarded with salvation. We are wired to think that if we do the best we can to follow God and read the Bible and do good things for others, that those things have an impact on going to heaven. That God will be pleased. But friends it is the other way around. God reaches out first. It is not about pleasing God. We can’t please God enough to get into heaven. Because of all of that sinful nature I talked about at the beginning. No, God offers salvation. We are not rewarded, we are offered salvation by God’s grace.

I mentioned the reformer Martin Luther earlier and how important understanding grace became to him. The church's understanding of grace during his time was that you were infused by grace, but then you still had to earn God's favor. That God's grace gave you the ability to then live a godly life and please God. And poor Luther tried and tried and just could not be good enough. The understanding of grace that we have here is different. Paul reminds us that we do nothing to earn God's favor and that it is all God's action. This changed Luther's world. He wrote: "When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through."

In Philip Yancy's book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, a book I know many of you have read, he writes "The many uses of the word in English convince me that grace is indeed amazing – truly our last best word. It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun." Grace. It sums up the relationship from God to us. So if our works cannot get us into heaven, what are we supposed to do then? Well, first we need to receive the gift of grace and that takes humility. It means recognizing your sinfulness and your inability to have it all together. In Yancy's book that I just mentioned he writes that an alcoholic told him "I have to publicly declare 'I am an alcoholic' whenever I introduce myself at group. It is a statement of failure, of helplessness, and surrender. Take a room of a dozen or so people, all of whom admit helplessness and failure, and it's pretty easy to see how God then presents himself in that group." Failure, helplessness, and surrender. Can you admit those feelings? Can you live with those realities? This means letting go of control and saying to God, I'll do it your way. Yancy discovered that "grace comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it, and I am one of those people." We are all one of those people.

So that's the first thing we have to "do." Be humble enough to receive the gift. But is that all? Should we stop doing good works? Well, not according to the end of this passage. Paul writes "For 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." For we are God's masterpiece. Now wait a minute, I just told you that failure, helplessness and surrender are necessary to receive the gift of grace. You probably are thinking pastor Chris you are making no sense. But the part that comes after that is important. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus. When we recognize our sinfulness and stop trying to be our own gods, God is able to make us into something new in Christ. And God does this because we do have good works to do. God planned work for us. The church has a job to do. But it is not so we go to heaven, it is because of what God has done in us when we did not deserve it. Michael Gorman writes this: "The question, then, is not whether deeds matter, but rather how – not as the cause of salvation but as its purpose and proper result."

Remember when I was talking about things that we do that have an expected outcome? Well, what about receiving a gift? What is the expectation when someone gives you a gift? Say Pastor Steve gives me a really nice new communion set. What should I do? Well, one I need to be willing to take the gift. If I say "no I don't want any gifts," the deal is off. This is what refusing God looks like to him. It's like saying to God "I don't want that gift you have for me." Or "I don't need your gifts." That's what we do to God when we refuse God. So, I take the gift. Next, I have to open it. Right? If I never take the wrapping paper off I won't receive the gift. So I open the gift. That's receiving God's grace. Receive the gift. And then next, I should probably write a thank you note. I should be grateful. We individually and as a church need to live in gratitude for God's grace every day. So, take, receive, and gratitude. And then lastly what should I do with the new communion set Pastor Steve gave me? Should I put it on the shelf and let it collect dust? No, I should use it. I should share that gift with others. We need to share God's grace with others.

Yancey writes “grace is Christianity’s best gift to the world, a spiritual nova in our midst exerting a force stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than hate.” Grace is the best gift the Christian faith can offer to the world, because it is God’s best gift to us. This is what Paul was preaching in the Romans passage earlier this morning. He says “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.”¹² Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him.¹³ For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”

This is our job as a church. To get this message out. This is the good work that God has planned for us to do according to Paul. That no matter who you are or what you have done, God’s grace is for you. How well are we doing that? You know, the reason Philip Yancey wrote that book about grace is because of what a friend told him who works in downtown Chicago. Here is what Yancey wrote:

“A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter—two years old!—to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable—I’m required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”

How do we get the message out to her? That God’s grace is for her. That she is not beyond salvation. That’s the kind of good work that God has planned for us to do. We need to get the word out in what we say and what we do that God’s grace is there for anyone that will receive it. That we are humble and recognize our own sin and are not here to judge other people’s sin, but we are here to offer God’s grace to them. How? I don’t have all the answers. And I’m not supposed to. We, as a church, using our combined skills and abilities, can find ways to extend God’s grace to a city and a world that desperately needs it. Brothers and sisters, I can’t say it any better than scripture. There is nothing profound for me to offer beyond what is here. Starting at verse 8: “⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰ For 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.”